

**Petrarchan Metamorphoses: Temporality and Desire in Tasso, Shakespeare, Sor Juana,
and Khalvati**

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the metamorphosis of a crucial Petrarchan motif, developing Teodolinda Barolini's idea that even more than a poet of desire, Petrarch is fundamentally a poet of time. It explores how a range of texts, specifically sonnets, written by Torquato Tasso, William Shakespeare, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and Mimi Khalvati, have appropriated and reimagined that motif centred on the beauty and mortality of the human body, declining it in original ways. The lyric sequence that the chapter creates through this comparative analysis demonstrates not only how the Petrarchan model travels across time and space but also how the texts resonate across the sequence and what they reveal about the lyric mode and the possibilities it opens to desire differently.

Key words:

beauty, desire, lyric, model, time, Petrarch, Tasso, Shakespeare, Sor Juana, Khalvati

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Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (ca. 1342-74, henceforth *Rvf*) is a lyric sequence of 366 poems (317 sonnets, 29 *canzoni*, 9 *sestine*, 7 *ballate*, and 4 madrigals) in the vernacular, divided in two parts, which primarily treats the poet's love for a woman named Laura, the unattainable object of desire who is, in the first part, mainly absent and distant, and in the second – after her death is registered – definitively elsewhere.¹ Also known as the *Canzoniere*, the *Rvf* provokingly shuns the thematic vastness, theoretical investment, and wild plurilingualism of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and instead opts for selection: in terms of content, Petrarch's sequence focuses on the interiority of the self and makes unrequited love the almost-exclusive theme, while linguistically it eschews the 'comic' and 'realistic' and aims to cultivate an abstract, refined, and classically-inflected style based on control, measure, and balance. This reduction is everything but a simplification. In fact, the *Rvf* is a complex bundle of competing impulses that the sequence tries to contain, and even at times to temper, but that repeatedly reappear, thereby destabilizing it while at once making it varied and giving it a distinctive pattern.

Although renowned also as a Latin poet and for his work as a proto-humanist, Petrarch is acknowledged worldwide for shaping the language of love.² Petrarch's sequence became the

¹ On Petrarch's 'lyric sequence', see Barolini, 'The Making of a Lyric Sequence'; on the two parts of the sequence, see at least Hainsworth 49–77.

² Petrarch is also the author of the vernacular *Triumphs*, as well as a remarkable set of Latin works: an unfinished epic poem, *Africa*; a *Bucolicum Carmen*; a confession with himself, *Secretum*; a number of compendia and philosophical treatises, including *De otio religioso*, *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*, *De viris illustribus*, *De vita*

primary model for writing lyric poetry in the Western tradition for centuries. Already influential in the fourteenth century, the *Rvf* underwent a veritable canonization first in Italy in the sixteenth century and from there in other parts of Europe through the so-called phenomenon of ‘Petrarchism’, a form of writing poetry that took Petrarch as the ultimate stylistic model to imitate but that simultaneously opened up the possibility of adapting his poetry to all sorts of contexts and situations.³ Both recognizable and malleable, Petrarch’s poetry enjoyed a success bolstered by the cachet of Italian culture in Early Modern Europe and became iconic. Not only could one say that ‘everybody’ wanted to write like Petrarch but, as William Kennedy has argued, multiple versions of Petrarch — ‘public figure, poet, lover, scholar, and Christian moralist’ (‘Iberian, French and English Petrarchisms’ 210) — were available, and from these myriad modes of appropriation ‘emerge[d] a Petrarch who could be anything and everything to all readers’ (*The Site* 3).

Out of this dizzying array of possible Petrarchs, in this chapter we first identify the motif that for us represents the ‘core’ of Petrarchan poetics, developing Teodolinda Barolini’s idea that even more than a poet of desire, Petrarch is fundamentally a poet of time (‘Petrarch as the Metaphysical Poet’). Then we explore how a range of texts, specifically sonnets, written by Torquato Tasso, William Shakespeare, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and Mimi Khalvati, have appropriated and reimagined that motif. Focusing on sonnets is a way of acknowledging the contribution Italy makes to European literature insofar as the sonnet is an Italian creation that has

solitaria, Rerum memorandarum libri; an Itinerarium ad sepulchrum domini nostril Yhesu Christi; as well as an impressive collection of letters in dialogue with ancient classics and contemporary men of letters, including the Familiars and Seniles. For an introduction, see Kirkham and Maggi, and Ascoli and Falkeid.

³ On literary imitation, see at least McLaughlin. On the plurality of Petrarchisms, see Virginia Cox’s entry in this *Handbook*.

its roots in early thirteenth-century Sicilian poetry,⁴ and it is through Petrarch that it is then codified, to the extent that with Jacques Roubaud we can say that ‘Tous les sonnets sont des sonnets de Pétrarque’ [Every sonnet is a sonnet by Petrarch] (344, cited in Rushworth 10). As we shall see, while recognizably Petrarchan, the sonnets we analyse do not seek to reproduce their model ‘grammatically’, through sheer imitation or replication of codified norms, but instead decline it in an original way.⁵ Moreover, the lyric sequence that we create will show not only how the Petrarchan model travels across time and space but also how texts resonate across the sequence and what they reveal about the lyric mode and the possibilities it opens.

Petrarch: Persevering

Our analysis begins with *Rvf* 90, a sonnet which has been widely recognized as an ‘archetype’ of Petrarchan poetry, both for its formal and thematic features, and that has been a source of inspiration for many later poets and painters (see Güntert 251). In particular, it is emblematic of Teodolinda Barolini’s point that, as central as love is to Petrarch’s poetry, ‘the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* are not primarily erotic: erotics are secondary in the *Fragmenta* to multiplicity and time and the subjection of the self to these forces’ (‘Petrarch as the Metaphysical Poet’ 205). Petrarch’s reflection on time is profoundly shaped by Augustine’s philosophy, specifically the idea of the *ordo amoris*. In this view, anything mortal, however beautiful and attractive, is inherently imperfect and it is necessary first, to appreciate the incommensurability between the transience of the created world and God’s permanence, and second, to affectively detach from the former and ‘use’ it (*uti*) only in order to reach and ‘enjoy’ the divine (*frui*).⁶ For Petrarch, throughout his works, Laura’s body is the ultimate instantiation of this Augustinian paradigm

⁴ See Federica Pich’s entry on ‘The Sonnet’ in this *Handbook*, and Gragnolati.

⁵ On ‘creative’ versus ‘imitative’ Petrarchism, see Jossa.

⁶ On this distinction see Saint Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I, 4. On its implications for Petrarch’s poetry, see especially Freccero.

and among the innumerable examples that one could give that combine her beauty and mortality, is line 8 from sonnet 248: ‘cosa bella mortal passa et non dura’ [the beautiful mortal thing fades and does not endure]. In this sonnet, the praise of Laura’s virtue and beauty is structured around her imminent death, and the poet urges whoever does not want to miss the pleasure of gazing upon her, to do so quickly.

Sonnet 90, while placed earlier in the sequence, is also centred on the impermanence of Laura’s beauty. It too is a praise poem that picks up the *stilnovo* motif of the Lady’s epiphany, a moment that seeks to capture the fulguration of the Lady’s presence, and paradoxically casts it in the past and taints it with the shadow of time’s passing, immediately suggested by the imperfect tense, ‘Erano’:⁷

Erano i capei d’oro a l’aura sparsi
che ’n mille dolci nodi gli avolgea,
e ’l vago lume oltra misura ardea
di quei begli occhi, ch’or ne son sì scarsi;

e ’l viso di pietosi color’ farsi,
non so se vero o falso, mi pareva:
i’ che l’ésca amorosa al petto avea,
qual meraviglia se di súbito arsi?

Non era l’andar suo cosa mortale,
ma d’angelica forma; et le parole
sonavan altro che pur voce humana:

uno spirito celeste, un vivo sole

⁷ For a reading of *Rvf* 90 in the context of epiphany, see Gragnolati and Southerden.

fu quel ch'i' vidi: et se non fosse or tale,

piagha per allentar d'arco non sana.

[Her golden hair fluttered in the breeze, | twisting into a thousand sweet knots, | and those beautiful eyes which once shone beyond measure | are now deprived of their enchanting light. || Her face seemed to colour with compassion | (whether real or imagined I do not know): | and should I, Love's captive, | wonder if I suddenly caught fire? || She walked not like a mortal woman, | but like an angelic creature, and when she spoke, | the loveliness of her words did not resemble any human voice. || A celestial spirit, a living sun, | this is what I saw; and even if she were no longer so, | the wound doesn't heal, though the bow be slack.] (*Rvf*90)⁸

The poem restages Venus's apparition to Aeneas in *Aeneid* I, when he first sees a beautiful huntress with her hair loosed to the breeze and recognizes her as the goddess through her divine, non-mortal, gait, face, and voice (Virgil, I, 318–405).⁹ The whole poem is built on the premise that Laura's body would be similarly immortal and divine in its bearing and yet the initial 'Erano' sets the tone of a sonnet that is built upon the contrast between appearance and reality

⁸ Quotations from Petrarch's *Rvf* are cited from *Canzoniere*. Translation here is by Caroline Dormor and Lachlan Hughes. Other translations of Petrarch are ours, unless otherwise stated.

⁹ See especially lines 318–20, 'Harpalyce volucremque fuga praevertitur Eurum.namque umeris de more habilem suspenderat arcumvenatrix dederatque comam diffundere ventis' [For from her shoulders in huntress fashion she had slung the ready bow and had given her hair to the winds to scatter; her knee bare, and her flowing robes gathered in a knot], and lines 403–05, 'ambrosiaeque comae divinum vertice odoremspiravere; pedes vestis defluxit ad imos, et vera incessu patuit dea' [From her head her ambrosial tresses breathed celestial fragrance; down to her feet fell her raiment, and in her step she was revealed a very goddess].

and, in connecting the imperfect tense with Laura's hair, introduces a sense of entropy and heralds that Laura's body is in fact subject to time.

Already in the first quatrain, this weaving of temporality with the lady's body is acutely apparent in the passage from line 1 to line 4. As the sonnet begins, the reader is seduced by the almost supernatural qualities of Laura's beauty that are conveyed through the miraculous play of her hair in the breeze and the way her eyes shone 'oltra misura' [beyond all measure], however the caesura in line 4 sets the fullness of this vision against the paucity of the present, in which the light of her eyes is dimmed. The deictic 'or' [now] encapsulates the contrast with the past and brutally declares that things are different when the poet is writing, and that Laura has aged and her beauty has faded.

As is typical for Petrarch, the use of tenses articulates the movement of the text and this is also evident in the second quatrain, where we remain with memory and the emphasis is again on perfection, only undermined by the question of whether the poet saw what he describes or merely imagined it. The intensity of the past beauty is expressed in the past historical 'arsi' that captures the moment when the poet couldn't but fall in love, literally catch fire ('qual meraviglia se di subito arsi?', line 8).

The first tercet continues this mode of perfection in the past and the emphasis is placed again on the seemingly more than human character of the beloved, whose gait did not appear 'a mortal thing' ('cosa mortale') but angelic and whose voice, like Venus's in the *Aeneid*, sounded anything but human. The last tercet begins by extending this idea of Laura's unfading beauty by opening with a purely nominal and chiasmic line that seems outside of time and points to the heavenly, living, and dazzling nature of the lady's appearance ('Uno spirito celeste, un vivo sole'), but the past historical 'fu' in the *rejet* abruptly brings time back in and definitively sets that perfection in a past that is over. In the same line, the adverb 'or' comes back and, as in line 4, it suggests that the lady's immunity from time's passing is a fantasy.

In the final axiomatic line, 'piagha per allentar d'arco non sana', everything turns again and the poem concludes with another, vertiginous temporal shift, its most powerful one: despite

the recognition that the imperviousness to time of? Laura's beauty might be a delusion, and that consequently the power of Love's arms over the lover might be diminished, his wound does not heal. The brutality of the initial imperfect, which had imbued the poem with an inevitable sense of loss, is made not to matter by the final present tense 'non sana' which almost heroically expresses the perseverance of desire. As we have argued elsewhere, by the end of the poem the past is also in the present, since the temporal line that runs from the 'subito' of line 8, when the poet first fell in love, to the present has not been broken and is in fact mastered by the poem. To this extent, the 'now' of poetry contrasts entropy and even overcomes it, opening a paradoxical space where desire can continue to flourish and where there is pleasure in continuing to linger on the attraction for something while (or, maybe, even because of) knowing that it is imperfect and no longer there.

The unexpected perseverance that concludes sonnet 90 is far from an isolated phenomenon in the *Rvf*, which can actually be seen as a mise-en-abyme of the poet's inability/unwillingness to stop desiring Laura. In fact, as pervasive as the Augustinian theme of the fallibility of the mortal objects of desire is in Petrarch's poetry, the paradoxical way the poet responds to it at the end of *Rvf* 90 is equally pervasive and possibly even more quintessentially Petrarchan. If, as Barolini states, 'Petrarch is constantly doing what Augustine tells him to do in *Secretum* which is to meditate on death'; what Petrarch is *not* doing is the other thing Augustine constantly tells him to do, which is to relinquish the 'cosa bella mortal' of *Rvf* 248 for immortal and unfailing things, i.e. God.

Not only does Petrarch stage this refusal to change in several poems in the sequence, it is also structurally significant.¹⁰ For instance, sonnet 248 is part of a sub-sequence that is about the premonition of Laura's death and should lead to conversion (*Rvf* 245–254), yet when we reach the canzone 264, which opens part II of the *Rvf* and emphatically expresses the necessity of

¹⁰ As Barolini has shown, in 'The Making of a Lyric Sequence', the lyric sequence is itself predicated on the idea of transition and at the same time works against it.

transition away from desiring Laura towards God, the Augustinian imperative to eradicate from the heart every root of pleasure which can never bring happiness and does not let one breathe ('del cor divelli ogni radice del piacer che felice | nol pò mai fare, et respirar non lassa', lines 24–26) is met with the wistful nostalgia for the sweetness of being in the presence of Laura's earthly beauties. *Rvf* 264 ends not with resolution to the problem of desire but with impasse: 'veggio 'l meglio, et al peggior m'appiglio' [I see the best and hold fast to the worst] (line 136). Awareness does not imply action. Rather, here, too, poetry opens the space for a paradoxical form of pleasure that consists of sticking to desire for beautiful, mortal things even knowing they are harmful.

Tasso: In Full Bloom

The next sonnet we consider, Torquato Tasso's 'Negli anni acerbi tuoi purpurea rosa', is a homage to the Princess of Ferrara Lucrezia d'Este, and is a good example of Tasso's free and 'eclectic' Petrarchism (see Brand). It is inspired by *Rvf* 90 and offers an original take on the beauty of (and attractiveness exerted by) the aging body. The sonnet is centred on the motif of the rose and belongs to a long-standing literary tradition that associates flowers with the beauty and fragility of the human being. In Petrarch, the association of flowers with transience and insubstantiality has the same Augustinian tone as we highlighted before insofar as it is meant to induce the lover to transfer desire from anything ephemeral to God.¹¹ In particular, the flower

¹¹ See, for example, this passage from the *Secretum*, on Narcissus: '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' [The story of Narcissus has no warning for you, and, content with gazing only at the outward envelope of the body, you consider not that the eyes of the mind tell you how vile and plain it is within.

and specifically the rose appear as a symbol of Laura in three poems of the subsequence 245-54 which, as noted above, highlight the transience of her beauty and convey a fearful premonition of her death (*Rvf* 245, 246 and 249).

While in Petrarch's Augustinian mode the rose's ephemerality had a moral connotation in the lesson it taught about death, when Tasso is writing in the second half of the sixteenth century, it had been turned around and morphed into the motif of the *carpe rosam*, that is, an invitation to gather the rose and enjoy it in the present before it fades. The genealogy in this case is classical, going back to the Greek and Latin bucolic poets and present also in the poetry of Catullus and the pseudo-Ausonius. The most distinctive element of this motif, beginning from Lorenzo and Poliziano among the vernacular poets of the late Quattrocento, is the 'epicureismo leggero, spensierato, voluttuoso' [lighthearted, carefree, sensuous Epicureanism] that specifically incites women to revel in their youth and enjoy their beauty while it lasts (see Fiorato 456).

Already developed by Tasso's father Bernardo (1493-1569) in the sonnet 'Mentre che l'aureo crin v'ondeggia intorno', the 'carpe rosam' motif is reformulated in a well-known passage from Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* in the Garden of Armida:

‘Deh mira’, egli cantò, ‘spuntar la rosa
dal verde suo modesta e verginella,
che mezzo aperta ancora e mezzo ascosa,
quanto si mostra men, tanto è più bella.
Ecco poi nudo il sen già baldanzosa
dispiega; ecco poi langue e non par quella,

Moreover, if you had no other warning, the stormy course of life itself, which every day robs you of something, ought to show you how transient and perishing that flower of beauty is] (Latin is cited from 'Secretum'; translation from *Petrarch's secret*). On the significance of the flower motif in Petrarch's poetry as related to Narcissus, see Southerden.

quella non par che disiata inanti
fu da mille donzelle e mille amanti.

Così trapassa al trapassar del giorno
de la vita mortale il fior e 'l verde;
[...]

cogliam d'amor la rosa: amiamo or quando
esser si puote riamato amando.'

(canto XVI, 14–15)

['Ah see (he sang) shamefast and virginal the rose break forth from her green foliage, still half revealed and half hidden, how the less she shows herself, so much the lovelier she is. At first with audacity, lo, she displays her naked breast; then lo, she languishes, and seems not the same; the same she does not seem that was before desired by a thousand maidens and a thousand lovers.

So passes in the passing of a day the flower and leaf of mortal life; [...] Let us gather the rose in the brilliant morning of this day that loses its brightness so soon; let us gather the rose of love: now let us love when loving we can have our love returned.]¹²

The passage makes an analogy between human life and the life cycle of the rose, which is most beautiful and desirable when it is only half open but ends up losing all its allure. Here the motif of the necessary decline and trajectory towards death leads to the advice to enjoy youth and to gather the rose as long as one is still desirable.

While it would seem that we are very far from the moralizing tone of Petrarch's Augustinian meditation on the passing of time, the context in which the passage appears actually

¹² Italian is cited from *Gerusalemme liberata*; English comes from *Jerusalem Delivered*.

indicates that its message is not so different. The speaker is a parrot who, with its song, tries to detain two paladins on a mission to rescue the Christian Rinaldo from the sorceress Armida's clutches, and its words are understood to be as false and deceitful as the rest of Armida's garden enchantments. Indeed, the messengers do not succumb to the parrot's words and instead free Rinaldo from Armida's spell, enabling him to restore order. Nonetheless, it has been convincingly argued that Tasso's *carpe rosam* is not a mere ruse and that for all its seeming deceitfulness, the motif continues to express Tasso's ambivalent fascination with the most sensual form of poetry and desire embodied by Armida (see Fiorato).¹³

If we now move to consider our sonnet, we will see that by directly confronting the Petrarchan model of *Rvf* 90, it retains the model's sensuality and manages to free it from any conflicting ambiguity. Most likely written in 1575, 'Negli anni acerbi tuoi purpurea rosa' is an encomium for Lucrezia d'Este (1535–1598) which Tasso himself described in an 'argomento' [a topic heading] for the poem as 'praising Lucrezia's beauty that does not diminish with the increasing of age' (*Loda la bellezza de la signora Lucrezia d'Este, duchessa d'Urbino, la quale non scema perché cresca l'età*):

Negli anni acerbi tuoi purpurea rosa
sembravi tu, ch'ai rai tepidi a l'ora
non apre 'l sen, ma nel suo verde ancora
verginella s'asconde e vergognosa;

o più tosto parei, ché mortal cosa
non s'assomiglia a te, celeste aurora
che le campagne imperla e i monti indora
lucida in ciel sereno e rugiadosa.

¹³ See also Zatti 146, and, for a different reading, Ramachandran; see also Yavneh.

Or la men verde età nulla a te toglie;
né te, benché negletta, in manto adorno
giovinetta beltà vince o pareggia.

Così più vago è 'l fior poi che le foglie
spiega odorate, e 'l sol nel mezzo giorno
via più che nel mattin luce e fiammeggia.

[In your unripe years, you resembled a purple rosebud which doesn't open its breast in the warm rays of the sun but, virginal and demure, hides itself still in its green mantle. Or rather, since no mortal thing could resemble you, like celestial dawn you appeared, which, resplendent in a clear and dewy sky, adorns the countryside with pearls and gilds the mountains.

Now your less green age takes nothing away from you, nor can youthful beauty decked out in ornament come close to equalling your natural, unadorned grace.

Thus, more beautiful is the flower when it unfolds its fragrant foliage to the air and the sun blazes brighter at noontime than in the morning.]¹⁴

Recasting its Petrarchan model, the first quatrain of Tasso's sonnet emphatically transports the reader to a past time when the lady was young and her beauty was in its prime. The opening recalls that of *Rvf* 90, insofar as the imperfect tense (here 'sembravi', at the beginning of line 2; there 'Erano') suggests a contrast between a remembered beauty and the present moment. The

¹⁴ The sonnet is cited from Tasso's section, edited by Francesco Ferretti, in Anselmi and others 804–05; the translation is ours.

image of the rosebud, still only peeking through its covering, imbues that beauty with a typically Tassian sensuality through the metaphor of the rose's breast but, by sharing several features and even words ('verde', 'verginella', 'ascosa', 'sen') associated with the *carpe rosam* motif that we have seen with the parrot's speech in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, it also creates the expectation that this initial phase will be short, and the blush of youth will soon be replaced by decay and lose its attraction.

The imperfect 'parei' in the first line of the second quatrain extends the focus on the past, but also indicates that there is something inadequate in the image of the rosebud and the mortality it suggests. Whereas in *Rvf* 90, the line 'non era l'andar suo cosa mortal' (line 9) is revealed to be delusion since although the lady *then* seemed to be more-than-human, *now* she has shown herself to be subject to time and mortality, in Tasso's sonnet the present tense in the phrase 'mortal cosa | non s'assomiglia a te' affirms the lady's ongoing imperviousness to time even in the now of writing. In fact, the image of the celestial dawn, itself intimately Petrarchan, is chosen not only because it suggests the incredible reach of the lady's splendour, which colours the landscape mother of pearl, gilds the mountains, and illuminates the sky, but also because it is a potent symbol of non-mortality. The tenses have now shifted into the present and rather than contrasting with the past, as Lanfranco Caretti argues, they work to create a 'perfectly immobile time' ('tempo perfettamente immobile', 210) in which celestial beauty could endure eternally.

When we move to the first tercet, we might think that, as in *Rvf* 90, the quintessentially Petrarchan adverb 'Or' that opens line 9 will stress the temporal fracture between past and present with which the sonnet began, but instead something delightfully unexpected happens. Although we are now in a 'less green age' ('men verde età') and the lady's beauty is 'less adorned' ('negletta'), nothing has been lost ('nulla a te toglie') and the lady is equal or even superior to any youthful beauty so that the diminutive adjective 'giovinetta' retrospectively colours the initial 'acerbi' of 'acerbi anni' with a sense of imperfection. Time passes also in Tasso but rather than contrast between past and present, one finds continuation – a continuation

that is reproduced through that insistent use of enjambement that represents the most distinctive feature of the sonnet.

Continuation is also intensification (see Caretti 209) and the final tercet is the most striking moment of the poem. It goes back to the initial images of the rose and dawn and instead of indicating that time diminishes them, it recasts them in terms of a greater perfection. Sensuality is also at its peak: the rose, now fully opened, releases its beautiful perfume to the air and the noonday sun shines so much brighter than the morning light. Thus, the poem ends with a stunning fulguration in the present, which stops any further development and resists any downward turn or sense of possible decay. As such, the 'or' really permeates the poem woven into the very fabric of its language through the six rhyme words (lines 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, and 12), and the last lines become an axiom on beauty and time that not only turns a commonplace view on its head but reclaims an atemporal truth. Like *Rvf* 90, the sonnet unexpectedly manages to stop the threat of time but does so differently and whereas in Petrarch desire can persevere unhindered by the transience of the beloved's beauty, in Tasso beauty does not decrease with time's passing but is made greater with age.

Shakespeare: Ravaged by Time

When Shakespeare published his sonnet sequence (1609), Petrarchism had been around in England for almost a century. It was transplanted in the late 1520s from Italy with Thomas Wyatt's and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey's translations/adaptations of Petrarch, and then, through Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella* (1582), there began a fashion for sonnet writing (see Kennedy, 'European Beginnings' 101–02).

The sonnet we have chosen, 'To me, fair friend, you never can be old' (no. 104), belongs to the first part of the sequence (1–126) dedicated to the love for the so-called 'Young man'. While in the second part of the sequence, a series of sonnets (127–52) for the 'Dark Lady', the poet is trapped in a compulsive attraction for an object of desire represented as base and repugnant, the Young Man is mostly portrayed in a Petrarchan manner that both idealises him

and taints him with a sense of mortality.¹⁵ Sonnet 104 is acknowledged to be one of the most Petrarchan in its focus on beauty and time and, as has been noted, is in direct dialogue both with *Rvf* 90 and 248 (see Strier 78; and Kennedy, 'Iberian, French, and English Petrarchisms' 216). Among all the sonnets we look at, Shakespeare's sonnet is perhaps the text that most fully encapsulates the Petrarchan 'cosa bella mortal passa et non dura' in its representation of the poet's experience of time:

To me, fair friend, you never can be old,
For as you were when first your eye I eyed,
Such seems your beauty still. Three winters cold
Have from the forests shook three summers' pride,
Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turned
In process of the seasons have I seen,
Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned,
Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green.
Ah, yet doth beauty, like a dial-hand,
Steal from his figure, and no pace perceived;
So your sweet hue, which methinks still doth stand,
Hath motion, and mine eye may be deceived:
For fear of which, hear this, thou age unbred:
Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead.

While Shakespeare's sonnet sequence began by stressing the transience of the Young Man's beauty by associating it with the image of the rose (which the poet tried to counter with the idea

¹⁵ On the representation of the Young Man in relation to time and mortality, see Fineman, Chapter 5.

of procreation that characterises the first seventeen poems: 'From fairest creatures we desire increase, / That thereby beauty's rose might never die'; sonnet 1, lines 1–2), sonnet 104 opens with what looks like a praise of the young man's eternal youth. The idea of the Young Man as the paragon of timeless beauty is encapsulated in line 1, which is considered a 'perfect' example of the iambic pentameter form in English, with its measured rhythm and cadences (Regan 2). Unlike Petrarch's sonnet, which started with the imperfect tense 'Erano' stressing a contrast between past and present and placing the lady's beauty emphatically in the past, here there seems to be no contrast and the combination of the present tense ('never can be old') in line 1 with the past tense ('as you were when first your eye I eyed') in line 2 establishes a continuity between them and indicates that the Young Man's beauty is unchanged. Time seems to have stopped, even more so when we read the first hemistich of line 3 'thus seems your beauty still', where 'still' as an adverb conveys a sense of sameness, and as an adjective, that of motionlessness (see Harvey 318).

At this point, a paradoxical mode enters the sonnet. On the one hand, an analogous sense of continuity between past and present is conveyed in the following sentence, which spans the remainder of line 3 until the end of line 8 and seamlessly flows through the enjambements that connect not just the individual lines but also the first and the second quatrain. Here Shakespeare recasts the Petrarchan motif of the 'anniversary' poems marking the years that have passed since the poet's first falling in love, but he is less interested in the 'originary moment or the possibility of recalling that moment' (Dubrow 124) than in restating that the Young Man is not affected by the passing years. Indeed, only nature's beauties and the seasons are affected by time's onslaught, and he seems to remain unchanged ('Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green', line 8). On the other hand, a sense of transience begins to make itself felt in the texture of the poem which progressively undercuts the idea of the Young Man's timelessness. As Don Paterson has noted: 'the three time-spans are constructed to *feel* successively shorter: winter-summer; spring-autumn; April-June (because of their weaker contrast, the second item feels briefer than

the first [...], so we have a sense of beauty's erosion coming ever closer' (299, italics in the original).¹⁶

The third quatrain develops this sense of transience much more dramatically. It opens with an interjection that introduces an explicit tone of lament and concludes by acknowledging that, in fact, the poet's 'eye may be deceived' and that the aura of timelessness around the Young Man is a delusion. The poem switches from addressing the beloved to registering the poet's realisation that although he may not notice it, implacably like the hands turning on a clock, beauty passes from the Young Man's face. In lines 11–12, this idea is reinforced through the reference to the 'sweet hue' that to the poet ('methinks') appears to be intact, but that is actually subject to flux ('hath motion'). The 'methinks' really points to the delusory perspective of the subject and resignifies as ambivalent what at the beginning of the poem was presented as safe and indubitable: retrospectively, 'To me' (line 1) expresses a contrast between the poet's perception and that of others (and possibly, of the Young Man himself) and 'seems' (line 3) no longer reads as 'appears' but rather as 'seems — perhaps falsely'.¹⁷

The inexorable passing of time culminates in the final rhyming couplet, where death breaks violently into the text as the poet tells posterity that the Young Man will have died by when they live and thus that they will never be able to appreciate his beauty. Critics have noticed what a bleak conclusion this is: Paterson writes that 'The pace quickens horribly, emphasized by the careering and brutal *unbred/born/dead* woven through the couplet' (299), and Helen Vendler considers the 'stunning "turn"' which has the Young Man die in the space between the third quatrain and the final couplet as 'the major aesthetic achievement' of the sonnet (443). The stress on time's ravaging effects is profoundly Petrarchan and in Shakespeare the assault on beauty extends to recording the beloved's death, which was only anticipated, implicitly, in *Rvf* 90 and,

¹⁶ For a detailed comparison of Shakespeare's and Petrarch's treatments of time, see Callaghan 104-18.

¹⁷ See Duncan-Jones's note to the poem in Shakespeare 318.

explicitly, in *Rvf* 248. Yet like *Rvf* 90 and 248, Shakespeare's sonnet 104 remains a praise poem and while stressing the mortality of the Young Man, the phrase 'beauty's summer' reactivates the previous threefold references to his beauty (lines 3, 5, 9) and powerfully reinscribes it in the text. One finds neither cessation of desire nor yielding to a transcendental plane that could counter time's effects and if the poem ends with a bleak tone, still, by associating the Young Man's unparalleled beauty with its ephemerality, the couplet makes desire even more compelling and urgent and also suggests that part of the human beauty's appeal is intensified by its mortality.

Sor Juana: Revolution

The next sonnet we consider, 'Miró Celia una rosa que en el prado' [She saw a rose that in some grassy place], was written by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–95), a nun at a Hieronymite convent in Mexico City whose poetry is considered as one of the most interesting and original expressions of Petrarchism in the Spanish colonial world.¹⁸

Petrarch entered Spanish literature in the first half of the sixteenth century with the Petrarchan imitations by Juan Boscán (ca. 1490–1542) and, especially, Garcilaso de la Vega (ca. 1501–36), who imported the hendecasyllable line from Italian verse and contributed to the dissemination of the sonnet form. Petrarch became a veritable literary icon in Spain, flourishing first with figures such as Gutierre de Cetina (1520–44), Hernando de Acuña (1520–80), Fernando de Herrera (1534–97), and then with the Golden Age poets Lope de Vega (1562–1635), Luis de Góngora (1561–1627), and Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645). Petrarchism was part of an Italian vogue that soon expanded into the Americas, where it took on distinctive features from those of the metropole (see Kennedy, 'Iberian, French, and English Petrarchisms' 210–13).

Sor Juana wrote a total of sixty-six sonnets on a variety of topics. They reflect the impressive depth of her education, culture, and interests and range between the philosophical,

¹⁸ For an introduction to Sor Juana's distinctive Petrarchism, see Kennedy, *The Site* 257–61.

mythological, didactic, moral, religious, and amorous. Our poem was published in the 1689 edition and together with two later poems, published in 1692, create a sort of ideal triptych on the motif of the rose. The sonnet 'Rosa divina que en gentil cultura' [O Rose divine, in caring cultivation], written in a didactic mode, develops the traditional motif of the rose as the symbol of beauty and ephemerality and takes the contrast between appearance and reality as a way to condemn human presumption and pride. We find clearly expressed the idea of the rose as encapsulating the intermingling of life and death, and the sonnet finishes on a chiasmic crescendo on the moral teaching that the rose's transience should impart: 'viviendo engañas y muriendo enseñas' [in life you dupe, in death you edify]. By contrast, the sonnet 'Señora doña Rosa, hermoso amago' [My Lady Rose, you comely compilation] is a burlesque parody of the inflated, stale use of the rose in poetry as a symbol of female beauty. It personifies the rose as an aristocratic lady and then proceeds to dress her down through a series of questions, thereby making fun of the literary topos of the rose as the finest of flowers. It is a sophisticated metapoetic play on how that topos has been worn out through overuse, ending by addressing Señora Rosa and humorously admitting: 'escribo, no más, este soneto / porque todo poeta aquí se roza' [I only write this sonnet [...], because you are where every poet goes].

Our sonnet, 'Miró Celia', like 'Rosa Divina' returns to the traditional motif of the rose but seems to dialogue with 'Señora doña Rosa' in subverting it and offering a truly fresh take on that well-worn trope:

Miró Celia una rosa que en el prado
ostentaba feliz la pompa vana
y con afeites de carmín y grana
bañaba alegre el rostro delicado;

y dijo: Goza, sin temor del hado,
el curso breve de tu edad lozana,

pues no podrá la muerte de mañana
quitarte lo que hubieres hoy gozado.

Y aunque llega la muerte presurosa
y tu fragante vida se te aleja,
no sientas el morir tan bella y moza;

mira que la experiencia te aconseja
que es fortuna morirte siendo hermosa
y no ver el ultraje de ser vieja.

[She saw a rose that in some grassy place
its vain pomp joyously exhibited
and doused with deep delight its dainty face
in its cosmetics of the brightest red.

She spoke: 'You must enjoy, not fearing Fate,
the brief course of your lusty youth, O Rose.
Tomorrow's death cannot obliterate
the taste of happiness today bestows.

And though death's closing in without delay,
and fragrant life's departing, do not rue
that young and lovely you must pass away;

for look, experience advises you
you're lucky to be dying while still fair:

age is an outrage you won't have to bear.]]¹⁹

The first quatrain, centred on a female figure named Celia looking at a rose in a field, articulates the quintessentially Petrarchan trope of the 'vanity' of earthly beauty.²⁰ The language used to describe the rose in this stanza appears to be a language of censure: the second line 'ostentaba feliz la pompa vana' implies the rose is ostentatious in boldly showing off its beauty, and the 'afeites' [cosmetics] that adorn the 'rostro delicado' of the flower suggest artificiality and excessive embellishment. However, that which in the sonnet 'Rosa divina' was condemned as a kind of presumption, here is altered somewhat by the 'feliz' (line 2) and 'alegre' (line 4), which imply a less negative sense of cheerfulness and self-assuredness.

The second quatrain changes the tone and sees the female figure speak – the only instance of dialogue in a sonnet by Sor Juana. It switches to another well-established motif, that of the *carpe rosam*. While above we have seen Torquato Tasso's original version of it in the parrot's discourse in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, the motif was usually formulated by a male voice and addressed to young women telling them that, given that their body will decline with age, they should let themselves be seduced while they are still desirable. It was quite a common motif in the Spanish tradition, where it was introduced by Garcilaso de la Vega's rendering of the sonnet 'Mentre che l'aureo crin v'ondeggia intorno' by Bernardo Tasso, Torquato's father.²¹ Several

¹⁹ Texts and translations of the poems we cite by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz are taken from the selection included in Rutherford.

²⁰ On Sor Juana's relationship with Petrarch, see Rabin, 'The *blasón*' and her 'Speaking to Silent Ladies'; Neumaster; and Salas.

²¹ 'En tanto que de rosa y de azucena / se muestra la color en vuestro gesto, / y que vuestro mirar ardiente, honesto, / con clara luz la tempestad serena; / y en tanto que el cabello, que en la vena del oro se escogió, con vuelo presto / por el hermoso cuello blanco, enhiesto, / el viento mueve, esparce y desordena: / coged de vuestra alegre primavera / el dulce fruto antes que el tiempo

critics have noticed that by introducing a female voice in the text, Sor Juana changes the perspective radically. In this quatrain, instead of the male voice patronising a silent woman about what she is meant to do with her beauty, we have Celia addressing the rose as a sister, that is as her own reflection (see Rivers). She urges it to enjoy ('Goza') the exquisite exuberance of its brief 'edad lozana' (lush / lusty age) without fearing death ('sin temor del hado'), since it will not be able to take away what she has enjoyed ('lo que hubieres hoy gozado').

The first tercet reinforces the sense that although death is pressing, and life is fleeting, dying in one's prime, beautiful and young, should not be regretted. Indeed, in the final tercet, speaking as 'experiencia', which carries both the idea of an elderly lady and that of a wisdom which comes from experience, Celia tells the rose to heed her advice and count itself lucky that in dying young it will not live to suffer the outrage of being old ('el ultraje de ser vieja').

As in other texts by Sor Juana, one finds a feminist gesture, which here does not limit itself to acknowledging the staleness of a century-long tradition (as in the parodic 'Señora doña Rosa') but vies with its patriarchal legacy and rewrites it. In this specific case, Sor Juana offers a declination of the *carpe rosam* motif that challenges pre-existing literary and philosophical norms: through the theatrical stratagem of dialogue in this sonnet, what was traditionally an

airado / cubra de nieve la hermosa cumbre. / Marchitará la rosa el viento helado, / todo lo mudará la edad ligera / por no hacer mudanza en su costumbre' [While roses' and madonna lilies' shades / are blossoming upon your countenance, / while the impassioned chasteness that pervades / your look calms tempests with its radiance, / and while your tresses, which were chosen out / from richest veins of gold, to sudden flight / are prompted by the wind, and blown about / upon your high-held neck of purest white, / gather the pleasant fruit of your glad spring / before wild, wrathful Time gathers his snows / and with them he commences covering / the fair peak. Icy blasts will blight the rose, / for Time, so fast and fickle, disarrays / all things, excepting only his own ways]. Text and translation of Garcilaso de la Vega's poem also come from Rutherford. On the motif of the rose in early-modern Spanish poetry, see Luiselli, especially 137–42.

object of desire becomes a speaking (and writing) subject who expresses a feminine subjectivity on her own terms. As Alessandra Luiselli argues, this bold female voice, instead of letting herself be reprimanded and lectured to through the poetic trope of the rose, as had been the case in poems written by Sor Juana's male predecessors on this theme, instructs the flower to do precisely the opposite of what they had demanded: not to fear ('sin temor', Luiselli 155).²² In Luiselli's own words, 'Sor Juana is not opposed to young women enjoying themselves, she is opposed to using the example of the ephemeral life of the rose to threaten women, insulting them in their maturity' (see Luiselli 154-56).²³ And, contrary to those male, peninsular poets who had advocated humility and a renunciation of vanity, we find a voice from *Nueva España* that tells the rose not to renounce its display of beauty, but to dare to enjoy those pleasures that not even death will be able to take away.²⁴

Through all these metamorphoses, with Sor Juana, Petrarch's model for thinking of time of mortality has travelled far, not only geographically but conceptually. If already Petrarch had resisted the Augustinian injunction that beauty's transience should lead the lover to detach from it and, at best, be used as an instrument to reach God, by placing the woman at the centre, Sor Juana's sonnet inverts the perspective and changes the paradigm altogether: it does not present the beauty and fragility of the rose as a moral lesson, thus 'using' them to arrive at a greater truth, instead it suggests 'enjoying' the loveliness of youth in and of itself. The pleasure of enjoying earthly beauty is as finite as in Petrarch but unlike in *Rvf* 90, where poetry allowed a

²² See also Sancho Dobles; and Brescia.

²³ Quotation is on page 154 and reads 'Sor Juana no se opone a que las jóvenes gocen, se opone a que se utilice el ejemplo de la vida efímera de la rosa para amenazar a la mujer, injuriándola en su madurez'.

²⁴ On the subversion of models that Sor Juana's position from the margins allows, see Rabin, 'The *blasón*'; Hahn; and Avilés, who engages with both Bergmann and Merrim.

space for extending it beyond where it should meet its limit ('piagha per allentar d'arco non sana'), it appears all the more precious for its brevity. Perhaps the twist here is in Sor Juana imagining that the rose dies precisely in its prime, in full bloom ('es fortuna morirte siendo hermosa'), before it reaches that state of decay (which Tasso's parrot in the *Gerusalemme Liberata* renders as 'poi langue' [then it languishes] and Garcilaso's sonnet as 'Marchitará' [will wither away, line 12]). Yet, for all the revolutionary and feminist verve that Sor Juana's sonnet finds in the margins, still there is an idealization of youth and the female body that regards ageing as an 'outrage' ('ultraje') to be avoided at all costs. The sonnet we will consider as our final instantiation of the Petrarchan motif also turns that idealization on its head.

Khalvati: Overblown

The British poet Mimi Khalvati (1944–), born in Tehran, grew up on the Isle of Wight, and has been resident in the UK since the age of twenty-five. She has published eight collections of poetry and has shown a distinctive predilection for the sonnet, especially for the Petrarchan rather than the Elizabethan form. In an interview Khalvati explains that the Italian sonnet's 'prolate symmetry' of eight to six lines not only allows for a compelling change from the more static, tableau-vivant-like octave to the much more dynamic sestet but also seems to replicate the organic proportions that one finds in the natural world (See 'Eggs'). Our sonnet, 'Overblown Roses', is taken from *The Meanest Flower* (2007), a collection that includes diverse poetic forms (sonnets, elegies, ghazals, songs) and pays attention to details and small things that might otherwise be overlooked.²⁵ The sonnet we will read begins from a childhood memory that centres on a dialogue between the poetic subject and her mother:

She held one up, twirling it in her hand
as if to show me how the world began

²⁵ On this and other collections by Mimi Khalvati, see Sampson; and Maitreyabandhu.

and ended in perfection. I was stunned.

How could she make a rose so weebegone,
couldn't silk stand stiff? And how could a child,
otherwise convinced of her mother's taste,
know what to think? *It's overblown*, she smiled,
I love roses when they're past their best.

'Overblown roses', the words swam in my head,
making sense as I suddenly saw afresh
the rose now, the rose ahead: where a petal
clings to a last breath; where my mother's flesh
and mine, going the same way, may still
be seen as beautiful if these words are said.

The octave describes a vignette which opens with the mother turning a rose in her hand and displaying it to her child as a measure of the world's perfection, its alpha and omega. While the reader would expect this perfection to repeat the century-long association of beauty with the rose in its prime, the child's incredulity and amazement signals a change that will be explained in the following lines. In fact, the rose that the mother is showing is withered and drooped, perhaps only more so because it is being spun around, and the child's two questions to herself indicate both how far from a conventional idea of beauty this rose that cannot stand upright conveys and how unsettling the mother's take on reality is for the child (and for us as readers). Moreover, when the mother confirms that the rose has passed the prime of bloom and that she loves it all the more for that, her smile indicates that, as with Sor Juana's sonnet, she is unabashedly aware of inverting a longstanding poetic trope.

The sestet opens by registering the child's sudden change of perspective through a newfound perception of what 'overblown' means. She now understands that the rose represents

the human body, specifically her and her mother's 'flesh', and that their shared fragility and mortality contains a special beauty. The rose still marks time but in a different way to what we have seen before: 'the rose now, the rose ahead', which is probably a play on words ('the road now, the road ahead') inverts the fear of decay that the future brings about, while the image of the 'a petal cling[ing] to a last breath' softens it and makes it natural and even attractive. Additionally, if the 'still' in the phrase 'may still / be seen as beautiful if these words are said' registers the unexpected association of the beautiful and mortal, it also signals that poetry is the space where that unexpected association can be made, and made to last each time the poem is read.

The sequence of sonnets that we have explored shows the generative way that Petrarch as a poet of time has been a model for lyric poets throughout the centuries. In particular, we have seen how Tasso, Shakespeare, Sor Juana, and Khalvati have all been drawn to his meditation on the ephemerality of the human body and its beauty, which represents one of its most distinctive traits, and have declined it in different ways. On the one hand, in the variety of their responses, these sonnets are neither simple copies nor complete changes but, rather, metamorphoses that capture and recast the quintessentially Petrarchan quality of poetry as the space for the unexpected, where it is possible to think and desire differently. On the other hand, in this way, one can also see that later instantiations reveal the malleability of the Petrarchan model and what one could call 'the potentiality of the literary model',²⁶ that is by looking at what comes after one can also better understand what is contained in the model. In our case, the potentiality in Petrarch's text seems to come not only from the sensibility and artistry with which he manages to convey the beauty and fragility of human life but also from what we could call his 'daring to

²⁶ On the potentiality of the literary model, see Sissa.

desire', a possibility of lyric which opens the way to the forms of resistance, bold imagination, and affectivity we see in these examples.

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