

When the Divine Lady Becomes a Genius: The Journey from *Joi* to Lack in Courtly Love Poetry

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Nothing is wonderful but the soul, which, when great itself, finds
nothing great outside itself.
Petrarch¹

The glorious lady of my mind.
Dante²

Hee that shunns love doth love him self the less.
Mary Wroth³

for I / Except you'enthrrall mee, never shall be free
John Donne⁴

The twelfth century, metamorphosed by the rediscovery of Ovid, was besotted with love. Writing love lyrics to their Ladies, the troubadours of Southern France invented the genre of courtly love poetry, which would

¹ Petrarch, 'Letter to Dionisio da Borgo San',
Sepalcrohttp://petrarch.petersadlon.com/read_letters.html?s=pet17.html (26.10.12)
[Original Source: James Harvey Robinson, *The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1898)]

² Dante, 'La Vita Nuova', in H. Oelsner ed., *Dante's Vita Nuova Together With The Version of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1908), p. 3

³ Lady Mary Wroth, *Pamphilia To Amphilanthus*, in Josephine A. Roberts, ed., *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), Poem 83. Wroth breaks her sonnet sequence into individually numbered sections. Roberts adds a single continuous numerical sequence for all the poems, indicated throughout this essay in square brackets.

⁴ John Donne, 'Holy Sonnet XIV', in John Hayward, ed., *John Donne: A selection of His Poetry*, (Hammondsworth, Middx: Penguin Books, 1950), p. 172

become the literary language of heterosexual love for five hundred years. At the same time the mystic Bernard of Clairvaux wrote and preached obsessively about the Shulamite of the amatory biblical text *Song of Songs*, whose passionate song of love to her bridegroom - *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!* - Bernard interpreted as the speech of Mary, the mother of Christ.

It is customary to regard the troubadours' brilliant, witty, and raunchy love songs as the starting point for the secularization of love and sexuality.⁵ But Julia Kristeva suggests that the lyrical *jouissance* with which the troubadours expressed their fervor for their ladies was a song of *Joi*, a celebration of being, that was very similar to the Christian beatitude experienced by the amorous mystic Bernard. According to Kristeva, both experiences of exalted happiness were founded on the certainty of possessing the loved object. In the case of Bernard of Clairvaux, for Kristeva, this was God. But, importantly for this essay, Bernard's most beloved object was a divine Lady, the Shulamite. Kristeva argues that while the troubadours did not possess their Lady, as she was always unobtainable, at the very least, they possessed 'the Word'. We know of this *Joi* of possession through their literary utterances. 'Identification with the song-Word and the Creator, a joy of incantation-creation, is the only perceptible evidence ... for beatitude in general and courtly *jouissance* in particular.'⁶ These subjects glorified love before reason, seeming to proclaim, '*Ego Affectus est*'.⁷

To observe the twelfth century parallel between the profane and the divine Lady, consider this fragment of troubadour Arnaut Daniel's song, *En cest sonet coind' e lèri* (*On This Precious and Joyful Music*), with its double entendre about the Pope:

No vuolh de Roma l'empèri
 In qu'òm n'en fass apostòli
 Qu'en liès non aja revèrt

⁵ Julia Kristeva discusses this question at length in her chapters on Bernard of Clairvaux and the troubadours in Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, Leon S. Roudiez trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp.151 – 169 & 280 – 296.

⁶ Kristeva, p. 153

⁷ Literal translation: 'I was affected'. Kristeva defines *Ego Affectus est* as an *I* that is not yet an ego 'because he thinks "I" is because *I love*.' This 'I' 'does not point to itself as a basic identity, split as it is between the Other and the affect. An *I* that is passion.' Kristeva, p. 169

Per cui m'art lo còrs em rima;

[I want neither the empire of Rome
Nor anyone to make me Pope
If I were not to return to her
For whom my heart burns and eats away at me.]⁸

The listener is presented with an image that may function both as a joke on the Pope, and as a compliment to the singer's lover. If the 'her' to whom Arnaud's singer wants to return if he were made Pope is his lover, the lyric casts a flippant aspersion on the celibacy of the Pope; on the other hand, the singer might just as easily be innocently complimenting his lady by comparing her with the Pope's divine Lady. This ambiguity, or excess, of meaning, along with the troubadours' brilliance of wit, and the virtuosity of their rhythms and rhymes, transcend the direct message of their songs, and proffer them as signs of love's intensity, or *Joi*.

In order to be a loving subject, one must be able to idealise, and identify with, the Other. It is no accident that in twelfth century mysticism and courtly love poetry this is achieved by idealising the Lady, or that the language of courtly love poetry is the first literary form to be expressed in the mother-tongue, for this idealised love is founded on the memory of the baby's earliest love. For Kristeva, idealised love for the Lady is a displacement of the infant's devastating upheavals of desire for the mother's body, with their sexual and homosexual passions:

Respectful and respectable love for an idealized (maternal) object spares the delights and the pangs of sadomasochism - the divine is finally a goddess, priestess of archaic power, which allows less to repress than to separate raving desire from its refinement.⁹

The troubadours' songs, or *sonets*, influenced the development of the sonnet. Though designed to be read, rather than sung, the sonnet retained the musical structure of the troubadours' *canzone*, which divided the stanza into two parts, with a *volta* or 'turn' separating the two parts. This became

⁸ *or:* if I could not, with respect to her effect a change
for whom my heart makes art and rhyme.

James J. Wilhelm, ed. and trans., *The Poetry of Arnaut Daniel* (New York & London: Garland, 1981), pp. 40-43, in Kristeva, pp. 284-286

⁹ Kristeva, pp. 75-76

the syntactical structure of the sonnet in Italian, a poem of fourteen lines, broken into an octave and sestet with a turn at the end of the octave.¹⁰ Courtly love poets channeled their desires into this ‘well wrought urne’,¹¹ in a veritable explosion of sonnet writing idealizing the Lady. By the end of the seventeenth century, some three thousand writers had produced a massive two hundred thousand sonnets.¹² In this paper, I will argue that love sonnets became so popular over this five hundred year period because their space enabled the relationship between the sonneteer and the Lady to develop into a new type of humanist self-love that flowered as the Renaissance ‘genius’. In this process, the divine Lady comes to represent the poet’s own ‘soul’; in other words, the Lady becomes a ‘genius’. In order to examine in detail how this merging of identities occurred, I will pay especial attention to the metaphor of ‘the hunt’.

The notion of genius has an etymology extending back to classical times, when, as Kristeva points out, the genius was divine. The Latin *genius* evokes

a ‘particular god’ who watches over each man, thing, place, state. This ‘presence of a god’ from birth, sharing the destiny of the ‘being’ and disappearing with him, translates from the start an intrinsic communion between the divine and the human.¹³

Later on when the Gospels proclaim the ‘good news’ of the Messiah, the bond with the divine becomes

a gift of love, received and given back, that in its very gratuitousness fulfills a promise and brings into being a pact, thus tracing the outlines of the optimal space for a social and historic exchange. The ‘singularity’ of Christian genius ... implies the *putting into action* of the divine ... which is the presence of love of and for the Other.¹⁴

¹⁰ Michael R.G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 13 - 17

¹¹ John Donne, ‘The Canonization’, in Hayward, ed., p. 28

¹² Spiller, p. 83

¹³ Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic, (Columbia University Press: New York, 2009), p. 30

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 31

In the renaissance, ‘men, who were losing God ... displace transcendence toward the best among them. ... The traits of the “genius” and/or the divinity within each of them’ are conferred onto matchless works of art or vanish ‘into the person who has the quality of “genius”’.¹⁵ As we shall see, the Renaissance ‘genius’ gains in stature through the absorption of his genius, the Lady, but it is a pyrrhic victory. With the loss of the Lady’s divinity, the confidence of possessing the object dissolves, and the *Joi* of courtly love poetry is transformed into the anguished awareness of desire’s lack.

During the thirteenth century, the *stilnovisti*, of which Dante and Cavalcanti were leading poets, developed a new kind of ‘I’, a persona that is mirrored by the beloved Lady.¹⁶ For the *stilnovisti*, the relationship between the Lady and her lover is comparable to the relationship between God and the world, and the language in which the Lady is celebrated is shaped by the Deuterocanonical biblical text *Wisdom of Solomon*. Wisdom as the feminine face of God, -- who participates in creation, who is ‘more beautiful than the sun’, and, ‘reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well’¹⁷ -- is apparent when Dante portrays his beloved Beatrice as Christ when they meet at the end of the *Purgatorio*¹⁸, and ends the *Commedia* after Beatrice leads him to ‘l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle’ [the love that moves the sun and other stars].¹⁹

The sonnet form was used by the *stilnovisti* to describe the Lady’s greeting, or *salute*, an ordinary word for greeting that has the etymological meaning of ‘salvation’. In the *salute*, the Lady appears and bestows her

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 31-32

¹⁶ Spiller, p. 28.

¹⁷ Wisdom of Solomon 7:29 – 8:1

¹⁸ The editor and translator of the new Penguin Classics edition of the *Commedia*, Robert Kirkpatrick, supports this interpretation of Cantos 30 & 31 in the *Purgatorio*. He also notes that in Canto 33 Beatrice speaks in the same words that Christ used to address his disciples, in Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, Robin Kirkpatrick, ed. and trans. (London; Penguin Classics, 2007), pp. 481 & 497. For a fascinating theological discussion on the precedence of Wisdom as the textual model for Christ, see Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2002), pp. 94 – 100.

¹⁹ Robert M. Durling discusses the importance of the Wisdom of Solomon in Dante and Petrarch’s conception of the Lady in Robert M. Durling, ed. & trans., *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 25

love upon the speaker of the poem, arousing an epiphany in him, before passing on her way, in a gift of gratuitous love that functions like the 'putting into action of the divine', which Kristeva attributes to the Christian 'genius'. The sonnet is the record of the singularity of this moment and its impact upon the speaker, which can be so overwhelming that it strikes the poet dumb, as in Cavalcanti's sonnet:

Chi è questa che ven; ch'ogn'om, la mira,
 che fa tremar di chiaritate l'âre,
 e mena seco Amor, sì che parlare
 null'omo pote; ma ciascun sospira?
 O Deo, che sembra quando li occhi gira,
 dical Amor, ch'i'nol savria contare:
 cotanto d'umiltà mi pare,
 ch'ogna'altra ver di lei i' la chiam'ira.
 Non si poria contar la sua piagenza,
 ch'a lei s'inchin'ogni gentil vertute
 e la beltate per la sua dea la mostra.
 Non fu sì alta già la mente nostra,
 e non si pose 'n noi tanta salute,
 che proppriamente n'aviàn canoscenza.²⁰

[Who is she coming, whom all gaze upon,
 who makes the air all tremulous with light
 and at whose side is Love himself? That none
 dare speak, but each man's sighs are infinite.
 Ah me! how she looks round from left to right
 let Love discourse: no words will come from me.
 Lady she seems of such humility
 as makes all others graceless in men's sight.
 The beauty which is hers cannot be said;
 to whom are subject all things virtuous,
 while all things beauteous own her deity.
 Ne'er was the mind of man so nobly led
 nor yet was such redemption granted to us
 that we should ever know her perfectly.]²¹

²⁰ Mario Marti, ed., *Poeti del Dolce Stil Nuovo*, (Florence: 1969), 133, in Spiller, p. 31

²¹ D. G. Rossetti, trans., *Dante and His Circle, 1100-1200-1300*, rev. ed. (London: 1874), 134, adapted, in Spiller, p. 31

The function of language in Cavalcanti's sonnet is not to communicate a message to the Lady, with whom the poet does not speak, but to express the self in its inarticulate experience of epiphany. The sonnet is well shaped to contain the speaker's contemplation of the symbol of the Lady as a reflection of his interior life. Its form requires the poet to come to the point, twice, at the end of the octave and the end of the sestet, and to develop the octave in the sestet in some way. This structure demands more than a simple statement of feeling, but its brevity does not allow for philosophical or narrative development. In the octave Cavalcanti's speaker describes his experience of the *salute*; in the sestet he considers the Lady's moral impact. The sonnet closes by returning to the self-awareness of the speaker, reflected in unspoken visual language that conveys the speaker's *joi* in his spiritual encounter with the Lady, who leads him toward redemption.

The Lady alters the composition of the air as she fills it with light, but she is without real substance; the abstract qualities of her beauty and gift of love are apprehended primarily through the responses she stirs up in the poet. The speaker's feelings of love merge with the affects the Lady produces, and the silent discourse of Love, so that the boundaries between the speaker, Love, and the Lady become indistinct. The sonnet records the moment of the poet's self-awareness of this internal psychic transformation, in which the Lady merges with his own psyche.²²

When Petrarch began to compose love sonnets to his beloved Lady, Laura, in 1330, he inherited the */I/* of the *stilnovisti*. Petrarch's originality lay in the way he expresses the imaginings of his 'great soul' through the metamorphosis of an entire landscape. The speaker in the *Rime* merges his self with the Lady through the repeated use of puns on her name, Laura. 'Laura' derives from 'laurus', the laurel or bay tree, which crowns Apollo, the patron of poets. In this doubling Laura represents both the Lady whom the speaker loves, and the poet's aspiration to win the laurel crown of poetry. The name 'Laura' can also be heard and read as both 'l'aura', 'the breeze', and 'l'auro', 'gold'. The breeze stands both for the effects Laura produces on the landscape, and for the speaker's inspiration, while gold represents both Laura's hair and Apollo, the sun God, who inspires all poetry and is the protector of poets.²³ For example, the opening of *Rime* 196 has three richly layered meanings:

²² See Spiller, pp. 30 - 34 for a detailed discussion of these points.

²³ Spiller, pp. 52 - 53

L'aura serena che fra verdi fronde
Mormorando a ferir nel volto viemme ...

[The calm breeze that through the green leaves comes
murmuring to strike my face ...

or

Laura, in her serenity, who comes among the green leaves with
whispered speech to strike my attention ...

or

The exalted laurel (poetry) that speaks gently among its green
fronds (poems) and comes to strike my attention ...]²⁴

We can see the same metaphors at work in Petrarch's famous *Rime* 190, in which the poet's persona leaves his work to follow a sweet doe, another image for the Lady. The doe appears in the shade of the laurel tree/laurel crown of poetry, when the sun is rising, a reference to the god Apollo, source of poetry and patron of poets, at a time in infertility, implying creative drought. The poet's persona is like a miserable miser seeking the doe as a treasure to hoard within his own mind:

Una candida cerva sopra l'erba
verde m'apparve, con duo corna d'oro,
fra due riviere, all'ombra d'un alloro,
levando 'l sole, a la stagione acerba.
Era sua vista si dolce superba,
ch'i' lasciai per seguirla ogni lavoro:
come l'avarò che 'n cercar tesoro
con diletto l'affanno disacerba.
'Nessun mi tocchi,' al bel collo d'intorno
scritto avea di diamanti et di topazi.
'Liberà farmi al mio Cesare parve.'
Et era 'l sol già vòlto al mezzo giorno,
gli occhi miei stanchi di mirar, non sazi,
quand'io caddi ne l'acqua, et ella sparve.

²⁴ Spiller, p. 61

[A white doe on the green grass appeared to me, with two golden horns, between two rivers, in the shade of a laurel, when the sun was rising in an unripe season.

Her look was so sweet and proud that to follow her I left every task, like the miser who as he seeks treasure sweetens his trouble with delight.

‘Let no one touch me,’ she bore written with diamonds and topazes around her lovely neck. ‘It has pleased my Caesar to make me free.’

And the sun had already turned at midday; my eyes were tired by looking but not sated, when I fell into the water, and she disappeared.]²⁵

The inscription that the persona sees on the doe’s collar refers to a legend, told by Solinus, that, three hundred years after Caesar’s death, white stags were found with collars inscribed ‘Noli me Tangere quia Caesaris sum’ [Do not touch me for I am Caesar’s]. These words are a conjunction of two passages in the Latin Vulgate. In John 20:17 Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection and says to her: Do not hold me [noli me tangere] since I have not yet gone up to my father. In Matthew 22:21 Jesus tells the Pharisees to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. In the conjoined phrase reported by Solinus a substitution has taken place. The white stag – symbolising Christ who belongs with God - is usurped by the temporal monarch, Caesar.

Robert During, the standard translator of Petrarch into English, suggests that in Petrarch’s Rime 190, ‘my Caesar’, probably means God. Even if this is so, by using the name of an earthly ruler to represent God, and showing Caesar as possessing the doe, in place of ‘Love Himself’ who stood beside the Lady in Cavalcanti’s poem, Petrarch starts down the road to humanism. The doe may belong to God, but she is also an image created by, and belonging to, the poet, earthly Caesar, whose imagination has set her free. Like God, the poet can create an abundant and ever-changing landscape, which he delights in filling with symbols of ecstatic self-contemplation. That, Narcissus-like, the God/poet might be leaning over

²⁵ Francesco Petrarch, *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems*, trans., Robert M. Durling, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 336

the river gazing at his own image reflected in the surface of the water, is suggested by the ending of the poem, when the speaker falls into the water and the vision disappears.²⁶

In Ovid's myth, Narcissus mistakes his reflection for solid reality. When he tries to embrace it, the surface of the spring is disturbed and the image disappears. In horror, Narcissus beats himself to death. His tragedy is that he did not understand the image to be a reflection of himself. Early Christian thought reworked the *topos* of Narcissus to create an inner space in which the image is acknowledged to be a reflection, and Narcissus is transcended. Plotinus sees the soul as creating a mirror of the world, or reflection, that leads it towards the ideal of Beauty.²⁷ By creating reflections of the world the eye becomes 'inner', and rather than being dazzled by the 'bright objects' of the world, the eye looking inwardly sees the 'beauty of the good soul'. And as with the *stilnovisti*, the speaker is changed spiritually by the beautiful visions seen within his soul. 'He has become other, he is no longer himself.'²⁸

Petrarch inherits transcendental Narcissism from Christian tradition. But for Petrarch, the experience of looking and reflecting is no longer expressed as a spiritual *salute* from the Lady that brings salvation. Petrarch's *Joi* come from the unending delight of gazing with love at the greatness of his own soul. Even though the speaker's eyes are tired, they are still not sated by the image of the doe when he falls into the water. As Kristeva puts it, explaining Plotinian Narcissism, '(This) is a self sufficient love that radiates in itself and for itself – a felicitous, dazzling return of Narcissus.'²⁹ What we are seeing here is the internalisation of the Lady by the Renaissance poet-genius. Unlike the Narcissus of Ovid's myth, Petrarch knows that the doe is the idealised reflection of his mind. Therefore the poem ends lightly, almost humorously, with the speaker's mishap of carelessly falling into the water, rather than with the tragedy of his death.

Wyatt's translation of Petrarch's *Rime* 190, 'Who so List to Hounte',

²⁶ The latin root of the verb 'di marer', used by Petrarch in line 13 to describe how the poet is looking when his eyes tire, is *mirari*, which is also the root of the English, 'to mirror'. OED Online, Third edition, March 2002

²⁷ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, pp. 106-7

²⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads*, E. Bréhier, trans. [Belle Lettres], in Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, pp. 108-9

²⁹ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 111

famously reworks Petrarch's imagery. Wyatt transposes the doe from Petrarch's abundant, mythical landscape to the competitive field sport of the King's hunt, and at the same time makes the decisive shift in Caesar's identity from God to earthly King, introduced as a threatening third figure in his metaphorical landscape.

Who so list to hounte I know where is an hynde
 But as for me helas I may no more
 The vayne travaille hath weried me so sore
 I ame of them that farthest cometh behinde
 Yet may I by no meanes my weried mynde
 Drawe from the Diere, but as she fleeth afore
 Faynting I folowe I leve of therefore,
 Sithens in a nett I seke to hold the wynde
 Who list her hount I put him owte of dowbte
 As well as I may spend his tyme in vain
 And graven with Diamondes in letters plain
 There is written her faier neck rounde abowte
 Noli me tangere for Cesar's I ame
 And wylde for to hold, though I seme tame.³⁰

By contrast with Petrarch's sonnet, Wyatt's arduous landscape of the mind wearies and defeats the fainting poet. A wind blows through it that he can't capture in the language or form of the sonnet, which is like a net full of holes. Rather than imaginary plenitude, the poet encounters lack. Even though he has no hope of reaching the hind, he follows, unable to give up his desire although the hind is too wild/dangerous to hold. In the competitive Oedipal world of the King's hunt, Wyatt's persona must accept that the hind belongs to Caesar the King. Wyatt emphasizes this authority's absolute power by holding back his description of the possessive inscription on the hind's collar until the sonnet's epigrammatic closing couplet.

As with Petrarch, the hind is portrayed by the speaker as an image, which his mind cannot draw away from. The speaker does not merge with the divine doe in a moment of spiritual epiphany, or gaze at her as a transcendental Narcissus, in loving self-regard. Rather, dispossessed by the King, the speaker is alone with himself, 'of them that farthest cometh

³⁰ Sir Thomas Wyatt, 'Who so list to hounte I know where is an hynde', in Alice Oswald, ed., *Sir Thomas Wyatt: Poems selected by Alice Oswald* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. xxiii

behinde'. Deprived of union with the divine or with himself, like Ovid's Narcissus, Wyatt's speaker cannot close the circle of psychic 'internality'. Like the net with which he seeks to capture the wind, his self 'remains open, gaping, mortal',³¹ lamenting its lack.

Just as, in the twelfth century, Kristeva finds a connection between the joyful songs of the Troubadours and Bernard of Clairveaux's religious preoccupation with the biblical text *Song of Songs*, so it seems to me that it is no accident that the anguished Oedipal voice of *Who so List To Hunt* coincides not only with Wyatt's loss of Anne Boleyn to Henry VIII, but also with the crisis in religion brought about by the King in order to unmake a succession of Queens, in the process establishing the English reformation, with its repression of images of the divine Lady in the Deuterocanonical Wisdom texts, and Mary herself. Henceforward, in English courtly love poetry, spiritual salvation and a masculine God will be opposed to the self-fashioning of courtly love, which is now guided towards idealisation by Ovid's love Goddess Venus and her son Cupid, who are understood by sonneteers to be literary tropes.³² But rather than filling the speaker with jouissance, Venus and Cupid victimise and torment their hapless victims, and the poetic emphasis shifts from the jubilatory experiences of transcendence that we have seen in Continental courtly love poetry, to the passions and torments of the early modern subject, in whose internalised landscape desire's lack comes to the fore.

The theme of melancholy lack underpins Lady Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus*, the first sonnet sequence to be written by a

³¹ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 121

³² See for example, Sonnet V in Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*: 'It is most true, what we call *Cupids* dart / An image is, which for ourselues we carue, / And, foolse, adore in temple of our hart, / Till that good god make church and churchmen starue. ... True, that on earth we are but pilgrims made, / And should in soule up to our country moue: / True, and yet true that I must *Stella* loue.' Renaissance Editions, University of Oregon, 2009 (<http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/stella.html>). As far as I know, the only English sonneteer to retain the association of the Lady with the Christian divine is Spenser, see for example, Sonnet XXII in *Amoretti and Epithalamion*: 'This holy season fit to fast and pray, / Men to deuotion ought to be inclined: / therefore, I likewise on so holy day, / for my sweet Saynt some seruice fit will find, / Her temple fayre is built within my mind, / in which her glorious ymage placed is ...' Yet Spenser sets up this image of his Lady as a Christian divinity only to expose this fantasy as folly later in the sonnet sequence. Renaissance Editions, University of Oregon, 2009 (<http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/amoretti.html>)

woman in English. The opening sonnet in the sequence recalls the opening of Petrarch's *Trionfe*, when, warmed by the early morning sun, with its connotations of new beginnings, Petrarch's persona falls asleep, and, after dreaming that he becomes the victim of Queen Venus and her son Cupid, wakes love struck. Wroth chooses strikingly different language to introduce this Petrarchan theme. From the first line of the sonnet Pamphilia is enveloped in images of darkest night, and, unlike male sonneteers, who delight in and assert their self-knowledge, Wroth portrays Pamphilia in a deathlike state of not knowing herself.

When nights black mantle could most darknes prove,
And sleepe deaths Image did my senceses hierie
From knowledge of my self, ...

Pamphilia awakes from the dream as a lover, Cupid having 'martir'd my poore hart'. She burns with passion, and longs for the sight of her beloved, 'Your sight is all the food I doe desire,' [P15]. But throughout the sequence Pamphilia, whose name means 'all loving', is tortured by jealousy in the absence of her beloved, Amphilanthus, whose name means, 'the lover of two'.³³ It is tempting to conjecture that the 'greater powre' that ravishes Pamphilia's 'deere delight' [P29] is not so much a flesh and blood rival as it is his beloved Lady, the internalised image representing his own, self-fashioned, self-infatuation. Whatever the cause of Amphilanthus' inconstancy, in stark contrast to earlier sonnet sequences, the love object is entirely absent from all but two poems in the sequence.

When Pamphilia is in the presence of her beloved, she gazes at him with all the intensity of desire that we expect from a courtly love poet: 'mine eyes enjoye full sight of love / Contented that such hapinesses move.' [P39] But Amphilanthus is not developed in the sequence as an object of the speaker's mind. There are no blazon or *carpe diem* themes itemising his desirable qualities or expressing the urgency of consummating the relationship. When, in Poem 23, the poet imagines a hunt, she does not picture Pamphilia pursuing an image of the beloved as a charming, desirable stag, in a feminine reversal of Wyatt's imagery. Pamphilia withdraws from the hunt altogether, to sit alone inside, chasing her thoughts in a day-like night, her eyes 'voyd of right' because they can't gaze on her beloved.

³³ Josephine A. Roberts, Ed., *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), p. 42

In this blank and solitary interior space, Pamphilia's mind flies to the 'wished end' of hawking, in a fantasy of being captured in the talons of her beloved, as a wild bird is captured by a hawk. Pamphilia visualises herself as her beloved's prey, the object of her beloved's desire, which indeed classical psychoanalysis would lead us to expect of feminine desire, but this imagery is presented in a kind of double negative. The metaphor of the hawk does not stand for the symbolic presence of the beloved, but is grasped as a thought, which marks his absence. The desired moment of sexual possession is merely gestured towards in the abstract term 'wished end', rather than being symbolised within an imaginary landscape. In Pamphilia's world of feminine lack, her solitary thoughts are more prized than social pastimes yet her 'sweet thoughts of love' are not true pleasures, but merely 'poore vanities':

When every one to pleasing pastime hies
 Some hunt, some hauke, some play, while some delight
 In sweet discourse, and musique shows ioy's might
 Yett I my thoughts doe farr above thes prise.

The ioy which I take, is that free from eyes
 I sitt, and wunder att this daylike night
 Soe to dispose them-selves, as voyd of right;
 And leave true pleasure for poore vanities.

When others hunt, my thoughts I have in chase;
 If hauke, my minde att wished end doth fly,
 Discourse, I with my spiritt tauke, and cry
 While others, musique choose as greatest grace.

O God, say I, can thes fond pleasures move,
 Or musique bee butt in sweet thoughts of love? [P26]

For Kristeva, the narcissistic image, on which idealizations of the other are based, is a necessary self-deception that protects the not-yet an Ego from the emptiness of the mother's absence, and thus insures an elementary separation. It is preserved through identification with the speech of the other, and the incorporation of language.³⁴ It is possible that Pamphilia's thoughts do not conjure up a narcissistic image of her beloved

³⁴ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, pp. 25-26

because, according to Kristeva, women are more vulnerable to melancholic breakdown than men. The subject's loss of the archaic bond with the mother, or maternal body, is for men more easily sublated within language, especially poetic language, in which rhythm and tone recapture the joy of that early bond, whereas for women, who are largely excluded from the compensation of symbolic representations, the loss of the mother is more easily experienced as an imprisonment in a dead space of emptiness and loss. For Kristeva, writing is the cure for this melancholy: 'poetic revolution' is a counter-depressant that enables the author to creatively participate in symbolic production, and in the process transform herself and her culture.³⁵ Of course, in writing a sonnet sequence, Wroth is participating in just such a process of creative transformation. But the speaker of her sonnet sequence is not permitted to perform such a creative, public role. Pamphilia is unable to 'breathe least part' of her passionate love in public:

How like a fire doth love increase in mee,
The longer that itt lasts, the stronger still,
The greater purer, brighter, ...

Mine eyes can scarce sustaine the flames my hart
Doth trust in them my passions to impart,
And languishingly strive to show my love;

My breath nott able is to breathe least part
Of that increasing fuell of my smart;
yet love I will till I butt ashes prove.' [P55]

What Wroth offers us with her persistent images of sleep, night, death, and loss, is an insight into the emptiness behind the screen of the narcissistic image: 'Night cannot grief intombe though black as spite.' [P12] Though she longs for the other, Pamphilia finds only the abyss of the spring in which the reflection of the self disintegrates. By portraying Pamphilia as suffering from the almost total absence of Amphilanthus, to the extent that he is barely imagined other than as an absence, Wroth takes the reader much further into Narcissus' melancholy abyss than does Wyatt. Like Ovid's Narcissus, Pamphilia longs to die.

³⁵ Zakin, Emily, 'Psychoanalytic Feminism' in Edward N. Zalta ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2011 Edition)*, (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/feminism-psychoanalysis>)

For all the depth of my hart-held despaire
 Is that for you I feele nott death for care;
 But now I'll seek it since you will nott save. [P6]

At the apex of the sonnet sequence, Pamphilia considers the alternatives that are available to her in a 'Crowne of Sonnets dedicated to Love', in which she compares her predicament to being trapped in a labyrinth. Petrarch described his love for Laura as a labyrinth of 'lovely branches' in which reason is dead; and one yearning desire is born after another:

Vertute, Honor, Bellezza, atto gentile,
 Dolci parole ai bei rami m' àn giunto
 Ove soavemente il cors s'invesca

[Virtue, honor, beauty, gentle bearing, sweet words brought us to the lovely branches, that my heart may be sweetly enlimed.]³⁶

Petrarch's labyrinth of lovely branches includes the entire body of his *Rime*, whereas Wroth's labyrinth is a closed cycle of fourteen sonnets in which the last line of each poem becomes the first line of the next poem in the sequence. Rather than creating an imaginary landscape, Pamphilia continues to examine her solitary thoughts, in a metaphysical dialogue with herself. And by contrast to Petrarch's delight in his never-ending entrapment, the directions open to Pamphilia are all painful.

In this strange labourinth how shall I turne?
 Wayes are on all sids while the way I miss:
 If to the right hand, ther, in love I burne;
 Lett me goe forward, therin danger is;

If to the left, suspicion hinder bliss,
 Lett mee turne back, shame cries I ought returne
 Nor fainte though crosses with my fortunes kiss;
 Stand still is harder, although sure to mourne; ...

Yett that which most my troubled sence doth move

³⁶ Petrarch Rime 211, trans. Robert Durling, as quoted in Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 11

is to leave all, and take the thread of love. [P77]

The 'thread of love' is not a physical direction, but, as we learn in the following sonnet, the metaphysical concept of Love itself.

... Which line strait leads unto the soules content ...

Which chaste thoughts guide us then owr minds ar bent
To take that good which ill from us remove,
Light of true Love, brings fruite which none repent
Butt constant lovers seeke, and wish to prove;

Love is the shining star of blessings light;
The fervent fire of zeale, the roote of peace,
The lasting lampe fed with the oyle of right;
Image of fayth, and wombe for joyes increase. [P78]

Love, personified in the corona as a mature Cupid in his court, is an idealised masculine divine love, with the qualities of being chaste, constant, and blessed, comparable to Christian love. Pamphilia now attempts a role reversal in the traditional speaking voice of the courtly love poet. Rather than presenting herself as the desiring lover, she proposes to herself that she join Cupid in his court to, 'bee in his brave court a glorious light', that is, to occupy the position of the Lady. [P79]

As the Lady, Pamphilia ejects the Goddess Venus from the court because Venus lusts, which is sinful. In the lovely fifth sonnet of the corona, describing Pamphilia's longed for state of *joi*, Pamphilia differentiates lust from 'true desire', which is elevated by Love into:

vertues which inspire / Soules with devine love, ...
and guide hee is to joyings; open eyes
Hee hath to hapines' [P81]

Thus transformed by Love Pamphilia presents herself as offering an epiphany that rains blessedness on her beloved like the *salute* of the Beloved Lady, and suggests that if he rejects this experience, her beloved will lose the opportunity to become a greater soul, more 'parfett' than he is. The poet identifies herself in this role by the use of the pun 'worth', the

common pronunciation for 'Wroth'.³⁷

Hee that shuns love doth love him self the less
 And cursed hee whos spiritt nott admires
 The worth of love, wher endless blessednes
 Raines, and commands, maintained by heavnly fires [P84]

The Crowne of Sonnets contains the speaker's passionate articulation of the joys, fires, ashes and light of her desires. The speaker is also idealised in the feminine architecture of the labyrinth, which metaphorically encircles the interior space of an idealised female body within which Cupid rules as a phallic love God. In Poem 81, the poet makes this connection explicit, 'love is ... the womb for joyes increase.' Ultimately though, the Protestant Wroth's attempt to elevate a real desiring heroine to the role of the divine Lady can't be sustained. 'Frayle dull earth' undermines Pamphilia's attempt at self-idealisation by bringing forth 'plenty that in ills abound':

A timeles, and unseasonable birth
 Planted in ill, in wurse time springing found,
 Which hemlock like might feed a sick-witts mirthe
 Wher unruld vapors swim in endless rounde. [P87]

Like a miscarriage, jealousy undoes Pamphilia's faith of heart and pure thoughts. So as we reach the fourteenth and last sonnet in the corona, these 'mischiefs' bring her full circle, back to her initial position of paralysis.

Curst jealousie doth all her forces bend
 To my undoing; thus my harmes I see.

Soe though in Love I fervently doe burne,
 In this strange labourinth how shall I turn? [P90]

In the second last sonnet in the sequence, Pamphila overcomes a wintry and desolate mood, to hopefully maintain her love for her beloved in his absence, 'for this state may mend.' In a mirror reversal of the tormented opening sonnet, the final sonnet resolves Pamphilia's state of not knowing herself and her anguished lack. She tells herself:

³⁷ Bear, R.S. and Bear, Micah eds., *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, (Renaissance Editions, University of Oregon, 1992), bibliographic note, (<http://www.luminarium.org/renaissance-editions/mary.html#Pamphilia%20>)

My muse now hapy, lay thyself to rest,
 Sleepe in the quiet of a faithful love

This resolution is achieved by abandoning the discourse of Venus and her son with the tormenting ‘phant’sies’ they provoke, in order to study truth instead, ‘which shall eternall goodnes prove,’

And thus leave off, what’s past shows you can love,
 Now lett your constancy your honour prove.’ (P103)

Constancy is an abstract Christian virtue, modelled on Christ’s love, as expressed, for example, in Hebrews 13:8, ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever’. The sonnet sequence seems so closely to follow Revelation 2:10, ‘Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life’, that the resolution of the quandary posed in the ‘Crowne of Sonnets’ could be modelled on it. Although, as we have seen, Pamphilia fails to elevate herself to become the divine Lady, she now absorbs the Lady’s attribute of constancy into her wan genius.³⁸

Crucially, Pamphilia reasons her way to her rejection of Love’s ‘phant’sies’. Wroth’s valorisation of reason over Love reflects the banishment of love taking place within the Renaissance as the *Ego affectus est*, the loving subject of the *Song of Songs* and courtly love poetry, gives way to the thinking subject, the *Ego cogito*, as it will soon be formulated by Descartes in his *Discours De la Méthode* of 1637.

Wroth reworks the persona of the Petrarchan sonneteer, transforming the metaphor of the Lady into the embodiment of a feminine desiring subjectivity grappling with lack. The pleasurable poetic performance of the human self overcomes the devastations of this abyss, in the creation of a reasoning, if wintry and still lacking, Christian humanist subject, who rejects the dressing up of love in Venus’ livery. That this defensive formulation of Pamphilia’s Ego is not creatively life-affirming is betrayed by the ‘gloewoorme like’ appearance of the sun’s ‘colde beames’, and that it leads her to put her poetic genius to rest, in the resolution of her need to

³⁸ This interpretation is supported by Wroth’s subsequent development of the narrative of *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus* in the prose romance *Urania*. Her editor notes that in the latter work, when Pamphilia accepts the keys to the Throne of Love, the personified ‘Constancy vanished, as metamorphosing her self into her breast.’ Roberts, *Wroth*, p. 142

write courtly love poetry. Fittingly, the sonnet sequence that takes the side of reason against Venus and Cupid is the last courtly love sonnet sequence to be published in English.

Wroth's disillusionment with courtly love was shared by the young George Herbert, who wrote in 1610:

My God, where is that ancient heat towards thee.
Wherewith whole showls of *Martyrs* once did burn,
Besides their other flames? Doth Poetry
Wear Venus *livery*? *Only serve her turn*?
Why are not *Sonnets* made of thee? And layes
Upon thy Altar burnt? Cannot thy love
Heighten a spirit to sound out thy praise
As well as any she?³⁹

By the 17th Century the inherited tradition of courtly love poetry and its personas, themes and metaphors were no longer a credible way of expressing the self and its aspirations, partly because, as I have outlined, the development of the sonnet tradition enabled the self-fashioning of modern subjectivity, in which the Lady vanished into the poet's persona.

Mary Wroth is a contemporary of John Donne's, and the work of both poets shares a preoccupation with metaphysics and scepticism about courtly love, particularly with regards to the constancy of the beloved. But while Wroth ultimately portrays Pamphilia's constancy as an honourable expression of true love, Donne mocks the very idea of the Lady's constancy, along with other common tropes in courtly love poetry.

This satirical downgrading of the Lady is identified by Kristeva as the collapse of the idealisation necessary for *Joi* to be experienced in heterosexual love relationships. 'The Lady need no longer be exalted: an object to be conquered, in the same way as the rest of the world, the feminine character is a target of satire. ... Reason, prevailing more and more, was to banish Love and *Joi* and, with them, not woman (was she ever truly the main preoccupation of courtliness?) but the very possibility of idealisation supported by the possible-impossible meeting with the other sex.'⁴⁰

³⁹ George Herbert, 'double sonnet', in F. E. Hutchinson, ed., *The Works of George Herbert*, Rev. ed. (Oxford: 1978), p. 206, as quoted in Spiller, p. 177.

⁴⁰ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 296

Donne undermines the idealisations of courtly love poetry with the hard-edged reality of a lovers tryst, not only as thematic content, but also in form and style, in ‘Woman’s Constancy’, a sonnet that breaks away from the traditional sonnet form.

Now thou hast lov’d me one whole day,
 To morrow when thou leav’st what wilt thou say?
 Wilt thou then Antedate some new made vow?
 Or say that now
 We are not just those persons, which we were?
 Or that oathes made in reverentiall feare
 Of Love, and his wrath, any may forswear?
 Or, as true deaths, true maryages untie,
 So lovers contracts, images of those,
 Binde but till sleep, death’s image, them unloose?
 Or, your owne end to Justifie,
 For having purpos’d change, and falsehood; you
 Can have no way but falsehood to be true?
 Vaine lunatique, against these scapes I could
 Dispute, and conquer, if I would,
 Which I abstain to doe,
 For by to morrow, I may think so too.⁴¹

Donne uses dramatic techniques and plain speaking to break up the predictable smoothness, rhymes and turns of the sonnet form. His sonnet has an odd number of lines, seventeen in total, of irregular lengths, and while in broad outline it has much the same proportion as the sonnet, its raggedness allows Donne to mimic the sardonic turns of the speaker’s wit. In the last four lines of the poem the speaker appears to come to the point with a conventional couplet, in which like a courtly love poet, he asserts that he could persuade his lover to be constant, but then he mirrors the couplet with another one expressing the opposite stance: that the speaker won’t take the love poet’s position of persuasion and seduction, because he too may want to wriggle out of the vows he made in the moment of passion.

Donne’s speaker mocks the very notion of metaphorical images in courtly love poetry, with the mirroring within the poem of images comparing true deaths that untie true marriages with ‘lovers contracts,

⁴¹ John Hayward, ed., *John Donne*, p. 25

images of those', unloosed not by death, but by death's image sleep. The endless, Ovid inspired, metamorphoses of Laura into charming images of the doe, the laurel tree, and so on, in Petrarch's Rime, for example, are here derided as nothing more than the refractions of an empty hall of mirrors, that can bend any kind of falsehood into the semblance of truth. Donne's speaker is a lover for whom love vows are meaningless, who cannot idealise his lover in order to experience a compelling lifelong, creative passion. He is destined instead to be always lacking, in the constant search for new objects of desire, which will always reveal themselves to be empty images.

Later in his life, Donne would show us the difficulties that the Renaissance genius would have in connecting with an increasingly intangible male God amidst the spiritual uncertainty of the early modern world, with its great strides of reason and knowledge, the New Philosophy that filled the seventeenth century with such anxiety. As Kristeva describes it, with the advent of the *Ego cogito*, 'internal space closes up to the benefit not of a journey in the folds of the soul and of its lining, the utterance, but of one bent for knowledge and possession of the outside.'⁴² The speaker in Sonnet XIV of the Holy Sonnets expresses this anguish as a kind of exile from, and desperate longing to be ravished by, precisely the epiphanic experience of Love's affects that proved so ecstatic for Cavalcanti's medieval speaker in his encounter with the Lady's *salute*:

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
 As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
 That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee,'and bend
 Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.
 I, like a usurpt towne, to'another due,
 Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,
 Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
 But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue.
 Yet dearly'I love you,'and would be loved faine,
 But am betroth'd unto your enemye:
 Divorce mee,'untie, or breake that knot againe,
 Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
 Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.⁴³

⁴² Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 296

⁴³ John Hayward, ed., *John Donne*, pp. 171-2

For Donne's speaker reason is no help in the labour to admit God or experience his affects. In order to know God's love, the speaker yearns to feel God's affects on his body, but this is precisely what he cannot feel. God's touch is too light and innocuous to imprison the speaker, who in begging for a more thorough ravishment inscribes the amatory space of his desire in language that bursts with syllables shoe-horned into the pentameter lines of the sonnet, roughly trampling over what had once been the rocking iambic rhythm of courtly love sonnets inspired by the Lady.

Donne's love poem 'The Sunne Rising' represents the epitome of Renaissance self-fashioning, and it also includes his most complex reference to the theme of 'the hunt', in which Donne's lover persona offers a bravura display of self-mastery and high self-esteem. He begins the poem by addressing the sun as a 'busie old foole, unruly Sunne' who is a 'sawcy pedantique wretch', in a marked contrast to Petrarch's idealisation of the sun as the god Apollo, patron of poets. At the time when the medieval order of the universe is being overthrown by the Copernican revolution, Donne undermines the old fashioned idealisations of courtly love by presenting the sun as having an unruly orbit. However, his persona has such complete mastery and power that he can tease the cheeky old sun, and order it around. He instructs the sun to 'Goe tell Court-huntsmen, that the King will ride,' rather than bothering the lovers with the morning light.

Donne's lover is 'all States', offering the treasures of 'both th'India's of spice and Myne, as well as perhaps being in all states of sexual arousal. Having thus demoted the Lady to the status of a conquered world, the speaker takes the position of its ruler. He tells the sun that he is all the kings in the world: 'those Kings whom thou saw'st yesterday/ ... All here in one bed lay.' Unlike Dante, who reflects the reverence of the *stilnovisti* for their Ladies, when he concludes the *Commedia* after Beatrice leads him to 'l'amore che move il sole e l'altre stelle' [the love that moves the sun and other stars], Donne's male lover imposes his own will on the sun: 'Shine here to us, and thou art every where; / This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy spheare.' Donne's persona exemplifies the absorption of the Lady in the Renaissance 'genius', who places himself at the centre of this humanist universe, which is his to command.⁴⁴

'The Sunne Rising' is a vigorous and jubilant love poem, yet as we have

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 26-27

observed, Donne would not spend his life in such a state of bliss. Donne's speaker's fantasy is conjured up at the moment when the Renaissance genius has lost possession of the divine Lady, and with her loss, the genius has also lost the loving subject's ability to *Joi*.

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