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‘Lust in Action’

Control and Abandon in Dante, Petrarch, and Shakespeare

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3. 'Lust in Action'

Control and Abandon in Dante, Petrarch, and Shakespeare

This chapter proposes a reading of three sonnets that explore the relationship between will, knowledge, and desire: Dante's 'Io sono stato con Amore insieme', Petrarch's 'S'amor non è, che dunque è quel ch'io sento?' (*Rvf* 132), and Shakespeare's 'Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame' (sonnet 129). Our decision to read these three texts together derives from the fact that they are all 'mini-treatises' on passion in the sonnet form that analyse desire from a physiological perspective and define it as a sensual force overcoming the will and rendering the subject passive.

In this undertaking, as we have mentioned in the introduction, our aim is not to put forward a genealogical link between the texts or to suggest that one is the source of the other. As far as we are aware, it is not known whether Shakespeare knew Dante, even though it has been suggested that Petrarch may work as an intermediary between the two given that Shakespeare would have been familiar with at least some of Petrarch's poems in Thomas Wyatt's and

Surrey's translations/adaptations. Moreover, in the specific case of *Rvf* 132, that poem came into the English tradition as early as Chaucer, when he incorporated a translation/expansion of it in his *Troilus and Criseyde*, providing an authoritative link to the English context.¹ We are also aware that the transversal reading we are attempting could risk abstracting the three poems under discussion from their original context. In a way, this is a stronger gesture in the case of Petrarch and Shakespeare since they wrote lyric sequences in which the placement of a particular poem is very much part of the meaning of the poems themselves (and, as we shall indicate later, *Rvf* 132 and sonnet 129 are not only each within a 'sequence' but also in a 'sub-sequence').² Yet as will become clear, Dante's sonnet also points to a larger context within the poet's *oeuvre* and as such is embedded in its own way in a field of textual relationships.

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- 1 On the relationship between Shakespeare and Petrarch, also in the context of English Petrarchism, see Thomas P. Roche, Jr, *Petrarch and the English Sonnet Sequences* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), esp. chapter 8; Heather Dubrow, *English Petrarchism and its Counterdiscourses* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), esp. chapter 4; Ronald L. Martinez, 'Francis, Thou Art Translated: Petrarch Metamorphosed in English, 1380–1595', *Humanist Studies & the Digital Age* 1.1 (2011), pp. 80–108; Linda Gregerson, 'Open Voicing: Wyatt and Shakespeare', in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare's Poetry*, ed. by Jonathan Post (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 151–66.
 - 2 On the notion of lyric sequence see Barolini, 'The Making of a Lyric Sequence'. See also Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Sonnet Sequence: A Study of its Strategies* (New York: Twayne, 1997); Olivia Holmes, *Assembling the Lyric Self: Authorship from Troubadour Song to Italian Poetry Book* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Marco Santagata, *Dal sonetto al canzoniere: Ricerche sulla preistoria e la costituzione di un genere* (Padua: Liviana, 1979); Marisa Galvez, *Songbook: How Lyrics Became Poetry in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); and Roland Greene and Bronwen Tate, 'Lyric Sequence', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Greene and others, pp. 834–36, including the bibliography listed at the end of the entry.

As in the rest of this book, the experiment that we propose carrying out is to bring the poems into dialogue and see what they share and where they differ from one other, with the hypothesis that they can illuminate each other in productive ways. Pivotal to our reading is an attention to poetic form, specifically the way in which each poet appropriates — or transgresses — the constraints of the sonnet form in order to express or even master the uncontrollable nature of desire by exhibiting differing degrees of control in or over his texts. In this case, too, our attention to form is indebted to Bersani's concept of 'aesthetics', which acknowledges textuality's capacity to replicate the movement of desire and have the reader experience it.³

LUCIDITY

Dante's 'Io sono stato' is a sonnet written to Cino da Pistoia most likely between 1303 and 1306 and, as such, is one of the author's latest lyrics. It is accompanied by a Latin epistle in reply to Cino's sonnet 'Dante, quando per caso s'abbandona', which opens by posing in an obscure way the question of whether it is licit to abandon an old love for a new one:

Dante, quando per caso s'abbandona
 lo disio amoroso della speme
 che nascer fanno gli occhi del bel seme
 di quel piacer che dentro si ragiona, i' dico, poi se morte le
 perdona
 e Amor tienla più delle due estreme,
 che l'alma sola, la qual più non teme,
 si può ben trasformar d'altra persona.

3 See [Chapter 1](#).

(Dante, when by chance it happens that the love-desire despairs of that hope which the eyes cause to grow from the fair seed of beauty revolved in the mind, then I say that — if death reprieves her, and if Love controls her more than the two extremes — the soul, left to herself and fearing nothing more now, is fully at liberty to change to another person.) (1–8)⁴

A reply to this proposition by Cino, Dante's sonnet can be considered a *quaestio de amore*. It reads as follows:

Io sono stato con Amore insieme
 de la circolazion del sol mia nona,
 e so com'egli affrena e come sprona
 e come sotto lui si ride e geme. Chi ragione o virtù contra
 gli sprieme,
 fa come que' che 'n la tempesta sona
 credendo far colà dove si tona
 esser le guerre de' vapori sceme. Però nel cerchio de la sua
 palestra
 liber arbitrio già mai non fu franco,
 sì che consiglio invan vi si balestra. Ben può con nuovi
 spron punger lo fianco,
 e qual che sia 'l piacer ch'ora n'addestra,
 seguitar si convien, se l'altro è stanco.⁵

4 Cino's sonnet and its translation are cited from *Dante's Lyric Poetry*, ed. by Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyde, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1, pp. 198–99. On Dante's correspondence with Cino, see André Pézard, 'De passione in passionem', *L'Alighieri*, 1 (1960), pp. 14–26; Natascia Tonelli, 'Amor da che convien ch'io mi doglia', in *Dante: Le quindici canzoni. Lette da diversi* (Lecce: Pensa Multimedia, 2012), pp. 255–83; Enrico Fenzi, 'Ancora sulla Epistola a Moroello e sulla "montanina" di Dante (*Rime*, 15)', *Tenzzone*, 4 (2003), pp. 43–84; and Sabrina Ferrara, 'Io mi credea del tutto esser partito: il distacco di Dante da Cino', in *Cino nella storia della poesia italiana*, ed. by Rossend Arqués Corominas and Silvia Tranfaglia (Florence: Cesati, 2016), pp. 99–111.

5 Dante's sonnet is cited from Dante Alighieri, *Rime*, ed. by Domenico de Robertis (Tavarnuzze [Florence]: SISMELE · Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2005).

(I have been together with Love | since my ninth rotation of the sun, | and I know how he tightens his reins and digs in his spurs | and how under his sway you laugh and groan. || Trying to use reason or power against him | is like ringing church bells in a storm, | thinking they will calm the clashing vapours | where the thunder sounds. || For on Love's battleground | free will has never truly been free, | and reason shoots there in vain. || He can spur you on again, rest assured; | and whatever new passion is leading you, | you must pursue it, if the old one is spent.)

Dante's sonnet responds 'per le rime', that is, it reprises the same rhymes of the *envoi* of Cino's poem and states that there is no choice: if an old passion is extinguished and a new attraction arises, one cannot but follow it. In particular, Dante's poem asserts that the lover has no control over passion because it hinders reason and its ability to exert free judgment (9–11). This idea reaffirms a well-established courtly topos, which in Italy had been expounded by the Sicilians and recently reaffirmed by Guido Cavalcanti's tragic and grand exemplum, in particular in the doctrinal *canzone*, 'Donna me prega, per ch'eo voglio dire', which is also a treatise on love. In this poem, Cavalcanti declares that in love, which he regards as a passion of the sensitive soul, 'la 'ntenzione – per ragione vale' (33), effectively expressing the same concept that we later find in Dante's sonnet. Yet if the motif is common in the lyric tradition, it is interesting to note its untimeliness with respect to Dante's meditation on love insofar as it contradicts both the previous project of the *Vita Nova* to integrate desire and reason and the *Commedia's* ethics of desire. In the former, the poet claims that his love for Beatrice happens with 'lo fedele consiglio della ragione' (the faithful

counsel of reason; II, 9/1.10),⁶ and in the central cantos of the *Purgatorio*, desire is explained in precisely the opposite terms of Dante's 'Io sono stato'. One could also contrast the sonnet's claim with Dante's almost-contemporary self-presentation in the *De vulgari eloquentia* as 'cantor rectitudinis' (II, ii, 9), i.e., as a moral poet as exemplified by his *canzone* 'Doglia mi reca ne lo core ardire'. In other words, Dante's journey as a poet is usually seen as a progressive transformation of eros into *caritas*, yet 'Io sono stato' contradicts and destabilizes that linearity and progression by reaffirming the supremacy of eros over reason. Not only does Dante, even at a later stage, theorize desire in terms of compulsion,⁷ but as Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyde have remarked, in the first quatrain he even admits to a 'carnal love' for Beatrice (1–2).⁸

As Dante's accompanying Latin epistle to Cino confirms, here love is a passion of the sensitive soul: 'Cum igitur potentia concupiscibilis, que sedes amoris est, sit po-

6 We quote Dante's *libello* from Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, ed. by Domenico De Robertis, (Milan–Naples: Ricciardi, 1980), which uses the text by Michele Barbi (Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, Florence: Bemporad, 1932). The reference to the text according to its traditional subdivision into forty-two chapters is followed by the reference according to the subdivision into thirty-one paragraphs proposed by Guglielmo Gorni (Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, ed. by Guglielmo Gorni (Turin: Einaudi, 1996)).

7 See Barolini, 'Dante and the Lyric Past', pp. 23–45, and her 'Dante and Cavalcanti (On Making Distinctions in Matters of Love): *Inferno* 5 in its Lyric and Autobiographical Context', in her *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, pp. 70–101. One of the reasons for Dante's return to a more traditional courtly mode could be that he was at this point close to the court of the Malaspina, which was one of the most important centres for troubadour poetry in Occitan. See Gilda Caiati Russo, *Les Troubadours et la Cour des Malaspina* (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2005), and 'Il marchese Moroello Malaspina testimone ideale di un dibattito tra Dante e Cino sull'eredità trobadorica', *Dante Studies*, 124 (2006), pp. 137–48.

8 See *Dante's Lyric Poetry*, ed. by Boyde and Foster, II, p. 323.

tentia sensitiva, manifestum est quod post corruptionem unius passionis qua in actum reducitur, in alium reservatur' (Since, then, the appetitive faculty, which is the seat of love, is a faculty of sense, it is manifest that after the exhaustion of the passion by which it was brought into operation it is reserved for another; III, 5).⁹ As in Cavalcanti, we are in the domain of natural philosophy and medical discourse, which considers the subject as fully submerged in the realm of matter and sensual appetite, which paralyzes the faculty of judgment and its ability correctly to advise the will whether an object of desire is good or bad.¹⁰ This is the precise and technical way one should understand the only-apparent paradox that is put forward in lines 9–11: in matters of love 'free will has never truly been free' (*liber arbitrio già mai non fu franco*).¹¹ In the poem this defeat of reason in Love's arena is expressed through two

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- 9 The Latin epistle to Cino is cited from Dante Alighieri, *Rime*, ed. by Claudio Giunta (Milan: Mondadori, 2018), pp. 517–19. The translation comes from *Dante Alagherii epistolae = The letters of Dante*, trans. by Paget Toynbee, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).
- 10 On will and the faculty of judgment in Dante, see Giorgio Stabile, 'Volontà', in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, ed. by Umberto Bosco, 6 vols (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 1970–78), v, cols 1134–40; and also the definition that Dante gives in *Monarchia* I, xii, 4: 'Si ergo iudicium moveat omnino appetitum et nullu modo preveniatur ab eo, liberum est; si vero ab appetitu quocunque modo preveniente iudicium moveatur, liberum esse non potest, quia non a se, sed ab alio captivum trahitur'. Quoted from Dante, *Monarchia*, ed. and trans. by Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 11 This paradox is only apparent because it can actually be explained through contemporary Scholastic philosophy. On the distinction between free will and free choice in the Scholastic context, see J. B. Korolec, 'Free Will and Free Choice', in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Discovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism 1100–1600*, ed. by Norman Kretzmann and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 629–41 and Alain De Libera, *Volonté et action: Cours du Collège de France 2014/2015* (Paris: Vrin, 2017).

main metaphors: the lover being ridden by Love as a horse (which recalls the common image of old Aristotle being ridden by Phyllis), and the useless ringing of bells during a storm (which anticipates the 'bufera infernal' of *Inferno* v).¹² This passivity culminates in the necessary acquiescence to Love's power that is expressed in the final tercet, where the noun 'piacere' hints that there is nonetheless something pleasurable in this abandon.¹³

So while everything in Dante's sonnet is about compulsion and submission to love, what we find interesting is that there is not much room for overwhelming angst. This is in contrast to the near-contemporary 'canzone montanina', which, as scholars have pointed out, shows several connections, both formal and thematic, with our sonnet, but in a more tormented and heightened mode, which stresses the lover's anguish in being completely dominated by passion.¹⁴ Our sonnet is instead a space of knowledge. The poetic subject has proved the contradictory and destabilizing effects of love, which restrain and goad, provoking laughs and groans, but there is a kind of lucidity in the answer to Cino's question, 'Io sono stato con amore insieme [...] e so com'egli affrena e come sprona | e come sotto lui si ride e geme' (1; 3-4; our emphasis). Phrases like 'so' in l. 3 or 'ben può' in l. 12 leave no space to doubt and correspond to the deductive reasoning of the discourse of science and

12 See Barolini, 'Dante and Cavalcanti', p. 89.

13 Claudio Giunta, in his notes on Dante's sonnet, has glossed 'piacere' not as 'bellezza' but as 'sentimento piacevole della passione amorosa', whereas in Cino's sonnet to which Dante is replying, 'quel piacer che dentro si ragiona' (4) refers to the introjected image of the lady, in her beauty, that the lover turns over in his mind. See Giunta's commentary in Dante, *Rime*, p. 516.

14 On Dante's *Canzone montanina* see Tonelli, 'Amor d che convien'; and John C. Barnes and Zygmunt G. Barański, 'Dante's *Canzone montanina*', *The Modern Language Review*, 73.2 (April 1978), pp. 297-307.

its accurate Scholastic substrate: as we shall see, things are very different in Petrarch. Although Dante's sonnet begins with a series of contrasts, it maintains a kind of consequential, rational movement that culminates with the irrefutable clarity of 'si convien' in the last line. This clear knowledge allows the 'I' to affirm itself so prominently at the beginning of the sonnet: 'Io sono stato con Amore insieme'. Put another way, even if the onslaught of passion is described in a way that could suggest an annihilation of the 'I' under the force of Love, the matter-of-fact tone is maintained, and there is still a subject that commentates on that experience with authority and lucidity.

(IM)BALANCE

Such lucidity is lacking in Petrarch's *Rvf* 132. It is the first sonnet in a triptych on the question of the nature of love, which privileges oxymoron, antithesis, and paradox.¹⁵ It reads:

S'amor non è, che dunque è quel ch'io sento?
 Ma s'egli è amor, perdio, che cosa et quale?
 Se bona, onde l'effecto aspro mortale?
 Se ria, onde sí dolce ogni tormento? S'a mia voglia ardo,
 onde 'l pianto e lamento?
 S'a mal mio grado, il lamentar che vale?
 O viva morte, o dilectoso male,
 come puoi tanto in me, s'io no 'l consento? Et s'io 'l

15 Michelangelo Picone has located the poem after the cinque 'canzoni sorelle' (*Rvf* 125–29) — largely set in Vaucluse and centred on the search for the image of the beloved — and just before the sonnets that denounce the Babylonian captivity of the Church in Avignon (*Rvf* 136–38): 'I paradossi e i prodigi dell'amore passione (*Rvf* 130–140)', in *Il Canzoniere: Lettura micro e Macrotestuale*, ed. by Michelangelo Picone (Ravenna: Longo, 2007), pp. 313–33.

consento, a gran torto mi doglio.
 Fra sí contrari vènti in frale barca
 mi trovo in alto mar senza governo, sí lieve di saver, d'error
 sí carca
 ch'ì medesimo non so quel ch'io mi voglio,
 et tremo a mezza state, ardendo il verno.

(What is this feeling, if not love? | And if love, by God, what is its essence, and what its quality? | If it is good, then why this fatal agony? | If it is wicked, then why is every torment so sweet? || If I burn of my own volition, then why such tears and lamentation? | If against my will, then what sense does lamenting have? | O living death, o delightful anguish, | how can you do so much to me without my consent? || And if I consent, then I have no right to complain. | Buffeted by such opposing winds in a flimsy vessel, | I find myself in rough water without a rudder, || so light of knowledge and heavy with error | that I myself don't know what I want, | and I tremble in mid-summer and burn in winter.) (*Rvf* 132)

Petrarch's sonnet is a veritable mini-treatise on love that situates itself in a line that begins with Guillaume IX d'Aquitaine and extends to Italy through the *tenzone* between the Sicilian poets, Jacopo Mostacci, Pier della Vigna, and Giacomo da Lentini.¹⁶ The poem is one of

16 On the link with Guillaume IX d'Aquitaine, the earliest troubadour poet whose texts have survived, see Marco Santagata's notes to Petrarch's poem, in Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, in relation to the poetic technique of the *devinalh*, 'ovverosia della costruzione di enigmi per addizioni di contrari' (p. 648). The *tenzone* among the Sicilian poets Jacopo Mostacci, Pier della Vigna, and Giacomo da Lentini is made up of three sonnets that debate the nature of love, specifically whether love is, in Aristotelian terms, an 'accident' or a 'substance'. See Michelangelo Picone, 'La tenzone "de amore" fra Jacopo Mostacci, Pier della Vigna e il Notaro', in his *Percorsi della lirica duecentesca* (Florence: Cadmo, 2003), pp. 47–67, and Bettarini's introductory note to *Rvf* 132, in Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere. Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini, 2 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), I, p. 641.

the most Scholastic texts of the collection and opens with the question about the essence of love: 'S'amor non è, che dunque è quel ch'io sento?', in which the feeling of love is established as the object of an intellectual investigation. As Piero Boitani has underscored, the rest of the octave continues by asking six more questions that stem from the first, according to 'a scholasticizing process of *divisio*'.¹⁷ Thus the octave appears to follow the rational and investigative mode of the medieval *quaestio*, addressing not only the nature of love but also the role of the will and opening up several possibilities ranging from total passivity ('Come puoi tanto in me, s'io nol consento?') to responsibility ('E s'io 'l consento, a gran torto mi doglio') and even to paradoxical pleasure ('S'a mia voglia ardo, onde 'l pianto e lamento?').¹⁸ And yet the sestet provides no answer to these questions and, in a quintessentially Petrarchan move, proposes instead the impossibility of knowing due to being prey to love sickness.

Indeed, this poem is not only one of the most Scholastic of Petrarch's collection but also one of the most physiological in its display of the symptoms of the *malattia d'amore*. Bettarini has recalled Andreas Capellanus's treatise *De amore* and stated that in this poem love 'is a pathology of sensation, a feverish disturbance, like the condition of the one who shivers with cold "in mid-summer" and burns in heat in the depths of winter'.¹⁹ These are the same symptoms that, as Natascia Tonelli has shown,

17 Piero Boitani, 'O *quike deth*: Love, Melancholy, and the Divided Self', in *The Tragic and the Sublime in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 56–74 (p. 57).

18 On masochistic pleasure in Petrarch see [Chapters 1 and 2](#).

19 See Rosanna Bettarini's gloss in Petrarcha, *Canzoniere*, I, p. 641; our translation.

inform much of Duecento love poetry, especially Cavalcanti's, with its emphasis on love as a passion of the sensitive soul that affects the body and paralyzes the mind.²⁰

Even though the concept of love is the same as that in Dante's 'Io sono stato', the movement of Dante's and Petrarch's sonnets is different. As we have already hinted, while Dante's sonnet conveyed the poetic subject's grasp of the matter of love and provided a lucid dissection of desire and its consequences with Scholastic precision, Petrarch's sonnet transitions back from the theoretical quest to the poetic subject's feeling and experience of love. The result is that the subject's knowledge is completely hindered and replaced by the typically Petrarchan condition of error — his boat is light on knowledge and heavy on error — which in turn becomes an existential impasse: 'Fra sì contrari venti in frale barca, | mi trovo in alto mar senza governo, | sì lieve di saver, d'error si carica, | ch'i' medesimo non so quel ch'io mi voglio, | e tremo a mezza state, ardendo il verno' (10–14).²¹ The Petrarchan 'I' is even more present than the already prominent 'I' that opened Dante's sonnet, but it stops being concerned with the theoretical understanding of love and capitulates instead to a state of confusion

20 See Tonelli, *Fisiologia della passione*.

21 'Errore' is a quintessentially Petrarchan term and key also in *Rvf* 129, where it designates a state of self-forgetting that stems from a fixation on the beloved's image and Love's control over the 'I', which desires nothing else: 'Ma mentre tener fiso | posso al primo pensier la mente vaga, | et mirar lei, et obliar me stesso, | sento Amor sí da presso, | che del suo proprio error l'alma s'appaga: | in tante parti et sí bella la veggio, | che se l'error durasse, altro non chiegio'. 'Voglia', meanwhile, is a key concept in *Rvf* 118, a sonnet that expresses the impasse that comes from non-decision and is summarized in the lines 'Or qui son, lasso, et voglio esser altrove; | et vorrei piú volere, et piú non voglio; [...] né per mille rivolte ancor son mosso' (9–11; 14). On errancy in Petrarch see Philippe Guérin, 'Pétrarque, ou de l'écriture comme odyssee', in *Voyages de papier: Hommage à Brigitte Urbani*, ed. by Perle Abbrugiati and Claudio Milanese (= *Italies*, 17/18 (2014)), pp. 31–57; and Southerden, 'The Art of Rambling'.

that takes it back to the sensations that gave rise to the investigation in the first place. In other words, if the first line asked the question ‘S’amor non è, che dunque è quel ch’io sento?’; at the end of the sonnet knowledge is gone, and only the ‘sentire’, i.e. sensation, remains. In a similar way, as Warren Ginsberg has indicated, the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction collapses, and the binary Scholastic mode of reasoning is replaced by paradox, which is the Petrarchan mode of desire and already present in the octave with the oxymora ‘dolce [...] tormento’ and ‘dilectoso male’ in lines 4 and 7.²²

One also finds paradox in the status of the ‘I’, which is hindered in its knowledge and reduced to pure sensation but not annihilated. The last two lines reaffirm the poetic subject through the repeated personal pronouns as a coexistence of opposites. Similarly, the epistemological instability (‘non so’) is replicated formally, for example in the imbalance between octave and sestet, in the sense that line 9 seems to logically belong with the quatrains as also indicated by the structure of the *coblas capfinidas* of ‘consento’ in lines 8–9; or, in the last line, where one could expect a parallelism between indicatives, one finds instead the indicative ‘tremo’ followed by the gerund ‘ardendo’. John Kerrigan has spoken of a ‘calculated asymmetry’ that characterizes almost all of Petrarch’s poetry in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, and in *Rvf* 132 what we might call a ‘harmony without symmetry’ conveys the masterly control through which the unstable ‘I’ reaffirms itself and relishes in the pleasure of cultivating that imbalance.²³

22 Warren Ginsberg, ‘Chaucer and Petrarch: “S’amor non è” and the *Canticus Troili*’, *Humanist Studies & the Digital Age*, 1.1 (Winter 2011), pp. 121–27 (p. 122).

23 See John Kerrigan, ‘Between Michelangelo and Petrarch: Shakespeare’s Sonnets of Art’, in *On Shakespeare and Early Modern Literature: Essays*

EXCESS

The question of pleasure is also at stake in Shakespeare's sonnet 129, which is the third of the Dark Lady sequence that follows the sonnets written about the Young Man (1–126). In particular, sonnets 127 and 128 signal an aesthetic shift towards that which the poet calls 'blackness' and which corresponds to a journey into the most obscure recesses of sexual appetite.²⁴

Like the poems by Dante and Petrarch we have already analysed, sonnet 129 puts forward a physiological concept of desire as an annihilation of the will. Crucially, however, there is an enormous difference with respect to what we have seen in the case of Dante and Petrarch insofar as this physiological concept of desire and the corresponding form of the text are taken to another level with respect to what comes before. Indeed, if we wanted to use an adjective that itself recurs twice in the sonnet, we could say that the cipher of the poem is its 'extreme' character: exaggerated, without control or limits. In this respect, sonnet 129 corresponds well to the way in which Linda Gregerson has suggested that Shakespeare intensifies the agitation and torment of Petrarch's sonnets, which he would have encountered in Wyatt's translation, and in relation to which

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 23–40 (p. 25). See also Peter Hainsworth's reading of the sonnet in *Petrarch the Poet: An Introduction to 'Rerum vulgarium fragmenta'* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 209, in which he acknowledges a certain 'game'-like aspect and a lighter tone.

24 On the relationship between the two sequences, see Michael Schoenfeldt, 'The Sonnets', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Poetry*, ed. by Patrick Cheney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 125–43, and his 'Friendship and Love, Darkness and Lust: Desire in the Sonnets', in his *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 88–111.

she remarks that this is 'Petrarch with a vengeance'.²⁵ Sonnet 129 reads as follows:

Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame
 Is lust in action; and till action, lust
 Is perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
 Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;
 Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,
 Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait,
 On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
 Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
 Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
 A bliss in proof, and prov'd, a very woe;
 Before, a joy propos'd; behind, a dream.
 All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
 To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.²⁶

One immediately notices a striking feature of this text. Unlike in Dante and Petrarch's sonnets, there is no grammatical 'I' in Shakespeare's sonnet — indeed, this poem is one of only two instances in Shakespeare's sonnets in which the 'I' is missing, in this case because of its complete annihilation by the self-destructive and violent impulse of sexual desire.²⁷ Lines 1–2 already say it all in the sense that there is no space for love in this sonnet, only lust. The reader is immediately introduced to the obscurity of bodily matter and the most degrading and humiliating aspects of the sexual impulse, which is represented as a disease. As in Dante and Petrarch's sonnets, we are dealing with lovesickness, but here the reference is specifically to the medical

25 Gregerson, 'Open Voicing', p. 159.

26 We cite the poem from William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones (London: Methuen Drama, 2010).

27 The other sonnet from which the 'I' is absent is 94, 'They that have power to heart and will do none'. See Schoenfeldt, 'Friendship and Love', pp. 96–97.

theory that orgasm diminishes the vital force and leads the subject closer to death. The physicality of that experience has been aptly described by Don Paterson with reference to the contemporary understanding of the chemical and hormonal changes that occur in the (male) brain before, during, and after sex:

[I]t's too irrational and disproportionate a response to explain by anything but a bizarre reaction to a sudden flood of post-orgasmic transmitters. Your anticipatory thrill-dopamine goes through the roof during arousal, but the prolactin secreted during orgasm suddenly suppresses it, so you get a mood plummet [...] driv[ing] you into your limp 'refractory period.'²⁸

In Shakespeare, as the references to shame and lust make clear, love sickness brings 'physical as well as moral degradation.'²⁹ Indeed, like many other words in Shakespeare's poetic language, 'spirit' is a polyvalent word and stands here for the vital force, the soul, and also 'semen'.

The remainder of the sonnet, up to the final couplet, offers a veritable anatomy of desire, describing the different phases of 'lust in action' in terms of a before, during, and after. And it is arguably the time before that is most emphasized, to which are dedicated the chaotic accumulation of lines 3–4 and 6–8; the first hemistich of line 9 ('mad in pursuit'); the second hemistich of line 10 ('in quest to have, extreme'); and the first of line 12 ('before a joy proposed'). The idea that is continually repeated in the poem is that of pre-orgasmic desire as a trick or 'bait', 'laid to make the taker mad', i.e. compulsive and obsessive. The moment

28 Don Paterson, *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets: A New Commentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), pp. 388–89.

29 See Katherine Duncan-Jones's notes to this poem, in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, pp. 272–73.

of 'action' itself, the 'now' of desire (a concept to which we will return in the [following chapter](#)), is remembered only very briefly: in addition to the phrase 'lust in action' in line 2, we have in line 9 'mad in possession', and in line 11, 'a bliss in proof', which is perhaps the only positive note of the whole poem, if we can call it that. Instead, the idea of the 'after' is that of scorn, hatred, suffering and self-abasement, experienced as shame and self-loathing. Yet notwithstanding the repellent and demeaning nature of the sexual impulse, the subject — which is no longer a subject, annihilated as it is by desire — cannot but continue to want it. The overall message of the sonnet is the impossibility of resisting the attraction that sexual appetite continues to exert, even nostalgically, in the phrase 'behind a dream.' It indicates the self-delusion, as well as the susceptibility of being lured into its power and fascination over and again.

The impossibility of controlling desire with reason is repeated in the anaphora of 'past reason' in lines 6 and 7 and returns in the final couplet, which is a sort of aphorism. Here the concept of knowing (and not knowing), which was present in Dante and Petrarch's sonnets, also returns: 'All this the world well knows, yet none knows well | to shun the heaven that leads men to this hell' (13–14). Here there is a split between a theoretical knowledge of the negativity of the sexual impulse and the concrete impossibility of refusing it even knowing what it truly is, where 'hell' reiterates the negative and misogynistic drive of the sonnet since 'hell', in this case, stands not only for all 'the shame and hatred described in the previous lines' but also for the vagina.³⁰ In other words, Shakespeare's impersonal statement recovers the lucidity in the matter of love (here lust) of the Dantean subject and turns the Petrarchan not know-

30 See Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, pp. 372–73.

ing into the impossibility of resisting a truly masochistic, self-destructive impulse. Moreover, if we consider that 'to lead' is the equivalent of the Italian 'menare', we cannot but be reminded of canto v of *Inferno* and of the entire lyric tradition that subtends it, and we could say therefore that with Shakespeare, the hell of passion is found on earth.³¹

As in Dante's and Petrarch's sonnets, irrational compulsion is consequently at the centre of Shakespeare's poem, but while Dante and Petrarch's sonnets maintain a sense of self, no matter how impaired by desire, in sonnet 129 the poetic subject disappears from the text, destroyed by the strength of its sexual impulse. As in Dante and Petrarch, we would say that lyric textuality perfectly corresponds to the desire that it expresses, in this case through its formal exaggeration, lack of control, and disjointedness. Michael Schoenfeldt has commented that the sonnet's 'headlong syntax and rushed enjambment brilliantly enact the rash, impulsive action the poem describes' and that 'The emphatic but progressively exhausted stresses of line 4 effectively produce one of Shakespeare's least metrical lines.'³² In addition, and this is particularly interesting having read Petrarch's sonnet, the *coblas capfinidas* structure that sees the adjective 'mad' repeated between the end of line 8 and the beginning of line 9 is placed in the same position as the repetition of 'consento' in Petrarch's sonnet, notwithstanding the different organization of the Elizabethan sonnet into three quatrains and a final rhym-

31 Cf. *Inferno* v's description of the lustful souls as buffeted by the infernal storm, 'La bufera infernal, che mai non resta, | mena li spirti con la sua rapina | voltando e percotendo li molesta (31-33); 'di qua, di là, di giù, di sù li mena' (43). Text is cited from Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966-67). On the verb 'menare', see Barolini, 'Dante and Cavalcanti'.

32 Schoenfeldt, 'The Sonnets', p. 133.

ing couplet. The big difference from Petrarch is that here the poem builds not through antithesis but via accumulation, which creates the feeling of excess noted above. Any sense of control, no matter how asymmetrical or paradoxical, is gone, and this formal imbalance replicates well the destructive and uncontrollable nature of sexuality, which produces only a moment of pleasure, which, for Shakespeare, is inextricable from disgust and self-loathing and traumatizes the self (or what remains of it) into repetition compulsion.³³

Thus in Shakespeare's sonnet there is no room for balance or control of any sort, and with the destitution of the subject, everything else falls apart. Simultaneously, the sonnet form itself is altered, not merely in the turn from the Italianate to the Elizabethan form but in the sense that the many caesuras in the verse lines, combined with the enjambments, create a totally different rhythm: at moments furious, at other times nearly broken, in keeping with the unstoppable drive of the sexual impulse and the downfall to which it leads. Rather than Dante's lucidity or Petrarch's confusion, in Shakespeare's sonnet we find obsession that may even devolve into hallucination. Abandoning oneself to repetition compulsion is staged as entering a black hole that absorbs all light and subsumes everything to sheer intensity. And even though at the end of the sonnet, the aphorism in the final couplet would seem to open up towards a more detached or universal statement, the final, misogynistic reference to '*this hell*' hits the readers with affective violence. An analogous experience occurs

33 Repetition compulsion is a Freudian notion. See Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), in *The Standard Edition to the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), xviii (1955), pp. 7-64.

when reading some of the most scatological lyrics of the troubadour Arnaut Daniel, where, as Bill Burgwinkle has noticed, the sexual and somatic details are such that 'we cease even to consider what pleasure might be had from the operation and instead relish the poet's delight in wiping our faces in the abject'.³⁴ In Shakespeare's sonnet too a paradoxical space of pleasure is opened up for readers, who are left both shocked and amazed by the force of what the poem's aesthetics has made them experience.

34 See William Burgwinkle, 'Modern Lovers: Evanescence and the Act in Dante, Arnaut, and Sordello', in *Desire in Dante and the Middle Ages*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and others (Oxford: Legenda, 2012), pp. 14–28 (pp. 19–21).

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