



Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden, *Possibilities of Lyric: Reading Petrarch in Dialogue. With an Epilogue by Antonella Anedda Angioy*, Cultural Inquiry, 18 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 45–63

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CITE AS:

Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden, 'Openness and Intensity: Petrarch's Becoming Laurel in *Rvf* 23 and *Rvf* 228', in Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden, *Possibilities of Lyric: Reading Petrarch in Dialogue. With an Epilogue by Antonella Anedda Angioy*, Cultural Inquiry, 18 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 45–63 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-18_02>

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2. Openness and Intensity

Petrarch's Becoming Laurel in *Rvf* 23 and *Rvf* 228

THE PLANT WORLD

This chapter explores the relationship between Petrarch, poet of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, and the laurel tree, a symbol that usually stands for the poet's beloved Laura, but in the two poems we will look at comes to be connected also with the lyric 'I'. In other words, while the laurel is a pervasive symbol in Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, in keeping with the Ovidian myth of Apollo and Daphne, it is the *beloved* who is usually transformed into the laurel, frustrating the poet's desire to possess her and making that frustration the root of poetry. This scenario corresponds to Freud's idea of sublimation as the diversion of libidinal energies towards nonsexual aims — like artistic creation, intellectual pursuits, or in general, objects of higher social value. The body of Laura/Daphne that her lover fails to

possess is ‘transferred’ into the poetic sign, and desire is ‘sublimated’ into verse.¹

In keeping with Leo Bersani’s concept of aesthetics and the way in which we have thought of Petrarch in the [previous chapter](#), our approach here is to read Petrarch’s lyric textuality not as transcending or ‘taming’ eros but as replicating the movement of desire, extending it to text, and allowing the reader to experience it. We have already looked at one of the poems we will analyse here, *canzone* 23, the so-called ‘*canzone* of metamorphoses’, and have argued that it is centred on the poet’s impossibility, or unwillingness, to relinquish sensual desire and culminates with the suggestion that this experience encompasses a form of paradoxical pleasure. In this chapter, we return to *Rvf* 23 and look at it together with another poem from Petrarch’s collection, sonnet 228, and consider both from the perspective of the poet’s fusion with the laurel. The ‘becoming laurel’ of our title is to be taken literally, since in these texts the Petrarchan subject *becomes* the laurel tree in *Rvf* 23 and has the laurel implanted into him in *Rvf* 228, then proceeding to beautify it with his tears and sighs. In looking at *Rvf* 23 and *Rvf* 228, we are interested in the kind of subjectivity and desire — or even sexuality — that might correspond to Petrarch’s ‘becoming’ a laurel tree and that we might locate in relation to the plant world more broadly. Our sense is that the ‘becoming tree’ entails a loss of self,

1 On this dynamic in Petrarch, see Lynn Enterline, ‘Embodied Voices: Petrarch Reading Himself Reading Ovid’, in *Desire in the Renaissance: Psychoanalysis and Literature*, ed. by Valeria Finucci and Regina Schwartz (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 120–45; on Freudian sublimation, see Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1973), pp. 431–33.

a kind of dispossession and opening to the outside that conveys a sense of desire not as lack but as intensity.

Our reading is shaped in dialogue with writers who have thought about plants and their modes of existence and have thereby suggested new ways to think about subjectivity — ways that we propose to connect with the concept of openness in the work of Rosi Braidotti. Specifically, we want to relate these ways of thinking about plants with Braidotti's concept of 'polymorphous vitalism', a means of experiencing desire not as a state of lack but as intensity and excess, which she has developed through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of 'becoming'² — and that is the reason why the title of our chapter includes the idea of 'becoming'. For Braidotti, 'Becoming has to do with emptying out the self, opening it out to possible encounters with the "outside"', thereby expanding the possibilities of subjectivity and envisioning a self that can be 'joyfully discontinuous, as opposed to being mournfully consistent.'³ In other words, becoming entails a loss of autonomy that is 'non-unitary' but not destructive. Insofar as 'the firm boundaries between self and other' dissolve, there is 'an enlargement of one's fields of perspective and capacity to experience', and this enlargement entails a space of becoming which does not limit love to the human subject but instead opens to a 'whole territory' around it.⁴

Some of the philosophers and theorists who have thought about plants have envisioned a similar kind of

2 See Rosi Braidotti, 'Intensive Genre and the Demise of Gender', *Angelaki*, 13.2 (2008), pp. 45–57, where she engages in depth with Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

3 Braidotti, 'Intensive Genre', p. 47.

4 *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 55–56.

openness to the outside, like for instance Emanuele Coccia in his 2016 book *La Vie des plantes: Une métaphysique du mélange* and Héléne Cixous in her novels *La* and *Illa*, especially as studied by Sarah-Anaïs Crevier Goulet.⁵ The main idea here is the interconnectedness of plants, that is, the idea that they are porous organisms, and that there is a fluid boundary between inside and outside such that the two become hard to differentiate. Plants' natural tendency is to spread: in *La*, Cixous's narrator describes how when she is in a garden to which she feels connected 'vegetally' (J'ai toujours eu la certitude que j'étais liée à un vrai jardin par... Parenté archivégétale?), her body fuses with the earth and surrounding flora such that it is 'étendu partout', as stretched out and vast as the earth itself.⁶ And plants are related to each other through an interconnectivity that is also evident in their spreading *across* the earth. According to Coccia, this spreading connotes an ultimate form of openness in the sense that the borders are undone between what we think of as 'the subject' and the *milieu*: 'One cannot separate the plant — *neither physically nor metaphysically* — from the world that accommodates it. It is the most intense, radical, and paradigmatic form of being in the world.'⁷ This sort of 'being together', this co-existing, of plants is, as the title of Coccia's study indicates,

5 See Emanuele Coccia, *La Vie des plantes* (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 2016), in English as *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, trans. by Dylan J. Montanari (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), from which quotations are taken; Héléne Cixous, *La* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) and *Illa* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1980), the latter two discussed in detail by Sarah-Anaïs Crevier Goulet, 'Du jardin d'essai / esse à l'hortus conclusus: Figures de la naissance et du végétal dans l'oeuvre de Héléne Cixous', in *Des jardins autres*, ed. by Paolo Alexandre Néné and Sarah Carmo (Paris: Archives Karéline, 2015), pp. 257–80.

6 Cixous, *La*, pp. 57–58.

7 Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, p. 5.

a 'métaphysique du mélange' (metaphysics of mixture). In an even more open sense, this state of coexistence of plants is also a 'jumble' of things, for they are conjoined and yet still distinct from one another, in the way that things in an ecosystem are fundamentally entwined, but their particularity and distinctions are nonetheless maintained.⁸

Thinking about the sort of subjectivity to which this kind of 'mélange' might correspond we find suggestive the following lines from Braidotti's essay on Virginia Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West: a 'field [...] of perpetual becomings' in which 'What happens is vitalist erotics, which includes intensive de-territorializations, unhealthy alliances, hybrid cross-fertilizations, productive anomalies and generative encounters — allowing 'the unfolding of ever-intensified affects'.⁹ In Braidotti and in some other works that consider plants in relation to eros, this sort of openness and becoming relates to sexuality and not just desire. For example, Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari have analysed the treatment of plants as modes for human sexuality in the seventeenth-century writings of Guy de la Brosse and Cyrano de Bergerac. Within those works, Meeker and Szabari have traced what they term 'a scene of queer animacy [a term they take from Mel Chen], in which affects and sensations are mobilized across different kinds of bodies and diverse modes of being'. This phenomenon is all the more surprising given that plants are usually considered asexual and yet become an (imagined) site of 'flexible and formally inventive pleasures', 'multiplying pleasures at the limit of what we might recognize as subjectivity itself'. Meeker and Szabari

8 As Coccia writes, 'In order for a climate to exist, all the elements within a given space must be at once mixed and identifiable' (ibid., p. 27).

9 Braidotti, 'Intensive Genre', p. 55.

also cite Timothy Morton on tree hugging as a form of eroticism, which suggests that ‘To contemplate ecology’s unfathomable intimacies is to imagine pleasures that are not hetero-normative, not genital, not geared towards where the body stops and starts.’¹⁰

This line of thought has been suggestive for our thinking about the Petrarchan subject’s ‘becoming laurel’ in *Rvf* 23 and *Rvf* 228, where that opening to the *végétal* seems intimately bound to the question of pleasure for him.¹¹ In particular we would like to develop the connection between Braidotti’s concept of the ‘di-vidual’ or open subject, the vegetal, and the idea that it represents an intensification of desire.¹² In this sense, passivity is the possibility of ‘an affective, de-personalized, highly receptive subject’,¹³ which is the closest Petrarch’s ‘I’ gets to a form of dispossession (which the ego usually resists) and corresponds, as we have begun to suggest, to an experience of desire not so

10 Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari, ‘Libertine Botany: Vegetal Sexuality and Vegetal Forms’, *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 9.4 (2018), pp. 478–89. The quotation from Morton is taken from his article, ‘Guest Column: Queer Ecology’, *PMLA*, 125.2 (2010), pp. 273–82 (p. 280).

11 On the concept of *végétal*, see Crevier Goulet; and for the way in which becoming-plant has been theorized in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Mille plateaux*, see Hannah Stark, ‘Deleuze and Critical Plant Studies’, in *Deleuze and the Non/Human*, ed. by Jon Roffe and Hannah Stark (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 180–96. See also Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) and Michael Marder, *Plant-thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) and *The Philosopher’s Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium*, with illustrations by Mathilde Roussel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

12 See Braidotti, ‘Writing as a Nomadic Subject’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 11.2–3 (2014), pp. 163–84, where she defines the ‘dividual’ as ‘a singularity bounded by its own powers to endure intensities and relations to others’ (n. 9, p. 183).

13 Braidotti, ‘Intensive Genre’, p. 46.

much as lack but as intensity, or as Braidotti has called it, the ‘intensive multipli[cation] of affects.’¹⁴

OPENING TO LOVE

Our analysis begins with *canzone* 23, where the poetic subject undergoes a series of transformations explicitly modelled on Ovid. As discussed in [Chapter 1](#), the poem is a blueprint of Petrarch’s early poetry, one centred on the unrequited love of the troubadour and the Ovidian traditions. In view of the latter, the poem focuses on the transformations of the ‘I’ through the effects of love — first into a laurel and then into a swan, stone, fountain, flint, voice and stag, evoking respectively the Ovidian myths of Daphne, Cygnus, Battus, Byblis, Echo and Actaeon. All these are imposed on a helpless subject who has no choice but to yield to the force of sensual desire.

Here we are interested in the first three stanzas, which articulate the first metamorphosis of the ‘I’ — the one into a laurel — and situate it as the turning point in the subject’s affective history. In particular, the poem opens with the idea that in his youth, a time defined in terms of freedom, or ‘libertade’, the poet was not subject to love. What is significant is that this state of not being touched by love is described in terms of enclosure and of a stone-like protection, which was tearless and unbending:

Nel dolce tempo de la prima etade,
che nascer vide et anchor quasi in herba
la fera voglia che per mio mal crebbe,
perché cantando il duol si disacerba,
canterò com’io vissi in libertade,
mentre Amor nel mio albergo a sdegno s’ebbe.

14 Ibid., p. 48.

[...]

I' dico che dal dí che 'l primo assalto
 mi diede Amor, molt'anni eran passati,
 sí ch'io cangiava il giovenil aspetto;
 e d'intorno al mio cor pensier' gelati
facto avean quasi adamantino smalto
ch'allentar non lassava il duro affetto.

(In the sweet season of my first youth, | which saw
 the birth and budding growth | of the wild de-
 sire that grew to torment me, | I will sing, because
 singing renders grief | less bitter, *of how I lived in*
freedom then, | while Love was still scorned in my
heart. [...] I say, then, that many years had passed
 | since the day of Love's first assault, | so that my
 youthful aspect was changing; | and *icy thoughts*
around my heart | had made it almost as hard as dia-
mond, | giving no rein to my obstinate desire.) (*Rvf*23,
 1–6, 21–26; our emphasis)

It is in this context that Love intervenes, and with the help
 of a 'powerful lady', Amor turns the subject into the laurel:

Lagrime anchor non mi bagnava il petto
 né rompea il sonno, et quel che in me non era,
 mi pareva un miracolo in altrui.

[...]

Ché sentendo il crudel di ch'io ragiono
 infin allor percossa di suo strale
 non essermi passato oltra la gonna,
 prese in sua scorta una possente donna,
 ver' cui poco già mai mi valse o vale
 ingegno, o forza, o dimandar perdono;
 e i duo mi trasformaro in quel ch'i' sono,
 facendomi d'uom vivo un lauro verde,
 che per fredda stagion foglia non perde.

(No tear yet stained my breast | or woke me from
 my sleep, and what I lacked | seemed miraculous in
 others. [...]) For that pitiless foe of whom I speak,

| seeing that none of his darts had yet | pierced be-
 neath my clothing, | took into his service a powerful
 lady, | against whom neither cunning, nor force, |
 nor begging for mercy ever was (or is) much use;
 | and these two transformed me into what I am, |
 making of me, a living man, a laurel tree, | which,
 though winter come, never sheds a leaf.) (*Rvf* 23,
 27–29; 32–40)

This first metamorphosis is thus set up as loss of autonomy, yet strangely it is not something merely negative but rather a softening. In other words, there is a twist in this part of the poem, and the twist with respect to the idea of wounding, penetrability, and porosity is seen as more positive. In *Rvf* 23, therefore, the idea of *libertade* and autonomy appears as something more limiting and the poem resonates with Braidotti's stress on the open subject and what she calls the 'di-vidual': a 'subject-in-becoming' whose processes are 'collective, intersubjective and not individual or isolated'.¹⁵ In other words, becoming the laurel really means an opening up to affect. Following Braidotti, who herself is in dialogue with Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*, we can say that relinquishing *potestas* — the forms of restrictive and institutionalized power — allows for finding one's *potentia*, a state of creative potentiality and possibility that is the foundation of vitalist erotics.¹⁶

The actual metamorphosis is described in detail in stanza 3 of Petrarch's poem, in which the poet rewrites Ovid's description of Daphne turning into the laurel as his own transformation:

Qual mi fec'io quando primier m'accorsi
 de la trasfigurata mia persona,

15 Braidotti, 'Writing as a Nomadic Subject', p. 173.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 171 and pp. 174–75.

e i capei vidi far di quella fronde
 di che sperato avea già lor corona,
 e i piedi in ch'io mi stetti, et mossi, et corsi,
 com'ogni membro a l'anima risponde,
 diventar due radici sopra l'onde
 non di Peneo, ma d'un più altero fiume,
 e n' duo rami mutarsi ambe le braccia!

(Imagine my surprise when first I took note | of my transfigured person, | and saw my hair become the very leaves | with which I had hoped to be crowned, | and my feet, with which I stood and walked and ran, | become two roots (since every member | answers to the soul) beside the rippling waters, | not of Peneus, but of a nobler river, | and both my arms transform into two branches!) (*Rvf* 23, 41–49)

Critics have pointed out that the poet's transformation into the laurel in lines 38–40 (beautifully illustrated in a 1470 Venetian incunabulum now in the Biblioteca Queriniana in Brescia)¹⁷ is connected to a passage from the *Triumphus Cupidinis* that describes love as complete loss of control and autonomy and as all consuming: 'è so in qual guisa | l'amante nell'amato si transforme' (and I know in what way | the lover turns into the beloved; III, 161–62).¹⁸ Love is an experience of dispossession: for instance, Santagata talks of the poet being 'dispossessed of his own

17 The Petrarca Queriniano incunable is one of the most richly decorated examples of Petrarch's works produced in the 15th century. It can be viewed digitally at <<http://www.misinta.it/biblioteca-digitale-misinta-2/1400-2/1470-petrarca-canzoniere-e-trionfi-miniato>> [accessed 20 August 2020]. For further detail on this incunable, see Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere, Trionfi: l'incunabolo veneziano di Vindelino da Spira del 1470 nell'esemplare della Biblioteca civica Queriniana di Brescia con figure dipinte da Antonio Grifo, INC. G V 15*, ed. by Giuseppe Frasso, Giordana Mariani, and Ennio Sandal (Rome: Salerno, 2016).

18 See [Chapter 1, n. 19](#).

identity' (spossessato dalla propria identità) to the degree that he 'loses consciousness of himself' (perde coscienza di sé). The experience is a form of 'ecstatic forgetfulness' (smemoramento estatico).¹⁹ Moreover, the concept of the lover's transformation into the beloved seems to displace into a lyric context the theological concept of 'compassion', that is, the idea that Mary's love for Christ during His Passion transformed her into an image of her Son because, as Bonaventure writes, 'the power of love transforms the lover into an image of the beloved' (vis amoris amantem in amati similitudinem transformat).²⁰

If we want to understand better what it means to *become laurel* in *Rvf* 23, we could look at the metamorphoses that follow, but as we saw in Chapter 1, all that matters is the first metamorphosis: the following ones are either temporary or a fantasy and didn't actually happen. What this means is that the poet never got out of being a laurel, and indeed line 38 states 'i duo mi trasformaro in quel ch'i' sono' (and these two transformed me *into what I am*), so it is clear that the actual permanent condition of the lyric 'I' is the one described in lines 17–20: 'et un penser che solo angoscia dàlle, | tal ch'ad ogni altro fa voltar le spalle, | e mi face obliar me stesso a forza: | che tèn di me quel d'entro e io la scorza' (and a single thought which causes only anguish, | and makes me deaf to all other thoughts, | and forces me to forget myself entirely: | for it governs all that is in me, and I only the shell). The image of the 'scorza' (literally the bark of the tree) makes it clear that

19 See Santagata's note in Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, p. 105.

20 Bonaventura, *De assumptione B. Virginis Mariae*, sermo 2, in *Bonaventurae opera Omnia*, ed. by PP. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 11 vols (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1882–1902), ix (1901), p. 161; see also: Otto G. von Simpson, 'Compassio and Co-redemptio in Roger van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*', *The Art Bulletin*, 25 (1953), pp. 9–16.

here the poetic subject really *is* a tree: he's only thinking of Laura, and that thought alienates him from himself as a sense of fusion into the beloved that dispossesses the lover of his identity. *That* seems to be the state of being turned into Laura. That condition, after all, is the result of a violent transformation — but at the end of the poem it is also revealed to be a pleasurable one:

né per nova figura il primo alloro
seppi lassar, ché pur la sua dolce ombra
ogni men bel piacer del cor mi sgombra.

(nor could I ever leave the first laurel behind | for
a new form, for its sweet shade | expels all lesser
pleasure from my heart.) (*Rvf* 23, 167–69)

In these lines too there is a striking combination of identity and alterity in the relationship between the poetic subject and the laurel tree. On the one hand, as Carla Freccero has argued, there seems to be an irreducible 'masculinized identification' between the poet and the 'alloro', which reiterates the initial dynamic of the transformation into the 'lauro verde'.²¹ On the other hand, with the 'nova figura', the gender of the subject shifts between masculine and feminine, and as Marguerite Waller, has noted, the 'ombra' itself is both double and a locus of instability: 'The shadow of the laurel is his shadow and he is, in some sense, its shadow [...], but his awareness of that fact prevents reification of himself in the image of some seemingly more substantial counter.'²² Santagata glosses the final line, on the effects of this shadow, 'it chases from my heart all other passion as less beautiful' (*mi scaccia dal cuore ogni*

21 See Carla Freccero, 'Ovidian Subjectivities', esp. pp. 27–30.

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

altra passione, come meno bella), where passion is pleasure and carries this paradoxical tone that for us is a cipher of Petrarchan desire and pleasure.²³

MÉLANGE

While *canzone* 23 stages the poet's transformation into the laurel, in *Rvf* 228 Love opens the left side of the lyric subject and plants the laurel tree in the middle of his heart. In this poem we find an opening and a wound, which are followed by an act of nurturing, and indeed critics such as Nicholas Mann have spoken of Petrarch as 'gardener' in relation to this sonnet, one who 'cultivates' the laurel in the double sense of the Latin *cultus* meaning both to 'cultivate' and 'to worship':²⁴

Amor co la man dextra il lato manco
 m'aperse, e piantòvi entro in mezzo 'l core
 un lauro verde sí che di colore
 ogni smeraldo avria ben vinto et stanco. Vomer di pena,
 con sospir' del fianco,
 e 'l piover giú dagli occhi un dolce humore
 l'addornâr sì, ch'al ciel n'andò l'odore,
 qual non so già se d'altre frondi unquanco. Fama, Honor et
 Vertute et Leggiadria,
 casta bellezza in habito celeste
 son le radici de la nobil pianta. Tal la mi trovo al petto, ove
 ch'i' sia,
 felice incarco; et con preghiere honeste
 l'adoro e 'nchino come cosa santa.

23 See Santagata's note in Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, p. 123.

24 Nicholas Mann, 'Petarca giardiniere (a proposito del sonetto ccxxviii)', *Lecture Petrarce*, 12 (1992), pp. 235–56. On the broader topic of Petrarch and gardens, see also William Tronzo, *Petrarch's Two Gardens: Landscape and the Image of Movement* (New York: Italica Press, 2014), pp. 1–23. This image of Love as 'gardener' is also present in *Rvf* 64, 6–7, 'del petto ove dal primo lauro innesta | Amor più rami'.

(Love opened my left side with his right hand | and
 planted, in the middle of my heart, | a laurel tree
 so green in colour | that it would far outshine any
 emerald. || The ploughshare of pain, the sighs of my
 heart, | and the raining down of sweet tears from my
 eyes | have so embellished it that its fragrance waf-
 ted heavenward; | I do not think that other leaves
 have ever equalled it. || Fame, honour, virtue, grace,
 | chaste beauty with celestial demeanour: | these are
 the roots of the noble plant. || Wherever I am, I find
 it a happy burden | on my chest; and with honest
 prayers | I adore and bow to it as a sacred thing.)
 (*Rvf* 228)

A wound that is opened by Love is a common image in the lyric tradition, but here it also alludes to the Christian trope of receiving the stigmata. Yet with Coccia's earlier suggestion in mind, it is impossible to read the poem and consider the plant as separate from the world that accommodates it. So while the 'I' does not *become* the laurel in this poem (as it did in *Rvf* 23), there is a mixing of the 'I' with the tree. In the case of the Petrarchan sonnet the 'I' is the 'world that receives' the plant, and as in *Rvf* 23, we find an 'impossible separation' between the subject and the laurel. In *Rvf* 23 it is a result of transformation, and in *Rvf* 228 it is in Coccia's sense of 'mélange'.

Sonnet 228 opens by reiterating the beginning of *Rvf* 23 and describes the origin of the poet's love for Laura: Love, Amor, takes hold of the subject and literally opens ('m'aperse') his left side and implants the laurel into the very centre of his heart ('in mezzo al core'). Then the poet cultivates the plant with his suffering and by watering it with tears, which in a very Petrarchan way are defined oxymoronically as 'dolce humore' (sweet water). This bodily act of nurturing the plant makes it special and unique, and the word 'odore', relating to the fragrance of

the tree, indicates the sensual character of the poet's desire. Yet 'odore' also evokes the 'arbor odorifera' (fragrant tree) of Petrarch's *Coronation Oration* (*Collatio laureationis*), where the laurel is the symbol of poetic fame and glory, as well as the *dolce lignum* of the Cross and the sweet fragrance linked to God.²⁵ Indeed, as Manuela Boccignone has shown, if the beloved's presence in the poet's heart is a common, well-established motif of the lyric tradition, the image of the tree implanted in the heart corresponds to the Cross and has a strong Christological connotation in medieval allegorical tradition that we might also perceive in poems in which Petrarch consciously sets the laurel tree, associated with Laura, against the tree of the Cross (see especially *Rvf* 142).²⁶

The following tercet describes the laurel, that is, the beloved Laura, as a 'nobil pianta', suggesting that she is a noble and even pure being, and it is therefore different from the way in which Laura is often described as incom-

25 On these intertexts see Rosanna Bettarini's commentary of line 7 of the poem, in Petrarcha, *Canzoniere*, p. 1056. The reference to the sweet fragrance of the Lord comes in Gen. 8.21 ('Odoratusque est Dominus odorem suavitatis', as Castelvetro notes in his commentary (also cited in Bettarini). On *dulcedo* and *suavitas* as characteristics of God see also Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 80–107. Petrarch's *Collatio laureationis* is available in English as 'Petrarch's Coronation Oration', trans. by Ernest Hatch Wilkins, *PMLA*, 68.5 (Dec. 1953), pp. 1241–50. The Latin text is in *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, ed. by Antonietta Bufano, 2 vols (Turin: UTET, 1975), II, pp. 1255–83. According to Mann ('Petrarca giardiniere', pp. 244–45), the perfume of the tree can also be connected to the fame and immortality the poet seeks to bestow on Laura and he cites the Song of Songs 1.3 ('unguentum effusionis nomen tuum') and Catullus (VI, 16–17) as possible sources.

26 Manuela Boccignone, 'Un albero piantato nel cuore (Petrarca e Iacopone)', *Lettere italiane*, 52.2 (April–June 2000), pp. 225–64. On the image of the tree in Petrarch and Jacopone, see Lina Bolzoni, *La rete delle immagini: predicazione in volgare dalle origini a Bernardino da Siena* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002), pp. 103–44.

patible with God and even His enemy. Laura would seem to be not an evil distraction but rather depicted in the lyric mode associated with the divinization of the *donna*, more in line with a certain *stilnovo* mode that runs from Guinizzelli to Dante. At this point it would seem that there is nothing problematic in this love — and indeed critics have even read the poem as signalling ‘the protagonist’s progress on the arc of his spiritual journey’ insofar as it stages ‘the ordering of the inchoate matter of the passions into a new textual body of the virtues.’²⁷ Instead, we argue that a real turn takes place in the following and final tercet, actually in the last line and its vertiginous twist: up to ‘preghiere oneste’ the reader expects the sonnet to culminate with a sort of moral climax, but instead suddenly we are presented with an image of idolatry: ‘l’adoro e inchino come cosa santa’ (I adore and bow to it as a sacred thing). The verb ‘adoro’ signals the conflation, since it means both to show devotion to a divinity and, in courtly lyric, to worship the beloved lady as though she were divine. (It is, for example in Giacomo da Lentini, Chiaro Davanzati, and in Cino da Pistoia.)

A suggestive antecedent for this conflation may be found in the final stanza of Guido Cavalcanti’s *ballata* ‘Perch’i’ no spero di tonar giammai’, which we shall discuss at length in [Chapter 5](#):

Tu, voce sbigottita e deboletta
 ch’esci piangendo de lo cor dolente,
 coll’anima e con questa ballatetta
 va’ ragionando della strutta mente.
 Voi troverete una donna piacente,
 di sì dolce intelletto

27 See most recently Thomas E. Peterson, “‘Amor co la man dextra il lato manco” (*Rvf* 228) as Allegory of Religious Veneration’, *MLN*, 135.1 (January 2020), Italian Issue, pp. 17–33 (pp. 31–32).

che vi sarà diletto
 starle davanti ognora.
 Anim', e tu l'adora
 sempre, nel su' valore.

(Bewildered and frail voice, | you who weeping
 leave my grieving heart, | with my soul and this little
 ballata | tell her of my fractured mind. | You will
 find a dazzling lady, | with such sweet intellection
 | that it will delight you | to remain eternally in her
 presence. | Then, my soul, adore her | always, in all
 her valour.) ('Perch'i' no spero di tonar giammai',
 37–46)²⁸

As Claudio Giunta has observed, Cavalcanti's poem is constructed upon the model of contemporary will and testaments and, in particular, reproduces the motif of the *commendatio anime*, that is, the recommendation of one's soul to God with the hope that after death it may succeed in enjoying the beatific vision. Significantly, though, Cavalcanti's text replaces God with the lady and concludes by making the wish that the poet's soul dwell in an eternal contemplation of his beloved, where the verb 'adora', which resonates with the Biblical line 'quia ipse est dominus tuus et adora eum' (*Psalms* 44.12), suggests a love that is experienced with the intensity of faith.²⁹

Petrarch's sonnet undertakes a similar operation and concludes by staging what in Augustinian terms can be

28 Quotations of Cavalcanti's poems are taken from Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime*, ed. by Roberto Rea and Giorgio Inglese (Rome: Carocci, 2011).

29 Claudio Giunta, 'Guido Cavalcanti, "Perch'i' no spero di tonar giammai"', in *Codici. Saggi sulla poesia del Medioevo* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2005), pp. 45–61. The Biblical reference is noted by Roberto Rea in his commentary to the poem in Cavalcanti, *Rime*, p. 199. On Cavalcanti's ironic use of Biblical intertexts, see Paola Nasti, 'Nozze e vedovanza: dinamiche dell'appropriazione biblica in Cavalcanti e Dante', *Tenzone*, 7 (2006), pp. 71–110.

understood as a form of idolatry, that is, the act of turning the creature into the Creator and thereby perverting the *ordo amoris*, according to which worldly, mortal things are not to be desired or enjoyed per se but used as instruments (objects of use, *uti*) that move the soul towards God, who alone represents the ultimate object of desire and the only object of enjoyment (*frui*).³⁰ In John Freccero's reading, this kind of idolatry, which is a recurrent feature of Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, corresponds to a reification of the sign and of desire, both of which are emblemized in the figure of the laurel, which Petrarch makes into a self-sufficient symbol of poetic autonomy: 'a poetry whose real subject matter is its own act and whose creation is its own author' with no reference to the world beyond the one the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* create. For Freccero, this project risks stripping both the poet's beloved (Laura) and desire of their vitality in order to arrive at immortality and the illusion of substance, when really the object the poet pursues is a mirage, and the sign, in the absence of an external referent, remains opaque and unknowable.³¹ In contrast, while our reading of the two poems acknowledges the presence of the idea of desire as non-progression as well as the presentation of the poet's fidelity to love as wrong in Augustinian terms, we contend that ultimately the poems do not present the steadfastness of the poet's desire for Laura as mere reification or fixation

30 See Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* (PL 34), I, 4 <<http://www.augustinus.it>> [accessed 15 September 2020]. On this distinction, see also Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire*, p. 15.

31 John Freccero, 'The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics', *Diacritics*, 5.1 (Spring 1975), pp. 34–40 (esp. pp. 38–39). On petrified immobility as the hallmark of *canzone* 23, see also Barolini, 'The Making of a Lyric Sequence', p. 30.

but rather as a paradoxical openness to passion and the susceptibility to being moved.

The proposition with which we would like to conclude this chapter is that the connection between the poet and the laurel, which is unusual not in terms of frequency but in terms of modality, is a sign of a profound intimacy between *canzone* 23 and sonnet 228 — an intimacy that is certainly related to the poet's unwavering sensual desire but that also helps us to appreciate an aspect that is usually less perceived in Petrarch's poetry: the paradoxical pleasure deriving from dispossession and softening the boundaries with the other.³² Sonnet 228 may even convey a sense of commingling at the level of sound, in the linguistic texture of the words, since according to Mann we might see in the 'core' (heart) of line 2 a fusion of 'or' and 'co' sounds, the first of which runs from 'Amor' (1) through to 'adoro' (14) and the last of which is especially prominent in the final line, 'l'adoro e 'nchino come cosa santa.'³³ In the case of both poems, pleasure comes from the subject's passivity, which enables it to be penetrated and affected from the outside and after to remain in that state as one of unparalleled 'sweetness' (*dolcezza*, *Rvf* 23) and 'happy burden' (*felice incarco*, *Rvf* 228). Our hypothesis is that this paradoxical pleasure is connected to the plant imagery informing the two poems and that if read with the works that have recently focused on the plants' mode of existence, our two texts vibrate with a desire that makes the subject boundless and expands it into the experience of intensity.

32 On paradoxical pleasure, see [Chapter 1](#).

33 See Mann, 'Petarca giardiniere', p. 252.

Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden, 'Openness and Intensity: Petrarch's Becoming Laurel in *Rvf23* and *Rvf228*', in Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden, *Possibilities of Lyric: Reading Petrarch in Dialogue. With an Epilogue by Antonella Anedda Angioy*, Cultural Inquiry, 18 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 45–63 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-18_02>

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