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**"I never saw a goddess go": The
Language of Mysticism in English
Petrarchan Poetry**

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Abstract

After the introduction of Petrarchan love by Thomas Wyatt in England, multiple poets continued this trend of expressing love through religious conceits, often idealizing the beloved or expressing the lack of affection as a divine punishment. However, the Reformation and the English temperament and philosophy modified the Petrarchan tradition in England. An analysis of a selection of sonnets by Shakespeare, Spenser, Sidney and Wroth will show how the English adapted Petrarch's style to their own poetry considering social factors such as religion, gender roles or the idea of courtly love.

Keywords: sonnets, Petrarchism, mysticism, English poetry

Resumen

Tras la introducción del amor petrarquista en Inglaterra por parte de Thomas Wyatt, numerosos poetas decidieron seguir la tendencia de expresar el amor a través de metáforas religiosas, lo cual resultaba con frecuencia en idealizar a la persona amada o de expresar su falta de afecto como un castigo divino. Sin embargo, la Reforma de la Iglesia Inglesa, su forma de ser y la filosofía modificaron el petrarquismo en el país. A través de un análisis de una selección de sonetos de Shakespeare, Spenser, Sidney y Wroth, este trabajo prueba cómo los ingleses adaptaron el estilo de Petrarca a su propia poesía, considerando factores sociales como la religión, los roles de género o la idea del amor cortés.

Keywords: sonetos, Petrarquismo, misticismo, poesía inglesa

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Justification

Poesie or poesy, which includes all literature, is a complete art that has encapsulated philosophy, history or theology from its beginnings, even in English poetry. For this project I will analyze the relation between love and mystical expressions, including religion, in the sonnets written by Shakespeare, Sidney in *Astrophil¹ and Stella*, Spenser in *Amoretti*, and Wroth in *Pamphylia to Amphilanthus*.

Thomas Wyatt was the first to introduce the Petrarchan tradition in England through his translations of its creator, the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca, from now on referred to with his English name: Petrarch. As a translator, he interpreted the poems and added his own vision. This meant turning Petrarch's praise-style into his own complaint-style, often changing the focus of the poem (Dasenbrock, p. 129). However, as the original nature of his works is not clear, his work will serve as a context and not to be analyzed within this project. His contribution exerted an influence on the four studied sonneteers: Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Mary Wroth and William Shakespeare. *Astrophil and Stella*, *Amoretti* and *Pamphylia to Amphilanthus* are sonnet cycles that include songs; therefore, although the songs may be considered for contextual purposes, only the sonnets will be analyzed.

With the aim of discussing the presence of mysticism in these sonnets, the historical context regarding the sonnets will be studied in the first chapter, considering the literary background surrounding this style: Petrarchism, mysticism and previous studies on the sonnets and sonneteers. With this base, an analysis will be performed on a selection of poems by each author to address each author's style, specific mystical images and their effect on the work. Furthermore, we will address how differences such as religiosity, reciprocity of their love, gender of the muse and author and their idea of courtly love influenced their works. The last chapter will search for mystical words, to the extent of their connection with religion (for example, direct mentions to God, Heaven or Hell are more overtly mystical than the use of nature), other related conceits and Petrarchan metaphors related to mysticism. In addition,

¹ Also written *Astrophel* in some editions

specific poems by each author will be used as examples. This will show how they adapted Petrarchism to their works and their different approaches to mysticism.

Finally, it must be noted that mysticism and religion are correlated, yet not synonyms. This means that mystical elements do not need to be directly religious. This discussion will explore this lyrical subgenre to understand English mysticism and the cultural and literary influences.

Chapter I: Background

The Transformation of the Petrarchan Tradition

The Renaissance brought a new literary trend influenced by the new humanist ideas and the ancient Latin culture, which was prompted by its French and Italian origin. One of the most important trends was created by the Italian poet Petrarch, with his sonnet cycle titled *Canzoniere*. In his sonnets, he writes about his courtly love for Laura, who does not reciprocate. This causes him to see that rejection as a reason to hate God for punishing him and, paradoxically, to see religion as an escape from that suffering (Cheney, pp.238-239). Therefore, the Petrarchan style is characterized by the creation of sonnets marked by religious figures and paradoxes, such as the vision of the mistress as physical and abstract, sensual and chaste (Coch, p.125) or as the subject and the object at the same time (Dubrow, p.41). Moreover, Dubrow also notes stasis as another basic paradox, as “[it] is the physical state that represents an emotional state of depression and compulsive repetition, of wishing that one was not unable even to wish.” (p.19).

Petrarch’s new literary tradition expanded through Europe with small modifications according to the already existing trends and the socio-cultural situation of each country. In the case of England, it was Wyatt who introduced Petrarch through translations of his *Canzoniere*. According to Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie*², he polished the English meter and style through this imitation. Thus, Puttenham contributed to propagate the fame of this poetry in England:

“In the latter end of the same kings raigne sprong vp a new company of courtly makers, of whom Sir *Thomas Wyat* th’elder & *Henry Earle* of *Surrey* were the two chieftaines, who hauing traualled into *Italie*, and there tasted the sweete and stately measures and stile of the *Italian Poesie* as nouices newly crept out of the schooles of *Dante Arioste* and *Petrarch*, they greatly polished our rude & homely maner of vulgar Poesie, from that it had bene before, and for that cause may iustly be sayd the first reformers of our English meetre and stile.” (Puttenham, ch. 31).

²Originally published in 1589

Reed Way Dasenbrock argues that these translations and interpretations were crucial for the creation of love sonnets in the English culture and “culminated in the great sonnet sequences of Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare” (p.122). According to him, there are several theories on the motivation behind Wyatt’s shift from translation to creation, such as Lever’s theory on a disagreement with the style prompting to parody, and Guss and Greene’s idea of this imitation seen as a transformation following Renaissance principles, which would make both Petrarch and Wyatt channels of transmission of the Latin authors and early Italians for the rest of English contemporary authors (p.123-126). Finally, Dasenbrock mentions some differences between the original and the translated material, namely a different focus or a different style: while Petrarch used a praise-style, expressing admiration for his muse, Wyatt uses a blame or complain-style, seeing her as a cruel chastisement.

There were three main reasons for the difference between the original and the English Petrarchism: the cultural difference, the religious and moral situation and the influence of the French sonneteers. Beginning with the cultural difference, the English considered themselves too logical and too influenced by reason to fully embrace mysticism, a position mainly defended by the Cambridge Platonists (Thompson). As for the religious and moral situation in Elizabethan England, a strong Protestant and anti-Catholic movement encouraged writers to either switch from romantic and erotic poetry to devotional one, as was the case of John Donne, or to defend and justify their sonnets, as Sidney did (Dubrow; Thompson). Finally, according to Heather Dubrow, the French hid in their sonnets their ambition and often focused on their achievements as poets as their source of happiness, instilling in the English the dilemma between a rhetorical and an aesthetic agenda, which would mean to fail as a lover and succeed as a poet. This is reinforced according to the name of Petrarch’s lover: Laura, which could be interpreted as Laurel (success as a poet), l’aura (divine love) and Laura herself (earthly love) (Dubrow, p. 31).

Therefore, English poets adapted this style to fit their cultural and personal concerns. They were not mere vehicles for this trend or lovers expressing their feelings; they were artists who had their own brand and used poetry to share a message, sometimes expecting recognition. Wyatt had already introduced changes in the style that the English would receive.

Mysticism and Poetry in Early Modern England

Mysticism in England had its peculiarities in comparison with the rest of Europe: a marked temperament (Thompson, p. 171) and a new religion, Protestantism, as a result of the Reformation and especially promoted during the reign of Elizabeth I (1533-1603). Although theology and literature had separated in the 13th century, poets “find the seeds of transcendence within the practice of language itself” (Burrows, p. 183); therefore, a new mystical aesthetic will flourish in England, using mystical (not necessarily religious or metaphysical) language in poetry. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, mysticism is “[the] belief in union with the divine nature by means of ecstatic contemplation, and belief in the power of spiritual access to ultimate reality, or to domains of knowledge closed off to ordinary thought.” (“mysticism”). I will follow this definition to explore how the sonneteers will seek transcendental experiences through love.

George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie* was published in 1589, coinciding with the trend for the sonnet sequences. Puttenham shared the general view on religion with the sonneteers, including Philip Sidney as well, whose treatise “*The Defense of Poesie*” was published posthumously in 1595³. These two works on literary theory were influential in a time when literature was a luxury that patrons paid for and expected a result of great quality. Puttenham saw poetry⁴ as an integral part of religion because of its role in pagan cultures, in which poets acted as the first priests, prophets and even oracles. In medieval times, the Clergy had the most access to interpret and write literature thanks to their higher education; moreover, kings and emperors could also write (or at least commission) books, as Henry VIII did to defend the Reformation. Therefore, literature is a tool to preach and moralize. Sidney agrees with this idea and sees the lyrical genre as a tool to praise God (although some poets may use it for the wrong deity). In the case of sonnets specifically, they are an often-faulty

³ Both works could have been composed around a decade earlier.

⁴ Both Puttenham and Sidney use the term “poesie”, which referred not only to poetry, but to literature in general, following the Greek root of the word.

tool, since they tend to express lust, vanity, inescapable love and passion, which he disagrees with unless they use it wisely:

“Alas! Love, I would thou couldst as well defend thyself, as thou canst offend others[...]. But grant love of beauty to be a beastly fault, although it be very hard, since only man, and no beast, hath that gift to discern beauty; [...] grant, I say, what they will have granted, that not only love, but lust, but vanity, but, if they list, scurrility, possess many leaves of the poets’ books; yet, think I, when this is granted, they will find their sentence may, with good manners, put the last words foremost; and not say that poetry abuseth man’s wit, but that man’s wit abuseth poetry.” (Sidney, 2014)

Paradoxically (since he wrote love sonnets), Sidney disapproves the use of poetry and sonnets outside moralizing or praising immortal beauty and thinks mistresses should not feel attracted by the wrong use of this genre. Finally, Puttenham and Sidney agree on the Platonic origin of poesy and how it is an imitation of God’s ideals. For them, poets create through divine inspiration and imitating the “excellencies of God” (Sidney, 2014). Furthermore, Sidney sees Plato originally as an enemy (philosophy brought Atheism, therefore it is problematic); however, he also encourages poets to accept him as their patron.

This relation between Platonism and mysticism is fundamental to understanding the sonneteers. In Elbert Thompson’s article on 17th century English mysticism, he already points out the influence on the 15th and 16th century authors. As mentioned in previous sections, the English position to these ideas was skeptical in general. Mysticism implies the importance of intuition, as it is the expression of God in people and how He transmits his ideas to the poets. The mystical position on religion was an individual one, God is not seen, but felt in nature⁵ and through love, as He is within oneself and only the heart can sense this (Thompson). John Donne was one of the intellectuals supporting this: true love happens between souls, so it is spiritual. However, this Platonic idea of the earthly world being the shadows of Heaven caused some controversy as poets such as Spenser encouraged people to enjoy earthly experiences, which clashed with the dogmatic and formal expression of worship expected. These ideas were seen in some metaphors frequently found in sonnets, such as

⁵ This was a Neoplatonist idea that seemed to agree with Pantheism: God being present everywhere.

gardens (the Garden of Eden is the maximum expression of God in nature), night (the best way to see God in religious poems) and death (not seen as a profound change in spiritual life, but just as another step in the spiritual journey to get closer to God). Prior stances on the connection between the soul, Earth and God explained English mysticism: Plotinus idea of the Good, the Intellect and the Soul is connected to the Holy Trinity, Saint John's vision of love coming from a free soul and God's will causes calm and optimism among mystics, although England's temper does not allow them to reach the maximum spiritual vision theorized by Richard of St. Victor in "*Cell of Self-Knowledge*" in 1521 through ecstasy and the loss of self-consciousness. Moreover, we can return to Puttenham's idea of the mystical, which was similar of that of a parable:

"But whensoever by your similitude ye will seeme to teach any moralitie or good lesson by speeches mysticall and darke, or farre sette, vnder a sence metaphoricall applying one naturall thing to another, or one case to another, inferring by them a like consequence in other cases the Greekes call it *Parabola*, which terme is also by custome accepted of vs: neuerthelesse we may call him in English the resemblance mysticall: as when we liken a young childe to a greene twigge which ye may easilie bende euery way ye list: or an old man who laboureth with continuall infirmities, to a drie and dricklie oke. Such parables were all the preachings of Christ in the Gospell, as those of the wise and foolish virgins, of the euil steward, of the labourers in the vineyard, and a number more. And they may be fayned aswell as true: as those fables of *Aesope*, and other apologies inuented for doctrine sake by wise and graue men." (Puttenham, ch. 19)

Therefore, the mystical is the relation between God and us through nature, through teachings in a literary form and achieve through contemplation.

Another issue regarding religion was the contrast between Catholicism (prohibited) and Anglicanism (a version of Protestantism and the official religion in England), with the latter being encouraged by the Queen and the first being persecuted. Catholics suffered executions, as was the case of the Catholic poet Robert Southwell, a mystic whose unchanging faith and ideas maintained his optimism even during torture according to testimonies (Thompson, pp.176-178). As specified by Coch (p. 118), Catholics allowed strong emotions, Protestants saw them as a distraction and Puritans completely prohibited them. This disagreement also affected how they interpreted the Bible and the conceits included in it, such as the highly erotic Song of Solomon and the garden metaphors, being

the least accepted by the Puritans. Catholicism was seen as too liberal for Protestants (Thompson) and some poets could hid a discussion on the division of Christian denominations in their poems, as was the case of Shakespeare as per some interpretations (Hokama).

All these special English characteristics conditioned the poets' mysticism, making it more dogmatic than in the rest of Europe and less pompous. Protestantism was sober in style, so the poets who practiced this religion (or whose patrons did) had to keep their topics and concerns within the limits imposed. Feelings and love could be both a path to a higher vision and a distraction that leads to sin. Thus, their association of love with religion had to be cautious, as they would not be allowed to encourage sin or commit blasphemy. Instead, they used related conceits and explored a more general idea of mysticism.

The Sonneteers and Petrarchism

Philip Sidney (1554-1586), William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Edmund Spenser (1552/53-1599) and Mary Wroth (1587-1652) all wrote sonnets. However, each sonneteer interpreted the Italian trend according to their convictions and with a particular goal, be it moralizing or transgressive.

Starting with Sidney, his essay "The Defence of Poesie" expresses his opinion on sonnets, although this opinion apparently contradicts his own practice. Similarly to other courtly poets, he wrote in favour of Queen Elizabeth I⁶, given that he was foremost a noble. For him, English poetry was already the purest (Sidney, 2014). He firmly defended the moralizing responsibility of poetry, seeing it as either a way to praise God and promote true love or as a cautionary tale. According to Coch, Sidney saw good poetry to be a tale where the poet is a strong soldier who is capable of resisting temptation, putting the muse as a temptress who tries to lure him into eroticism. In *The Reinvention of Love*, Anthony Low dedicates a chapter to explain how he paradoxically was the "poet of desire", and the last courtly poet. He defines him as a

⁶ Sidney wrote a short play about her called "The Lady of May"

“Knightly poet, chivalric lover, Protestant idealist, perfect gentleman, Sidney became the embodiment of all his admirers' desires, the focusing figure of a hopeful future increasingly less realizable and of a vanishing and now unobtainable past.”. (Low, p.13)

Sidney's sonnet cycle *Astrophil and Stella* shows his poetic persona, Astrophil, as a negative exemplum, as a sinner whose lustful love causes him suffering, showing the fulfillment of desire without repentance as a destruction of the soul. However, according to Low, his intention was not only moralizing, but that of achieving success, mixing three types of desires in his poems: sexual, religious and political. He uses war and feudal metaphors for love, in a nod to the introduction of love language in Queen Elizabeth's policies. For him, courtly love was similar to patronage: it requires courting noblemen or women to get financial or sexual favours, respectively, in return (Low, p. 22-23; 25). Sidney personifies these three ambitions in Jove, Mars and Cupid, seeing unrequited love as a form of war and also as the duty that should be chosen. Therefore, Sidney warns about, not only the dangers of earthly love, but also of ambition, considering himself a sinner.

In the case of Shakespeare, his sonnets did not conform a single cycle, instead they were rather a compilation of poems dedicated to either a patron (WH, often referred to by scholars as a friend) or to his “Dark Lady”. As is the case with all of our sonneteers, the sonnets did not only express love, they also justified his tone and apologized for the possibility of being interpreted as a blasphemous poet (Hokama, p.210). Rhema Hokama's article discusses how Shakespeare defended himself from that possible interpretation. The poet wrote during a time of religious change and tension and his style often resembled prayers or devotional gestures, which risked being interpreted by his rivals and Puritans as a form of superstition, encouraging idolatry (as he seems to worship his muse) and potentially losing the capacity of devotion. The poet-playwright defended his poetry comparing it to theatre (also forbidden by Puritans) and to public devotion: “Co-opting the logic shared by Church orthodoxy and Puritan antitheatricalism, the Sonnets configure acts of devotion and praise as public performances that produce commensurate devotional states in the one who praises” (Hokama, p. 201). Furthermore, Shakespeare alludes to the language conflict surrounding religion and how love cannot be expressed in any language and his poems keep his beloved alive, as the Book of Common Prayer does with faith. Therefore, Hokama defends that

Shakespeare not only does not consider himself blasphemous, but he also accuses (in a veiled manner) his rivals of not actively participating in Communion⁷ and the Prayer. Another important point in our discussion about Shakespeare is made by Terrell L. Tebbetts, who observes how he continued Petrarch's style adding the element of Platonism through the inclusion of the Judeo-Christian tradition. He uses heavenly language and slavery conceits such as the relation between an ignored lover and a slave to defend the transcendentalism of love and art and how poets are almost gods. His muse is the Messiah in a world of Love and he takes that role in the world of Art, so they save each other from the corrupt real world. Moreover, Shakespeare grants his muses salvation by forgiving them and eternal life by writing about them. His repetition of slavery images is not rooted in the importance of feudal power as was the case in Sidney's poems, but on the biblical idea of the "last becoming first" at the gates of Heaven. Therefore, Hokama and Tebbetts show how Shakespeare mystical language was controversial and showed a sincere devotion to his muses, which agree with the idea of love as a spiritual path.

Edmund Spenser interpreted Petrarchism and decided to only follow it partially, which makes him a "counter-Petrarchan" according to Patrick Cheney in Andrew Escobedo's 2017 book on this poet. This sonneteer was the first to break one of the Petrarchan foundation principles: unrequited love: his cycle ends in marriage, encouraging mutuality over male dominance. His personal style shows the disagreement with the duality and paradoxes involving the Italian trend, which translates into a fusion of sex and salvation: in Spenser there is not a distinction of love being good and the body being bad, rather both are seen as godly: "[an] erotic foreplay as a divinely ordained act of sexual union" (Cheney, p. 241). Similarly, he solves the dilemma posed by Sidney between love, success and Christian glory by recognizing his beloved as the way to fulfill all. His mixed style of "private erotic lyric and public national epic" (Cheney, p. 236) allowed him to interpret the erotic paradigm behind Petrarchism and to turn idolatry into a metaphysical spirit.

⁷ Even though communion is often related to the Catholic liturgy, it is part of the Anglican Church ritual, and it already was during Shakespeare's life (Hokama, p.214).

Finally, Mary Wroth's case is remarkable because she was one of the very few women sonneteers. While some women did write, such as Aemilia Lanyer, their poetry was mostly religious. Puttenham (ch. 26) did agree with women learning how to write poetry, although he did think that it was a skill that was not the most appropriate to have for wives. Sidney, on the other hand, saw poetry's faults as feminine:

“So that since the excellences of [poesie] may be so easily and so justly confirmed, and the low creeping objections so soon trodden down; it not being an art of lies, but of true doctrine; not of effeminateness, but of notable stirring of courage; not of abusing man's wit, but of strengthening man's wit; not banished, but honoured by Plato;” (Sidney, 2014)

Either way, women were more often seen as the objects of poetry rather than the subjects, and were usually linked to the conceit of a garden to conceal the female eroticism, a tradition that had already appeared in the Bible in the Song of Solomon and is related to the Garden of Eden and Eve (Coch). Mary Wroth has been mostly studied from a feminist perspective, and one of these perspectives is proposed in Daniel Juan Gil's 1999 article, where he discusses her female authority. Pamphilia writing to Amphilanthus was not only a change in perspective (a woman being the poet instead of the muse), but a silent way to disrupt the patriarchy in Petrarchism. Women were seen as objects of exchange and, in the Petrarchan tradition, as an unobtainable object of lust. Therefore, Wroth's Pamphilia demanding to be truly loved was seen as less desirable and would give her a way out of that exchange.

These four sonneteers followed and transformed Petrarchism at the same time, interpreting it according to their ideals and their relationship with religion and gender norms. Sidney was the closest to the original Petrarchan model, writing his sonnets as a cautionary tale; however, Shakespeare used the sonnets to express his own view on religion (among other things), and Spenser and Wroth wrote theirs to defend reciprocity in courtship, either with a mystic or a transgressive goal.

Chapter II: Introducing the Sonnets

As artists, the sonneteers applied their own styles to their poems. Even though the trend was marked and followed some principles, they experimented with topics and showed preference for some rhetorical figures over others. It must be noted that these four authors did not completely agree with Petrarch's ideas, as the previous section explained, so they found small ways to transgress the rules and include their own temperament into their creations. For this section, an overall analysis of the sonnets, including rhyme, frequent rhetorical figures and vocabulary has been performed to understand the themes, interpretations and transgressions.

The publication of the sonnets differed from poet to poet. Sidney's sonnets were the firsts to be published together in 1591 as *Astrophel and Stella*, five years after his death, although they had been circulating as manuscripts in his inner circle since 1582. The next sonneteer to be published was Spenser, who got *Amoretti* published together with *Epithalamion* in 1595, and was involved in its edition. In the case of Shakespeare, his sonnets appeared for the first time in the 1609 quarto. Lastly, Wroth followed her uncle Philip Sidney's steps and got the sonnets that had been circulating as manuscripts compiled and published in 1621. The number of sonnets for each author is not dissimilar: while Shakespeare has a total of 154 sonnets and Wroth only wrote 81 for *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, Spenser and Sidney stay around a hundred sonnets with 83 and 110⁸ respectively. However, the length of the publications would be balanced because of the songs that Wroth, Spenser and Sidney included, and Shakespeare did not. These sonnets were carefully ordered to tell a story, either of a fictional character or of the poetic persona of the author. Therefore, there is an established order that usually follows the poetic persona feeling a strong attraction towards the beloved, love being challenged, the possibility of the consummation of love (which changes depending on the author) and the death of either the romance or the beloved. The identity of the beloved and whether they existed is often a mystery: although it is known that Spenser's poems were dedicated to his wife, Elizabeth

⁸ In Grosart's 1877 edition; previous ones did not include the last two sonnets

Boyle (Larsen), the rest of the poets never confirmed whom their poems were about. Shakespeare's works were addressed to two people, namely "the fair youth" (a young man, seemingly Mr. W.H. in the initial dedicatory) and the "Dark Lady" (Hokama), their identities have been speculated and not proven. Similarly, Stella and Amphilanthus' identities were never confirmed by Sidney and Wroth respectively; however, they have been commonly identified with Sidney's lover, Penelope Devereux ("Sir Philip Sidney"), and Wroth's cousin and lover, William Herbert (Bear, p.9).

Even though all the authors are writing the same type of poem (sonnets) and following the same tradition, there are rhetorical differences in their styles. Beginning with the rhyme pattern, Sidney and Shakespeare follow the traditional sonnet pattern with alternate rhyme resetting in every quatrain and ending in a couplet, rhyming 7 different endings: ABABCDCDEFEGG. However, Spenser gives more unity and sonority to this pattern by making the second rhyme on one quatrain the first one in the next: ABABBCBCCDCDEE. Meanwhile, Wroth mostly follows the traditional pattern, although she does not always follow the alternate rhyme and changes the quatrains to ABBA. These small changes in the structure prove the playful nature of the poems, showing that Wroth and Spenser will not accept the established form. Continuing with the rhetorical aspect, they use similar devices, namely alliteration, repetitions and different forms of metaphors. However, a possible reading would express that Wroth uses mostly repetition, using vocabulary related to pain, grieve and death in most of her poems, and metaphors and comparisons appear less frequently than in other authors. This simplicity shows Pamphilia's obsession being not with fame, as the rest of poetic personas studied here, but with love, focusing on the raw emotions of desperation over the form. Shakespeare uses repetition in most of his sonnets, sometimes using synonyms or semantic fields to create allegories. My analysis of sonnet 135 shows how he uses repetition and typography for emphasis, which combined with wordplay creates an interesting effect in sonnets 135 and 136⁹:

⁹ Even though this use of typography (*italics*) adds meaning to the sonnet, there is no certainty on whose idea it was, Shakespeare or the editor's. Nevertheless, *italics* are used in capitalized "Will", proving the intention of the author. In figure 1, the highlight was added as part of the analysis.

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WHO euer hath her wish, thou hast thy *Will*,
 And *Will* too boote, and *Will* in ouer-plus,
 More then enough am I that vexe thee still,
 To thy sweet will making addition thus.
 Wilt thou whose will is large and spacious,
 Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine,
 Shall will in others seeme right gracious,
 And in my will no faire acceptance shine :
 The sea all water, yet receiues raine still,
 And in abundance addeth to his store,
 So thou beeing rich in *Will* adde to thy *Will*,
 One will of mine to make thy large *Will* more.
 Let no vnkinde, no faire beseechers kill,
 Thinke all but one, and me in that one *Will*.

Figure 1: Shakespeare's Sonnet 135 as in its original edition

His own name, Will, is used with the noun "will" to mean intention, hoping to make his lover see him as an intention. This inclusion of names is also present in *Astrophil and Stella*, where the name Stella appears in 61 poems, often repeated more than once; furthermore, the cycle includes the poet's name, as Astrophil represents Phil-ip Sidney with a reference to stars¹⁰. Therefore, each author shows their own style at the rhetorical level of their poetry, using rhyme and figures to create a personal brand.

As for the themes and vocabulary, according to my analysis, they did show predilection for different topics to compare them with love. In the case of Sidney, he compares love to a war, a realm or learning, using metaphors and vocabulary related to battles, kings and servants, or schools, comparing love to a battle that cannot always be won, a tyrant king or a lesson to be learned. Furthermore, he has the widest palette of the sonneteers,

¹⁰ The prefix "astro" means "star" in Greek, while the name "Stella" is the same word in Latin. This classical references were common during the Renaissance.

frequently adding red, white or silver to the common black and gold that is present in the sonnets by Shakespeare, Wroth and Spenser. The addition of red to represent love and blood helps with his moralizing argument: earthly love as something painful. Sidney also references Stella's breath frequently, making the poetry slightly more sensual. Concerning Shakespeare, he uses death and time more than his fellow poets and as something inevitable and normal, rather than a source of suffering. His motivation behind writing is not only that of fame; it is also a way to preserve his lovers' memory, granting them some pseudo-immortality and a relief to the passage of time. Additionally, Shakespeare uses some original allegories for love as an illness and medicine at the same time, less negatively than his colleagues, and law, specifically the crime of stealing. His poetry is very sensual, engaging smell and other senses frequently. Regarding Wroth, she mostly uses the semantic field of pain as mentioned in the previous point, making her sonnets especially negative. Finally, Spenser is not only keen on the battle imagery, he frequently uses hunting and a shipwreck in relation to love, comparing unrequited love to being the prey of his beloved and mutual love to a balance in nature, and seeing courting as a ship in the ocean that needs to avoid the storm of rejection. Most of these are conceits taken from the Petrarchan tradition, but each poet adapts them to their needs.

Before entering into the mystical references, which is the central part of my analysis, we must point out that there are some topics and words that appear frequently in their sonnets and should be mentioned to illustrate the relevance of witty wordplay among sonneteers and how this will be used to connect the material and spiritual spheres. We can begin with the semantic field of vision ("eyes", "sight", "look", "blind", etc.), which can be observed in all poets and is related to the mystical idea of achieving spiritual vision. It is connected with the topic of beauty, which appears in relation with the two previous points: the beloved is admired (and desired) for their beauty, and it is a result of Neoplatonism, as they represent the beauty of heaven. Another word that appears frequently is "sweet", which appears on descriptions of the beloved. A special case with this word is that of Sidney's sonnet LXXIX, where he uses it in polyptoton: "Sweet kisse, thy sweets I faine would sweetly endite,/ Which, euen of sweetnesse sweetest sweetner art;" (Sidney, lines 1-2). Another two words that recur in all poets because of the romantic nature of their poetry are "desire" and "delight".

Furthermore, “desire” can be often found rhymed with “fire” and “delight” with “night”, which emphasizes the erotic side of the Petrarchan love: the addressee is not only seen as a “heavenly object” that leads to spirituality, but also as a person who sexually attracts the writer, whether this is positive or negative, as is mostly the case of Sidney. Three more recurrent themes are the night, nature and wit. Although night and nature will be discussed in the following chapter, we can see that gardens, oceans, seasons and the sky are metaphors for either the beloved or love itself, connected again with the Neoplatonic idea of beauty. In the case of the metaphors with “wit”, they show the intention the authors might had by sharing or getting published these sonnets. Beyond expressing their ideas of courtly love or immortalizing love, they are concerned with fame, thus needing to prove their creations are works of art. Furthermore, they refer to love as foolish or consider themselves fools for not being reciprocated, or they, as is the case with Spenser mostly, praise wit in their muse.

Therefore, we can observe how the poets questioned the Petrarchan style in subtle ways, changing the structure or themes that the Italian poet started. Their sonnets were not simply expressions of courtly love; they were responses to the movement. From the rhyme to the images used, the English sonneteers created their own style and used the poems as a display of their wit and senses, central qualities to mysticism that they considered could be lost when love was a cause of suffering.

Gender and Reciprocity: Small Transgressions

Poetry has an intention and a purpose for these poets. The four sonneteers go beyond the expression of love or the search for fame, and this translates into small transgressions present in their poetry. The intention behind the sonnets, who they are addressed to or how they tackle certain topics is unique to each poet, which creates a new version that can sometimes seem to satirize the original Petrarchan style and to explain their own perception of spirituality.

Astrophil and Stella was conceptualized by Sidney as a cautionary tale on lust, as a lengthy parable in form of a sonnet cycle. However, he did follow the Petrarchan model quite faithfully, even getting him to be considered “the poet of desire” (Low). His Christian ideas

were mostly expressed through allegories; however, the ending could clash with them. In the last sonnet in Grosart's editions, Sonnet CX, the poetic persona alludes to suicide:

“O take fast hold; let that light be thy guide
In this small course which birth drawes out to death,
And thinke how euill becommeth him to slide,
Who seeketh heau'n, and comes of heau'nly breath.
Then farewell world; thy vttermost I see:
Eternall Loue, maintaine thy life in me” (Sidney, lines 9-14)

Suicide is considered sinful in the Christian religion, as it interferes with God's plans, so if that was the case, the protagonist of the parable would commit the ultimate sin, not reaching Heaven as he intends. This is a twist on Petrarch's poems, as his *Canzoniere* ends with the realization that he should focus on spirituality. For Sidney, the beginning of desire and lust already condemns the sinner to death and Hell. Another small transgression is the sonnet from the point of view of Stella, Sonnet LXXXVI, since, surprisingly, he gives voice to his muse.

The next published sonnet cycle was *Amoretti*. As Spenser was the sonneteer who was most involved in the publication of his own poems, we can have more certainty that everything in his cycle was intentional. He defied the basic requirement for Petrarchan courtly love: his love is reciprocal. As we have already seen, his sonnets are some of the most overtly mystical. However, while Sidney and Petrarch opposed desire to spirituality while paradoxically adding an erotic element in their poetry, Spenser sees both concepts as complementary. He sees Elizabeth in nature, and this allows him to also see God. For him, his wife is sent from Heaven, which is most clear in Sonnet LXXIX:

“MEN call you fayre, and you doe credit it,
[...]
but the trew fayre, that is the gentle wit,
and vertuous mind is much more prayd of me.

[...]

That is true beautie: that doth argue you

to be diuine and borne of heauenly seed:

deriu'd from that fayre Spirit, from whom all true

and perfect beauty did at first proceed. [...]" (lines 1, 3-4, 9-12)

Shakespeare's cycle is the least focused on courtly love, or love in general. Unlike the rest of the sonneteers, he does not attempt to tell a story; instead, he (or perhaps his editor) creates a compilation of sonnets. Not telling a story is not the only way he deviates from the Petrarchan stream: his style can be opposite to Petrarch's, for example by using an anti-blazon in one of his most famous sonnets, Sonnet 130, where he compares his muse with nature in a negative manner and finishes with "And yet by heauen I thinke my loue as rare,/ As any she beli'd with false compare" (Shakespeare, lines 13-14), thus ending the tradition of divinizing the beloved. Furthermore, he admits that his carnal desires will prevent him from reaching Heaven and this is not a problem for him in Sonnet 146, which contrasts with the ideas of the previous sonneteers, who either condemn it or justify it. Finally, the most controversial point in Shakespeare's sonnet is probably how most of his sonnets are addressed to a man, who he addresses as a friend ("But if the while I thinke on thee (deare friend)/ All losses are restord, and sorrowes end.", Sonnet 30, lines 13-14), yet seems to consider women fortunate for being able to love him in Sonnet 20: "A Womans face with nature oowne hand painted,/ Haste thou the Master Mistris of my passion, [...] But since she prickt thee out for womens pleasure,/ Mine be thy loue and thy loues vse their treasure" (Shakespeare, lines 1-3, 13-14).

Finally, Wroth's sonnets have already been mentioned as the less related to beauty and the most related to death and pain. Her sonnets are told from the point of view of a woman, Pamphilia, whose love for Amphilanthus seems to be unrequited; therefore, she breaks the pattern of men yearning for women. However, her sonnet cycle is part of a bigger narrative, *Urania*, where both characters have a happy ending, which can already be seen in the "crown of sonnets dedicated to love" included in the cycle. Therefore, her happy ending

is another transgression in content. Finally, unlike her uncle's cycle, even though Pamphilia sees death as a way to avoid such pain, she does not seek suicide as the ending but rather displays perseverance and patience, qualities expected of women since biblical times.

In conclusion, there were changes from Sidney to Wroth, with the authors playing increasingly with the expectations of the genre. From a parable with a tragic ending to a woman reaching her love story, the poets have slowly disagreed with the clash between love and desire and have slowly introduced a voice for women and a place for men as muses. These sonneteers adapted the genre to create their own idea of courtly love, where love can be experienced by anyone, seen in common places and can transcend time happily.

Chapter III: The Language of Mysticism

The language of mysticism is difficult to circumscribe, as it does not only involve explicitly religious expressions. Everything that connects the mundane with the divine or that expresses a desire for superior knowledge can be considered mystical. One of the ways to express mysticism is by referring to religion. However, following the Petrarchan tradition, nature is the best reflection of the Lord's work. We can see nature divided in what I will call the "physical nature", which includes mostly garden, animal and element metaphors, and the "passing nature", which includes the passage of time, mostly expressed through days and nights, and how it ends in death. This does fit with the idea of mysticism as considered in this essay because it is based on observation and contemplation¹¹ and on a sustained allegory that intends to persuade the reader of the author's ideas.

Sacred Words

The most explicitly mystical language includes both biblical references and mythology¹², as part of the mystical vocabulary. The sonneteers were Christian, so they would use their own religion the most. However, they included paganism to follow the style of the Renaissance and Petrarchism and, perhaps, to avoid mentioning their beliefs excessively or to be accused of blasphemy. Because of the didactic approach that Sidney took, he included frequent allegories: personifications of virtues, such as Beauty, Sense, Vertue, Humbleness or Chastity. However, all poets used virtues and sins frequently to describe what their beloved should be or how they cause them to behave, considering lust as the most common sin, often compared to a beast. As for other overtly religious language, "heaven" and "heavenly" are common references to describe their muse, although it can appear in an oxymoron with "hell" or "hellish", such as this verse from Sidney's sixth sonnet: "Of force of heau'enly beames infusing hellish paine" (line 3). Similarly, "blessed", "cursed", "pray", "holy" and "sin" are recurrent expressions, often associated with love, which again

¹¹ Defended by Puttenham and Spenser (Junker, p.278), among others (Thompson).

¹² Looking for superior knowledge also applies to Pantheist religions.

appears in *Astrophel and Stella*: “Then loue is sin, and let me sinfull be.” (Sidney, Sonnet XIV, line 14). However, other direct references to angels or demons are less frequent, probably as a result of English restraint. This is not the case of Shakespeare’s sonnet 144, where he creates the image of a good and a bad angel trying to persuade him, showing how humans struggle to fight temptation: “Yet this shal I nere know but lieu in doubt,/ Till my bad angel fire my good one out.” (lines 13-14)

The most direct religious reference is alluding to God. Nevertheless, while the Christian God is only mentioned explicitly (referred to as “God” or “Lord”) 14 times across the total 434 poems considered, gods and goddesses are often referenced, mostly divinizing Love (who is personified and alluded), or as classical gods. We may regard this polytheism as part of the mystical sphere: the Roman gods were already mentioned by Petrarch and the most important ones for this poets are Venus, goddess of love; Phoebus, another name for the God of poetry; Mars, god of war; Cupid, Venus’ son and helper, and Iove/Iupiter, the main god and probably used to avoid blasphemy and maintain the theme. This selection of gods matches the main themes and metaphors: love is seen as a war and as an inspiration for poetry. This distinction between gods and what they represented was expressed by Puttenham at the time, who did not agree with the contemporary use and still recognized it as a proof of “poesie” connecting the mortal with the divine realm (ch. 12). In addition to alluding to these deities, the poets also call for the muses and write sonnets addressed to Love. Finally, there are direct references to the Bible or mythology. In the first case, we have the example of the lamb and the lion or the wolf, a metaphor that appears several times in the Bible to refer to a dangerous person and their helpless victim, which in the sonnets are the lover and the poet, respectively. The allusions to mythology do not restrain to the previously mentioned gods, as there are references to myths, such as the myth of Daphne and Apollo (Phoebus in this poem) in Spenser’s sonnet XXVIII. Another interesting fact about this myth in relation to the Petrarchan influence is how the tree that Daphne becomes is a laurel, which is also referenced in Sidney’s sonnet XC. Furthermore, there are a few sonnets that resembles a Christian prayer alluding to God, as is the case of Sonnet LXVIII of *Amoretti*:

MOST glorious Lord of lyfe that on this day,

Didst make thy triumph ouer death and sin:
 and hauing harrowd hell didst bring away,
 captiuity thence captiue vs to win.

 This ioyous day, deare Lord, with ioy begin,
 and grant that we for whom thou didest dye
 being with thy deare blood clene washt from sin,
 may liue foreuer in felicity.

 And that thy loue we weighing worthily,
 may likewise loue thee for the same againe:
 and for thy sake that all lyke deare didst buy,
 with loue may one another entertayne.

 So let vs loue, deare loue, lyke as we ought,
 loue is the lesson which the Lord vs taught.

The structure resembles that of a prayer, starting with “Most glorious Lord”, while the content resembles a sacred teaching, ending with “love is the lesson which the Lord us taught”. Even though Spenser was not as focused on the didactic nature of literature as Sidney, we can read this poem as with a clear didactic intention.

Therefore, we can see how the sonneteers do not limit mystical language to the Christian imagery, also alluding to classical literature, which was fairly common during the Renaissance. Not only the publications can serve as parable, but they also refer to biblical and mythological parables. Alluding directly to deities, whether they are Christian or pagan and in form or content, is the most direct expression of mysticism followed by these authors.

The Garden of Eden

Nature had always been and would continue to be a source of inspiration for poets. In the subsequent centuries, English poets such as Wordsworth or Coleridge and the American Transcendentalists would find the connection between God and Nature, seeing it

as one. However, we can already see these ideas in the selected cycle of sonnets, influenced by Petrarch's Platonism. While it was obvious according to this theory that love reflected the divine world, so did nature. Petrarch had already connected his love for Laura with the laurel tree, and the sonneteers would use nature and natural phenomena to describe the feelings and emotions that love and its absence had in them.

One of the most obvious relations between nature and heaven could be the Garden of Eden. Recovering the idea from the first section, nature reflected Heaven on Earth; however, Spenser expresses in his Sonnet XXIV a dichotomy between nature and God as creators:

“When I behold that beauties wonderment,
And rare perfection of each goodly part:
Of natures skill the onely complement,
I honor and admire the makers art” (lines 1-4)

It is also worth mentioning how Spenser explores the notion of “the maker ” in other sonnets, such as LIII (“But mercy doth with beautie best agree,/ as in theyr maker ye them best may see”, lines 13-14) or in Sonnet LXXXI, where he adds love as another possible creator: “The rest be works of natures wonderment,/ but this is the worke of harts astonishment” (lines 13-14). Furthermore, he was keen on metaphors with natural elements (as we will see later in this section), taking further his descriptions using flowers by describing more intimate parts of his beloved in his famous Sonnet LXIII, where the blazon does not only include her face, but even her naked breasts. However, some authors used garden metaphors to experiment with the least agreeable part of nature. This was the case of Shakespeare and Wroth. Shakespeare used “weeds” to describe his addressee in a negative light, for example in sonnets 69 (“To thy faire flower ad the rancke smell of weeds”, line 12) or 94 (“Lillies that fester, smell far worse then weeds”, line 14). We could read these metaphors as a contrast between the external and internal beauty in the addressee, whose appearance is agreeable, while their personality is not. In the case of Wroth, she does not use garden metaphors as often as other authors, however, she plays with the idiom “nip something from the bud” in her fifth sonnet, where she writes “killing the budd before the tree doth spring” (Wroth, line

10), which similarly to Shakespeare, uses to describe how the rejection of her muse causes her attraction to decrease.

Along with the flora, the fauna is another indispensable part of nature, which the authors used for their poems. Sometimes, animals were mentioned following metaphors that originated in the Bible, for example the previously mentioned lambs and lions or wolfs, as we can see in Shakespeare's Sonnet 96 ("How many Lambs might the sterne Wolfe betray", line 9) and Spenser's Sonnet XX ("And yet the Lyon that is Lord of power,/ [...]disdeigneth to deuoure/ the silly lambe that to his might doth yield.", lines 5, 7-8). However, other animals were often used to show the position of power of the muse over the poet: the lack of affection makes the lover a predator, and the poet is a defenseless prey. Sidney compares himself to a dog in his Sonnet LIX, where he considers that his mistress treats him worse than the animal: "Deere, why make you more of a dog then me?" (Sidney, line 1). In the case of Shakespeare, he identifies animals with personalities: in Sonnet 19 his beloved is compared to beasts such as tigers, lions and a phoenix, while he identifies horses and hawkes with wealth in Sonnet 91, putting his beloved above those creatures of wealth: "Richer then wealth, prouder then garments cost/ Of more delight then Hawkes or Horses bee:/ And hauing thee, of all mens pride I boast." (Shakespeare, lines 10-12). Finally, Spenser uses animals the most, especially birds as a metaphor of liberty in relation to golden cages (Sonnets LXV and LXXIII) and cuckows to announce his love (Sonnets XIX and LXXXV). However, he also compares his beloved to a Spider, relating it with the Iliad to talk about her patience, in Sonnet XXIII, and to a panther ready to attack him in Sonnet LIII. His most interesting animal metaphor is found in Sonnet LXXI, where he reverses the Petrarchan idea of the beloved ready to attack him to defend reciprocal love:

"Your selfe vnto the Bee ye doe compare;
and me vnto the Spyder that doth lurke, [...]
And all thensforth eternall peace shall see
betweene the Spyder and the gentle Bee." (Spenser, lines 2-3, 13-14)

Finally, even though not all parts of nature are alive, the authors still use them to describe the object of their affection or their relationship. This is the case of the elements and the minerals. Fire has already been discussed as a metaphor for both passion and hell; however, the water in different forms is also a recurrent theme, found as ice in contrast to the fire in Wroth's Sonnet 17 ("Heate in desire, while frosts of care I proue.", line 12) and Spenser's Sonnet XXX ("MY loue is lyke to yse, and I to fyre;", line 1). Water also refers to the ocean, which has already been discussed to appear in Shakespeare's sonnets and Amoretti with the metaphor of a shipwreck. The elements are still related to religious imagery, as Amoretti's Sonnet LV shows:

"Not earth; for her high thoughts more heauenly are,

not water; for her loue doth burne like fyre:

not ayre; for she is not so light or rare:

not fyre; for she doth friese with faint desire.

Then needs another Element inquire

whereof she mote be made; that is the skye." (Spenser, lines 5-10)

We can see how not only all the elements are mentioned, but so is Heaven: Elizabeth, Spenser's beloved, is beyond earthly. Finally, this cycle also includes a blazon that uses gemstones and minerals to describe his muse in Sonnet XV, including gold, silver, sapphire, ruby, pearls and ivory, which demonstrate not only her beauty, but also her worth.

We can conclude that plants, animals and other elements of nature are "the maker's work" and at the same time a way to describe the muse of the poems. Therefore, the muse reflects the world beyond the mundane, either being beautiful and valuable like Heaven or being cruel and disagreeable like Hell. While Spenser explores this idea the most, Shakespeare, Sidney and Wroth use these metaphors and comparisons as well to insert their muses and themselves in nature.

Night and Death

In this love poetry, another abstraction often takes central stage: time. It can appear in relation to nature, through the parts of the day or the seasons, or in abstract terms. As we saw that death is just another step towards the complete knowledge, the sonneteers do not refrain from talking about it, sometimes as an exaggeration or as something that they could prevent if they were God-like beings. In Sidney's Sonnet XXXII, we can already see explicit the relation between night and death in the first verse, where he invokes "Morpheus, the liuely sonne of deadly Sleepe," (Sidney, line 1). Night is a temporal preview of death and the seasons are a shortened version of life.

The juxtaposition of light and dark is combined with nature through the alternation of day and night. Usually, the day is the moment the poet can admire their beloved, and at night they dream and think about them, as Wroth expresses from her first sonnet, where she gives a justification for Pamphilia's expressions of yearning and also set the relation between night and death. ("When night's blacke Mantle could most darknesse proue,/ And sleepe (deaths Image) did my senses hyre,/ From Knowledge of my selfe, then thoughts did moue". (Wroth, lines 1-3). However, this is not always the case, as even Wroth writes about how no moment of the day is inherently happy nor sad in her Sonnet 18:

"WHich should I better like of, day or night?

Since all the day, I liue in bitter woe:

Inioying light more cleere my wrongs to know,

And yet most sad, feeling in it all spite;

In night when darknesse doth forbid all light;

[...]

Darke to ioy by day, light in night opprest?" (lines 1-5, 14)

Talking about the parts of the day can lead to extending to the sky and the celestial bodies, and not just Heaven. The poet who explores this the most is Sidney, due to his sonnet cycle having a celestial theme, and often refers to the sun, the moon, stars, planets and everything

else in the sky. As he has the most conservative style and vision, his poems rarely show any experimentation. However, Sonnet LXXXIX is the exception:

LXXXIX

Now that of absence the most irksom night
With darkest shade doth ouercome my day;
Since *Stellaes* eyes, wont to giue me my day,
Leauing my hemisphere, leaue me in night;
Each day seemes long, and longs for long-staid night;
The night, as tedious, wooes th' approach of day:
Tired with the dusty toiles of busie day,
Languisht with horrors of the silent night,

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/%7Erbear/stella.html> (36 of 61)4/11/2005 9:10:53 AM

Astrophel and Stella

Suff'ring the euils both of day and night,
While no night is more darke then is my day,
Nor no day hath lesse quiet then my night:
With such bad-mixture of my night and day,
That liuing thus in blackest Winter night,
I feele the flames of hottest Sommer day.

Figure 2: Sonnet 89 in Astrophil & Stella

We can see marked the repetition of day and night: each appear ten times along the sonnet and are the only rhymes. We could interpret this repetition as days passing by quickly, which seems to contrast with verses 5 and 6, where he describes the days and nights as long and tedious, respectively. This sonnet is a catalogue of rhetorical devices, including paradoxes, oxymorons, epistrophe and polyptotons.

Units of time such as minutes, hours, days and years, and they are used in some of the sonnets to express the continuity of feelings: “By cruell Loue, who might haue these redeemd,/ And all these yeeres of houres to ioy assur'd.” (Wroth, sonnet 54, lines 7-8), “O doating Time, canst thou for shame let slid, / So many minutes, while ills doe beguile” (Wroth, Sonnet 78, lines 5-6). However, the sonneteers frequently connect time with nature through the seasons. They usually play with the association of spring and summer (colorful, energetic) with youth, and winter and autumn (cold, dark) with death, as we can see in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 98:

“From you have I been absent in the spring,
When proud pied April, dressed in all his trim,
[...]
Yet seemed it winter still, and you away,
As with your shadow I with these did play.” (lines 1-2, 13-14)

Some poets play with this idea in the form of a conceit, as another sonnet by the same author highlights the qualities of summer to make the lover outshine the beauties of the season: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate:/ [...]” (Shakespeare, Sonnet 19, lines 1-2). Beyond the seasons, time is a recurrent theme, interpreted by each poet in a different manner. Wroth seems to appeal to death as an escape from her unrequited love (“Is that for you, I feele not Death for care,/ But now Ile seeke it, since you will not saue”, Sonnet 6, lines 13-14), while Shakespeare warns about old age and announces how he can grant immortality through his verses, for example in Sonnet 3:

“So, thou through windowes of thine age shalt see,
Dispiht of wrinkles this thy goulden time.
But if thou liue remembred not to be,
Die single and thine Image dies with thee” (Shakespeare, lines 11-14).

Therefore, even though time is an abstraction, like love, the poets find ways to make it tangible, connecting it with the already discussed nature. They observe time, both enjoying and suffering each day, night and month. They also observe death without fear, even seeing it as an escape from the problems caused by love, or as the end of the body and the continuity of the soul through poetry or an afterlife with God and/or the beloved.

Conclusion

The introduction of sonnets in the 16th century English poetry meant the inclusion of a new style that relies on mysticism: Petrarchism. Therefore, these poems were not simple expressions of love, instead they were crafted works of art that introduced a metaphysical element, often with didactic or argumentative purposes. However, I found that their use of mysticism is not so commonly acknowledged because they did not consider it in the traditional way: they did not search for or felt called by God per se, they observed and experimented with experiences such as love, embracing the mundane to understand the divine. The same way that Laura brought Petrarch closer to God, English sonneteers see their love for their muses as transcendental. Sidney and Wroth warned about the dangers of lust when it is confused with love, which can bring people closer to Hell than Heaven, in cycles that acted like parables; Shakespeare granted a God-like immortality for his loved ones through poetry and Spenser saw marriage as a reflection of God's work.

The English were strongly influenced by the Protestant Reformation, leading to a more sober style with less religious mystifications. In addition, their own personality and social position prompted them to explore more conceits and small transgressions to avoid completely opposing to the genre and to reduce the direct allusions to God and the Bible. As for the remaining conceits, they understood that the mystical element can be platonic, and as such, God and Heaven are present in Earth through nature or time. Each plant and each star are as perfect as the poet's beloved and as perfect as God made them. Furthermore, through small changes in the rhyme pattern, witty puns and other rhetorical devices, the sonneteers found a balance between Petrarchism and their own interpretations. Some of their changes included defying the expectations of gender in the poet, especially in the case of Wroth and, to an extent, Sidney, and in the muse, in the case of Wroth and Shakespeare.

For this group of poets, love was mystical: it was obscure, something created by a superior being that can give and take lives, transforming the world surrounding it and that survives time. When it is true, it should be honored through prayers; when it is mistaken with lust, it must be avoided. This interpretation of the Italian style will continue for centuries in poetry and later in music, writing love as a transcendental, mystical experience.

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