"The Fashioning of English Anti-Petrarchism: Spenser and Shakespeare Remembering Du Bellay"

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Thanks to Anne Lake Prescott's work on the influence of *Pléiade* poets in England, we know more about the English reception of French poetry in the period, alongside with Italian poetry (Prescott 1978; Prescott 2013b).[1] We have also begun to better perceive the mediation of France in the reception of Petrarchism itself, and the importance of translation and imitation (for definitions of the protean movement of Petrarchism, see Dubrow 4; for imitation, see Greene; and Melehy 2005, 159–160). It has become increasingly clear that the fashioning of England's literary idiom took place in a European, transnational context (Boutcher). Joachim du Bellay, whom Spenser celebrated as "first garland of free poësie / That France brought forth […] well worthie […] of immortalitie" (Spenser 1591, S4), was well-known in England, mostly thanks to Spenser's mediation. Spenser did much to popularize Du Bellay in English: first, he translated some of Du Bellay's *Songe* in Jan van der Noot's anti-Catholic *Theatre for Worldlings* (1569); then he adapted his *Antiquitez de Rome* as *The Ruines of Rome*, which were published in his 1591 *Complaints*. Spenser's interest in the Catholic Du Bellay has led to intense speculation but can be explained by the French poet's satirical treatment of Rome, which made him acceptable in a Protestant context (Coldiron; Belle and Cottegnies, 45). Some of Du Bellay's sonnets were even discreetly absorbed into the English repertoire, as shown by Prescott (1978, 52–60). A minor Elizabethan poet, Sir Arthur Gorges, thus translated twenty-three of Du Bellay's poems, taken from works as diverse as *L'Olive, Les Antiquitez*, *Les Regrets*, *Poésies diverses*, and *Divers jeux rustiques*, which shows the extent of Gorges's reading,

[1] For an earlier, much shorter version of this argument, see Cottegnies 2020.

alongside twenty sonnets by Desportes. It is impossible, of course, to say whether his manuscript poems circulated at all, but Samuel Daniel also included imitations of four Du Bellay sonnets from *L'Olive* in *Delia* (Prescott 1978, 58).

It is likely that Shakespeare had read some Du Bellay, and at least Spenser's version of *The Ruines of Rome*. A. Kent Hieatt has identified verbal and thematic echoes between *The Ruines* and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. Shakespeare might have been drawn to the French poet, one of the most individualistic of the *Pléiade* sonneteers, for the irreverent anti-Petrarchan stance of his late poetry, most particularly in *Les Antiquitez de Rome* and *Les Regrets* (Prescott 2013: 144–145). Whether Shakespeare had read Du Bellay's works (or any other French poet) in French directly is a moot point, although he had some French, as we know from his plays (see Kennedy 2006; Kennedy 2016, 219–221). Few critics have looked into Shakespeare's debt to French sonneteers, perhaps for lack of direct evidence, with the valuable exception of Hassan Melehy and Anne Lake Prescott (Melehy 2010, 205–220; Prescott 2013a). Shakespeare the lyric poet still baffles critics, as if his debt to the tradition was either undetectable or limited to the fact that he wrote sonnets.[2] Yet, as for Spenser, Shakespeare's engagement with various modalities of adaptation and imitation of European poetry was instrumental in shaping his response to the genre of the sonnet, as this essay argues.

Following Anne Coldiron, Melehy has reminded us of the importance of Du Bellay's plan for a defence and illustration of the vernacular for a whole generation of European poets, including Spenser (Coldiron; Melehy 2010, 17–30; Brown). But even he, and Prescott, could only argue for a *probable* influence of Du Bellay on Shakespeare, which they mainly detect in Shakespeare's notions about time, and in the immortalizing and embalming function he grants poetry (Melehy 2010, 205; Prescott 2013a). This essay cannot, unfortunately, produce

[2] Although Shakespeare's sonnets were collected and published in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe, Edmondson and Wells have suggested in a recent edition that Shakespeare did not compose them as an organized sequence (Shakespeare 2020). The present essay is based on a sequential reading of the sonnets, however.

groundbreaking evidence proving that Shakespeare had definitely read Du Bellay, but it argues for a change of tack. I suggest that instead of looking for sources, we should compare Shakespeare's free imitation of Petrarchism to Du Bellay's, for both poets challenge the Petrarchan fashion in a similar, impertinent manner. While Spenser's mode of imitation keeps close to the original (Melehy 2005, 159; Melehy 2010, 76), I argue that Shakespeare and Du Bellay share a form of productive imitation that differs in degree from Spenser's and moves away from the humanistic conception of imitation.

It seems established that Shakespeare's *Sonnets* include verbal and thematic echoes that recall Spenser's *Ruines of Rome.* Hieatt lists, for instance, the association between "injurious" and "time" (Spenser 1591, Sonnet 27; Shakespeare, Sonnet 63), between "time" as "devouring" (Spenser 1591, Sonnet 3; Shakespeare, Sonnet 19), the "war" waged against time (Spenser 1591, Sonnet 27; Shakespeare, Sonnets 15 and 16), or the use of words like "antique" and "antiquities" ("extremely rare among other sonnets of the time," Hieatt, 801), and, even rarer, the verb "to ruinate". One of the most obvious thematic "resemblances" is the emphasis on time and mutability. Shakespeare's Sonnet 55 is thus often cited as the closest to Spenser's *Ruines of Rome*. But, as Prescott reminds us, these echoes have their significance within the larger context of the European vogue for "Ruinish," or the language of ruins (Prescott 2013a, 135). It has also been pointed out that Du Bellay's *Antiquitez de Rome* makes explicit the analogy between the decayed city and a ruined female body, through the personification of Rome (Rebhorn). Du Bellay's sequence has thus been read as a radical revisiting of a Petrarchan sonnet sequence, with the lost Roman glory in lieu of the lost Laura (Prescott 2013a, 144), a transposition which is made even more explicit by Spenser through the use of the third-person pronoun "she" to designate the city of Rome: "She, whose high top above the starres did sore…" (Spenser 1591, Sonnet 4, 65). In his *Sonnets*, Shakespeare similarly makes an implicit analogy between his addressee, the youth, and ruins when he submits the young man's body to the

"bloody tyrant, Time" in Sonnet 16 (Prescott 2010, 142), just as he compared Lucrece's body to a ruined building in *The Rape of Lucrece*: "her soul's house is sacked […] Her mansion battered by the enemy" (quoted in Prescott 2013a, 142). In Sonnets 55 and 65, the youth is compared to ruined "statues" and a "work of masonry", a joint allusion to the end of civilizations and to a funerary monument "besmear'd with sluttish time" (Sonnet 55).[3] The young man celebrated by the poet is thus, paradoxically, also constantly associated with the prospect of his demise; and when Shakespeare emphasizes the power of poetry to immortalize its object in a rewriting of the Horatian trope of the *exegi monumentum aere perenius*, it is, again, by overtly associating his explicit subject, the youth, with physical decay. But while many of these thematic "similarities" are intriguing, they do not seem overly specific, and some of them go even as far back as Horace or Ovid; as such, they are shared by a generation of poets.

Yet both Shakespeare and Du Bellay wittily revisit the Petrarchan genre with an irreverence that few poets of their generations display (for Shakespeare's poetics of irreverence, see Venet 2016, 397–398). Both show a critical awareness of generic expectations and systematically distort and dislocate them to create a new poetics. While Du Bellay replaces his mistress with Rome and everything it stands for, Shakespeare substitutes the beautiful lady of the tradition with a fair young man in the larger section of the sequence, and a dark lady for the remaining section—also thereby revising the subgenre of the sonnet to the ugly woman identified by Patrizia Bettella. Like Du Bellay in *Les Regrets* (1558), Shakespeare turns the sonnet sequence into a dramatic exploration of the speaking persona's self, and several overlapping themes emerge. These include not just the multifaceted meditation on ruins that we find in both sequences, but also the melancholy treatment of exile, as in Sonnet 31 of *Les Regrets* ("Heureux qui comme Ulysse", Du Bellay 1993, II: 54), which seems to find an echo

[3] All quotations from the *Sonnets* are from Shakespeare 2006.

in Shakespeare's Sonnet 56 (Kennedy 2006, 108). Both Du Bellay and Shakespeare substitute blame for the praise that is usually expected from a sonnet sequence. This is particularly obvious in *Les Regrets*, where Du Bellay uses the sonnet form more creatively than in his former sequence, *L'Olive* (1549). *Les Regrets* includes a catalogue of his male friends and patrons, and does away with the fiction of a beloved, while the speaker mourns for the lost grandeur of Rome. For if Du Bellay's poems retain from Petrarch an elegiac tone, they are mostly about melancholy and the loss of Rome as a symbol of the passing of time. The sequence constructs a community of readers, who, as patrons and friends, are blamed and praised in turn, united through the agency of the poet's self-centered persona. Replacing social distinction with a form of literary election, the speaker inverts the conventional relationship of patronage, asserting the symbolic power of the poet over his social superiors. Shakespeare also subverts the power balance that lies at the heart of the patronage system, predominantly by turning a patron into the beloved of his sequence and repeatedly blaming him for his corruption. Moreover, he ostensibly fails to give him a pseudonym, that "surnom louable" ("praise pseudonym"), as poet Maurice Scève called it in Dizain LIX of *Delie* (1544, 47), or the imaginary name often imbued with symbolic significance that was usually given the beloved in sonnet sequences. He even refrains from revealing his patron's name—in spite of the sonnet genre's affinity with onomastics in the period. Moreoever, by constantly emphasizing the power of his verse to immortalize the young man's fame, the poet subverts the implicit exchange on which the relationship of patronage is based, turning it into a form of symbolic blackmail.

Du Bellay was generally quite vocal in his criticism of Petrarchism; his famous verse diatribe against Petrarchan poets, "Contre les Pétrarquistes" ("Against Petrarchan poets"), which was published in *Divers Jeux rustiques* (1557), was well-known in England. It was imitated, for instance, by Gorges:

> J'ay oublié l'art de Petrarquizer,
> Je veulx d'Amour franchement deviser,

Sans vous flatter, and sans me deguizer (Du Bellay 1993, II: 190).

Of love fayne woolde I frame my style
Yet nott to flatter nor beguyle
For they that so their words doo fyle
And use a glosinge kinde of vayne (Gorges 50).

This poem includes a stanza on blazons, which Du Bellay's speaker dismisses as vain rhetorical exercises. Contrary to lovers who pilfer the heavens for comparisons and hyperboles, Du Bellay's persona is a down-to-earth lover, looking for a much more concrete satisfaction:

Mais quant à moy, qui plus terrestre suis,
Et n'ayme rien, que ce qu'aymer je puis,
Le plus subtil, qu'en amour je poursuis,
S'appelle jouissance (Du Bellay 1993, II: 194).

In his imitation, Gorges skips the explicit reference to "jouissance," which evokes sexual fulfillment:

For me I cannott reache soe hye
Butt still my truth and faith shall trye
That I am yours untill I dye
And doo by me, by me desarts (Gorges 52).

It is tempting to see this passage as anticipating Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 and perhaps offering a precedent for its no-nonsense lover: "I grant I never saw a goddess go— / My mistress when she walks treads on the ground" (Sonnet 130). Shakespeare might have found an inspiring precedent in the playful treatment here of the Neoplatonic base on which Petrarchism relies.[4] First, Du Bellay revisits the androgyne of Plato's *Symposium* critically, to turn it into a metaphor expressing the perfect friendship between lovers seen as equals (Du Bellay 1993, II: 194).

[4] For definitions of neoplatonism in the period's literature, see Bulger, Medcalf and Roe.

However, in a final twist, he feigns playfully to endorse the conventional Petrarchan topos of the beloved as perfection incarnate, and therefore its Neoplatonic basis, offering to take up his Petrarchan stance to continue wooing his lady as "the most beautiful idea" ("la plus belle Idee", *ibid.*, II: 196), if she so wishes, provided that she agrees to step down from her pedestal and let him kiss her. As the speaker turns the Petrarchan trope into a playful metaphor without substance, he also frankly acknowledges the reality of his sexual desire, which runs counter to the fiction of idealized courtship. In his imitation of the poem, Gorges characteristically omits both the reference to the androgyne and the cruder allusion to the physicality of desire (Gorges 50–52). In his *Sonnets*, Shakespeare combines an original treatment of the androgyne, as when he extols the "master-mistress" (the "Fair Youth") of his "passions" in Sonnet 20, with the celebration of sinful physical desire in the sonnets to the "Dark Lady". In the spirit of Du Bellay's poem above, Shakespeare's sonnet sequence thus subverts orthodox Petrarchism by making physical desire the explicit subject matter in a series of sonnets that are about desire and consummation. One sonnet in particular is entirely devoted to depicting the psychology and physiology of lust, described as obsessional and sinful—"Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action" (Sonnet 129)—while Sonnets 135 and 136 are based on a series of very explicit sexual jokes involving puns on the polysemous word "will" and the proper name "Will."

Throughout his oeuvre, Du Bellay developed a whole range of strategies critical of the blazon. With Sonnet 91 of *L'Olive*, a poem that was itself inspired by two minor Italian poems, he writes a paradoxical blazon, which starts by blaming the lady, but ends with praise. The speaker cantankerously feigns to relinquish his unworthy lady, "unblazoning" her line after line, commanding her to give up all her qualities one by one, because they are all usurped from nature—and in doing so, he literally deconstructs the conventional Petrarchan catalogue of physical beauties:

> Rendez à l'or cete [sic] couleur, qui dore
> Ces blonds cheveux, rendez mil' autres choses :
> […]
> Rendez ces mains au blanc yvoire encore,
> Ce seing au marbre, et ces levres aux roses… (Du Bellay 1993, I: 62).

> Return to gold this colour which gilds
> This fair hair; Return a thousand other things
> […]
> Return these hands to white ivory
> This breast to marble, and these lips to roses… (my translation).

The poem is, however, based on a witty reversal, which reads as blackmail: it ends on a volta introduced by the conjunction "or" which overturns the poem's ostensible aggression towards the woman, and suggests the possibility of her keeping her status—if she accepts his advances. The final twist wittily suggests that the poet can renege on his cursing and start loving his lady again:

> Ou aux rochez rendez ce cœur de marbre,
> Et aux lions cet' humble felonnie (Du Bellay, *ibid*.).

> Or return to the rocks this marble heart,
> And to lions this humbling treachery (my translation).

The sonnet thus, paradoxically, reaffirms the validity of the conventional blazon after all. As for the typical catalogue of beauties, its hackneyed metaphors imply a form of literalization, as each body part is turned into a material substance: the lady's hair, for instance, is not described as being like gold, but *is* gold itself. The lady is thus turned into a beautiful object, a hybrid compound of material parts, as in one of Arcimboldo's contemporary mannerist composite object portraits. The poem, which reads until the very last couplet like a counterblazon, or a poem satirizing or blaming an ugly woman, must finally be read as its opposite: a paradoxical blazon. The paradox on which it is based is the apparent unworthiness of the lady, which is ultimately reversed back into worthiness—although the strategy deconstructing the praise in the first twelve lines necessarily questions the very validity of the blazon.

This poem was known in England and was adapted fairly literally twice, successively

by Sir Arthur Gorges and Samuel Daniel. Intriguingly, they both overlook the final twist, to end on a straightforward rejection of the lady, failing to translate the witty irony of the original poem. In Sonnet 20 of his *Vannetyes and Toyes*, Gorges adds a final couplet in which the speaker simply dismisses his mistress:

> Restore agayne that colloure of the golde
> that garnishte hath those haires like golden streames
> And lett those eyes so heavenly to beholde
> resign unto the Sonn their borrowed beames
> […]
> And let that harte off hardened flynty stone
> return unto the rocks from whenc [sic] it came
> And then (oh love) if thow wilte heare my mone
> teach me withall how to foregett her name (Gorges 23).

In Sonnet 18 of *Delia*, Daniel also alters the ending, adding one last particularly blunt line which sends the woman packing:

> Restore thy tresses to the golden Ore,
> Yeelde Cithereas sonne those Arkes of loue;
> […]
> But yet restore thy fearce and cruell minde,
> To Hyrcan Tygers, and to ruthles Beares.
> Yeelde to the Marble thy hard hart againe;
> So shalt thou cease to plague, and I to paine (Daniel).

It is quite possible that Daniel was imitating Gorges's version here rather than Du Bellay's,[5] but it might also be the case that both Gorges and Daniel resisted the subtle tweaking of generic conventions which Du Bellay achieved with his final reversal of counterblazon into paradoxical blazon. It is perhaps the case that a misogynistic poem entirely dedicated to blame (and to the rejection of the lady) was more appealing to a contemporary English readership, or that Gorges and Daniel perhaps found it more satisfactory for aesthetic reasons, because it did not contradict

[5] For a similar suggestion about another poem, see note in Gorges, 189.

the rest of the poem.

Du Bellay uses a similar twist in Sonnet 91 of *Les Regrets*, an anti-Petrarchan parody, which is a rewriting of a sonnet by Mellin de Saint-Gelais, itself inspired by a former poem by Francesco Berni (Saint-Gelais, 1: 184–185; Berni, 95). The poem, again, plays with generic expectations, as it oscillates between a parodic blazon (as signaled by the meliorative adjectives and the repeated interjections) and an ironic counter-blazon, as the woman is seemingly praised but also associated with negative terms—until, brushstroke after brushstroke, it is the portrait of an ugly woman that finally comes together:

> O beaux cheveux d'argent mignonnement retors!
> O front crespe, et serein! Et vous face doree!
> O beaux yeux de crystal! ô grand' bouche honoree
> Qui d'un large reply retrousses tes deux bordz!
> […]
> O beau corps transparent! ô beaux membres de glace!
> O divines beautez! pardonnez moi de grace,
> Si pour estre mortel, je ne vous ose aymer (Du Bellay 1993, II: 84).

Du Bellay's ending differs from both sources, however. Where Berni ended with a sarcastic comment taking stock of his lady's parodic portrait, and Saint-Gelais with an ironic mention of his pangs of love, Du Bellay ends on a final, coy withdrawal ("Oh, divine graces! Forgive me, / If being a mortal, I dare not love you"—my translation). The poet rejects the ugly woman he has vilified under the guise of a perfidious parodic praise, by simply withdrawing from the scene. In order to reject her, he modestly feigns to don again, in a final twist, the mask of the humble Petrarchan lover: as a down-to-earth human being, he finds himself eventually unworthy of this "goddess"—even though he has erected a profoundly repellant idol. In these two sonnets, -Du Bellay thus reworks his sources in a creative way, making full use of the final volta to baffle his readers' expectations.

Shakespeare shares with Du Bellay this critique of the blazon, which is aligned with his overall critique of Petrarchism. In his works, the blazon is treated in an exclusively parodic and satirical mode. In Sonnet 106, it is clearly associated with a poetic practice of the past—which

reminds us that Shakespeare is writing almost fifty years after Du Bellay:

> When in the chronicle of wasted time
> I see descriptions of the fairest wights,
> And beauty making beautiful old rhyme,
> In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights,
> Then in the blazon of sweet beauty's best,
> Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,
> I see their antique pen would have expressed
> Even such a beauty as you master now.

There is not one instance in his œuvre where Shakespeare treats the blazon as straightforward praise. In *Henry V* (1599), the blazon is associated with the French princes and ridiculed: on the eve of the battle of Agincourt, the arrogant French courtiers quarrel about whose horse and suit of armour are the most beautiful. Orleans mocks the Dauphin's hyperbolic praise of his horse: "I have heard a sonnet begin so to one's mistress."[6] The praise of the horse becomes an absurd, parodic version of a Petrarchan blazon. Meanwhile, Henry V describes himself as a down-to-earth English soldier unable to speak the language of courtship and refuses to woo the French princess in the manner of courtiers who can "rhyme themselves into ladies' favours" (5.2.163). His manly plainness stands in sharp contrast with the sophistication of the effeminate French courtier, as if to signify that the conventional blazon and its continental Petrarchan poetics are either not truly English, or no longer fashionable.

Shakespeare's plays are full of Petrarchan lovers who are mocked for loving too closely "by th' book", like Romeo rebuked by Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* (1597, 1.5.109). In *As You Like It* (1599), Orlando, the arch-Petrarchan lover, is mocked for carving poems extolling the beauties and virtues of his lady into the bark of trees in 3.2 (see Venet 2014). In *Twelfth Night* (1603), the conventional blazon is turned by Olivia, to whom it is sent as a compliment, into an itemized list of body parts similar to a post-mortem inventory. This time Shakespeare shows the rebellion of the love object: the lady of the blazon appropriates her own praise to turn it

[6] 3.7.41. All quotations from the dramatic works are from Shakespeare 2005.

upside down. The itemized inventory becomes an apt metaphor for the deadly dismembering carried out by the conventional blazon.

> VIOLA 'Tis beauty truly blent, whose red and white
> Nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on.
> Lady, you are the cruell'st she alive
> If you will lead these graces to the grave
> And leave the world no copy.
>
> OLIVIA O, sir, I will not be so hard-hearted. I will give out divers schedules of my beauty. It shall be inventoried, and every particle and utensil labelled to my will, as, *item,* two lips, indifferent red; *item*, two grey eyes, with lids to them; *item*, one neck, one chin, and so forth. (1.5.228–238)

But it is with Sonnet 130, which reads like a distant rewriting of Du Bellay's *Regrets* 91, that Shakespeare offers his most explicit criticism of the blazon (Roulon). The sonnet extols the beauties of the "Dark Lady", who has been alternatively described by critics as a brunette, an ugly woman or a black woman (de Grazia). It is not exactly a counterblazon, since, in a similar fashion to Du Bellay's Sonnet 91 of *L'Olive*, it finally recuperates the conclusion of a conventional blazon, ending by affirming the speaker's lady's superiority over other ladies: it can more accurately be described, therefore, as a parodic blazon, because it ends on a note of paradoxical praise. Like the two Du Bellay blazons discussed above, the poem is based on a surprising twist, and manipulates the readers' expectations, keeping them guessing until the very end:

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
> Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
> If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
> […]
> And yet by heaven, I think my love as rare
> As any she belied with false compare.

Shakespeare playfully reworks the topos of the "ugly" lady's parodic praise in a paradoxical blazon. In the end, however, which contrasts with that of *Regrets* 91, the woman, even though she has been described as not conventionally desirable, is not rejected, but eventually embraced *with* all her faults—which is in keeping with the wider group of "Dark Lady" sonnets, in which

the speaker embraces sin. As with Du Bellay, the rhetorical target of the poem lies elsewhere: turning away from the woman herself, Shakespeare uses the paradoxical blazon as a poetic manifesto to deconstruct the conventions of the genre—whose inadequate, hackneyed rhetoric, reduced to "false compare", is the real subject matter of the poem—while affirming the "plainness" of his new poetic voice.

Shakespeare's treatment of the blazon here can perhaps be contrasted with Spenser's, which is also creative, but distinctively less critical of Petrarchism. Jonathan Sawday has argued that the gender of England's ruler gave the English blazon a peculiar tonality, making it markedly more chaste, less erotically charged, than on the continent (197). He also remarks that English sonneteers were encouraged to associate the genre with "emerging discourses of commerce, trade" and imperialism (198). According to him, two blazons by Spenser best illustrate this. In a blazon embedded in his 1594 *Epithalamion*, Spenser plays with convention, eulogizing his bride in a passage where she is described as a surrogate of the queen in Ireland. To this effect, the speaker summons a chorus of young maids, all daughters of merchants, to acknowledge his lady's beauty:

> Her long, loose yellow locks, like golden wire,
> Sprinkled with pearl, and pearling flowers atween,
> Do like a golden mantle her attire;
> And being crownèd with a garland green,
> Seem like some maiden queen.
> […]
> Tell me, ye merchants daughters, did ye see
> So fair a creature in your town before?
> So sweet, so lovely, and so mild as she,
> Adorned with beauty's grace and vertue's store? (Spenser 1595, [G8]–[G8v]).

The poem then literally turns the beloved into an "object of consumption," to be displayed and admired by this mercantile audience (Sawday 199), through the hyperbolic list of the precious comparisons: "Her goodly eyes like Saphires shining bright, / Her forehead ivory white…". Spenser uses a similar conceit in Sonnet 15 of *Amoretti* (1595):

> Ye tradefull Merchants that with weary toyle,

> Do seeke most pretious things to make your gain:
> And both the Indias of their treasures spoile,
> What needeth you to seeke so farre in vaine?
> For loe my love doth in her selfe containe
> All this worlds riches that may farre be found,
> If Saphyres, loe hir eies be Saphyres plaine,
> If Rubies, loe hir lips be Rubies sound:
> […]
> But that which fairest is, but few behold,
> Her mind adornd with vertues manifold (Spenser 1595, B).

While it is tempting to read the rise of English protocapitalism and imperialism in these poems, this hypothesis takes a beating when we realize that both this sonnet and the passage of *Epithalamion* quoted above are close imitations of a sonnet of Desportes's *Diana* (Sonnet 32, Book 1, 1573), which Sawday overlooks—so much for national peculiarity. If a materialistic reading of such sonnets remains possible, they must be set in a transnational context, as reflecting a European trend. The "English" blazon is not particularly English after all: if seen within a transnational perspective, it belongs to a European web of texts.[7] Desportes's conclusion, however, differs from Spenser's:

> Marchands, qui recherchez tout le rivage more
> Du froid Septentrion et qui, sans reposer,
> À cent mille dangers vous allez exposer
> Pour un gain incertain, qui vos esprits dévore,
>
> Venez seulement voir la beauté que j'adore,
> Et par quelle richesse elle a su m'attiser:
> Et je suis sûr qu'après, vous ne pourrez priser
> Le plus rare trésor dont l'Afrique se dore.
> Voyez les filets d'or de ce chef blondissant,
> […]
> Cet argent, cet ivoire; et ne vous contentez
> Qu'on ne vous montre encor mille autres raretés,
> Mille beaux diamants et mille perles fines (Desportes, vol. I, 92–93).

In this version, merchants are summoned to admire the lady, who has been turned into an icon, and to claim that she is more beautiful than all worldly treasures. This admission in turn renders

[7] For an earlier version of this argument, see Cottegnies 2018.

their quest and their pilfering of all the world's riches vain. But in *Amoretti* 15, Spenser alters the original sonnet by adding a reference to the lady's hidden beauty, her mind, in the final couplet. The poem can therefore be read on two levels. First, as a variant on a conventional blazon, it ostensibly celebrates the lady's perfections, both physical and moral, as is obvious from the last line. Unsurprisingly, Spenser's lady is described as far superior to all the most precious material things, making the quest for material possessions vain, in a variant on the trope of the *sans pareille*. But a second, moral reading is also suggested, as the merchants also represent the vanity of mercantile pursuits, as evidenced by the negative connotations of terms such as "weary toil," "gain," and "spoil," while the lady stands as the embodiment of steadfast moral perfection pitted against such toys. This interpretation chimes with the neoplatonic tenor of Spenser's *Amoretti* as a whole (Bulger). But in one further turn of the screw, we can also read the poem through a reflective perspective as a metapoetic sonnet critical of the genre of the blazon, for the lady's portrait constructed through the poem is that of a materialistic idol, a grotesque embodiment of the mercantile dream. This reading helps us to read the penultimate line as a riddle, addressed perhaps to Spenser's conniving male readers: "But that which fairest is, but few behold…" This part of her which few can behold is, naturally, her virtuous mind, as we are told in the last line. Yet, for a short moment of suspense, the poem seems to suggest a playful sexual innuendo—t is as if two different, incompatible images were superimposed.

However subtle, Spenser's version of the Desportes blazon is still an imitation: the original poem remains identifiable and Spenser's wit lies in the way he interprets, imitates and alters his source. The same was true of Du Bellay's *Regrets* 91, in which the originals by Saint-Gelais and Berni are still present, according to Du Bellay's conception of imitation as defined in *Deffence and Illustration*. Melehy argues that Spenser, in turn, borrows his "notion of poetic imitation from the Pléiade […] in order to effect an imitative reworking of Du Bellay and the other poets," and to create "an English literature that would rival that of Antiquity, and then

ultimately surpass it" (Melehy 2010, 76). While we can call Du Bellay's and Spenser's conceptions of imitation humanistic, Shakespeare's attitude to imitation is different, not in nature—imitation for Shakespeare also implies "reordering [pieces of a text], transforming them, and writing a text that addresses and contributes to the present context" (Melehy 2005, 159–160)—but, rather, in degree. Thus, even though Shakespeare's blazon in Sonnet 130 does not call to mind a direct source and is not opposed to a specific precedent; it can still be seen as a product of the culture of imitation, but of a different kind, less indebted to specifics. When literary reminiscences surface in the *Sonnets*, they are so well digested as to become unrecognizable and untraceable.

Keeping the precedent of Du Bellay's treatment of Petrarchism in mind, we can tentatively offer, to conclude, a reading of Shakespeare's sequence as creating a new poetics through a sustained revising of the metaphysical and aesthetic principles of Petrarchan poetics (for a different reading, see Kennedy 2016 and Edmondson and Wells in Shakespeare 2020). As argued above, the most visible twist to the genre is the substitution of a man for the more conventional mistress in the main of the sequence, but also important is the fact the youth is presented as the embodiment of a Neoplatonic ideal, the perfect alloy of "fair, kind, and true" (Sonnet 105), before his corruption shatters this essential Platonic trinity. Meanwhile, in the poems commonly associated with the "Dark Lady", the woman is presented as neither beautiful nor virtuous, but an object of discourse; she becomes the wedge that splinters the world order and causes in the speaker a far-ranging epistemological crisis. When the Petrarchan tradition is still traceable, it has become so distorted that it seems like a grotesque reminiscence. Sonnet 20, for instance, still contains the echo of a conventional blazon, down to its erotic titillation, as the poet praises the different body parts of the youth, including that part that cannot be named. But the perfect youth does not simply take up the position of the lady of the sonnets: he supersedes women, as he is described as having a "woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted /

With shifting change as is false women's fashion." Yet the poem retains, but distorts, the conventional topos of impossibility of the Petrarchan convention: the inadequacy of the "supplement" of the youth's sexual anatomy renders him improper for the persona's love. Nature "by addition me of thee defeated, / By adding one thing to my purpose nothing." The sonnet thus suggests a new dichotomy between a more noble love ("thy love") and physical love ("thy love's use"), in a complete revision of the Platonic opposition between the celestial Venus and then terrestrial Venus presented in Plato's *Symposium.* This, in turn, subverts the topos of loss and failure that conventionally lies at the heart of the Petrarchan sequences by taking it into hitherto uncharted, queer, territory: the topos of impossibility no longer has anything to do with cruelty or absence, but to a supplement that is defined as privation.

The Platonic *fable* created in the first section of the Sonnets is soon denied, however, as the youth proves fallible: the final section is about a love experienced as explicitly sinful and dishonorable. Here the buoyancy of Sonnet 130 is undercut by a darker notion of love, where the persona's decision to call fair and true what he knows is ugly and false takes on subversive undertones, and leads to an explicit and systematic reversal, then confusion, of values; the paradoxical blazon of dark beauty becomes a metaphysical drama that takes on a more pessimistic dimension—as the poet's perception of truth splits, with radical consequences:

> Thou blind fool, Love, what dost thou to mine eyes,
> That they behold, and see not what they see?
> They know what beauty is, see where it lies,
> Yet what the best is take the worst to be. (Sonnet 137, l. 1–4)

The speaker decides to call fair that which is foul, good that which is evil, true that which is false. By willingly embracing sin, he turns the world's order upside down, with potentially radical consequences, as fair and foul, good and evil become interchangeable and indistinguishable. In this distorted episteme, the crisis to which the poet submits Petrarchan poetics symbolically informs a new creation, almost Satanic, and produces a metaphysical, moral and aesthetic crisis: "For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as

black as hell, as dark as night" (Sonnet 147). In Sonnet 121, the speaker boldly declares "I am that I am", a blasphemous echo of *Exodus* 3.14. The consequence, as Joel Fineman has shown, can only be a splitting of the speaking, perjurous subject: "For I have sworn thee fair: more perjured I, / To swear against the truth so foul a lie" (Sonnet 152). Never had the conventional paronomasia on "eye" and "I" acquired such an intense meaning, as the aesthetic and metaphysical crisis becomes a crisis of the subject. With the experience of sin opening up a space of interiority, the willful "I" discovers himself as impure and abject. These sexually explicit sonnets, which stage a subversive desire, seem to be the logical outcome of the metaphysical and moral demise that is staged elsewhere. Here Shakespeare leaves behind the dead remains of the Petrarchan tradition to venture into pastures new.

This essay argues that Du Bellay and Spenser adopted a form of imitation that could be called humanistic—in which the source remains identifiable—while Shakespeare did not. Commenting on Spenserian imitation, Melehy argues that *Complaints* constitutes "a kind of 'defense and illustration' of English poetry" (Melehy 76–77); then Shakespeare's *Sonnets* might best be considered as creating a new kind of poetry from the ruins and detached pieces of a poetry which, around 1600, appeared old-fashioned. It could be argued that Shakespeare was following the lead of Du Bellay after all, whose anti-Petrarchan stance he might have remembered, by authoring a poetry that is intensely self-reflexive, but also concerned with forging a radically new poetic idiom. The subversion of the conventional, often degraded, neoplatonism inherent in the Petrarchan tradition is what, if this reading of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* has any traction, gives this most dramatic of sequences its peculiar shape. With his blazons of ugliness and celebration of impure desire, Shakespeare transforms the Petrarchan heritage beyond recognition.

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