

## *Quell'antico pianto, quell'antica fronde...*

by Donatella Restani

A young woman, portrayed in three-quarter pose, hints at an ambiguous smile, while her eyes invite the spectator to rest his gaze on a line in a small pocket book, to which she points with her left index-finger. This allusive game, involving reader and spectator, concerns the search for a line that is indicated yet concealed by the cover of the book, was painted by Andrea Del Sarto in Florence probably between 1528 and 1529. But while there is uncertainty about the identification of the line, as well as about the woman portrayed (perhaps either Maria del Berrettaio or Lucrezia del Fede, the painter's future wife), there is no such doubt about the book itself: on the open page we can clearly read two sonnets from Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Hence the origin of one of the conventional titles of the painting: *Dama col 'petrarchino'* (fig. 1).

The choice of the sonnets painted (*Rvf* 153, 154) documents a type of reception for the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* in the first twenty years of the 16th century, reflecting the frequent circulation of this collection in the houses of aristocratic and bourgeois Florentines. As Marc Fumaroli has recently reminded us, the first generations of Petrarch's disciples, whether clerics or laymen, formed a "society within a society", one committed to sharing the ideals that he had prefigured and one capable of grasping, as *pathos*, the melancholy sensation of the brevity of life and the ephemeral flow of earthly things, compensated by the desire for a glory founded on service to undying qualities: compassion, beauty and the sense of grandeur. Following in their tracks, the nobles and cultured bourgeois of the 16th century, both in Florence and elsewhere, in whose rooms the verses written during and after Laura's lifetime were read, learned by heart and transmitted as the science of sciences (or the science of the heart of man), felt themselves to be, and represented themselves as, the heirs designated to embody and transmit those ideals to future generations. Thus also, since Petrarch had sung the praises of Cicero, on whose example he proposed, as a public figure, to concern himself with the ailing City and cure it (again according to Fumaroli), some of the first companies of poets, painters, sculptors and musicians that emerged in the early 16th century (like the company of the Cazzuola, or that of the Paiuolo, to which Andrea Del Sarto also belonged, along with Ottaviano de' Medici, a patron who commissioned his work) adopted not only the four Ciceronian qualities of *grauitas*, *uarietas*, *elegantia* e *suauitas* as a model for the poetic, literary, figurative and musical, but also the ethical virtues of the *De officiis* as a model for life.

In the rereadings of the *Canzoniere*, the ancient and the modern merged to form an inseparable partnership. Fragments of classical mythology, above all those concerning the metamorphoses of women into plants and birds, in accordance with the Ovidian example, became metaphors for describing the passions of the human heart. Two examples should suffice, in which a parallel, yet distinct, transmission in the musical and figurative arts produced remarkable results in both idioms.

In the sonnet “Zefiro torna, e ’l bel tempo rimena” (*Rvf* 310), the voice of Progne and the silent weeping of Filomena (Philomela) are the only audible signs by which Petrarca alludes to the metamorphosis of the two sisters, relieved of the brutal legacy of their human existences and de-materialized in the sound that returns at the arrival of spring:

e’ garrir Progne e pianger Filomena (*Rvf* 310, 3).

Different was the behaviour of the engravers, whose tables accompanied the 16th-century vernacular versions of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (VI, 412-674), illustrating the dire violence of the marriage of Progne (or Procne), daughter of the Athenian Pandion, with Tereus, king of Thrace, and the fatal tangle of vendettas that ensued (fig. 2). Closely adhering to the Petrarchan choice, on the other hand, were the respective settings of Luca Marenzio in the *Primo libro dei madrigali a quattro voci* (1585) and Claudio Monteverdi in the *Sesto libro de’ madrigali* (1614). Petrarch had mentioned only Philomela’s distinctive weeping sound, that which Ovid (VI, 546, 610-612, 669) had already described as the last phase of a voice capable of making the woods echo, then forced to silence and weeping: a distinctive feature of both the woman and the bird that shelters under roofs. In the same way, in the imitative procedure of the musical transcription, Progne’s cry is identified with that of the joyful birds that populate the woods and gardens in spring, while Philomela reacquires the voice that had been snatched from her.

In the clear contrast between the settings of the quatrains and tercets of the sonnet, between the ‘charm’ of the season and the landscape and the ‘gravity’ of the state of mind of the lyrical “I”, the listener of the 16th and 17th centuries (and reader of Ovid) would perhaps travel with his memory from the ‘garrir’ (chirping) and ‘pianger’ (weeping) back to the ancient myth and, also by this means, enhance his empathy with the author of the text.

In the same way, the thematic nucleus of the *rime*, the metamorphosis of the fugitive woman into a leafy bush (Daphne/laurel/Laura) had become a manner of introspective description for the unreturned love of Apollo/‘lyrical I’, i.e. of the god, prophet musician archer healer, according to the Ovidian example (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, 517-524), understood as an image of the poet. These affective implications were then multiplied in dozens of madrigal settings:

Apollo, s'ancor vive il bel desio / che t'infiammava a le tesaliche onde»  
(*Rvf* 34 in 1367*NV*);

Almo sol, quella fronde ch'io sola amo, / tu prima amasti, or sola al bel  
soggiorno / verdeggia [...] (*Rvf* 188 in 1709, 2071, 2459, 2909*NV*).

Accompanied by innumerable variations on, and allusions to, the theme of the woman/tree (among others: *Rvf* 107 in 5, 296, 1734, 2827-2830, 743-7, 1523, 1709, 1843, 1992, 2752*NV*; *Rvf* 142 in 2069*NV*), and by the symbolic trappings associated with Apollo, also involving both Cupid with his bow and arrow (for example: *Rvf* 88 in 2637*NV*; *Rvf* 90 in 1987*NV*; *Rvf* 127 in 2339, 2790, 1847*NV*) and Phaeton (*Rvf* 105 in 332, 2189*NV*), these settings satisfied – through their ‘sounds for the eyes’ – the ears of the residents and guests who frequented the rooms of palaces and villas in town and country. The privileged and careful listener would also find that memory of sounds repeated in the *Apollo and Daphne* by Dosso Dossi (c. 1522) (fig. 3), where the wood of the god’s instrument reflects the tree into which Daphne is transformed, and the sculpture by Bernini on the same subject (c. 1622) (fig. 4). Today, they stand in the same room, respectively on the wall and in the middle of the floor, of the Casino di Villa (today, the Villa Borghese) that Cardinal Scipione Borghese had built in Rome (fig. 5). In the differences in figurative approach between the two images we can detect an important aesthetic changes that took place in the chronological period during which the Petrarchan madrigal experience took place.

Sigla:

*Rvf* = *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (quoted from F. Petrarca, *Opere*, edited by E. Bigi, Milano, Mursia, 1968<sup>4</sup>)

*NV* = *Il nuovo Vogel* (E. Vogel, A. Einstein, F. Lesure, C. Sartori, *Bibliografia della musica italiana vocale profana pubblicata dal 1500 al 1700*, Rome-Geneva, Staderini-Minkoff, 1977)