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Poetics of Sixteenth-Century Widowhood: Vittoria Colonna's Use of Gender and Grief as a Means of Social and Spiritual Transcendence

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Poetics of Sixteenth-Century Widowhood: Vittoria Colonna's
Use of Gender and Grief as a Means of Social and Spiritual Transcendence

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This thesis project surrounds the life of sixteenth-century poet Vittoria Colonna, and the poetry she wrote following the death of her husband Ferrante D'Avalos, Marquis of Pescara, in 1525. Often regarded in tandem with the works of Michelangelo, Vittoria Colonna's literary accomplishments in the face of personal tragedy speak for themselves as she became one of the foremost female poets of her time. Beyond her relationship with Michelangelo, the surrounding literature on Colonna looks at her widowhood as a stage for her poetry, her use of Neoplatonist imagery, and the influence of the Petrarchan sonnet. Expanding on the arguments presented by scholars Abigail Brundin and Virginia Cox, who are the foundation for my research with their thorough understanding of these connective elements, my thesis explores how Colonna actively used gender and grief specifically within her widowed poetry to pursue social and spiritual transcendence through a comparison of primary texts.

In merging these elements together, I find that Colonna complicates the role of the female widow. She uses her widow's grief as a tool to remain within the lines of social propriety while also seeking personal freedom. Benefitting from her performance of what Erasmus calls a "true" widow, Colonna presented her grief within the parameters of social expectation but provided a way to break free from them. Within this public space, Colonna's complicated relationship with gender comes into play as she uses it to her advantage to transcend socially through subversions of Petrarchan convention, while also dismissing gender entirely through Neoplatonism in order to transcend spiritually. In this, Colonna maintains a complex widowhood as she both fulfills and

dismantles the boundaries set in place for her, finding a sense of freedom within the blurred lines of propriety.

Introduction

Within the patriarchal society of sixteenth-century Italy, women were restricted in private and public spheres. Limited in place and person, their lives were essentially dictated by the external forces of a male-dominated social structure. Bound by tradition, women were set in the subdued, obedient roles of wife and mother as presented to them by the male authority. This constrained existence was especially true of widowed women as they took on the existing roles of women and added a layer of further isolated restriction to their behavioral expectation. The widows' common existence demanded harsher regulation as they toyed with the balance of society, existing within an externally-structured place without the internal structure by way of a husband. Stricter social rules and consequences were enforced in order to control the widow as she lived in the world of men, yet without a man. However, with every rule there is an exception, as is the case with *cinquecento* widow and poetess Vittoria Colonna, Marchesa of Pescara.

After the succumbing to wounds sustained in battle, Colonna's husband Marquis Ferrante Francesco d'Avalos died in 1525, leaving Colonna devastated. As she adjusted to her newfound status as a widow, Colonna needed to modify her character to fit the behavioral expectations of widows set out by social rule. However, rather than submit to the restrictions that accompanied her widowhood, Colonna flourished as she became the center of the male literary scene in her time. Colonna used the *cinquecento* societal expectation of an isolated, chaste, and faithful widow as a way to attain social and spiritual transcendence. Through the feeling of devastation expected of the widow, Colonna utilized grief as a way to escape the confines of societal

restriction by transforming it into published, written word. Colonna's poetry provided her with the space to interact with elements of poetic subject and device that fueled her virtuous visage of a "true" widow, bringing both her character and soul into esteem by doing so.¹ Colonna's widowhood became the means by which her poetry entered the social world as she slipped by the gendered boundaries through the applauded grieving within her verse. While seemingly playing the part of the "true" widow, Colonna complicated societal expectation in her verse, exploiting the traditional widow's role to avoid the consequences of her new-found freedom from marriage and enter into the literary world.

Gaining many friends and admirers as her poetry became renowned in its time, Colonna interacted with many great contemporary thinkers and artists. Irma Jaffe notes that Colonna was "esteemed, almost venerated, friend of the most prominent and influential artists and writers of the first half of the sixteenth century."² The most notable of her acquaintances was artist Michelangelo Buonarroti, and their relationship is something studied in length within the discourse surrounding her work. Beyond this friendship, her general popularity was widespread as she became one of the most foremost female poets of the time by not only entering, but excelling within the literary sphere of a spiritual, masculine world. By publicly grieving her husband's passing, and in doing so in verse, Colonna allows herself the opportunity to be held as an example to the male audience on the proper widow, opening up the possibility for ascension within that literary space. In the perfect model of widowhood that she presented, Colonna was praised through the works of her male contemporaries. Through the prestige she gained within this space, Colonna befriended and engaged with top literary and philosophical minds of the time

¹ The "true" widow as will be defined in the body of the Chapter 1.

² Irma Jaffe with Gernando Colombaro, *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets*, (Fordham University Press, 2002), pg. 39.

such as Pietro Bembo and Baldassare Castiglione, being dubbed ‘the divine’ by her male contemporaries.³ Speaking to her general popularity, Irma Jaffe notes:

Cardinal Pietro Bembo expressed his admiration for her...in a letter to Paolo Giovio: ‘She has given more steady and well-founded judgement, and a more minute criticism, than I have seen on my poetry by the greatest masters...She is certainly that great lady you have honorably described to the world more than one in your prose writings.’⁴

Through word of mouth, and with strong backing, Colonna’s reputation improved as the discussion of her positive attributes spread. Through the sharing of opinion, and through the distribution of her widowed poetry, Colonna gains prestige within the male literary space.

Illustrated in texts by Colonna’s contemporaries including Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano*, Erasmus’ “On the Christian Widow,” as well as articles by Evangelisti and Baerstein, Chapter One will deal with the complications of widowhood. Beginning with the role of women and then moving into widowhood, Chapter One looks into the struggle between widow, family, and finance while exploring the roots of contention between society and self. The chapter concludes with Colonna’s own interaction as a widow of special circumstances. By carefully constructing her own image of “true” widowhood through her poetry, Colonna pacifies the male authority through a well-played widow’s role, challenging expected gender boundaries in doing so.

Chapter Two explores Colonna’s self-presentation through the light of the poetic traditions she adopts. By reacting to and subverting conventions of Petrarchan poetry, Colonna presents both her relationship with Ferrante and her poetry as ways to break through gendered, social boundaries. While looking comparatively at poetry between fourteenth-century poet

³ Thomas Trollope, *A Decade of Italian Women*, (Chapman and Hall, 1859). “Vittoria became speedily the most famous woman of her day, was termed by universal consent ‘the divine’ and lived to see three editions of the grief-cries, which escaped from her ‘without her will’”

⁴ Irma Jaffe and Gernando Colombardo, *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets*, (Fordham University Press, 2002), 46.

Petrarch and Colonna's own, similar themes are found throughout: distance, faithfulness, legitimacy of love, and relationships with the Virgin. The discussion of these themes revolves around Colonna's subversion of them through gender as she uses her position as a female writer within male tradition, a "reworking of the genre" that Abigail Brundin calls "entirely unprecedented."⁵ With the dual objective of avoiding traditional desire within the form, and establishing herself as a poet of stature, Colonna's use of gender serves her search for social transcendence. Not only do the Petrarchan conventions she employs give precedence to the literary excellence she achieves socially, but her use of gender further helps her to break apart from both the male form and popularize her work within its own right. With the combined image of the "true" widow, and the inherently elevated nature of her poetics, Colonna is able to break through the boundaries of a male-dominated literary world and thrive.

Expanding upon the circumstances provided by the gendered subversion of Petrarchan conventions, Chapter Three investigates Colonna's poetry within the genderless light of Neoplatonism. Utilizing primary material from Marsilio Ficino, Michelangelo Buonarroti and secondary understandings of Italian Neoplatonism, this chapter discusses Colonna's spiritual transcendence through the escape from gender and physicality. In this, Colonna searches for the eternal and uses Neoplatonic ideas of love and imagery in order separate herself from the corporeal world. To do this, Colonna dispels notions of gender from her poetry, as she leaves behind her gendered, mortal body in favor of the transcendent immortal soul. Focusing on Neoplatonic understandings of the immortal soul as an emanation of the One, this chapter focuses on the divine ordinance of Platonic love and truth as ways to reach God. Through these examples of Neoplatonic philosophy, this final chapter explores Colonna's desire to shed the

⁵ Abigail Brundin, *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition*, (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 3.

casing of her mortal, gendered body in order to release her soul, guided by Ferrante, into the eternal heavens.

Complicating the role of the female widow, Colonna's poetry transformed her socially expected devastation from that of required behavior into a path toward social and spiritual salvation. As she moved from a restricted place into one of autonomy, Colonna used her widow's grief as a tool to remain within the lines of social propriety. Within this proper space, she also sought personal freedom through her use of Petrarchan conventions alongside Neoplatonic philosophy. She utilized gender in both as she subverted it within Petrarchan convention, and also discarded it through the traditional philosophies of Neoplatonism. Through verse, Colonna's conventionally Petrarchan devotional work gave her entrance into the literary circle that would have otherwise been closed to her as a woman. By subverting Petrarchan poetic conventions through her gender, Colonna created the space from which she could excel. As she skillfully separated herself from the traditionally male form, Colonna gained the prestige that an association with Petrarchan form brings while making it her own. Likewise, her use of Neoplatonic ideas, such as Platonic love and truth, assisted her search for eternity as she sought to escape her gender and body with the hope of reaching the eternal afterworld. The Platonic love she wrote of inspired Platonic "truth" through images of light and ascension, ultimately freeing her soul from the encasement of the physical world. These freedoms, gained in her widowhood, gave Colonna the social and spiritual transcendence that she seemingly longed for as she entered the social world of man, free of the gendered shackles of physicality.

Chapter One

A Struggle between Society and Self: Vittoria Colonna's Seeming Conformity to the *Cinquecento* Widow's Role

Women of *cinquecento* Italy found themselves subject to tightly-bound gender roles, as they existed within a highly patriarchal and conventional society. The Renaissance woman was confined to an interior space: maintaining the home and family, having no place within the external, male world. As she was expected to behave and perform in ways that demonstrated submission to the man who controlled her, the woman was dictated by her place, be it in her personal behavior or when entertaining men. Steeped in tradition and shaped by abundant notions of what the female should and should not be doing, the Renaissance woman faced regulation supported by time and custom.

The regulation of female behavior was felt especially by aristocratic women due to their higher place in society, a challenging position with regard to lower-class men. They also had an added responsibility as models for other women. Renaissance women's character fell into certain rules which noble court ladies had to follow as illustrated in Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*. Within the third book, one of the main participants in the book's discursive conversations, the Magnifico, outlines the proper behaviors of courtly women:

A certain affability is becoming above all else, whereby she is able to entertain graciously every kind of man with agreeable and comely conversation...joining in serene and modest manners...but with such a kind manner as to cause her to be thought no less

chaste, prudent, and gentle than she is agreeable, witty, and discreet...and must strictly observe certain limits and not exceed them.⁶

With such restrictions in place for those of higher status, their personalities boiled down to fit into a proper mold, aristocratic women of this time faced unreal expectations from the male authority. They were required to perform within the male space the part of witty-yet-chaste entertainer without actually belonging within that place. Even as aristocrats, they had to entertain a certain degree of this behavior toward “every kind of man,” regardless of rank, highlighting the skewed balancing act between hierarchy and patriarchy for the Renaissance woman.⁷

In the next stage in a woman’s life, widowhood held its own expectations. As the result of the complicated role the widow played in society, she experienced freedom in her widowhood; however, her freedom was restricted. While she attained a certain freedom as an independent being, her behaviors were more strictly controlled. With this new societal role for the aristocratic woman came a financial capability that seemingly freed her from the immediate rule of a husband or family. In her widowhood, a woman became the legal owner of the estate of her dowry. Because of this condition, widows were in irregular situations as women. “The ambivalence with which society (and the church) viewed the widow, and the various demands to which she was subjected [that of possession of her body and dowry] stemmed from her potential power; if she exercised her rights, she was a property owner not firmly tied to a family.”⁸

Widows had the peculiar situation in society of being autonomous, which created room for the complicated relationship between self and society that surrounded the widow. The attempt at

⁶ Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, ed. Daniel Javitch, trans. Charles Singleton (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002), 151.

⁷ Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, ed. Daniel Javitch, trans. Charles Singleton, 151.

⁸ Renee Baernstein, “In Widow’s Habit: Women between Convent and Family in Sixteenth-Century Milan,” (*The Sixteenth Century Journal* 25.4, 1994), 789.

retaining control over potentially independent women ushered in a harsher societal expectation for these women to follow. Down to their very behavior, these widows were monitored and shaped in order to remain within the mold of dependent women living in the patriarchal world.

These women faced a formidable array of demands, limits, rules, and suspicions from both secular and religious sources. The widow was often the target of a fierce struggle between her husband's and her father's families, each contending for control of her dowry, which was legally hers to live on but which was often difficult for her to claim.⁹

In order to maintain control over widow and woman alike, male authority needed to take action to retain their hold over both lest the power in which widows were entitled disrupted the carefully constructed, gendered society.

Taught to be chaste, obedient, and spend their lives in solitary weeping, Renaissance widows were conditioned to adhere to more heavily enforced societal rules as they were subject to only themselves rather than to their late husbands or surrounding family. The Marchesa of Pescara, Vittoria Colonna seemingly embodied this image of widowhood perfectly. As a new widow, Colonna was aware of the pressures placed on widows to perform in new behavioral capacities, and she devoted herself to conforming to them. From certain perspectives, Colonna seemed to be following the appropriate, socially-constructed behaviors proper to a widow, not only in her life but also in her poetry. From the inception of her widowhood, Colonna embraced these behavioral restrictions as she remained entirely devoted and devastated in the wake of her husband's death. Colonna perfectly embodied the role as she welcomed the inconsolable character of the true widow. Isolating herself from society by residing in the *San Silvestro en Capite* monastery, she became the silent, weeping widow, never remarrying and staying true to Ferrante as she penned seven years of poetry that served to uplift his character and tie the two

⁹ Baernstein, "In Widow's Habit," 788-9.

eternally in verse. Within her poetry, Colonna portrayed the expected behavioral elements of isolation, devotion, and grief, befitting the embodiment of the perfect *cinquecento* widow.

In depictions of widowhood by contemporary male influencers, the regard of the widow lies in the attainment of the title “true” widow. Erasmus’s *On the Christian Widow* forms an outline of the proper or “true” widow. This widow is a wholly devout woman, freed from the obligations of marriage. She is careful in her actions, and lives a solitary life, with both writers setting her character as that of a reclusive, isolated being. These requirements dichotomized widowhood into true and not, and only the wholly devoted could attain the title of true widow, as Erasmus presents:

It is essential, therefore, that you remember your role, and you will do so if you truly deserve the name by which you are called. For when Paul ordered that honour should be accorded to widows ‘who are true widows,’ by this he meant that there were those who were falsely called by the name of widow...For just as there are foolish virgins, whom the heavenly Spouse, the lover of virgins, does not recognize...just so there are false widows.¹⁰

As a main example of the true, virtuous widow, Erasmus sites Judith, patriotic widow of the Old Testament.¹¹ As Judith represents confession and praise to God, so must the true widow, for widows, “[...] are not worthy of the care God has bestowed on them unless they acknowledge their helplessness.”¹² The widow must spend her life proclaiming her sins in praise of God in order to achieve the elevated status, acknowledging she is lost and torn from the world of men, helpless in her isolation.

¹⁰ Erasmus, “On The Christian Widow” in *Erasmus on Women*, ed. Erika Rummel, trans. Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, (University of Toronto Press, 1996), 194.

¹¹ The main example coming from his citing of her name meaning “confessing” or “praising” in Hebrew.

¹² Erasmus, “On the Christian Widow.” 195.

Colonna's poetry, written in the wake of Ferrante's death, seems to confirm the guidelines for female behavior set out by the male authority of the time. Colonna sought to recluse herself into the monastery and wrote of nothing but her longing for him, inspiring her friends in her absolute devotion: "I write solely to salve the suffering that those bright eyes, peerless in this world, caused my heart."¹³ Her poetry is filled with a combination of praise and grief as she recounts and enhances Ferrante's heroic life in her longing. Colonna praises his heroism in life through her poetry as a way portraying her devotion to his memory. "The time and the season, my eternal light, gave no advantage to your victories; your sword, your courage, you dauntless heart were your instruments, in summer and winter alike." As she praises him, she is also grieving him as she fears her words will never produce an honest rendering of his character. "A just cause leads me to lament, and it sorely pains me that I may detract from his glory; his great name deserves to be rescued from death by a loftier voice and wiser words."¹⁴ In her struggle, she seems to have a dual purpose: to actively grieve while uplifting Ferrante's spirit by doing so through verse.

In her isolation, the "true" widow embodies an important quality: eternal devotion. While Renaissance women were devoted to their husbands in marriage, they were also expected continue their devotion in widowhood. "Social convention praised the widow who remained faithful to her departed spouse, rejecting remarriage and a return to the flesh... 'The widow should be like the tortoise, who is a chaste animal, and upon losing her companion, she never goes with others, but spends the rest of her life in solitary weeping.'"¹⁵ The fidelity to their late husbands played a large part in the widows' actions as a whole as they isolated themselves from

¹³ Vittoria Colonna, "*Scrivo sol per sfogar l'interna doglia*," in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 134.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Baernstein, "In Widow's Habit," 789-90.

society in order to devote themselves entirely. They sought to enhance their husband's memory, in the form of uplifting, sometimes hyperbolic praise as was the fashion of the time. In their devotion to their late husbands, widows also found themselves at a crossroads in society. "If she was young, though, the temptation to replay her on the table of marriage alliances frequently got the better of her natal family..."¹⁶ While their families wanted or needed them to remarry for political and economic reasons, the larger society encouraged them to remain chaste and refuse to remarry for the sake of remaining loyal to their late husbands.

As both a wife and as a widow, Vittoria Colonna performs within her poetry the devotion toward Ferrante that is expected of her. Despite the long separations encountered in Ferrante's absence during war and his extramarital affairs, Colonna remained entirely devoted as shown in her poem *Eccelso mio Signor* where she recognizes her place as a "bride by the play of natural law."¹⁷ From a certain perspective, Colonna feeds into the outlines for behavior as she questions the place of the wife and woman in the poem while ultimately submitting herself to it: "But I remain, miserable and angry, waiting in your lonely abandoned bed, mingling my sorrow with some faint hope; only the thought of your happiness softens my grief."¹⁸ Just as in life, Colonna remained devoted to the late Ferrante and was devastated by his death. Her devotion to Ferrante makes itself known as she uplifts his character within her poetry, raising his image into the heavens by doing so:

Keen foes, proud royal spirits, wide rivers, steep mountains, fair cities were conquered
and vanquished by your daring. You ascended in this world to the highest honors; now in
heaven you enjoy different, true triumphs, your temples adorned and crowned by

¹⁶ Baernstein, "In Widow's Habit," 789.

¹⁷ Vittoria Colonna, "*Eccelso mio Signor, questa ti scrivo*," in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, 80.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 81.

different wreaths.¹⁹

Staying true to Ferrante as she pens poetry that serves to uplift his character and tie the two eternally in verse, Colonna displays her true widowhood to the masses. Colonna's seeming devotion within her poetry gained its own renown as her readers admired the behaviors she presented to them, allowing the role of devoted widow to fully encapsulate her character in their work. The devotion portrayed in these external works is an acknowledgment of Colonna's depiction of her own character within in her poetry dedicated to Ferrante.

The issue of remarriage also lies at the center of what it means to be a true widow. A true widow, as a rule, did not remarry. Savonarola, fifteenth-century Dominican friar and man of letters, presents his argument on the subject in his *Book on the Life of the Widow*. "There are many different types of widows. Some, once their husbands die, think about remarrying, and these, though they may be widows because they do not physically have the pleasure of a husband, are not widows in their mind, for they desire a husband."²⁰ The youthful widows were subject to remarry due to their desire to continue as a wife or to satisfy their carnal needs within the sanctity of marriage. However, these were not true widows as they did not remain isolated in their new positions as a devoted widow. "They dress neatly and in tight-fitting garments, with veils or kerchiefs drawn and creased, and they eagerly linger in the company of youths...be careful of these young widows for, once they have satisfied their lust, they want to become brides of Christ, while they bear his damnation for having broken their first promise, which they had with their husbands."²¹ The true widows maintain higher prestige because they are able to

¹⁹ Vittoria Colonna, "A le vittorie tue, mio lume eterno," in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, 135.

²⁰ Girolamo Savonarola, "Book on the Life of the Widow," in *A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*, trans. Konrad Elsenbichler, (Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2003), 196.

²¹ Savonarola, "Book on the Life of the Widow," in *A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*, 197.

abstain from that which they have already tasted: the fruit of carnal desire. In abstaining by refusing to remarry and therefore upholding her “first promise,” the true widow elevates herself.²²

Colonna also esteemed the true widow as she refused to remarry. Betrothed at the age of four and married at the age of nineteen, Colonna spent most of her life with Ferrante until his death in 1525. Hearing of Ferrante’s passing while on her way to see him, Colonna reportedly fell from her horse as if dead herself before hastening to the *San Silvestro en Capite* in order to take vows to isolate herself completely.²³ Her brother, acting head of the family following the death of their father, petitioned the Pope against allowing her to do so on grounds of preventing her from making a hasty decision, while also hoping to forge a marriage alliance.²⁴ Now prevented from taking vows, Colonna was safely within the walls of the monastery away from the direct influence of her family and repeatedly refused remarriage in her devotion to Ferrante. In this desire for devoted isolation, Colonna acts as a true widow.

Within these different elements of the true widow lies the most essential element: grief. While separating herself from society, a true widow remains loyal to her late husband by grieving him for the rest of her life. The element of grief plays a larger role to the widow because it lies at the core of her expected behaviors. The traits set out for the contemporary widow are that of the irreproachable, grieving widow, isolated in her loss, and chaste in her behavior. “The widow should embrace solitude prayer, discipline, weeping, religious music and

²² Savonarola, “Book on the Life of the Widow,” in *A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*,” 197.

²³ Maud F. Jerrold, *Vittoria Colonna, with Some Account of Her Friends and Her Times*, (Books for Libraries Press, 1969).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

confession.”²⁵ Grief acts as the catalyst for all of these behaviors because the widow is meant to be alone in order to properly and eternally grieve for her husband. What Erasmus calls the “tears of the true widow...weep out of their longing for the heavenly Spouse, with whom they desire to be coupled in complete and eternal union.”²⁶ Erasmus praises these true widows as they grieve because they are not clinging to the dead, but rather celebrating their advancement into the eternal afterworld with an elevated soul.

She remembers her husband sufficiently who refuses to marry another and keeps her plighted troth to him as if he were not dead but simply away. She has forgotten her husband in a very fortunate way [in the flesh] who...perseveres in a life of chastity and who...forgets the earlier pleasures she has known and dedicates herself entirely to delights of the spirit. This sort of forgetting is worthy of Christian widows.²⁷

Through the combined grief and isolated meditation on this transcendence, the widow is then closer to finding her husband again in the eternal afterlife during her musings on God, life, and the eternal soul.

The grief outlined by the contemporary male makes its appearance in abundance within Colonna's poetry. While staying in the monastery as a widow rather than a nun, Colonna began writing poetry devoted to Ferrante that only touched on the grief of losing him. It is through this grief and poetry that the measure of her reaction to widowhood can be understood. In the wake of Ferrante's death, Colonna perfectly embodied her new role as she embraced the inconsolable character of the true widow. She becomes the silent, weeping widow in her isolation, never remarrying and staying true to Ferrante. It was a potent grief, fueled by longings for death in order to reunite with him: “My own hand, encouraged so often by grief,/ would have done it, but

²⁵ Catherine King, “Renaissance Women Patrons: Wives and Widows in Italy, C. 1300-1550,” (Manchester University Press, 1998), 32.

²⁶ Erasmus, “On the Christian Widow,” 195.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 206.

then my burning zeal/ to find him again keeps holding me back.”²⁸ The pain of grief can be felt throughout her devotional poetry as she lets it touch the core of her work while securing her position as a true widow. “May my pure faith, my ardor, my intense grief excuse me, for my mourning is such that neither reason nor time can restrain it. Bitter weeping, not sweet song; dark sighs, not a serene voice: my verse boasts not of style but of woe.”²⁹ In using a variety of descriptive words in an attempt to explain the severity of her emotion, it is apparent that grief and pain, in this sense, act as the driving force for Colonna’s poetry. As she claims to be writing not for style but for woe, her verse is the ultimate form of her grief.

In all of the senses discussed above, Vittoria Colonna seemingly exemplifies the true widow as devised by the contemporary male authorities. She is chaste, eternally devoted, and isolated in her grief, with grief serving as the important crux in her appointment of the title. Colonna’s grief also outlines her own criteria of what a true widow should be as she names herself victor in a comparative poem against the famous widows of history. In each example, Colonna establishes her rules for a true widow: there must be a true separation, your husband must be worthy of lament, and you must live on in your suffering. As she continuously lists the historical widows, she finds the ways in which she conquers them: “But let it be enough for me to have conquered these few towering examples... For however many torments I read about, worthy and unworthy, all soon find their end, whether through change of heart or impetuous death.”³⁰ Against Colonna, the pain of these famous women is incomparable. Laodamia and Penelope’s pain ends in hope and happiness, Ariadne and Medea’s husbands were unworthy, and

²⁸ Vittoria Colonna, “*Di gravosi pensier la turba infesta*,” in *Renaissance Women: The Life of Vittoria Colonna*, trans. Ramie Targoff, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 70.

²⁹ Vittoria Colonna, “*Scrivo sol per sfogar l’interna doglia*,” in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, 134.

³⁰ Vittoria Colonna, “*Mentre la nave mia, longe dal porto*,” in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, 143-4.

Porcia ended her own life and therefore tore herself away from her lover forever. “So why continue to turn the ancient pages that tell of others’ ills, or to look for peers in the unhappy ranks of modern lovers? I may be less than these heroines in their other fine qualities, but in my pain I am like the phoenix, eternally renewing myself in the fire.”³¹ Ferrante is a man worthy of devotion and that sparks eternal grieving; her pain renews her life and sorrow cyclically as in the manner of the phoenix. With this, Colonna achieves the true tears of the widow as she longs for Ferrante, being eternally reborn until their souls “meet again in complete and eternal union.”³²

³¹ Vittoria Colonna, “*Mentre la nave mia, longe dal porto,*” in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, 143-4.

³² Erasmus, “On The Christian Widow,” 195.

Chapter Two

A Role Exposed: Vittoria Colonna's Use of Gender and Societal Expectations to Benefit her Position

Vittoria Colonna embodied the perfect widow by following the guidelines established by the larger society: she isolated herself from public life, behaved chastely, and remained loyal to her late husband Ferrante. Although following these socially expected behaviors made Colonna appear to be acting strictly out of devotion to Ferrante, her actions can also be interpreted as those of playing the widow's role to benefit herself. The poetry Colonna wrote in the wake of her husband's death not only showcased perfect widowhood, but also enabled her entrance into the previously exclusively-male literary world. As a woman in a man's world, literary aspirations were often difficultly achieved as there were gendered barriers to cross. In light of this, rather than functioning with the sole purpose of selfless affection to her lost love, Colonna's poetry opened a pathway to both social and spiritual transcendence during her widowhood. She achieved this through gendered subversions of Petrarchan poetic conventions. As she wrote in the traditionally-inspired poetic form, Colonna utilized a reinterpretation of gender within Petrarch's sonnets, bringing something "entirely new and significant" to the traditional sonnets as positioned by Abigail Brundin.³³ This not only strengthened the perception of her relationship to Ferrante as it was juxtaposed with Petrarch's own famous love, but it also elevated the perception of her poetry through poetic association. In rethinking Colonna's presentation of her

³³ Abigail Brundin, *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition*, 19.

personal grief within the Petrarchan-inspired poetry, her journey toward a social transcendence begins. As she breaks down the gendered, social barriers presented to her during her widowhood, Colonna gains prestige among her male contemporaries while still seemingly remaining within those barriers.

A reinterpretation of the widow's role allows for the exploration of Colonna's performance in a more introspective light. With the aid of her widowhood, Colonna was able to enter the male space. In her discussion from *Sonnets for Michelangelo* on Colonna's success as a female poet, Abigail Brundin makes the case for the impact of Colonna's public, widowed character: "Colonna had a great skill at manipulating and disseminating the 'correct' public image that would aid, rather than hinder, her literary aspirations and at finding a wholly successful means of tailoring those aspirations to fit the image."³⁴ Rather than being shunned for stepping within a public, literary space, Colonna instead used her circumstance as a widow in order to enter that world and find a way to belong within it. She did this by pairing together the persona of the perfect, "true" widow with long-established conventions of Petrarchan poetry. In doing this, Colonna became one of the most famous female writers of her time. Colonna's poetry was praised by her male contemporaries and allowed the social behaviors of a widow to transform from those of expected conduct into a way to benefit her social transcendence.

While secluded in the *San Silvestro* monastery, Colonna took inspiration from literary predecessor Petrarch's, poetry in order to convey her widow's grief. Petrarch's famous *Canzoniere* primarily used the sonnet form with the hopes of immortalizing himself and his love for the distant Laura. Laura existed as the main object of his life-long desire, with over 300

³⁴ Abigail Brundin, *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition*, (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.

poems written in her name. At the center of his work is a thematic longing for Laura as a result of life and death as Laura denies his love in both. In life, Laura rejects his affection; in death she is parted from him forever. The love Petrarch shows within his poetry, unmoved by inflicted separation, is what drives his poetry and makes him the ultimate figure of devotion.

Petrarch's poetry, steeped in devastation from yearning for Laura, was the perfect model for a widow who faced similar feelings of longing. Petrarch produced a popular style of grieving within poetry that women could emulate as a means to devotedly grieve their husbands during their widowhood. Colonna, in particular, adapted Petrarch's style in her grief over the loss of Ferrante. As he wrote for his Laura, Petrarch delivered poetry full of longing that would be modeled by Colonna. Colonna utilized their similar feelings of loss to emphasize the nature of her widowhood and her subsequent grief at the loss of her husband. By using Petrarch as a model, Colonna not only distinguished her loss, but she also distinguished herself as a poet.

While the poetry of loss provided an excellent example for widows, certain elements of Petrarchan poetry were difficult to model. Petrarch's poetry had elements of sexual desire, making it a problematic form for widows to use, as they were meant to remain chaste. Petrarch's worship of Laura's physical attributes and beauty announce his desire in *Canzoniere* 52:

Diana was not more pleasing to her lover,
When by chance he saw her all naked
In the midst of icy waters,
Than, to me, the fresh mountain shepherdess,
Set there to was a graceful veil,
That ties her vagrant blonde hair from the breeze...³⁵

³⁵ Petrarch, "Canzoniere 52" in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa

The comparison made by Petrarch between the visceral pleasures of Laura's hair to Diana's nakedness communicates a stark difference in acceptable content between female and male poets. In his discussion of the dangers for female poets in their use of the Petrarchan form, Stanley Benfell explains the complications made by Petrarchan desire: "translating the language of Petrarchism across gender lines, of course, opened up certain opportunities but also brought difficulties, as it was not socially acceptable for women to speak openly of sexual desire, even if that desire could be understood as a metaphor for other concerns."³⁶ In using this form, female poets were faced with possible shame as their reputations could become stained with the connotation of lust and desire associated with certain Petrarchan conventions. "...Female poets had to employ strategies that while allowing them to imitate Petrarch also allowed them to transform Petrarchan convention in a way that would prove socially blameless."³⁷ In order to escape the possible marring of their reputations, female poets needed to be aware of their desire. To avoid the more inappropriate conventions, female poets wrote with a focus on their eternal devotion and love for their displaced partner. Colonna excelled at this evasion of more improper themes and gained the hallmark of being "heralded as the undisputed matriarch of Italian Petrarchanism."³⁸

In order to rely on conventions set out by Petrarch, Colonna used gendered subversions of different themes as ways to successfully endow her poetry with the popular, lyrical style. She achieved this through the manipulation of several conventional themes including: distance, faithfulness, legitimacy of love, and their respective relationships with the Virgin. By subverting these traditional Petrarchan conventions, Colonna sought to separate herself from both the male

³⁶ Stanley Benfell, "Translating Petrarchan Desire in Vittoria Colonna and Gaspara Stampa," (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Brundin, *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition*, 13.

poet, along with the more inappropriate elements of his poetry. By doing this, Colonna was able to utilize the popular form without tainting her reputation. Joined with the appearance of a ‘true’ widow, these subversions of Petrarchan conventions helped Colonna rise within the social world of literary man. Through the combination of these elements, she garnered praise for her devotion to Ferrante and her literary excellence as both are heightened through their association with Petrarchan conventions. As she takes each of the conventions presented and transforms them through a different use of gender, Colonna is able to create a space for a social transcendence through her poetry, bypassing the boundaries set for her as a widowed woman.

The first Petrarchan convention that Colonna subverts is distance as a motif. Whether in life or in death, Petrarch was constantly subject to a distance from his love which inspires a central characteristic found within his *Canzoniere*: the longing for his displaced love, Laura. As he encounters an antagonistic Laura in life, Petrarch finds himself abandoned and alone in her scorn for his affection. “A bitter rain of tears pours down my face/ blowing with a wind of anguished sighs/ should my eyes turn to look at you alone/ for whom I am divided from mankind.”³⁹ Emotional separation becomes distance in his solitude as Petrarch finds himself “alone and deep in thought [as] I measure out/ the most deserted fields, with slow, late steps.”⁴⁰ As Petrarch faces his unrequited love, he marks the loneliness in physical steps order to characterize the distance of emotion between him and Laura within his poetry. His only companion in this pursuit is the personification of Love, who follows him listlessly as he travels both physically and emotionally away from Laura. In this separation, Laura holds power over Petrarch since she is in control over the distance given: “lady, you have expelled me/ from the sweet place that I had made my home:/

³⁹ Petrarch, “*Canzoniere 17*” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, (Indiana University Press, 1996), pg. 18-9, lines 1-4.

⁴⁰ Petrarch, “*Canzoniere 35*” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, pg. 56-7, lines 1-2.

miserable exile!”⁴¹ Petrarch feels the presence of distance given by Laura everywhere: “I grieve in every place I cannot see/ those lovely, gracious eyes.”⁴² Petrarch’s distance from Laura stems from her absence, both physical and emotional, and his longing to see her increases as a result. Laura antagonizes his emotional state as she withdraws from him time and time again, making his longing for her increase with each passing withdrawal.

In her attempt to use the theme of distance subverted through gender, Colonna’s distance from Ferrante is found not in the closing of distance, but in the circumstances surrounding it. By altering the dynamics of male and female within the Petrarchan model, Colonna is able to manipulate gender as a female poet within a traditionally male role. This Colonna maintains the Petrarchan position while Ferrante embodies the distant Laura. Rather than stepping into the female character of Petrarch’s form, she instead becomes the male figure subject to the distance given by the female role. “I no longer have help, only greater fear/...only of ever sailing on this ocean,/ which I have furrowed so long without hope,/ for death conceals my true port from me.”⁴³ Colonna, like Petrarch, is faced with the disappearance of her love within her view. Just as Laura leaves Petrarch behind, Ferrante leaves Colonna behind and the fear of not only distance, but unwanted separation speaks to their similarities. This separation cements her position as ‘Petrarch,’ and affords her a sense of empowerment as both a poet in charge of the narrative, just as Petrarch was, and as mistress within the poem. As mistress within, she holds sway over her male counterpart as she decides what type of distance to impose on him. Instead of distance given willingly as a result of unfaithfulness or duty during their time as a married couple, Colonna depicts their widowed separation in a different light. As the poet, Colonna

⁴¹ Petrarch, “*Canzoniere* 45” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, pg. 72-3, lines 1-8.

⁴² Petrarch, “*Canzoniere* 37,” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, pg.58-9, lines 33-43.

⁴³ Vittoria Colonna, “*Provo tra duri sogli e fiero vento penne*” in *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. and trans. Katharina M. Wilson, (University of Georgia Press, 1987), 37.

constructs the distance from Ferrante as unwilling as he seeks to reunite with Colonna in the afterlife.: “My living Sun fills my burning soul with love from within...and from heaven he teaches me to love and to suffer, sustaining the humble shell of my body...”⁴⁴ Like the classical widow Porcia, whom Colonna praises in her “*Mentre la nave mia, longe dal porto,*” Colonna contemplates a grand suicide within her poetry to end her suffering. In her desperation to fill the distance provided by Ferrante’s death, Colonna contemplates death but she is stopped by her living Sun, Ferrante, as this would sever their connection entirely and create a permanent separation. Colonna’s depiction of distance within her poetry differs from Petrarch. Rather than a separation caused by emotional distance, Colonna’s distance is not dictated by Ferrante’s disinterest, but rather in the circumstances of their roles. Through the use of gender, Colonna is able to determine the distance as both mistress and poet, whereas Petrarch’s role is limited to poet. Because of this, Colonna’s distance from Ferrante may be physically far, but it is close in terms of love.

Another example of a utilized theme within Petrarchan poetry is faithfulness. The focus of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* is his unrequited love for Laura, which he characterizes as a visceral assault on his senses. He praises her “sweet breath,” and “angelic singing [and words]” from which Love “dazzles and...melts him.”⁴⁵ However, as much as he ardently adores her, she remains uninterested: “and now I’m hoarse,/ lady, from begging mercy [from Love]—and you don’t care.”⁴⁶ The relationship found within his poetry is one of struggle and disinterest on the part of Laura. Petrarch’s faithfulness in this kind of love is displayed through *Canzoniere 21* where he expresses the suffering felt at the whims of Laura’s attention, or lack thereof. “I offered

⁴⁴ Vittoria Colonna, “*Mentre la nave mia, longe dal porto,*” in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 143-4.

⁴⁵ Petrarch, “*Canzoniere 133,*” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, pg. 218-9, lines 11-3

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, lines 3-4.

you my heart, but you refuse/...and if, some other lady hopes, perhaps,/ for it, she lives in weak, fallacious hope/...since it loves you the more”⁴⁷ The love Petrarch suffers through is carried with him for years as he remains faithful to Laura despite the struggle of a love unfulfilled and unrequited. In *Canzoniere 11*, Petrarch faces Laura’s affronted rejection to his attention: “when Love made you conscious of my feelings,/ your blond hair took the veil immediately, your gaze withdrew into itself.”⁴⁸ While he praises her faithfully throughout his poetry, Petrarch is also tormented by Laura’s indifference. In *The Icy Fire: Five Studies in European Petrarchanism*, Leonard Forster speaks to the cruel, female lover: “the classic petrarchistic situation is that the lady is heard-hearted...The lady is often shown as enjoying the lover’s pain...If there is something of the masochist about the petrarchistic lover, there is something of the sadist in his picture of his beloved.”⁴⁹ Petrarch’s depiction of Laura as an unrequited, cruel love plays heavily to his faithfulness to her despite the rejection he faces. As the “sadistic”⁵⁰ Laura rebukes his advances, Petrarch’s image of devotion is heightened by loving her regardless.

Colonna subverts this theme of faithfulness in order to transform convention to fit her own needs. Rather than present Ferrante as an indifferent lover, as Petrarch does with Laura, Colonna does the opposite in rendering her late husband as a devoted lover, “[celebrating] the memory of a love that has...been reciprocated.”⁵¹ Although their married life was marred with indiscretion on the part of Ferrante, Colonna’s characterization of ‘Ferrante’ in her poetry was that of a devoted and faithful husband as he calls to her from the heavens: “My thoughts rise with the sun, leading me back to my own Sun, who honors heaven with a greater light and who seems to be

⁴⁷ Petrarch, “*Canzoniere 21*,” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, pg. 22-3 lines 4-14.

⁴⁸ Petrarch, “*Canzoniere 11*,” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, pg.12-3, lines 5-10.

⁴⁹ Leonard Forster, *The Icy Fire: Five Studies in European Petrarchism*, (Cambridge University Press, 1969), 15.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Abigail Brundin, *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition*, 3.

calling my soul back from this high cliff to its sweet natural abode.”⁵² With a newfound devotion to Colonna, Ferrante embraces her love faithfully. Rather than the coldness shown by Laura in Petrarch’s poetry, the characterization of Ferrante’s hold over her is rendered in a lighter tone:

You know, my love, that I never tried to escape
from your gentle prison, nor to free myself
from your tender yoke around my neck, I never took from you
what my soul gave you, that first day.⁵³

Even though Ferrante was unfaithful in life, Colonna remained loyal to him as she stayed lovingly by his side since the beginning of their relationship. As she describes her unending devotion toward him, Colonna uses physical language to describe her attachment, citing a “tender yoke around [her] neck” and the “gentle prison” assigned to her.⁵⁴ The use of the “gentle prison” within the stanza also emphasizes Ferrante’s faithfulness toward Colonna as he keeps ahold of her rather than rejecting her as Laura did to Petrarch. Unlike Laura, who rebukes Petrarch’s love when learning of it, Ferrante embraces Colonna’s love for him as he reacts to her high praise. Even in her depiction of his reaction, Colonna praises Ferrante by describing his response in a manner that recalls the image of Christ: “Won over by my entreaties, he shows me/ his beautiful wounds, and told me about where and when/ and how he won his brilliant victories.”⁵⁵ Colonna utilized her position as poet in order to transform Ferrante’s attentions toward herself after his death, as discussed by Irma Jaffe, the editor of *Shining Eyes, Cruel*

⁵² Vittoria Colonna, “*Quand’io dal caro scoglio miro intorno*,” in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox, lines 5-8

⁵³ Vittoria Colonna, “*Amor, tu sai che già mai l’antica fede*” in *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets*, ed. and trans. Irma Jaffe and Gernando Colombardo, (Fordham University Press, 2002), pg. 44, lines 1-4.

⁵⁴ Vittoria Colonna, “*Amor, tu sai che già mai l’antica fede*” in *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune*, ed. and trans. Irma Jaffe and Gernando Colombardo, pg. 44, lines 1-4.

⁵⁵ Vittoria Colonna, “*Que fece il mio bel Sole a noi ritorno*” in *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune*, ed. and trans. Irma Jaffe and Gernando Colombardo, pg. 45, lines 5-11.

Fortunes: “The man for whose love she had desperately, vainly yearned...and whom she had been willing to accept as he was in life, faithless, was now dead and finally hers alone. She was free to reinvent him”⁵⁶ Colonna’s Ferrante does not reject her as he did in life, but rather regales her with his tales. In doing so, Colonna is then able to show her faithfulness by relating his virtuous, heroic character in her poetry. Instead of gaining renown for her unwavering faithfulness against a disinterested lover, Colonna gained renown as her faithfulness is reinforced by Ferrante’s.

Woven throughout the conventions of distance and faithfulness is the theme of legitimacy in love. One of the main complications of love in Petrarch’s poetry is his inability to reconcile his love for Laura with his love for God. His love for Laura was illegitimate on three fronts: it was not divinely ordained, it was based in physical desire, and his love for Laura conflicted with his love for God. While extolling his love for Laura within his poetry, Petrarch grappled with feelings of guilt that stemmed from his strong religious convictions that love, apart from the love for God, is in itself morally wrong, as it “impedes his access to grace.”⁵⁷ In his discussion on the struggles Petrarch faces in love, Leonard Forester explains, “love is not a virtue in itself, for he realizes that his love is a passion and that passion is sinful. But he wants both passion and purification, and cannot always balance the two. He longs to be free of his hopeless devotion and knows he cannot escape.”⁵⁸ This struggle is especially apparent in *Canzoniere 234* as Petrarch questions love’s impact:

O little bed that once was rest and comfort
for so much labor...

⁵⁶ Irma Jaffe with Gernando Colombardo, *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune*, pg. 45

⁵⁷ Abigail Brundin, *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition*, 4.

⁵⁸ Forster, *The Icy Fire*, 3.

Not only from my hiding place and rest
I flee, but more from my own self and thoughts
that used to take me with them so high in flight.”⁵⁹

The helplessness Petrarch shows toward the personification of Love against his past “thoughts that used to take me with them so high” displays his struggle as he is effectively removed from the “high, hard mountain” of religious prosperity despite his desire to climb upward once again.⁶⁰ Stanley Benfell comments on the dichotomous loves in Petrarch’s life as they cause an internal rift, because as he is “caught between Laura and Christ, Petrarch never progresses towards a unity of self, but instead finds himself trapped in a cyclical pattern of desire, partial repentance, and return to desire.”⁶¹ As he thinks himself freed from desire and love, Petrarch realizes his inability to separate the two: “Love, even though I realized it late,/ between two opposites wants me to struggle.”⁶² Failing to separate the two loves causes another barrier between Petrarch and Laura as she is in the eternal afterworld while he is stuck in the base, mortal world, unable to reach her due to his divided love. Because their love is not legitimate, his desires for her are morally wrong which hinders his attempt to reach both her and the heavens.

While Petrarch failed to reconcile love and religion, Colonna was able to rely on her status as a widow in order to do so. Just as Petrarch longed desperately for Laura, Colonna consumed herself with her widow’s grief for Ferrante. The difference, however, is that the love between Colonna and Ferrante is presented as an “honest love,” a love stemming from the “desire for beauty,” and not “motivated by the sensual impulses.”⁶³ As beauty is “a grace born of the

⁵⁹ Petrarch, “*Canzoniere* 234,” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, pg. 334-5, lines 5-11.

⁶⁰ Petrarch, “*Canzoniere* 2,” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, pg. 2-3, line 13.

⁶¹ Benfell, “Translating Petrarchan Desire in Vittoria Colonna and Gaspara Stampa,” 13.

⁶² Petrarch, “*Canzoniere* 55,” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, pg. 90-1, lines 13-4.

⁶³ Rinaldina Russell, “The Mind’s Pursuit of the Divine: A Survey of Secular and Religious Themes in Vittoria Colonna’s Sonnets,” (Gale Group, 2002).

harmony of soul and body, and is consequently directed to a virtuous as well as beautiful person,” it is a love directly ordained by god.⁶⁴ Colonna’s use of honest love stems from divine ordinance and serves as a subversion of Petrarchan convention as Colonna’s love was legitimized and eternal, whereas Petrarch’s was not.⁶⁵ Colonna proclaims this honest love as her own: “Sweet bond, that was ordain’d so wondrous well/ By the Almighty ruler of the sky,/ Who did unite it one sweet loving tie.”⁶⁶ Through the marital connection of a divinely ordained love, Colonna characterizes both souls involved as virtuous from the inception of their marriage. Her presentation of their marriage through her poetry acts as “a joining together of the two poles of Petrarchan desire [love and God] through a narrative of conversion... a continuity missing in Petrarch, who always sees his two desires as conflicted.”⁶⁷ Abigail Brundin notes, “where Petrarch bemoans an unreciprocated love... Colonna, as befits a respectable and aristocratic woman, celebrates the memory of a love that has not only been reciprocated but also legitimated through marriage.”⁶⁸ Unlike Petrarch and Laura’s emotionally distant and unattainable love, the love of Colonna and Ferrante’s performs within the bond of marriage. This bond purifies their relationship through the sharing of a soul as their “honest love” suggests. Rather than being met with regret and violence, Colonna is instead pleased in her encounter with love as it served to uplift her due to its divine nature. “That day when his beloved image entered my heart/ where it was to remain peacefully for many years/ in loving custody, such did it seem/ that I wondered

⁶⁴ Rinaldina Russell, “The Mind’s Pursuit of the Divine: A Survey of Secular and Religious Themes in Vittoria Colonna’s Sonnets,” (Gale Group, 2002).

⁶⁵ Abigail Brundin, *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition*, 19: Thematically, these [Petrarchan] sonnets are traditional in their emphasis on the suffering poet who bemoans a lost love, although the gender reversal is of course entirely new and significant and the love that is mourned, unlike its male counterpart, has a legitimate public face.”

⁶⁶ Vittoria Colonna, “*Cara union, che in sì mirabil modo*” in *A Decade of Italian Women*, trans. Thomas Trollope, (Chapman and Hall, 1859), lines 1-3.

⁶⁷ Benfell, “Translating Petrarchan Desire in Vittoria Colonna and Gaspara Stampa,”

⁶⁸ Abigail Brundin, *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition*, 3.

whether it was of a man or god.”⁶⁹ Unlike Petrarch, who defines his love as suffering, Colonna is content in her love for Ferrante as she exists in his “loving custody.” Colonna also lacks Petrarch’s reluctance in love as she embraces it rather than try and pull away from it. “Heedless of itself it flamed with a joy/ from which it would never desire to turn away.”⁷⁰ She finds joy in her love, and finds the presence of God within it as God inspired it:

God was generous to my beloved,
gave him every grace, with strength to guard his soul...
How then could I deny Love, how not want
him?... in my mind *his light* is not spent, here still
I preserve his unique form completely.⁷¹

This legitimization of love allows Colonna to transcend beyond the reaches of Petrarch as she equates her love to the heavens. The subversion lies in Colonna’s successfully legitimate marriage. As a female poet, Colonna is able to reconcile God and love as she embraces both, even in her widowhood. Often regarding Ferrante and God interchangeably as her “sun/Sun,” Colonna is able to tether herself to Ferrante’s soul as she thinks of God and the eternal heavens.⁷²

A recurring topic throughout the *Canzoniere*, notably within its final poem, is Petrarch’s praising of the Virgin. Mary was a prominent figure of devotion. A predecessor to both Petrarch and Colonna, Jacopone da Todi writes of the Virgin in his mournful thirteenth-century hymn *Stabat Mater*, highlighting the connection he feels toward her as Mother and also toward her

⁶⁹ Vittoria Colonna, “*Quel giorno che l’amata immagin corse*” in *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune*, ed. and trans. Irma Jaffe and Gernando Colombaro, pg. 43, lines 1-8.

⁷⁰ Vittoria Colonna, “*Quel giorno che l’amata immagin corse*” in *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune*, ed. and trans. Irma Jaffe and Gernando Colombaro, pg. 43, lines 7-8.

⁷¹ Vittoria Colonna, “*D’ogni sua grazia fu largo al mio Sol*” in *Michelangelo’s Poetry and Iconography in the Heart of the Reformation*, trans. Ambra Morocini, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 44.

⁷² Vittoria Colonna, “*Quando ’io dal caro scoglio miro intorno*” in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox, pg. 136: “My thoughts rise with the sun, leading me back to my own Sun...”

grief. To all, she was the ultimate mother figure as she was the bringer of salvation through the birth of Christ. The tears she wept over his body were of pure devotion as she mourned her son while also praising his sacrifice. As Petrarch faced death and sought salvation, the relationship between Mary, as the mother, and her son was given significance. As the eternal mother, the Virgin stands as the most significant female in life and in death, leaving no room for other female figures in the process. While mothers and wives held significance in mortal life, the Virgin stands above all as she is ultimate form of maternal love, the love from which all things are born.

Throughout the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch acts as the helpless male unable to break away from Laura, but he ultimately abandons her for Mother Mary after frequently comparing the two in earlier poems. Within the final poem, Petrarch develops a wholly devoted worship to the Virgin as he seeks her guidance to cleanse himself. “Virgin, those lovely eyes/ that saw in sorrow those pitiless wounds/ upon the sweet limbs of your cherished son,/ turn to my dangerous state,/ who come impudent to you for your help...”⁷³ Petrarch gained inspiration from works such as the *Stabat Mater*. In this hymn, Mary’s tears play an important role as her tears are the embodiment of perfect motherhood: “oh how sad and downcast/ was that blessed mother...who trembled with grief and despair/ when she saw the punishment/ of her noble child.”⁷⁴ Inspired, Petrarch taps into the tradition of invoking the image of the weeping Mother to call on the sorrow and tears typically associated with the Virgin in order to garner sympathy for *his* suffering: “Virgin, now with repentant and holy tears fill up my weary heart;/ at least let my last weeping be devout,/ without the mud of the earth”⁷⁵ Petrarch invokes this image of suffering in order to relate himself

⁷³ Petrarch, “*Canzoniere* 366,” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, pgs. 510-1, lines 22-116.

⁷⁴ Jacopone da Todi, *Stabat Mater*, trans. Brendan Cook.

⁷⁵ Petrarch, “*Canzoniere* 366,” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, pgs. 510-1, lines 22-116.

to her as a broken son, worthy of her tears. He relies on the relationship with the Mother as caretaker in order to empathize with her as he seeks salvation by having her tears seek his salvation as he also sheds them. In doing so, Petrarch tries to elevate himself spiritually as he ends his tormented struggle between love and religion by devoting himself to the Virgin. He abandons Laura, failing to reconcile his love for her, by posing a question to the Virgin: “for if a bit of mortal, fleeting dust/ can make me love with faith so marvelous,/ how then will I love you, a noble thing?”⁷⁶ In making this proclamation, Petrarch hopes to elevate himself through a sacred love.

In a subversion of Petrarch’s interactions with the Virgin through gender, Colonna also interacts with the Virgin, but in a way that equalizes the pair as empathetic women instead of a child seeking redemption. Following the vein of the *Stabat Mater*, Colonna seeks to interact with the Virgin directly. Rather than praising the Virgin as an adoring subordinate seeking salvation, however, Colonna creates a mirrored image of her grief and the Virgin’s in order to share in the qualities of the ultimate model for female excellence. She does this in her prose piece, *Plaint of the Marchesi di Pescara on the Passion of the Christ*. Like Petrarch, Colonna builds off of the image of the Virgin in the tradition of the *Stabat Mater*, but she goes much further than he does in trying to get closer to the Virgin. Imitating the Virgin’s grief, Colonna attempts to become one with her.⁷⁷ Hinting at the redemptive nature of grief, Colonna characterizes herself alongside the Virgin. She does this in her sorrow and status as she uses grief as the connective tissue to both their ascensions. Colonna notes that the grief of the Virgin gives her life: “and all I see that all those virtues, which like the soul’s food, were now flavored with sorrow’s poison...the more she

⁷⁶ Petrarch, “*Canzoniere* 366,” in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, pgs. 510-1, lines 121-3.

⁷⁷ Jacopone da Todi, *Stabat Mater*, trans. Brendan Cook: I yearn to stand/ beside the Cross with you/ and freely share your weeping. Chosen virgin among virgins,. Do not be cruel to me,/ and let me weep with you.”

love the more she sorrowed... she gave greatest thanks to her suffering.”⁷⁸ As the suffering of the Virgin is transfigured into something celebrated, Colonna makes her connection by relating to this kind of grief. Just as the Virgin’s grief was subject to a “cure [of] further suffering,” Colonna’s grief gives her access to peace through weeping. “Eyes, let us weep so much that you lose your sight...for if my boldness and your vigor were such as to let us penetrate heaven, we should disdain all other, earthly sights.”⁷⁹ Colonna uses the traits of shared grief to further uplift herself while also using the Virgin’s image as a way to lift her own. “I mirror myself and polish myself in your lovely example, turning my soul after your blessed footsteps and lifting it to your holy deeds.”⁸⁰ As she places the virtues of the Virgin onto her own person, Colonna feeds societal impressions of her character as that similar to the Virgin, further separating herself from the men in the literary world and enabling a social transcendence.

Through the subversion of praised poetic conventions, Colonna transformed her widow’s role into a means of transportation through the social and literary space of men. She uses gender within her inspired poetry, along with her socially-appropriate behavior as a “true” widow to help solidify a perfected widow’s image. Rather than become subject to the stigma surrounding women who wrote in the Petrarchan form, Colonna was able to utilize the different conventions of his writing in order to benefit her circumstances. Through her subversions, Colonna created a space in which she could both entertain and excel within the typically-male literary space. Her added comparison to the Virgin Mary also aided the uplifting of her character as male

⁷⁸ Vittoria Colonna *Pianto della Marchesa di Pescara sopra la passione di Christo* in *Who is Mary?: Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*, ed. and trans. Susan Haskins, (The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 65.

⁷⁹ Vittoria Colonna, “*Occhi, piangono tanto*” in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox, pg. 147.

⁸⁰ Vittoria Colonna, “*Donna accesa animosa, e da l’errante,*” in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox, pg. 202.

contemporaries celebrated her grace and propriety in adherence to their presented behavioral constructs. Using the constraints on her gender to redirect Petrarchan conventions, as well as her inherently elevated literary skills, Colonna was able to slip into the literary world successfully as a woman using a male form. Through the elevated persona she depicted in her grief, Colonna was able to reinforce her status as a “true” widow while tackling a form of poetry that was difficult for women, ultimately earning her prestige and transcendence in the social world in which she lived.

Chapter Three

The Cyclical Soul: Neoplatonism and the Search for

Eternality through Vittoria Colonna's Genderless Form

Although Vittoria Colonna used her gender as a means to subvert established poetic conventions, gender was not something she always embraced. In certain ways, she attempts to escape from her gender, within her poetry, in her search for spiritual transcendence. Relying on the contemporary Neoplatonic teachings that influenced her education, especially those that surround the immortal soul, Colonna sought to dissociate from the physicality of gender. Without the influence of gender, Colonna could freely exist in the purely spiritual form, the soul, within her poetry. In her attempt to escape the bodily form and release her immortal soul, Colonna utilizes ideas of Platonic love and truth as “her love is the primary vehicle for arriving at divine fulfillment...”⁸¹ She focuses not on the physical, mortal connection between lovers, but on the spiritual, immortal bond in order to escape from her base, finite form. Using poetry as a pure form of spirituality, Colonna folded examples of Neoplatonic philosophy within her transcendently genderless poetry as she aimed to reunite with her beloved Ferrante. In her search to shed her gendered, physical body, Colonna focused on the purely metaphysical connection between her own soul and the One eternal. Her reunion with Ferrante aides in her ultimate spiritual transcendence as she uses their connected souls to enter the eternal afterworld and rejoin God, the divine entity from which all was born. In using these themes of the immortal within her

⁸¹ Abigail Brundin, *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition*, 4.

poetry, Neoplatonism affords Colonna the ability to not only transcend spiritually into the eternal heavens, but to do so through the soul unhindered by traditional boundaries of gender.

Italian Neoplatonism was one of the most notable areas of philosophical tradition during Colonna's time. Born of classical fourth-century BCE philosopher Plato, Neoplatonism was a reinterpretation of his teachings, primarily through the lens of third-century CE Greek philosopher Plotinus. During the Renaissance, the tradition of Neoplatonism was well-known to scholars. With the dedication of fifteenth-century Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino and the famous Renaissance family's Cosimo di Medici, The Neoplatonic Academy was founded to house and cultivate the philosophical teachings. With the help of the academy, Neoplatonic influence was prevalent during the time as its teachings appeared within all manners of art and letters. With prominent Renaissance figures like Ficino and his followers, including Pico della Mirandola, at the fore of this philosophy, Neoplatonism was inspired thought that influenced much of culture, including the work of contemporary artist and poet Michelangelo Buonarroti. The poetry of Michelangelo and his direct involvement with both Neoplatonism and with Colonna is an example of the philosophy's influence as they discussed spirituality and love through the guidance of Neoplatonic thought.

Within Neoplatonism, the idea of the soul as a separate entity from the body became popular for scholars like Ficino. This idea is particularly true in relation to man's pursuit to distance the immortal soul from the body. Scholar Rinaldina Russel highlights this teaching in her discussion of Neoplatonic themes: "In the Neoplatonic cosmos, which is created by a loving God and receives from Him life and movement, human souls are emanations of the universal

Mind, fallen and imprisoned in matter.”⁸² In Neoplatonic thought, the body exists as a casing for the soul, which is born from a single source, God. As separate entities, the soul, born of God, exists as the “emanation of the universal Mind,” whereas the body serves as a form of prison. The body exists as mortal matter, different from the soul that it detains, and houses the transient modes of physicality such as gender and sex. Because of this, the body as “matter” is the point from which the soul, in its immortality, should seek to escape. As the body acts as the physical encasement of the soul, its physical characteristics such as sex and gender, are representative of the barriers existing between the soul and its transcendence into the eternal heavens. Gender in itself exists in a corporeal state and is reminiscent of human sexuality as it sexual by nature. Because of this nature, gender and body are synonymous within the context of the physical and are obstacles for the ultimate spiritual transcendence: the release of the soul. With the soul and body separated, an escape from the physical becomes the spiritual transcendence of the soul as it longs to be reunited in the eternality of the heavens.

Existing between body and God, the soul exists in an eternal state of flux as it is trapped in the transient, gendered body. According to Ficino, the soul exists in the exact middle between God and Man in the hierarchy of being: “...between the things that are purely eternal and those that are purely temporal is soul, a bond as it were linking the two.”⁸³ Ficino marks that the intention of the soul is to escape the physical and return to the heavens, moving through the cyclical phases of existence in doing so:

So the third essence [the soul], starting from itself, circles perpetually back to itself, by unfolding its powers from the highest powers [heavens], through the middle [soul] and down to the lowest [body], and likewise by folding them again commencing from the

⁸² Rinaldina Russell, *The Mind's Pursuit of the Divine: A Survey of Secular and Religious Themes in Vittoria Colonna's Sonnet*, (Gale Group, 2002).

⁸³ Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology vol. 1*, ed. James Hankins with William Bowen, trans. Michel J. B. Allen with John Warden, (The *I Tatti* Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2001), 233.

lowest, through the middle, and up to the highest.⁸⁴

With God as the source of all souls, existing as the One soul in which all souls leave and return to, gender and body are the barriers for which the soul to cross in its eternal loop. Michelangelo also speaks of this within his sonnets:

The soul, the intellect complete and sound,
more free and unfettered, can rise through the eyes
up to your lofty beauty but great ardor
gives no such privilege to the human body,
which, weighed down and mortal, and still lacking wings,
can hardly follow the flight of a little angel.”⁸⁵

The body, and gender by extension, acts as an encasement for the soul as it “[lacks] wings” that would be aide in its rise through the hierarchy toward God. The body is heavy where the soul is light, and as the soul descends from God and attaches itself to a mortal form, it struggles to climb once again, as is its nature, to return to the heavens in spiritual transcendence.

Within her poetry, Colonna sought to dismiss physical urges such as desire and sexuality for both social necessity and more Neoplatonic purposes. Socially, the removal of sexual undertones from her poetry aided Colonna’s reputation as she solidified her role as a chaste, “true” widow figure. Relying on this image of the “true” widow, Colonna’s chaste longing for Ferrante aided her spiritual transcendence. Rather than the longing for the physical Ferrante, Colonna seeks sustenance for her body before being able to join him in the genderless, spiritual

⁸⁴ Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology vol. 1*, ed. James Hankins with William Bowen, trans. Michel J. B. Allen with John Warden, 245.

⁸⁵ Michelangelo Buonarroti, “*Per ritornar là donde venne fora*” in *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, trans. James M. Saslow, (Yale University Press, 1991), lines 1-4, pg. 238.

plane of true existence. “Walled up in this evil prison, hated like an enemy, my soul is confused, here is no life, there yearned-for no flight. I would know splendor, I would melt into the light which gave light to my existence: it was only through his life I knew life.”⁸⁶ By knowing his true life, one of the heavens, and gaining clarity to her own, illuminated by their Platonic connection, Colonna seeks to cast her body away and reunite with the eternal One. It is only through “[melting] into the light which gave [her] existence” that Colonna would be able to free her true self from her body. She invokes the image of melting away the wholly corporeal nature of her being to experience a truly free life, genderless in its reform from physicality. In this, the idea of Platonic love having the power to captivate the soul, bring acknowledgment to its physical cage, and give hope with the promise of truth beyond mortal captivity is introduced.

While shrouded in the darkness of her grief as she yearned to be reunited with her beloved in the afterworld, Colonna sought to escape the formal gender in her search for spiritual transcendence. The grief and longing she felt at Ferrante’s death provided a way to disassemble gender and physicality from her poetry in an attempt to pursue a more pure form of existence. With Mind existing as the element between body and soul in Neoplatonic hierarchy, Colonna’s mention of thought being called away acts as a step toward transcendence as she thinks of Ferrante: “My thoughts rise with the sun, leading me back to my own Sun, who honors heaven with a greater light and who seems to be calling my soul back from this high cliff to its sweet natural abode...”⁸⁷ Through the images of the dual suns, Colonna connects with both her husband’s soul and the ultimate Soul. As she leaves her body with the rising of the sun, she embraces the transformation of her own self. The sun/Sun in this Neoplatonic context is

⁸⁶ Vittoria Colonna, “*Cara union, che in si mirabil modo*” in *A Decade of Italian Women*, trans. Thomas Trollope, (Chapman and Hall, 1859), lines 13-4.

⁸⁷ Vittoria Colonna, “*Quando ’io dal caro scoglio miro intorno*” in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), lines 1-8, pg. 136.

indicative of both Colonna's and Ferrante's transformation and transcendence toward the higher power of God. As she absorbs the "greater light" of God, the Sun, she envisions the escape of her soul from her mortal body through the guidance of Ferrante's already transcendent soul: "...my amorous mind imagines him coming, to change my base, dolorous condition with that high, eternal state, and in that moment, my spirit feels a ray of the ardor of the blessed."⁸⁸ Imagining the transformative ecstasy of the soul's escape, Colonna acknowledges of the necessary change from her "base" state to the "high, eternal" one.⁸⁹ This acknowledgement speaks to the Neoplatonic soul as she uses her longing for Ferrante as a way to realize her own transcendence through his. Because he is already joined the greater Sun, the One Soul, Colonna's admission of Ferrante's transformative light allows her own transcendence into the eternal Sun's light. While this connection can seem as the wishful longings of a widow, the potentiality of salvation is heightened as Colonna uses her grief as a conduit for the separation of her soul into the heavens. This separation is the result of the effective abandonment of her body, and gender by proxy.

One of the most significant elements of both Colonna's poetry and Neoplatonism is Platonic love. Platonic love differs from regular love as it depends not on an earthly connection but on one of the soul. Because of this, Platonic love plays a large role in the joining of souls and the combined search for heightened existence. Ficino compared the two forms of love, physical and spiritual, in order to explain the significance of a love separate from the body:

The first [form of love] he placed in lust, the latter in contemplation. The former he thinks revolves around the particular beauty of a single body, the latter around the universal beauty of the whole human race. He says that these two loves certainly oppose each other in man, and that the former drives him down to the bestial or voluptuous

⁸⁸ Vittoria Colonna, "*Quando'io dal caro scoglio miro intorno*" in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, lines 11-14, pg. 136.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

life, whereas the latter raises him up to the angelic or contemplative life.⁹⁰

Pertaining to love, the search for goodness and beauty enriches the soul rather than bury it further into the trappings of the flesh. Seeking to escape the physical, “bestial” love, Neoplatonism placed a significance on abandoning the external love of a single person in favor of their internal qualities that were shared metaphysically. Michelangelo took hold of these Neoplatonist leanings within his poetry. He celebrated Platonic relationships in his quest for a pure connection by stratifying the two forms of love in his poem “*La vita del mie amore non e’l cor mio.*” Rather than a love that is debased in passion, Michelangelo talks about the purity of his love and how it would be a disservice to diminish his connection to that of a physical one, distancing himself from the former love that Ficino distinguishes as lesser. “The life of my love is not in my heart,/ for the love I love you with is not of the heart;/ it could never be found where there is anything/ earthly and full of error, or wicked thoughts.”⁹¹ In distinguishing his love as one “not of the heart,” Michelangelo not only elevated it above the “wicked,” “earthly” senses, but he also spoke to its eternity. As he distances himself away from those “earthly” senses, Michelangelo also strives to transcend gender as he abandons a love that could exist only between two sexual, gendered people in favor of one between two souls outside of the “error” of the physical. This is seen again in a poem dedicated to Tommaso Caveleri as Michelangelo uses beauty and love to describe a feeling of spiritual elevation rather than physical enjoyment:

I see in your beautiful face, my lord,
what in this life words cannot well describe;
with it my soul, still clothed in flesh,

⁹⁰ Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love*, trans., intro., & notes Sears Jayne, (Spring Publications, 1985), 153-5.

⁹¹ Michelangelo Buonarroti, “*La vita del mie amore non e’l cor mio*” in *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, trans. James M. Saslow, lines 1-4, pg. 113.

has already often risen to God.

And if the common people, evil, stupid and base as they are,
attribute and assign to others only what they themselves can feel,
my intense longing is no less cherished for that,
nor my love, faithfulness and virtuous desire.⁹²

In the invocation of the beauty of Cavaleri, Michelangelo dismisses the physicality of it by focusing on its spiritual connections to God. In her discussion on Neoplatonism within Michelangelo's work, Ambra Moroncini states that "in perfect Neo-Platonic verses, Michelangelo proposes Ficino's concept whereby 'beauty is splendour of the divine light' and 'honest' love is 'borne of God's beauty.'"⁹³ In disregarding the people who think of his attentions as those of physical desire, "only what they themselves can feel," Michelangelo solidifies his "virtuous" desire. In loving so purely, the soul has a connection not only to a Platonic lover's soul, but to the greater Soul in heaven. Through the acknowledgement of physical beauty and love as nothing more than the "[resemblance of] that merciful/ spring whence all derive," Michelangelo strips away the physicality of his affections.⁹⁴ Leaving only an honest love and admiration for the One, this connection void of physicality creates a pathway toward spiritual transcendence as the soul seeks to reunite with its creator in the eternal heaven.

In the Neoplatonic world, for Ficino and his followers, Platonic love is a pure connection between souls which raises the spirit into the heavens and aides in ultimately escaping the body. Because it is a love that originates from the connection of souls, it is a form of the ideal, divine

⁹² Michelangelo, "*Veggio nel tuo bel viso, signor mio*" in *Michelangelo's Poetry and Iconography in the Heart of the Reformation*, Ambra Moroncini, (New York : Routledge, 2017), 61.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

love as souls emanate from the single source, God. In her discussion on themes of divine love, Rinaldina Russell claims that it "...penetrates the soul, inflames it and pulls it toward the creator."⁹⁵ As a love determined by the divine, it has the power to inspire the soul to leave the prison of the body and return to its original place among the eternal One. Michelangelo embraces this as he speaks of his lover's ability to transport him to paradise:

Like heat from fire, one cannot separate
eternal beauty from my regard, which exalts
whoever most resembles Him from whom it came.
Since your eyes have in them all of paradise,
to return to that place where I loved you before
I run back, burning, underneath your brows.⁹⁶

In a poem that celebrates Platonic love, Michelangelo's lover possesses a divinity in their eyes that shows the beauty of God. Unlike the physical beauty that is fleeting, Michelangelo is more interested in the "eternal beauty" present here, devoid of the physical traits of gender or body. With the promise of return, Michelangelo remains enraptured by his lover's eyes as he can see the heavens, "that place where [he loved them before]."⁹⁷ Having experienced their souls "[take] their leave from God," Michelangelo constantly burns himself in the flame of eternal light, found within his lover's eyes to rediscover the cyclical connection to God and transcend the body in that way.⁹⁸

In her grief, Colonna uses Platonic love in order to link her soul to Ferrante's in the hopes of eternal reunion in the heavens. Colonna's feelings for Ferrante, as she depicts in her poetry,

⁹⁵ Rinaldina Russell, *The Mind's Pursuit of the Divine*.

⁹⁶ Michelangelo, "*La vita del mie amore non e'l cor mio*" in *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, trans. James M. Saslow, lines 12-4, pg. 113.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid, line 5.

are those of a Platonic love sustained by their divinely-ordained marriage. This divine connection to Ferrante helps Colonna find release from the shackles of the earthly world by embracing in the eternal Platonic love. By relying on her relationship with Ferrante, Colonna is able to attach her soul to his to share a single, genderless soul in the search for immortality. As a married couple, Ferrante and Colonna share a connection beyond body and through spirit as they exist as a single soul, bound together in “one sweet loving tie.”⁹⁹ Through her role as a widow, Colonna calls on this soulful connection as she grieves not the loss of Ferrante’s gendered, sexual body, but the separation from his essential being. Writing of her longing and grief, what Colonna recalls most significantly is his soul: “...in my pain I am like the phoenix, eternally renewing myself in the fire. My living Sun fills my burning soul with love from within, covering it and stoking it so that it disdains all lesser lights...”¹⁰⁰ Colonna makes her Platonic love apparent in this depiction by calling on the eternality of both her and Ferrante’s souls. In doing this, she also separates their love from the former, base love that both Ficino and Michelangelo despise. Ferrante’s “love from within” that brings her salvation is not a love of the gendered body, but of the spirit.¹⁰¹ This salvation is what makes her cherish his Platonic love above all other forms, or “lesser lights,” as she can rely on the eternal companionship of a love that will bring her to the heavens. Through Platonic love, Colonna is able to embrace her widow’s grief, letting it consume her. However, instead of being weighed down by such strong emotion, her grief becomes the transformative flame of the “phoenix,” inspiring her spiritual transcendence with its eternal flame.

⁹⁹ Vittoria Colonna, “*Quel giorno che l’amata immagin corse*” in *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets*, ed. and trans. Irma Jaffe and Gerardo Colombardo, (Fordham University Press, 2002), pg. 43, line 8.

¹⁰⁰ Vittoria Colonna, “*Mentre la nave mia, longe dal porto*” in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, lines 67-72 pg. 141-5.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Platonic love serves a further purpose for Colonna as it not only creates a space for her laments to eternalize her husband, but to eternalize herself as well. As she grieves, she invokes the larger, connected realm of existence as she seeks out the One. Through the musing of her grief, Colonna depicts her love for Ferrante, and his love for her, as something eternal and sustaining. Through Ferrante, Colonna is pulled into the heavens and affixed there by the “tangled thread” of God.¹⁰² By relying on their love, Colonna seeks out this connected existence as her and Ferrante’s love is strung together and tied by the knot of divine fate:

Out of His love God weaves a tangled thread
round the soul, by this snare pulls her to him;
His son's dear hand tightens the knot--not just
what but how it's done answers my heart's need...

raise her to where the blest meet and hold hands,
linked from lowest to highest, gathered close,
to gaze into love's timeless reflections.¹⁰³ divin

As she finds herself tethered to Ferrante’s soul by divine invention, Colonna uncovers “the steps of a stairwell [to] climb/ to paradise.”¹⁰⁴ Through the divine, Platonic love that Colonna and Ferrante experience together, they can achieve eternity as their connected love is further connected to God by His own design. Beyond the string of the divine, Colonna’s use of the characterized “phoenix, eternally renewing myself in the fire” as a representation of herself further symbolizes the power of their Platonic love.¹⁰⁵ In her footnotes on Colonna’s “*Mentre la nave mia, longe dal porto*,” Virginia Cox elaborates that “it signifies both uniqueness and immortality, especially immortality attained through love.”¹⁰⁶ Ferrante’s love keeps her soul

¹⁰² Vittoria Colonna, “*Tira su l'alma al Ciel col suo d'amore*,” in “Vittoria Colonna: A Literary Study of her Formative Years,” trans. Dennis McAuliffe, (PhD Diss: New York University, 1978).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Vittoria Colonna, “*Mentre la nave mia, longe dal porto*” in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, pg. 141-5.

¹⁰⁶ Virginia Cox, *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, pg. 145.

eternally aflame, as it is still present in his death, and his flame renews her being over again as in the cyclical process of the immortal soul. While her true self is encased in the mortal body, Colonna looks to the heavens in her grief over Ferrante, much like Michelangelo did in peering into his lover's eyes.

Just as Platonic love is paramount in making a true connection between souls, understanding Platonic truth is essential to the conditioning of the souls that seek to return to the heavens. Without the goodness that is born of the Platonic truth, a soul cannot hope to attain true transcendence, even if Platonically connected to another. The Neoplatonic truth revolves around the knowledge of what is good as a way to know God.¹⁰⁷ It is a key component in the acknowledgement of a deeper, more soulful connection between all living things. The ability to see the truth, to understand truth, too, is limited to those who are enlightened as explained by James Hankins: "Truth...as and experience. A light that can shine brighter or not depending on the condition of the soul that receives it."¹⁰⁸ Knowing goodness conditions the soul's ability to know God, as Ficino outlines: "God is one, by the Platonists' second argument, because He is truth. The highest truth is one."¹⁰⁹ God standing as both highest Truth and Soul, the necessity of the light within the soul to reach the heavens is critical in order to transcend to the heavens. Just as Michelangelo and Colonna both experienced through their encounters with Platonic lovers, God exists as the top level of being as truth and pure goodness. In order to perceive God's truth, Ficino argues that the mind has to be open to the light of eternal flames:

¹⁰⁷ Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology* vol. 1, ed. James Hankins with William Bowen, trans. Michel J. B. Allen with John Warden.

¹⁰⁸ James Hankins, "Plato in the Italian Renaissance," (Acls Humanities e-Book, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition), 340.

¹⁰⁹ Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology* vol. 1, ed. James Hankins with William Bowen, trans. Michel J. B. Allen with John Warden, 103.

Your mind is to your soul what your eye is to your body. Your mind is the eye of your soul. Similarly, the light of the truth bears the same relationship to the eye of your soul as the light of the Sun to your bodily eye. Your bodily eye is not itself light but has the power to perceive light; so too your mind, the soul's eye, is not itself the truth though it can perceive the truth.¹¹⁰

Truth and light are hand in hand as God, the eternal Sun, is the light of truth existing within the mind. "For God is clearest truth and truest clarity or sight, the light seeing itself, the vision giving light to itself."¹¹¹ Taking in the divine light of God as the truth aides the pursuit for the divine afterworld as the mortal body is unable to reach eternity in body. Instead, by basking in the light of the eternal Sun, the mind can perceive truth, God, and the divine eternity.

Through the eyes of her Neoplatonically-informed education, Colonna had the ability to combine both Platonic truth and light to see the divine light of truth within her work. Colonna found the truth of the immortal and stove to reunite her soul with Ferrante's within the eternity of the One. To do this, Colonna uses images of light as a gauge for her transcendence as only the purest of souls can enter into that true world beyond the trappings of the flesh. Images of light, fire, and the Sun make appearances within Colonna's work as methods to embrace the "true" world, with these bright images indicative of God's light and the way to the "true" world. Just as she writes "my thoughts rise with the sun, leading me back to my own Sun, who honors heaven with a greater light" as a way to show her grief and connection to Ferrante's soul, she also utilizes the imagery of light as transformative.¹¹² "...My amorous mind imagines him coming, to change my base, dolorous condition with that high, eternal state, and in that moment, my spirit

¹¹⁰ Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology* vol. 1, ed. James Hankins with William Bowen, trans. Michel J. B. Allen with John Warden, 83.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 85.

¹¹² Vittoria Colonna, "*Quand'io dal caro scoglio miro intorno*" in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, pg. 135-6.

feels a ray of the ardor of the blessed.¹¹³ As Colonna transforms her mind through thoughts of the radiance and light of transformation, she is able to imagine replacing her mortal body with one eternal, having sensed the afterworld through Ferrante's shelter. By replacing her "base, dolorous condition," Colonna dispels her body, and gender by extension of physical form, within her verse by feeling the "ray of the ardor of the blessed."¹¹⁴ Through the light of the sun, Colonna's soul raises into the heavens: "Your sun can produce only mortal effects, while mine renders the soul blessed."¹¹⁵ She makes the distinction between dueling suns, as others pale in comparison to her own "which now gleams above, in its celestial home, burning with a holy ardor in perpetual daylight, flaming and glowing before the true Sun."¹¹⁶ As Ferrante's soul has reached the eternal One, Colonna's own soul feels the "warmth, that...so inflame[s] me," benefitting from the Platonic love that she shares with her departed sun. Using both the eternal flame to swallow the physical aspects of her being and the dual suns, Colonna frees her soul from the trappings of the flesh and soars upward into the heavens. Colonna's descriptive verse of her transformation relies on the transcendence of her gender and body into the perfect, spiritual form. Once her soul is in its purist form after receiving the transformation of spiritual transcendence, she casts away her body and gender, burns them away in the light of Platonic truth.

In the culmination of the Neoplatonic philosophy, Colonna's use of the poetic form becomes a method to reach spiritual transcendence. Seeking to transcend the sinful, mortal world in favor of the holy, spiritual one, Colonna uses poetry as the epitome of purity and truth.

Deriving from a divine source, language and art as poetry provides a way to understand the true,

¹¹³ Vittoria Colonna, "*Quand'io dal caro scoglio miro intorno*" in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, pg. 135-6.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Vittoria Colonna, "*Questo sol ch'oggi agli occhi nostri splende*" in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, pg. 137.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

eternal world. Stemming from antiquity, poetry was regarded in tandem with divinity, as was the poet. Within her discussion on the history of divinity within poetry, Alice Sperduti poses that “the activity of the poet, too, was accepted as a kind of divine madness... It is under this metaphor that Plato chose to describe divine inspiration, and the concept of *mania* for the poet persisted even in the Middle Ages...”¹¹⁷ Aided with the divine *mania* of a spiritually enlightened mind, poets have the ability to speak to the divine truth as their words were akin to classical prophesy. In his discussion of Ficino’s *Harmonia*, William Bowen states, “driven by the desire to recover the pure state of his soul and enjoy true or divine music, man strives to imitate the ideal *harmonia* through audible music and poetry.”¹¹⁸ In the pursuit of the “pure” soul, poetry acts as a pathway into the divine as it is born of the divine; as the immortal soul is of the One, the emanations of the soul are also of the One. Acting as a single path toward retrieving the “pure state of the soul,” poetry remains genderless as the immortal soul found encased in the mortal world is genderless in nature. As it is born of the divine *mania*, poetry acts as the perfect conduit in the pursuit of spiritual transcendence as it begins and ends in divine inspiration.

Vittoria Colonna’s attempts to rid herself of gender, and subsequently body, are expressed through her Neoplatonically-charged poetry. As a woman, and especially as a widow, gender created a societal boundary that was difficult to cross, even as someone of noble birth. As a poet, her entrance into their male circle was dictated by how well she appeased their expected behaviors. Within her poetry, the act of escaping gender was a way to free herself from the limitations presented to her under the guise of socially accepted means. By translating her grief into a literary medium, Colonna does not let her poetry stand as a solely therapeutic device.

¹¹⁷ Alice Sperduti, “The Divine Nature of Poetry in Antiquity” in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* vol. 81, (John Hopkins University Press, 1950), 217.

¹¹⁸ William R. Bowen, “Ficino’s Analysis of Musical *Harmonia*” in *Ficino and Renaissance Neoplatonism*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler and Olga Zorzi Pugliese, (Dovehouse Editions Toronto, 1986), 18.

Instead, she uses grief as the fuel for her social and spiritual transcendence through traditionally-praised Neoplatonic ideas of the immortal soul. Using her divinely-ordained love, Colonna latches onto Ferrante and uses his soul as the spiritual guide, tied together by divine “thread.”¹¹⁹ As she writes to understand and grieve the loss of her husband, she grasps at his soul not only for reunion, but to also push her soul upward in transcendence into the eternal afterworld alongside him. “Your sun can produce only mortal effects, while mine renders the soul blessed, so that I am resolved to despise the one, and glory in the other.”¹²⁰ Rather than long for her physical husband, Colonna celebrates Ferrante in the eternal afterworld as he is reunited with the One—an aspiration she commits to while still in the casing of her gendered body. Using the ubiquitous presence of light and flame, Colonna essentially builds a funeral pyre in the name of Ferrante and burns away her widowed body with his flame, beholden to the idea of a genderless love, settled in eternity. This symbolically eradicates the physicality of her gender and releases her soul from the mortal casing, allowing her to attain spiritual transcendence as her soul moves through its hierarchal cycle once again.

¹¹⁹ Vittoria Colonna, “*Tira su l'alma al Ciel col suo d'amore*,” in “Vittoria Colonna: A Literary Study of her Formative Years,” trans. Dennis McAuliffe

¹²⁰ Vittoria Colonna, “*Questo sol ch'oggi agli occhi nostril splende*” in *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, 137.

Conclusion

Within the world dominated by restriction for women and widows alike, Vittoria Colonna stood apart from her gender by entering to the male-dominated literary scene. Rather than face a life of unwilling constraint, Colonna retained a complicated independence in her widowed state through her popular verse. Her poetry, while ostensibly intended for private grieving, served as a public display of widowhood. In the public space of grief, Colonna portrayed the perfect image of widowhood as she characterized herself within the limitations of the “true” widow: one who is isolated in her grief, chaste, and loyal to her husband. It is through these perceived limitations that Colonna managed to enter into the social world through the praise of her male contemporaries. Instead of being scorned for her literary entrance, she was praised for her content as it was perfectly aligned with the behavioral expectations set by society. Through the guise of propriety, Colonna made use of both her gender and grief in order to transcend social rule and spiritual boundaries. In this, the poetry written in Colonna’s widowhood becomes more than an outlet for grief. Instead of dispelling her sorrows, Colonna’s grief becomes a conduit for salvation and personal freedom. Acting within the restricted role of the “true” widow, Colonna’s poetry allowed the opportunity for escape.

Within the overall argument of escape, one element demonstrated within Colonna’s poetry is how Petrarchan verse can be used to benefit her position within literary society. As Stanley Benfell stated, “translating the language of Petrarchism across gender lines... brought difficulties, as it was not socially acceptable for women to speak openly of sexual desire, even if

that desire could be understood as a metaphor for other concerns.”¹²¹ Through a subversion of verse, I show the way in which Colonna draws from Petrarchan poetic conventions in a way that allows for an opportunity of entrance into a literary circle that would have otherwise been closed to her as a woman. In this, Colonna characterizes her unyielding love for Ferrante and the devastation of her loss, solidifying her position as a “true” widow. With the assistance of this title, Colonna entertained a unique angle of the longing style. As pointed out by Abigail Brundin, “[Colonna’s] reworking of the genre to suit the needs of her own particular position was entirely unprecedented.”¹²² Using her gender within the style, Colonna entertains a new subversion of the male/female dynamics of poet and lover, both internally and externally. Unlike Petrarch’s love, which was unfulfilled and tormented by notions of sin, the love Colonna presented in her poetry was not founded in unreciprocated desire nor is it illegitimate. Instead, it existed through the divinely-inspired union of marriage. By relying on this ordained relationship with Ferrante within her poetry, Colonna is able to attach her soul to his in the search for immortality.

While Colonna utilized a subversion of gender in Petrarchan verse, another way to understand the complicated nature of her poetry is through the connection of grief. Grief operates as an effective device in understanding the inspiration of divinity and ascension within Colonna’s Neoplatonic poetry. Present as the fuel for the longing, Petrarchan form, grief functions as an active tool and passageway into the free, eternal world through Platonic love and imagery. The grief that inspires her verse invokes the larger, connected realm of existence that is born of God. As discussed by Marsilio Ficino and Rinaldina Russell, the entire realm of existence is born from a single entity, God. In this, the immortal soul seeks out the heavens as it

¹²¹ Stanley Benfell, “Translating Petrarchan Desire in Vittoria Colonna and Gaspara Stampa,” (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005).

¹²² Abigail Brundin, *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition*, 3

exists “between the things that are purely eternal and those that are purely temporal...a bond as it were linking the two.”¹²³ This realm becomes a beacon of hope as she seeks to reunite with Ferrante’s soul in the eternal by effectively abandoning her gendered, physical body. The freedom from physicality through her embraced grief stands as a main element to the argument I make. Grief exists at the core to all of the elements to Colonna’s poetry, connecting each facet of belief and transcendence together in a grand escape from the prison of her corporeal world. In equating grief to a sense of freedom, I move that it exists outside of the dark connotation found within widowhood. Her poetry is typically dark as she laments her husband, but through this idea of Platonic love as found through grief, she brings her soul back into brightness and allows herself the freedom of eternal light and public praise. In all, grief acts as an active agent in not only her entrance into the literary world, but also for the ascent of her eternal soul.

While the connection between Petrarchanism and Neoplatonism is not an unprecedented topic, Colonna’s use of these elements combined with her portrayed widowhood distinguished her from her contemporaries. As she used her poetry to share her grief, Colonna was able to mitigate the consequences of being in the public, when as a widow she was meant to be private. While she used her grief to enter into the male literary world, she was not ostracized as a woman because of the way she used it within her poems. As Abigail Brundin argues, “Colonna had a great skill at manipulating and disseminating the ‘correct’ public image that would aid, rather than hinder, her literary aspirations.”¹²⁴ Rather than give into the restrictions of her widowhood, Colonna instead played with them by focusing on Ferrante’s legacy and the pain she felt at his loss. In her perceived devotion, Colonna established a public persona of a “true” widow which

¹²³ Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology vol. 1*, ed. James Hankins with William Bowen, trans. Michel J. B. Allen with John Warden, (The *I Tatti* Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2001), 233.

¹²⁴ Abigail Brundin, *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition*, (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.

further aided her social transcendence. It is through the isolated depths of her widowhood that Colonna entered into the public space of literary men. Colonna's depiction of widowhood, formed through grieving verse, benefited her situation in society as her male contemporaries praised her loyalty and devotion to Ferrante. Because of this, Colonna provides a new perspective of widowhood at the time. While she complied with the construct of the characterized "true" widow, she also dismantled it by entering and performing within the public space. She cited her poetry as written "solely to salve [her] suffering" and "not of style but of woe," but the eventual celebrity she encountered complicates her role as a widow.¹²⁵

The seeming adherence of socially-expected behavior helped Colonna as the depiction of her poetry could serve to uplift her dignity and social standing through spiritual means. By playing the role of the socially-proper widow, Colonna could engage in Petrarchan and Neoplatonic conventions, earning approval from the male literary world in doing so. In using these elements in addition to poetic verse, Colonna gave her male contemporaries the form that they desired while adhering to the behaviors that they desired. In his discussion of the poetics surrounding Colonna's work, Dennis MacAuliffe argues that "the poetess, as an intelligent, educated participator in the cultural life of her times, realized that, if she wanted to partake in the current literary dialogue, she would have to use accepted currency [sonnets]."¹²⁶ In light of this, I pose that her use of gender to describe the grief, longing, and eventual immortal escape that comprised her widowhood acted as a conduit for her liberation. Aided by Petrarchan conventions, Colonna hones a lyrical, feminine sonnet and utilized it as "currency" in a world

¹²⁵ Vittoria Colonna, "Scrivo sol per sfogar l'interna doglia," in *Lytic Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 134.

¹²⁶ Dennis J. MacAuliffe, "Vittoria Colonna and Renaissance Poetics, Convention and Society" in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 vol. 71*, ed. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, (Gale, 2002), 4.

where spiritual transcendence in poetry meant power.¹²⁷ As “one of the leading contributors” to this literary exchange of currency, Colonna retained an extent of personal freedom as she actively participated through her spiritually charged, Neoplatonic verse.¹²⁸ This verse then acted as a form of payment for existence out of the restricted female role: a societal dowry that she has complete possession of as a widow.

¹²⁷ Dennis J. MacAuliffe, “Vittoria Colonna and Renaissance Poetics, Convention and Society” in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 vol. 71*, ed. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 4.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

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