

TRACING PETRARCH:  
THE REPRESENTATION OF ROMANTIC LOVE  
FROM THE MIDDLE AGES  
TO CURRENT DAY

by

Bailey Elizabeth Betik

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Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Ariane Balizet, Ph. D.

Department of English

Linda K. Hughes, Ph. D.

Department of English

Lisa Vanderlinden, Ph. D.

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

### ABSTRACT

I aim to trace modalities and afterlives of Petrarchan love throughout the early modern/Renaissance era, British and American modernism, and current contemporary culture. In following the idea of loving a person from afar, I seek to examine how methods of idealization and objectification of the beloved persist and shift through the ages. Through the theoretical lenses of Lacanian mirroring and projection, I will explore how distance and perception of unattainability affect the representation and definition of "love," then trace what effects those ideals have on the voice and agency of the usually female beloved in literature.

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*“What a treacherous thing to believe that a person is more than a person.”*

—Paper Towns, *John Green*

In John Green’s book *Paper Towns*, the protagonist Q—upon discovering that Margo, the girl next door, is an entirely different person than he has imagined for eighteen years—realizes that he doesn’t quite know anything about her beyond the one-sided relationship he has crafted in his imagination. Q had built up an idealized version of his neighbor for such a long time that he fell in love not with Margo as an actual person, but the idea he had shaped Margo to be, an invention of her as unattainable and perfect, as if she were placed on a pedestal. But 2008, the publication year of *Paper Towns*, was not the first time that literature depicted someone “in love” with an idea rather than an actual human being—far from it. Undoubtedly this pedestaling and idealization, this loving an imaginary idea of someone instead of an actual physical person, can be traced all the way back to classical times. One of the key historical moments where representation of romantic love continued to gain traction as a trope was in the middle ages with a man named Petrarch.

Italian poet Francesco Petrarch’s lifelong dedication of his poetic works to the lady Laura grew to become the romantic motif of “Petrarchism,” or the “Petrarchan modality,” a version of love that has persisted since the 1300s. The Petrarchan modality’s continuing influence has created parameters for an acceptance of love not defined by mutual partnership and love, but rather obsessive love of an idea of a person. Though throughout time many have rejected this trope of obsessive, over-idealized love, many have indubitably affirmed it as acceptable, as it remains ingrained in our culture today.

The history and genealogy of this cultural modality as it blossoms post-Petrarch circulates around pivotal questions. How one can truly love someone from afar? What is unrequited love--loving a person or loving the romanticized notion of someone? How does this tradition play out through various texts across time? And, overall, how do such conventions affect the voice and representation of women in literature of the time periods examined? By allowing these representations of romance to flourish in our cultures, we are subconsciously permitting love to be defined by Petrarchan criteria: one-sided obsession from afar, usually characterized by a male speaking over the woman's forced or expected silence. Effusions of Petrarchan love fixate on the beloved as unattainable, distant, or holy, and as a consequence often reduce the voice of the beloved to nothing or next-to-nothing. By doing this, keeping the beloved at a distance (or claiming that the beloved distances herself from the lover), the Petrarchan modality functions as a form of control over women. It leaves the beloved voiceless and static, thus allowing the lover freedom to invent and interpret the thoughts, words, and actions of the beloved in any way, as if the woman is either an unresponsive object—or as if she was never there.

The attitude towards the relationship of the lover and the beloved shifts contextually over time, in some spaces mocked as trite or creepy and in others taken as serious and sincere. Despite the fluctuation in how it is regarded, the Petrarchan definition of love exists as an undercurrent in almost every major epoch in the English literary canon. Thus I intend to map the threads of Petrarchism throughout time, starting from Petrarch's precursors and working my way through not only the drama and sonnets of Elizabethan England, but also in both American and British early postmodernist fiction and poetry, then finally ending with the young adult literature and popular culture of

today. The time periods I examine and their corresponding receptions and interpretations of the Petrarchan motif will function as a sort of literary litmus test in exploring how the agency and voice of women in literature responds to the gender roles, ideologies, and societal constructs of these times; I chose these periods in particular because of the abundance of materials from those spaces and direct correlations I saw between them. I aim to explore the transformation of the relationship between lover and beloved as it unfolds across the centuries. In the context of my research, I define the lover as a man and the beloved as a woman, though notable exceptions, permutations, and riffs on this idea exist in later literature and are not unignored, especially in modern times. Further, I will be investigating the tradition of “love” as romantic love rather than platonic or filial love.

The hallmark trait of Petrarchan love is distance between the lover and the beloved. Whether it be actually tangible, physical distance like the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* or an intangible distance such as social class, like that between Daisy and the title character in *The Great Gatsby*, this key characteristic is the most constant aspect of the trope. Another aspect of Petrarchan love is the act of adoration; Petrarchan sonnets usually blazon and extol a woman’s physical beauty, almost always in a fevered, religious fashion, and highlight unrequited feelings of the lover toward the beloved, usually because the beloved is married, betrothed, or romantically involved with someone else besides the lover. These unrequited feelings also serve as distance, an emotional hedge that either cannot be surpassed due to rejection or due to the fact that the lover cannot bring himself to directly express his emotions to the beloved (usually on account of not speaking to or knowing her.) Petrarchan love seems never to end well-- the



feelings are not reciprocated, the beloved is not what she seems, etc.—and sometimes involves what most today would call obsession or stalking. All of these attributes seem to further distance the lover from the beloved. As the tradition of Petrarchism stems from Petrarch's dedication of over three hundred sonnets to a woman he saw in the church twice in his lifetime, the entirety of the trope necessitates a removal from the beloved for the "relationship" to function. For this definition of romantic love to play out, the lover must put some sort of distance between himself and his beloved, invented or otherwise; thus, the pedestalization of women was born.

My research will focus primarily on what I call pedestalization, or placing someone on "the pedestal,"—the motif in which lovers idealize and essentially objectify their beloveds as something precious to be revered, worshipped, or served as a guiding factor in their life or artistic endeavors. This thesis will aim to explore two facets of the pedestal: the way distance is manifested in the relationship between lover and beloved and the amount of voice and agency given to the beloved, specifically the woman, in the relationship and in society as a whole. With this information, I hope to identify how the relationship between themes of perceived unattainability and idealization/objectification shift as both the distance and agency of women increases or decreases. Though women's agency arguably increases over the centuries, I find that even despite these strides in voice and representation, the Petrarchan definition of love, along with its negative, misogynistic consequences, remains intact today.

I seek to explore the harmful implications in literature and culture that come when we decide that Petrarchan love really constitutes an acceptable model of love, and how that redefines relationship structures. By pedestaling a beloved, the lover not only

objectifies and reduces the interiority and complexity of his beloved, but also is not truly in love. The lovers instead are disillusioned and obsessed with the idea of a person, usually a woman that they have silenced. Furthermore I am trying to understand how the implications of accepting Petrarchan love as a standard example in our culture bleed over and echo in afterlives throughout the ages. I am curious as to how these past representations play a role in shaping our understandings of love, courtship, and gender roles, and, after investigating the changes in these factors, determine how the historical construct of what “love” looks like affects women in the culture of tomorrow.

## MIDDLE AGES

### **“MY LADY”: Medieval Madonnas and Courtly Love**

Before talking about tropes of Petrarchism in the early modern era, we must first have a working knowledge of how Petrarch’s body of literature fits in with the literature preceding it; then, we must trace how it echoes throughout the Renaissance, the early twentieth century, and current day.

Prior to Petrarch, ideals of love centered mostly around the love-service and courtly love rituals of Medieval Europe and England. Closely bound with ideas of the Church and feudalism, women were treated in relationships in astonishing similarity to relationships found in both of those systems. Suitors modeled their pursuits after courtly love, a tradition that concentrated on “nothing good except what [a man] believes will please his beloved” (Kelly-Gadol 6). A beneficial mutuality akin to the relationship of the Virgin Mary and a religious pilgrim, of a lord’s lady and a servant, kept the basis of courtly love in respect, honor, and chastity. Courtiers in medieval society would proffer poems and ballads lavishing the woman with praise, but would also offer services of

fidelity and constancy to the lady's honor. Women in a courtly love affair, as an allegorical stand-in for the Madonna or for an overlord, had power to grant "succor" to protect a knight in her service. A woman was supposed to "honor her lover as a friend, not as a master," and love service offered "a reciprocity of rights and obligations" for both parties (Castiglione 114). Courtly love then was a form of non-sexual love, not of romantic aims to sleep with a person, and, like religious love, became chastened and desexualized. These actions became a ritual of status and societal exclusiveness among the aristocratic class, a convention of society almost like an after-dinner pastime. To engage in courtly love, both the woman and the man had to actively and mutually participate in benefitting and serving the other, not just one-sidedly adoring or worshipping.

Kelly-Gadol finds it worth noting, though, that this concept of a mutual love and understanding pervaded the culture in a time that women possessed control and authority through their husbands; because a married woman was the lord's lady, she also became entitled to controlling the lands of her husband as well as the vassals and knights of her husband's court, much like the famed Queen Guinevere of Arthurian legend and her relationship with Lancelot. This gave women of the medieval ages an agency in their relationships that disappeared with the decline of feudalism, and the relationship of Renaissance courtly love did not carry over with the same implications as it did in the medieval era. Since Italy, where Petrarch and Dante lived, was composed of primarily separate sovereign states, the society recognized no overlords or feudatories, and therefore women were left virtually powerless to the standards of society. Because the tradition of courtly love carried over from feudal European society and bled into the city-

states of Italy, courtly love served as a precursor for Petrarchan love. David Herlihy finds objection with this argument considering the fact that many women saints—Catherine of Siena, Joan of Arc, Julian of Norwich—were named during the Renaissance, which he takes to be a sign of progress for women, especially within the church. However, within the parameters of this paper, this only strengthens the assertion that the expectations of women were elevated to holy status; a woman was to be the equivalent of the Madonna, limiting her to that singular interpretation. Here then, as Slavoj Žižek so aptly notes in the essay “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing,” women in these sonnets and these love services were not represented or characterized as people, but objects on which emotions could be projected.

Perhaps the most influential bridge between courtly and Petrarchan love, Dante Alighieri, in his sonnet cycles, immortalizes a woman that he had been in love with since he was nine years old. He courted her in a mutual love affair, but they later broke up as, according to Mark Musa, “their relationship was not an easy relationship, for Beatrice took offense at the attention he paid other women. The resulting rebuff caused Dante great sorrow” (xiii). Before Dante could make up with her, after trying to love another woman and being constantly haunted by Beatrice’s image, Beatrice passed away in 1290. Dante’s *Vita nuova*, dedicated to “Beatrice”—thought to be Bice, wife of Simone de’ Bardi—describes a dreamlike reunion of the afterlife where both Dante (if we are presuming him to be the narrator of the *Vita nuova*) and Beatrice unite in a wonderful paradise-like setting. These poems, joined with explanatory prose, explore a dream scenario where the two lovers come together in the afterlife. This work predated Petrarch, and shows a convergence of sentiments regarding lost love and the courtly love’s trends

of lavishing praise and virtue. As “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” examines, the Dantesque beloved inspires feeling and sentiment with no outer, physical aim, merely the aim of transcending the world to reach a religious afterlife. Worth noting, also, is that Dante and Beatrice, while distanced and separated, ultimately bridge the obstacles and come to be on equal footing, as they are reunited in the afterlife.

### EARLY MODERN/ RENAISSANCE

#### **“I grasp nothing”: Petrarch Himself**

Building off this concept of spiritual transcendence, the Italian-turned-English permutation of the courtly love cultural modality stemmed mainly from the sonneteer Petrarch. Francesco Petrarch, a fourteenth-century poet who invented the popular form of the Petrarchan sonnet, lived between the years 1304-1374. Over about forty years, Petrarch wrote almost exclusively to his lover “Laura,” pining for her affection and lamenting the tortures of being in love with someone who does not love him back. Petrarch gives very little information about who Laura actually is, but scholars of history speculate that this woman may have been Laura de Noves, who lived during the years 1310–1348. Unlike Dante, who mutually engaged in a love situation turned sour with Beatrice, Petrarch places himself in a love situation that is not reciprocal or submersed in the emotions of personally knowing another human being. Beyond her name, Petrarch’s poetry elucidates no more about the woman in question except that he fell in love at first sight with “Laura,” whoever she was, on April 6, 1327 at mass in Avignon, directly after Petrarch had renounced his vocation as a priest (Musa xii). Laura de Noves was also present at this mass with her husband Count Hugues de Sade. If Laura de Noves was in fact the Laura of Petrarch’s sonnets, then we know for certain that he did not have a

personal relationship with her past the “pedestal”-like love-at-first-sight level. However, even if Laura de Noves was not the Laura in question, Petrarch’s sonnets imply that he did not have a direct relationship with his beloved, and instead relied on sonnets of his own creation to shape her voice in their “relationship.”

There is no seemingly mutual love affair that inspires his poetry in the way that Dante’s poetry laments a lost love affair with “Beatrice,” and instead the brief sighting of Laura becomes the only basis of his love for her. Laura acts as a springboard of inspiration for his poetry, even though he saw her twice in his life from afar. Thus his poetry models itself after such brief encounters, fixating on scenes where the figurative distance between them in poetry mirrors the physical distance separating them in reality. Not only are the poems in structure brief and contingent upon each other in sequence, but they are evanescent, as they are simply small glimpses that pass on into the next brief glimpse of an imagined love life and do not follow a linear trajectory or narrative. This brevity in the general shape of the poem allows Petrarch to pick and choose the way he represents Laura in these short flashes of fourteen lines.

Regardless of if Laura de Noves was the true Laura of Petrarch’s poetry or if she is someone else entirely, Petrarch’s meticulous notekeeping in his “Secretum” made it clear that his Laura refused his love because she was already married to another man, which was one layer of torturous distance. We also know that whoever Laura was, she passed away in 1348, which caused a tonal shift in Petrarch’s poetry and added yet another layer of distance to his love situation: that of being “in love” with a dead woman, as the mysterious Laura was deceased thirty years of his poetic venture in *Il Canzoniere*, or the *Rime sparse*. (For the record, Laura de Noves also passed away in 1348.)

Beside the facts that she was married and dead for half of their love affair, another complicated layer to the distance between Petrarch and Laura is that of a “forbidden fruit” mentality. Petrarch imposes these layers of meaning upon Laura’s personhood by using his poetry as a vehicle of grappling with his relationship with the church and the world. Petrarch yearned for fame and recognition as a poet, perhaps more than his predecessor Dante did, but his ecclesiastical career in the church, a career he eventually quit, racked him with guilt at feeling compelled toward earthly glory. As Petrarchan scholar Mark Musa states, “This flux and indecision, the attraction to the world of the flesh as well as that of the spirit, the difficulty of choosing the steeper path which leads to good, are driving forces in much of the poet’s work. They are essential to the movement of his *Canzoniere*” (Musa x). This further distances Laura as unattainable because he views her as if she is something forbidden, as if he can choose either her love or to continually serve the church.

Because of this dichotomy, some scholars believe that the name “Laura,” so close to the term “laurels,” could be a fictitious woman standing in for Petrarch’s pursuit of poetic “laurels” and recognized achievement as a classical scholar. This poetic move, treating a woman as a vehicle of embodiment for an idea, implies that if Petrarch—or the speaker in Petrarch’s poetry—can obtain Laura, then he too will gain poetic fame. Equating a woman to a goal or an idea is a trope that implies that a woman is a prize to be won or achieved as the sole purpose of the poet’s life, objectifying her even further. This plays out in much later texts like Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and John Green’s *Paper Towns*, and suggests that a woman is the sole remedy for the author’s life situation. However, when this idea of a woman as an end result and goal is juxtaposed with

Petrarch's pain caused by loving Laura, a double standard develops where women are both simultaneously the problem and the solution, yet no blame rests on the man for positioning her inside this standard.

Petrarch's admiration of beauty and the frustration of not having something he desperately wants are the two key emotions at play in the relationship fleshed out in *Il Canzoniere*, therefore consistently keeping the lover-poet in a state of unsatisfied limbo, as he illustrates in Sonnet 134:

I find no peace and I am not at war,  
I fear and hope, and burn and I am ice;  
I fly above the heavens, and lie on earth,  
and I grasp nothing and embrace the world. (1-4)

This passage conveys that Petrarch is torn, wanting to be free of the torment of unrequited love, but also finding that he cannot bring himself to stop loving Laura. His poetry insists that he cannot do anything to help himself out of his love situation because he blames Laura as the driving force of his life. He positions himself between two worlds: imaginary and real, celestial and earthly, fire and ice, and is satisfied by none of them. By distancing himself from Laura yet defining himself by his relation to her, he pushes himself into a corner where he cannot be placated by any one thing, and feels the only way he can be with her is an imagined love affair through poetry. Thus distance, perceived unattainability, and striving to obtain a woman as an object become the driving factors of Petrarch's love definition, rather than love focusing instead on a mutual admiration, affection, or respect.



Unlike Dante, who takes solace in knowing that he will be in the afterlife to correct his love affair's mistakes from the earthly world, Petrarch is left on uneven footing with his lover, even while she is still alive, and thus by positioning himself and Laura in different realms, he ultimately sets himself up for romantic failure—and sets Laura up to fail the expectations of ever fully pleasing him.

Because this distance makes actually knowing Laura impossible for Petrarch, Petrarch is forced to connect the dots between these interactions (or lack thereof) to invent an idea of Laura. Laura through his poetry becomes an immutable idea of a woman as perfect and ethereal, as essentially immortal. Petrarch positions himself below Laura, constantly portraying her as an angel, a celestial being, which furthers the distance between them and increases her unobtainability. This is inherently harmful as unobtainability and idealization caused by distance end up painting Laura as a static being. Because distance and idealization are the entire basis of Petrarch's attraction to Laura, he sets an impossible standard for her or himself to achieve. However, Petrarch strives to achieve a homeostasis of some sorts, for though the distance makes his lady unobtainable, by reducing her to a sum of body parts he brings her back to a comfortable place in his mind, something he achieves through the blazon. Petrarch uses blazons-- poems that catalogue the beloved's physical attributes—to selectively glorify pieces of Laura rather than speaking of her actions as a whole human woman.

This complex tug-of-war between frustratingly complex and then grossly oversimplified representations is illustrated in several of his sonnets. Rife with comparisons of Laura to divine beings—the Roman goddess Diana in Sonnet 52 and what Sonnet 90 calls a “godly spirit and a living sun” that was “not the way of mortals

but of angelic forms”—Petrarch’s sonnet cycles never address his beloved’s person beyond her “virtuousness” and her physical features. As Nancy Vickers states in her essay “Diana Described,”

We never see in the *Rime sparse* a complete picture of Laura...Laura is always resented as a part or parts of a woman. When more than one part figures in a single poem, a sequential, inclusive ordering is never stressed. Her textures are those of metals and stones; her image is that of a collection of exquisitely beautiful disassociated objects. Singled out among them are hair, hand, foot, and eyes: golden hair trapped and bond the speaker; an ivory hand took his heart away; a marble foot imprinted the grass and flowers; starry eyes directed him in his wandering. (268)

By contrastingly painting Laura as lofty metaphors and blazoning her into lists of individual body parts, he segments and compartmentalizes a complex human woman into narrow definitions and singular ideas. This creates a flat, one-dimensional idea of a woman rather than a fleshed-out portrait of a beloved, and so whatever love Petrarch intends to impart is as one-dimensional as the lover he describes.

As Dasenbrock explains it,

The Lady, of course, never changes at all, at least in the sense that she never allows the poet to satisfy his desires. But her inflexibility reinforces the protean and unstable character of Petrarchan love. First, it means that the love situation is never resolved but must go on and on, endlessly, as long as the poet continues to love and write poems about that love. Second, what he writes about,

in the absence of any change in the Lady, is the change in his attitude toward her.

(46)

The agency in Petrarchan poetry is complicated, but purely one-sided. Though Petrarch constantly blames the idea of Love, whom he personifies in many of his sonnets for his situation and shift in attitude, Laura as a woman ultimately cannot be blamed for his love situation. She does not know of the torture he is enduring, does not intentionally cause this torture or trap him, and as far as we know, for all intents and purposes, probably does not know he exists. Laura, for a good deal of his *Rime sparse*, is dead. Additionally, in the 1300s, a woman lacked agency in selecting a husband, as marriage was viewed more instrumentally by the family's decision for social standing. Laura's agency in the relationship between Petrarch and herself is absolutely nonexistent, and therefore she cannot be blamed or held accountable for a situation that Petrarch invented himself. Unlike her Renaissance successors, Laura as a person is not ever blamed for his torture, but rather the idea of Laura is blamed for torturing Petrarch. Thus the creator of the idea is to blame for having such an idea, so Petrarch, in a nutshell, is his own frustration. Therefore, though Laura, like Beatrice, is long dead, the idea of her as perpetuated by Petrarch is still very much alive.

Petrarch, because he is inventing an idea of Laura in his poetry, can then manipulate her image in any way he wishes; he envisions her as something out of his reach, yet continually reduces her to qualities that are easily containable and countable. This flux, as Musa points out, is a vital element of Petrarchan love. So, though Petrarch claims that he is caught and tormented by his love situation, it is easily a situation from which he could remove himself. Yet because he is so drawn by the idea of what could

have been—whether romantically or intellectually—he does not wish to extract himself from the imaginary pursuit of the woman he has invented. “From thought to thought, mountain to mountain top,/ Love leads me on; and every trodden path/ I find unsuited to a peaceful life” (129). As Aldo Scaglione states, to continue the rush of unrequited love, it must remain unrequited and tormenting by being barred by cultural restrictions (563). Thus it becomes a masochistic addictive need for the psyche and a thrill for the lover, similar to a drug.

For Petrarch especially, not so much as Dante, the love service of his Renaissance woman fluctuates between intense awe and more intense hatred: “Love found me all disarmed and found the way/was clear to reach my heart down through the eyes/ which have become to halls and doors of tears” (13-16). Over the course of the poem, he finds himself wishing he was dead and longing for release from the torturous pursuit of Laura. While this overdramatic writing would have made sense in the medieval ages, where sonnets were traded between courtly lovers pining to see each other as mutual tokens of their agreement, Petrarch trades his love sonnets with no one. Musa says that “The poet finds that he is unable to write, and yet is forced to write. Writing helps him, yet it is writing that makes him suffer because of his love, for only writing can provide the cure. A double paradox. Love leads to poetry while poetry creates love and preserves it. And poetry will earn fame for its creator and assure him a place in posterity” (Musa xvii). But this begs the question whether poetry—or writing in general—really creates love, or the idea of love.

Dasenbrock argues that Petrarchan love aims to transcend the world to a higher spiritual calling, striving for divine with Laura acting as a stand-in metaphor for salvation

and godliness conflicting with his longing for earthly glory, and it would make more sense to call Petrarch a pilgrim, a worshiper, than to call him a lover. However, I disagree with Dasenbrock in that Petrarch seems only to wish for earthly reward and glory, seeking Heaven in the flesh of the world, which seems to be the very reason he gave up the Church in the first place. Petrarch does not seem to want to transcend, though Dasenbrock argues this, but further eviscerates his tormenting love situation. Because of this, the modality of loving Laura is akin to idol-worship; though in Renaissance times, courtly love was compared to worship of the Virgin Mary, the Virgin Mary/ ladyship at least reciprocated benefits in some way. Petrarch takes elements of the chastened idea of courtly, platonic love and conglomerates those with slighter elements of romantic love, of longing to touch and engage physically with his lover in a more worldly way than working for the attainment of divine transcendence.

Writing sonnets, in Petrarch's case, seems to be mostly a method of self-reflection, which some may defend as innocent pursuit of "laurels". But the fact remains that one cannot remove Laura from the picture entirely, in that his self-reflection cannot simply be self-reflection but can only function through the metaphor of a woman beloved. This utilization of a woman not just as an object to be pursued but as a device for his own advancement has startling implications; this marks a literal use of women to achieve whatever the man desires out of this relationship, the continuation of which usage later in literature implies a social sanctioning that using female representation for the betterment of males is an acceptable behavior.

And this is where Petrarchism begins to have troubling implications. Petrarch does not concern himself with Laura's welfare, and much of his poetry concentrates on

the agony caused by the presence of Laura in his mind. Love as displayed by Petrarch seems to be more of a one-sided obsession with concern only for the lover and not the beloved. Fourteenth-century love seems not to concern itself with mutuality, if Petrarch's love poetry is any example. In this situation, Laura, an object, an idol, an idea, cannot and does not respond.

Musa also does not seem to think that the woman's identity in this work is of any importance beyond Petrarch's own construction of her, and also adds that Laura is merely "the ornament of [Petrarch's] verse... Laura is not the main subject of the work. Petrarch himself is its subject and centre..." (Musa xvii). Though I agree that Laura is not the main subject of the work, I find a point of contention with disregarding her identity. The line between fiction and reality, between the poet's real person and the poet's narratory point of view, seems to be a blurry danger zone when considering the precedence such a gray area sets for standards of love and courtship in the literature following after Petrarch. Though fictional women are just that—fictional—the consequences of imagining women as impossible ideals or as static objects are very real, especially given that the woman in these poems has no opportunity to respond (positively OR negatively) to Petrarch's one-way professions of love. If a man writing a poem expects to have complete control over the representation of a female, who is to say a real female could then have the agency to dispel unwanted projections, or have the right to a voice? Completely disregarding the point of contention that Laura may or may not be fictional, still the staying powers of Petrarch are very real regarding women who are also real. Considering that modern-day readers and students even now study his sonnets as an

acceptable form of expressing love, his works have several lasting effects on how poets and writers view love and the beloved from Petrarch onward.

Paul N. Siegel in his essay “The Petrarchan Sonneteers and Neo-Platonic Love” says that

The sonnet was the vehicle of courtly compliment. By its means, the courtier paid homage to his mistress and displayed his wit. Presented with a flourish, it was not meant to be taken literally, just as the senti-mental valentine is not meant to be read as a subtly introspective analysis of one's emotions. The flattery lay not so much in the hyperbole, which was taken for granted, as in the presentation of the poem as an ingenious filigree which the author had constructed as a tribute to his love. The Petrarchan sonnet was written in the spirit of gallantry; it was part of the entire aristocratic art of making love. (169)

Though we cannot discount the true statement that courtly sonnets’ exaggerations may not have been as truthful and sincere as we read them to be, I disagree with Siegel’s assertion that Petrarch uses sonnets in this way, mainly in that there are several differences between courtly sonnets and Petrarch’s works. First, unlike the English courtly love predating it, the Italian Petrarchan tradition does not concern itself with satisfying the woman in a mutual exchange of flattery or “what is best” for her; rather, the Petrarchan model of love focuses on what the lover receives from the love situation, instead of what the beloved receives in return. Secondly, Petrarch never gave these sonnets to Laura, thus they could not function as a currency of dramatic gestures that medieval courtiers in English courts utilized, especially because (thirdly) Petrarch was not part of a medieval court that paid homage to a lord and lady. Further, because this work is seen as a gesture of Petrarch’s “love,” he is allowed invent any version of a

woman that he wants and hold the woman to an impossible standard of an idea of this fictitious, idealized woman. This as a whole is a disconcerting thought when thinking of the representation and self-definition of the modern twenty-first century woman. Though its intentions in the fourteenth century may have stemmed from a courtly love revering and respecting a woman in a holy manner, the practice of permitting a fourteenth-century poet to have invention and control over a woman's representation and calling it "love" in the current day is detrimental because of its continuing influence and afterlives in culture from that point forward, as we will explore further throughout other chapters.

As a result of having much less agency in affairs of land and love, courtly ladies of the Italian Renaissance were expected to uphold a different standard of ladyship than their medieval predecessors. According to the popular treatise by Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, written between the years 1514-1519, women were expected to appear the equivalent of the courtier. They possess the same virtues of the mind that their lover does and are well-educated in letters, music, and painting, dancing, and "how to be festive"; essentially, women's education existed to equip them to please the courtier in conversation and "entertain graciously every kind of man" (133). Unlike men, women's primary education was in the art of charm, giving up anything unbecoming to the courtier's ideal of womanhood, like weaponry or opinions contradictory to their lord. These tools of education greatly benefitted women who were of the court, but, as the importance of the court declined with the plummeting of feudalism, they left women unequipped to be anything BUT ornaments, much as Laura was described in Petrarch's sonnets: without agency, without protest, without a voice.



Dasenbrock claims that Renaissance Petrarchans do not understand Petrarch because Petrarch aims to transcend his love situation into divinity, which as I have noted above, I disagree with. Saying that a later wave of Petrarchism is not truly Petrarchism is stifling, akin to the way limiting the interpretation of a literary work to a singular lens restricts and distorts a full understanding of that text. Undoubtedly, lingering tastes of Petrarch's agonizing distance, unfaltering devotion, and blazoning of physical features remain inextricable from the English Renaissance sonnetry of Spenser, Marlowe, and others. Paul Siegel theorizes that sonnets of the Elizabethan era evolve from desiring a love based on physical possession of a lover—striving to attain a one-dimensional lover, to concentrate on the distance needed to be overcome—to a love of both physical and attitudinal attributes. Whether the pedestal as a correct modality of courtship is accepted, encouraged, twisted, parodied, mocked, or rejected by the sonneteer, we can trace the theme of distance, objectification, and unobtainability in the pedestal motifs present in literature post-Petrarch, in British early modern poetry and drama particularly.

### **“She is Heaven itself, on Earth”: English Renaissance Sonneteers**

Christine B. Hutchins in her article “English Anti-Petrarchism: Imbalance and Excess in ‘the Englishe straine’ of the Sonnet” concentrates chiefly on how Petrarch functioned in a clamor for nationalistic identity of Britain. She examines closely the “Englishe straine” of Petrarchism that arises from Chaucer, Shakespeare, Drayton, and Daniel's own derivatives of love a la Petrarch, after Petrarch's sonnets were translated from Italian and Latin into English and then widespread. Chaucer especially takes Petrarch's modality and twists it to paint pictures of the beloved as cheating and unfaithful, claiming the English strain of Petrarchans are more temperamental and

oscillate wildly between love and hate for the beloved...mostly hate. Chaucer thus bifurcates the tradition and sonneteers into two strands—one focused on being the traditional unattainable, perfect love and one that results not from eternal purity or distance but from promiscuity, fickleness, and the lover's bitterness.

One of the particularly Chaucerian sonneteers who engaged in both "English strains" of Petrarchan love was Sir Thomas Wyatt, who translated quite a bit of Petrarch's works into English alongside Henry Howard Surrey. Wyatt seemed especially to concentrate on the torture of his lover's fickleness with famous sonnets like "Whoso list to hunt" and "I abide and abide and better abide." The majority of Wyatt's body of sonnets focuses on the unobtainability of his woman, who is also someone else's (thought to be Anne Boleyn or other women of the court), and the torment of being in love with someone who is unavailable. However, using the "English strain" of Petrarchism, Wyatt turns the mistress, usually virtuous and inspiring in the Petrarchan tradition, into a cruel-hearted and intentionally malicious woman. Here the distance between lovers is not just a mishap that none can bridge, but a distance either intentionally placed and preserved by the woman, a distance that she refuses to bridge despite her ability to do so, or (the least popular option) a distance placed by the sonneteer so that Wyatt can project his own emotions onto the situation. Somewhere in the translation of Petrarch's sonnets, the concept of Laura has transformed from frustration caused by the idea of a woman to frustration directly caused by a woman; THIS very transformation may have been the shifting point of how women came to be represented in the English sonnet tradition, and thus in unrequited love modalities in later texts. Instead of Wyatt's women being viewed

as holy, guiding muses like Petrarch's Laura, they instead are constantly compared to deer who flee from him and must be hunted down.

Following the neo-Petrarchan, Chaucerian tradition of focusing on unattainable, perfect love, Sir Philip Sidney wrote the renowned sonnet cycle *Astrophel and Stella* in 1591. Literally meaning "star-lover" (Astrophel/ Astrophil) and "star" (Stella), the lover finds his sole identity in Stella, yet another unobtainable woman. Some have suggested that the love represented within the sequence may be a literal one as Sidney evidently connects Astrophil to himself and Stella to Penelope Rich, the wife of a courtier, Robert Rich, 3rd Baron Rich; but like Petrarch, regardless of truthfulness or fictitiousness, Astrophil feels the torment of distance as a mortal human courting Stella, a celestial being who is seemingly immortal. Sidney employs some of the same methodologies that Petrarch does, distancing himself by placing Stella in a sphere of immortal existence and himself on the earth as a mere mortal, blazoning her features as he does in Sonnet 9 where he compares Stella's face to "Queen Vertue's court."

However, mixing with the other vein of Chaucerian Petrarchism, Sidney acknowledges the frustration of documenting his love situation, self-reflecting on the futility of writing to someone who does not hear in Sonnet 34.

What idler thing than speak and not be heard?

What harder thing than smart and not to speak?

Peace, foolish wit! with wit my wit is marred.

Thus write I, while I doubt to write, and wreak

My harms on ink's poor loss. Perhaps some find

Stella's great powers, that so confuse my mind. (9-14)

This acknowledges the seeming pointlessness of writing sonnets to one who will never read them nor know of their existence; this moment of almost meta-referential realization of difference highlights how unlike the courtly love tradition these sonnets truly are. Another difference of Sidney's sonnets is that the voice of the woman exists at least in one sonnet of *Arcadia*, assenting that

My true-love hath my heart, and I have his,  
 By just exchange one for the other given:  
 I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss;  
 There never was a bargain better driven. (1-4)

This sonnet shows the woman affirming their love affair as mutual. Though at least Sidney does give some voice to his beloved, and though this sonnet in particular harkens back to the mutuality of the medieval era, this is still not entirely satisfactory by modern standards of gender representation as proportionally, out of more than one hundred sonnets and eleven songs, this single poem is the only sonnet that dares give the beloved a voice—and the voice does not even belong to Stella. Still too the voice echoes the sentiment of her lover the way that Renaissance women would have been trained to do. We as readers know only Astrophil's version of Stella's profession of love, since it comes through his sonnet cycle. Again, as in Petrarch, the voice of the woman is not equally reciprocated in a measure of any sort of love, as she only has one sonnet to speak. Christine MacLeod, a feminist scholar, notes in her essay "Stella Speaks" that even when Stella is given a voice, it is either to tell the poet that she loves him (as above) or to refuse his advances. When the woman refuses, her "no" is not taken seriously, and only encourages to poet to further his blazoning and admiration, which is another troubling

concept. That a woman's voice, her "no," is taken as a signal for the man to continue on with gestures of flirtation and love, is a dangerous precedent to set when thinking about its consequences, as when then does "no" mean "no" in the culture post-Renaissance sonnet? However, as MacLeod is reexamining Stella within a 21<sup>st</sup>-century perspective, how can we then fairly judge what Stella would have actually said in the sixteenth-century? We cannot know, really, as most voices of these women were filtered through the storytelling perspective of men, and even then, can do little from the pedestal on which they are placed.

Deviating from this tradition and the norm of Renaissance Petrarchan sonneteers, Edmund Spenser is a unique poet in that he does not necessarily utilize distance and unobtainability in the way that Petrarch and Sidney do. Perhaps this is because Spenser was already betrothed to the woman receiving these sonnets and thus knew his affection was reciprocated, and did not need to extend sentiments of idolatry or the need to blazon in the way that the other poets felt the need to. Or, unlike his predecessors, perhaps Spenser differs in the tone of his sonnets because his sonnets have an actual recipient who reads and reacts to the sonnet off-paper. As Dasenbrock puts it,

All the heavenly modifiers he uses describe the supposedly earthly Lady, and the effect is to identify the Lady with Heaven, not with the burden of mortality. The Lady is not, therefore, as in Dante and Petrarch, an agent of transcendence who will aid the poet in his ascent to Heaven or of the Platonic ladder; she is Heaven itself, on earth. (262)

Distance as represented in Spenser is far different from the distance seen in Sidney or in Petrarch, and twists the concept of one-sided, idolatrous love. Whenever

Spenser's poet speaks of his lady being far away from him and the typical Petrarchan theme of torment by not being with his lover, Spenser is always able to bridge that distance. The woman becomes more and more obtainable as the cycle goes on, as she is portrayed as a mortal human who is unmarried (unlike Stella or Laura) and alive (unlike Laura or Beatrice), so the courtship chronicled in Spenser's poetry eventually does end in marriage. Rather than detailing the torturous, endless cycle of a lover pining for his beloved, Spenser paints a journey that has a definitive arc, a beginning and end, a spectrum of emotional growth within the relationship. This relationship, a mutual understanding rather than obsession from afar, shows a shift in the perception of the beloved in a way that Sidney and Petrarch do not demonstrate; the beloved is no longer solely the idea of a beloved etched out in verse, but a flesh and blood woman who exists beyond the page. The poet goes from blazoning Elizabeth's "lilly hands" in the first sonnet to admitting in the final sonnet that poems are indeed not a proper representation of Elizabeth's person.

SONG made in lieu of many ornaments,

With which my loue should duly haue bene dect,

Which cutting off through hasty accidents,

Ye would not stay your dew time to expect,

But promist both to recompens,

Be vnto her a goodly ornament,

And for short time an endlesse moniment. (Sonnet 82, "Epithalamion")

Again, unlike Petrarch or Sidney, Spenser emphasizes that love is not a one-sided practice. His beloved speaks back, often in a way that disagrees with him: "Vain man,"

said she, 'that dost in vain assay, / A mortal thing so to immortalize; /For I myself shall like to this decay" (Spenser Sonnet 75 ln 5-8). He goes through the struggle of love in a way that Castiglione notes differs from those sonneteers that came before him:

The veneration and awe with which he regards his mistress is not the mere rhetoric of the Petrarchists; it is the expression in literary terms of the genuinely idealistic sentiments of the Platonist who sees in the beauty of his mistress a manifestation of God. He uses the Petrarchan convention of cataloging his mistress's beauties, but instead of winding up with a longing anticipation of the joys of possessing her body, as the Petrarchists do, he concludes: *But that which fairest is, but few behold, Her mind adorned with virtues manifold*. He laments the cruelty of his mistress in refusing his suit, but then reflects that all things of great worth are hard to get, and that such love as hers is "not lyke to lusts of baser kynd, The harder wonne, " (Castiglione, p. 225)

An example of this deviation is in Sonnet 67:

Lyke as a huntsman, after weary chace,  
 Seeing the game from him escapt away,  
 Sits downe to rest him in some shady place,  
 With panting hounds, beguiled of their pray,  
 So, after long pursuit and vaine assay,  
 When I all weary had the chace forsooke,  
 The gentle deer returnd the selfe-same way,  
 Thinking to quench her thirst at the next brooke.  
 There she, beholding me with mylder looke,

Sought not to fly, but fearlesse still did bide,  
 Till I in hand her yet halfe trembling tooke,  
 And with her own goodwill her fymely tyde.  
 Strange thing, me seemd, to see a beast so wyld  
 So goodly wonne, with her owne will beguyld.

Though Spenser like Wyatt compares his woman to a hind, she “with her own goodwill...firmly tyde” herself to his hand instead of fleeing from his advances. To be “won,” it seems, the woman herself must consent to it. Otherwise, without that partnership, there is no real love situation—hence the women “flee” from Wyatt. Therefore Spenser in writing the *Amoretti* rejects the Petrarchan pedestal and the trope of agony in love, of unrequited idol-worship of someone who does not love the lover back; “Spenser consciously challenges Petrarchan notions of love when he writes a poem like Sonnet 67, which relies on the classic Petrarchan topos of love as a hunt, only to conclude that love cannot be a hunt if it be love” (Dasenbrock 265). Responding to the “hunt” that Wyatt lamented in the earlier Elizabethan sonnets, Spenser proves Siegel’s assertion that the early modern sonneteers transform over time to include attitudinal as well as physical traits; over time in the English Renaissance, distance and pedestaling of the woman is not taken as seriously as a love motif as Petrarchan tradition may imply.

In his sonnets, Shakespeare is more complex than some of the other sonneteers before him; though he does praise the virtues of the “bright eyes” of the person who is the object of his sonnet, critics have widely agreed that the earlier sonnets in Shakespeare’s collection are addressed to a “fair youth” in urging him to procreate and continue on his reputation. Shakespeare extols the beauty of the youth, as in Sonnet 53—“What is your



substance, whereof are you made,/ That millions of strange shadows on you tend?”— where he announces the youth to be so beautiful that he makes Adonis look like a counterfeit. Shakespeare also shifts the conventions of a pained limbo state typical of Petrarchism by releasing himself from the grip of confusing adoration— Sonnet 87’s “Farewell! Thou art too dear for my possessing”— and subverts the Wyattesque tradition of thinking that lovers are fully to blame for these situations with Sonnet 57’s final couplet’s announcement that “So true a fool is love that in your will/ Though you do anything, he thinks no ill.” However, it is difficult to determine if Shakespeare feels romantic love toward this man or if he is, like the medieval tradition, simply producing poetry in exchange for patronage. This is a very different situation from writing blazoning sonnets to a woman lover, which Shakespeare openly mocks in one of his most famous sonnets, Sonnet 130:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
 And in some perfumes is there more delight  
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;

My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.  
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
 As any she belied with false compare.

This sonnet is the epitome of an anti-Petrarchan blazon, an anti-blazon even, as it itemizes a woman not by her beauty as determined by body parts, but as a real person beyond “false compare.” Shakespeare sees no need to compare his mistress to a goddess because she is a real person, and thus allows his mistress a more honest interpretation, less concerned with distance and unobtainability and more about being in an actual love affair. He does not see his lover as an object measured by senses, as Sonnet 141 states:

In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes,  
 For they in thee a thousand errors note;  
 But ‘tis my heart that loves what they despise,  
 Who, in despite of view, is pleased to dote;  
 Nor are mine ears with thy tongue’s tune delighted,  
 Nor tender feeling, to base touches prone,  
 Nor taste, nor smell, desire to be invited  
 To any sensual feast with thee alone:  
 But my five wits nor my five senses can  
 Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee.

Instead, Shakespeare counts physical aspects of his lover as less important than herself as a person, and, while not allowing her a voice, he allows her to be a more fleshed-out character in his poetry beyond just a beautiful “hind” bent on ruining his love life. He acknowledges her imperfections as well as his own, as seen in Sonnet 138’s

assertion that even though they lie and wrong each other, “Therefore I lie with her and she with me,/ And in our faults by lies we flattered be.” But Shakespeare does also still follow some Petrarchan modalities, not completely eliminating but at least acknowledging the catch-22 of unrequited love in Sonnet 147:

My love is as a fever, longing still  
 For that which longer nurseth the disease,  
 Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,  
 Th’ uncertain sickly appetite to please.

And often does he still refer to love as being painful, asking his mistress to “kill [him] outright with looks, and ease [his] pain” in the final line of Sonnet 139.

Shakespeare, while subverting many of the Petrarchan traditions cycled before him, ultimately still clings to some aspects of them. But by presenting his lover as someone more than a star, more than a list of beautiful body parts, and someone who is flawed as much as he is, Shakespeare presents not only a true mutual love affair unlike Petrarch’s tradition, but also establishes his lover on equal footing with himself. Shakespeare’s woman is not an idealization or a muse, but a true woman, and his poetry seems to imply that a man can be satisfied with an actual human being with the same powerful effusions of emotion usually inspired by a figment of men’s imaginations. In Shakespeare we see the beginnings within the tradition of slowly dismantling the “pedestal.”

### **“Much in our vows, but little in our love”: English Renaissance Dramatists**

But why would Shakespeare have reason, historically, to give women more agency and fewer expectations of perfection? Perhaps the politics at the time and the rise of powerful women monarchs like Queen Elizabeth I, commonly known to be one of his

patrons, may have influenced Shakespeare's view toward women. This mocking of blazoning, idealizing, and distancing women is outlined even more clearly in Shakespeare's plays. In Renaissance drama, the woman is obviously given more voice than in a sonnet, as she is present onstage (or, at least, a character of a woman is, though that character was most likely played by a man). Though high school English teachers and modern culture may have readers believe that Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is the world's most classic love story, upon further examination the play seems to hold a more critical view of the pedestal and Petrarchan modality. The story of Romeo and Juliet is yet another story that emerged from Italian culture as early as 1476 in Masuccio of Salerno's *Il Novellino*, but Shakespeare notably changes the story to become more humorous for the stage: expediting the love affair from nine months to less than a week, expanding the role of Mercutio as a teasing, witty friend, and making Romeo a more lovelorn puppy-dog character, "like that of the conventional wooer in a sonnet sequence by Francesco Petrarch or one of his imitators." Transforming the story to fit within the context of English dramatic culture and engagement with an Elizabethan audience, "pedestal" moments of blazoning a lover, lauding physical beauty as virtue, and distance between lovers follow the Chaucerian strain of Petrarchism that sees the lover as perfect and unattainable, and because the two title characters follow this mode, they are then mocked and viewed as trite and hollow, even among other characters of the play.

The characters of Romeo and Juliet versus characters like Friar Lawrence, Mercutio, and Benvolio represent, in a way, the Chaucerian strands of Petrarchism, with the titular characters being the Petrarchan mode and the others being the anti-Petrarchan mode. In the Petrarchan mode, Romeo begins the play pining for the unembodied

Rosaline, a woman who does not return his love and is the reason for his weeping. Rosaline is much like a Beatrice or a Laura, a Stella; she is merely the idea of a woman, extolled only for her beauties and condemned by the scorned lover Romeo because she possesses “Dian’s wit” and refuses him. Juliet’s mother, the Lady Capulet, pushes the idea of loving at first sight on her daughter when the suitor Paris comes to visit. Lady Capulet believes that because Paris is good-looking, Juliet should “find delight writ there with beauty’s pen” and be satisfied in love and marriage because of this beauty. Of course, Romeo has his fair share of Petrarchan moments: effusions of faithfulness, the famous balcony scene, and outbursts of passion, awe, and anger at his two lovers, Rosaline and Juliet. We even see him make direct echoes of Petrarch in comparing his lover to a celestial body --“But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun” (II.ii.3-4). Or, rather, bodies, since he also compares her to the moon with such a sheen that she makes even Diana, goddess of the moon, jealous, which is yet another harkening back to Petrarch with the Diana comparison.

However, when one calculates the moments of the play as having Petrarchan versus anti-Petrarchan sentiments, anti-Petrarchan instances far outnumber the Petrarchan instances. For starters, whether you find it romantic or not, the entire play is about the demise due to tragic miscommunication and haste between two lovers, which ultimately casts the judgment that whatever love Romeo and Juliet had was not meant to be a mutual, lasting affair. But the biggest indications of how we are supposed to feel about Romeo and Juliet’s love come from the other characters in their world. When Benvolio in Act I tries to pinpoint the cause of Romeo’s sorrows, he openly laughs at Romeo’s gushings of woe and encourages him to move on to “other beauties” in a more cavalier

love than the intense devotion he shows Rosaline. Benvolio advises Romeo against Petrarchan “without-book prologue” as a technique of wooing because it is “scaring the ladies like a crowkeeper.” Mercutio agrees with Benvolio and suggests that “If love be rough with you, be rough with love” (I.iv.30) rather than moping around about an uncontrollable love situation. He then launches into the famed Queen Mab speech, comparing lovers’ dreams to fairy-addled nonsense, and later attempts to cheer Romeo by mockingly blazoning Rosaline’s “bright eyes/ By her high forehead and her scarlet lip,/ By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh/ And the demesnes that there adjacent lie (II.i.19-26). His mocking blazon reflects the bawdier side of anti-Petrarchism, the Chaucerian humor of sexual acts toward someone intended to be Petrarchanly pure. The offhanded treatment that Mercutio and Benvolio give to love seems to be an indicator that Romeo’s moping and Petrarchan speech is not a commonplace, acceptable trope at the time, for he is outnumbered in the play by people who suggest more logical love than love seized by passion. Friar Lawrence and Romeo have a discussion of the difference between pedestal love and actual love in Act II, Scene ii:

ROMEO: Thou chidd’st me oft for loving Rosaline.

FRIAR: For doting, not for loving.

The Friar seems to claim that “love” by definition ought to be holy and constant, whereas the Petrarchan “love” of Romeo is by nature idolatrous and fickle. He also warns Romeo to heed such incendiary passion and quick relationships, since “violent delights have violent ends,” and tells him instead to “love moderately” (II.vi)

Though the roles of female and male genders seem more egalitarian than in Petrarchan-style lamentations, ultimately the lovers are mutually hollow, extolling only

love for physical beauty or instant attraction, not even mentioning virtue. Hollowness, it seems, is the key trait of the Petrarchan mode when examined in this play—hollowness of practiced speech, of a relationship begun at first sight, of a marriage of a week, and of a possibility of afterlife. Perhaps the most telling exchange of the play is between Mercutio and Romeo when Romeo interrupts Mercutio's Queen Mab speech:

ROMEO: Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace!

Thou talk'st of nothing.

MERCUTIO: True, I talk of dreams,

Which are the children of an idle brain,

Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,

Which is as thin of substance as the air

And more inconstant than the wind. (I.iv.94-100)

“Dreams” here are synonymous with the “love” that Romeo has for Rosaline, an imaginary love affair that will amount to nothing but “vain fantasy...as thin of substance as the air.” Mercutio's speech echoes Wells' theorizing on the erotics of death, where kitsch is present in the sentimental escapes of beauty—such as to distract from death. In *Romeo and Juliet*, there is no hint of a spiritual union after death. This contradicts Petrarch's desire for death as an escape from the torments of life because ultimately death is a spiritual reality where he can reconnect with his lover, as Dante before him theorized. This discussion of hollowness, of uncertainty in death, and in hesitation to give into Petrarchan modes indicates, more than anything, the more anti-Petrarchan tradition

seemingly stirring in the Elizabethan culture, beginning in Shakespeare's sonnets and coming to fruition through statements by characters in both his and others' plays.

Wells says that Shakespeare uses kitsch—cutting out the nasty, unhappy bits of stories— for ironic effect by presenting sweeping, grandiose affectations as over-optimistic kitsch and then bursting that bubble with realist cynicism (what she calls anti-kitsch). Romeo in Shakespeare's play speaks in constant overdramatic kitsch of exaggerated Petrarchisms that make him impervious to the stinging remarks that Mercutio and Benvolio make about his naïveté. Even Rosaline does not care for his exaggerations. Juliet, on the other hand, according to Wells, is so young and inexperienced that she does not know that in the game of courtly love, a woman's role is to remain aloof and cold toward her lover. Juliet is more practical than Romeo and dispels his flowery romantic notions and gestures, telling him not to swear by the moon. This notion of the woman being more logical and less taken away by swooning words will carry over even into American and British modernists like Fitzgerald or Eliot. Juliet calls Romeo out on his overdramatic, measured speech. As Wells puts it, "she will have none of his shop-worn clichés learned in the service of Rosaline" (921). As practical as Juliet is compared to her lover, Romeo's penchant for Petrarchism rubs off on Juliet, as she begins to speak in couplets and become overwhelmed by passion and drama; Romeo and Juliet, without having people to properly sit them down and tell them that love is "all lies," as Shakespeare puts it in *As You Like It*, cannot properly function in love without being kitschy in their motions or notions? of romance. In Shakespeare, though, at least Juliet has agency to make her own decisions (in secret, but still): she marries the man that she falls in love with despite her parents' wishes, and chooses to kill herself rather than



be without her lover. Though it seems that the representation of women in Juliet's character is not a positive representation, comparing her character with the character of Romeo, who is perpetually teased and dismissed for his self-pitying and self-martyring ways, illustrates that she is in the grand scheme of things the more respected of the two lovers for her decisions.

When thinking of distance in *Romeo and Juliet*, one automatically jumps to how Romeo spotted Juliet across the room and fell in love with her, or how he placed himself beneath her during the balcony scene. However, distance functions differently in this play than in the sonnet cycles of the early modern era. The distance in *Romeo and Juliet* is not so much impossibility of attainment due to other romantic partners, but because of the Montague-Capulet political feud. Romeo and Juliet do bridge this physical distance; we know that they get married, consummate their love sexually, and eventually die next to each other on equal terms. This equality seems to happen only because it does not work out in the end; at the same time, while there is distance in their relationship, there is also extreme closeness in that they actually fulfill their desires of the love affair in an extremely condensed window of time, which further functions as distance in preventing the two from engaging in a true relationship beyond flowery words and dramatic actions. The tragedy of Romeo and Juliet's relationship, Shakespeare seems to imply through the structure of the story and use of his characters, is that though they are able to bridge their distance, they still do not really know each other beyond an idealized invention of how they perceive the other one to be. Unlike Shakespeare and his mistress who acknowledge each others' flaws and still love each other at the end of the day, Romeo and Juliet do not ever really see the other's flaws.

This “distance in closeness” is also satirized in the drama *Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, where the main dilemma is that Giovanni, the lover, and Annabella, the beloved, are brother and sister. Like Romeo and Juliet, Annabella has a moment where she spots her brother from her window and does not recognize him, asking “what blessed shape/ Of some celestial creature now appears!” The flowery speech that Giovanni musters is akin to that of Romeo’s balcony speech:

GIOVANNI: Such a pair of stars  
As are thine eyes, would, like Promethean fire,  
If gently glanced, give life to senseless stones.

ANNABELLA: Fie upon you!

GIOVANNI: The lily and the rose, most sweetly strange,  
Upon your dimple cheeks do strive for change:  
Such lips would tempt a saint; such hands as those  
Would make an anchorite lascivious.

ANNABELLA: Do you mock me, or flatter me?

GIOVANNI: If you would see a beauty more exact  
Than art can counterfeit, or nature frame,  
Look in your glass, and there behold your own.

ANNABELLA: O, you are a trim youth!

Annabella, like Juliet, does not at first fall for the over-the-top speech and takes it as mockery rather than flattery. The fact that both of these women initially doubt the

sincerity of such heightened language is a positive sign in the agency of women being adored...but this headway is undercut by the fact that ultimately both fall for their lovers' "love" after the lovers protest, resulting in death for both Annabella and Juliet. That the love affairs end negatively after having such Petrarchan beginnings—especially after Giovanni's tirade that he has "spent/ Many a silent night in sighs and groans" and that either Annabella must love him or he must die—is, however counterintuitively, a step in the right direction toward the reproaching and mocking of Petrarchism's overdramaticism and lack of substance.

A dark side of the pedestalization surfaces especially when the lover believes the woman to be perfect and noble and yet she is quite the opposite, sometimes despicably so. The character of the servant De Flores in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's 1622 play *The Changeling* is in love with Beatrice-Joanna, the daughter of his master. The distance here is not in proximity but in social class, as she is a lady and he a servant, which causes him to work to bridge this distance. However, in striving to attain her love and despite flowery speeches and declarations of fidelity, De Flores murders two people and lies countless times in order to protect her, with Beatrice-Joanna acting as a twisted version of Beatrice or Laura's muse inspiring De Flores to commit unforgivable sins. Though Dante, Petrarch, and other sonneteers can never reach the level of holiness that is their muse, De Flores finds that by following Beatrice-Joanna's evil "guidance," he can ultimately bridge the gap and be on equally terrible footing as his sinful beloved by blackmailing her into having sex with him. This move seems to combine Shakespeare's mockery and the Petrarchan convention into a singular question: what happens when the muse the lover has idealized, guiding their every action, is flawed beyond repair? Though

the representation of Beatrice-Joanna is certainly far from perfect, it errs in the vein of being like Wyatt's sonnets, scorning and blaming women for the bad things that happen in a man's life when a man could easily remove himself from the situation.

Especially paired with the Petrarchan and Dantesque goals of attaining a perfect union in the afterlife, *The Changeling* paints a particularly bleak picture of actually reaching this reluctant love affair. One factor is their intentions in death. De Flores in the end wishes to die to go to a place where they can safely be together, telling her "I would not go to leave thee far behind," while Beatrice-Joanna laments and repents her ashamedness of betraying Alsemero and dies mainly to escape that shame, not to be with De Flores. Another point is that if they did die to end up together in the afterlife, this would not be a perfect union of "dying for love" because they would be together in Hell for their sins according to Christian theology. This too counteracts the traditions instilled by Petrarch, taking all intentions present in typical Petrarchan love and showing them in worst-case-scenario consequences. Ultimately beautiful speech and holy guidance does not save him, but causes the lover De Flores' downfall.

Returning to our friend William, characters of Shakespearean drama in general seem to discount the idea of loving an idealized version of a woman, as we see in his comedies. *Twelfth Night*, written five years after *Romeo and Juliet*, continues along the vein of anti-Petrarchism present in English drama. The Duke of Illyria becomes infatuated with the lady Olivia upon first sight, but instead of approaching her and getting to know her himself, he sends a "eunuch" (really Viola in disguise) to be his middle man. This medium of communication becomes the distance between the Duke and his love interest Olivia, and the very method he intends to help his romantic cause hurts him, as

Olivia unwittingly falls in love with the eunuch-Viola. Olivia's relationship with Viola, as she falls in love with the eunuch Viola is pretending to be, is another anti-Petrarchan transformation of the Petrarchan ideal of loving the idea of a person. Olivia is not in love with the eunuch, nor with Viola; Olivia is in love with the idea of the eunuch that Viola is performing, an idealized and imaginary persona, which makes her love as hopeless as the Duke's love for Olivia because she is loving someone that does not exist. As Viola puts it in Act II, "Poor lady, she were better love a dream."

Meanwhile in another romantic relationship, as the Duke Orsino is able to communicate with Viola-as-eunuch as an equal because the Duke believes Viola to be a man, the Duke does not put on such romantic and flowery airs as he does with Olivia. Because of this strange mixed-up situation and because the distance of gender roles is not an issue, Viola and the Duke are able to grow closer in their relationship than they would have typically been allowed to through Petrarchan norms. Viola discusses her feelings as a man discussing his sister's romantic history, which puts enough distance between them to be bridgeable with the correct amount of knowledge. But she too questions, in Act II, the value of unrequited love, or of one-sided infatuation, as well as the merit of courtly verses in the Petrarchan tradition:

She never told her love,  
 But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,  
 Feed on her damask cheek: she pined in thought,  
 And with a green and yellow melancholy  
 She sat like patience on a monument,  
 Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?

We men may say more, swear more: but indeed  
 Our shows are more than will; for still we prove  
 Much in our vows, but little in our love.

Here the “patience on a monument” line aligns itself with the pedestal mentality. Viola speaks about how women’s expectation was not to voice their emotions or feelings, but to instead “smile at grief” from their untouchable realm. She implies with this that even this woman’s unspeakable love is more valuable than hollow intonations of “love.” *Twelfth Night* especially explores the theme of hollow verses, as the exchange between Viola and Olivia in Act I, Scene v, indicates. Olivia asks the eunuch to skip the praising bits of his message so that she can hear the substantial part of the message, and blazons herself as a mocking formality:

O, sir, I will not be so hard-hearted. I will give out diverse schedules of my beauty. It shall be inventoried, and every particle and utensil labeled to my will: as, item, two lips indifferent red; item, two grey eyes, with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin, and so forth.

Olivia’s agency is greater even than of Juliet’s, as she is able to represent herself truthfully and honestly rather than through the Petrarchan conceits that Romeo and Juliet rely on. Relationships in this play show far more egalitarian footing, especially as Viola and Orsino have known each other for the course of the play before they engage in a romantic relationship, rather than the five minutes it takes Romeo to hawk out Juliet at a party. However, a troubling element to Viola and Orsino’s relationship is that Viola has served Orsino the entire play, beneath him and underneath his rule. Orsino then did not really know Viola for the entire play, but the idea of the eunuch. So it also could be

posited that he loved the idea of Viola at first sight as well, because he never knew her as herself, but as the fabricated idea of someone else; nor did Orsino know Viola as an equal, but as a subordinate, which may make her “new” identity as a woman less threatening as a lover.

As Christine MacLeod argues, the biggest problem with Petrarchan love conceits is that women in society are shaped by these preconceived notions that a typical trait of being female is being a silent ornament for admiration, even today. Women, she warns, must speak out to create a voice for themselves, or the trend will continue in a perpetuating, harmful cycle of misrepresentation. Ultimately, when tracing the ideas of Petrarchism from Petrarch’s predecessors to himself to his English Elizabethan followers, the agency and voice of the woman seemingly grow in a way that corresponds to more mocking attitudes about the Petrarchan conventions. Writers of this time period, after embracing the Petrarchan tradition, begin to outgrow courtly love’s traditions without the necessary social systems in place, and at the very end of this time period begin to prod at these traditions with a quizzical eye. With both Petrarchan and anti-Petrarchan modes at play, it is safe to say that seeds of Petrarch’s influence still remain deeply ingrained years after Petrarch lived and wrote, so it is only fitting that we examine another time of rapid change not only for women, but for society as a whole. The next time period we will examine is three hundred years after the 1600s, jumping transnationally and transatlantically to explore the themes of Petrarchism present post-Industrial Revolution.

## MODERNISM

In my previous chapter, I establish with the backing of Christine MacLeod that the biggest problem with Renaissance/Elizabethan sonneteers and their beloveds in Petrarchan love conceits is that women have very limited voice in society and thus have no voice in literature. Without women's being able to speak or represent themselves in literature ABOUT women, she concludes, misrepresentation of the sex will continue. Skipping ahead three hundred years as another litmus test of culture, we see that despite the often critical and mocking attitudes toward Petrarchan love throughout Elizabethan drama, the thought of women as idealized objects, the pursuit of women as an unattainable goal, and unrequited love (or obsession) thriving on distance are concepts very much continually alive in the cultural imagination of literature and of what is deemed as romance, as it surfaces yet again in modernist writings.

The same features of distance, agency, and idealization exist in the relationships of the early twentieth century literature transatlantically across the Western sphere of influence, but automatically we see another trait trickling in: doubt. Beginning as early as 1914 with the publication of James Joyce's *Dubliners*, the modernist landscape is not only bleak and tainted with the rise of industrialization and urban life, but also riddled with internal struggles seemingly not present in earlier works. Moving to a post-Freudian society, Modernism's maneuvering with Petrarchism is similar in the objectification and idealization of women in a more profoundly Lacanian manner, the distance becoming—rather than physically barriered—prolonged by a mental disconnect.



### **“The men that is now is only all palaver”: Joyce’s “The Dead”**

In “The Dead,” one of the most famous short stories from Joyce’s collection, the climate for budding romance or charm seems grimmer than in the Renaissance. Gabriel Conroy, a married Irishman, begins the story with a bumbling encounter with a pantry maid where he accidentally insults her, which throws off his confidence and makes him obsess over how he is being perceived by his crowd of mostly women. It seems that because he is surrounded by women at this party, women of considerable influence and power—the Morkans, Miss Ivers, Gretta, each matriarchs with opinions and status—he is noticeably stifled into doubting his actions because women have the agency to question him. This sets off an inner monologue of self-consciousness that causes him to overanalyze every aspect of human interaction:

He would only make himself ridiculous by quoting poetry to them which they could not understand. They would think that he was airing his superior education. He would fail with them just as he had failed with the girl in the pantry. He had taken up a wrong tone. His whole speech was a mistake from first to last, an utter failure. (2509)

From this moment on, Gabriel embarks on an evening of embarrassment, awkward encounters, and misjudging situations, as evidenced by his political quarrel with Miss Ivers that he supposed was a joke but was intended to be very serious. This series of unfortunate events leaves him shaken in his interactions with his beloved, his wife Gretta. The story culminates in a scene where Gretta stands on the stairs as Gabriel waits at the front door for her to leave, but she is distracted and entranced by a folk song being performed in the next room. Physical distance plays out in this scene much in the way that Romeo and Juliet’s balcony scene functions, with Gretta idealized as a still life and

Gabriel gazing up at her from the foot of the stairs. Gretta is placed higher and depicted through imagery in a way similar to the idol-worship of the Renaissance sonneteers' muse:

He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. *Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter. (2527)

Thomas F. Smith, through a close reading of "The Dead," examines the color choices and mention of light/dark contrast with the self-awareness of the characters. Smith notices that characters who are paler in color (like Gabriel) are more interior and think more than do, while their darker counterparts-- mostly women like Gretta, Aunt Julie, Miss Ivors, and D'Arcy--are more driven to action and self-awareness throughout the story. The "darkness" noted in the scene above highlights not only the mysteriousness of Gretta in this moment, but also hints at the agency she possesses. Smith also notes that though Gabriel notices so much going on on the surface of the story through motifs of vision, light, and his glasses, he does not know what goes on inside of Gretta's mind, operating purely on the pedestal level of Gretta's outward appearance.

But perhaps the biggest distance is internal, the distance of the mind. In modernist writings, the discrepancy between a lover and his beloved is more psychological than

physical. Here this is manifested in two ways in the distance between the intents of Gabriel and Gretta and the distance of reality and fantasy of Gabriel stuck in his head. Gretta, after hearing this song, "The Lass of Aughrim," is suddenly moved to reflect upon her girlhood love Michael Furey, who sang the song for her in Galway before he died. Gretta becomes silent and moved, visibly quieter and more reserved as the memories of Michael Furey come flooding back. Gabriel, on the other hand, finds himself aroused and intrigued by the emotion stirring in Gretta and reads her emotion as sexual interest. He fantasizes about taking her to bed and his confidence grows as he assures himself that the glow in Gretta's eyes is sparked by emotion for him. When they get back to their hotel room, he asks her what she is thinking about, assuming that she is thinking about him:

"Gretta, dear, what are you thinking about?"

She did not answer nor yield wholly to his arm. He said again, softly:

"Tell me what it is, Gretta. I think I know what is the matter. Do I know?"

She did not answer at once. Then she said in an outburst of tears:

"O, I am thinking about that song, The Lass of Aughrim."

.....

The smile passed away from Gabriel's face. A dull anger began to gather again at the back of his mind and the dull fires of his lust began to glow angrily in his veins.

"Someone you were in love with?" he asked ironically.

"It was a young boy I used to know," she answered, "named Michael Furey. He used to sing that song, The Lass of Aughrim. He was very delicate."

Gabriel was silent. He did not wish her to think that he was interested in this delicate boy. (2532)

This disconnect between memory, time, and trust first allows Gabriel the space to view Gretta as an idealized object in his own invented fantasies of her, then justifies the internal doubts of accepted behavior that Gabriel has been struggling with the entire time. In the similar vein of Wyatt or Shakespeare's description of beloveds as troublesome and responsible for problems in the relationship, Gabriel sees Gretta as the root of the issue as he is frustrated that she will not "turn to him or come to him of her own accord" (2531). However, unlike these sonneteers, Gabriel, racked with self-consciousness, does not directly blame Gretta or himself, but instead mostly just ponders the state of his love affair rather than figuring out how it came about. With this overanalytic nature, Gabriel is able to do something that no other suitors up to this point have done and scold himself for imagining an idealized version of Gretta that is unlike her actual self in reality:

While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another. A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror. Instinctively he turned his back more to the light lest she might see the shame that burned upon his forehead.

Gabriel then does not follow the Petrarchan model in that he yearns for his beloved's affection, because he is already married to her and does not pursue her like an

unattainable goal to be won. But Gretta is unobtainable; she slips through his grasp as he lies beside her in bed, unable to know her entire history, and Gabriel acknowledges that he does not truly know the feeling of love with his own romantic relationship in the way that Gretta knew love with Michael Furey. Gabriel's attitude toward this lack of love is not one of aggressive pursuit or angry scorning of his beloved, but one of emotional turmoil that paralyzes him with no way to fix his love situation, much like Petrarch but without the blame.

Many critics have suggested that Joyce used a virgin-whore dichotomy for women in writing, and another critical view suggests a static triad of Woman as virgin-mother-temptress, but Tilly Eggers suggests that "The Dead" is an exception to this rule. Though she believes Joyce uses virgin imagery, she says he uses it to help restore women to a place of more respect by announcing the virgin image (especially Gretta) DOES indeed have life beyond being a statue or idol of worship. Joyce in "The Dead" speaks against the sonneteers' use of virgin imagery as passive or unobtainable by positioning Gretta on a pedestal and then shattering the idealized thoughts that pedestal creates.

Garry Leonard notes that "Gabriel hopes to confirm his own existence by seducing his audience into authenticating it for him" (455)-- in the same way he relies on Gretta and the other women in the story to confirm his importance in the Lacanian notion of "the subjective function." In this, women respond to Gabriel only to repudiate the function he seeks to assign them, throwing his identity into disarray. Leonard sees this especially in the mirror-shattering conversations between Lily and Gabriel, where the two dismantle the preconceived identities they created in assumption that the other one would interpellate with their character, determining their identities with the other. Gabriel

"shattered [his mirror for her] first by asking a real woman a question better asked of a little girl in a fairy tale (of course she is that unreal to him)," as he has already preimagined this entire conversation in his mind. When Lily says "The men that is now is only all palaver," she "becomes, for an instant, an accurate reflector of [Gabriel's actual] state rather than a fanciful mirror for his ideal self" (Leonard 457).

Leonard especially explores the notion of "The Woman" as "the place on to which lack is projected and through which it is simultaneously disavowed-- woman is a 'symptom' for the man...which the man believes in order to keep at bay the fragmentary, non-identificatory, pre-mirror phase...She exists, like Tinkerbell, because a man believes in her." This speaks to earlier texts, where often women like Stella, Laura, and Beatrice were "symptoms" for their respective lovers' own identities. Eggers too notes this in the interpellation and identity of Gretta; though she is "defined" (rather, labeled) as "Gabriel's wife," neither her relationship to him or identity are determined by that role, as she loves someone else and defines herself otherwise. Rather than affirming their lovers' beliefs as mirrors—Petrarch's quest for "laurels," Stella's actions interpreted as responses for love-- women in "The Dead" instead function in a more Shakespearean fashion, as they fail to act as symptoms because they shatter Gabriel's idealizations. Even Michael Furey as a seemingly direct correlation of Romeo's wooing of Juliet at the balcony speeds his own death from consumption, and his death, though he dies "for Gretta," is viewed as something not appreciated as tragic by Gretta as she herself tells him many times to leave and go home. Suzette Henke observes that Gretta, by being a woman further than an icon helps Gabriel achieve the self-betterment Petrarch and other sonneteers sometimes sought in the opposite way that Petrarchism intends; because

Gretta does not reflect him but instead reflects the things he does not have, Gabriel learns more about himself and can only self-actualize in that way. “The Dead” thus is a comparatively significant departure from Petrarch in that Gretta’s emotions, her memories, her previous loves, and her voice end up having privilege over Gabriel’s thoughts; Gabriel ultimately emerges as a fool because he behaves like a Petrarchan lover, worshipping the idealized beloved on the surface level before coming to the bitter realization that he cannot love and fully know the flesh-and-blood woman to whom he is married. Man then is not enforced in these expressions of love, but rather broken down, analyzed, and rationalized in a way that reflects the era’s tendency toward relying more often on logic and science.

**“That is not what I meant at all.”: Eliot’s Prufrock**

This overanalysis and fretful calculation is perhaps best embodied in the 1915 T. S. Eliot poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the epitome of sexual and romantic frustration. Originally subtitled “Prufrock Among the Women,” the poem begins with an epigraph from Dante’s *Inferno*:

S’io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
 A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
 Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
 Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo  
 Non torno vivo alcun, s’i’odo il vero,  
 Senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.

Loosely translated, this excerpt comes when Guido da Montefeltro confesses all of his evil, essentially shrugging off consequence by telling Dante his evil matters not since Dante will not be returning from Hell: "If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy."

This reference to Hell sets readers up to believe that Prufrock is in his own version of Hell created by himself. Prufrock dreads "restless nights in one-night cheap hotels" and "an overwhelming question" that makes him uneasy, presumably regarding romance. To cope with these questions, Prufrock must "prepare a face to meet the faces that [he meets]" with "time yet for a hundred indecisions/ And for a hundred visions and revisions,/ Before the taking of a toast and tea." Prufrock's selfhood is determined by the revisions he makes to please others, and thus his self-consciousness debilitates him from participating in any romantic relationships beyond the surface-level pedestaling of women. The women who come and go are of utmost importance in determining Prufrock's status, disposition, and overall identity; their approval or rejection means so much to him that for him to confess his desires would be the equivalent of disturbing the universe. Prufrock, following the Petrarchan conceit, itemizes women into logical inventories of parts—"the voices," "the eyes," "the arms," "the faces." This reduction to body parts is quite obviously a conscious decision of Prufrock to diminish women to things he finds manageable and less intimidating.

Like Gabriel, Prufrock's social interactions, especially with women, are carefully measured and formulated to achieve the appropriate and maximum response. However,



also like Gabriel Conroy, Prufrock's overanticipation of women's responses—like the famous “That is not what I meant at all,/ That is not it, at all.” of imagined rejection—fails to take into account women's actual voices, a realization that strikes him all too hard later in the poem. Women in this poem, then, have a voice, but only as an echo of Prufrock's own insecurities. Like the Lacanian notion of mirrors, women again in this poem much as in “The Dead” act as counter-mirrors, shattered representations aimed to bring men's self-image to a clattering halt. But Gabriel at least takes the risk of the fall, learning that his idealization of his wife is completely untrue and unfounded. Prufrock does not even take that risk, nor does he see himself as deserving of these mistresses as the Renaissance sonneteers did. Instead he overidealizes the women so much that he breaks his own heart, using these invented voices of doubt to speak for the women he deems so unapproachable:

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
 Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
 When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
 By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown

Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (124-130)

Here not only does Prufrock set women apart as mythical creatures, but also the speaker reflects on the double-sided harmfulness of the reality/fantasy dichotomy.

Fantasy life is harmful because it is not true, but reality is harmful because it is. By drifting into reverie imagining the “what could have been,” the fall back to real life is thus doubly as heart-shattering. Women thus are twice as dangerous in his imagination, as they lure him to his death when he realizes his impossibility at of? attaining one.

Women have agency and voice in Prufrock’s worldview in a similar way that they do in Wyatt’s poetry: for the single reason of destroying men. This view of women, as well as the theme of internalized distance, continues with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s canonical work *The Great Gatsby*.

### **“Beautiful Little Fools”: Fitzgerald’s Gatsby**

From the beginning sentence of the book, it is clear that distance is an especially salient aspect in understanding how the novel represents women in romantic relationships, as it is the biggest factor in how the novel’s women are analyzed by the narrator, Nick Carraway. The romantic relationships present in the novel are the pairings of Tom-Daisy, Gatsby-Daisy, Tom-Myrtle, and Nick-Jordan, but the main relationships in question here are Gatsby and Daisy and then Nick and Jordan as a romantic subplot. (Tom and Daisy do not engage in an exchange or love service in the same way that Gatsby and Daisy do, and Myrtle cannot function in an exchange of love service because she is not really the “beloved” of Tom, but rather a side woman. These will go untouched in my analysis.) Nick Carraway, a self-described honest, stand-on-the-sidelines man, begins the novel essentially justifying the means through which Gatsby pursues his beloved, Daisy. Describing Gatsby, Nick believes that the primary personality trait of his

friend “was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again” (2). Already by the second page Gatsby is characterized as romantic by another man, his actions accepted and justified as a normal love practice for a lover in a romantic relationship. In fact, Gatsby’s actions and words, as well as Daisy’s actions and words, are mediated through not only the distanced voice of a male narrator but also a male author, therefore limiting the agency and voice of a female beloved from the beginning.

Like the medieval system and the sonneteers of the Renaissance, Gatsby seems to operate on a system of courtly love gestures; he gives her something, she gives him love in return mutually. This is overtly displayed in the extravagant lengths to which he goes to construct an enormous mansion across the lake from where she lives, to create a new identity with a story so intricately practiced and crafted that he even has legitimate photographs and medals as evidence of his adventures, and to throw over-the-top parties attended by the brightest stars in Hollywood. Gatsby works his entire life to create a version of himself that Daisy will inevitably love, attempting to bridge all possible distances and counteract any potential arguments against the case of him being with her. However, similarly to Petrarch, Gatsby cannot claim the argument of performing all of these acts just because they are expected in a courtly system because he goes too far with his grandiose gestures. No longer is it accurate to call his actions part of courtly love, as, like Petrarch, Gatsby does these things in a non-mutual exchange. Though Daisy does benefit from Gatsby’s actions as a lady would in medieval times, she cannot return the favors with the result that he wishes for: a requited love that lasts. Neither does she follow the Renaissance model of courtly love that Elizabeth Morgan observes in her

article “Gatsby in the Garden: Courtly Love and Irony.” She outlines that “[t]he cult of courtly love has rules, like any game: a god of love, a Madonna, cruelty, and mercy, and so forth....it constitutes an aesthetic and socially acceptable ritual for the expression of nostalgia, passion, and anxiety” (32). Daisy, though pedestaled and made out to be the center of the novel, acts as a muse not to the higher principles of poetry or religion, but a muse for the materialistic nature of modern American culture. Thus again we must call into question whether Gatsby’s actions are truly love, or just literarily appropriated obsession, what we would today call stalking.

Distance manifests itself in several ways in the Gatsby-Daisy relationship, each adding another layer of unobtainability. First is the initial distance of time, as Gatsby met Daisy in the summer of 1917, five years prior to the action of the plot, engaged in a love affair with her, and now returns to win back her love. Over this time, Gatsby has had the opportunity to manipulate her memory into remembering only the wonderful parts about her, to idealize her into a memory or idea of a person rather than the actual person of Daisy. Gatsby contorts their relationship into a sustained event rather than accepting it as a moment’s occurrence, much as Petrarch does with Laura. The only contact he has with any information of her is a letter that she crumples up on her wedding day—which we are to understand she never responds to— and the bits of news he hears about her from other sources. When he finally sees Daisy again, he shows her a book of “clippings—about you” (93) that he has been collecting in her absence. The physical distance of being across the country from Daisy during this time is also a major factor in how he remembers her, as is the physical distance between their houses, which he tries to remedy by purchasing a mansion directly across the lake from her. By lessening the distance

between himself and Daisy, Gatsby satisfies himself but does not quite bridge the distance to a point where he has to actually confront Daisy as a person. Nick witnesses Gatsby one night on the dock, saying “[h]e was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far way, that might have been the end of a dock” (21). This gesture of reaching toward Daisy’s green light is a nod to the plot: Gatsby attempts to reach across the remaining distance to her person, but also is content with keeping her at an arm’s length so that he can still imagine her without being subjected to the reality of her being.

Several other factors distance Daisy from Gatsby; for one, she is married to another man, which adds to her unattainability, and she is of a different socioeconomic class, which Gatsby tries to bridge through building an enormous mansion and creating the image of himself as a perfect mate to Daisy—Oxford-educated, army-serving, and old money-inheriting. However, he cannot quite reach this bar, as he is none of these things, but just the illusion of these things, a fact that becomes painfully obvious through multiple factors including the rumors of mob connections buzzing around him, the conciliatory derision of Tom Buchanan’s remarks, and even the physical position of living in West Egg (representative of new money) versus having a place on East Egg. Gatsby remarks when Daisy leaves one of the opulent parties he throws for the sake of impressing her that he feels “‘far away from her...it’s hard to make her understand...she used to be able to understand’” (109). In this way, Gatsby attempts to pedestal himself, putting himself on seemingly equal footing with Daisy to attempt to win her over and

equate their social classes, but because his class difference as “new money” operate on a different level of showiness than Daisy’s more conservative world, for a moment he is suspended above Daisy as a foggy figure from her yesterdays that intrigues her as well. This illusion of Gatsby as greater-than-or-equal-to Daisy lessens as the book goes on, as Daisy begins to realize that she is ultimately more privileged.

When Gatsby finally reunites with Daisy, he finds himself unable to function, chickening out on talking to her, nervously pacing, and embarrassing himself in trying to impress her. Fitzgerald addresses this in the passage detailing their first meeting:

After his embarrassment and his unreasoning joy he was consumed with wonder at her presence. He had been full of the idea so long, dreamed it right through to the end, waited with his teeth set, so to speak, past an inconceivable pitch of intensity. Now, in the reaction, he was running down like an overwound clock.  
(92)

Because Gatsby has had so long to imagine interacting with Daisy, he has constructed an entire fiction in his head of what she is like: her interests, her wants, her disposition. Gatsby projects his ideals of Daisy onto the person of Daisy, and thus obscures his vision of what she truly is with the image of what he has shaped her to be. He even goes so far as to make claims for her emotions, saying that he does not think that Daisy ever loved her husband and that she loves Gatsby instead (152). Like Petrarch, he has committed himself so fully to the idealized pedestal version of her that he must force himself to twist the harsh reality of Daisy to fit his ideal of her; Nick says “[t]here must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything” (95). Examining the biography of Fitzgerald’s early life,

Barbara Lupack looks at *The Great Gatsby* as an Arthurian motif, questing for a grail that is Daisy Fay Buchanan. She compares the troping of a medieval quest -- preparing a regimen, traveling a great distance, having a mentor--Dan Cody—and aspiring after a golden reward. The pursuit of Daisy is no longer solely about Daisy, but of the American dream of bootstraps to billionaire that her status and society represent. This disconnect not only leads to the ultimate failure of their romantic relationship, but also questions the legitimacy of their relationship. What would happen if Gatsby actually “obtained” Daisy? What would the story of Gatsby, the great man, be without the never-ending pursuit? As Nick famously remarks, “There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired”; a mutual relationship not centered around chess-like gestures becomes essentially impossible for Gatsby and Daisy, as neither really knows the other one, just the idealized falsehoods of what they have perceived the other to be. Without distance, the relationship between them would ultimately be based upon loving false identities that they had each built up for the other; without those false identities, they would be two strangers thrown together. In both of their cases, loving the idea of someone, or pursuing the blurry picture of what they are, is a way of controlling their relationship and their decisions.

Daisy and Jordan Baker posit two very different types of women as represented in relationships within this novel. The portrait of Daisy as a beloved without flaw (through Gatsby’s eyes) is contrasted starkly with Jordan Baker. Jordan, for one, functions as a sort of half-beloved, as Nick is not entirely convinced that he is in love with her, but rather feels “a sort of tender curiosity” (57). His romantic relationship with Jordan is less about the romance and the flowy courtly gestures of presents and lush parties; he states, “Unlike Gatsby and Tom Buchanan, I had no girl whose disembodied face floated along

the dark cornices and blinding signs, and so I drew up the girl beside me” (80). Jordan is a blatantly flawed character, but also a character holding more depth than Daisy as a beloved. Jordan, in contrast to Daisy, has a voice that is taken seriously, often as the voice of reason and truth despite her inherent dishonesty, and often as the source of important news throughout the story.

Rather than blazoning his beloved, Nick will occasionally catalogue her flaws in an anti-blazon (much like Shakespeare) and mention her negative traits more often than her positive. Nick describes her as “wan,” “scornful,” “hard,” “limited,” and “careless” over the course of the book, but nevertheless engages with her in a romantic way. He recognizes that “[s]he was incurably dishonest...it made no difference to me. Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply—I was casually sorry, and then I forgot” (56). He accepts Jordan anyway without blaming her for her bad qualities, and presents a more complicated view of Petrarchism in this way as he takes all of her into account as a person rather than selectively choosing the parts he wants. This offers a view of romance as not dependent on obsession with a clouded image of a person, but it also offers a view of a romantic relationship that functions without a real “beloved,” as Nick states several times that he does not love her and does not mention any real emotions toward her. Nick and Jordan’s relationship does not offer an optimistic picture of passion, appreciation, or even particular interest in the other person. While the Nick-Jordan relationship can be seen as a step up from the one-sided and unsubstantiated relationship of Daisy and Gatsby, still it is one devoid of emotion.

Nick’s treatment of Jordan is comparatively less harmful than Gatsby’s treatment of Daisy. Because he is close to Jordan with a physical intimacy, he cannot idealize her as



an object on a pedestal because he knows her so well, even the negative, and thus cannot imagine a fantasy version of her. He and Jordan are of similar background and of similar standing, are both single and unattached, and are both existing in the same time and space as the other in a way that makes timing not an issue. Distance is of little importance in their relationship. However, when it comes to strange women he has never met that he feels himself longing for, he finds himself with the authorization to imagine whatever version of them that he can in a way that mirrors Petrarch:

I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove. Sometimes, in my mind, I followed them to their apartments on the corners of hidden streets, and they turned and smiled back at me before they faded through a door into warm darkness.

Because he knows nothing about these women, he is free to create any idea of them that he wishes, much to the extent that Petrarch, Sidney, and other characters like Gabriel and Prufrock wish to do, setting up the women as simply mirror-pedestals onto which he can project his idealized version of self.

Daisy acts as the archetypal Petrarchan beloved or a woman of courtly love, openly adored by many men within the book. Nick often concentrates on how she sounds or how she looks while saying things rather than what she is saying, as in the first scene we meet her: "She laughed again, as if she said something very witty, and held my hand for a moment, looking up into my face, promising that there was no one in the world she so much wanted to see. That was a way she had" (9). Daisy has the liberty to control her actions as more dominant than prior women, but even as her platonic cousin, Nick notices first and foremost her manner of acting, interprets it through his own lens, and retells it, thus controlling Daisy even further by describing her in terms of how he is affected by

her person rather than just describing her person. He blazons her even though he is not in a romantic relationship with her, saying that “[h]er face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth...there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget” (9). He often comments on her appearance and manners, then filters her opinions through those actions.

Daisy’s appearance seems to add to her enigma. Joan Korenman investigates the inconsistencies of Daisy's appearance as described throughout the novel, sometimes blonde and sometimes brunette. She views Daisy as a white tower sort of prize, delving into her associations with gold, light, and whiteness. This corresponds to the virgin imagery discussed earlier as well as adding the layer of vulgarity associated with money. Juxtaposing the innocence of fairness OR the swarthy darkness of appearance with these tropes seems to add to the effect of Daisy's romantic yet terrible persona. Daisy is often associated with light, metals, and other ethereal associations, much like Elizabethan blazoning compared the beloved to angels or madonnas. Even her name “Fay” suggests “Morgan le Fay,” the evil sorceress of Arthurian legend, or a “fay,” a fairy. Tristram Coffin historicizes Daisy in comparison with Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and Celtic memory. Her lightness, the fact that her name means fairy, the comparison of Gatsby to a knight-- all of these are indicators of her ethereal, idealized state...that ultimately hint at the demise of Gatsby, as the fairy in Keats’ poem drives the knight to madness and death.

Though women technically and literally have a voice, as the book mentions many times, ultimately Daisy’s voice becomes another object, another aspect of her to be blazoned. When Nick mentions Daisy speaking, more often than not he does not say

“Daisy said” but “her voice sang” or “her throat told.” He fixates on “...her low, thrilling voice. It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again” (9). When she and Gatsby have a long passionate conversation in their first meeting, “[h]er throat, full of aching, grieving beauty, told only of her expected joy” (89). Gatsby outright remarks that her voice “is full of money,” and that that attribute is the majority of Daisy’s appeal. Here she is reduced, much like Olivia remarks in *Twelfth Night*, to an inventory of body parts, disconnected from her actual person or ownership. But Daisy does not mind being objectified for the most part; she downplays any intelligence and responsibility she is able to claim by continually relying on her husband or Gatsby to bail her out of trouble only on the basis of her charm and flirtation.

Daisy herself is mostly a shallow, superficial lover akin to the Stella of Spenser’s *Amoretti*, not one of substance or complication. Her only goal is to lead a safe life of luxury without any thought as to where it comes from or whose responsibility it is, as Nick observes when she attends one of Gatsby’s parties: “[the party] offended her—and inarguably, because it wasn’t a gesture but an emotion. She was appalled by West Egg... she saw something awful in the very simplicity she failed to understand” (107). Daisy is the beloved that Wyatt laments, the beloved that wants only to selfishly and carelessly take whatever is offered her on a silver platter and then toss away the lover when he has bored her; or, like Beatrice Joanna, a beloved who leads their lover into darkness. Arguably, Daisy does lead Gatsby on, insinuating that there is hope of a romantic relationship even as she knows that such a pursuit is doomed, a trait not consistent with the sonneteers’ beloveds who are either unaware of their lovers’ existence or simply

unobtainable with no hope of crossing the boundary of marriage or death. Daisy's actions—kissing Gatsby, dancing with him, and having tear-stained, whispered conversations in Nick's garden—imply that she returns Gatsby's affections, which would somewhat legitimize frustration with her. But Gatsby, unlike Wyatt, Petrarch, or sonneteers who blame their lovers for their woes, never blames Daisy as having any agency, covering even when she murders Tom's mistress Myrtle in a hit-and-run accident. He ascribes to the view of his beloved that Shakespeare disdains in his Dark Lady sonnets, painting Daisy as an angel who can do no wrong, who has no negative traits, when in actuality she is a pretty morally terrible person. Gatsby purportedly, according to Coffin, "becomes disillusioned because he is forced to deal with her as a real woman and not as a golden girl" when he realizes "how grotesque a rose is," but ultimately I believe that Gatsby chooses to reject Daisy's flaws, despite being exposed to them, as continually the text points to his insistence that she will come around to the way she once was eventually, covering for her even as it leads to his death.

However, in defense of Daisy-- what else was she at liberty to do? Her status in life, though it afforded her wealth, positioned her only to become a mother and socialite; her husband's brute force and cocky supposed intelligence swiftly deterred any notion of original thought, as depicted in the debate over superior race claims. The novel's set up positions her search for selfhood or self-actualization to be of no importance and of virtually no possibility. Leland Person, in conversation with past critiques of Daisy as "Dark Destroyer" and "first notable anti-virgin of our fiction, the prototype of the blasphemous portraits of the Fair Goddess as bitch in which our twentieth-century fiction abounds," (253) asserts that reducing Daisy to purely evil is sexist. She has her own story

playing along Gatsby/Nick's, creating a duality of "both anima and Doppelgänger," the story of a mutual dream failing. This, ultimately is true: Daisy alienates Gatsby from reality in the same way that he alienates her; she idealizes Gatsby in the same way he idealizes her. Though this may not be the ideal response to being pedestaled, Daisy cannot entirely be written off as Gatsby's downfall. Both Daisy and Gatsby grip the steering wheel and mutually choose their fate; her voice in love too goes lost forever, as she chooses logic over love. Of course Daisy's double-crossing, betrayal, and failure of Gatsby was bound to happen; "no woman, no human being, could ever approximate the platonic ideal he created" (251). By choosing, instead of a double suicide in the yellow car that would join herself and Gatsby on mutual ground, the cathartic death of Gatsby and her own practical removal from love, she literally reduces herself to a stereotype to survive. She, like all the women before her in Petrarchan texts, is set up for nothing but failure on a double standard, choosing to spend her life as "the best thing a girl can be...a beautiful little fool."

Overall, when we are comparing these texts of Ireland, the United Kingdom, and America to those of Petrarchan Italy and Elizabethan England, dramatic strides have been taken in the attitude portrayed towards blazoning and pedestaling. In this era, the lovers like Gatsby, Prufrock, and Gabriel are made out to be foolish or naïve, and the beloved's voice becomes stronger. The distance remains in a way that is more internalized and imaginary rather than physical, and disillusionment of women—and men!— is still very much a real occurrence, as will be further investigated in the trope of Manic Pixie Dream Girl. However, still a definition of love is not completely nailed down quite in the way that Shakespeare implies (though his definition seems to be disregarded). In even today's

day and age we see that representations of love in these two previous eras circle around this idea and aim to align themselves with Shakespeare's famously insistent Dark Lady sonnet.

### CURRENT DAY

Petrarchism in the Middle Ages stemmed from the idea of the Madonna-muse, motivating and guiding the artist-lover's every action so that he can most achieve his artistic potential yet never reach his goal of wooing her. The Renaissance saw the trope of the pedestaled beloved not only remain, but also morph into dramatic permutations that poked fun at the idea of distancing the beloved. Modernism gave women in literature more voice and agency than previous eras, but still the active woman finds herself defined by what the lover imagines her to be, with an interiority that is seen as either aligned with the lover's ideals, evil if conflicting with his ideals, or virtually nonexistent.

Most notably in today's culture, Petrarchism persists in films and young adult literature through the notion of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl as a Lacanian mirror of the male protagonist's self. As Leonard so aptly puts it, "woman is a 'symptom' for the man ... She exists, like Tinkerbell, because a man believes in her." Just as? like Daisy "Fay" is compared to a fairy akin to the Arthurian and Romantic fairies of Keats, who lure and haunt men for the rest of their lives, Manic Pixie Dream Girls are pixie-like young teenage or twenty-something women who flit from one manic, joyful, or crazy idea (usually a "dream") to another, showing unsuspecting men the previously unexplored mysteries of life, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. Budd Boetticher claims that the MPDG exists then as a result of The Male Gaze--"What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance." The male protagonist in these works is very similar to the "artist," "poet," or tortured lover painted since Petrarchan times: he is single, consumed with his work and thoughts, usually introverted,

shy, and has not always met or spoken to the objects of his desires. He is sometimes described as “mopey” and is often (like Eliot’s Prufrock or Joyce’s Gabriel Conroy) indecisive, anxious, or depressed.

Distance of availability enhances this in current day stories as well. Like Petrarch, Dante, or other sonneteers, these love affairs often hinge on very brief specific moments of meeting, sometimes called “meet-cutes”: the lovers’ lives and actions are then from that moment “inspired” or “guided” by these women and the seeking of their approval, much like Gatsby or Gabriel Conroy’s constant striving to please their women. These moments are often fleeting: Quentin of *Paper Towns* shares one night completing a revenge checklist with his beloved, Charlie in *Perks of Being a Wallflower* decides at first sight that he is in love with Sam despite her having a boyfriend. In fact, most of these women have boyfriends or other love interests at some point, like Sam, or Margo in *Paper Towns*. Oftentimes they are just plain romantically unavailable or aloof, like Alaska in *Looking for Alaska* or Holly in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.

Director Nathan Rabin who coined the term defines the Manic Pixie Dream Girl as "that bubbly, shallow cinematic creature that exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures." They help men achieve their goals without pursuing their own happiness. A Manic Pixie Dream Girl, or MPDG for short, is characterized by her lack of ambition, her “quirkiness,” her inability to deal with complex issues (much like Holly Golightly’s penchant for going to look at the jewelry at Tiffany’s to calm her nerves), and overall rejection of commitment. Laurie Penny furthers this definition, clarifying that “[s]he’s never a point-of-view character, and she isn’t understood from the



inside. She's one of those female tropes who is permitted precisely no interiority. Instead of a personality, she has eccentricities, a vaguely-offbeat favourite band, a funky fringe." Rather than the concentration on virtue that Petrarch extolled, lovers in plots regarding MPDGs often not only blazon them physically, but in a litany of their "quirks": they play the ukulele, they wear purple tights, they are energetic and full of adventure. They are brave. They consider up and moving to Sing-Sing or in more negative lights they openly discuss things taboo like drug use, death, or porn. Rabin coined this term in relation to Kirsten Dunst's character in the 2007 film *Elizabethtown*. These MPDGs are stock characters? in romantic comedies or romance movies in general, even from the early twentieth century: Katherine Hepburn's Susan Vance in *Bringing Up Baby* in 1938, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*'s Holly Golightly in 1961, and thought of most notably in today's age Natalie Portman in *Garden State* or Zooey Deschanel in *(500) Days of Summer*. Even in Disney, Amy Adams' Giselle in *Enchanted* and the character Ellie in *Up* both act as MPDGs for their lovers.

Many film critics and consumers have sparred with the definition Rabin posited as in some circles it became the common name for any unique or quirky, energetic young woman in film, boxing in all female characters or love interests of the male in an overarchingly generalized connotation. Rabin himself retracted his definition, for its fuzziness that allowed sexist interpretation. The pejorative use of the term, then, is mainly directed at writers who do not give these female characters more to do than bolster the spirits of their male partners.

*Gone Girl's* protagonist Amy Dunne (created by Gillian Flynn) defines the MPDG under the term "Cool Girl," as follows:

Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl. For a long time Cool Girl offended me. I used to see men – friends, coworkers, strangers – giddy over these awful pretender women, and I'd want to sit these men down and calmly say: You are not dating a woman, you are dating a woman who has watched too many movies written by socially awkward men who'd like to believe that this kind of woman exists and might kiss them. I'd want to grab the poor guy by his lapels or messenger bag and say: The bitch doesn't really love chili dogs that much – no one loves chili dogs that much! And the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be. Oh, and if you're not a Cool Girl, I beg you not to believe that your man doesn't want the Cool Girl. It may be a slightly different version – maybe he's a vegetarian, so Cool Girl loves seitan and is great with dogs; or maybe he's a hipster artist, so Cool Girl is a tattooed, bespectacled nerd who loves comics. There are variations to the window dressing, but believe me, he wants Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn't ever complain.

Flynn here addresses (through the eyes of a psychopath, said in a diary and not out loud, which is important to remember—a stable-minded woman who? cannot reasonably vocalize these opinions in stories without having backlash from her lover) the incredible weight of expectations projected onto the beloved, especially how these expectations shift to be determined by her lover's personality. She extols the "Cool Girl" through lists of character traits beyond just appearance, which is a step up from the roses

for lips and mountains for breasts that the Elizabethans seemed so fond of detailing, but equally as lacking in substance. She does not detail a woman's actual wants, desires, dreams, goals, or flaws. Instead, she catalogues the expectations in relation to the man's wants and desires.

Recently there has been discussion of a male version of this trope, the Manic Pixie Dream Boy or Manic Pixie Dream Guy. Matt Patches gives Augustus Waters from *The Fault in Our Stars* (2014) this title, stating that "he's a bad boy, he's a sweetheart, he's a dumb jock, he's a nerd, he's a philosopher, he's a poet, he's a victim, he's a survivor, he's everything everyone wants in their lives, and he's a fallacious notion of what we can actually have in our lives." The Manic Pixie Dream Boy trope has also been pointed out in sitcoms such as *Parks and Recreation* and *30 Rock*. The female protagonists of these shows, functioning as the lovers, are married to men, functioning as the beloved, (Adam Scott's Ben Wyatt and James Marsden's Criss Cross, respectively), who, "patiently [tamp] down her stubbornness and temper while appreciating her quirks, helping her to become her best possible self."

Distance is not a requirement, here, for these relationships to function, as many of these lovers do obtain their beloveds....but the Manic Pixie Dream Girl/ Boy is the literal paper-thin fulfillment of self-idealization in a way that expects the man to drop everything to miraculously change a woman's life and vice versa. Skylar Astin's character Jesse in the 2012 film *Pitch Perfect* also embodies this trope. His role in the film appears to be to coax the very serious character "Becca" played by Anna Kendrick out of her gloom and embrace life to the fullest—much like nearly every other interpretation of this trope from Dante to Daisy, her life will not be happy without him.

He has no backstory of his own, and no major autonomous goals in the context of the film. According to an article on Ohio State's Entertainment News site, "Jesse, the male protagonist, never fails to break my heart. His character is seemingly flawless: he is sweet, charming, funny, boyishly handsome, and talented, but in a self-deprecating way. The character radiates youthful appeal in a way that makes me want to sit close to him and watch John Hughes movies with him. He takes on the selfless task of cracking open the stony girl protagonist by showing her *The Breakfast Club* and becomes a victim—Jesse is unusual. Jesse is a background story-less charisma machine."

“A background story-less charisma machine”: an apt way to describe most representations of the MPDG of either gender. They become, as Laurie Penny puts it, the things they have been taught and conditioned to be: “Men grow up expecting to be the hero of their own story. Women grow up expecting to be the supporting actress in somebody else's.” In today’s industry of storytelling, men too are being subject to this phenomenon of becoming a supporting actor, a background plot catalyst, rather than a co-star on equal footing. One in the relationship is always pedestaled, kept in a Romeo-Juliet balcony of the mind like Eliot and Fitzgerald exalt; with the MPDG, the relationship cannot exist without this distance, without this divide. If the lover “obtains” his beloved, it is as the story ends, as the resolution to all of the problems; or it is the beginning of the problems, as the lover may physically “have” the beloved (Gretta in *The Dead*, Summer in *(500) Days of Summer*) but is constantly fighting to keep her. The MPDG can be essentially boiled down to the following Holly Golightly quote: “I’m like cat here, a no-name slob. We belong to nobody, and nobody belongs to us. We don’t even belong to each other.” MPDGs are wild things, unable to be tamed, and yet the whole idea behind

these plots is that the lover is the one person who can tame them, who can break the mold and shape her as he sees fit.

### **“I was drizzle and she was a hurricane”: MPDG in Young Adult Literature**

Too often in young adult literature do the most famous stories rely on the trope of the MPDG; almost proportionately too often do the MPDGs in question have to die to truly function in aiding the protagonist to self-discovery. Leslie Burke in *Bridge to Terabithia* begins this list (as often this book is read in fifth-grade classrooms), pulling the sullen Jesse (and his movie version, Josh Hutcherson) out of his funk by inventing a fictional world they can explore together. Leslie is pretty, smart, athletic, and absolutely daring and comfortable in her own skin. When she passes away, Jesse finds himself constantly reminded by her spirit, presumably in a way that asks him “What Would Leslie Do?” In this way, he is guided much in the way Renaissance sonneteers were guided by their muses.

Another example of this is Clarisse in *Fahrenheit 451*, is a simple seventeen-year-old girl—“Seventeen and crazy!”— who loves rain, dandelions, and generally living. Montag recalls that “She was the first person [he] can remember that looked straight at [him] as if [he] counted” (Bradbury 100). She appears for a couple of scenes to impart knowledge to Montag and to reinforce his belief that he is doing the right thing...until she gets hit by a car, and then her death and thoughts linger to push Montag to find the bravery to act out against the horrors around him.

Other MPDGs in young adult literature include Sam in Stephen Chbosky’s *Perks of Being a Wallflower* or the famous Alaska in John Green’s *Looking for Alaska*, whose death spurs the entire novel and Pudge’s (the lover’s) discovery of self-actualization.

MPDGs have agency and intensity—as Pudge puts it, “if people were rain, [he] was drizzle, and [Alaska] was a hurricane”--, they have voices, and sometimes they have dreams, but often they are even more unattainable than the lover’s dreams and are never pursued, like Alaska’s ever-growing library of books she wants to read when she’s older. But MPDGs never grow older. They never mature, they never venture into self-discovery, because their agency is limited to the rose-colored glasses that the lover sees them through and to the actions that directly affect and interpellate with the definition of the lover’s identity. This is a different form of silencing in that though sonneteers did not allow their women in question to reply, modern day films and literature allow the beloved to reply only in ways that the lover sees fit, cutting and pasting pieces of her personality, omitting her interiority. They are unsustainable characters who cannot live a full life in the way men wish them to live—which perhaps says something on the expectations in the realm of real life after their fictional story has ended. They must die in order that the male protagonist might be inspired to live a fuller life.

Though omnipresent, as this trope ages in the current millennium, men and women both outright address and reject this notion as an acceptable view of love, especially as more and more women writers and screenwriters gain more following and critical consumer voices’ outlets for feedback increase with social media, the blogosphere, and other sources. Some movies directly buck against the trope: Kate Winslet’s Clementine in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* in 2004 addresses this by telling her lover, Jim Carrey’s Joel, “Too many guys think I’m a concept, or I complete them, or I’m gonna make them alive. But I’m just a fucked-up girl who’s lookin’ for my own peace of mind; don’t assign me yours.” And though Zooey Deschanel is painted as

this MPDG as a character in *(500) Days of Summer*, the movie as a whole shows the dangers of viewing women as single-dimension beings. Ultimately the portrayal of women and love that Joseph Gordon-Levitt's artist-type protagonist has constructed in his mind become deconstructed to show that idealizing women as things is incorrect, rather than respecting them as real people with their own complex outlooks. Director Marc Webb stated that "Yes, Summer has elements of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl - she is an immature view of a woman. She's Tom's view of a woman. He doesn't see her complexity and the consequence for him is heartbreak. In Tom's eyes, Summer is perfection, but perfection has no depth. Summer's not a girl, she's a phase."

Popular author John Green has stood against the MPDG, crafting his novel *Paper Towns* to be a statement speaking out against the trope. "[*Paper Towns*] is devoted IN ITS ENTIRETY to destroying the lie of the manic pixie dream girl...I do not know how I could have been less ambiguous about this without calling [*Paper Towns*] *The Patriarchal Lie of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Must Be Stabbed in the Heart and Killed*" (John Green). By immediately introducing his beloved Margo as a "miracle," Quentin (or Q), the protagonist and lover of the novel, sets Margo up as a typified one-dimensional idea of a girl rather than an actual person. Margo is adored by the entire school, but only on a mythical level, only at a distance. She finds this interpretation of herself by others so irreversible that she cultivates it herself, continuing the mystery "so much that she became one." But she ultimately becomes so unhappy—so unhappy that no one truly knows her the way that they think they do—that she runs away to escape it all, literally furthering the distance between Q, her other lovers (the school's population in general), and herself.

But by the second part of the novel, Margo is someone who, he comes to understand, like the “paper towns” around him, has a lot more going on underneath as he gets a closer look. On Quentin’s adventure to find Margo, he realizes that she has all of these levels of her life that he never knew about: she reads Walt Whitman, she hangs out in abandoned buildings. These are all traits he never considered her to have in his “paper,” oversimplified, and romanticized version of Margo on a pedestal. When he finally finds Margo, she admits that she encouraged this paper view of her to make herself more appealing, to present herself in the most easily digestible form—the opposite of what Shakespeare’s Olivia does when she dismantles the notion of her representation, Margo constructs herself in the most shallow way possible:

I looked down and thought about how I was made of paper. I was the flimsy-foldable person, not everyone else. And here’s the thing about it. People love the idea of a paper girl. They always have. And the worst thing is that I loved it too. I cultivated it, you know? Because it’s kind of great, being an idea that everybody likes. But I could never be the idea to myself, not all the way.

Like Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl*, Margo herself is thus in charge of her mirroring, her representation to others, but on society’s terms. She wants to be the Cool Girl, but then one day decides that she has to escape the confines she has created for herself by disappearing completely on her own terms. This selfishness and her aim to pursue something apart from what these lovers want from her separates her from being an actual MPDG. She has an interiority full of flaws, goals, and selfish intentions. Quentin realizes then that he knows her most fully when, like Shakespeare knows his Dark Lady, when he knows her flaws, asking Margo, “When did we see each other face-to-face? Not until you



saw into my cracks and I saw into yours. Before that we were just looking at ideas of each other...But once the vessel cracks, the light can get in. The light can get out” (302). This remains one of the most pointed and recent iterations of the sentiments echoed through *Twelfth Night*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Dead*: people are flawed, inherently so, and to imagine them to be perfect is to deconstruct their identity to a singular level that lacks the nuance of humanity.

Love, it seems, should not be based on Petrarch’s flawless beloved, or twentieth-century skirting over the blatant flaws, or becoming so consumed with improving one’s own imperfections that one is spiritually incapable of loving another; Elizabethan dramatists and the Modernists previously discussed paint pictures of men as ridiculous for believing their woman has no voice or say. Rather, they promote an idea that love is looking those flaws dead in the eye and embracing them anyway. However, achieving this definition of love, much like achieving the goal of a “dream woman,” proves in literature to be more difficult than it seems when so many aspects of culture focus on the idea of perfection.

No doubt interpellation with one another, for the betterment of ourselves—especially within the fictional realm of possible interpellations that literature presents for self-reflection—is integral to our function as human beings. No one wants to pursue someone who we believe to be morally inferior to ourselves, who we believe will bring us down; we want to be uplifted by our partner, to be with someone who makes us a better version of ourselves, who improves us—like Petrarch believed—spiritually, artistically, mentally, to reach our potential greatness. This in itself is not a problem. The problem lies with the fact that beloved women (and particularly growing in the twenty-

first century, men) are objectified, pursued as a Holy Grail; their voices, though increasingly more present, still for the most part ignored unless what they are saying directly or indirectly affirms the lover's notion that whatever he is doing with his life is making himself superior. In short, the beloveds in these relationships are not central characters, but are simply mirrors to reflect the protagonist. We remember the Alaskas, the Daisies, the Juliets and Lauras of the world not because of their goals or their drive for autonomy. We remember them as in their relationships, how they reflect back onto Pudge, Gatsby, Romeo, and Petrarch. We remember them as the male author would have them remembered, because the story, of course, is really about him.

Whether art is an imitation of life or not is again something we must grapple with. Much like with the "airs" of courtly love possibly not reflecting actual courtship rituals of the Renaissance, not every Modernist writer had a real-life "unattainable pursuit" courtship like Fitzgerald seemed to have, and certainly not all people of the time moped around crippled by indecision like Eliot's Prufrock nor did every American truly believe the only way to win a lover over was by throwing extravagant parties. Not everyone in the Renaissance sat around pining and writing poems to their beloved they would never send. This representation of love is but one of many—but the power it holds over our culture is widespread and ever-mounting. As Laurie Penny states in her rejection of the MPDG, "Stories matter, always... fiction creates real life, particularly for those of us who grow up immersed in it. Women behave in ways that they find sanctioned in stories written by men who know better, and men and women seek out friends and partners who remind them of a girl they met in a book one day when they were young and longing." But the fact remains that even if people do not endorse, believe, or prescribe to this

representation of women or love, still it remains circulating and embedded firmly in the media and storylines we consume—and ultimately reflects onto the expectations we have of romantic relationships and gender roles today.

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