

Icons and idols in Dante and Petrarch

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Abstract:

This essay explores the presence of a polarised thematic of icons and idols in the works of Dante and Petrarch. In Dante's *Vita nuova* and *Commedia*, and in Petrarch's *Canzoniere* and Latin letters, the Veronica – *vera icon* – of Christ is invoked in relation to the poet's beloved either as an analogous model or as a point of opposition. In the latter case, which applies both to Dante's siren (in *Purgatorio* XIX) and to Petrarch's Laura (particularly in *RVF* 16), the presence of the Veronica can only properly be understood in contradistinction to the poetic idolatry which haunts each text. In particular, Laura is found to be an idol for three reasons: Petrarch's worship of her name; doubts over her existence; and the Pygmalion myth that haunts Martini's portrait of Petrarch's beloved. For Petrarch, the only possible solution to the temptation of idolatry is a Dantean one, namely invocation of a further icon, the Virgin Mary (both in *RVF* 366 and in his Testament), even if the *Canzoniere* is never fully able to forsake Laura.

KEYWORDS: Dante, Petrarch, Veronica, siren, Ulysses, idol

In this essay, hope in icons and fear of idolatry are explored in relation to the love poetry of Dante and Petrarch.¹ Analysis of the Veronica (the veil on which the true image – *vera icon* – of Christ on the path to crucifixion was imprinted) in the work of each poet underpins a discussion of the power of icons and the opposing temptation of idols. Icons are here understood as images for veneration in Western Christian practice, which, while not going so far as the Orthodox tradition (in which icons are believed to render the subject physically present), still granted icons a devotional status greater than that of mere representation. While Christ and the saints were popular subjects for icons, I concentrate here on the Veronica, as well as on the Virgin Mary, particularly in Giotto's painting (now lost) to which Petrarch alludes in his Testament. If icons are images which lead to God, idols are images which stand in the way of God and call into question the function and authority of image-making more generally, a topic which was hotly contested by theologians throughout the Middle Ages.

By way of context, I begin by citing Biblical injunctions against idolatry in the Book of Exodus, and the echoes of these passages in Dante's *Inferno* (canto XIX) and Petrarch's *Canzoniere* (in particular, *RVF* 137). Subsequently, I focus principally on idolatry as it relates not to theological but to amorous matters, although similar problems appertain to both, particularly in terms of idolatry as the creation of an object without any referential capacity outside itself. The Veronica is introduced as a stark contrast to such idols, since it points beyond itself to Christ and is, crucially, not man-made but composed by miraculous contact with the suffering face of Christ. I trace evocations of the Veronica from Dante's *Vita nuova* and *Paradiso* to the writings of Petrarch, in which the Veronica is explicitly placed as antithetical to Laura both in *RVF* 16 and in *Familiare* 2.9. In

particular, I read *RVF* 16, a sonnet which narrates the pilgrimage of an old man to see the Veronica, as acknowledging the potential idolatry of the poet's love for Laura. These idolatrous undertones are further accentuated by discussion of the sonnet's reworking of Dante's tale of Ulysses (from *Inferno* XXVI) and thence the dream of the siren (*Purgatorio* XIX). Drawing on definitions of idols found in Origen and Fulgentius, which present idolatry as the creation of a non-existent object and as a response to mourning, I undertake a comparative reading of Dante's siren and Petrarch's Laura as idols. Finally, the Virgin Mary is seen to operate in analogous ways to the Veronica, that is, as an icon, thereby continuing the salvific mode of Dante's Beatrice and, for Petrarch, offering a not always welcome alternative to his idolatrous love for Laura.

The classic Scriptural text on idolatry is Exodus 20.3-5, the first of the Ten Commandments:ⁱⁱ

non habebis deos alienos coram me

non facies tibi sculptile neque omnem similitudinem quae est in caelo desuper et quae in terra deorsum nec eorum quae sunt in aquis sub terra

non adorabis ea neque coles ego sum Dominus Deus tuus fortis zelotes

Thou shalt not have strange gods before me.

Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth.

Thou shalt not adore them, nor serve them: I am the Lord thy God, mighty, jealous.

The importance of this commandment is underscored later in the Book of Exodus (chapter 32), in the tale of the Golden Calf ('vitulum conflatilem', 'molten calf') which is made by the Israelites and destroyed by Moses, and for which God punishes his people.

In the writings of both Dante and Petrarch, a similar criticism of idolatry is reiterated in terms which echo these foundational Scriptural injunctions against the making of idols. In *Inferno* XIX, the *canto* of simony, Dante-poet accuses certain popes of worshipping money, an even more pervasive and multifaceted idol than the Golden Calf of Exodus:

Fatto v'avete dio d'oro e d'argento;
e che altro è da voi a l'idolatre,
se non ch'elli uno, e voi ne orate cento?

(*Inferno*, XIX, 112-114)

In the Avignon sonnets (*RVF* 136-138), Petrarch voices a similar complaint about the Church, which he dubs 'L'avara Babilonia' (*RVF* 137.1) for its forsaking of Rome and for its life of excess and love of money, represented by its new gods, 'Venere et Bacco' (*RVF* 137.4). The poet of the *Canzoniere* assumes a prophetic voice in predicting the eventual downfall of this corrupt institution: 'Gl'idoli suoi sarranno in terra sparsi, | et le torre superbe, al ciel nemiche' (*RVF* 137.8-9).

In these examples, Dante and Petrarch stand outside the indicted sin on a sort of moral high ground. However, the remainder of this article is devoted to a consideration of a different form of idolatry, one which is more intimate and dangerous for each poet, since it is bound up with the very writing of love poetry. In this respect idols are importantly polarised in relation to icons; while idols are forbidden and man-made,

icons – in particular of Christ – are a sign of God’s presence in the world and often have miraculous origins. These divine origins in a distant past remove icons from any taint of being, like idols, attributable to human hands alone (Belting, 1994). Icons are present in both Dante and Petrarch in a particular form, that of the Veronica. The appellation Veronica refers both to the veil itself, which has imprinted on it the *vera icon* of Christ, and to the reputed Saint Veronica who offered Christ the veil. Exemplarily, the Veronica is, then, God-made and not man-made, in other words ‘acheiropoietic’, to return to Belting’s argument.

In Dante, the Veronica is referred to in the *Vita nuova*, when Dante remarks, after Beatrice’s death, on pilgrims passing through Florence on their way ‘per vedere quella imagine benedetta la quale Iesu Cristo lasciò a noi per esemplo de la sua bellissima figura’ (VN XL, 1). Like the pilgrims on the way to Rome, Dante searches for an absent, deceased other who is now in Heaven and whose image is present more persuasively in the Veronica than in the angels he drew a year after her death (VN XXXIV, 1). Beatrice herself is a figure of Christ already in the *Vita nuova* (Gragnolati, 2010: 139-140), and so another Veronica rather than in competition with Christ. Beatrice’s Christological function is further confirmed in the Earthly Paradise, where she is greeted, like Christ, with the acclamation ‘*Benedictus qui venis*’ (*Purgatorio*, XXX, 19). Beatrice comes *in nomine Domini*, the implicit continuation of the *Benedictus* (Martinez, 2004: 294).

The second reference to the Veronica comes at the end of *Paradiso*, thereby bringing together the *Vita nuova* and the *Commedia* (Vettori, 2003). Here, Dante-pilgrim’s sight of St Bernard is compared to the desire of a pilgrim to see ‘la Veronica nostra’ and who wonders “Segnor mio Iesù Cristo, Dio verace, / or fu sì fatta la

sembianza vostra?” (*Paradiso* XXXI, 104, 107-108). St Bernard is another *figura Christi*, and the theme of sight here is an important anticipation of Dante-pilgrim’s final vision of the Empyrean and God Himself, which Dante’s purified gaze will transform from ‘rivera’ (*Paradiso*, XXX, 61) to ‘rosa’ (*Paradiso*, XXX, 117). The *Commedia* is a journey from ‘falso veder’ (*Inferno*, II, 48) to a divine ‘vista nova’ (*Paradiso*, XXXIII, 136), and the Veronica is at the end a marker of true sight and the performative vision demanded of icons. The choice of Santa Lucia, patroness of sight, as Dante’s personal guardian is apt (Cassell, 1991; Rosser, 2005).

Petrarch adopts the Dantean motif of pilgrimage to the Veronica in *RVF* 16:

Movesi il vecchierel canuto et bianco
del dolce loco ov’ à sua età fornita
et da la famigliuola sbigottita
che vede il caro padre venir manco;

indi trahendo poi l’antiquo fianco
per l’extreme giornate di sua vita,
quanto più pò, col buon voler s’aita,
rotto dagli anni, et dal camino stanco;

et viene a Roma, seguendo ’l desio,
per mirar la sembianza di Colui
ch’ ancor lassù nel ciel vedere spera:

così, lasso, talor vo cerchand'io,
donna, quanto è possibile, in altrui
la disiata vostra forma vera.

Against the Dantean, medieval icon of the Veronica, however, whispers of idolatry surface in the Petrarchan version. As Elena Lombardi has suggested, 'While the Veronica is an image/sign of the face of Christ pointing toward God and meaning in heaven, other women's faces and bodies point to yet another face and body, thus creating a self-referential – idolatrous and physically embodied – system of signs' (2010: 28). Critics have long worried about the 'altrui' at the end of Petrarch's sonnet, which suggests blasphemy (the Veronica as an image of Laura?) and infidelity ('altrui' as other women). As regards the sonnet's relationship to Dante, Ulyssean echoes have also been noted (Squarotti, 1994: 46-48), which form part of a wider nexus of intertextual connections between the two poets which have Ulysses as their centre (Ferroni, 1998; Cachey, 2009: 3-49).

In *RVF* 16, such similarities are more situational than verbal; in both cases, an old man leaves his family for a long, arduous journey. Ulysses is moved by 'né dolcezza di figlio, né la pietà / del vecchio padre, né 'l debito amore / lo qual dovea Penelopè far lieta' (*Inferno* XXVI, 94-96), while the 'vecchierel' of Petrarch's sonnet is a 'caro padre' who abandons his 'famigliuola'. That the recognition of this Ulyssean intertext relies on an implicit situational parallel accords with Petrarch's espousal of Senecan rules of *imitatio* in *Familiars* I, 8, in brief that 'elegantioris esse solertie, ut, apium imitatores, nostris verbis quamvis aliorum hominum sententias proferamus' ('it is a sign of greater

elegance and skill for us, in imitation of the bees, to produce in our own words thoughts borrowed from others?').ⁱⁱⁱ

The 'folle volo' (*Inferno*, XXVI, 125) of Dante's Ulysses beyond the bounds set by God contrasts in direction and sanctity with the pilgrimage of Petrarch's 'vecchierel' towards Rome and Christ's image. Yet this very contrast is unsettling, since the infernal tale of misdirected desire and lack of familial piety thus haunts what should be a celebrated journey of self-denial and religious devotion. Instead, Petrarch, through his choice of adjectives and diminutives, invites the reader to sympathise with the 'famigliuola sbigottita' being abandoned by the 'caro padre'. The uncomfortably similar example of Ulysses's abandonment of his own father, wife, and son complicates the apparently straightforward pilgrimage narrative traced in *RVF* 16, opening up fissures in the sonnet which eventually coalesce, via the emergence of the poet in the last tercet, in the final rift between Laura and 'altrui'. This rift represents a conflict between the Veronica and Laura, true icon on the one hand and false idol on the other, and it is in interrogating the Ulyssean undertones of this sonnet that the Petrarchan theme of idolatry becomes clearer, with new implications for the siren in Dante's *Purgatorio*.

Crucially, the siren is an example of an idol for early Christian theologians such as Origen and Nicephorus. In a homily on Exodus, Origen brings together the commandment against idols and the assertion by St Paul that idols do not exist ('scimus quia nihil est idolum in mundo', 'we know that an idol is nothing in the world', 1 Corinthians 8.4) in order to argue that while icons are based on likeness, idols are images of non-existent things:

Si quis in quolibet metallo auri uel argenti uel ligni uel lapidis faciat speciem quadrupedis alicuius uel serpentis uel auis, et statuatur illam adorandam, non idolum, sed similitudinem fecit; uel etiam si picturam ad hoc ipsum statuatur, nihilominus similitudinem fecisse dicendus est. Idolum uero fecit ille qui, secundum Apostolum dicentem quia: *idolum nihil est*, facit quod non est. Quid est autem quod non est? Species, quam non uidit oculus, sed ipse animus fingit. Verbi gratia, ut si qui humanis membris caput canis aut arietis formet, uel rursus in uno hominis habitu duas facies fingat, aut humano pectori postremas partes equi aut piscis adiungat. Haec et his similia qui facit, non similitudinem, sed idolum facit. Facit enim quod non est nec habet aliquid simile sui. Et idcirco haec sciens Apostolus dicit : *Quia idolum nihil est in mundo* ; sed quod ipsa sibi otiosa mens et curiosa repperit. (Origen, 1985: 250-252)

For example, if someone with gold or silver or wood or stone should make the form of any four-footed animal or serpent or bird and set it up to be adored, he has made not an idol, but a likeness, or even if he set up a painting for this purpose he is to be said no less to have made a likeness. But he has made an idol who, according to the Apostle's word that 'an idol is nothing,' makes what is not. But what is that which is not? A form which the eye does not see, but which the mind imagines for itself. For example, if someone should fashion the head of a dog or a ram on human members, or again, devise two faces on one appearance of a man, or join the hindmost parts of a horse or fish to a human breast. He who makes these things and things like them does not make a likeness, but an idol. For he makes what is not, nor is there anything like it. And, therefore, knowing these

things the Apostle says, 'An idol is nothing in the world', for no form is adopted from existing things but that which the idle and curious mind itself perceived in itself. (Origen, 1982: 321)

For Nicephorus, too, idols are 'insubstantial things, [...] such as tritons, centaurs, and other nonexistent phantoms' (2005: 236). While Nicephorus is unlikely to have been known to Dante or Petrarch, Origen's commentary circulated in the Middle Ages in its Latin translation by Rufinus of Aquileia, of which passages (including that cited above) were incorporated into the influential twelfth-century *Glossa ordinaria* (Ginzburg, 1994; Scheck, 2013: 19-23). In this way Origen's works in Latin translation remained 'well-diffused and much-read in the Middle Ages' (Matter, 1997: 87), and Origen's views on idols were thus able to be taken up by later medieval theologians such as Bernard of Clairvaux or Thomas Aquinas, as well as writers including Dante and Petrarch.^{iv}

Following Origen, the siren, part-woman, part-bird, perhaps part-fish, is thus a prime example of an idol, and *Purgatorio* XIX can be usefully re-read as a discussion of the dangers of idolatry, adding further weight to Herbert Marks's suggestion that the siren is 'an idol animated by the gaze of those whose movement she arrests' (1992: 156). Such an interpretation also draws on the vertical mode of reading Dante's *Commedia*, within which the siren of *Purgatorio* XIX is manifestly connected to the theme of idolatry first raised in *Inferno* XIX in relation to the simoniac popes. In *Purgatorio* XIX, an ugly, deformed 'femmina balba' (v. 7) is turned through Dante-pilgrim's gaze into a beautiful, eloquent lady who identifies herself as a siren ("Io son," cantava, "io son dolce serena", v. 19) and boasts of her temptation of Ulysses ("Io volsi Ulisse", v. 22). Dante-pilgrim is only saved from this distraction by the appearance of 'una donna [...] santa e presta' (v.

26) who chides Virgil. The dream ends with the siren being disembowelled and the pilgrim coming to his senses once more:

L'altra predea, e dinanzi l'apria
fendendo i drappi, e mostravami 'l ventre;
quel mi svegliò col puzzo che n'uscita. (vv. 31-33)

The siren is brought to life by Dante-pilgrim's gaze, and she has but a superficial, transient existence for as long as she is admired or worshipped. Moreover, she is an anti-Veronica in that she is composed not of a 'velo' but of 'drappi', and behind her cloth is not Christ but an infernal stench. The tendentious argument that the 'donna [...] santa' here is St Lucia and not Beatrice is strengthened by the issue of right seeing that it is at the heart of this encounter (Boyde, 2000: 163).^v The siren's declaration "'Io son [...] io son dolce serena'" is illusory and misleading; the siren is not 'dolce', and in fact as an idol cannot even be said to exist (*essere*). This line is thus rewritten by Beatrice when reunited with Dante-pilgrim, as many critics have noted (e.g. Hardie, 1965: 235; Ferrante, 1975: 145), in the even more assertive form "'Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice'" (*Purgatorio*, XXX, 73), with its injunction to look carefully and its confident self-naming, the latter arguably modelled upon the 'Ego sum' of the God of the Old Testament cited at the start of this essay ('ego sum Dominus Deus tuus', '*I am the Lord thy God, mighty, jealous*'), as well as the earlier declaration in Exodus, 'Ego sum qui sum', '*I am who am*' (Exodus 3:14).^{vi} The siren's self-identification also harks back to Santa Lucia's self-naming in the dream of *Purgatorio* IX, "'I son Lucia'" (v. 55). In *Purgatorio* XIX, however, since the formula 'io son' has already been fraudulently adopted by the siren, the 'donna [...] santa', whether Lucia or Beatrice, must necessarily forgo verbal self-

revelation which might lack authenticity or credibility in such a space. This frustrating ambiguity of identity stems from the abuse of language on which the siren thrives.

Understanding Dante's siren as an idol allows us to return to *RVF* 16 with a new appreciation of the sonnet's strange Ulyssean undertones, which can now be heard to resonate with a well-founded fear of idolatry. It is as if Petrarch has transferred his fear of turning Laura into an idol onto the innocent, faithful, hopeful 'vecchierel'. The latter knows that the Veronica is an icon, a true image of Christ; the former, however, worries repeatedly that seeking Laura instead of Christ is sinful and will lead not to Rome but rather to damnation (even, to Avignon). It is also appropriate, then, that Laura should be figured explicitly as a 'sirena' (*RVF* 167.14; see Sturm-Maddox, 1986) and indeed as an idol elsewhere in the *Canzoniere* (as cited below). Moreover, unlike Beatrice's clear self-naming at the top of the mountain of Purgatory, Laura only ever identifies herself through a negation of the typically Dantean formula 'I' son': 'I' non son forse chi tu credi' (*RVF* 23.83).

John Freccero has cogently described both Petrarch's love for Laura and Petrarch's desire for the laurel crown (that is, poetic fame) as idolatrous, noting that one Augustinian definition of idolatry is 'the reification of the sign in an attempt to create poetic presence' (1975: 38). In this sense, the name is a prime example of idolatry in Petrarch's poetry, and there is a persistent concern that – unlike the Veronica – there may be nothing behind the veil of language beyond its own admiring self-contemplation. The link between name and idol can be strengthened with reference to the *Canzoniere* and to Petrarch's Latin works. While Laura is explicitly defined as an idol in *RVF* 30.27 (as 'l'idolo mio scolpito in vivo lauro'), Petrarch elsewhere exhorts 'non far idolo un nome |

vano, senza soggetto' (RVF 128.76-77). This last phrase recalls the Pauline definition of an idol as non-existent (here, 'senza soggetto') and meets head on fears that names may be empty and therefore idolatrous, albeit in a political rather than an amorous poem.

In book three of the *Secretum*, the rhetorical interlocutor Augustinus attacks Petrarch's obsession with Laura's name as vain and mad:

Quis digne satis excretur aut stupeat hanc alienate mentis insaniam cum, non minus nominis quam ipsius corporis splendore captus, quicquid illi consonum fuit incredibili vanitate coluisti? (Petrarch, 1955: 158)

Is it possible to denounce too strongly your foolishness in revering everything about her, not only her physical beauty but even the beauty of her name?

(Petrarch, 2002: 68)

A comparable criticism of obsession with Laura's name is recorded as having been levelled against Petrarch by Giacomo Colonna in the ninth letter of book 2 of the *Familiars*:

Quid ergo ais? finxisse me michi speciosum Lauree nomen, ut esset et de qua ego loquerer et propter quam da me multi loquerentur; re autem vera in animo meo Lauream nichil esse, nisi illam forte poeticam, ad quam aspirare me longum et indefessum studium testatur; de hac autem spirante Laurea, cuius forma captus videor, manufacta esse omnia, ficta carmina, simulata suspiria. (Petrarch, 1933-1942: I, 94)

What in the world do you say? That I invented the splendid name of Laura so that it might be not only something for me to speak about but occasion to have others speak of me; that indeed there was no Laura on my mind except perhaps the

poetic one for which I have aspired as is attested by my long and untiring studies.

And finally you say that the truly live Laura by whose beauty I seem to be captured was completely invented, my poems fictitious and my sighs feigned.

(Petrarch, 2005: I, 102)

The phrase ‘*Lauream nichil esse*’ seems to echo St Paul’s assertion, cited above, that ‘*nihil est idolum in mundo*’, bringing the theme of idolatry to the fore. The fact, moreover, that in this same letter Petrarch expresses his desire to see the Veronica (‘*verendam populis Salvatoris imaginem*’, Petrarch, 1933-1942: I, 96; ‘*the venerable image of the Saviour of people*’, Petrarch, 2005: 104) creates a stark contrast between his potentially idolatrous love for Laura and her name and charitable love for Christ and his icon.

This letter’s fierce defence of Laura’s existence can be better understood in the light of the connection with idols and a lack of existence. If Laura exists, as Petrarch asserts, then she cannot be an idol according to Origen’s Pauline definition. In this debate, the name becomes a bone of contention, maligned as illusory, deceptive, and a mere poetic device. Yet even if Laura’s existence is accepted, dying renders her an idol according to the classic tale of the origin of idols related by Fulgentius and highlighted in Carlo Ginzburg’s essay on idolatry (2011: 118-135).^{vii} Fulgentius narrates that the first idol was set up by Diophantus of Sparta in mourning for his deceased son:

Denique doloris angustia quae semper inquirit necessitatis solatium filii sibi simulacrum in edibus instituit dumque tristitiae remedium quaerit, seminarium potius doloris inuenit nesciens quod sola sit medicina miseriarum obliuio; fecerat enim ille unde luctus resurrectiones in dies acquireret, non in quo luctus solatium

inueniret. Denique idolum dictum est, id est idos doli, quod nos Latine species doloris dicimus. (Fulgentius, 1898: 16)

In the grip of grief which always endeavors to relieve its need, he set up an effigy of his son in his household; but when he sought a cure thereby for his grief, he found it rather a renewal of sorrow, for he did not realize that forgetting is the true healer of distress: he had made something whereby he would acquire daily renewals of his grief, not find comfort from it. This is called an idol, that is idos doli, which in Latin we call appearance of grief. (Fulgentius, 1971: 48)

The *Canzoniere* has a similar function in setting up an idol and rendering grief endless; Laura's mortality condemns the poet and his poetry to an idolatrous status. It is, moreover, for the same reasons as those given by Fulgentius that Augustinus derides Simone Martini's portrait of Laura in the *Secretum* just before attacking Petrarch's obsession with Laura's name:

Quid autem insanius quam, non contentum presenti illius vultus effigie, unde hec cuncta tibi provenerant, aliam fictam illustris artificis ingenio quesivisse, quam tecum ubique circumferens haberes materiam semper immortalium lacrimarum? Veritus ne fortassis arescerent, irritamenta earum omnia vigilantissime cogitasti, negligenter incuriosus in reliquis. (Petrarch, 1955: 156, 158)

And – the maddest thing of all – not satisfied with seeing in the flesh the woman who caused you all this misery, you had her portrait painted by a famous artist so that you could carry it about with you and always have a reason to weep. Afraid your tears might dry up, you did all you could to provoke them, and neglected everything else. (Petrarch, 2002: 68)

Idolatry, whether in word, name, or image, fuels and thrives on Petrarch's inexhaustible mourning.

Focus on Martini's image of Laura as a form of idolatry points to three further myths in the *Canzoniere* beyond the Fulgentian: the myths of Medusa, Narcissus, and Pygmalion. Firstly and most prominently, Laura is ultimately identified in the *Canzoniere* with Medusa (*RVF* 366.111; Foster, 1962: 41-56), a figure who cannot be gazed upon without risk of petrification. In this sense Laura is an anti-Veronica.^{viii} Moreover, not only does Petrarch thus offer 'a definitive gloss of Dante's Medusa' (Freccero, 1986: 132), but Dante's siren, too, has some Medusan qualities (Suther & Giffin, 1980). The character Virgil is, for instance, especially careful to look at the 'donna [...] santa' rather than the siren ('el venìa / con li occhi fitti pur in quella onesta', *Purgatorio*, XIX, 29-30), while Dante-pilgrim having once looked is transfixed. To the Medusa myth can be added the myth of Narcissus, a man who falls in love with his own image and a tale which applies in the *Canzoniere* both to the poet and to a vain, self-absorbed Laura (Mazzotta, 1993b: 31, 64-67).

Yet it is the Pygmalion myth, of these three, which comes the closest to the Petrarchan situation, as the poet himself recognises in addressing Pygmalion at the end of one of the sonnets (*RVF* 78.12) on Simone Martini's portrait of Laura criticised in the *Secretum*.^{ix} The idolatry of *RVF* 16 is particularly apparent when read against the portrait of Laura by Martini discussed in *RVF* 77 and 78, three sonnets which Giorgio Bertone (2008) has helpfully drawn together. While *RVF* 77 aimed to present Martini's portrait as an icon bordering on 'acheiropietos' with suggestions of divine aid and inspiration ('certo il mio Simon fu in paradiso' and 'ivi la vide, et la ritrasse in carte', vv. 5 and 7),

the reference to Pygmalion at the end of *RVF* 78 brings the painting down to earth with a jolt. As Mazzotta observes, there is a move away from ‘aesthetic contemplation of the icon’ (*RVF* 77) towards a desire for possession and contact (*RVF* 78), creating ‘a disruptive tension’ (1993b: 29). In this myth, a sculptor (Pygmalion) falls in love with his own creation, just as Giacomo Colonna had accused Petrarch of doing.

The resonances are even more persuasive given that Pygmalion’s creation is made of ‘niveum [...] ebur’, ‘snowy ivory’ (Ovid, 1977-1984: II, 82, 83: *Metamorphoses*, book X, vv. 246-247), and that Laura, too, is frequently associated with both snow (e.g. *RVF* 30.2) and ivory (‘netto avorio’, *RVF* 199.10). References to other precious materials such as pearl and gold (the latter, Laura’s ‘capei d’oro’, *RVF* 90.1, perhaps recalling the Golden Calf of Exodus 32) also highlight Laura as a created object and a work of art, in short, an idol. In one sonnet, Petrarch asks repeatedly ‘Onde tolse Amor l’oro’ and ‘onde le perle’ out of which Laura is formed (*RVF* 220.1 and 5), but no answer is given, perhaps because the truth – that Petrarch’s pen and imagination provided love with the materials from which Laura is made – does not bear contemplating. Although Enrico Fenzi (1996: 62) wonders hopefully, if without conviction, whether the contentious ‘altrui’ of *RVF* 16 might in fact refer to Martini’s portrait of Laura, such a substitution can hardly clear Petrarch of charges of idolatry, since the portrait is rendered irredeemably suspect through the invocation of Pygmalion.

Against the apparent omnipresence of idols in the *Canzoniere* is placed, in the end, not only the Veronica but also the figure of the Virgin Mary. Petrarch’s Testament informs us of another painting in his possession (now also lost), which is implicitly antithetical to the portrait of Laura: ‘tabulam meam sive iconam beate Virginis Marie,

operis Iotti pictoris egregii', 'my panel or icon of the Virgin Mary, a work of the eminent painter Giotto' (Petrarch, 1957: 78, 79). Mary is also the final addressee of the *Canzoniere*, where the 'Vergine' is incessantly invoked and defined as a 'vera beatrice' (RVF 366.52), in a rewriting of Dante's own prayer to the Virgin (Squarotti, 1995). Vergine and Veronica are phonically linked, and both are bearers of *veritas*, pointing to Christ.

The importance of the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary is also central to Dante's theology, from Buonconte's salvific "'nel nome di Maria fini'" (*Purgatorio*, V, 101) and Dante-poet's own devotion, shared by Beatrice, to 'il nome del bel fior' (*Paradiso*, XXIII, 88), to St Bernard's prayer in *Paradiso XXXIII* (see Martinelli, 2007: 343-373).

Importantly, Dante's siren is antithetical not only to the Veronica but also, as Naomi Yavneh notes (2001: 109-136), to Mary, since Mary's fruitful womb contrasts starkly with the putrid 'ventre' of the siren in *Purgatorio* XIX, 32. Mary and her name, for Dante and Petrarch, are salvific and iconic, like Dante's Beatrice and unlike Petrarch's Laura.

Against the Dantean icon, then, is pitted the danger of Petrarchan idolatry. We are asked to believe that Beatrice leads to God because she is made by God, just as God has had a hand ('ha posto mano') in the 'poema sacro' that is the *Commedia* (*Paradiso*, XXV, 1-2). Beatrice, in name and substance, is iconic, and so, by extension is Dante's poem, offering us images of Christ and Mary glimpsed in Paradise through and beyond Beatrice. In contrast, Laura, if she exists at all, exists only through the all too human hand of her literary creator, Petrarch, in an idolatrous form and in a dark, difficult dialogue with Dante's own poetry. If name and icon enable true, meaningful, spiritual dialogue for Dante, Petrarch affords the reader only what Sara Sturm-Maddox has called 'an illusion

of dialogue' (1986: 8). This illusion, in its narcissistic, self-absorbed pose, ultimately reveals only the harsh, golden glitter of the illusion constituted by idols and idolatry themselves.

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ⁱ All citations from Dante are taken from the Princeton Dante Project available at <<http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/index.html>>. Quotations from Petrarch's *Canzoniere* are taken from Marco Santagata's edition (Petrarch, 2010), preceded by the abbreviation *RVF* (*Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*).

ⁱⁱ Citations from the Bible are taken from the Vulgate, and the English translation is that of Douay-Rheims.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quotation from Petrarch, 1933-1942: I, 40 (with translation from Petrarch, 2005: I, 41-42). Petrarch's theory of imitation is reviewed in McLaughlin, 1995: 22-48. Despite Petrarch's explicit theory, much of his

engagement with Dante does, of course, resurface in textual borrowings rather than consistent rewording (see Trovato, 1979, and Santagata, 1990: 25-91).

^{iv} See Lokaj, 2001, for discussion of Origen if not in Dante then in early commentators on Dante, as well as discussion (also in Lokaj, 2003) of Petrarch's naming of Origen in four letters across the *Familiars* and *Seniles*. Unlike Petrarch, Dante never names the theologian directly (Leclercq, 1973: IV, 196).

^v For many critics including Hollander, 1983: 77-88 and 1969, Picone, 2001, and Mazzotta, 1993a: 135-153, the 'donna [...] santa' is, nonetheless, Beatrice.

^{vi} On God as the paradoxical paradigm of naming and namelessness in Dante see Franke, 2012.

^{vii} Unlike Dante, of whom Albert Russell Ascoli notes (with reference to Pizzani, 1971) that 'direct knowledge of Fulgentius's texts by Dante has not been established' (Ascoli, 2008: 312), Petrarch had a copy of Fulgentius's *Mythologies* (as noted by Whitbread, 1971: 26; see also Nolhac, 1907: I, 205-206). More generally, Stephen Gersh has commented on the 'remarkably sustained popularity throughout mediaeval times' of Fulgentius's *Mythologies* and *Expositio Virgilianae Continentiae* (1986: II, 758; see also Hays, 2002: 37-39).

^{viii} Given that the Veronica and Medusa are diametrically opposed, it is fascinating to read Ewa Kuryluk's comments that the disembodied head of Christ probably owes much to the Medusa myth iconographically (1991: 153-161).

^{ix} See Enterline, 1994: 125-7, and Migraine-George, 1999.