

The Untranslatable Laura: Nineteenth-Century French Perspectives

New critical attention has been afforded to the concept of the ‘untranslatable’ in recent years as a result of Barbara Cassin’s *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, first published in 2004 and subsequently translated into English in 2014 as *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*.¹ According to Cassin’s introductory definition:

Parler d’*intraduisibles* n’implique nullement que les termes en question, ou les expressions, les tours syntaxiques et grammaticaux, ne soient pas traduits et ne puissent pas l’être—l’intraduisible, c’est plutôt ce qu’on ne cesse pas de (ne pas) traduire.

[To speak of *untranslatables* in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated: the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating.]²

It is this sense of the untranslatable which I wish to invoke in my title; as this volume amply testifies, Petrarch’s poetry, too, is untranslatable not because it is impossible to translate (though it may at times appear to be so), but rather because it forever calls for fresh translations, which can, happily, never be definitive or sufficient.

In this essay Petrarch’s beloved Laura is, more specifically, described as ‘untranslatable’ in two different ways. In Cassin’s sense, Laura’s name and the polysemy it generates are explored as ‘what one keeps on (not) translating’, through the example of various nineteenth-century French translators of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*. Laura’s name evokes in turn and at times simultaneously a plethora of signifiers—*l’aura* [the breeze], *l’auro* [the laurel], *l’oro* [gold], *l’ora* [time], or *l’aurora* [dawn], to name but the principal variants—and this type of wordplay poses a constant and thorny challenge to translators of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*. By way of conclusion, however, Laura’s untranslatability or resistance to translation is considered from the perspective of a more technical, ecclesiastical meaning of the word ‘translation’, namely ‘the transference of the relics of a saint either from their

¹ *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, ed. by Barbara Cassin (Paris: Seuil/Le Robert, 2004); *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. by Barbara Cassin, Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). For a useful range of recent critical responses to this volume, see *Translation and the Untranslatable*, ed. by Michael Syrotinski (= *Paragraph*, 38.2 (July 2015)).

² Cassin, ‘Présentation’, in *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*, pp. xvii–xxii (p. xvii); Cassin, ‘Introduction’, trans. by Michael Wood, in *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, pp. xvii–xx (p. xvii).

original place of burial into an altar tomb or shrine, or from one shrine to another'.³ Though not a saint, this religious meaning of translation is argued to be relevant to Petrarch's Laura, whose burial site interested readers of the *Canzoniere* in thrall to a wider 'quest' for Laura's historical identity.⁴ Before treating these two aspects of Petrarch's 'untranslatable Laura', I begin with an overview of French Petrarchism in the nineteenth century, in order to set the scene and provide some context for what will follow.

Nineteenth-Century French Petrarchism: A Brief Introduction

French Petrarchism has typically been considered to be foundational for sixteenth-century poetry by the likes of Maurice Scève, Pierre de Ronsard, or Joachim du Bellay.⁵ As Jean Balsamo in particular has explored, sixteenth-century French poets turned to Petrarch as a way of reinvigorating their own national language; accordingly, the ostensible *italianisme* of these poets also often, paradoxically, masked a form of *anti-italianisme* which proclaimed that the French literary language was equal or superior even to the Italian of Petrarch.⁶ Sixteenth-century French Petrarchism, whether through more or less direct translation of the medieval poet or a freer process of poetic imitation (the art of *pétrarquiser*), was fuelled by both ambivalence and rivalry with respect to its chosen model. In contrast, in this essay I will explore a later manifestation of French Petrarchism, locatable in the nineteenth century. Unlike their sixteenth-century predecessors, nineteenth-century French readers and translators of Petrarch sought not so much to rival as to adopt the medieval poet as, controversially, somehow French.

After the ubiquity of the Petrarchan mode in sixteenth-century poetry, French Petrarchism largely fell silent, a victim of its own success. In the nineteenth century, a

³ Definition of 'translation' cited from *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 1637.

⁴ This phrase borrows from 'The quest for the historical Beatrice' in Alison Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 102–16.

⁵ See, for instance, Sara Sturm-Maddox, 'The French Petrarch', in *Petrarch and the European Lyric Tradition*, ed. by Dino S. Cervigni (= *Annali d'Italianistica*, 22 (2004)), pp. 171–87; *idem*, *Ronsard, Petrarch and the 'Amours'* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999); *Les Poètes français de la Renaissance et Pétrarque*, ed. by Jean Balsamo (Geneva: Droz, 2004). For a broader European perspective, see Leonard Forster, *The Icy Fire: Five Studies in Petrarchism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) and William J. Kennedy, *The Site of Petrarchism: Early Modern National Sentiment in Italy, France, and England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁶ See Jean Balsamo, *Les Rencontres des Muses: italianisme et anti-italianisme dans les Lettres françaises de la fin du XVIe siècle* (Geneva: Éditions Slatkine, 1992), especially Chapter 5 on 'Le "Pétrarque français"', pp. 217–54.

recognized period of Romantic medievalism, Dante is thought to be of greater importance and prominence.⁷ Yet, as Edoardo Zuccato in particular has argued in relation to English examples, the influence and inspiration of Petrarch at this same time ought not to be overlooked.⁸ Indebted to the early work of Lide Bertoli and more recently to Ève Duperray's wide-ranging study of French Petrarchism across the centuries, in *Petrarch and the Literary Culture of Nineteenth-Century France* I have sought to trace comprehensively this more modern French engagement with Petrarch through attention to both translation and rewriting, in and out of the canon.⁹

Nineteenth-century French Petrarchism had two identifiable and distinct types of catalyst, literary and political. Three eighteenth-century authors, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the abbé de Sade, were responsible for sowing the seeds of a second wave of French interest in Petrarch.¹⁰ The first, Voltaire, translated the first stanza of *RVF* 126, a celebrated *canzone* which begins 'Chiare, fresche et dolci acque' [Clear, fresh, and sweet waters] and which celebrates Laura's oneness with the Provençal landscape.¹¹ This translation was to act as a bookmark in the *Canzoniere*, drawing French translators back to this poem time and time again.¹² The second, Rousseau, was instrumental in the fashion for what Duperray has termed 'le roman pétrarquiste' [the Petrarchan novel], through his immensely popular *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*.¹³ The third, however, was no doubt the

⁷ For a general overview of French medievalism in this period, see *La Fabrique du Moyen Âge au XIXe siècle: représentations du moyen âge dans la culture et la littérature françaises du XIXe siècle*, ed. by Simone Bernard-Griffiths, Pierre Glaudes, and Bertrand Vibert (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006). On the nineteenth-century obsession with Dante, see: *Dante in the Nineteenth Century: Reception, Canonicity, Popularization*, ed. by Nick Havely (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011); *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century: Nationality, Identity, and Appropriation*, ed. by Aida Audeh and Nick Havely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Michael Pitwood, *Dante and the French Romantics* (Geneva: Droz, 1985).

⁸ Edoardo Zuccato, *Petrarch in Romantic England* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). See also Gerhart Hoffmeister, 'The Petrarchan Mode in European Romanticism', in *European Romanticism: Literary Cross-Currents, Modes, and Models*, ed. by *idem* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), pp. 97–111.

⁹ See: Lide Bertoli, *La Fortuna del Petrarca in Francia nella prima metà del secolo XIX: note ed appunti* (Livorno: Raffaello Giusti, 1916) and *idem*, 'I traduttori francesi del Petrarca nel secolo XIX', in *Raccolta di studi di storia e critica letteraria dedicata a Francesco Flamini da' suoi discepoli* (Pisa: Mariotti, 1918), pp. 653–79; Ève Duperray, *L'Or des mots: une lecture de Pétrarque et du mythe littéraire de Vaucluse des origines à l'orée du XXe siècle: histoire du pétrarquisme en France* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1997); Jennifer Rushworth, *Petrarch and the Literary Culture of Nineteenth-Century France: Translation, Appropriation, Transformation* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, forthcoming 2017).

¹⁰ On the wider French interest in medieval matters in the eighteenth century, see Alicia C. Montoya, *Medievalist Enlightenment from Charles Perrault to Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013).

¹¹ See Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756), ed. by Bruno Bernard, John Renwick, Nicholas Cronk, and Janet Godden, 9 vols (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009–), IV (2011), 274. All quotations of the original Italian text are from Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. by Marco Santagata, 4th edn (Milan: Mondadori, 2010).

¹² French translations of the first stanza of *RVF* 126 published between 1756 and 1903 are listed in Appendix 2 of Rushworth, *Petrarch and the Literary Culture of Nineteenth-Century France*.

¹³ See Ève Duperray, 'Le mythe littéraire de Vaucluse dans le roman pétrarquiste de *L'Astrée* (1607–1628) à *Adriani* (1853)', in *Dynamique d'une expansion culturelle: Pétrarque en Europe XIVe–XXe siècle: actes du*

most significant, through his authoring of a lengthy biography of Petrarch, the three-volume *Mémoires pour la vie de François Pétrarque*.¹⁴ The abbé de Sade was himself not only Avignonese but even, as he partly hoped to prove by way of family documents transcribed in his *Mémoires*, a descendent of Petrarch's Laura, née Laure de Noves but by marriage Laure de Sade and mother of eleven children. Such, at any rate, was Sade's thesis.

Besides these literary influences, politics also had a role in the renewal of Petrarchism in the nineteenth century. The unification of Avignon with France at the Revolution, after its prolonged status as a papal annexe, provided new inspiration for claiming the city and its illustrious medieval past as French.¹⁵ Soon thereafter, Napoleon himself founded the Athénée de Vaucluse, an organization with the mission of promoting local culture, including Petrarch; one of the Athénée's early tasks was to organize celebrations in honour of the fifth centenary of Petrarch's birth (1804), at which the Napoleonic column was installed at Fontaine-de-Vaucluse.¹⁶ Two further anniversaries celebrated in France as in Italy were to foment peaks of interest in Petrarch later in the century: 1874, the fifth centenary of Petrarch's death; 1904, the sixth centenary of Petrarch's birth.¹⁷ As Henry Cochin observed on the latter occasion, such celebrations were 'le point de départ de belles périodes de travail' [the starting point for excellent periods of work], which included not only translation but also essays and editorial projects, all Petrarch-centred.¹⁸

It was against this backdrop, both literary and political, that nineteenth-century French Petrarchism developed. Yet unlike its sixteenth-century predecessor, Petrarchism in this later period was not primarily a result of rivalry in terms of national language, that is, the wish to demonstrate and expand the capabilities of French through recourse to the translation and importation of Italian models, amongst which most prominently Petrarch.¹⁹ Rather,

XXVIe congrès international du CEFI, Turin et Chambéry, 11–15 décembre 1995: à la mémoire de Franco Simone, ed. by Pierre Blanc (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001), pp. 417–27, as well as *idem*, *L'Or des mots*, pp. 109–23.

¹⁴ Jacques F.P.A. de Sade, abbé, *Mémoires pour la vie de François Pétrarque, tirés de ses œuvres et des auteurs contemporains, avec des notes ou dissertations, & les pièces justificatives*, 3 vols (Amsterdam: Arskée et Mercus, 1764–67).

¹⁵ See René Moulinas, *Histoire de la Révolution d'Avignon* (Avignon: Aubanel, 1986).

¹⁶ Materials relating to the early days of this organization are gathered in *Mémoires de l'Athénée de Vaucluse, contenant le compte rendu des travaux de cette Société depuis son institution, et le recueil des ouvrages en prose et en vers, lus à sa séance publique* (Avignon: De l'Imprimerie d'Alph. Berenguier, An XII/1804).

¹⁷ On these anniversaries see Duperray, *L'Or des mots*, pp. 222–57, as well as Harald Hendrix, 'Petrarch 1804–1904: Nation-Building and Glocal Identities' and Francesca Zantedeschi, 'Petrarch 1874: Pan-National Celebrations and Provençal Regionalism', both in *Commemorating Writers in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Nation-Building and Centenary Fever*, ed. by Joseph Leerssen and Ann Rigney (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 117–33 and pp. 134–51 respectively.

¹⁸ Henry Cochin, *Le Jubilé de Pétrarque (extrait du 'Correspondant')* (Paris: De Soye et fils, 1904), p. 7.

¹⁹ See Balsamo, *Les Rencontres des Muses*.

nineteenth-century Petrarchism functioned through adoption and appropriation, claiming that Petrarch was, indeed, French. The most explicit of such claims came early on, from the abbé de Sade, in a letter at the start of the first volume of his *Mémoires* addressing his potential Italian readers directly:

Que diriez-vous, si on osoit vous disputer Pétrarque ? Il a reçu le jour dans le sein de votre belle contrée, cela n'est pas douteux ; la Ville d'Arezzo l'a vu naître, on ne peut pas lui contester cet honneur ; mais il a fait ses études à Carpentras, à Avignon, à Montpellier. Ses meilleurs Ouvrages ont été conçus, commencés, plusieurs même achevés sur les bords de la Sorgue ; les rochers de Vaucluse ont répété mille fois les sons harmonieux de sa lyre ; dans ces belles Odes que vous admirez tant, il prend à témoin les sources, les bois, les monts & les prés de cette solitude : enfin, c'est là qu'il a conçu ce Poëme épique auquel il doit la couronne.

Il s'agit à présent de sçavoir, si un homme de Lettres n'appartient pas plus au Pays où il a été élevé, formé, instruit, où il a composé ses meilleurs Ouvrages, qu'à la terre où il a reçu & quitté la vie. C'est un problème que je vous laisse à résoudre. Je me garderois bien de dire sur cela ce que je pense: je craindrois d'exciter votre courroux, en vous enlevant un des plus grands ornemens de votre patrie.²⁰

[What would you say if someone dared to dispute your claim to Petrarch? He first saw the light of day in the heart of your beautiful land, of that there can be no doubt; the town of Arezzo witnessed his birth, none other one can compete for this honour; but he studied in Carpentras, Avignon, and Montpellier. His best works were conceived, begun, and many also completed on the banks of the river Sorgue; the rocks of Vaucluse have repeated a thousand times the harmonious sounds of his lyre; in these beautiful *canzoni* which you admire so much, he calls as witness the springs, woods, mountains, and meadows of this solitary place: lastly, it is here that he conceived the epic poem to which he owes his crown.

It is necessary, then, to consider now whether a man of letters does not belong more to the country where he was brought up, formed, and educated, and where he composed his best works, than to the earth where he received life and whence he departed the same. It is a problem that I leave you to resolve amongst yourselves. I would rather refrain from speaking my mind on this matter; I would fear to incite your wrath, by depriving you of one of the greatest ornaments of your country.]

With this passage, Sade set the tone for French encounters with Petrarch through the following century, by boldly asserting that Petrarch was, in essence, not Italian but French. Sade, and others after him, based such a claim on innovative and idiosyncratic criteria for identity, according to which residence, education, love, and place of writing mean, or ought to mean, more in terms of identity than the traditional importance ascribed to birthplace and place of death.

Translating Petrarch into French in the nineteenth century was, in part, a way of accentuating or voicing this polemically charged claim about identity and belonging. A comprehensive study of translations and translators in nineteenth-century France published in

²⁰ Sade, *Mémoires*, I, pp. lxxi-lxxii.

2012 declared that ‘Le XIXe siècle n’est sans doute pas un très grand siècle pour la traduction de Pétrarque en France’ [The nineteenth century is doubtless not a very important century for the translation of Petrarch in France].²¹ Yet this statement is based upon the few complete French translations of the *Canzoniere* published in the nineteenth century, and neglects the many incomplete translations undertaken in the same time frame, not to mention the translation of other works by Petrarch, whether the *Trionfi* or his various works in Latin. In this period there are some six complete translations of the *Canzoniere*, frequently accompanied by the *Trionfi* and published between 1842 and 1903.²² There are, however, countless more incomplete translations of the *Canzoniere*, which I have attempted to chart elsewhere.²³ Here I wish to return to a representative selection of these translations, in relation to one central crux of translating Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, that is, the challenge of rendering the polysemy of Laura’s name and its constituent syllables.

What’s in a name? The Untranslatable Wordplay on Laura

While nineteenth-century French translators often sought, following Sade, to demonstrate and affirm Petrarch’s Frenchness, this claim necessitated a revisionist approach to the poet and his *œuvre*. The French adoption of Petrarch was markedly selective, privileging his vernacular love sonnets far above any of his Latin works in either poetry or prose. Yet even as far as Petrarch’s sonnets were concerned, one recurrent stylistic feature was consistently denigrated by French readers after Sade: Petrarch’s wordplay on the name of Laura. Simonde de Sismondi’s assessment from early in the nineteenth century is, in this respect, representative:

²¹ Christine Lombez and others, ‘Poésie’, in *Histoire des traductions en langue française: XIXe siècle: 1815–1914*, ed. by Yves Chevrel, Lieven D’Hulst, and Christine Lombez (Lagrasse: Éditions Verdier, 2012), pp. 345–442 (p. 378).

²² Ferdinand de Gramont, *Poésies de Pétrarque: traduction complète: sonnets, canzones, triomphes* (Paris: Paul Masgana, 1842); Anatole de Montesquiou, *Sonnets, canzones, ballades et sextines de Pétrarque traduits en vers*, 2 vols (Paris: Leroy, 1842); Joseph Poulenc, *Rimes de Pétrarque, traduites en vers, texte en regard*, 4 vols (Paris: A. Lacroix, 1865), of which a second edition was also published in 1887: *Rimes de Pétrarque: traduction complète en vers des sonnets, canzones, sextines, ballades, madrigaux et triomphes, par Joseph Poulenc: deuxième édition, revue et corrigée*, 2 vols (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1887); Francisque Reynard, *Les Rimes de François Pétrarque: traduction nouvelle* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1883); Fernand Brisset *Les Sonnets de Pétrarque à Laure: traduction nouvelle avec introduction et notes* (Paris: Perrin et Cie, 1899) and *idem, Canzones, triomphes et poésies diverses: traduction nouvelle avec introduction et notes* (Paris: Perrin et Cie, 1903); Hippolyte Godefroy, *Poésies complètes de Francesco Petrarca* (Montluçon: Imprimerie A. Herbin, 1900). Note that in fact the last, Godefroy’s translation, is not complete, despite its titular claims, but omits seven poems: RVF 55, 59, 63, 99, 149, 314, and 324.

²³ See Appendix 1 in Rushworth, *Petrarch and the Literary Culture of Nineteenth-Century France*.

J'aimerais mieux que la pensée, le sentiment, la passion, me rappelassent Laure, que l'éternel jeu de mots de *lauro* (le laurier), ou *l'aura* (l'air, le souffle du matin). Le premier surtout revient sans cesse, non pas dans les poésies seulement, mais dans la vie entière de Pétrarque ; on ne saurait dire si c'est de Laure ou du laurier qu'il est amoureux, tant celui-ci lui donne d'émotion toutes les fois qu'il le rencontre, tant il en parle avec saisissement, tant il consacre de vers à le chanter.²⁴

[I would rather be reminded of Laura by thought, sentiment, and passion, than by the eternal wordplay of *lauro* (laurel) or *l'aura* (air, the morning breeze). The first especially returns incessantly, not only in Petrarch's poetry, but also throughout his entire life; it's hard to tell whether he's in love with Laura or the laurel, so much does the latter fill him with emotion every time he sees it, so vividly does he talk about it, so many verses does he dedicate to singing it.]

French readers around this time often reacted, like Sismondi, with irritation at the ambiguity and confusion that arises from Petrarch's love of puns and polysemy. These readers wanted Petrarch to be French, but only on their own terms, terms which at times necessitated the rejection of essential aspects of Petrarch's art. These same readers also wanted to celebrate Laura's Frenchness, but accompanied by a somewhat reductive reading of poems about Laura which they sought to restrict in meaning to Laura as a specific historical individual.

In such a reading, many texts had to be either expunged from the selection of Petrarch being translated (unless the translation was one of the rarer projects committed to completion) or preserved but edited so as to present to the reader a more restricted range of meanings, which, for instance, would point to Laura explicitly rather than a laurel (one of the favourite, Ovidian-inspired images of Petrarch for his beloved).²⁵ As regards the approach of reduction or simplification, a particularly stark example is one translation of *RVF* 126 by A.P.A. Bouvard, in which the first reference to Laura (in the original, 'colei' [she], v. 3) is replaced by the explicit name of Laure:

Chiare, fresche et dolci acque,
ove le belle membra
pose colei che sola a me par donna.

[Clear, fresh, and sweet waters,
where her beautiful limbs
laid she who alone to me seems a lady.]

²⁴ 'Chapitre X : Influence du Dante sur son siècle ; Pétrarque', in J.C.L. Simonde de Sismondi, *De la littérature du Midi de l'Europe*, 4 vols (Paris and Strasbourg: Treuttel et Würtz, 1813), I, 386–425 (pp. 408–09).

²⁵ On the Ovidian laurel in Petrarch see Peter Hainsworth, 'The Myth of Daphne in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*', *Italian Studies*, 34.1 (1979), 28–44.

Ondes fraîches, claire fontaine,
Où Laure apparut à mes yeux.²⁶

[Fresh waters, clear fountain,
Where Laura appeared before my eyes.]

In this translation, there is no possible ambiguity about which woman the poet is watching, while the fragmentation of Laura's body into 'belle membra' [beautiful limbs] has also been elided.

Chief among Petrarchan texts considered culpable of excessive onomastic wordplay was *RVF* 5, a sonnet in which the name of Laura (in either a Provençal or a Latin diminutive form, *Lau-re-ta*) is fragmented across and embedded in the poem.²⁷ Once more setting a trend, Sade had already dismissed *RVF* 5 for its:

jeu de mots puerile sur les syllabes qui composent le nom de Laure ou Laurette qu'il est impossible de rendre en François, & qui est bien au-dessous d'un génie tel que celui de Petrarque.²⁸

[childish wordplay on the syllables which make up the name Laure or Laurette which is impossible to render in French and which is very much beneath a genius such as that of Petrarch.]

Pierre-Louis Ginguené reiterated this same criticism in his influential multi-volume *Histoire littéraire d'Italie*, similarly admitting that he would reproach Petrarch for 'des jeux de mots puérils' [childish wordplay]—borrowing liberally from Sade's earlier accusation—'tels surtout que cette étrange décomposition du nom de Laure, ou plutôt de *Laureta*, en trois parties' [such as in particular that strange decomposition of the name of Laura, or rather of *Laureta*, in three parts].²⁹ Finally, another translator at the very start of the twentieth century, Ernest Cabadé, similarly judged that:

C'est un véritable tour de force que ce morceau ; la pensée est, du reste, plus que subtile, elle est obscure, torturée ; somme toute, ce n'est pas ce sonnet qui ajoutera rien à la gloire du poète. C'est une espèce d'acrostiche sans grande saveur.³⁰

²⁶ A.P.A. Bouvard, *Fables nouvelles et poésies diverses* (Auxerre: Imprimerie de Gallot-Fournier, 1835), p. 183.

²⁷ On this poem, see Fredi Chiappelli, 'L'esegesi petrarchesca e l'elezione del "sermo lauranus" per il linguaggio dei *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*', *Studi petrarcheschi*, n.s., 4 (1987), 47–85.

²⁸ Sade, *Mémoires*, I, 177.

²⁹ Pierre-Louis Ginguené, *Histoire littéraire de l'Italie*, 9 vols (Paris: Chez Michaud frères, 1811–35), II, 564.

³⁰ Ernest Cabadé, *Les Sonnets de Pétrarque traduits en sonnets français avec une préface de M. de Trèverret* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1902), p. 5.

[This piece is a real *tour de force*; the idea is, besides, more than subtle, it is obscure, contorted; all in all, this sonnet will not add anything to the poet's glory. It is a type of acrostic without great taste.]

These comments suggest the constancy of the low regard in which *RVF* 5 was held by French readers and translators throughout the nineteenth century. Yet in describing the sonnet as an acrostic Cabadé also unwittingly suggests one possible way of translating this particular sonnet, one which, indeed, had already been followed by Emma Mahul in the second volume of her five-part translation of all three hundred and seventeen sonnets from Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Here is stanza one of Mahul's necessarily free translation:

Louer son nom n'est pas petite chose :
Amour d'un trait l'écrivit dans mon cœur.
Unissez-vous à la bouche demi-close,
Redites-le, soupirs, moi je ne l'ose
Et je craindrais d'altérer sa douceur.³¹

[Love in a flash wrote her name in my heart,
And praising it is no small matter.
Unite yourselves to my parted lips,
Repeat it, sighs, for I dare not
And would fear to spoil its sweetness.]

In this way, while Sade dismissed the sonnet as untranslatable (in his words, 'impossible de rendre en François' [impossible to render in French]), Mahul demonstrates that—returning to Cassin's definition of the untranslatable—the very difficulty of translating this sonnet invites translation and retranslation, in innovative and even virtuosic, if necessarily imperfect ways.

Besides *RVF* 5, especially challenging for translators reluctant to engage with onomastic play is a series of four sonnets in the middle of the *Canzoniere* which all open with the word 'L'aura' (*RVF* 194 and 196–98). As we have seen, this type of sonorous, homonymical pun (Laura/laurel) was not popular with Petrarch's late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers. Nonetheless, nineteenth-century French translators who tackled these sonnets were still forced to find some sort of solution to this further Petrarchan untranslatable. The most literal solution—'La brise' [The breeze]—was possible but unsatisfactory in its loss of the pun on Laura's name.³² The most similar in terms of sound—

³¹ *Choix de sonnets de Pétrarque traduits par Madame S. Emma Mahul des comtes Dejean: seconde édition revue, corrigée et augmentée de la traduction de différentes poésies de Pétrarque* (Florence: Héritiers Botta, 1867), p. 125.

³² In the translation of Francisque Reynard, *Les Rimes de François Pétrarque : traduction nouvelle* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1883), pp. 130–33, all four sonnets start with 'La brise'. See also Emma Mahul, *Sonnets inédits*

‘L’aure’—preserved Laura’s name, but was potentially meaningless, hence, perhaps, the embarrassed italicization of this solution.³³ As Anatole de Montesquiou pointed out in a note to his translation of *RVF* 239 (a *sestina* in which one of the recurrent keywords is also ‘l’aura’/Laura), the putative word ‘l’aure’ is not, alas, French:

Pour la consonnance et le jeu de mots obligé, j’ai essayé l’emploi de ce mot italien francisé. J’aurais bien voulu trouver pour cela quelque autorisation dans notre vieux langage : mais toutes mes recherches ont été vaines ; le mot *aure*, qui, s’il existait, signifierait *brise*, et justifierait, par la langue italienne et par la langue latine, une assez illustre origine, a toujours été étranger à la France.³⁴

[For the sake of consonance and the necessary wordplay, I have experimented with using this Frenchified Italian word. I would have liked very much to find for this some authorization in our old language, but my investigation has been to no avail; the word *aure*, which, if it were to exist, would mean *breeze*, and would prove, through the Italian and Latin languages, quite an illustrious origin, has always been foreign to France.]

Petrarch’s play on ‘l’aura’/Laura has since been traced back to the Provençal troubadour Arnaut Daniel.³⁵ Seemingly unaware of this Occitan model, however, Montesquiou suggests that the creation of a new word, ‘l’aure’, on the model of the Italian, lacks the sanction of historical precedent but is nonetheless too appealing a solution to be discarded. Here we see in miniature how translation can directly enrich and expand a language, by introducing new words and encouraging recourse to neologisms.

For the four ‘L’aura’ sonnets, however, Montesquiou opted not for ‘l’aure’, but rather for other similar sounding, suitably Petrarchan words. Thus, in Montesquiou’s translation *RVF* 194 begins with the phrase ‘L’orageux air’ [The stormy air], retaining the allusion to Laura’s name (‘L’or’/Laure) through premodification of the noun ‘air’ (where the reference to ‘L’aura’ as breeze is retained).³⁶ In contrast, it is precisely the word ‘L’air’ which is chosen by Joseph Poulenc to introduce his translation of all four of these sonnets, in a compromise

traduits de Pétrarque, cinquième publication complétant la totalité des sonnets (Rome: Héritiers Botta, 1877), p. 73, where the translation of *RVF* 197 likewise begins with ‘La brise’.

³³ See, for instance, Gramont, *Poésies de Pétrarque*, pp. 134–36, as well as Philibert Le Duc, *Les Sonnets de Pétrarque: traduction complète en sonnets réguliers, avec introduction et commentaire*, 2 vols (Paris: Leon Willem, 1877–79), II, 12, 16, 18, and 20. ‘L’aure’ and ‘L’Aure’, albeit not in italics, is also the translation chosen by Godefroy, *Poésies complètes de Francesco Petrarca*, pp. 181–84.

³⁴ Montesquiou, *Sonnets, canzones, ballades et sextines de Pétrarque*, II, 112.

³⁵ Arnaut Daniel described himself in one poem as ‘Ieu sui Arnaut qu’amas l’aura’ [I am Arnaut who gathers the breeze], as noted by Gianfranco Contini, ‘Préhistoire de l’aura de Pétrarque’, in *idem, Varianti e altra linguistica: una raccolta di saggi 1938–1968* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), pp. 193–99 (first publ. in *Actes et mémoires du premier congrès international de langue et littérature du Midi de la France* (Avignon: Palais du Roure, 1957), pp. 113–18).

³⁶ Montesquiou, *Sonnets, canzones, ballades et sextines de Pétrarque*, II, 45.

between sense and sound.³⁷ Then, to start *RVF* 196 Montesquiou opts for ‘*L’aurore*’ [The dawn], accompanied by a rather defensive footnote:

Je sais fort bien que, dans le texte, il n’est pas question d’*aurore* ; mais j’ai voulu, par un son, donner l’idée d’un jeu de mots qui plaisait à la tendresse du poète.³⁸

[I know well that the original has nothing to do with *aurore* [dawn]; but I wanted, through a sound, to give the idea of a play on words which pleased the tenderness of the poet].

This choice is sympathetic to the *Canzoniere*, since Laura is, after all, assimilated to Aurora elsewhere (see, for instance, *RVF* 291), although clearly Montesquiou remains uneasy with this solution.

It would be interesting to look at solutions to the opening homonymy of these four ‘L’aura’ sonnets across a wider time period and between different target languages, as well as important to widen the survey to other sonnets in the *Canzoniere* with similar forms of onomastic wordplay. For the present, however, the nineteenth-century French examples cited above amply demonstrate that Laura is, through her very name, ‘what one keeps on (not) translating’. In the absence of any wholly satisfactory solution, translators repeatedly returned to Petrarch’s sonnets as a space of experimentation and compromise. Petrarchan wordplay was, in short, not merely unpopular but also challenging and intriguing for nineteenth-century French translators.

Translating the Body: Gravesites and the 1874 Petrarchan Celebrations

As noted at the start of this essay, translation in an ecclesiastical sphere can refer to the movement of a saint’s relics (whether whole body or fragmented remains) from one resting place to another, the latter usually chosen as a place of greater honour or the centre of particular devotion to the saint in question. The day on which such a translation takes place is often commemorated in liturgical calendars. To take one example, Benezet of Avignon lived in the twelfth century and built a bridge over the Rhone, the famous *pont d’Avignon*, where he was interred in a chapel. In 1669 Benezet’s grave was disturbed by a flood and his body found to be incorrupt. The saint was then translated to Avignon cathedral, though he was

³⁷ Poulenc, *Rimes de Pétrarque* (1877), I, 234 and 236–38.

³⁸ Montesquiou, *Sonnets, canzones, ballades et sextines de Pétrarque*, II, 48.

moved again in the nineteenth century to the church of Saint Didier.³⁹ Neither Laura nor Petrarch have any claims to such sanctity, yet their gravesites bear witness to a similar process of veneration and even a desire for translation, as I will suggest in the final part of this essay.

Interest in Laura's grave is an important strand of French Petrarchism, from the sixteenth century on. The story begins in 1533, when Maurice Scève claimed to have found Laura's grave in a church in Avignon; authenticating evidence included a poem purportedly by Petrarch, as well as a medal depicting a lady with the inscription M.L.M.I., which Scève interpreted as 'Madonna Laura Morta Iace' [Here lies the dead lady Laura].⁴⁰ This exciting discovery might eventually have been dismissed as a hoax, but for the royal *placet* from François I who visited the site and composed a poem in honour of the find.⁴¹ Following Scève (though not all were convinced by his claim), nineteenth-century French Petrarchism did not require the translation of Laura, since her remains were already present in the city where her cult was particularly fervent. Instead, the presence of Laura's body in Avignon on newly French soil, after the city's unification with France at the Revolution, in a certain sense preceded and laid the foundation for the translation of Petrarch's poetry into French, and certainly aided the claim that Petrarch was French, as discussed above.

Petrarch's body, however, lay far from Avignon in the small hilltop village of Arquà. On the occasion of the 1874 celebrations marking five hundred years since Petrarch's death, the translator Edmond Lafond lamented Petrarch's distance from Avignon in the following sonnet:

De saint Pierre le Rhône avait reçu la barque,
Et les papes français se faisaient provençaux,
Lorsqu'un vendredi saint tu vis Laure, ô Pétrarque;
Cinq siècles ont, depuis, passé sur vos tombeaux.

Trop loin d'elle, tu dors sur la colline d'Arque;
Vaucluse te rappelle au milieu de ses eaux;
Les sonneurs de sonnets t'y nomment leur monarque,
Viens compter tes sujets dans ces chanteurs nouveaux.

³⁹ Details from *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, ed. by David Hugh Farmer, 5th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 52–53.

⁴⁰ On this discovery, see Olivier Millet, 'Le tombeau de la morte et la voix du poète: la mémoire de Pétrarque en France autour de 1533', in *Regards sur le passé dans l'Europe des XVIe et XVIIe siècles: actes du colloque organisé par l'Université de Nancy II (14 au 16 décembre 1995)*, ed. by Francine Wild (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 183–95, and Enzo Giudici, 'Bilancio di un'annosa questione: Maurice Scève e "la scoperta" della tomba di Laura', *Quaderni di filologia e lingue romanze*, 2 (1980), 3–70.

⁴¹ The poem found in the grave and supposedly by Petrarch is reproduced in Sade, *Mémoires*, II, 41 ('Notes justificatives'), with the poetic epitaph by François I on p. 42.

Au bruit de nos concerts, dont elle semble fière,
Ta dame, secouant son antique poussière,
Se lève du cercueil que lui garde Avignon.

Triomphe du sonnet qui la rend immortelle !
La voici, grâce aux vers qui célèbrent son nom,
Vieille de cinq cents ans, mais toujours jeune et belle.⁴²

[Of Saint Peter the Rhône had received the ship,
And the French popes were making themselves Provençal,
When one Good Friday you saw Laura, O Petrarch;
Five centuries have, since, passed over your graves.

Too far from her, you sleep on the hill of Arquà;
Vaucluse is calling you back in the middle of her waters;
There the sonnet-ringers name you their monarch,
Come count your subjects in these new singers.

At the sound of our concerts, of which she seems proud,
Your lady, shaking off the ancient dust,
Gets up from the grave which Avignon has kept for her.

Triumph of the sonnet which makes her beautiful!
There she is, thanks to the verses which celebrate her name,
Five hundred years old, but still young and beautiful.]

In this sonnet by a translator of Petrarch, published in an appendix to the work of another translator of the same, the two meanings of translation explored in this essay rub shoulders.⁴³

Translation of Petrarch's sonnets from Italian into French is accompanied by a desire to transport Petrarch's body from Northern Italy to join Laura in Avignon. This translator-poet laments that Petrarch sleeps 'Trop loin' [Too far] from Laura, and seeks to unsettle the cosiness otherwise suggested by the rhyme of 'Pétrarque' and 'Arque' by expounding the greater claims of Avignon on the poet. Laura, meanwhile, is imbued in this sonnet with an odour of sanctity, since she shares with saints such as the aforementioned Benezet the holy attribute of being physically incorrupt. She is, as Lafond declares, 'Vieille de cinq cents ans,

⁴² Edmond Lafond, 'Le centenaire de Pétrarque', cited from 'Appendice: fêtes de Vaucluse et d'Avignon: sonnets à Pétrarque et à Laure', in Le Duc, *Les Sonnets de Pétrarque*, II, 351–82 (pp. 375–76). On the occasion of the 1874 Petrarchan celebrations Lafond's sonnet, as Le Duc notes in a footnote, was awarded third prize and a silver medal under the category *Sonnet sur Pétrarque* [*Sonnet about Petrarch*].

⁴³ For Edmond Lafond's earlier project of translating Petrarch, undertaken with his uncle, see Ernest and Edmond Lafond, *Dante, Pétrarque, Michel-Ange, Tasse: sonnets choisis traduits en vers et précédés d'une étude sur chaque poète* (Paris: Comptoir des Imprimeurs-Unis, 1848), especially pp. 91–326 for the section on Petrarch, which includes translations of 192 sonnets from the *Canzoniere*.

mais toujours jeune et belle' [Five hundred years old, but still young and beautiful]. Laura's incorruptibility is, however, thanks not to saintliness but to poetry, and more specifically the sonnet.

In this case Laura does not need translating because she is already in Avignon, whence she joins her voice to the clamour of Petrarch's nineteenth-century French admirers who desire the translation (in both senses of the word) of his corporeal and poetical remains.⁴⁴ Despite concerns about aspects of Petrarch's poetics (in particular the play on Laura's name, deemed, as we have seen, excessive and puerile), nineteenth-century French readers of the poet were keen to bring Petrarch home to Avignon. Yet it was perhaps Petrarch's resistance to this translation that kept both himself and Laura ripe for retranslation. Returning to Cassin, the untranslatability of Laura—Petrarch's beloved and a symbol of his poetry—is precisely that which ensures that the *Canzoniere* 'keeps on (not) being translated', in different languages across the centuries, in a rich tapestry of reception history of which this essay has followed but one shimmering thread.

⁴⁴ For the pun on 'remains' and an analysis of a wider interest in the graves of poets in the period, see Samantha Matthews, *Poetical Remains: Poets' Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).