

Pending Sparagmos: Encountering the Divine in Ovid, Petrarch and Shakespeare

“I am transformed,” cries the Petrarchan lover, “and still I flee the belling of my hounds.”ⁱ This piteous lament, appearing at the conclusion of Canzone 23 of Petrarch’s *Rime sparse*, appropriates the mythological tale of the hunter Actaeon as an analogy for the lover’s experience in encountering the beloved. Transformed into a stag by the goddess Diana, Actaeon is killed according to the ritual of sparagmos: he is torn to shreds, and by his own hounds. On a meta-textual level, Canzone 23 reflects the overwhelming influence of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (from which source the story of Actaeon was drawn by the Italian poet) upon Petrarch’s work. Further consideration of the heritage of the Actaeon myth reveals a psychologically real embodiment of the tale in the character of the Duke Orsino in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. A study of these three manifestations of the Actaeon myth produces an informative reflection upon the trajectory of literary influence (Ovid upon Petrarch and Petrarch upon the English Renaissance). Beyond this, the disparate Actaeons of these works unite to present a fascinating discourse on the nature of love and man’s encounter with the Divine.

Actaeon, wandering in the woods after a long day of sport, happens upon the goddess Diana, “huntress queen,” bathing in a “sacred grove.”ⁱⁱ The goddess, incensed at having her privacy thus invaded, flings water into the young man’s face and transforms him into a stag. He perishes miserably:

Now they are all around him, tearing deep
Their master’s flesh, the stag that is no stag;
And not until so many countless wounds
Had drained away his lifeblood, was the wrath,
It’s said, of chaste Diana satisfied.ⁱⁱⁱ

The tragic fate of Actaeon is intensified with the revelation that his subjective consciousness withstands metamorphosis, as Ovid himself reflects pityingly:

Would that he were indeed
Absent! But he was there. Would that he watched,
Not felt, the hounds’ (his hounds’) fierce savagery!^{iv}

Actaeon is still Actaeon; so much so, in fact, that when he hears his fellow hunters calling his name and deploring his absence at the kill, he “turned his head.”^v He is fully conscious of his own destruction and is unable to call off his murderers, even though he struggles to address the dogs by name and stop their butchery.

The fate of Actaeon is not chosen arbitrarily; he is a victim of the ritual of sparagmos (σπάργμος). Usually associated with the god Bacchus and his Maenads, or Bacchae, frenzied female followers of the god, this sacrificial dismemberment involved the complete obliteration of the victim and was often followed by omophagia (ομοφαγία) or ritual cannibalism. The bard Orpheus is one of the most famous victims of sparagmos. Orpheus mourned the death of his beloved wife Eurydice and even ventured into the underworld to try and draw her forth. When this attempt failed tragically, he spent his time wandering and singing plaintive airs. He was set upon by “a frenzied band / Of Thracian women,” who, angered that he had spurned their love,

tore him to pieces.^{vi} That this barbaric practice became a conventional metaphor for romantic love must initially inspire some wonder; yet, as will be demonstrated in a close-reading of Petrarch, the underlying philosophy of sparagmos analogically addresses a fundamental aspect of authentic love.

“Ovid,” remarks Robert M. Durling in his introduction Petrarch’s *Rime sparse*, “is omnipresent.”^{vii} The *Rime sparse* is a collection of Italian lyrical poetry arranged according to a fictional chronology for the sake of chronicling the saga of the poet’s unconsummated love for his beloved. Throughout the *Rime sparse*, Petrarch draws upon a network of influences amidst which the elegies and *Metamorphoses* of Ovid are preeminent. Petrarch’s Canzone 23 in particular can be considered as a miniature *Metamorphoses*, encapsulating the sprawling grandeur of the Ovidian text. This poem, the longest of the *Rime sparse* and yet astonishingly brief when compared to the length and breadth of Ovid, takes up a stream of mythological tales in representing the state of the lover: the fate of Cygnus (changed into a swan), the punishment of Battus (turned to stone), the grief of Byblis (who wasted away into a fountain), the transformation of Echo (who dissolved into a disembodied voice), the ravishing of Danae (visited by Jupiter in a shower of gold), and the destruction of Semele (who begged to see Jupiter in all of his glory and was consumed by lightning upon the sight). The conclusion drawn from this parade of victims can be inadequately summarized thus: love transforms and consumes the lover.

What is the special significance of Actaeon for the *Rime sparse*? He too appears in Canzone 23, showcased in a considerable number of lines between the story of Echo and that of Danae:

I followed so far my desire that one day, hunting as I was wont, I went forth, and that lovely cruel wild creature was in a spring naked when the sun burned most strongly. I, who am not appeased by any other sight, stood to gaze on her, whence she felt shame and, to take revenge or to hide herself, sprinkled water in my face with her hand. I shall speak the truth, perhaps it will appear a lie, for I felt myself drawn from my own image and into a solitary wandering stag from wood to wood quickly I am transformed and still I flee the belling of my hounds.^{viii}

The reliance of this encapsulation of the Actaeon story upon the Ovidian narrative is obvious. Most notable among the differences between the two versions, the Petrarchan Actaeon climaxes to a state of *anticipatory* sparagmos – “still I flee the belling of my hounds.” He is both frozen in time and perpetually in action. The transformation of Ovid’s Actaeon is not fully realized until he has been torn to shreds. Petrarch’s Actaeon, frozen in the state of ecstatic openness, is on the verge of absolute consummation in the encounter with the Divine. In a sense, therefore, the Petrarchan Actaeon both survives and everlastingly endures the Divine encounter. The capricious behavior of the “lovely cruel wild creature” is not really the power behind this scene; the beloved is merely a screen to the transformative power of Divine influence.

In light of this, the agency of sparagmos requires special consideration. Ovid’s presentation of the tale of Actaeon relies on a familiar characteristic of Greek mythology – the gods are fickle and of questionable moral outlook. Ovid diplomatically asserts that the justice of the goddess’ deed is arguable:

As the tale spread views varied; some believed

Diana's violence unjust; some praised it,
As proper to her chaste virginity.
Both sides found reason for their point of view.^{ix}

The goddess Diana brutally punishes Actaeon on a mere whim. In contrast, the god Bacchus deplors the sacrilegious murder of Orpheus and even punishes his female followers by turning them into oak trees.^x As noted above, complete destruction of the human when encountering the Divine is characteristic of the *Metamorphoses*. Countless human victims perish in the overwhelming embrace of lusty gods and goddesses. In the light of Petrarch's use of the Greek heritage, several questions must be asked. What will happen to this paradigm of human interaction with the Divine when the God of Christianity enters the scene? Vagaries of mood or morals cannot be attributed to Him. Further, as He is love, should love be presented as bloody dismemberment? Can God be considered in the light of a metaphorical monster, rending a victim limb-from-limb in a brutal, selfish, feverish ecstasy?

The answer to this last (and somewhat facetious) question is resoundingly and obviously negative; nevertheless, the question must be asked. What then, is love in the Christian tradition and what effect will this new conception of love have upon Christian versions of the Actaeon myth? Two things must be taken into consideration in answering this question – first, that love is more than an encounter of the lover and the beloved since it necessarily involves an encounter with God; second, that, as the Greek myths imperfectly demonstrate, man cannot encounter God without being fundamentally changed. As God's majesty is so far beyond human language or understanding, all human tools of expression must be painfully inadequate to the task of describing such an encounter. The very violence of absolute physical destruction insufficiently embodies this fact.

The Actaeon of the *Metamorphoses* dies brutally and passes into immortality through Ovidian composition. Petrarch, in contrast, employs a first-person narrator. The survival of Actaeon therefore becomes a necessity; he cannot write of his experience if he is really physically torn to shreds. The Petrarchan speaker is instead symbolically dismembered. Divine love is both unitive and procreative; by uniting with the Divine, the poet produces his poetry. Through this particular collection of poetry, these "scattered rhymes," the glorified lover sings forth the fragmented elements of his own transformation and glorification. True love explodes the suffocating world of closed subjectivity, expanding the soul of the lover into a paean of consummation.

Later manifestations of Actaeon, particularly in the Elizabethan period, reflect this Christianization of the Greek myth. Petrarch was of monumental importance to the period. Sir Thomas Wyatt, the "father of the English sonnet" (a title he shares with Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey), borrowed heavily from and even directly imitated Petrarch. The preeminence of Petrarchan influence has long been the subject of academic deliberation:

To the newly-consolidated nations of Europe such as England, France and Spain it was Italy that had demonstrated the literary potential of the vernacular; and within Italian literature, despite the considerable prestige of Dante, it was Petrarch who proved the most inimitable of masters.^{xi}

This sociological analysis by Anthony Mortimer is followed by a keen insight on the emotional and, it might be said, spiritual importance of Petrarch:

Above all, perhaps, what the Renaissance saw in Petrarch was a unique combination of introspection and elegance, a way of exploring emotion without losing control.^{xii}

This desire for maintaining “control” seems, at a cursory glance, to be undermined by identification with the Actaeon heritage – to be torn into mutilated fragments and scattered to the winds is not to be in control. And yet, appropriating that symbolic figure to represent a subjective experience frees the lover from the obligation of being himself physically torn to shreds. At least, this is the theory. Actaeon was a highly popular figure during the English Renaissance – he is mentioned in Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, the second sonnet of Fulke Greville’s *Caelica* sequence, and in several of Shakespeare’s plays including *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Julius Caesar*. The premier appearance of the mutilated hunter occurs in *Twelfth Night* with Shakespeare’s creation of the Duke Orsino. Orsino, the new Actaeon, is so conscious of his own symbolic standing that he tries to manipulate the mythological heritage so as to dodge the transformative power of a real encounter with the Divine. He fails, of course; the theory cannot withstand the metamorphosing force of Divine inspiration.

A central character to the plot of *Twelfth Night*, Orsino is often considered as the personification of Elizabethan melancholy.^{xiii} Beyond this grandiose identification, Orsino is characterized for most of the play by the fact that he doesn’t *do* anything. Consumed by his unrequited love for the Countess Olivia and blind to the fact that his clever young eunuch Cesario is really the maiden Viola in disguise, Orsino wallows in self-pity and sends emissaries (including Viola herself) to woo the disdainful Countess. His lack of real action has special significance in the light of an early self-reference to the Actaeon myth:

CURIO	Will you go hunt, my lord?
DUKE ORSINO	What, Curio?
CURIO	The hart.
DUKE ORSINO	Why, so I do, the noblest that I have: O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first, Methought she purged the air of pestilence! That instant was I turn’d into a hart; And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds, E’er since pursue me (I.i.16-24).

Here then is an Actaeon who lazily avoids a second viewing of the beloved. Orsino asserts that he has been transformed by an encounter with the Countess. Playing with the pun of “hart” and “heart,” he bewails his fate, pursued by the “fell and cruel hounds” of his own desires. Like the Petrarchan Actaeon, this new Actaeon remains frozen in anticipatory sparagmos. Personified in human form, just as the Petrarchan Actaeon was manifested through scattered rhymes, the new Actaeon takes on an extraordinary aspect of psychological realism—if Actaeon is frozen in the moment of Divine inspiration, he is incapable of real action.

This inability to accomplish anything is equated to the virtue of constancy in a comment later made by Orsino himself:

For such as I am all true lovers are,
Unstaid and skittish in all motions else

Save in the constant image of the creature
That is beloved (II.iv.14-19).

Here Orsino claims for himself an aesthetic ascendancy as personified love. The passage is inadvertently comical as he addresses these words to Viola (disguised as the eunuch Cesario). His shallow appreciation for the signs of love – Petrarchan conceits, melodramatic wallowing, self-indulgent hypersensitivity, and a preoccupation with superficially heightened experience rivaling that of the Romantic poets (Keats especially) – pales in comparison with the real urgency and pathos of Viola’s secret love for him.

The limitations of Orsino’s love are not merely shown through implied comparison to Viola. Feste, the fool of *Twelfth Night*, challenges Orsino to his face in a startlingly intense moment of character analysis:

Now the melancholy god protect thee, and the tailor make thy doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very opal. I would have men of such constancy put to sea, that their business might be everything, and their intent everywhere; for that’s it that always makes a good voyage of nothing (II.iv.72-77).

This is the Actaeon rut. To be *ancora stormo* – still fleeing – and yet never to arrive at consummation is to be of “everything” and “everywhere,” and yet to arrive at “nothing.” The true transformation of Orsino does not occur in the encounter with Olivia, even though the stage has been set for a sublime Petrarchan experience. Transformation follows on the heels of the fool’s prayer. Orsino’s “doublet” is indeed made “of changeable taffeta;” in the concluding scenes of *Twelfth Night* Viola reveals herself and Orsino determines to marry her (the Countess Olivia having been effectively wooed and wedded by Viola’s twin brother Sebastian).

The pending union of Viola and Orsino is not merely a tidy piece of Shakespearean comedy. The fact that it is *pending* proves this. The Actaeon metaphor so eagerly embraced by the melancholy Orsino has been fully realized in the course of the play. Subtly, Orsino has been transformed. The play concludes with Petrarchan flair – the fullness of the encounter is anticipated, not realized. Its realization hovers in the distance. The Petrarchan paradox of pain and pleasure is also represented in the frustrated eagerness of the uniting lovers. Unlike the Ovidian Actaeon who is no more and the Petrarchan Actaeon who is perpetually fleeing and scattering lyric poems in his wake, this new Actaeon of flesh and blood hurries impatiently towards consummation.

The theological significance of Orsino’s character arc lies precisely upon the fact that Orsino’s transformation is not external but internal. Like the Petrarchan lover, the issue at stake is not that of physical transformation (brought on as a result of the spurious irritation of an ill-tempered goddess) but of a spiritual reformation. Orsino has attempted to present himself as physically transformed – he is moody, he is melancholy, he is morose, and all is attributed to that early vision of Olivia. Love, the Divine impulse that can lead to true transformation, can see beyond the façade of Elizabethan melancholy. The set piece of unrequited passion finds fit contrast in the truly “wonderful” revelations that conclude the play (V.i.217). Love has transformed Orsino unbeknownst to him and has accomplished this feat without histrionics or dismemberment.

Love, as a transformative agent, has many victims in *Twelfth Night*. In a particular way, Viola represents all that is superficial in physical transformation. By merely putting on clothes

in imitation of her brother Sebastian, Viola becomes a completely different person, and even inspires love in Olivia, to Viola's chagrin: "Fortune forbid, my outside hath charmed her!" (II.ii.17). It is interesting to note that Viola, directed by Orsino to "act my woes" and ostentatiously parading the fact that she plays a "part," proves a better wooer of Olivia than Orsino has ever been (I.iv.25; I.v.171).

What has occurred in Olivia and what occurs in the heart of Viola with reference to Orsino, is a surge of the heart. It is precisely this Divinely inspired impulse that Orsino lacks. Only when he becomes a willing victim of transformation – eager to cooperate with the movements of Divine grace, and not fixated on melancholic micromanagement – can true transformation occur. The result of this transformation is easily identifiable. Love transforms and *motivates*. Orsino, characterized early in the play by his lethargic wallowing, becomes a man of action. Filled with the Divine impulse, Orsino goes to see Olivia (he does not yet realize that the true object of his love is Viola) and, in the face of her staunch rejection of him expostulates, "What shall I do?" (V.i.109). No longer content with theatricality, Orsino is eager to be *doing* something.

How does Divine inspiration bring about this astonishing change in Orsino? Love enters through a door that Orsino unknowingly provides. He makes an unwitting confession of his ecstatic openness to love (disguised as Viola) when he tells his young page Cesario: "Thou know'st no less than all; I have unclasped to thee the book even of my secret soul" (I.iv.12-13). Such is the nature of Orsino's (unintentional) submission of agency, a submission that is fully realized at the conclusion of the play:

And since you call'd me master for so long,
Here is my hand: you shall from this time be
Your master's mistress (V.i.314-316).

This submission contrasts sharply with Orsino's early desire to control and determine where and when the Divine impulse will occur. It likewise reforms the piteous cry of Ovid's Actaeon who tried in vain to call out to his hounds: "I am Actaeon, look, I am your master!"^{xiv} The hounds tear their master to shreds; Viola, by exploding (or dismembering) Orsino's Actaeon façade, allows him to become more fully and more perfectly himself (working from her knowledge of his "secret soul"). The result therefore is not mutilation, but liberation.

Just as Canzone 23 can be seen as a miniature of the *Metamorphoses*, the mutilated fragments of the hunter Actaeon can be taken as an analogized representation of the web of influence from Ovid to Petrarch and from Petrarch to the English Renaissance. Actaeon has been spread to the winds in varying states of dismemberment – he is utterly destroyed in Ovid, frozen and arranged in mosaic form by Petrarch to present a consummate image of the lover, and playfully humanized in Shakespeare's Duke Orsino who tries to present himself as Actaeon before he has experienced the critical encounter or undergone real transformation. The Christian tradition reinvigorates the Actaeon myth; love, as a transformative agent, when it is lacking the Divine influence, is empty, shallow, hollow and theatrical. The melancholy Actaeon does not flee, he mopes. In *Twelfth Night*, the truth that man cannot encounter God and remain unchanged finds mete proof, moving beyond the theological limitations of Ovid's tale. Even disguised, the power of the Divine encounter overwhelms the set-piece Petrarchan appropriation of Greek mythological symbolism. Actaeon still flees, but he does so with Divine love, not the shrewish curses of a capricious and spoiled goddess, at his back.

Eleanor Donlon is a freelance writer and editor based out of Charlottesville, VA.
www.eleanordonlon.com

ⁱ Petrarch, *Rime sparse*, Canzone 23, 159-60.

ⁱⁱ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* III. 179; 156.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, III. 252-256.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, III. 249-251.

^v *Ibid.*, III. 249.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, XL. 43-44.

^{vii} Robert M. Durling, introduction to *Rime Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, by Petrarch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 27.

^{viii} Petrarch, Canzone 23, lines 147-160.

^{ix} Ovid, III. 257-260.

^x Ovid, XI. 69-70.

^{xi} Anthony Mortimer Ed., *Petrarch's Canzoniere in the English Renaissance* (Rodopi: New York, 2005), 12.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 12.

^{xiii} Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Pantheon Books, c2004), 509-510.

^{xiv} Ovid, III. 230