

EXTRACT

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From Petrarch to Gaspara Stampa: On the Wings of Arabian Phoenix

New Translations by Barbara Carle

Barbara Carle has completed two new books of translation from Italian into English and French: *Patmos* by Rodolfo Di Biasio (revised translation into English, new translation into French) and *Bambina mattina, Little Morning Child, Fillette du matin*, by Domenico Adriano, Ghenomena, 2013. Her article *Dalle zolle perdute alla finestra: l'identità letteraria dei confini in Lina Galli e Graziana Pentich* will appear in 2014. She is author of three bilingual books of poetry (*Don't Waste My Beauty Non guastare la mia bellezza*, Caramanica, 2006, *New Life Nuova Vita*, Gradiva, 2006, *Tangible Remains Toccare quello che resta*, Ghenomena, 2009) and three books of translation.

Francesco Petrarca 1304-1374

Petrarch requires little introduction. Incomparable poet, innovative Humanist, and brilliant scholar, his major works consist of the *Rime sparse* (*Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*), *I trionfi*, the *Secretum*, and numerous collections of letters. Petrarch's sonnets, *canzoni*, sestinas, and madrigals are the source of inspiration and model for many subsequent poets including Shakespeare, Gongora, the Pléiade poets, the poets of the Italian Renaissance and Gaspara Stampa's *Rime*, to name but a few.

Petrarch's sonnets have been widely translated into English, more recently by David Young, Robert Durling, Mark Musa, and others.¹ We do not wish to ignore previous translations by offering these new versions, simply to suggest a more poetic rendering.

We have chosen three sonnets whose themes and images reappear in the poetry of Gaspara Stampa: XC, *Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi* (memory), CLXXXV, *Questa fenice de l'aurata piuma* (the Arabian phoenix), and CCXXXV, *Lasso, Amor mi trasporta ov'io non voglio* (the ship or vessel). In the first poem the theme of memory blends with that of love for Laura (*l'aura*) and the passage of time. In the second, the mythological Arabian phoenix is compared to Laura (and of course poetry itself – *il lauro*). In the third sonnet,

the ship tossed on a raging sea is the driving metaphor. It is not original, but Petrarch's treatment of it is distinct and unforgettable.

Gaspara Stampa 1523-1554

Gaspara Stampa's complete poems were recently translated into English by Jane Tylus.¹ For scholars of Stampa's opus this edition is most welcome. It includes a critical introduction, commentary, and a rich array of biographical and bibliographical information. It is based on the 1554 edition. A selection of Gaspara's poems was also included in Laura Anna Stortoni and Mary Prentice Lillie's *Women Poets of the Italian Renaissance*² These works are invaluable for in depth understanding and appreciation of Stampa's poetry. Here we offer new versions, more focused on poetic harmony than literal meaning. The Venetian poetess takes up the themes of love and memory while renewing the emblem of the Arabian phoenix and the ship struggling at sea. Along with many of the women poets of the Renaissance, Gaspara was busy imitating Petrarch's sonnets while revising their content, tone, mood, and even their form to fit her own experiences. As the Arabian Phoenix who dies and is reborn from its own ashes, Petrarch's poems die and are reborn in Gaspara Stampa's conscious hands. The polished perfection of Petrarch's love poetry, its concentrated remoteness disappears and is replaced by a more direct, perhaps more raw experience of love, passion, suffering, introspection, hope, and joy. Previous adaptations of Gaspara Stampa's poetry, specifically her sonnet CCVIII, *Amor m'ha fatto tal ch'io vivo in foco* appeared in *Don't Waste My Beauty Non guastare la mia bellezza* (Caramanica, 2006). These imitations were rendered in English and in Italian. The Italian version was co-translated with Antonella Anedda. The present version is more of a translation than an imitation. Nevertheless attempts have been made to recreate corresponding meters, rhymes, and tones as well. Even though she imitates Petrarch's sonnets, Gaspara Stampa's approach is more realistic, more Dantesque, we could say, if we are mindful of Mario Luzi's well known essay titled *L'inferno e il limbo*. Hopefully this microselection from Petrarch's *limbo* and Gaspara Stampa's *Inferno* will open new perspectives.

Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*⁴

XC

Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi
che 'n mille dolci nodi gli avolgea,
e 'l vago lume oltra misura ardea
di quei begli occhi, ch'or ne son sí scarsi;

e 'l viso di pietosi color' farsi,
non so se vero o falso, mi parea:
i' che l'ésca amorosa al petto avea,
qual meraviglia se di súbito arsi?

Non era l'andar suo cosa mortale,
ma d'angelica forma; et le parole
sonavan altro, che pur voce humana.

Uno spirto celeste, un vivo sole
fu quel ch'i' vidi: et se non fosse or tale,
piagha per allentar d'arco non sana.

CLXXXV

Questa fenice de l'aurata piuma
al suo bel collo, candido, gentile,
forma senz'arte un sí caro monile,
ch'ogni cor addolcisce, e 'l mio consuma:
forma un diadema natural ch'alluma
l'aere d'intorno; et 'l tacito focile
d'Amor tragge indi un liquido sottile
foco che m'arde a la più algente bruma.

Purpurea vesta d'un ceruleo lembo
sparso di rose i belli homeri vela:
novo habito, et bellezza unica et sola.

Fama ne l'odorato et ricco grembo
d'arabi monti lei ripone et cela,
che per lo nostra ciel sí altera vola.

Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*

XC

Her aura was scattered in strands of gold
which she had wound in countless knotted crowns,
her lovely light-filled eyes, which have turned old,
once burned beyond their source of greenish brown.

It seemed compassion set her face aglow,
I do not know if it was dreamt or real
the fuse of love that lit me long ago
though I should not wonder since I still feel.

She did not move as any mortal thing
but like angelic dawn, nor were her words
dull sounding like a human, they seemed to sing

like one celestial spirit, sun struck wings
had touched her soul and voice which I first heard
and had they not, my wound would lose its sting.

CLXXXV

This phoenix whose bright plumes of gold adorn
the alabaster glow of her lovely neck
reveals a bright gem effortlessly born
that charms each heart, and my own, to sweet wreck,

she constitutes nature's diadem, vivid
igniter of air so the tacit flint
of Love can then release delicate liquid
inflaming me to burn with frosty glints.

Cerulean edges of her violet dress,
conceal her fair shoulders scattered with roses
uniquely beautiful aura, novel guise.

Fame still proclaims that her sweet scented breast
in Arabian mountains hides and poses
yet she flies so haughtily through our skies.

CCXXXV

Lasso, Amor mi trasporta ov'io non voglio,
et ben m'accorgo che 'l never si varcha,
onde, a chi nel mio cor siede monarcha,
sono importuno assai più ch'i non soglio;

né mai saggio nocchier guardò da scoglio
nave di merci preziose carcha,
quant'io sempre la debole mia barcha
da le percosse del suo duro orgoglio.

Ma lagrimosa pioggia et fieri vènti
d'infiniti sospiri or l'anno spinta,
ch'è nel mio mare horribil notte et verno,

ov' altrui noie, a sé doglie et tormenti
porta, et non altro, già da l'onde vinta,
disarmata di vele et di governo.

Gaspara Stampa, *Rime*⁵ "sol una nocte, et mai non fosse l'alba"
Petrarch, *Rime sparse*, XXII

CIV

O notte, a me più chiara e più beata
che i più beati giorni ed i più chiari,
notte degna da' primi e da' più rari
ingegni esser, non pur da me, lodata;

tu de le gioie mie sola sei stata
fida ministra; tu tutti gli amari
de la la mia vita hai fatto dolci e cari,
resomi in braccio lui che m'ha legata.

Sol mi mancò che non divenni allora
la fortunata Alcmena, a cui stè tanto
più de l'usato a ritornar l'aurora.

Pur così bene io non potrò mai tanto
dir di te, notte candida, ch'ancora
da la materia non sia vinto il canto.

CCXXXV

Ah, Love transports me where I don't want to go
and well I know that all duty is transgressed
thus for the monarch who reigns in my chest
I have become importunate, out of tow.

What helmsman could steer his precious ship through tides
as I have done, never afraid to wrestle
the currents or cliffs, guiding my frail vessel
amidst the battering blows of her harsh pride?

And yet this rain of tears and fearsome winds
of infinite sighs now drive my vessel on
throughout my sea of winter and horrid night

bestowing tedium to her, aches and chagrin
to itself, nothing else, vanquished by strong
sea surfs disarming sails to ungoverned might.

Gaspara Stampa, *Rime*

CIV

Oh night, more blessed and more bright to me
than the most blessed days and the brightest.
Oh night, worthy of praise by the highest
and keenest of minds, not by my ecstasy.

You brought him back to me with tenderness
the one who each joy of mine has governed
disarmed my doubts, dissolving all stubborn
remains of bitterness with sheer sweetness.

It seemed that I became the Alcmene
of dreams for whom a cosmic moan
delayed Aurora's timely return so long

I was the willing subject of Selene.
Oh night, I can't write your glory; you alone
shall shadow the dazzling of my song.

CCVIII

Amor m'ha fatto tal ch'io vivo in foco,
 qual nova salamandra al mondo, e quale
 l'altro di lei non men stranio animale,
 che vive e spira nel medesmo loco.

Le mie delizie son tutte e 'l mio gioco
 viver ardendo e non sentire il male,
 e non curar ch'ei che m'induce a tale
 abbia di me pietà molto né poco.

A pena era anche estinto il primo ardore,
 che accese l'altro Amore, a quel ch'io sento
 fin qui per prova, più vivo e maggiore.

Ed io d'arder amando non mi pento,
 pur che chi m'ha di novo tolto il core
 resti de l'arder mio pago e contento.

CCXXI

A mezzo il mare, ch'io varcai tre anni
 fra dubbi venti, ed era quasi in porto,
 m'ha ricondotta Amor, che a sì gran torto
 è ne' travagli miei pronto e ne' danni;

e per doppiare a' miei disiri i vanni
 un sì chiaro oriente agli occhi ha pòrto,
 che, rimirando lui, prendo conforto,
 e par che manco il travagliar m'affanni.

Un foco eguale al primo foco io sento,
 e, se in sì poco spazio questo è tale,
 che de l'altro non sia maggior, pavento.

Ma che poss'io, se m'è l'arder fatale,
 se volontariamente andar consento
 d'un foco in altro, e d'un in altro male?

CCVIII

Love generated me to live in fire,
like salamanders newly born to earth,
or the just as strange creature who expires
in the same place that brings it back to birth.

My game and my every delight consist
of living fire and never feeling pain,
of never caring if he who causes this
relents the vehemence of his domain.

Soon after the first flame had burned away,
then Love lit up another, which I feel
with more intensity and greater sway.

I don't regret defying fate through love
as long as he who dares again to steal
my heart remains content with the above.

CCXI

Love has transported me back to open sea;
from there for three years I could never flee
although I was near port as winds claimed my sails
now he prepares to increase my travails

by doubling the wings of my former desires
attracting me with bright oriental spires
immersing me with comfort as I learn
new depth so that I'm not afraid to yearn

again. A fire just like the first I feel;
if this, in such tight space, is now the case
I fear it will be greater than the other.

What can I do, if burning is my appeal,
if voluntarily I consent to taste
ill after ill, one fire after another?

Notes

1 Petrarch's Lyric Poems: *The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics*, Francesco Petrarca and Robert M. Durling, Harvard University Press, 1979. *Petrarch: The Canzoniere, or Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, Mark Musa and Barbara Manfredi, Indiana University Press, 1999. *The Poetry of Petrarch*, David Young, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.

2 Gaspara Stampa *The Complete Poems* The 1554 Edition of the "Rime," a Bilingual Edition, Edited by Troy Tower and Jane Tylus. Translated and with an Introduction by Jane Tylus, University of Chicago Press, 2010.

3 *Women Poets of the Italian Renaissance: Courtly Ladies and Courtesans*, Laura Anna Stortoni (Editor), Mary Prentice Lillie (Translator), Italica Press, 2008.

4 Poems quoted in Italian from Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, Testo critico e introduzione di Gianfranco Contini. Annotazioni di Daniele Ponchioli. Torino, Einaudi, 1964, pp. 123, 241, 297.

5 Gaspara Stampa's poems in Italian are quoted as they appear in: Gaspara Stampa, *Rime*, Introduzione di Maria Bellonci, Milano, Rizzoli, 1976, pp. 147, 213, 221.