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A Female Voice in Early Modern Love Poetry – Gaspara Stampa

Johanna Vernqvist

- 1 Art was made by men for men, and it perpetuated as normal, ordinary and unquestioned the control by men of the public sphere. Some women patrons produced minor transgressions of these norms, and such transgressions do at least show how flexible the artistic conventions were, and that women could conceive of shifts in meaning.¹
- 2 In her article “Women as patrons”, Catherine King is concerned with the rules and norms regarding female patrons during the early modern period. Her words above also pinpoint the very notion I will assess in this article; “that women”, here the poet Gaspara Stampa (1523-1554), “could conceive of shifts in meaning” through the very code of art that were “made by men”. In the Cinquecento there was a revolution for women poets in Italy², and Stampa was one of the strongest voices. Her ambition is clear from the very beginning in her collected poems, *Rime* (1554), where she says:

You who hear in these troubled rhymes,
 In these troubled and these dark accents,
 the sound of my amorous laments
 And sufferings that vanquish all others’ –
 Wherever valor is esteemed and prized,
 I hope to find glory among the well-born :
 Glory and not only pardon ; for what
 Gives rise to my laments is so sublime.
 And I hope some woman will be moved to say :
 “Most happy she, who suffered famously
 For such a famous cause !
 Oh, why can’t the fortune that comes
 From loving a lord like him be mine,
 So such a lady and I might walk side by side ?³
- 3 She seeks, not only pardon, but also glory for her work of poetry and she wants to find it among the well-born people. Note also how she especially addresses women. This ambition is rather different from her predecessor and stylistic ideal Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) who writes in his first poem to the *Canzoniere* (1351-53) the following :

All you that hear in scattered rhymes the sound
 Of sighs on which I used to feed my heart
 In youthful error when I was in part
 Another man, and not what I am now,
 For the vain hopes, vain sorrows I avow,
 The tears and discourse of my varied art,
 In any who have played a lover's part
 Pity I hope to find, and pardon too.
 But now I plainly see how I became
 A mocking tale that common people tell,
 And in myself my self I put to shame ;
 And of my raving all the fruit is shame,
 And penitence, and knowing all too well
 That when the world loves is a passing dream.⁴

- 4 Even if she differs from him on several levels, there are no doubts that Stampa emulates Petrarch's sonnet in her own fashion. If both seek pardon, Stampa also looks for *glory*, when Petrarch hopes his readers to *pity* him. And where Stampa speaks, just as Petrarch, to all who can hear her rhymes, she specifically hopes that they will move "some woman". She represents a women's voice both by writing literature as a female author and by addressing women specifically. Petrarch's listeners can be both male and female, but the woman in his poems, does not speak, hence, has no voice of her own. After a short biographical backdrop this article discusses some aspects of Gaspara Stampa's appropriation of the Petrarchan tradition, and how female poet conceives of shifts in meaning regarding women's voices.

A voice is heard

- 5 Gaspara Stampa was born in Padua, Italy, sometime around 1523, as the daughter of jewellery merchant Bartolomeo Stampa and his wife Cecilia. Gaspara's father died when she was still a child and her mother moved with her family to Venice where they had relatives. The Stampa children got well educated, especially for a middle class family, and Cecilia opened her home to hold salon, *ridotti*, frequented by many highly regarded philosophers, artists and writers. Both Gaspara and her older sister Cassandra got an early notice for their musical skills and Gaspara was seen as the most gifted. She got praised for her angel voice and way of playing the lute. This early contact, in her own home, with cultural elite and recognition of her talent probably played a major role in her own entrance to Venice cultural salons. One of the main houses to entertain was Domenico Venier's and his "salon was the preferred haunt of the better literati of Venice and was frequented by a number of foreigners and several artistically inclined ladies".⁵ Conversations often regarded Petrarch and Petrarchism, the poetic imitation of his work, and it must have been a perfect milieu for Stampa who "doubtlessly learned a great deal about versification, meter, rhythm, cadence, imagery, form and rhyme", as Bassanese points out.⁶
- 6 Petrarchism is further described in Encyclopædia Britannica as the literary phenomenon that developed within Petrarch's own lifetime and kept growing over the three following centuries. It had a deep influence in Italy and spread to Spain, France and England rapidly. "His followers did not merely imitate but accepted his practice of strict literary discipline and his forms, including his preference for the sonnet—without which the European literary Renaissance would be unthinkable."⁷ Further, Petrarchism is known for

its clear motifs: women's beauty, love as bittersweet pain and lover who wishes to die. Petrarch's lady, Laura, is like Dante's Beatrice, an idealised perfection looking down on the poet from heaven, guiding man towards spiritual love and completion:

When sometimes Love comes in that lovely face,
 Alone among the other ladies there,
 As each, compared to her, is far less fair,
 By so much does my will to love increase.
 I bless the time and very hour and place
 That raised my eyes up to a height so rare,
 And say : *my soul*, now ought you to declare
 Your thanks that you were honoured with such grace.
 From her there comes to you the thought of love
 That, followed, *leads you to the highest good*,
Careless of all that other men regard ;
 From her there comes the blithe and graceful mood
 That *shows the right-hand path to heaven above ;*
 And thus my hope already walks with pride.
 (11)⁸

- 7 Petrarch's ideal love is a question of duality, where physical desire is considered low and misguiding, whereas spiritual desire is considered high and fulfilling. In sonnet 13 above, the desire awakened by the sight of the woman, through the eye, moves towards the divine and most highly regarded love. The woman Laura, the object of desire, is rather to be seen as a function, a guide, leading the man ("my soul") on the right path towards spiritual completeness. In the italicized sections we read how she "*leads you to the highest good*" and further "*shows the right-hand path to heaven above*". This ideal was not only present in Petrarch's poems. It got even more defined in one of the most popular philosophies on love during the early modern period, starting in Marsilio Ficino's (1433-1499) *De amore* (1474), and had a great influence on love literature written through these centuries –Neoplatonism. We can also recognize the heritage from troubadour lyrics, that have their roots in the Middle Ages in Southern France. The troubadours created a courtly lyrical style where praise and love of (married) noblewomen was the core.
- 8 However, the awareness of tradition and stylistic ideal regarding love poetry means something else for Gaspara Stampa as a female poet than to male Petrarchan followers. Stampa was not alone, but the period has come to represent a sort of revolution for female writers in Italy. Yet, Stampa lives and writes within a code created by and for men, where the voice traditionally belongs to a male subject. As Gordon Braden writes: "Depriving the worshipped woman of speech is part of the nature and, indeed, the purpose of Petrarchism".⁹ Despite this, it is possible for her as a woman to write Petrarchan love poetry from a female point of view. As a matter of fact, the woman speaks from a subject position.

Thus do I turn to write

- 9 As mentioned above, Stampa is rather frank in her ambition with her literary work, a notion that separates her from her predecessor Petrarch and the tradition following him. As we remember, she says: "wherever valor is esteemed and prized, I hope to find glory among the well-born: glory and not only pardon". Petrarch is rhetorically more humble and dismisses his early poems, or at least that is how he wants to portray himself. After

all, the poems were written over a forty-year period, so clearly they were not only early works. However, this first poem of Stampa is not only a re-written version of Petrarch's first sonnet, but also alludes to another of his works – the *Triumphus Cupidinis*, in which Sappho takes part. Stampa's last section of the sonnet describes how she wishes to "walk side by side", a *paro*, with this great female poet from the ancient times, so highly regarded during Stampa's own time and still in our days¹⁰. She brings up Sappho and she also repeatedly mentions other great poets, mostly ancient but also of her own time. The comparison with these literary superstars clearly shows her own ambition and she also points out her own uniqueness among them. Jane Tylus even means that poems like the one below, 114, shows a "glimpse [...] of self-confidence" that does not consider male lover as the primary subject of her poems, but Stampa herself¹¹:

But since he who sang Sörgue and Monginevro
 Along with the great Homer and Virgil,
 Would hardly be enough to tell the truth,
 Reason mandates that memory is stilled.
 Thus do I turn to write of this alone,
 The stories of my joyous griefs
 That make me unique among all others,(162)¹²

- 10 Over Christmas 1548, Stampa gets introduced to the man who will inspire her "stories of her joyous griefs"; Count Collaltino di Collalto. They become lovers for three years, but their relationship will never end up into a marriage. Collalto spends several long periods away from Italy, mostly in France, serving as a soldier and he finally leaves Stampa, probably due to her lower social status. Early in Stampa's *Rime*, in sonnet 17, we can read:

Holy angels, I don't envy you one bit
 Your many glories and your many gifts,
 And those desires that are granted in full
 As you stand, forever, before the great Lord:
 Because my delights are such that by human
 Hearts they can barely be conceived,
 As long as those calm lights are before me
 Of which it suits me always to write, and sing.
 And just as you take solace and life itself
 From his gaze in heaven, so do I,
 Down here below, from that infinite beauty.
 Only in this does your joy outpace mine :
 Your glory is eternal, unchanging,
 While mine – too soon will it die.
 (73)¹³

- 11 First of all, we can see how the subject of the poem is female, speaking with a woman's voice from a woman's point of view. Hence, Stampa creates a female subject position that is in total contrast with the literary code or view on the poet's right to free innovation. Second, the object here is a man, who in his turn is deprived of voice. The traditional positions and the purpose of Petrarchism, as described by Gordon Braden above, are being totally reversed – the man has become the silent muse! See how this is illustrated in sonnet 3: "His holy, revered, irresistible shade/ rushes through my heart, an impetuous storm,/ clearing out all that's ignorant and base;/ it raises me up from lowly places,/ renews my style, renders gentle my song,/ and always awakens talent in my soul".¹⁴ Mary B. Moore says in her *Desiring Voices* that Stampa, on one hand follows the Petrarchan stylistic code, but on the other, renews, transgresses and creates a new ideal of love which is in opposition to the Petrarchan and also, in my opinion, the Neoplatonic ideal¹⁵.

Stampa does not seek a path from an earthly love to a higher spiritual love, as in the tradition and ideal way, when she says: “Holy angels, I don’t envy you one bit/ your many glories and many gifts”. The female subject in the poem is praising physical love, bounded to human heart (and body) “down here below” and there is only one thing in which the angels “outpace” her: “your glory is eternal, unchanging,/ while mine – too soon will it die”. But, this longing and knowledge about the finality of earthly love is the very fuel of desire! Let us have a look at sonnet 59:

Those hot tears and those sighs that you see me
Expelling so forcefully they could bring
The storm-tossed sea to a sudden halt
When it’s at its wildest and most violent:
How can you stand to watch me, with eyes
Not merely calm but contented ?
You must have a heart of fierce tigers or serpents
To survive on my harsh sufferings alone !
Ah, at least delay by an hour or two
Your going forth, on which you so insist,
So I can accustom myself to new heartbreak,
Because your sudden disappearance
Could take from me my life, which I cherish
Only insofar as it can serve you.
(109)¹⁶

- 12 In Stampa’s *Rime*, physical passion is central, if not necessary. In the poems, the dual point of view on love divided between low and high, bad and good, and the misogyny the Petrarchism traditionally stands for (with roots all the way down to Aristotle) gets thrown over. As said above, the longing and the finality of earthly love is a central theme. We can see how the female subject suffers from a love that does not get the strong response she desires: “how can you stand to watch me, with eyes/ not merely calm but contented?” and how life is not worth living without the man she desires: “because your sudden disappearance/ could take from me my life, which I cherish/ only insofar as it can serve you”. When other poets, not only male but female such as the famous Vittoria Colonna, writes about the longing for a deceased love (a husband in Colonna’s poems and Laura in Petrarch’s); Stampa loves, longs, desires and misses a very much alive *lover* (not a husband). The following poem (number 38) is another perfect example:

Whenever sighs issue from my heart
As they do so often, now burning, now spent,
Ever since the day I chose as my sun those eyes
That at first glance wounded me to the death,
Off they go toward the hill on which I gaze –
No matter that it’s far away – along
With all my thoughts and feelings ; no use
Restraining them or calling them back,
Because their only true and proper home
Is those handsome eyes and that divine beauty
That first awakened my desire.
Oh, if they could just be met with pity !
A thing I don’t dare hope for, since I’m used
To finding there only cruelty.
(91)¹⁷

- 13 “The hill” (*il bel Colle*) on which she gazes is obviously Collalto. The longing, the pain and the pleasure of earthly love is clear and there is no use in forcing them away “because

their only true and proper home/ is those handsome eyes and that divine beauty/ that first awakened my desire”. As Jane Tylus says in the introduction to *Rime*: “the heightened sensuality of her verse, particularly for a woman poet, is largely a new phenomenon. Surely it is missing in the poetry of Stampa’s contemporary Vittoria Colonna”¹⁸. Hence, the division of love between sinful and heavenly is not in Stampa’s interest. On the contrary, her love is earthbound where body and soul are one. Completion is not found in death nor in the union with the beloved in heaven, but in the (physical) union with the man she desires while they both are alive and walking the Earth.

Unique among all others

- 14 Stampa is not only a woman following a literary code created by and for men, she writes her poetry with confidence, takes tone and makes woman’s voice heard where it traditionally does not exist. She makes a man a subject of her poems, hence he becomes both a muse and an object deprived of voice. She echoes, or even rewrites, Petrarchan poems, and she compares herself to both him and other legendary poets. Her renewing and individual style unifies body and soul in an earthly bound love. It contradicts both the literary love ideal she emulates and the well-established Neoplatonic philosophy on love. Undoubtedly it makes her “unique among all others”.

ENDNOTES

1. Catherine King, “Women as patrons: nuns, widows and rulers”, p. 243-266, in *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion 1280-1400*, ed. Diana Norman, (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1995), p. 266.
2. See Virginia Cox, *Women’s writing in Italy 1400-1650*, (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2008).
3. “Voi ch’ascoltate in queste meste rime,/ In questi mesti, in questi oscuri accenti/ Il suon de gli amorosi miei lamenti,/ E de le pene mie tra l’altre prime/ Ove fia chi valor’ apprezzzi, e stime,// Gloria, non che perdon, de’ miei lamenti/ Spero trovar fra le ben nate genti;/ Poi che la lor cagione è sì sublime./ E spero ancor, che debba dir qualch’una,// Felicissima lei, da che sostenne/ Per sì Chiara cagion danno sì chiaro/ Deh, perche tant’Amor, tanta Fortuna// Per sì nobil Signor’ à me non venne,/ Ch’anch’io n’andrei con tanta Donna à paro?” Gaspara Stampa, *The Complete Poems. The 1554 Edition of the “Rime”, a Bilingual Edition*, ed. Troy Tower & Jane Tylus, trans. Jane Tylus, (Chicago & London, 2010), p. 58, 59. In the following I will give the page reference directly after quotes from this volume.
4. Voi ch’ascoltate in rime sparse il suono/ di quei sospiri ond’io nudriva ’l core/ in sul mio primo giovanile errore/ quand’era in parte altr’uom da quel ch’i sono, // del vario stile in ch’io piango et ragiono,/ fra le vane speranze e ’l van dolore,/ ove sia chi per prova intenda amore,/ spero trovar pietà, non ché perdono.// Ma ben veggio or sì come al popol tutto/ favola fui gran tempo, onde sovente/ di me medesimo meco mi vergogno; // et del mio vaneggiar vergogna è ’l frutto,/ e ’l pentérsi, e ’l conoscer chiaramente/ che quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno. Francesco

Petrarch, *Canzoniere. Selected Poems*, trans. Anthony Mortimer, (Penguin Classics, London, 2002), p. 3, 2. In the following I will give the page reference directly after quotes from this volume.

5. Fiora A. Bassanese, *Gaspara Stampa*, (Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1982), p. 11-12.

6. Bassanese, 1982, p. 12.

7. Britannica Encyclopædia online, Linköping University Library 2012-10-11, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/297281/Italian-literature/12511/Petrarch>

8. "Quando fra l'donne ad ora ad ora/ Amor vien nel bel viso di costei,/ quanto ciascuna é men bella di lei/ tanto cresce 'l desio che m'innamora// l' benedico il loco e 'l tempo e l'ora/ che sì alto miraron gli occhi mei,/ e dico : Anima, assai ringrazia dei/ che fosti a tanto onor degnata allora//b Da lei ti ven l'amoroso pensiero,/ che mentre 'l segui al sommo ben t'invia,/ poco prezzando quel ch'ogni uom desia ;// da lei vien l'animosa leggiadria/ ch'al ciel ti scorge per destro sentero,/ sì ch'i' vo già de la speranza altero., p. 10, 11.

9. Gordon Braden, "Gaspara Stampa and the gender of Petrarchism." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 38.2 (1996) : 115+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 5 Apr. 2012. Document URL <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA89929249&v=2.1&u=link&it=r&p=LitRG&sw=w>

10. Jane Tylus, "Introduction" in *Stampa, The Complete Poems*. p. 21.

11. Ibid., p. 25-26.

12. Ma, perche chi cantò Sorgia e Gebenna,/ E seco iln gran Virgilio, é'l grande Homero/ Non basteriano à raccontarne il vero/ Ragion, ch'io taccia à la memoria accenna.// Però mi volga à scriber solamente/ L'histoire de le mie gioiose pene,/ Che mi fan singolar fra l' altra gente., p. 161, 162.

13. Io non v'invidio punto Angeli santi/ Le vostre tante glire, e tanti beni,/ E que' disir di ciò, che barman, pieni ;/ Stando voi sempre à l'alto Sire avanti,/ Perche I dilette miei son tali, e tanti,/ Che non posson capire in cor terreni ;/ Mentr'ho davanti i lumi almi, e sereni,/ Di ciu conven, che sempre scriva, e canti./ E come in ciel gran refrigerio, e vita,/ Dal volto suo solete voi fruire/ Tal'io qua giù da la beltà infinita./ In questo sol vincete il mio gioire,/ Che la vostra è eternal, e stabilita,/ E la mia Gloria può tosto finire., p. 72, 73.

14. "La cui sacra, honorata, e fatal' ombra/ Dal mio cor, quasi subita tempesta,/ Ogni ignoranza, ogni bassezza sgombra./ Questa da basso luogo m'erge, e questa/ Mi rinova lo stil, la vena adombra ;/ Tanta virtù nel'alma ogn'hor mi desta." p. 60, 61.

15. Mary B. Moore, "Body of Light, Body of Matter. Self-Reference as Self-Modeling in Gaspara Stampa" in *Desiring Voices. Women Soneteers and Petrarchism*, (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale & Edwardsville, 2000), p. 59-60.

16. "Quelle lagrime calde, e quei sospiri,/ Che vedete, ch'iosprago sì cocenti,/ Da poter' arrestar' il mar co' venti/ Quando avien, ch'ei più frema, e più s'adiri,/ Come potete voi, co i vostri giri/ Rimirar non pur queti, ma contenti ?/ O' cor di fere Tigri, e di Serpenti,/ Che vive sol de' duri miei martiri,/ Deh prolungate almen per alcun'hore/ Questa vostra ostinata dipartita,/ Fin, che m'usi à portar tanto dolore ;/ Perciò ch'è così subita spraita/ Oi potrei de la vita restar fuore,/ Sol, per servir' à voi, da me gradita.", p. 108, 109.

17. Qualunque dal mio petto esce sospiro,/ Ch'escono adhor adhor' ardenti e spessi/ Dal dí, che per mio/ Sole gli occhi elessi,/Ch'è prima vista à morte mi feriro./Vanno verso il bel Colle, ove pur miro,/Benche lontana, & vanno anche con essi/I miei pensieri, e tutti I sensi stessi ;/Nè val, s'io li ritengo, ò li ritiro./Perche la propria loro e vera stanza/ Son que' begli occhi, e quella alma beltade,/ Che prima mi destar la disianza./ O'pur sieno ivi accolti da pietade,/ Di che non spero poi, che per usanza/ Vi suol sempre haver luogo crudeltade., p. 90, 91.

18. Jane Tylus, "Introduction", p. 23.

ABSTRACTS

In the 16th century a revolution took place for women poets in Italy and Gaspara Stampa (1523-1554) was one of the strongest voices of the period. She is not only a woman writing within a literary code created by and for men, Petrarchism – she writes her poetry with confidence, takes tone and makes a woman's voice heard where it traditionally does not exist. She goes against ideals and creates female speaking and loving subject. At the same time, she makes man her muse and silent object of her praise. And where the tradition divides love in high and low, heavenly and earthbound, Stampa seeks union of body and soul, a union of the two lovers, because without love life is not even worth living.

Au XVI^e siècle a lieu une révolution pour les femmes poètes en Italie et Gaspara Stampa (1523-1554) est l'une des voix les plus fortes de cette période. En plus d'être une femme écrivant au sein d'un code littéraire créé par et pour les hommes – le pétrarquisme – sa poésie est empreinte de confiance, elle fait résonner la voix d'une femme où il n'en existe traditionnellement pas. Elle s'oppose aux idéaux et donne la parole à un sujet féminin plein d'amour. Dans le même temps, elle fait de l'homme sa muse et l'objet silencieux de ses louanges. Là où la tradition divise l'amour entre le haut et le bas, le céleste et le terrestre, Stampa cherche l'union du corps et de l'âme, ainsi que celle des deux amants, puisque sans amour la vie ne vaut pas la peine d'être vécue.

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Johanna Vernqvist is a doctoral student at the research school Language and Culture in Europe at Linköping University. Her interest is in the construction of gender and sexuality during the pre- and early Modern period of history, with special focus on female authorships. The aim in her project is to assess how desire, gender, love and sexuality are represented in Marguerite de Navarre's (1492-1549) *Heptameron* (1559) as well as in the poetry of Louise Labé (1526-1566) and Gaspara Stampa (1523-1554). She asks questions such as : What kind of discourses about power impacts the construction of sexuality and gender ? Who is allowed to desire whom and how is the desire represented ? And more specifically, which opportunities to transgress norms does the literary expression allow and what kind of strategies does the writers make use of in their literary expressions ?