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"I LONG TO STRIDE BEHIND MY LORD": THE YEARNING VOICE IN VITTORIA COLONNA'S SONNETS

ABSTRACT

Vittoria Colonna's selected sonnets explore the sacred-profane dichotomy through the tension between earthly and divine forms of love. Colonna acknowledges that even though she maintains a strong faith, spiritual purity can be unattainable due to earthbound concerns. The contradictory feelings of holding a privileged position in the material world and longing for the eternal are poeticised with the clash between the earthly and the supernatural in Colonna's poetry. The analysis of the selected sonnets intends to highlight the poet's conflicting voices and personas as both a courtly woman and a devout follower of Christ. This study, therefore, focuses on Colonna's selected sonnets to illustrate how the poet uses imagery to contrast the notion of faith and 'false' desires from an Aristotelian perspective. A close reading of the poems reveals Colonna's literary complexity and the poet's religious attitude in creating the sonnets for Christ during a time when the profane challenged the sacred. The study concludes that Colonna's sonnets transcend personal expression in a didactic manner by constructing a space for hope, potentially offering solace not only to Colonna but to others as well.

Keywords: Vittoria Colonna, Metaphysical voice, Extraterrestrial sphere, Yearning, Passion, Close reading.

"EFENDİMİN ARINDAN YÜRÜMEYE CAN ATIYORUM": VITTORIA COLONNA'NIN SONELERİNDE ÖZLEM DOLU SES

ÖZET

Vittoria Colonna'dan seçme soneler aşkın dünyevi ve ilahi biçimleri arasındaki gerilim üzerinden kutsal-dünyevi ikilemini irdeler. Colonna, güçlü bir inanca sahip olsa da dünyevi kaygılar nedeniyle ruhani saflığa ulaşamayabileceğini kabul eder. Maddi dünyada ayrıcalıklı bir konuma sahip olmanın ve ebedi olana duyulan özlemin çelişkili duyguları, Colonna'nın şiirinde dünyevi ve doğüstü olan arasındaki çatışmayla şiirleştirilir. Seçilen sonelerin analizi, şairin hem saraylı bir kadın hem de İsa'nın dindar bir inananı olarak çelişen seslerini ve personalarını vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, Colonna'nın seçilmiş sonelerine odaklanarak şairin Aristotelesçi bir perspektiften inanç ve 'yanlış' arzular kavramlarını karşılaştırmak için imgeleri nasıl kullandığını göstermektedir. Şiirlerin yakından okunması, Colonna'nın edebi karmaşıklığını ve şairin, profan olanın kutsala meydan okuduğu bir dönemde İsa için soneler yazarken takındığı dini tavrı ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, Colonna'nın sonelerinin umut için bir alan inşa ederek didaktik bir şekilde kişisel ifadenin ötesine geçtiği ve potansiyel olarak sadece Colonna'ya değil başkalarına da teselli sunduğu sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Vittoria Colonna, Metafizik ses, Dünya dışı alan, Özlem, Tutku, Yakın okuma.

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Introduction

Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547) is one of the prominent women poets and one of the most active supporters of the literary patronage system during the Renaissance period. Being raised within the circles of an aristocratic family, Colonna had the opportunity to demonstrate her genius and creativity through composing poems and writing philosophical letters to eminent friends such as Michelangelo Buonarroti, Pietro Bembo and Baldassare Castiglione. Colonna had the opportunity to study Petrarch's *Rime* with the help of Pietro Bembo and imitate the Petrarchan sonnet form in her poems too. Moreover, Michelangelo influenced Colonna's intellectual concerns and her political ideas on the perception of faith as being a supporter of the reformist movement (Bassanese, 2007; Brundin 2001; Debby, 2003; Gibaldi, 1987; Nagel, 1997; Nova, 1997). During the debates about the church reform, the two exhibit a common reformist attitude among an "elite group of writers, theologians, and artists" (D'Elia, 2006, p. 95) and even the works of Colonna and Michelangelo get a similar response, as "Vittoria Colonna's poems were criticized as heretical as early as 1540, and Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* was attacked for indecorum as soon as it was finished in 1541" (D'Elia, 2006, p. 95). Her close bond with Michelangelo denotes the predominance of an Aristotelian regard for virtue and friendship, as Aristotle discusses in such works as *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Metaphysics*. Although reading Colonna's poetry with Aristotelian concepts is not the main concern of this study, such an attempt can delineate Colonna's unique position as a woman poet blending both neoplatonist elements with the Aristotelian ones. In the case of mimesis, Sidney also exemplifies the possibility of "a synthesis of both Platonic and Aristotelian notions of imitation" (Mete, 2018, p. 221). However, unlike Sidney's technical concern, Colonna takes the Aristotelian philosophy as mutually complementary when she feels the popular neoplatonic ideas of her time do not console her conflicting mood. In this regard, Diana Robin points out that "as her friendship with Michelangelo deepened and the two exchanged letters, sonnets, and gifts of drawings, Colonna's poetic involvement in reform theology intensified" (2012, p. 4). However, Maratsos states that "privately conceived and shared, these objects did not derive from the traditional institutions of Catholic patronage" (2017, p. 69). In his analysis of the letters between Colonna and Michelangelo, Nagel (1997) refers to an intellectual and divine progress between the two friends. Since Colonna is after wisdom in the way Aristotle defines it as "knowledge about certain causes and principles" (1995, p. 3346) in *Metaphysics* and she "by nature desire(s) to know" (Aristotle, 1995, p. 3343), her connection with Michelangelo triggers the possibility of fulfillment in her intellectual and spiritual journey. Additionally, the intellectual reciprocity between the two is a fruitful one for Colonna's poetry and her political stance since such a connection is away from any implication of carnal or courtly qualities in her time. Hughes discusses Aristotle's virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics* as follows, "living a worthwhile life requires not only that we have a well-rounded and balanced character, but also that we have developed the intellectual skills needed to grasp which choices we need to make as we go along" (2001, p. 11). Thus, Colonna's some sonnets, such as sonnet 13, can implicate a balanced mutual love and respect between Michelangelo and the poet, which presents an Aristotelian sense of virtue based on temperance as he argues in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1995, pp. 3752-3). Moreover, as Agoston points out, "The distinctive texture of their surviving written and visual exchanges conforms neither to traditional gender roles nor to period social hierarchy" (2005, p. 1186). Nagel (1997) suggests a similar perspective to the mutual connection between the two. As Sara M. Adler clarifies, "Michelangelo was single and had a reputation for homosexuality. Colonna, who had

married, was most probably heterosexual, though the way she conveys her attention to the opposite sex in her poetry is sublimated to and legitimated by a sense of love as spiritual rather than physical and sexual” (2015, p. 5), which creates a Petrarchan tension between the imagined world and the corporeal one throughout her sonnets. Even though she expresses her love for her husband in sonnet one for instance, the poet still retains the same metaphysical attitude glorifying the possibility of the eternal through a unique exemption from the limitative worlds of the material and the social. In the Book IX of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle elaborates on friendship as one of the highest forms of human relationship, essential for moral growth and happiness (1995, pp. 3918-9) with an emphasis on “its justification and its importance” (Hughes, 2001, p. 11). Aristotle identifies three qualities about relationships as utilitarian, pleasurable, and the loving kind, where the greatest good is between virtuous people who motivate and contribute to each other. Such is Colonna’s interaction with Michelangelo, an Aristotelian ideal of friendship based on respect, admiration, and involvement in their search for eternal and moral truth. Likewise, in the sonnets selected, the need to be with those who lead to becoming better in character underlines the yearning for such an Aristotelian highest form of friendship. Thus, the friendship between Colonna and Michelangelo in her daily life goes in parallel with the poet’s motivation to create the persona of Christ she longs for and seeks true companionship.

Colonna as the marchioness of Pescara represents the nobility and high social rank, but in her spiritual world, to which the readers can have access through her poems, she symbolises her time’s humble, devout woman image, even “a religious mentor to artists and poets, among them Michelangelo and Pietro Aret” (Debby, 2003, p. 30). In the Book II of *Rhetoric*, Aristotle discusses that “family happiness” and “bodily advantages” bring not only “good fortune” but also “piety, and the respect for the divine power” (1995, p. 4751). Colonna exemplifies such a medieval perception of piety in a time of emerging scientific discoveries and religious reform. Even so, as Adler elaborates, “Colonna countered the limitations posed to her gender, moreover, as a woman, clearly confident and proud of being one” (2000, p. 311). In such a manner, Colonna keeps her sovereignty as the representative of a popular literary sphere in the Renaissance by breaking the conventional Aristotelian classification. In other words, she subverts the idea Aristotle asserts with the words, “All classes must be deemed to have their special attributes; as the poet says of women, ‘Silence is a woman’s glory,’ but this is not equally the glory of man” in *Politics* (1995, p. 4293). Contrary to Aristotle’s gendered hierarchy, Colonna consolidates her position in the realm of literary practice by including herself in the public and intellectual space and offering a peculiar voice through her sonnets. Thus, Colonna resists the Aristotelian prejudice that regards women as mere passive objects. From another perspective, as Qestermark-Johansen states, “her deep involvement with the Catholic Reform movement marked her out as a woman of power, intellect, and influence, while at the same time, it kept her safely within the female domain of religious devotion” (1999, p. 271). Her social status fences the attacks of misogynists, a paradoxically common attitude in the rebirth of fine arts and sciences when a woman intellectual is concerned, originating from the medieval heritage and predominance of Aristotelianism as it happened in the case of Christine de Pizan. Roy Marz, a modern poet, composes a poem about the death of Colonna to express his sympathy towards the hardship of existing as a woman intellectual in the male-dominated world in such lines as “I, who sent this fur blanket because you sniffed, Work in the cold chapel, the fingers swell double, I groin them. . .” (1951, p. 280). When Roy Marz’s poem “Vittoria Colonna” (1951) is reconsidered from the privileges provided by the aristocratic circles, the poet reflects his imagined Colonna in his eulogy conflicting with historical knowledge. For

instance, the lines describing her death in parallel with an open enmity towards men, "And men who die more frequently than women/ Never learn to die with a woman's ease" (1951, p. 280) demonstrate the difference from the perspective of serenity even in the case of death. However, such poetisation of Colonna conflicts with the lyric I in Colonna's poems since she voices her sorrow for the loss of her loved ones and a prevalent uneasiness in the most sonnets. Thus, modern portrayals like Roy Marz's poem may overemphasise the hardships Colonna endured. Lines like "I, who sent this fur blanket because you sniffed . . ." (1951, p. 280) depicting Colonna working in harsh conditions may not align with the privileges of her social class. Despite the challenges faced by women of her era, her aristocratic background provided a degree of protection. While the contemporary interpretations like Marz's poem offer valuable insights, it is more plausible to ground them in a historical context by examining both biographical details and Colonna's own writings, which clarifies the image of Colonna as a unique intellectual of her time.

Diffley suggests that Colonna's poetical and artistic development can be classified into three periods, each of which represents a turning point in gaining a new literary and religious stance as follows, "First, before 1538, she decided to abandon the traditional love lyric. Second, she moved through a transitional period (1538-40) during which she continued to elaborate the earlier themes of love but also tried out more religious ones. Third, after 1540, religious themes dominated all her poetry." (1987, p. 756). The generic transformation from a secular stance to a more religious one in Colonna's poetry delineates both her dependence on the Petrarchan sonnet tradition and her departure from the conventional love poetry tradition in the form of a spiritual journey triggered by and through 'poetry' as an artistic exposition of her inner conflicts.

However, the aim of this study is not to evaluate Colonna's place and artistic importance from a historical perspective. The study investigates the first ten sonnets of Colonna from a thematic perspective to demonstrate how Colonna's poems combine both carnal and spiritual forms of love into an amalgamated unity of introspection and extrospection. As Colonna is a devoutly religious woman and her feelings about love are a combination of sensual and non-sensual forms of it, the sonnets selected present the clash of *philia* as Aristotle elaborates in *Nicomachean Ethics* and *eros*. Since the poet supports the Aristotelian perception of true love and a virtuous life through her affection for the image of Christ she recreates, her sonnets are evaluated to demonstrate her philosophical depth and richness in meaning besides the literariness of her writing. Despite her access to earthly pleasures as a member of the court, Colonna freshens her sincere enthusiasm towards spiritual gaining in her poems, which again reflects an Aristotelian manner against the gradual shift of spirituality's meaning during the early modern age. Yet, her love for Christ is embodied through the basic elements of the earth, air, water, and fire. In his analysis of Paolo Giovio's *Notable Men and Women of Our Time*, Gouwens points out that Giovio praises Colonna "as the ideal noblewoman" (2015, p. 33) and uses Empedocles' "four-part theory of roots" (Kingsley & Parry, 2019, para. 1) to signify the harmony of intellectual, divine and corporeal beauty in Colonna (Gouwens, 2015, pp. 53-54). From another perspective, Colonna's materialising the experience of self-suffering and endurance through concrete images reflecting the basic elements in nature denotes the poet's fluctuating sensibility towards the borders of corporeal and spiritual realms. Relatedly, the study concerns itself with the influence of her religious attitude on the poems written not only for herself but for an ambiguous recipient. The fluctuations between the terrestrial and extraterrestrial spheres arouse essential conflicting emotions about occupying a certain space in the physical world and yearning for the eternal one.

The perception of death is also the concern of this study. Colonna's descriptions of death reflect the sorrow felt for the crucifixion. The poems selected employ specific biblical images and include references to ecclesiastical sources. Hence, the study focuses on emphasising on the artistic quality and resources of a woman writer, Colonna, which calls to mind the attitude of Milton. In this sense, the poems function as an outlet for the intense passion for Christ and faith. Thus, a close reading of the selected poems can disclose the literariness or the literary complexity of Colonna.

The Sonnets for Christ

Colonna's perception of the terrestrial sphere and the extraterrestrial sphere is poeticised through the sonnets written to express the poet's intense love for Christ. The first sonnet, "Since my chaste love for many years," for instance, represents her ambiguous voice at the beginning and her determination to gain eternal love at the end. The poem opens with a confessing tone implicating her late husband, a warrior and the son of the Marquis of Pescara, Fernando Francesco d'Avalos,

Since my chaste love for many years
kept my soul aflame with the desire for fame, and it nourished
a serpent in my breast so that now my heart languishes
in pain turned towards God, who alone can help me. (Colonna, 2005, p. 57)

The sonnet reflects the sense of change regarding the sensual devotion Colonna feels to her husband mingled with the implied spiritual devotion to Christ. Accordingly, the first sonnet visualises a smooth change from the terrestrial sphere to the eternal one. As Ben-Aryeh Debby points out an interesting connection between Colonna and her husband with the words "Vittoria's devotion to her dead husband as expressed in her love poems parallels the Magdalen's love for Christ" (2003, p. 31), which adds a personalised sense to the biblical narration of sacrifice. From another perspective, "The desire for fame" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) is an implication of self-criticism since Colonna also wrote poems for the appreciation of literary circles of her time. "A serpent in my breast" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) refers to the desire for a notable achievement by means of powerful sonnets. But the serpent image also implies Biblical connotations. The serpent in the Garden of Eden is personalised within Colonna's heart and thus the poet emphasises her regret about the early 'secular' poems. "My heart languishes" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) denotes a reconciliation after directing attention to God himself, not to a celebrating public view. Colonna gains the mission of expanding the love for God among her surroundings through the act of writing. As the images of pen and paper clarify her mission as a spiritual poet, Colonna's literary achievement begins to take shape through evocative metaphors that allude to the crucifixion. In other words, through images such as "holy nail," "precious blood," and "sacred lifeless body" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57), the poet transforms the process of composing poems into a religious purification for the ones for whom Jesus Christ was crucified. Colonna indicates that the moments during the creation of the poems are heavy since they always remind her of Christ's suffering, but at the same time, these moments paradoxically lead to redemption with such suffering, which functions in a similar way to catharsis in ancient Greek tragedies.

Colonna poeticises the distinction between the heretic past and her present experience of an illuminated faith. In the lines below, the poet evokes the distant past of the archaic world and its beliefs to express the superiority of her own faith, "It is not right here to invoke Parnassus or Delos,/ for I aspire to cross other waters, to ascend/ other mountains that human feet cannot climb

unaided" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57). Parnassus is a high mountain that is sacred to Apollo and nymphs in Greek mythology. It is also believed to be the residence of Muses. Thus, it is the site for poetry and literature besides being a source of aspiration for the poets. Delos is an island where Apollo and Artemis were born (Hamilton, 1998, pp. 29-31). But in the lines above, Colonna does not try to derive supernatural powers and inspiration from these sacred places. On the contrary, she deliberately refers to the Biblical sources with "other waters" and "other mountains" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57). Parnassus and Delos represent the two elements of a literary convention, but here Colonna attempts to transcend the borders of tradition and yearns for something unattainable and eternal, as seen in "human feet cannot climb unaided" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57). The lines also demonstrate the crossing from the terrestrial to the extraterrestrial. Parnassus or Delos is replaced by "other" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) mountains or waters, which suggest the sources of inspiration outside the physical world. "I pray to the sun" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) reminds a political accusation about her tendency towards Protestantism and the arguments that she was holding some heretical opinions about the established religion. The line beginning with praise for the sun can signify a pantheist reception of nature; the sun as the source of liveliness and recreation denoted with "letting forth his shining spring" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) does not function in the same way for the poet. In other words, the rejuvenating sun cannot warm or console the spiritual crisis and suffering felt by Colonna. To consolidate this situation, she refers to the destructive side of the sun; its scorching rays shine as if they are punishing her, but she finds a parallelism between the drought of the sun and her spiritual hunger or "thirst" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57). Thus, she expresses her sincere suffering felt for the death of Christ.

Moreover, the sonnet beginning with the line "I long to stride behind my Lord," (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) stresses the personal incapability to gain a proper form of faith. Colonna yearns to be a disciple of Christ, but the consciousness of failure creates a pessimistic mood prevalent in the poet. In the first four lines, she praises "the true light of God" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) with a biblical style adapted in such lines as "Steep and narrow path" and "the eyes of faithful Peter" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) to underline the personal struggle for pure faith. In other words, Colonna's desire to carry the cross on a troublesome road can imply her passion for an enlightening revelation as in the story of Peter, who holds the keys of heaven. The lines, "but because I fail to understand completely/ that all human hope is as fragile as glass" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) indicate her Protestant discourse; the notion that only with the help of God, a Christian can attain salvation is represented with the self-accusing tone of the poet. The fragile glass image visualises the sensitivity wavering between a pessimistic voice and an optimist expectation about salvation in the poem.

Furthermore, the last lines of the second sonnet deal with what Colonna should do to obtain a whole sense of peace. The lines "If I were to present my humble heart/ in purest supplication before the divine table" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) demonstrate her attempts to regain purification through self-deprivation, she offers to sacrifice herself before Christ. The "divine table" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) refers to the spiritual space of Jesus Christ. By employing culinary images or through images pertaining to the domestic sphere of the kitchen, Colonna consolidates her yearning for devotion or self-sacrifice. The following lines describe what she means by "divine table," "the angel of God, our trusted friend,/ offers himself through his love to be our food, one day my appetite may perhaps be forever satiated" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59). Food image signifies the unification of the souls at last and a proper identification with "our trusted friend" (Colonna, 2005,

p. 59). The sonnet reflects Colonna's emphasis on unity in the sense that Aristotle argues the wholeness of essence and substance to be considered as distinct being in *Metaphysics* besides *eudaimonia* in *Nicomachean Ethics*. Such unified mood stands for prospective salvation and peace, but for the time being, it is not accessible to the poet, which creates a consistent melancholy throughout the sonnet.

Unlike the second sonnet, the opening lines of the third sonnet, "The wondrous and holy miracle by which," "through his mercy, I perceive two opposed beings,/ one divine and one human, so fused into one" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59) seem to suggest that Colonna perceives the terrestrial and extraterrestrial spheres as unified. Nonetheless, as the sonnet exemplifies the duality in the body of Christ, or by mirroring the duality within Christ's body depicted in the sonnet, the poem evokes a sense of wavering between hope and despair, or the absence of wholeness once again. Thus, such conflicting moods in Colonna's poetry find their way through binaries, which can be an indication peculiar to Renaissance Neo-Platonism. "I perceive two opposed beings,/ One divine and one human" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59) can also suggest the relation between 'musica universalis' and 'musica humana' since the music of spheres and that of humankind are combined in one body or centre, which paradoxically revisits the desire for an Aristotelian sense of unity.

Colonna voices a regained hope through the duality of Christ. Especially the fourth and fifth sonnets signify the transformation that Colonna's sonnets undergo, reflecting a shift from her initial focus on carnal concerns as a court member to her later devotion to spiritual forms of love. By embodying both the divine and the earthly, Christ serves as a turning point for the sufferings she experienced due to her terrestrial boundedness. That duality also enables her to be free from the earthly struggle of daily life. After the sense of relaxation, a kind of revelation is implicated in such lines as "With his sweet, gentle, wounded hand/ he has placed a yoke around my neck, and in the beautiful/ clear light I see it is an easy weight to bear;" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59). Colonna uses the yoke image to convey the overwhelming presence of Christ's love in her heart. In other words, as being harnessed with a yoke through the sincere belief in God, she finds the truest way to raise her faith in the field of heart. Accordingly, a common ascription to Jesus Christ, the shepherd turns into a farmer who plants the seeds of hope in the heart of Colonna. "Wounded hand" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59) image again refers to the crucifixion scene. In the last line, another representation of Christ is visualised, Christ as a king, "to all humble souls with his secret key/ he opens up his treasure, jealously guarded/ from any heart inspired by proud ambition" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59). Colonna refers to her early life and poetry as the products of a "heart inspired by proud ambition" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59). She understands that this ambition hinders her from the real treasure offered by Christ. In her transformation, she is hopeful since she begins to perceive the divine beauties instead of the earthly ones.

As seen in most poems of Colonna, through visual and tactile images, she criticises the earthly endeavour. As the first stanza of another sonnet, "From within a vast pure well of the true light" conveys, Colonna occupies the position of a petitioner. She mentions the difficulties and wrongdoings among the believers and desires for a remedy that would be granted by Christ, which demonstrates that her concerns change from the private sphere to the public one. "A vast well of the true light" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59) refers to "my great thirst" (Colonna, 2005, p. 57) in the first sonnet. The rejuvenating power of faith is visualised with the well image. "Crawling ants" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59) describe the despicable state of human beings. Their toil for gaining material accomplishments is disparaged by the poet through the act of "crawling" (Colonna, 2005,

p. 59). The first wish or prayer, "You turn your loving eyes" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59) is followed by the lines below,

Break down the thick wall of ignorance
which still casts over them Adam's
ancient shadows, chilly and persistent enemies
of the clarity and healing of your warm gaze. (Colonna, 2005, p. 59)

The first four lines denote the yearning for non-intrusive communication with Christ. After the state of man is clarified, the second wish emphasises the lack of knowledge. If the "vast well of true light" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59) is taken as the true source of knowledge, Colonna considers that the ones turning away from it are entrapped in the borders of Adam's failure indicating disobedience and ignorance as the line "Adam's ancient shadows" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59) reminds the original sin. Accordingly, the "thick wall of ignorance" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59) sustains the persistence of such delusion, and "Clarity and healing of your warm gaze" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59) maintains the position of Christ as the one watching human beings from a high stand as the "Eternal Shepherd" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59). The last lines of the fourth sonnet describe the idea of freedom through faith, which opens the gates of an immense sphere visualised with the image of a vast and heavenly shore. Brundin states that such "nautical imagery" (2005, p. 143) is common in Colonna's sonnets, and in her notes to *Sonnets for Michelangelo*, provides detail, suggesting that "the early church fathers sometimes employed the imagery of the church as a ship in which the faithful find safety and are borne to salvation. Thus, by association, the sky that they cross en route becomes an ocean and heaven becomes the celestial shore, as here" (2005, p. 143).

The liminality expressed through the image of shore in the sonnet "From within a vast pure well of the true light" evolves into a sense of wholeness in the fifth sonnet, "When, through your mercy, our living faith." In this respect, the poem underlines the unification of souls after the true light of faith as seen in the "ardent and joyful heart assembles them together in one place" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59). The unification of the soul with the eternal one leads to a rebirth in which all earthly binaries are resolved under the unique "enlightened mind" (Colonna, 2005, p. 61) delineating another version of the changeover from the earth or material entity to the heaven or spiritual entity. Regardless of whether the defining factors are abstract concepts like the moon's influence on temperament or more concrete forces like death or fortune, all ultimately yield their place to a more central, unifying principle within the illuminated mind. As such, the notion of "good and evil" (Colonna, 2005, p. 61) is also lost within this total tranquillity. Thus, both earthly and heavenly concerns come to a definite fortitude of hope through the yearning for liberation from the earthly boundaries and spiritual entrapment. Through binaries such as earth and heaven or shadow and light, Colonna again emphasises the curing revelation at the end of the fifth sonnet. The "wing" (Colonna, 2005, p. 59) image of the fourth sonnet, "From within a vast pure well of the true light" is re-employed to draw attention to the possibility of passing from a lower form to a higher one.

Colonna uses the image of a bird soaring above the earth's grand structures, such as oceans and mountains, to symbolise the freedom and peace found in faith—an image that G. M. Hopkins would later use in a similar manner in his "The Windhover." The sun of the first sonnet does not provide her any peace or relaxation, so she cannot see the sun of the fifth sonnet. However, Colonna's persona gazes at the "divine rays of light" (Colonna, 2005, p. 61) in the fifth sonnet and

finds consolation, not the thirst the first sonnet conveys. Thus, Colonna's love for Christ surpasses the earthly realm, reflecting her relentless pursuit of truth. Rather than being conflict, this constant quest reveals a mind actively seeking a deeper understanding of faith, which can exemplify the Renaissance's emphasis on the interconnection between intellectual inquiry and religious belief.

On the other hand, Colonna's discussion of 'time' as a concept revisits the medieval sense of temporality and fatalism in the sixth sonnet, "If man were to look with a clear vision upon." Within the context of her religious beliefs, Colonna's perception of time calls to mind that notion of the Middle Ages. The seeds of hope Colonna's faith inspire, as discussed above, seem to abandon the speaker in the sixth sonnet. To elaborate, she employs the arguments of scholastic teaching with an emphasis on the "sickly and vile state of human nature," (Colonna, 2005, p. 61) and thus, it can be suggested that she diverts from Renaissance humanism, considering the state of the human being as not a fallen creature but a praised superior one. With "our prescribed time on earth" (2005, p. 61), Colonna underlines the vain struggle on this earth again. But her presentation of an old subject matter is highly original since she likens the labouring man to an insect or prey in general, one that has fallen into the trap of time. Particularly, Colonna's employing evocative verbs, "the waxing and waning" (2005, p. 61), conveys the sense of man's gradual decline with each passing movement. Since the lifespan of man is finite and predetermined, she regards the earthly struggle as a hindrance to the realisation of faith, which again reminds an Aristotelian influence. She offers another solution for this temporal boundedness by surrendering to "our eternal Father,/ who alone clothes the lilies and feeds the birds" (Colonna, 2005, p. 61). The ending lines conclude by a logical equation: "If he has gathered within himself all truth and virtue,/ then a gentle heart must love him and burn for him alone,/ and disdain to direct its gaze elsewhere" (Colonna, 2005, p. 61). Thus, Colonna reformulates the diction of Petrarchan sonnet form to express a totally different theme. Here, the "gentle heart" (2005, p. 61) does not direct its love to an earthly bound being but towards the divine being, and thus, the sense of devotedness is recovered with the gentle heart image again. Viewed differently, as the equation above suggests, Colonna places Christ at the centre for the salvation of people, and the accusatory tone of the established Christian doctrine towards the individual is also mollified with the embodiment of Christ as "his breast and his face/ charged with infinite pity and unending love" (2005, p. 61).

The seventh sonnet, "My angelic escort, sent to me by God," shifts its focus from the sixth sonnet's public voice to the inner self. Colonna opens the sonnet with the ambiguous presence of a company. She begs for this guide to save her from failure in her journey towards the eternal truth. The translator of the poem, Brundin, suggests that this "angelic escort" (Colonna, 2005, p. 61) can refer to her spiritual mentor, Reginald Pole, but she also underlines the ambiguous nature of the expression (2005, p. 143). Moreover, Brundin maintains that "one letter in particular, written by Colonna early in 1540, presents itself as central to this discussion. In it she indicates the need that, in particular, women have for female role models to act as moral and spiritual guides, in a society in which the majority of models for imitation are male" (2001, p. 62). Additionally, "angelic escort" (Colonna, 2005, p. 61) may also signify the manifestation of an abstract guide such as mind or a sensitive heart in Colonna's metaphysical progress. The poet's fear of being diverted from this journey and her strong hope are kept with the sense of durability in the lines, "so that at the eternal marriage/ my light is not extinguished, /but with a brightly burning lamp,/ summoned by my Lord, wise and prudent," (Colonna, 2005, p. 61).

Furthermore, with reference to the 'Parable of Ten Virgins', Colonna implies that she holds a position among the wise five virgins. According to this parable in Matthew 25:1-13 (The New Oxford Annotated Bible), the story of five foolish and five wise virgins is related. The story underlines the importance of being prepared in the example of five foolish virgins whose lamps faded since they did not bring enough oil with them. By adapting and counterbalancing the parable from the Bible, Colonna exemplifies how she achieves an organic unity in her use of images, which gradually contributes to the total effect. For example, when she starts with an image related to fire, she continues with that image by extending and thus adding new meanings to the first image. In the sonnet, "My angelic escort, sent to me by God," too, her passionate love is visualised with the lamps of virgins in the biblical narration, and besides, she combines the firing lamp image with the sun at the end of the sonnet, "like an internal dawn,/ of the coming of my bright and blessed sun" (Colonna, 2005, p. 63). Accordingly, such yearning for rebirth expressed with "an internal dawn" (Colonna, 2005, p. 63) is clarified in the eighth sonnet, "Elected souls, in whom the broad, clear."

The eighth sonnet develops the theme of the immensity of God through the images related to water and the act of flowing, such as the ocean, "crystal waves of heaven," (Colonna, 2005, p. 63) and the drops of rain. "Elected souls" (Colonna, 2005, p. 63) refer to the lucky ones for whom salvation is granted by divine generosity. As a stylistic means for Colonna, the extension of the first image is also employed in this sonnet. In the first four lines, Colonna sets the ground for her argument about the grandiosity of God and then concentrates on the sinful nature of mankind. The threatening power of the terrestrial world is again denoted with "bitter worldly ones of ours" (Colonna, 2005, p. 63). However, Colonna suggests that even one drop from the ocean of God can change the bitterness into the sweet expectations of heaven. On the symbolical level, the divine drops signify a kind of baptism that purifies the soul from the "desires" that ardently search ways for the destruction of the soul (Colonna, 2005, p. 63). In other words, the mixture of earthly and heavenly waters leads to the regaining of faith. The thirst of "eager hearts" (Colonna, 2005, p. 63) is only alleviated by spiritual satisfaction. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is integrated into the water image from the respect of purification with the analogy between blood and water (Colonna, 2005, p. 63).

From another perspective, the sonnet "Elected souls, in whom the broad, clear" exemplifies the balanced pessimism of Colonna. Although the "holy water flowing" (Colonna, 2005, p. 63) conveys that the love for Christ cannot remove the intrinsic sins of the man, Colonna offers an alternative solution in the lines, "so pray to him that with those very voices/ with which it pleased him to call men to heaven,/ he awakens us now from this deep spiritual sleep" (Colonna, 2005, p. 63). The basic difference between the terrestrial and extraterrestrial spheres is again underlined with another image, "this deep spiritual sleep" (Colonna, 2005, p. 63). As she expresses the transience and false nature of the worldly beings, Colonna returns to the understanding of the world in the Middle Ages by calling it deep sleep again. This fluctuation between the innovatory voice and the conventional voice is one of the main enriching elements in her poetry, calling to mind the conflicting mood of Petrarch. Thus, it can be suggested that she does not employ Petrarch's literary form but also identifies herself with her literary guide's conflicting emotions of belonging to both past and present.

Colonna presents her own sufferings and intimate emotions towards faith by means of Biblical themes. Up to the ninth sonnet, "Let my heart be reborn in you on this glorious day," she

associates the Jesus Christ image with the sense of border to express the separation between the earth and heaven. She tries to find consolation through the pure love and favour of Christ. But in this sonnet, Colonna reinterprets the rebirth of the soul through philosophical deductions by means of the Virgin Mary image since “while Italian reformers tended to be Christocentric, Vittoria Colonna put a great emphasis on Mary’s role” (D’Elia, 2006, p. 121). Brundin clarifies such notions of transition and recreation as follows, “Colonna is, she claims, in a state of unhappy uncertainty with regard to the question of faith and she hopes that through her contact with the other woman she can be reborn spiritually” (2001, p. 62). Thus, in the ninth sonnet, “Let my heart be reborn in you on this glorious day,” Colonna takes the miraculous Virgin Birth as the basis and glorifies the Virgin Mary’s exceptional nature with the repeated light image. The sonnet implies that the Virgin Mary gives birth to Christ, but paradoxically, he makes her reborn since she gains more valuable gifts after the birth. “A greater light within” (Colonna, 2005, p. 63) describes the enlightening love of Christ. While glorifying the virtues of the Virgin Mary, Colonna also emphasises that the privilege of giving birth to Christ provides her “a thousand noble and honest inspirations to do good” (2005, p. 63). Thus, Colonna changes the roles of the Virgin Mary and Christ, or she offers a reciprocal prayer for her since the poet yearns for salvation with the help of the Virgin Mary. Colonna’s desire to exchange roles with Virgin Mary is expressed in “her vital energy may fill my being” (Colonna, 2005, p. 63). Her willingness to break the spatial and temporal boundaries of the material world is visualised in the images of “the knots” and “mortal shell” (Colonna, 2005, p. 63). In other words, the poet’s metaphysical yearning reaches up to an extreme point by rejecting or relocating her material presence. The harmonical union of body and soul, which can be regarded as one of the essential achievements triggered by the Renaissance, is subverted since the poet’s negating ‘body’ as a ‘knot’ or ‘shell’ that keeps the valuable essence inside makes her divert from the ideology of the Renaissance.

The tenth sonnet, “With wise probity and minute care,” speaks for the benefit of all people in the form of wise advice and in the sonnet, Colonna attempts to combine the notion of sinful man with that of the reflection of God’s perfectness. The sonnet opens with a reminding remark on the present situation of man. The poet describes an attentive individual about committing sin and recommends that “within and without, from far and near” (Colonna, 2005, p. 63) man must reconsider his state through prudence. She also underlines that as being created in the image of God, man should abstain from staining or blemishing the glorified image of God. However, the last lines of the tenth sonnet can be read as the innovatory voice of Colonna regarding her pro-reformist attitude. By referring to the pure image of Christ, Colonna criticises the established church’s attributions about Jesus Christ. In other words, “false icons” (2005, p. 65) demonstrate the long-lasting heresies in the Christian faith. Colonna revisits the theme of rebirth in the final lines. But in this case, through the cleansing of hypocrisy, the spirit of Christ finds a renewed presence. Thus, as the line “The holy/ light can reveal no more vile stains upon him” (Colonna, 2005, p. 65) signifies, a regained enlightenment through the “divine love” (Colonna, 2005, p. 65) is achieved at last.

Conclusion

Colonna claims a space within the literary practice, providing a distinct voice through her sonnets. By rejecting the conventional love lyric, Colonna adopts recurrent subject matters such as the spirituality of love and religion in her poems. However, her poems also indicate her dependence on the Petrarchan sonnet tradition. Colonna’s poetry combines carnal and spiritual

kinds of love with a unique divergence from conventional love poetry. Her imagery of death also personifies the biblical account of sacrifice. The intellectual connection between Colonna and Michelangelo parallels the poet's search for true friendship in the persona of Christ. Likewise, Colonna poeticises her heretical past as she labels it and the possibility of illumination through the love for Christ. Because she also speaks of a new vision of hope through the duality of Christ, her poetry changes from hope to despair, presenting the absence and presence of wholeness in a paradoxical way. Yet, Colonna reveals how her speaker devotes herself to the love of Christ and the quest for truth in an Aristotelian manner. Thus, earthly and heavenly themes are intertwined in the realm of poetry that reaches an intensity of hope deriving from liberation both from temporal and material constraints. Her reflections on 'time' revisit again the medieval sense of temporality and fatalism by offering the coexistence of the innovative and conventional voices in Colonna's poetry.

Vittoria Colonna does not only create poems to express her deep love for Christ but also underlines the healing power of poetry. On one hand, she confronts her personal shortcomings about faith through the sonnets; on the other hand, she tries to undertake the mission of converting the 'sinful souls' into the true path of faith. The conflict between the terrestrial and extraterrestrial comes to an end with the glorification of the later sphere as the ideal one. Thus, in some of the selected sonnets, Colonna reflects the medieval perception of religion with an emphasis on the sinful nature of man, but in the others, she endeavours to break the "false icons" (2005, p. 65) by underlining the hope and salvation through spiritual love. Thus, the poet skilfully employs two voices: one that addresses the concerns of a courtly woman, where material concerns hinder the spiritual journey, and another that embodies the voice of a devout individual, whose divine concerns transcend the temporal. To conclude, her sonnets become a way to escape the limitations of the physical world and create a space for hope to flourish, offering solace not just to herself but potentially to others as well.

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