# *Introduction*
## *'All That Rout of Lascivious Poets That Wrote Epistles and Ditties of Love'*

### 'We Should Write Just as Bees Make Honey': *Imitatio*, Roman Love Elegy and the 'Petrarchan'

The opening sonnet of Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* gives a vivid picture of a sixteenth-century English poet struggling to write love poetry. Astrophil's first recourse is to previous poets: 'oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow | some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburnt brain'.[1] Poetic inspiration is presupposed to come from reading prior writers, 'turning others' leaves'. But the practice of Renaissance literary *imitatio* is not a simple or unsophisticated one. 'Turning' certainly refers to the turning over of pages as Astrophil scours through what has already been written; but it also implies a metamorphic art, the 'turning' of one image, trope, text or even genre into something undoubtedly related and, yet, different.[2]

This book traces the imitation – a 'turning' – of Catullus and classical Latin love elegy (specifically Propertius, Ovid and Sulpicia) in, and into, the so-called 'Petrarchan' love poetry of four English writers of the sixteenth century: Thomas Wyatt, Philip Sidney, John Donne and Mary Sidney, with a brief foray into the seventeenth century via Mary Wroth at the end. While Catullus does not always write in elegiac metre and is not conventionally grouped with the elegists proper, this book reads him as a kind of proto-elegist who sets the erotic framework which elegy proper comes to adopt.[3] That Catullus was so presented by the elegists themselves as well as by Renaissance writers, including Petrarch, will be seen later.

The following chapters explore, through close and detailed readings, the complex dialogues set up by and between the selected Roman and English texts. By focusing on *imitatio* as a reciprocal textual dialogue, this project considers both what erotic elegy does to, and for, sixteenth-century love poetry, and what sixteenth-century poetry does with, and to, love elegy. In other words, eschewing a simplistic and one-directional

model of classical influence or source study which implies a hierarchical and overly mechanistic approach to the Renaissance imitation of classical texts, this book instead investigates how placing these poems in juxtaposition leads to readings which mutually illuminate both the Roman and English texts.

*Imitatio*, as Thomas Greene points out, is a broad, loose and unstable critical term that encompasses appropriations of style, vocabulary, theme, topoi or form, as well as adaptation, paraphrase or translation.[4] It is also, as the *Astrophil and Stella* quotation above shows, a fundamental 'literary technique' of Renaissance poetics. The next section of this introduction problematises Greene's influential analysis of *imitatio*. For the moment, however, it can be said that the influence of Roman erotic elegy on sixteenth-century love poetry is a surprisingly under-explored topic.

Much has been written on the imitation of Ovid in the Renaissance generally, and there have been specific studies on the influence of the *Amores* as well as the *Heroides* and the *Metamorphoses*.[5] Catullus, too, has attracted some attention: both the way in which he was read in Renaissance Italy, as well as how his poetry might be situated against the Petrarchan.[6] But there has been no study, to date, of classical erotic elegy as a genre which serves to inform, organise and shape what is a dominant mode, for Renaissance poetry, of articulating literary love and erotic relationships.

Given this gap in the scholarly literature, the aim of this book is to investigate the following questions: how do sixteenth-century English texts participate in the discourses mapped out by Catullus and Roman elegy, and what work might classical love elegy do in cultural, social, political, literary and ideological terms for English Renaissance love poetry? What does elegy enable that Petrarchism and epic, say, do not, especially in terms of gender constructions and sexualised power relations? In pursuing this agenda, we will also consider what an identification with the sometimes problematic texts of Catullus and the Latin elegists might signify in sixteenth-century England; and what the cultural potential and hermeneutic possibilities of erotic poetics might be for our specific English poets. A subsidiary objective is to trace how varying practices of *imitatio* might work on an intimate, text-to-text level.

The practice of *imitatio* might be a fundamental principle of Renaissance poetics but, as Charles Martindale, amongst others, remarks, it functions more as 'creative assimilation' rather than as simple allusion or quotation, and tends to result in texts which are 'derived from, but independent of, the original'.[7] This can be seen clearly from Renaissance writers' own articulation of their practice of *imitatio*. Petrarch, in a letter to Giovanni

Boccaccio in 1366, says: 'the imitator must take care that what he writes is similar but not the same'.[8] In the same letter, Petrarch uses the analogy of bees making honey, drawing on Seneca's epistle on imitation, as a stimulus to creation:

> we should stick with Seneca's advice, which, before him, was that of Horace, to write as bees make honey, not preserving the flowers but converting them into honeycombs, so that from many assorted elements a single thing is created, different and better.[9]

Petrarch is not concerned here with straightforward allusion but with a more complex, almost alchemical, process by which a multiplicity of sources inform, and are themselves transformed into, something creative and original. Indeed, Renaissance writers positively reject the idea of the easy and unthinking lifting and re-use of past texts. In a letter from c.1485 Angelo Poliziano states:

> those who compose only on the basis of imitation strike me as parrots or magpies bringing out things they don't understand. Such writers lack strength and life; they lack energy, feeling, character … there is nothing true in them, nothing solid, nothing efficacious … to draw nothing from the self and to imitate always is the mark of the unhappy mind.[10]

John Donne is even more direct in his indictment of writers who simply regurgitate others' texts:

> But he is worst, who (beggarly) doth chaw
> Others' wits' fruits, and in his ravenous maw
> Rankly digested, doth those things out-spew,
> As his own things; and they are his own, 'tis true,
> For if one eat my meat, though it be known
> The meat was mine, th' excrement is his own.[11]

Ben Jonson, too, in epigram 81 'To Prowl the Plagiary' makes an implicit distinction between *imitatio* and plagiarism.

Petrarch's bees analogy is not just on the subject of *imitatio* but is itself a reproduction of Seneca's aesthetics of imitation. As the following chapters will show, Roman literature is itself acutely and self-consciously imitative as it negotiates its relationship to prior Greek and Latin texts. It thus provides, for sixteenth-century writers, not just a model of content to be reworked and renewed, but serves as a paradigm of creative and metamorphic *imitatio*.

One of the key points to be drawn from Renaissance texts on *imitatio* is the differentiation and prioritisation of the *res*, 'matter' from the *verba*, 'words'. Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster* contains an extended discussion

of this point, that writers should be concerned with the matter or content of the texts which they are imitating, not simply the words, literal liftings or verbal echoes. This can be seen in practice when we consider the identification of 'Petrarchan' poetry in English: it is quite rare to find straightforward borrowings and literal translations of Petrarch's own texts, even in quasi-translations such as Wyatt's 'Whoso List to Hunt'. Chapter 2, which considers Wyatt's renewing of Catullan concerns in this poem, also traces how Wyatt's text draws attention to Petrarch's 'Una candida cerva' as a precedent while simultaneously transforming both it and Catullan allusions into a text with a specifically Henrician context and relevance. Imitations of elegy, as will be seen in detail throughout this book, operate in a similarly sophisticated, hybridised manner, and the very absence of direct quotations, bearing out Petrarch's 'similar but not the same', may be one of the reasons why this relationship has not been explored in more detail to date.

That is not to say that Roman elegy has been ignored completely in the literature: some scholars have certainly acknowledged a more complex genealogy for English 'Petrarchan' poetry than just Petrarch. Jennifer Petrie, for example, discusses the way Petrarch, in the *canzoniere*, appropriates themes and styles from what she calls 'the Augustans': while she accepts Petrarch's knowledge of Propertius, she is more interested in tracing the presence of Horace, Virgil and Ovid in his love poetry, as well as the influence of the vernacular Italian tradition.[12] Stella Revard argues for a Propertian influence in Donne's early love poetry but is overwhelmingly concerned with the persona of the lover as represented by both poets, and many of the arguments she makes about the character of the Propertian lover could equally be applied to the Catullan and Ovidian lovers who precede and supersede him.[13] She draws particularly on Helen Gardner who herself sees echoes of *Amores* 1.9, Tibullus 1.10, Propertius 3.4 and 3.5 in Donne's 'Love's War', a testament to the way the Latin elegiac genre influences Donne, rather than a single elegiac poet.[14]

Paul Allen Miller recognises what he calls a 'Petrarchan-Ovidian' tradition, as does Barbara Estrin; Arthur Marotti, however, sees the Ovidian and the Petrarchan as opposed to each other since he associates the Ovidian with 'the anti-feminist devaluation of women' versus Petrarchan devotion.[15] Heather Dubrow cites the influence of classical poets on Petrarch, W.R. Johnson reads Petrarch's lover as developing out of Catullus, and Gregory Heyworth remarks that Petrarch's *canzoniere* play a critical role in 'advancing the form of the elegiac sequence from its Augustan origins in Ovid,

Tibullus, Propertius and Catullus' – but these are all passing comments in books which have other concerns than the imitation of elegy.[16]

In a more focused study, Joseph Blevins argues for what he calls a 'Catullan consciousness' in Renaissance love lyric but sees this as an alternative to, and deviation from, the Petrarchan conventions, rather than as springing from one of the strands which informs the development of Petrarchism, as this project does.[17] At the same time, he reads Catullus' Lesbia poems as the first love sequence in Western literature, a premise which, surely, argues for a closer rather than more distant relationship between Catullus, Petrarch and their imitators, even though the Lesbia poems are, perhaps deliberately, not ordered as a sequence.[18]

It is certainly not new, then, to detect a relationship between Catullus, Latin erotic elegy and Renaissance 'Petrarchan' love lyric but the approach taken here, in contrast to past scholarship, is that of a sustained, focused and less fragmented view of Latin elegy allowing an examination of the way elegiac discourse as a whole informs the 'Petrarchan' mode of poetics. Petrarch, in this book, serves as a crucial mediator of love elegy into sixteenth-century England.

The elegiac 'plot' is a simple one, and can be mapped onto the Petrarchan with relative ease. In Catullus and elegy, the poet-narrator ('Catullus', 'Propertius', 'Ovid', 'Sulpicia') is obsessively in love with a sexually available though somehow still elusive mistress (Lesbia, Cynthia, Corinna) or, in the case of Sulpicia, the male Cerinthus, and the poems celebrate his or her erotic servitude. Many of the same tropes and conventions reappear in each poet's work: the *recusatio* where the narrator defends his writing of 'trifles' (*nugae*), rather than serious epic; the *paraclausithyron*, recited before the mistress's closed door; the birthday poem; the sickness poem; 'kiss' poems; poems which voyeuristically undress the mistress; and the repeated use of the conventions and imagery of *militia amoris*, 'the military campaign of love'.[19]

It is not hard to see how these tropes which help constitute the elegiac genre inform Petrarch and Petrarchan poetry: the depictions of obsessive love, the elusiveness of the mistress, the overwhelming concern with the poet-narrator's subjectivity, the translation of *militia amoris* into the bows and arrows of Cupid, the prevalence of kiss poems, and the re-emergence of the undressed mistress as the Renaissance blazon. Even the form of a 'cycle' of elegies may be linked to the Renaissance sonnet sequence, both modes displaying their fragmentation as much as their unity.

Petrarch's elegiac appropriations are many and his debt to Ovid has been especially well served by the literature, but it is also possible to identify more

varied, intriguing and non-Ovidian elegiac echoes within Petrarch's texts.[20] *Canzoniere* 250, for example, portrays a scene where 'Petrarch' is visited by Laura's ghost, an event which also serves as the basis for his *Triumph of Death*, translated by Mary Sidney, both poems drawing on Propertius 4.7, where Cynthia's ghost comes back from the underworld. Laura's speech in c.250 draws on Propertius 4.7 but also Sulpicia's last poem, [Tibullus] 3.18; and Petrarch's c.224, written in a single sentence, also alludes to [Tibullus] 3.18, Sulpicia's poem notably written in one long, breathless sentence. We will return to these specific instances of *imitatio* in the relevant chapters on Propertius-Sidney and Sulpicia-Mary Sidney respectively, but for now the point to be made is that to trace the 'Petrarchan' solely back to Petrarch, or Petrarch's poetry only back to Ovid, is misleadingly narrow and distorts the literary framework through which sixteenth-century English love texts and sonnets may be read. Ovid is certainly central to this body of verse, and Petrarch operates as an important mediator and transmitter of elegy, but the relationship between elegy, Petrarch and English (indeed, European) 'Petrarchan' love lyric is a more convoluted, tangled and fascinating one than has been previously acknowledged in the literature.

As we will see in the following chapters, Petrarch's sonnets and the 'Petrarchan' mode are not simply elegy under a different name: while frustration may certainly be a keynote of elegy, the sexual relationships between Roman poet and mistress ('*puella*') are consummated in a way that is rare, though wholly possible, in the Renaissance texts under investigation.[21] Petrarch's own sonnets may be chaste but Donne, for example, returns to the more cavalier attitude to sexual relations shown in elegy. Tone, too, can be various: the instances of humour we find in Petrarch's sonnets tend to be gentle and wry; elegy may offer a more erotically playful mood, irreverant wit, and even a robust model for a vigorous extension of the possibilities of love verse, especially in the case of Ovid, that proves productive in terms of Renaissance poetry. Rather than merely conflating the Petrarchan with the elegiac, this study explores what elegy offers as a model for imitative practice that Petrarch's poetry does not.

So why does this expansion of literary precedents matter? The labelling of poems as 'Petrarchan' settles an interpretative framework on them which foregrounds the undoubted debt owed to the *canzoniere*, but which also tends to obscure elements which do not fit the Petrarchan model.[22] Poetic deviations from Petrarch are overwhelmingly defined as 'anti-Petrarchan' so that they remain located within the contours of Petrarchan discourse.[23] One significant transformation which Petrarch makes in his re-writing of Roman love elegy is the neo-Platonic moralisation of Laura. As will be

seen in Chapter 2, Catullus' Lesbia is conspicuous for her immorality: the texts show her lying and cheating, and make much of her monstrous sexual appetite and lack of chastity. Propertius' Cynthia, Ovid's Corinna and Sulpicia's Cerinthus might not be represented with quite the level of invective and obscenity that is found in Catullus, but they, too, are, according to their narrators, unfaithful and deceitful. Petrarch's chaste, virtuous, muted and untouchable Laura is none of these things, and his editing out of the sexual explicitness and debauched morality of elegiac women is hugely influential on sixteenth-century sonnet sequences and love poetry. Sidney's Stella certainly owes much to Petrarch's Laura but more problematic facets of the elegiac mistress re-emerge in Donne's erotic poetry, in the 'betrayal' poems of Robert Sidney to be looked at presently in Chapter 1, and in Wyatt's women who, as shown in Chapter 2, are neither untouchable nor silent.

The recognition of Catullan and elegiac erotics as a source of *imitatio* for so-called 'Petrarchan' love poetry thus becomes critical because it shifts and refocuses the interpretative framework through which this body of verse may be read. As is the case with genre, identifying an imitative model sets certain expectations, concentrates and 'signposts' the reader's attention towards particular elements in the imitating text. This does not, of course, mean that imitations cannot interrogate, resist or dismantle the sources from which they spring – Petrarch does precisely that by moralising the elegiac mistress in his creation of Laura. A failure to recognise and acknowledge a model in the first place, however, prevents us from comprehending what might have been done with it in its imitative transformation. As John Frow asserts, 'the prehistory of the text is not a given but is relative to an interpretative grid'.[24]

An example of the kind of mis-readings this failure of recognition can give rise to may be found in an essay by Gordon Braden on Petrarch and Ovid. Braden reads what he sees as Petrarch's appropriation of the last lines of the *Metamorphoses* into the *canzoniere* as 'one of the most innovative and influential twists' Petrarch gives to love poetry as 'his lady is … all but indistinguishable from his literary ambition'.[25] Propertian scholars, however, had been exploring the way in which the elegiac 'mistress' (*puella*), operates as an embodiment of the literary project and elegiac text well before 2000.[26] Rather than Petrarch being an originator of this 'twist', his poetry is adopting what becomes a conventional elegiac trope from Propertius onwards. The metapoetic nature of the elegiac beloved is made especially prominent by Sulpicia when her beloved is named Cerinthus, 'wax-man', an allusion to the wax-tablets on which her elegies are written.[27] Petrarch's

'innovation' comes from the application of this trope to the chaste Laura, rather than the sexually active mistress (or male beloved) of elegy, and thus reveals something important about his resistance to, and re-writing of, elegiac erotics. What this example demonstrates is how recognising the source of *imitatio* as, in this case, Roman love elegy, reconfigures our understanding of the relationship between Petrarch's sonnets, sixteenth-century English Petrarchan poetry, and the classical precedents with which they engage.

## *Imitatio* and Intertextuality: 'What Gives Us Permission to Connect One Text to Another'?

In his influential *The Light in Troy*, published in 1982, Thomas Greene asked how can we 'discuss imitative works *as* imitations' (his emphasis) and account for the 'dynamic presence' of classical texts in Renaissance poetry.[28] He goes on to define four strategies of Renaissance *imitatio* but, for all his precision, his analysis prompts reservations.[29] The chief of these concerns his quest to uncover and articulate a single and unifying theory of Renaissance *imitatio* at a macro level. He reads *imitatio* as designating the broad cultural relationship between a classical past and a Renaissance present, and thus allocates to humanism a coherent and monolithic agenda. In his schema, *imitatio* is nothing less than a grand and all-embracing system for negotiating a relationship with the lost classical past, an attempt 'to heal that estrangement which humanism had constantly to face'.[30] Greene's narrative is one of loss and a conscious sense of anachronism, but does this vast, comprehensive and all-embracing approach help us to understand the relationships on a microcosmic level between two (or more) texts?

Malcolm Bull contests Greene's unifying narrative and suggests that the humanist engagement with classical culture was less coherent and consistent, more fragmentary and arbitrary than Greene proposes.[31] Charles Martindale also expresses some discontent with his analysis: discussing Shakespeare's 'free and relaxed' use of classical texts, he fails to discern the sense of melancholic loss and cultural disjunction at the heart of Greene's narrative.[32]

So does Greene's analysis really help to explain all that is happening when Donne, for example, writes erotic elegies in London in the 1590s – is Donne confronting an entire lost classical civilisation, or is he working on a far smaller scale; do his elegies really enact a wholesale cultural clash, or construct a far more intimate relationship with one or more individual poetic texts? The explorations in the following chapters take account of

these questions and consider whether, and where, anxieties might be located as sixteenth-century poets engage with Catullus and Roman elegy.

What is productive from Greene's analysis is his positioning of *imitatio* as a form of intertextuality.[33] This is, of course, like *imitatio*, a baggy and capacious term. For Greene, intertextuality is a means by which Renaissance texts register a sense of 'cultural discontinuity', a way of structuring their estranged relationship from a lost classical past.[34] What this model fails to allow for are mediations, such as Petrarch's re-writing of elegy, that insert themselves between the classical 'originals' and Renaissance 'imitations', and the way in which Renaissance verse may be engaging with near-contemporary texts at the same time as it is imitating classical poetics.

This book builds, then, on Greene's siting of *imitatio* as a form of intertextuality, but complicates the intertextual function. Instead of understanding intertextuality in Renaissance texts as a marker of cultural loss, here it is read in positive terms as a means of intensifying our sensitivity to the presence of other textual voices – both classical and 'contemporary' (to sixteenth-century readers) – and of expanding the relational complex against, and within, which poems site themselves. Two important elements of this nexus are Catullus and Roman elegy, but the following chapters also read Wyatt, for example, not just with Catullus but in relation to Petrarch and Henry VIII's love letters; and Donne with Thomas Nashe as well as Ovid. Latin elegy, too, frequently defines itself against other earlier and contemporary texts, and some of its own revealing allusions and intertexts are discussed throughout this book. A central critical assumption underpinning this project is that if *imitatio* is a crucial praxis of sixteenth-century, and Roman, poetics, then the resultant texts have to be read relationally, against preceding, contemporary, and possibly even later, writing.

One of the methodological dissimilarities between reception and intertextuality, as these terms are commonly used, is the move from a form of objective stability to something more subjective and, possibly, uncertain. Shakespeare's use of Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe story, for example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or John Marston's re-writing of Ovid's Pygmalion as *The Metamorphosis of Pigmalion's Image* are both clear and upfront about their uses of the prior poet's texts: it would be a perverse reader who claimed that these were not receptions of Ovid. The intertexts with which this book is largely concerned are, frequently, less fixed and fixable: they have a postmodern indeterminacy about them. There is no clinching argument on offer that 'proves' Wyatt's intended and straightforward reception of Catullus, or Sidney's of Propertius, for example – all the

same, the detailed readings of a few carefully selected and juxtaposed texts highlight the interpretational value of reading these chosen poems together. After all, one of the freedoms that the praxis of intertextuality allows is the renewing of a text's relations. If the author is 'dead', to use Barthes' term, then intertexts or points of textual connections are themselves subjective and in the consciousness of the individual reader. In other words, while the readings that follow have been hedged by the facts of the Latin texts being printed and available, being read and commentated on, even being introduced to the relevant early modern writers at school (apart, perhaps, from the female authors in Chapter 5), there is no 'smoking gun' to clinch an argument of proven intentional reception.

That said, some conventional and established receptions such as Donne's debt to Ovid in his songs, sonnets and elegies are no more proven in strict terms: we do not generally find Donne quoting or paraphrasing Ovid.[35] What has been read as his reception of the elegist might more accurately fit with the idea of intertextuality being discussed here where the textual connections are based on a situational and attitudinal likeness (witty sexual encounters with a mistress) as well as engagements with the politics of gender.

This raises, then, a fundamental question, one not often asked: as Jeffrey Wills puts it, 'what gives us permission to connect one text to another?'.[36] Wills is working specifically on Latin poetry with some attention to Latin allusions (his term) to prior Greek texts, but his interrogation can be productively applied to other literatures. Indeed, given the role played by Latin texts in the early modern period as paradigms of *imitatio*, it might be especially pertinent here.

For Wills, an 'allusion' or intertext might be identified and understood on the basis of diction (reused words, syntax, length of sentence, the line position of a word); narrative similarities such as those just noted between Ovid and Donne; or allusion through form. The first, allusion through diction, is problematic in most of the cases looked at here since we are generally concerned with intertextual relations in different languages, Latin and English. We will, though, see some examples of allusion through word repetition in Sannazaro's neo-Latin, and Petrarch's Italian, re-writings of Catullus in Chapters 1 and 2. Wills' identification of parenthesis as a basis for recognising an allusion through diction is also noted in Chapter 5 where Mary Sidney recalls a sonnet of her brother, Philip Sidney. Allusion through form might also be helpful since many, though certainly not all, re-writings of elegy are in the sonnet or sonnet sequence form (Petrarch, Wyatt, Philip Sidney, Donne, Wroth). The majority of intertexts explored