Petrarchan poetics

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Credit for canonizing Petrarch’s fourteenth-century *Rime sparse* usually goes to Pietro Bembo’s *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525). Squeezing out of Petrarch’s 200-year-old Siculo-Tuscan literary idiom the seeds of a factitious cultural heritage, Bembo promoted a style that spoke oddly to Italy’s competing regional centres, much less to the emerging national literatures of monarchies outside of Italy. Yet Petrarchism became the dominant lyric style not only in Italy but throughout Europe. Divergent critical views of Petrarch inscribed in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century commentaries on the *Rime sparse* and *Trionfi* offer compelling evidence. They construct a narrative of multiple Petrarchs, heterogeneous versions of the *Rime e trionfi* conformable to opposing ideologies at different times and in different places.¹ In their light we may better understand Petrarch’s place in a divided Italy, an imperial Spain, a monarchical France, and Protestant England.

The earliest Florentine biographies of Petrarch by Filippo Villani (1381), Pier Paolo Vergerio (1397), Leonardo Bruni (1436), and Giannozzo Manetti (1440s) reclaimed Petrarch’s Florentine ancestry and depicted him as sympathetic to the republican spirit of civic humanism, but they offered few comments on his vernacular poetry.² Commentaries written under the auspices of despotic rulers in northern Italy a century later, however, read and interpreted the Italian verse on different horizons. Each supports claims sympathetic to the aristocratic, autocratic, and expansionist interests of Ghibelline monarchism or Venetian oligarchy, and each asserts a special relationship with the historical Petrarch who spent the longest period of his Italian residence in northern territories, first at Milan where he served

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the Visconti (1353–61); then at Venice (1362–7); and finally in Padua and Arquà (1368–74) where Francesco da Carrara granted him an estate.

Antonio da Tempo, ‘a judge in the city of Padua’, and clearly not the more famous Antonio who composed an influential De ritimis vulgaribus in 1332, assembled the first full-scale commentary on the Rime sparse in the 1420s.1 Addressing his work ‘to Signor Alberto, of the noble Scaliger family of Verona’ (sig. Avi), Antonio celebrated Petrarch’s career as an exemplary public servant who advanced the cause of central government in northern Italy. Similar assumptions guided Francesco Filelfo, who served Filippo Maria Visconti in Milan. Accepting the duke’s commission to annotate the text in the mid-1440s, Filelfo sees himself re-enacting his predecessor Petrarch’s career at the Milanese court. Dedicated to ‘your highness occupied in governing and a great many worthy affairs’, but finished only as far as sonnet 136, his commentary would strengthen its patron’s bid to rule wherever Petrarch’s language is spoken – that is, throughout all northern Italy.² Within a generation Hieronimo Squarzafico completed the latter and published it along with his own at Venice in 1484.³ Combined in one volume after 1503, the Antonio–Filelfo–Squarzafico commentaries with their view of Petrarch as a Ghibelline monarchist dominated the printing of the Rime sparse in twenty-two editions before 1522.

Pietro Bembo set out to change this view. Early in the century he supervised the first unannotated Aldine edition of Petrarch’s Cose volgari (1501), claiming for his copytext the poet’s own partially autographed final exemplar (Vat. Lat. 3195). A friend of Giuliano de’ Medici and later secretary for two Medici popes, Leo X and Clement VII, Bembo fashioned his Prose della volgar lingua as a vigorous defence of Florentine cultural hegemony, certifying Petrarch’s highly artificial literary language as an inescapable product of Florentine genius and promoting it as normative for all Italian poetry, a ‘style that will be esteemed best and most beautiful by everyone’.⁴ The composite nature of this style, cobbled together with bits of Provençal, Sicilian court usage, Latinisms, archaisms, and idiosyncratic neologisms, summons in Bembo’s view a shared discourse of Medici cultural inheritance against contemporary factional strife. Gravità is its most important feature, whereby strategic clusters of what Bembo calls

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3 Li canzoneti dello egregio poeta messer F. Petrarcha . . . io Hyeronimo gli ho exposti (Venice: Piero Cremoneso, 1484).

sharp ‘masculine’ sounds lend clear definition to otherwise cavernous and diffuse ‘feminine’ ones, ‘an occult power, that, lingering in each word, moves one to assent to what one reads’.7 Echoing Petrarch’s sonnet 304, Bembo designates it a stil canuto [‘mature style’].8

In 1525 Alessandro Vellutello offered a new paradigm for commentary in his edition of Il Petrarcha.9 Vellutello’s major contribution was to reorder the sequence of ‘scattered’ poems into a coherent narrative so as to square their implied story with known events in the author’s life. Vellutello bases his authority on a careful reading of Petrarch’s Latin correspondence and upon deductions from Petrarch’s Latin and Italian poetry, but he also establishes his credentials as a student of social, political, religious, and amatory mores in Avignon and Vaucluse, and even as a cartographer of the surrounding region, for which he provides an extraordinary topographic relief map. Like a good ethnographer, he has visited the site and has conversed with its inhabitants. Their accounts yield startling results.

The first concerns Laura’s identity. Parish records of Cabrières affirm that she could not have been the noble ‘Laurette de Sade’ who came of age in the 1360s, but was the unmarried daughter of an impoverished lord Henri Chiabau. Her meeting with Petrarch occurred not in the church of Santa Chiara at Avignon, as the poet had claimed, but rather on the flower-strewn plain of the Sorgue, where the inhabitants of Vaucluse and Cabrières make a pilgrimage each Good Friday. Vellutello’s confidence that he has discovered the historical truth leads him to a tighter, more controlled chronology of the poet’s love for Laura and its impact on his diplomatic career. To the two conventional sections, in vita di Laura and in morte di Laura, Vellutello adds a third section of non-amatory poetry that features the patriotic canzone 128, ‘Italia mia’, presents sonnets on the Babylonian captivity of the papacy at Avignon, and includes other poems that reflect political, polemical, and poetical issues. Twenty-nine reprintings of Vellutello’s edition made it the most widely circulated sixteenth-century text of the Rime e trionfi. Though other commentators restored the poems’ conventional order, they devoted great care to answering or rebutting, modifying or revising Vellutello’s conjectures. Among them were Sylvano da Venafro and Giovanni Andrea Gesualdo at Naples and Bernardino Daniello at Venice. Sylvano and Gesualdo both published their work in 1533, the former for a local audience, the latter for a wider readership. Under Spanish rule since 1503, the Naples of their era laboured to preserve its cultural identity with the rest of Italy. Sylvano displaces the Ghibelline emphases of Antonio da Tempo, Filelfo, Le volgari opere del Petrarcha con la esposizione di Alessandro Vellutello da Lucca (Venice: Fratelli da Sabbio, 1525).
Squarzafico, and (in part) Vellutello when he focuses upon Petrarch’s archetypal representations of love and well-bred amatory conduct: ‘I write especially to please the ladies who might wish to understand more about matters that Petrarch writes of’. Celebrating Petrarch’s gallantry, piety, and Platonic detachment, Sylvano applauds the poet for expressing amatory sentiment in the decorous style of a Castiglionesque courtier.

Gesualdo’s annotations submit this style to an exiguous rhetorical analysis. Under the mentorship of his kinsman Antonio Sebastiano Minturno, who later produced an influential dialogue on Greek and Latin poetic forms, De poeta libri sex (1559), with an application to Italian forms in L’arte poetica (1563–4), Gesualdo appears to be working through controversies about rhetoric and poetics aired at the Academy of Naples in his time. He examines the literal and figurative discourse of each poem and he records debates about rival interpretations. He presents divergent opinions, offers reasons for each, and nudges his readers to interpret matters according to their own convictions. Unlike other glossators who propound a single strong thesis, Gesualdo offers many. The result is the longest, richest, and most studiously detailed commentary on Petrarch’s Rime e trionfi in the sixteenth century, and one that was reprinted as the magisterial gloss on these texts in the 1554 and 1581 Basle editions of Petrarch’s complete works.

Bernardino Daniello, a younger member of Bembo’s Venetian circle, offered a competing rhetorical analysis with an accent on literary competence. In 1536 Daniello had published a synthesis of Ciceronian and Horatian precepts, La poetica, defining lyric poetry as a ‘pittura parlante’ that presents nuanced images of truth overlaid with figurative language. In his commentary on the Rime e trionfi (1541) Daniello locates Petrarch in the context of other authors, both classical and contemporary, juxtaposing the poetry against sources, analogues, and later imitations. By reconstructing fragments from the classical past, Daniello shows how Petrarch collaborates with and rivals the greatest writers: ‘I don’t see any way in which our Petrarch is inferior to Theban Pindar or Venusian Horace’.

From these allusions, echoes, and literary cross-references,
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Petrarch emerges as a contemporary of Virgil and Cicero, Horace and Ovid, Plato and Aristotle, Dante and Cino da Pistoia, and a prophet of Bembo and Ariosto, not only recapitulating Western literary discourse before his time, but also improving upon it and offering it as a model for subsequent Italian style.

Yet another kind of commentary reveals traces of Reformationist thought that mark Petrarch as a proto-Protestant critic of the Avignon papacy, scholastic logic, and incompetent scriptural study. In 1532 Fausto da Longiano dedicated his gloss on the *Rime sparse* to the Count of Modena who had encouraged Lutheran reform in that city. Fausto interprets the text as a spiritual drama that unfolds amidst the courts of Europe where the Christian poet faces greed and corruption, baseness of every sort proffered by bishops and priests, popes and princes, grandes dames and whores, all while yearning for God’s promise offered in the gospels and taught by Augustine. Practical, independent, and possessed of a deep faith in the divine word, Fausto’s Petrarch shows the way for sixteenth-century courtiers to prosper in this world without losing their souls to unholy error.

In 1548 Antonio Brucioli dedicated his annotated edition of the *Rime sparse* to the daughter of Ercole II d’Este and Renée of France, who had harboured the heretical Clément Marot and Jean Calvin at Ferrara in the 1530s. Like Fausto, Brucioli emphasizes courtly manners and a courtly style as the setting for Petrarch’s moral action, and like Fausto he weighs Petrarch’s judgement against scriptural quotations that apply to particular situations. Himself a translator of and commentator upon the Old and New Testaments, Brucioli presents the Bible as a major intertext, displacing earlier commentators’ cross-references to classical literature and philosophy as an interpretative standard.

A third commentary with Reformist leanings was compiled by Lodovico Castelvetro, evidently in the 1540s before he left Italy for good. Retrieved from his papers and published posthumously by his nephew in 1582, the annotations emphasize as models for Petrarch’s poetry the writings of the Greek and Roman ancients, but also passages from Psalms, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, the New Testament, and the Church Fathers. Castelvetro is every bit as capable a classical scholar as Gesualdo and Daniello, but more than them he knows the Bible and understands how it

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penetrates the *Rime sparse*. His focus upon verbal peculiarities, often as correctives to Bembo’s linguistic speculations, may have proved irrelevant to a non-Italian audience, but the reach of his bolder conclusions about scriptural meaning and doctrinal associations surely attracted attention outside of Italy.

Such annotated editions brought Petrarch to a readership both inside and outside Italy, and to them one might add a vast array of other editions with shorter marginal glosses and interpretative aids. They include Paulus Manutius’s explanatory notes printed in five Aldine editions after 1533, Francesco Alunno da Ferrara’s *rimario* (1539), Francesco Sansovino’s plagiarized observations (1546), Girolamo Ruscelli’s elaborate concordance (1554), and Lodovico Dolce’s lexical gloss (1560). Every regional centre in Italy, it might seem, tried to claim Petrarch for its own. But if the poet from Avignon and Vaucluse could be thought of as Milanese or Venetian or Neapolitan or Florentine, why not also as Provencal or French?

In 1533 coincidental with the marriage of the future Henri II to Catherine de’ Medici, a union that prefigured the annexation to France of the power and prestige of Italy’s most celebrated family, Maurice Scève announced that he had discovered the tomb of Petrarch’s beloved Laura at the church of Santa Croce in Avignon. His discovery affirmed Laura’s historical identity as Laurette de Sade against Vellutello’s contentions, and it strengthened Petrarch’s powerful hold over the French imagination. Its first published account occurs in a preface dated 25 August 1545, written by Jean de Tournes for his Lyons edition of the *Rime e trionfi*. In de Tournes’ estimation, the event should ‘quiet those commentators who every day overwork their brains in quest of Laura’s identity’.

The subsequent vogue of Petrarchism in France took many forms, as the chansons and sonnets of Scève’s Lyonnais contemporaries Pernette du Guillet and Louise Labé would attest. Their feminine appropriation of Petrarch’s rhetoric brings not just an inversion of the lover’s and beloved’s gendered qualities, but an entirely new critical and cultural imperative. Du Guillet’s publisher writes that the poet’s example should inspire her Lyonnais sisters ‘to share in this great and immortal praise that the ladies of Italy have today earned for themselves and to such an extent that by their divine writings they tarnish the lustre of many learned males’.

This preface calls women to literary pursuits and it challenges French men as well as French women to outdo their Italian counterparts in learning and eloquence. Literary criticism turns into cultural criticism and political exhortation.


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In Spain a no less explicit agenda guides the preface of Juan Boscán to his Obras, published in March 1543 at Barcelona. Assembled just before his death, this collection supplements Boscán’s Petrarchan sonetos and canciones with others by Garcilaso de la Vega. In a prologue to his libro segundo the poet defends his Castilian imitations of Petrarch as augurs of a new literary standard for the international Spanish Empire. Affording the best model, Petrarch himself had followed models, including the Provençal Troubadours. Spanish poets can lay as much claim to anterior authority. Boscán, himself a bilingual Catalan- and Castilian-speaking member of Barcelona’s upper-middle class, cites the Troubadour influence on Catalan poetry, and especially on the lyrics of Ausias March: ‘From these Provençal poets came many excellent authors. Of them the most excellent was Ausias March.’\(^1\) According to this logic, Petrarch’s achievement was a historical accident. Any worthy descendant of the Troubadours, whether Spanish, French, or Italian, could have done likewise. In any event, the Iberians can now surpass Petrarch and elevate their language. As the future belongs to the kingdom of Castile, dis-enfranchised Italians may well envy Spain: ‘It could be that before long the Italians might complain about seeing the excellence of their poetry transferred to Spain’.\(^2\) The fame of Garcilaso as a noble courtier and military hero increased the prestige of his poetry even more than Boscán’s, and by extension its value as a model for emergent Spanish literature, so that a few decades later it would merit its own canonizing commentaries by El Brocense (1574) and Fernando de Herrera (1580).

Social class and distinction likewise modified the development of Petrarchism amongst the nobility in France. At mid-century in Paris two factions of the latter were competing for power – the old aristocracy, and newer members who had risen from the bourgeoisie by virtue of industry, education, and public service. Many of the rhétoriqueurs came from humble ranks and they displayed their poetic skills as a way of advertising their verbal talent for hire to the crown. The older aristocracy reacted by devising its own programme for social and cultural advancement. Joachim du Bellay, a landless member of this aristocracy, summoned those of his class to regain their influence by pursuing an élite education in the classics. His Deffence et illustration de la langue françoyse (1549) argues that all languages have equal value, and that modern French can express wisdom and truth as well as ancient Greek and Latin or modern Spanish and Italian. Through exogamic marriage to classical and Italianate poetic forms, the French vernacular can increase, multiply, and enrich its own cultural patrimony: it is ‘no vicious thing, but praiseworthy, to borrow


\(^{2}\) Boscán, Las obras, p. 172.
from a foreign tongue thoughts and words and appropriate them to our own.’ 21 Du Bellay of course emphasizes creative imitation rather than mere translation, so that Petrarchan features of style, transposed into linguistic forms current at the French court, become or are made to become conveyors of social and political impulse, dynastic aspiration, and national ascendancy.

Criticism and appropriation of the lyric took a moralizing form in Protestant England. Sir Philip Sidney elaborated a poetic theory in The defence of poesie (composed ?1581) to show that Petrarch’s model can best serve as a negative moral example. The Defence urges readers of poetry to put critical pressure upon the text’s potential meanings, fleshing out partial explanations and correcting bad ones. Such readers may exert more power over a text than its author does. The poet allows an access to truth only because he ‘nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth’. 22 ‘The reader by contrast can always uncover a practical truth by refuting error, labouring to understand not ‘what is or is not, but what should or should not be’, 23 even when the text’s author does not make the distinction. Petrarch’s amatory poetry affords a perfect testing ground for this endeavour. Disciplined readers will recognize the ‘wanton sinfulness and lustful love’ inscribed in ‘passionate sonnets’ and will ‘reprehend amorous conceits’ dramatized there and elsewhere. 24 Rather than ‘infect the fancy with unworthy objects’, such poetry will train it to recognize error and resist abuse. 25

The first critic of Sidney’s sonnet sequence Astrophil and Stella, Thomas Nashe, honoured this advice in his commendatory epistle for its pirated edition of 1591. Upon a ‘Scane of Idiots’ where Astrophil enters ‘in pompe’, Nashe describes the plot as one in which ‘the tragicoomedy of loue is performed by starlight . . . The argument cruell chastitie, the Prologue hope, the Epilogue dispaire.’ 26 A generation of sonneteers in late Elizabethan England allowed this criticism to inform its view of ‘poore Petrarchs long deceased woes’ (Astrophil and Stella, sonnet 15), turning criticism into poetic practice and poetic practice into art.


23 Miscellaneous prose, p. 102.

24 Ibid., p. 103.

25 Ibid., p. 104.