



Petrarch: The Otherization and Humanization of "Laura"

-Petrarch's View of Women from Laura

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Abstract. As the "father of humanism", Petrarch created the image of Laura, which was deeply rooted in people's hearts. Laura also became the source of inspiration for his lifelong artistic creation, and even spiritual conversion. Current research on Petrarch focuses on the musicality of the sonnets and the study of his humanism, but less on Petrarch's view of women. As a humanist pioneer of the Renaissance, it is of great significance to explore Petrarch's view of women from a feminist perspective. This article will try to start with Petrarch's most famous work "Canzoniere", through the analysis of the image of Laura, combined with Petrarch's life experience and the social status of women in the Renaissance background to explore Petrarch's view of women.

Keywords: Petrarch, Laura, feminist perspective, Canzoniere

1 Introduction

Born in Florence in the early 14th century, Francesco Petrarch, known as the "father of humanism", wrote his masterpiece, the *Canzoniere*, a collection of lyric poems in the Italian vernacular. The most important work for Petrarch is his expression of love for Laura. Laura was the love of his life and they met in 1327 at the church of St. Chiara in Avignon. The *Canzoniere* contains 336 poems, of which 317 are sonnets and 29 are longer poems. The love poems are divided into two parts, bounded by the death of Laura. After Petrarch fell in love with Laura at first sight, he began to express his adoration for her through poetry, and after the Black Death took Laura's life in 1348, the theme of the poems changed to the expression of endless mourning and the pain of lost love.

At that time, due to the ideological influence of medieval theology, the old lyric poetry was heavily formulaic, lacked poetic tension, and expressed raw and incomprehensible content. Petrarch's poetry, however, is tonal, sketching the beautiful Laura with delicate strokes. "Take off your veil, when the god of love lets you discover my feelings, your golden hair is covered by a veil, and then you withdraw your gaze full of

love"¹ Petrarch put women's hair, eyes, clothes, etc. into his works, and created a new model to eulogize women and praise love.

This portrayal of Laura is different from Dante's supreme divine love for Beatriz, hoping that women are angels to guide them closer to God. Petrarch's love is a mixture of erotic impulses, sensual gratification, and is full of humanity. At this point, Petrarch's Laura is full of contradictory conflicts and a sense of tearing. On the one hand, Petrarch is possessive of secular love for Laura, and on the other hand, he is influenced by religious thoughts and thirsts for spiritual conversion.

So what exactly is Petrarch's view of women? Is his sanctification of Laura tinged with religion, or is it a secular erotic possession, or is it the female as a subordinate to the male that was popularized during the Renaissance? Karl Marx said, "The mode of material production determines the general mode of society, politics, and ideology. Man's consciousness cannot influence its mode of existence; on the contrary, his mode of social existence determines his consciousness."² Marx insisted that man cannot create art apart from his real social environment. When we explore Petrarch's view of women, we should also note the influence of the real society and his own experience on his creation of Laura.

2 Background: Petrarch's external prison and life experience

In the second half of the thirteenth century, Italy saw the dawn of hope in the Renaissance movement, and the theological concepts, afterlife and asceticism which had characterized since the Middle Ages were gradually disintegrating. But the promotion of the lofty ideals of humanism did not involve the equality of men and women. Renaissance Europe was still filled with the shadow of a patriarchal society. Before women married, they had to obey their fathers, and after marriage, they were handed over to the rule of their husbands. Even Thomas More, the builder of the ideal society, confessed that the subordination of women to men "is the only despotic feature of a society in which all men are equal." As a result, the status of women in society at that time was not high. However, Petrarch's adoration for Laura easily makes us think that his life belonged to Laura, and he is what we now call a true "love brain". "If I die for love, though I die with honor, why should I let Eros untie or cut short the love-band, which, though it inevitably involves pain and death, I do so willingly."³

Petrarch's Laura is actually a knight's wife, when Petrarch fell in love with her at first sight and did not have more contact, but only printed Laura's silhouette in the heart, becoming a permanent white moonlight. Petrarch followed his parents to live in a foreign land since he was a child, living in exile without a fixed place. There was no faction in politics, and inwardly he was actually very lonely. In middle age, he held a minor teaching position, and was involved in ecclesiastical activities while engaging in literature and poetry. Tongliu Liu, the editor of the *Canzoniere*, once wrote: "Love and asceticism, honor and religious faith, humanist ideas and medieval concepts, were at times in violent conflict within him." When representatives of Christian theology condemned him for his obsession with secular life, he pointed out that while loving God, he also pursued happiness on earth. It is because of this pull between old and new views

that his description of Laura is filled with both the praise of mythological imagery and the sensual fulfillment of secular love.

3 Laura: The Laurel Tree by Petrarch

Petrarch's life can be summed up by two harmonizing words: "Laura" and "Lauro", the first being his beloved Laura, the latter a crown of laurel branches, which earned him the title of Poet Laureate. At the same time, we know that the laurel tree was mythologically transformed by Daphne to avoid Apollo's advances, symbolizing unattainable love, which later evolved into a symbol of honor. For Petrarch, Laura is that love unattainable, and it is Laura's characterization that makes Petrarch who he is. "Although, according to Petrarch's own account, Laura immediately rebuffed his ardent advances at the time, the *Canzoniere*, a collection of 366 songs that took nearly twenty years to write, was a whirlwind in modern Italy and throughout Europe, and almost all readers were impressed by the variety of Petrarch's moods --- melancholy, serenity, bitterness, passion, and these olive-scented Italian poems became the most popular reading of the Renaissance."⁴

Laura was the most important female character in her life for Petrarch, and analyzing Laura's characterization contributes to the exploration of Petrarch's view of women:

3.1 The beauty of the Holy Spirit

Petrarch's Laura is an idealized, nearly perfect being. Laura possesses the beauty of the human spirit, the beauty of the female form, and the innocence of nature. "Mortal tongues are not worthy to sing of her divine beauty," wrote Petrarch. The death of Laura at Avignon in 1348 from an illness devastated Petrarch, who wrote:

The sun that guided me along the path to heaven.
 Having now returned to God.
 My bright lights and shackles, her body.
 It was also buried under several layers of thick soil several rocks.
 I can't find her, but I see her sacred footprints.
 appeared above the highway to heaven.¹

In a depiction here that sacralizes her, in Petrarch's writing, Laura's eyes are twinkling and glowing, and a multitude of stars surround Laura, guiding him on his way.

3.2 Presence of reality

Although Petrarch's Laura is an idealized woman, the realistic coloring is much stronger when compared to the female figures in Dante's works. The poet portrays Laura as flesh and blood as possible, meticulously portraying her brow and eyes to show the beauty of a secular woman. Through Petrarch's description of his inner activities, we can go into the depths of his heart and dig out the poet's hidden emotions, and this meticulous change of inner rhythms, from the side of the unparalleled image of Laura. For example, poem 208 reads.

To kiss her feet, to kiss her delicate hands, white as jade.
 Instead of speaking in words, words are conveyed in passionate kisses.
 "My soul looks out more than my weary body."¹

The poet does not shy away from portraying the scene of kissing Laura's feet. Perhaps the kiss is just a figment of the poet's imagination and not really acted upon. But this spiritual longing for Laura, even physical longing allows the poet to break through the shackles of religious confinement of thought, so that Laura really flesh and blood, no longer just a high and mighty saint, no longer similar to the image of women in Dante.

Laura and the poet in love, these two images have the characteristics of the new era, "Laura's easy simplicity, tenderness and cheerfulness and the poet's sincerity and frankness have become two of the most modern characters in Italian and Western literature".⁵

4 A Peek at Petrarch's View of Women

The Longman Advanced English Dictionary defines feminism as "the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. The New Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary defines male chauvinism as "male prejudice against women; the belief that men are superior in terms of ability and intelligence, etc.".

The inquiry into Petrarch's view of women can be analyzed in three general ways:

4.1 The Shadow of Equalization

In the Canzoniere, we can see shades of Petrarch's humility, sincerity, and even obedience before Laura. But notice also that the poet does not see himself as weak and stumbling. Because of Laura's indifference and rejection of him, the poet writes this:

How dare she, unarmored, without fear?
 Sitting barefoot among the green grass and flowers, the
 Neither ignore me nor fear you⁶

We can feel the sense of displeasure and chagrin in the poet's heart as he adds an extra layer of unobtainable hatred to his love for Laura, and he asks Eros to avenge him by shooting a few arrows for him, but then turning to believe that he will someday be seen by Laura to be among the best of men, he goes on to write:

But I'm asking you not to touch her.
 Rather, I invite you to worship at her honored feet.
 Just say it, I'll be the first! The first!
 Flesh and blood, soul and spirit among the best of men.⁷

At the beginning of the Renaissance in a patriarchal society, this concept of "equality between men and women" is slowly being presented in Petrarch's books. The poet puts Laura in a very high position, no longer a subordinate to the male, and he is humble and even obedient in front of Laura. The pursuit of emancipation and the breakthrough of confinement are also reflected in the concept of men and women.

4.2 The pursuit of free love

From Petrarch's *Canzoniere* we can feel his breakthrough to the medieval asceticism, he expresses his love passionately, he seeks freedom for love, his love is no longer high up in the Holy Spirit, but also full of human nature's worldly desires. Though a churchman, Petrarch boldly proclaims, "I myself am mortal, and I ask only for mortal happiness." "The eyes, arms, jade feet, and dainty features I passionately sing of." Petrarch's love was a love based on the natural nature of man, seeking unity of soul and body. The Church regarded love as sinful lust, and the poet boldly demanded to break through the Church's asceticism, declaring, "I love her body and soul at the same time."⁸

4.3 Otherization

It is worth noting that although Petrarch wrote about Laura throughout his life, expressing his admiration and love for her, he did not have much contact with Laura in real life, and many of his creations were accomplished with his imagination. To a certain extent, Laura is Petrarch's spiritual conversion similar to the nature of religion, similar to an image, a conceptual product, at this time, Laura is "otherized".

In the real world, Petrarch, who was unmarried all his life but also had his own illegitimate daughters, felt a religious admiration for Laura. "This contradicted Petrarch's earlier clerical status, which was accompanied by a vow of celibacy, and signaled a kind of blasphemy against Laura's love, both of which caused him deeper torment. In the second volume of *The Secret*, which was later completed, Petrarch alludes to this 'sensual sin'.⁹

For Petrarch, Laura is the Holy Spirit, but also has a secular adoration. He thinks that Laura is the Holy Mother, his redeemer, "but also an ordinary object of love, an attraction to the beauty of human nature."¹⁰ Petrarch is in a contradiction, on the one hand, he seeks for human freedom and liberation, on the other hand, he is bound by the asceticism since the Middle Ages. It is in this contradictory state of mind that Laura is the "otherization" image created by him, which has both the sense of belief of the Holy Spirit and the image representation of secular beauty.

5 Conclusions

The *Canzoniere* is a work of Petrarch who has condensed his life's efforts and deep feelings. Based on the background of the Renaissance period and the poet's personal experience, this paper gradually excavates some of Petrarch's views on women through the analysis of Laura's characters, and the shadow of gender equality appears slightly. However, I also think that it is slightly one-sided and isolated to explore an author's view of women only through one work. Due to the limitation of personal time and energy, and the lack of ability, the paper that can be submitted in a short period of time can only reach this level. It is hoped that in future studies, a more complete understanding of Petrarch's view of women can be gained through Petrarch's other literary texts, as well as authentic letter sources.

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