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19.03.02 Feng, Writing Beloveds

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Feng, Aileen A. *Writing Beloveds: Humanist Petrarchism and the Politics of Gender*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. pp. xiii, 266. ISBN: 978-1-4875-0077-1 (hardback).

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In any study of the never-resolved passage from late medieval to early modern culture in European poetry, the term Petrarchism is set as a sort of ominous signpost. In spite of recent authoritative studies, from William Kennedy's monographs to the impressive survey undertaken by Jackson Campbell Boswell and Gordon McMurry Braden, *Petrarch's English Laurels*, we still tend to posit a stark division between the Latin, medieval Petrarch, now largely forgotten, and the Italian, Renaissance one, the author of *Triumphs* and, more importantly, of *Canzoniere*. One of the consequences is that Petrarch's fifteenth-century inheritance tends to be overlooked, and early modern Petrarchism is evaluated mostly with reference to his sonnet sequence. This creates a void in studies of Petrarchism that Aileen Feng's book seeks to fill.

It is one of the great merits of this volume that it explores this largely forgotten intermediate period, moving from the fifteenth to the early sixteenth century, focusing at the same time on non-canonical writers and texts. Feng's attention is drawn to women who made use of Petrarchan tropes, and on a number of men-- prominent is Pietro Bembo, the scholar who determined the major change of Petrarchism from Latin to the vernacular--who made of the Petrarchan language a code of literary and intellectual exchange. This choice requires the scholar to analyze a very inhomogeneous corpus, made of poems, treatises, and epistolary exchanges, both in manuscripts and in printed sources; the texts are analyzed in loving detail, and extensively quoted. Feng has a very wide critical perspective, and her assessment of critical trends in various areas related to Petrarch and Petrarchism is one of the major achievements of her work.

The main problem of the book resides with its overall aim. Feng uses Petrarch as the link between a classical (mainly Latin) tradition that was being rediscovered and the new voices of the nascent humanism. At the same time, the study attempts the meeting of different critical approaches: on the one hand the recovery of largely

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forgotten Petrarchist writings; on the other, a gender-based reading, that sees in the development of Petrarchism the emergence of an authoritative female voice. The search for such a voice, however, sometimes forces the author to choose between Petrarch himself and a rather vaguer idea of Petrarchism. This can be very slippery terrain: Petrarch not only left an immense heritage, both in poetry and in prose; he also fed his own writing with his erudition and insatiable curiosity, using the page as a locus of discussion with classical and contemporary writers, conscious of the weight of the past but also intending to use his poetic voice to build the literary culture of the future. Thus it is difficult to isolate Petrarch's voice in his works, as he often speaks with the words of his predecessors. Feng, who very carefully disentangles classical allusions and references, is sometimes less careful with the medieval tradition inscribed in Petrarch's works. Two examples will make this point clearer: Feng opens her study by evoking the image of the beloved carried in the lover's heart, a metaphor she ascribes to sonnet 75 of the *Canzoniere*, positing a unique line of continuity between this sonnet and the words of fifteenth-century humanists, whether they are explicitly referring to Petrarch or not. This image, however, is far from being Petrarch's invention, as it comes from the *Dolce Stil Novo*, and is, more in general, a commonplace of courtly poetry. In the same Introduction, we meet another recurring topos of Petrarchan studies: Petrarch's poetry, Feng writes, "reifies the one-way relationship between the sexes: Petrarch speaks; Laura is silent" (4). Once again, this is a staple of courtly poetry, and indeed, Petrarch breaks with this convention in his *Triumphus Mortis*, in which Laura's shadow sits beside her grieving lover and talks with him at length, revealing at last the depth of her own feelings. The point is not to deny well-established loci of Petrarchism, but rather not to confuse Petrarch and Petrarchism. The community within which humanists worked was wide and varied, and the voices intervening in it cannot be reduced to one fourteenth-century poet, however authoritative.

Some forced reading is evident in chapter 1, "Women of stone," in which the metaphor of the gaze turning men to stone--a metaphor employed by Petrarch with reference to Laura, and gleefully seized upon by fifteenth-century commentators who were also looking at the possible etymology of Petrarch's name--is subjected to an analysis that is sometimes confused, insisting as it does on a dichotomy opposing Petrarch-Perseus to Laura-Medusa. The parallel is interesting and fruitful, but forces the scholar to align every image to it: for example, Horace is invoked, as the idea of giving immortality thanks to poetry, which is "harder than marble," is brought back to the same stony imagery (27-28), forgetting that here Petrarch is alluding to Horace's famous line "exegi monumentum aere perennius." Widening the use of the image to include Petrarch's treatment of his patrons may offer some useful insight; but this approach overlooks the fact that Petrarch interconnects different images (the column, the laurel, the marble, Medusa), drawing meaning from their perpetually unstable relation. Feng, however, argues carefully and honestly: her teasing out the reconstruction of the figure and role of the intellectual from the various Petrarchan images is commendable. I was less convinced by her reading, on p. 113, and again on pp. 135-136, of Petrarch's sonnet "Solo e pensoso": the topos of the forlorn lover eschewing human company is interpreted as the image of the "solitary poet avoiding the footprints of the ancients." Although this is indeed a topic Petrarch is preoccupied with, this particular sonnet does seem extraneous to the matter. This problem may be due to the fact that, although Feng quotes from a number of Petrarchan works, her attention is mostly focused on *Canzoniere*, while I would contend the Latin works, and especially the letters, are the most fruitful source for the kind of investigation she is pursuing.

In the following chapter the analysis moves from Petrarch to a number of Petrarchan imitators or followers. Feng focuses particularly on women, such as Isotta Nogarola, Laura Cereta or Cassandra Fedele, famous Latin humanists in their

own time, who appropriated the Petrarchan codes in their own writings, entering a tradition that has mistakenly been considered exclusively male. Their reevaluation is timely: it is important to recognize that the transposition of the Petrarchist tropes of love, taken mainly from the *Canzoniere*, was accomplished by female as well as male writers. This created the pleasing paradox of the woman being at the same time the object and the subject of the Petrarchist trope: "the female humanist may have gained a voice through her writing, but she found herself objectified by her male interlocutors much as the silent, chaste beloved of the Petrarchan lyric had been" (73). I suspect both male and female humanists participated in this sophisticated, elitist game willingly, as it allowed for infinitely subtle variations on the Petrarchan tropes. Feng analyses these exchanges with subtlety and erudition, underlining the classical references

There are occasional problems with the Italian--"Non fenta Laura, o penta Beatrice" is translated as "does not offend Laura or displease Beatrice" (68), while it should be "Not a fictive (*finta*) Laura, or a painted (*pinta*) Beatrice." In itself a minor point (though such misreadings happen more than once), this leads to a misinterpretation of Francesco Filelfo's portrait of Isotta Nogarola: Filelfo praises Nogarola, I believe, not as an emblem of chastity but as a real person, as opposed to creatures of literary fiction. There are other instances of slight mistranslations, and some oversights, such as the attribution of Guido Cavalcanti's poem "Donna mi prega" to Dante Alighieri (187). More worrying is the fact that the narrowing down of the focus sees Petrarch as the one and only source for fifteenth-century humanists--every topos, even well-worn ones such as the eyes of the woman being compared to stars, is attributed to him, forgetting Dante's influence, and the fact that Petrarch was the great *summa* of an immense Latin and Italian (and French) tradition. Shared conventions play a huge role in this game--seeing Petrarch as their only depository is rather limiting. In statements such as "In the span of less than a century, Italy progresses from an illustrious literary program headed by the Florentine *Tre Corone*, and particularly Dante's and Petrarch's idealized representations of silent women and feminine virtue, to a humanist Latin tradition characterized as much by its women writers as by their male peers," (103) risks seriously underplaying the role of Boccaccio, whose representation of women, both as characters and as narrators, proposed significant novelties and deviations from the courtly tradition.

In the second part of the book, the focus is on the early sixteenth century and on Pietro Bembo. Curiously, however, there is very little mention of *Prose della volgar lingua*, in which Bembo offered a theoretical *summa* of his Petrarchism and transformed it into a programmatic text on the development of literary forms in Italian; rather, Feng focuses on private epistolary exchanges, notably with Bembo's two female correspondents, Maria Savorgnan and Lucrezia Borgia. Working always through close reading offers the possibility of highlighting undiscovered details; however, I missed an overall picture. I find the conclusion ("the poetic tropes that gave a voice to women in the publishing world of sixteenth-century Italy were the same ones that men had used to render women's voices ineffectual in the previous century," (208) especially controversial, particularly as concerns the use of the word "publishing," as, paradoxically, the fifteenth-century texts authored by women examined by Feng have a much more public role than the very private epistolary exchanges that form the basis of her work on sixteenth-century Petrarchism. In the afterword, Feng widens the perspective inserting her analysis within a more general view of women publishing, and of female patronage, citing the example of Caterina de' Medici; but there is no real connection between the evoked cultural policy of the French court and the very private examples chosen as the backbone of the book. At the same time, the feminist agenda is resolved in what is essentially a commonplace: "To deny that there was tension or anxiety related to changing social norms is to underestimate human nature" (211-212). The

impression offered by this conclusion is that it does not do justice to the enormous, detailed, sometimes contradictory evidence offered by the texts analyzed, as it tries to force an overall design on material that in many ways escapes a univocal definition.

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