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Review of Petrarchan Love and the Continental Renaissance

Maria Christina Quintero
Bryn Mawr College

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Reviewed by María Cristina Quintero
Bryn Mawr College

Gordon Braden’s *Petrarchan Love and the Continental Renaissance* is an intelligent and eloquent retelling of the story of Petrarchism. I use the words “retelling” and “story” deliberately, because what Braden provides is less a systematic study of Petrarch and Petrarchism than a lively and idiosyncratic account of the imitation and transformation of Petrarchan motifs in a number of poets. Although the book is divided into three chapters bearing short and sweeping titles that promise a high degree of inclusiveness (“Petrarch,” “Petrarchism,” and “Plus Ultra”), the author alerts the reader in the introduction that this is not intended as an exhaustive treatment of the topic of Petrarchism. Instead, Braden provides a narrative tapestry woven from many threads: brief discussions of an impressive number of authors, a breezy overview of literary history, light engagement with literary criticism, and insightful if succinct analyses of individual poems. The chapters (the first two are considerably longer than the third) contain no internal divisions or subheadings that organize the discussion according to themes or literary figures.

In the first chapter, Braden brings together salient aspects of Petrarch’s biography, the major themes of the *Canzoniere* with references to other Petrarchan texts such as the *Familiare* and the *Trionfi*, and a quick review of critical approaches. This is a seamless account by someone intimately acquainted with the *Canzoniere*, someone who can tease a particular thematic trajectory from the famous lyric sequence without following any chronological or systematic order. Thus, Braden confidently moves from poem to poem, following individual motifs related to what he sees as the most enduring source of Petrarch’s fame: the story of unrequited love. For example, in tracing the theme of solitude, Braden skips back and forth from poem 234 to 35 to 129 in the *Canzoniere*, at times quoting only a few verses, at other times slowing down (as in the case of 129) for a more detailed consideration. While what he is presenting is compelling in its overall coherence, most of his discussions will seem familiar to students of Petrarch. Indeed, many of the topics that he mentions—the controversy over Laura’s identity, Petrarch’s concern with fame, the use of myth (Daphne, Actaeon and Narcissus)—have been studied in much greater detail by other critics. This is not to say that there isn’t a great deal of value here. The discussion of Petrarch’s life as one lived in the interstices of the medieval social fabric and the poet’s disengagement from politics (the opposite of Dante) is compelling.

Also noteworthy is the account of Petrarch’s fierce sense of individuation and his concern, even obsession, with posthumous fame. Petrarch was less interested in contemporary renown than in the notion of futuriority, something that was essential to his literary activity. Indeed, whatever historical reality Laura might have had, her importance resides in becoming a stand-in or surrogate for Petrarch’s future literary audience. The emphasis on futuriority, Braden tells us,
would account for the “depopulation” of Petrarch’s lyric: the elision, for example, of Laura’s husband and Petrarch’s own wife. Braden displays a singularly feminist compassion for the silent women—not just Laura—implicit in the poet’s narcissistic literary project. In discussing the absolute need in amatory poetry for the beloved woman to be distant and unresponsive, for example, Braden invokes Petrarch’s real life companion: “It is hard not to think that the nameless but indisputably real ‘altra donna’ who bore the poet’s children forfeited her claim [to poetic immortality] precisely through her compliance” (21). Also important is Braden’s comparison of Petrarch with the troubadours’ lyrics (there are frequent references to Arnaut Daniel, Benard de Ventadorn, and Guiraut Riquier, among others). He tells us that, in sharp contrast to Petrarch’s concern for futuriority, Occitan love lyric has more to do with the immediate dynamics of a contemporary society or community of poets. He also convincingly argues that in many of the poems, the Occitan precedent is more important than classical sources. In the final section of this chapter, Braden contributes to the critical debate on the apparent recantation at the end of the Canzoniere. In Braden’s view, this “conversion” can be understood best with relation to Dante’s Commedia, and could be seen as the “anguished conviction that [Laura’s] love has provided only a corrosive parody of Dante’s experience” (55). The Dantescan paradigm serves, therefore, not as a goal toward which to aspire, but as a grid against which to recognize a different fate.

The most enduring source of Petrarch’s fame is the endlessly imitated love story recounted in the Canzoniere, his unending desire for one woman. The second chapter of the book studies how this story of frustrated desire and the related topics of seduction and betrayal were adopted and adapted by a series of authors. Braden reminds us that Petrarch’s influence seems indistinguishable from the Renaissance itself; and that, indeed, all accounts of humanism necessarily begin with him. This chapter begins with a consideration of the Petrarchan subtext in Boccaccio, not only in the aborted Rime but also in prose works such as the Filocolo and the Decameron. In passing, Braden touches on a topic that has not received enough attention: Petrarch’s influence in the development of the novella. He then proceeds to recount the familiar story of how Petrarch’s Canzoniere and the Trionfi came to be promoted by Bembo as the linguistic and stylistic standard for Italian. Overall, in this chapter, Braden does an excellent job of capturing Petrarchism as an international phenomenon of imitation. There are even some surprises as, for example, when he illustrates Petrarch’s far-reaching influence by quoting an anonymous Cypriot poet and two Serbo-Croatian writers.

The topic of Petrarchism is, of course, a daunting one: but in keeping with his lighter narrative approach, Braden does not overburden his reader with dates and background information. Instead, he again traces a particular theme or topos through its imitation and transformation in various texts from different national literatures. The ease and speed with which he moves from one author to another is a testament to his great erudition and familiarity with the subject, but also sometimes proves unsatisfactory in that we are often left with suggestive aperçus rather than sustained analysis. He gives us a comparison of Boccaccio’s Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta with Chaucer’s Troylus and Criseyde. He jumps from du Bellay’s L’Olive to Bembo’s Prose della volgar lingua. The discussion of Bembo as a systematizer of Petrarch is updated through the attention paid to the love letters he wrote to two
women in his life: Maria Savorgnan and Lucrezia Borgia. Petrarchan quotation and allusion became the means by which these historical figures communicated their illicit attachments; and Braden demonstrates that the women were as versed (so to speak) in Petrarchan rhetoric as Bembo was. In this chapter, among many other texts and authors, he mentions Girolamo Malipiero’s *Il Petrarcha spirituale*, Giordano Bruno, and Michelangelo’s poetry. He calls the latter, in its use of Petrarchism to express homosexual desire, “arguably the best Neoplatonic love poems of the century” (104). The discussion of the merging of Neoplatonism with Petrarchism in Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano* is perceptive, as is the often overlooked fact that Petrarchism seems to have been most successfully and systematically assimilated into treatises such as *The Courtier* and the *trattati d’amore* rather than into the actual poetry itself.

Braden dedicates significant space to Ronsard, who was not only interested in exploring how life and art relate in Renaissance sonneteering but also wanted to test just how much sexualization poetry can absorb. In Ronsard and others, the postures of the *Canzoniere* are refitted to serve a simple sexual goal and Petrarchan tropes become tools of seduction. In another section of this chapter, Braden traces the transformation of Petrarch’s Laura into Boiardo’s Angelica, who in turn became the symbol of elusive desire for Spenser. The deferred sexual encounter finds its most extravagant incarnation in the figure of Dulcinea in Cervantes’s *Don Quijote*. The Petrarchan connection here is rather tenuous, as Braden himself admits (“*Don Quijote* arrives flying no particular Petrarchan flags” [83]) and one is left to wonder why Cervantes is invoked at all. This reviewer was, nevertheless, gratified to find allusions to him and other Spanish writers, figures often relegated to the margins of Renaissance literary criticism. Petrarchism in Spain is an immensely rewarding topic, as the work of Anne Cruz (whom Braden does not mention) and Ignacio Navarrete (whom he does), among others, amply demonstrates. In this respect, Braden provides a corrective to the work of Thomas Greene and Roland Greene (to mention only two), whose otherwise excellent books seem deplorably unaware of the rich lyric production of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spain. It was refreshing to see Juan Boscán (who is believed to have ushered the Petrarchan fashion into the Iberian Peninsula) cited prominently in this chapter. At the same time, oddly, more important authors such as Garcilaso de la Vega (Boscán’s friend and collaborator) and the poet-theorist Fernando Herrera are barely mentioned. The last section of the chapter deals with female lyric poets such as Vittoria Colonna and Gaspara Stampa. Basing himself on other critics, Braden tells us that the figure of the abandoned woman has its own important history and is a source of literary authority on which male as well as female poets have drawn. The women poets represent a schematic completion of the Petrarchan story, “its compelling but usually unperformed second act” (126).

The discussion of the women Petrarchists in Chapter Two serves as an introduction to the third and final chapter, which is almost entirely dedicated to Juana Ramírez de Asbaje (1648-1695), the Mexican nun who is better known as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Her prominence in this study is also gratifying, although it must be said that her inclusion forces the reader to question the title of the book. After all, Sor Juana is neither Continental nor easily placed within what is normally understood as the Renaissance. There is nothing in the title of the book or the table of contents to announce the prominent presence of this important figure, and it may be that Braden’s study will go unnoticed by Hispanists. Perhaps Braden’s intention is to address readers who might be...
less familiar with the already widely admired and studied Sor Juana Inés and to demonstrate her importance within the practice of Petrarchan imitation. In this chapter, he makes mention of other Spanish poets (specifically Góngora and Quevedo) who influenced Sor Juana and who wrote most of their important poetry in the seventeenth century. In this regard, Braden seems to contradict his own assertion at the beginning of this chapter that Petrarchan lyric had largely done its work by the end of the sixteenth century. In any case, Braden’s discussion of Sor Juana, based as it is on critics such as Octavio Paz and Lisa Rabin, would likely prove familiar and even derivative to knowledgeable students of the Mexican nun. At the same time, the discussions of the politics of patronage and of the role of lyric poetry in this dynamic are deftly handled. Although he claims to be skeptical of making too much of the political dimension of the lyric because it can lead to “the unhappy loss of respect for the poetry’s manifest content” (136), Braden himself explores the connection between the rhetoric of amatory poetry and the idiom of courtly etiquette and deference. Braden is particularly concerned with the complex relationship between Juana and the vicereines of Mexico: the countesses of Paredes and Galve, and the marquise of Mancera. Again basing himself on Paz, he speaks of the affinities between the language of erotic prostration and the idiom of courtly power relations.

Braden is to be credited for giving a balanced account of Juana’s decision to enter the convent. He vividly describes the convent as a peculiarly paradoxical space where women writers simultaneously found enclosure and freedom, a space that provided them with opportunities for self-expression but also subjected them to the vigilance of confessors and the Inquisition. Although Braden calls Spain “the most inhospitable site in Western Europe for secular women writers” (141), he mentions several Spanish women who were Juana’s literary predecessors, notably Teresa of Avila but also lesser-known figures such as Ana de San Bartolomé and Marcela de San Felix. Braden tells us that the oxymoronic texture of these women’s writings made the rhetoric of Petrarchism particularly propitious. Although this last chapter seems particularly dependent on the work of other critics (in addition to Paz, Electa Arenal, Stacy Schlau and Allison Weber are frequently invoked), Braden is eloquent in demonstrating Juana’s originality. He tells us that this deeply cerebral woman resolves the perennial Petrarchan frustration of the lover by asserting that the beloved can be recuperated through the force of the intellect and the imagination. In discussing Juana’s (perhaps inadvertent) quotation of Laura’s “I’non son forse chi tu credi” of Canzone 23, Braden states that here “it is possible to hear [Juana’s] voice as the voice of generations of Petrarchan ladies finally replying. . .” (151).

In the introduction, Braden claims that he wants to make the phenomenon of Petrarchism as intelligible as possible. He has accomplished his goal to a great extent in this elegant and insightful book. We return, however, to the question of just who his intended readers are. Someone unfamiliar with Petrarch and Petrarchism may be confused by the unsystematic presentation, the jumping back and forth in themes, chronology, and geography. Braden himself refers readers to other books that provide a clearer introduction to the topic, for example Leonard Forster’s classic The Icy Fire. On the other hand, a critic well acquainted with the phenomenon of Petrarchism would be left with a sense that (s)he has read most of this before. This is, of course, the result of Braden’s intimate familiarity with the texts and the secondary literature, and
there is no question that he always gives credit where credit is due. One disconcerting aspect, however, is the practice of relegating the names of many of the critics who have influenced his own analysis to the endnotes. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, and indeed it may be that the author thought that eliminating the names of critics and direct quotes from the main text would make it more readable. Nevertheless, having to constantly consult the footnotes to identify who is being cited becomes intrusive after a while. A bibliography at the end would have been helpful in this regard.

Gordon Braden’s *Petrarchan Love and the Continental Renaissance* is not unlike a quirky and intelligent travel guide. It takes us through familiar territory, dutifully pointing out the important landmarks, but also forcing us to take interesting detours to out-of-the-way places that we might have overlooked in previous visits. As such, it is an enjoyable read and a welcome addition to the ever-growing bibliography on Petrarch and Petrarchism.