

Virtue and Desire: Love in Petrarch's Poetry

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Abstract:

Petrarch, famous for his sonnets, is one of the leading poets of the Renaissance. His love poems are widely circulated and have touched countless readers for nearly a thousand years. In his lyric poems, there is usually a constant heroine - Laura. Petrarch loved Laura as an earthly beauty and worshipped her as a saintess. This love does not demand perfection, nor even contact, as if the remaining poems as witnesses were enough. His unrequited love for Laura is one of the focuses of the study of Petrarch. For a long time, his love for Laura was often compared to the love presented in chivalry literature. This paper attempts to interpret this literature love from a philosophical perspective. Therefore, this paper will analyze Petrarch's love for Laura based on philosophical concepts. By interpreting Petrarch's love from a different perspective, readers can get closer to the nature of his love. According to different schools of philosophy, his love may be a kind of supreme good or just a kind of narcissism.

Keywords: Petrarch; psychoanalytic; eros

1. Introduction

As a famous Italian poet and a pioneer of the humanist movement, Petrarch has a great reputation in the history of world literature. Notably, he wrote many love poems for a noblewoman named Laura. His obsessive, unrequited love and his sad and passionate poetry left a strong impression on the Renaissance. Because of Petrarch's love for her, this ordinary lady, Laura, is still remembered as a literary image thousands of years after her death. In Petrarch's writing, she is both an earthly woman and a holy goddess with religious meaning. He sometimes praised the beauty of Laura's body and sometimes praised the divine temperament emanating from Laura. He sometimes treated Laura as a virgin and sometimes as an earthly woman. This feeling combines both sides of love, which means his love for Laura, both physical and spiritual.

On the surface, it seems to be a love close to perfection, and the love between Petrarch and Laura is indeed celebrated and promoted as a paradigm of love. This love follows the tradition of chivalry and is generally regarded as a virtue. There are many different comments from different perspectives for this kind of love. For example, the philosophers of ancient Greece must have been particularly fond of this kind of love that combined with the soul and truth. Moreover, Petrarch, one of the leading poets of the Renaissance, must have inherited this tradition of love from the Greeks. In Petrarch's attempt to talk to Augustine about the meaning and value of love, he almost uses Lau-

ra's love with him as a model of earthly love. This paradigm, though, is clouded. However, looking at Petrarch's feelings for Laura from a more modern perspective, such as Lacan's psychoanalysis, this love takes the opposite side. It loses its greatness and, on the contrary, becomes narcissism. Love is a topic that philosophers have discussed for thousands of years, and it is also a proposition that is entangled with literature. Petrarch's love for Laura has been preserved as a literary model; its implications are worthy of further study. This paper will combine literary criticism and philosophical research to analyze love in Petrarch's poetry.

2. Petrarch's love

2.1 Love as a Greek tradition

As a humanist, Petrarch often shows traces of Greco-Roman literature in his works. He was fluent in Latin and used to write long narrative poems imitating Virgil. He established his aesthetic value system through the deconstruction and reconstruction of ancient Greek and Roman classics. The Greco-Roman philosophy of love also influenced his lyric poetry. Greek tradition divides love into physical love and spiritual love. These two concepts cannot be reduced to binary opposites. Although physical love is generally considered inferior to spiritual love, the two concepts are not incompatible.

According to Plato, love is a ladder. It begins with a fascination with physical beauty and gradually elevates to

spiritual love[1]. When people reach the top of the ladder of love, they have the perfect and eternal happiness they need. This process can be seen in Petrarch's poetry. There are many descriptions of Laura's appearance in Petrarch's poems. In the songbook, he praises Laura's body without reservation. "The arms and hands and feet and countenance," "The gleaming golden curly hair," he wrote. This expression abandons the ascetic cover of the body and returns to the embrace of Greek culture. These accolades for women's physical beauty fill in the missing body culture and body art of the Middle Ages and recall Aphrodite, the goddess of love, long dormant. The evolution of writing on female appearance reflects the pursuit of physical beauty, which has evolved into the pursuit of abstract beauty[2]. These positive and frank expressions of eros are a form of human emancipation and a continuation of the glorification of eros in classical civilization. Socrates believes that love necessarily involves the pursuit of beauty. The pursuit of beauty in the Greek context always led to the pursuit of goodness so that love can be seen as proof of virtue.

However, his love for Laura did not stop at the first step. Admiration for Laura's physical beauty is not a major theme in his poetry. As a literary image, Laura also embodies morality and justice in Petrarch's mind. He describes Laura as the most elegant, intelligent, and saintly woman. This treatment originates from the Greco-Roman tradition of personifying wisdom or truth as feminine. This extreme idealization and literary description obliterate Laura's humanity. Laura becomes increasingly unreal in such heated words, and she is more like a goddess belonging only to Petrarch than a woman[3]. Her position in Petrarch's poetry echoes that of the Muse in the minds of Greek poets. She became Petrarch's goddess and source of inspiration. In this moment, by deifying Laura, Petrarch raises his love for her to the soul. When Greek philosophers defended the love of the soul, they often emphasized that the love of the soul would lead to creation. Just as physical union can lead to new offspring, the Greeks believed spiritual union can also lead to birth. This birth is of the soul. The love of the soul inspires and shapes wisdom. Knowledge and truth, which are born of the union of souls, are nobler than the product of physical love. For Plato, the process of love's development is a search for truth. It is a process in which one person seeks the truth in another. Petrarch's love for Laura fits this theory perfectly. His love for Laura led him to create more poems. These works correspond to the definitions of Socrates and Plato. They are the offspring of the soul. The birth of life in ancient civilizations was often seen as a reproduction and inheritance of the individual's self.

Therefore, by procreating offspring, human beings can obtain a kind of eternal continuity in the body. In contrast to the procreation caused by the body, the procreation caused by the soul was also well-defined in Greek civilization: The descendants of the soul are those things that make a person memorable, and they are always created by virtue and wisdom[4]. The poems Petrarch wrote about Laura have survived, and many scholars have analyzed and commented on their love. This situation is an outward manifestation of immortality.

From the depiction of Laura's body to the worship of Laura's character and the fixation of Laura as a literary image, Petrarch completed the transition from sensibility to rationality. Love rises from the worship of the individual body to the search for the soul; he ascended to the top of the ladder of love described by Plato. If we examine Petrarch from the point of view of Greek culture, we see that his love almost achieves a kind of supreme goodness. In this Renaissance, sage echoes the Greek concept of love.

2.2 Christian tradition and earthly love

Though Christian love, like Greek civilization, seeks the concept of immortality, it does so through the love of God. In the worldview of the 12th century, heaven and earth formed a dualistic structure, and earthly life was generally considered inferior to heavenly life. The famous early theologian in ancient Rome, Augustine, made a distinction between heavenly love and earthly love. In his argument, earthly love is far inferior to heavenly love because earthly love can never achieve eternal life. Therefore, a man's love for other human beings is far less valuable than a man's love for God. In Petrarch's writings, he invented the character of Francesco to have a dialogue with Augustine. Francesco's defense of earthly love is filled with allusions to Petrarch's worship of Laura: He gives Augustine that love can be divided into two kinds according to the difference in the object of love. Moreover, the woman he fell in love with was perfect in appearance and intelligence. By loving this perfect object, he acquires all virtues. So, his love is moral.

The defense of Augustine and Francesco was inconclusive, and there was little agreement between them. Most of the time, the two explain their different perceptions of love. Behind this gap in communication lies Petrarch's bewilderment. When he defends the sanctity and nobility of earthly love, he presents a view different from social norms[5]. He does not shy away from physical beauty, believes in the love between human beings, and even believes that some noblewoman has enough intelligence to teach men. He was content with earthly love, but he did not deny the superiority of heavenly love. Therefore, his works usually contain a kind of concessional self-satisfac-

tion. While he declared that he did not need eternal life or access to the divine, he also declared that earthly life was “enough” for him. Another implicit message in this statement is that there is greater glory and satisfaction in living forever or becoming God. Therefore, in Petrarch’s value system, heavenly love is still higher. In some verses, he tries to reconcile his love for God and his love for Laura, bringing unity to these two emotions. He tried to ease the tension between the structure of earthly love and heavenly love. However, as mentioned above, he was not a revolutionary, nor did he try to dispel the idea of dualism[6].

On the contrary, when Francesco defended his love, he took the initiative to create a new binary structure. In justifying his love, he actively distinguishes earthly love into two forms. One is the love of a woman of bad character, which corrupts, and the other is the love of a woman of good character, which ennobles. He deliberately emphasizes that the former is subordinate to the flesh and senses, while the latter has a spiritual component. Moreover, in portraying the woman he falls in love with, he makes her into a perfect image similar to God’s omniscience. When Petrarch spoke of Laura, he worshiped her and called her “The Virgin Laura.” He wrote in his songbook, “From her, I can imagine a heavenly life.” In him, the corrupting love and the ennobling love also form a dualistic structure similar to earthly love and heavenly love. Through these unrealistic descriptions of Laura, he accomplishes her idolization. His depiction of Laura puts her in a position that is almost divine but not divine. It can even describe Laura as being on the threshold of humans and God. Here, Petrarch uses the same logic as Christianity to justify his love for Laura[7]. By emphasizing Laura’s purity and perfection, he elevates his love to extraordinary heights. He removes the negative aspects of love, while Francesco also emphasizes in the debate that his love “contains nothing to blame.” This love is outwardly detached from the symbol of God—after all, Laura does not belong to the realm of heaven; she is still a person who stays on earth. However, it did not escape the fate of falling into theological worship. Petrarch created a new symbol for himself - the Virgin Laura. Petrarch presents Laura as a god on a pedestal, admiring her rhetorically and philosophically. She was seen as the embodiment of beauty and intelligence. This kind of love does not exist in the world. No woman can simultaneously possess these extreme qualities, and no love is moral. Petrarch’s love for Laura somewhat replaced his love for God. This love does not create a new structure for love. It partly continues the Christian tradition of the Middle Ages. Though he recalled the body, he placed the body under the soul; though he recalled the earth, he placed the earth under heaven.

2.3 Petrarch from a psychoanalytic perspective

If Petrarch’s love for Laura is viewed from the perspective of the medieval tradition, this love is in an honorable and righteous place. However, modern philosophy will deconstruct the sanctity of his love and defeat this lofty fantasy. Petrarch’s love for Laura is mixed with fierce idealization. Today, some psychoanalysts believe that idealization is central to romantic love, but they also acknowledge its dangers[8]. It is an obsession caused by fantasy and idealization. It is either extremely easy to destroy or downright deceptive. Petrarch, of course, belongs to the latter group. One gossip reveals the nature of Petrarch’s love: Many people came to Laura’s home after reading his poems, only to find that she was just an ordinary middle-aged woman. Laura, who appears as a literary image, has almost no connection with the real Laura. Moreover, the aging of the real Laura has never affected Petrarch’s passion for the character that emerged as a literary figure. At that moment, the terrible truth loomed out—Laura was not about Laura; Laura was only about Petrarch. Through his infatuation with Laura, Petrarch endows her with illusory value, immersing himself in an unrivaled ecstasy. He claimed: “Which made me a stranger in my romance.” Psychoanalytically, this kind of infatuation often implies a kind of narcissism. When Freud analyzed romantic love, he believed that the root of idealization was overvaluation. When humans idealize something, they always give it a fanciful value beyond what it should have in its conventional sense. He believes this overvaluation stems from primary narcissism in infancy. This emotion will gradually transfer to the external object in the growth process [9]. However, the overestimation of the other is also dangerous and unstable. According to Freud, the tendency to use another person as an idealized object of romance is tantamount to externalizing narcissism on the other. One of Lacan’s famous quotes is more direct: There is no such thing as a sexual relationship. It is impossible to create a perfect union between two people. Romantic love and the perfect partner is itself a fantasy. In love, one is objectified and objectifies the other. Neither can touch the essence of the other. Petrarch never tries to exorcise the illusions created by obsession and infatuation; he never tries to recognize the real Laura but actively indulges in a myth. For Petrarch’s Laura, there is no equivalent in the world. She exists only in Petrarch’s mind; she is an image entirely invented by Petrarch. The cultural environment influenced this emotional tendency. In the courtly love of the 12th century, knights were forbidden to touch the lady they loved. Courtly love does not end in the secular norm of marriage and procreation; on the contrary, it requires

the knight to keep a distance from the lady. Petrarch did not marry or have children with Laura, and Laura was always far from him. This is not so much a regret as a fulfillment. It is precisely because desire is unrealizable, caused by a lack, that the lover, as a symbol of desire, needs to possess an unattainable and inaccessible quality. The more remote and untouchable she is, the easier it is to idealize and objectify her. The real Laura lost her appearance and spent her time in family life like other ladies. However, in Petrarch's songbook, she is "The gleaming golden curly hair, the rays flashing from a smiling angel's glance" [10]. Petrarch is not concerned with the lady's subjectivity. She acted as a mirror, allowing him to project his ideals and fantasies. Even before Lacan's psychoanalysis was invented, this kind of love was being questioned by some astute literary critics. This unreal love even led to Shakespeare's ridicule. When Petrarch portrayed Laura as a celestial beauty, Shakespeare said, "My lover's eyes were not like the sun." Shakespeare interprets the ordinariness of his lover but thinks that such a lover is more worthy of love than other exaggerated beauties. Petrarch exemplified exactly the kind of lyrical paradigm he opposed. He captures the inauthenticity behind this exaggerated lyricism. To love an idealized object, that is, to love a projection on the other, is often essentially only narcissistic. If readers explain Petrarch's love for Laura from this perspective, they will find that it is not a sacrifice but a use. Even so, Petrarch's love is still great [11]. At this point, this greatness had nothing to do with Laura, only with him.

3. Conclusions

As an important poet in the Renaissance, Petrarch's love for Laura has always been a proposition often mentioned by literary critics. Love and eros are themes that poets often write about. Petrarch's love for Laura is special because of his obsession. Literature and philosophy are closely related, and the study of his love in the context of philosophy is helpful to the interpretation of his text.

It is incontrovertible that for most schools of philosophy, especially classical ones, his love is something close to

perfect. However, his love is clouded when we turn our attention to modern philosophy. This is partly because of the lack of emphasis on human subjectivity in classical culture and partly because of the pessimistic temperament of modern philosophy.

No matter which point of view he interprets his love for Laura, it is undeniable that Laura inspires his creative talent. Because of his tendency towards love and eros, he wrote poems dedicated to Laura. Therefore, love—and Laura—can be regarded as a link in his immortal fame.

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