

The Female Body in French Petrarchan Style (1543-1561)

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This project aims to carry out a stylistic and epistemological analysis of the French Petrarchan corpus in comparison with its Latin and Italian sources, combining a formal study with the history of representations, specifically focusing on the perception of the female body in the so-called “first generation” French Petrarchan collections (1543-1561). This primary corpus, comprising about fifty collections (from around thirty authors), will be supplemented by a secondary corpus of Italian collections (from the *Canzoniere* to the collective collections published by Giolito and Dolce in the early 1560s), to explore the affinities between French and Italian authors. It will also incorporate medical and art treatises in Latin, Italian, and French. This study, which spans these different languages and cultures, aims to shed light on the depiction of the female body in the texts, arts, and knowledge of the Renaissance, thus highlighting issues that are important to the relationship between men and women—where the weight of representations is essential – also in relation to our time.

Indeed, the description of the female body plays a decisive role in Renaissance Petrarchan collections. These collections adopt the arsenal of topoi drawn from Petrarch and Italian Petrarchans to describe the lady’s body; they have established a lasting codification of feminine beauty. Beneath these topoi (sunlike eyes, ivory hand, golden hair, coral mouth...), the goal is to go beyond the reductive notion of a commonplace to understand them as tools of a mental configuration (ideological, subjective) of the relationship to the body, in order to illuminate an epistemic framework, both individual and collective enunciative strategies, and, ultimately, to view them as the site of debates carried out by figures of authors who, from one culture to another, compete for control of the representation of the female body.

While each of the notions of Petrarchism, femininity, and style has separately piqued the curiosity of critics, the originality of this approach lies in the intersection of these notions and its epistemological orientation between two linguistic and cultural traditions. Furthermore, while the influence of Italian Petrarchism on the French Petrarchan corpus is well-known, this topic stands out by focusing on a particularly remarkable aspect of this cultural exchange: the issue of control over the discourse concerning the female body, which is an emerging subject and has yet to be systematically approached, let alone stylistically. In this regard, Italy’s cultural contribution is considerable due to the influence of Castiglione, which penetrates France during these decades, the pivotal role of Lyon as a cultural crossroads, and the existence of Italian female Petrarchists (Vittoria Colonna, Tullia d’Aragona, Chiara Matraini, Veronica Gambara, Laura Terracina...) whose works inform a French feminine love poetry, emulating them. This feminine poetry, which engages with the collections of male authors to question the language and effect from within, constitutes Petrarchism as a site of debate. This research will benefit from the privileged conditions of having access to a rich Italian collection and a co-supervision specialized in both cultural traditions.

By examining the image of the female body conveyed in these Italian and French collections, the goal is to analyze the stakes and consequences of this discourse and its evolution. Several arguments support such an approach. Firstly, it is impossible to overlook the importance of the body in love poetry and the weight of representations, particularly concerning the female body. The reception of these representations in texts and arts constitutes a major issue, especially in the context of *#MeToo* and cancel culture, where misunderstandings can arise if not thoroughly explored, while a new sensitivity to the implicit nature of representations, often trivialized as topoi, is developing. Yet, these representations have always been a matter of discourse and asymmetric interactions, where those who control the discourse hold the upper hand: it is our task to provide frameworks for these readings,

with nuance and rigor; and it is important not to neglect the past in the analysis of how desire is expressed – both to understand the creation of stereotypes and to address the ongoing concern of reinventing language.

Understanding Petrarchism as a discourse of love therefore justifies an investigation into style as part of the structuring of discourse and thought. This approach stems from the epistemological need to link anatomical representations, not just philosophical ones, to the words used to describe the body, in connection with contemporary arts and knowledge. It also responds to the pragmatic concern of placing variations in love style not only within a poetics of currents and genres or authorial stylistics but within general communication practices that convey something about the relationship to the body – idealized or sensualized – in light of recent enunciative analysis methods, and to shed light on their evolution. Finally, in terms of the circulation of ideas between Italy and France, gender representations, and the interactional logic of the collections, analyzing a discourse explicitly “feminine”, which interacts with the “masculine” Petrarchism, represents an innovative aspect of this study.

This project is organized around four main axes of analysis. The first (“The Words of the Body” at the crossroads of languages and disciplines) is epistemological. It aims to explore lexical circulations between Italian and French Petrarchan corpora, as well as between these and Italian treatises dedicated to the female body (e.g., the *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne* by Firenzuola, 1541), the Italian and French “arts of drawing” (Lecerle, 1987), the “books of secrets” (Berriot-Salvadore, 2010), and medical treatises (both Latin and vernacular), to identify convergences between the Petrarchan characterization of the female body and contemporary scholarly and artistic discourse.

The second, with a more clearly ethical focus, will examine the enumeration of the female body’s beauties (blazons and enumerative poems). It seeks to articulate the syntactic study of body fragmentation with a rhetorical approach (aiming to present the body in *enargeia*) and an enunciative approach (aiming to reconstruct, through echoic effects, a poetics of weaving and an implicit logic of projection, the “voyeuristic” subject whose gaze structures the decomposition). This rhetoric is not just about saying things well, but also about showing them well: the energy and *enargeia* of Petrarchan descriptions are part of a pragmatics.

The third axis will explore, in inter-linguistic emulation and diachrony, the diversity of figural strategies aimed at either idealizing or sensualizing the female body, making it a “pretext” for expressing the masculine “I” (Lazard, 1985), through a detailed study of substitution figures – metonymy and synecdoche – and the remotivation (materializing or not) of traditional tropes associated with the lady’s body.

The fourth will focus on cultural transfers and poetic interactions concerning gender through the emulative dialogue between French women poets and Italian Petrarchists, and with French male poets, to see how they take on the challenge of reappropriating a male-oriented topic by asserting their bodies not as objects but as poetic subjects.

Based on the study of a transnational literary movement, this project fits within the flagship program “Multilingualism, Pluralities, Citizenship” in several ways: by its position between multiple languages and cultures (Italy and France, as well as Latin), by the reflection it proposes at the intersection of poetic language and epistemological representations (particularly medical and artistic), by the consideration of the role of Italian and French women authors, and by the exploration of gender relations, all issues that resonate with our time.