

GERI, LORENZO. 2020. *Petrarca Cortigiano*. Roma: Bulzoni. ISBN: 978-88-6897-189-2, pp. 311, soft cover. 24.00 euros.

The image of Petrarch as “proto-humanist” or “pre-humanist” has a long and fortunate tradition. In addition to the importance of his *forma mentis* and his relationship with classical literature, especially Latin, Petrarch’s civic engagement and political commitments give additional meaning to this conception of him. Lorenzo Geri’s work on Petrarch as a courtier proposes a new and interesting approach to understanding this aspect of the Arezzo-born poet. Following in the footsteps of previous scholarship (critical editions, biographies, and other texts), Geri’s work sketches a comprehensive portrait through a long journey across Petrarch’s works. In this process, Geri traces Petrarch’s metamorphosis from a private person to the self-constructed public figure he sought to become.

Geri’s aim, as stated in the introduction, is to discuss the relationship between the poet and his protectors (kings, prelates, nobles)<sup>1</sup>. His primary sources are letters and documents, most already known to critics, but here enlightened by Geri’s new perspective on Petrarch not only as a poet but, more importantly, as a political man, with the privileges and benefits deriving from his status as *clericus* and *commensalis* (often considered by the poet himself as tedious activities, limiting and binding).<sup>2</sup> The increasing critical interest in Italian “humanisms”, moreover, has shed light on the importance of “profiling” authors and their relationships, with special attention to their poetical and dialogical production.<sup>3</sup> As Petrarch has long been considered the “father” and the main reference for early humanists’ political and practical duties, Geri’s timely research will be important to multiple critical fields.

The volume is divided into three main chapters and enriched by an extensive bibliography that considers the numerous articles and books about Petrarch’s poetry and intellectual impact on Italian and European literature. Each chapter presents a rich summary of the available information on Petrarch’s contacts and political relationships followed by three main points of discussion that Geri states at the beginning of the

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1. Specifically, the Colonna family, the papal court, the Viscontis, and the Carraras: see WILKINS 1961 for a complete overview of the biography of the poet.
  2. See for example Petrarch’s complaints in his epistle *Posteritati* (25) about the envy and rumours circulating in the environments he attended.
  3. As we can see from the direction of many intellectual biographies of authors that lean on archival documents, literary works, and indirect sources.

first chapter: The first point considers Petrarch's aim to preserve all the ecclesiastical benefits he acquired during life; the second encompasses the network of relationships he built and needed to save, and the third point concerns the ability of the *clericus* to keep together new and old bindings without ever making any errors. Together, these principles kept Petrarch faithful to his idea of the intellectual and poet.

Geri's work unfolds chronologically, starting with the preliminary stages of Petrarch's political activities and ending at the "Paduan" phase. In chapter one, *Petrarca da commensalis a diplomatico*, Geri provides a complete overview of the career trajectory Petrarch aimed for, giving new attention to his decision to drop out of legal studies and pursue clerical life under the wing of noble families.<sup>4</sup> Petrarch's skills in law, in conjunction with the increasing fame he obtained as a poet and scholar, made him quite a point of reference at the time. The habitus of an *observator illustrium* (*Sen.* VII 1, 20) provided Petrarch with a double perspective: he was aware of both the poetical state of the art and the political state of the nation.<sup>5</sup> Geri's second chapter, *Petrarca, le corti, i signori*, examines the poet's texts in conjunction with the historical data presented in the first chapter to evaluate whether or not the image Petrarch constructed of himself is historically and biographically accurate.<sup>6</sup> In this context Geri also offers examples of the political meanings of some recurring words in the poet's productions. While some of the words are quite "concrete" in their meanings (e.g., "aula" and "curia" [178]), others show the intrinsic polysemy of Petrarchan language (*ad vocem* "amicitial" [191]).<sup>7</sup>

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4. Again, the Colonna family, French cardinals of the Curia, the Pope himself, Clemente VI, and, finally, Lords of seignories of the north of Italy such as da Correggio and Visconti.
  5. See for example the language Petrarch adopted when referring to people and places, the "consilia" of the *Familiares* and *Seniles* addressed to lords, the *specula principis* in the form of a treatise traced under the lines of the other epistles, and, in the end, the polemics between Petrarch and Boccaccio on the status of the scholar and the political man in the employment of nobles and lords.
  6. We also would add that this hermeneutical approach is extremely useful when in presence of a sophisticated production like Petrarch's, where our comprehension of his life and thought is complicated by the prominent poetical autobiography given by the poet.
  7. A critical study on Petrarch's vocabulary has been conducted in the choral work of Luca Marcozzi and Romana Brovia, where a few of Geri's lemmas are explained; see MARCOZZI and BROVIA 2016.

The third chapter, *La produzione letteraria di Petrarca e le corti. Testi d'occasione e dediche*, focuses on Petrarch's idea of *homo politicus*. After identifying the genres in Petrarch's corpus that illuminate this idea — epitaphs, *carmina*, vernacular poems, for instance — Geri analyzes the poet's tactic of capturing the attention of his “dedicatari” with poetical homages.<sup>8</sup> This tactic is not restricted to the preliminary stages of his *cursus* but found in Petrarch's three most important works — *Africa*, *De Remediis*, and *De viris illustribus* — and Geri highlights the link between these poems and their “dedicatari”: Roberto d'Angiò, Azzo da Correggio, and Francesco da Carrara. In this relevant aspect of the poems' “creation”, Geri finds what he calls the prodromes of a “scambio nascente tra umanesimo e signorie in fase di consolidamento” (25), a characteristic of the Humanism of almost a century earlier. Here Geri offers a helpful chronology of the poems under discussion — from the “testi d'occasione”, to the *Rime*, *Epistles*, and *Africa* — as well as the difficult writing process Petrarch went through from *De Remediis* to *De viris Illustribus*.

While each of Geri's chapters offers important insights into Petrarch, it is the innovativeness of Geri's methodological approach — at once hermeneutical, philological, and cultural — that provides readers with a clearly stated and completed “panorama” on the historical and political role of the poet-courtier. What we are provided with by the end of the book is a clear overview of Petrarch's life and poetry, as well as a sense of his attempt to maintain a balanced *equilibrium* between his worldly commitments and duties and his need for a safe and quiet “*locus*” (a metaphorical inner peace) to write. Divided between these two *momenta* of his life, the articulation of the poet's production follows a certain “rhythm”.

From the very first chapter, this book is not about Petrarch as the poet we are used to hearing and reading about: Geri never even alludes to the familiar *leitmotif* of Petrarch's love for Laura. Rather, Geri's concerns are about the man and the environments in which he operated, and include a careful focus on details.<sup>9</sup>: Geri's work thus crucially contributes to the line of scholarship that delivers Petrarch from the consequences of the

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8. Geri's investigation foregrounds the abundant usage of the *locus amoenus topos* alluding to the *otium* needed for poetry, granted by protectors' financial support.
  9. E.g., the episode of the calumny that affected Petrarch's career in Avignon when he was accused of being a witch (118) and the complaints registered by Florentine intellectuals when Petrarch moved to Milan and was hosted by their enemies, the Viscontis (126).

assessments by the likes of Croce (after De Sanctis) and Contini.<sup>10</sup> Free from the enchanting but partial picture of the intimate poet, tormented by love and the idea of sin, we get to see Petrarch as a man of his time, an expert in politics, and a careful observer of the dynamics of the society he lived in. Within this quite multifaceted context, Geri's brilliant prose makes this book highly accessible for all readers, including those with no expertise on Petrarch's works.

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10. See DE SANCTIS 1868, and 1907. See also what Contini says about Petrarch: "Si tratta di due [Dante and Petrarch] esemplari umani addirittura antitetici, in uno dei quali l'inaudita ricchezza e a prima vista eterogeneità delle percezioni poetiche si accompagna, come di rado accade, non solo a una vivacissima intelligenza generale, ma a un vero logos capace di inventare concetti e strutturare ragionamenti; mentre l'altro, temperamento fondamentalmente introspettivo, elabora in solitudine una serie di meditazioni e, al limite, di modulazioni melodiche lentamente variate, scompagnate da operazioni *stricto sensu* razionali" (cfr. CONTINI 2007, 519–20).