*pietas and pietà*: Catullus meets Petrarch

In his *Canzoniere*, Petrarch makes wide-ranging use of vocabulary and concepts from religion, the erotic, and from public life to express his developing feeling about his lady, whom he calls Laura. English translations of his poems relentlessly translate the crucial term *pietà* (and its alter ego, *pietate*) as “pity.” It seems clear that this translation masks nuances of the word that are more suitable to its context: nuances such as tenderness, kindness, or affection. This is understandable in one respect, because his immediate model, Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, clearly and exclusively uses the word to correspond to “pity.” A short examination of relevant passages will demonstrate the less restricted sense of the word in Petrarch. This is consistent with his agenda to unite religious and erotic vocabulary (*cf*. Musa 723: “the language of love is finally reabsorbed into the language of Scripture”) and enriches the understanding of these passages and of his voice in general.

What is revealed is that Petrarch uses the term bilaterally: “pity” flows in only one direction, from the superior to the inferior, while *pietà* flows in both directions, from one party to the other and back. Even in religious terms, Petrarch strives for the mutually obligated relationship implied, “pity (*pietà*) from God” is different qualitatively but related to “devotion (*pietà)* to God.” At this point, Petrarch’s connection to the Roman Catullus becomes relevant. Catullus of course famously referred to himself as a *pius poeta*, over which many have pondered; in any case, it has long been shown that to enrich his vocabulary of personal affection, especially in regard to Lesbia but also to his other friends (and enemies), Catullus appropriates the vocabulary of Roman social relationships which is most easily described as the patron-client value system, or – between equals – political *amicitia*. (Paradigmatic is Poem 76.) Indeed, the poetic agendas of the two poets are strikingly similar in this regard; by examining the frequent expansion of the nuances of *pietà* in Petrarch, we may find insight also into Catullus’s bi-directional use of *pietas* (*pius*) in his lyrics. In the case of Petrarch, *pietà* toward his beloved is easy to understand, though it would not be “pity;” and the obligations implied by *pietà* toward him from her are very different.

Whether or not this is a direct influence from Catullus, our understanding of both poets is deepened by examining the interplay of these crucial religious/social concepts.

Texts:

R.A.B. Mynors (ed.) C. Valerii Catulli *Carmina*. Oxford Classical Texts 1958.

M. Musa, Petrarch, *Petrarch: The Canzoniere, or Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta.* Indiana University Press 1999.