

Petrarch's Love for Laura: Compare to Qu Yuan's Vanilla Beauty

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Abstract. The "Love for Laura" condensed in Petrarch's *Canzoniere* is a rare story in the history of literature, and to his lifelong love "Laura", whom he could not love, it is worthwhile to explore the spiritual implication under it; similarly, in the history of classical Chinese literature, there are a large number of literati who share the same ideal bitterness with him, represented by Qu Yuan. Qu Yuan's use of "Vanilla Beauty (vanilla represents all fragrant herbs and flowers)", which was to express his political bitterness and personal feelings, is a precedent of a cultural tradition. The purpose of this paper is to deeply interpret Petrarch's "Love for Laura" and Qu Yuan's "Vanilla Beauty" as ideal archetypes and to analyse and compare them from a comparative literary perspective. Laura is a kind of deified imagery, and "Vanilla Beauty" is also a symbol, a collection of characteristics; but "Vanilla Beauty" in the history of classical Chinese literature opened up a precedent for literati to use things to symbolise their dreams of returning to politics and to a certain extent opened up a tradition of literature. There are certainly similarities between them, but they are fundamentally different because of the differences in social systems and cultural traditions.

Keywords: Petrarch, Qu Yuan, Love for Laura, Vanilla Beauty.

1. Introduction

Petrarch was a medieval Italian poet and the first humanist of the Renaissance. In his *Canzoniere*, he created one of the classic characters in literary history, "Laura", the woman he adored all his life but was never able to get. Qu Yuan was the first Romantic poet of ancient China. He created the imagery of "Vanilla Beauty (vanilla represents all fragrant herbs and flowers)" to express his political bitterness and yearning for his ideal. The two are similar in terms of love but being unable to get it, and both "Laura" and "Vanilla Beauty" are highly abstract images and ideal archetypes. However, the typicality of an ideal represented by "Vanilla Beauty" is actually a literary tradition: many images in the history of later Chinese literature are in the same vein as the core of "Vanilla Beauty". Existing studies of "Laura" and "Vanilla Beauty" have only analysed them point by point to a certain extent, which is not comprehensive. This study, however, starts from these two classic images and tries to explore their similarities and differences, which is of certain significance for a deeper understanding of the two from different perspectives.

This paper will take the method of comparative research. First of all, the paper looks for the "Love for Laura" in the text of *Canzoniere*, and analyses the imagery of "Laura" to establish it as a collection of characteristics and an "ideal archetype". Secondly, the paper will explore the symbolism of "Vanilla Beauty" to reveal the poet's anguish and aspiration to his ideal, as well as the literary tradition that started by it. Finally, this paper will analyse the similarities between the two images from the perspectives of characteristics, nature and ideal archetypes, and then explain their differences from the perspectives of starting point and result, and later influences, all in order to provide new perspectives for a deeper understanding of the two images.

2. Laura: A lasting error

2.1. Petrarch and Laura

Petrarch was an Italian poet and the first humanist of the Renaissance, whose lifelong passion for writing was sparked by Laura's performance in a play at the church of Saint Clare in Avignon in 1327. Petrarch wrote 366 poems for her, which became known as the *Canzoniere*.

In the Middle Ages, there existed in European literature a kind of "courtly love" that emphasized chivalry, celebrated highly idealized, formalized, and artistic love, and stressed free devotion without expecting any reward. In these poems, the knights in love are the "slaves" and "prisoners" of their lovers, worshipping their supreme "goddesses" [1]. Interestingly, Petrarch's love for Laura fulfills almost all the characteristics of the so-called "courtly love." In fact, Laura and Petrarch didn't know each other, but that did not stop Petrarch from adoring Laura as if she were a fiery spurt of love. Petrarch mentioned that he first saw Laura on April 4th, 1327, in the church of Saint Clare [2]. While he did see Laura, it is difficult for readers to piece together a complete picture of Laura's appearance from his poem. Petrarch's love for Laura was sincere and loyal, but it was not reciprocated. He was willing to go through fire and brimstone for his Laura without expecting anything in return, and his devotion is almost that of a prisoner and an enslaved worshipper of the goddess.

In this collection of over 300 poems, Petrarch largely begins his exposition with the love of the perfect spirit. One of the very distinctive features of Laura's image in the earlier compositions is that she is not a complete figure, but a collection of features, an apotheosis of imagery synthesised from a multitude of things and good qualities.

Petrarch presented the introduction to the tale of Apollo and Daphne in the poem V. As a result, Daphne was changed from a living woman to a fixed tree because she was unable to withstand Apollo's ferocious chase. Apollo transformed Daphne into a unique symbol that only belongs to him [3]. His purpose was clear: in a way, he does try to compare himself to Apollo while comparing Laura to Daphne, which symbolises his desire to follow Apollo's example and turn Laura into the immovable tree that is exclusively his own. By the point that the story comes to Sonnet 8, readers discover that Laura is portrayed as something separated beneath her garment rather than a fully formed woman. Finally, Laura's veil took her place in Sonnet 11. The poet was governed by the veil "by heat and cold," even to his death. In the poems that followed, Petrarch kept objectifying Laura by replacing her with gold, silver and garlands. Laura remained silent, and her emotions were unknown to readers throughout the entire process. She has been presented much like a silent work of art [3].

Canzone 127 concludes each stanza with the poet's longing for Laura. Petrarch acknowledged that Laura was constantly present in his gaze. Ironically, though, Laura never existed; all Petrarch could remember were his memories. Even though he already knew this was an illusion, he still wanted his "error to last."

2.2. Laura: A Religious Symbol

At the end of the 61st poem of *Canzoniere*, it mentions Laura's hand, which the poet once strayed from, and her feet, which he is willing to fall at. Moreover, he mentions he is about to come with a "naked spirit" and "flesh and bone", which proves that he is, or truly was, obsessed with her body, along with his earthly desires. In the 192nd poem, the poet again refers to Laura's feet and the magic they possess. He wrote that those "grass", "flowers", and "old black ilex" pray her foot to touch or even press them down. The feet, which are not considered beautiful by the general public, are here made to be favoured by nature and plants [4]. The poet implicitly puts a part of his own soul into the flowers and plants, letting them take his place in articulating his desire to kiss her feet; this desire can hardly be detached from the level of carnal desire, but also equally difficult to be totally categorised as carnal desire, because the act of kissing the feet itself is more symbolic than realistic.

In the 325th poem, the poet compares Laura to a sparkling pearl set in gold, saying that her hands and feet possess an extraordinary magical power that enables grass to take on more graceful qualities and makes wood, water, earth and stone evolve towards a more perfect state. Her presence allows the

things of nature to sublimate and blossom, to turn away from their dirty, disorderly nature and towards beauty, serenity and calm. In the light of the analyses above, the general characteristics of Laura in the poem and in the poet's mind become clear: she is no longer the mortal woman that Petrarch glimpsed in the beginning but possesses the characteristics of a myth and the qualities of a goddess, and has become a beauty in dreams, a goddess that washes the soul. "Laura" is ultimately sublimated into the poet's religion, a daily routine of thoughts and prayers, but in its essence, an ethereal existence. Its nature becomes the poet's almost sacred religious worship.

Beyond those, Laura is also a collection of traits and qualities. To the men who looked up to her, she was no longer a human being or women or other definition can be used for a person, but a collection of features, qualities, and distinctions, and was a tool to express feelings and get close to the poet's dreams. She was never human. Therefore, the core of her literary character is tragic. It reveals that Petrarch, though claiming to write a songbook for Laura, actually aimed to establish an identity of poet for himself. For readers, the image of Laura is never displayed or fully shown. Her flesh, her face and her presence are totally substituted by the fragmental beautiful metaphors. It is difficult to perceive the complete outlook of Laura, but one only gets the impression of a series of signs that are indistinguishable and ambiguous.

Therefore, the conclusion can be generally stated as follows: Laura is just a symbol that Petrarch created and used to express his preference, and in a way, she is a box that carries what Petrarch wants rather than what she was meant to be. So it is known that Petrarch only met Laura once, which was their first encounter, and from then his love immediately became a raging, free horse until he died. It was not Laura the woman that he loved, it was what he pursued that he truly loved. Petrarch loved Laura even more after her death because he never got to attain what he genuinely wanted. Such things were never made to be gained. Laura represents many things: she can be the poet's sexual desire or a kind of ideal of Petrarch's humanism. She can be even just a beautiful woman who looks just like a goddess, but she can never be herself, the woman who gave birth to a dozen kids and eventually died of the great plague.

3. Vanilla Beauty: Qu Yuan's Spirit

3.1. Vanilla Beauty

Qu Yuan was a Chinese poet and statesman from the state of Chu during the Warring States period. He served as an important official in the Chu in his early years but was later exiled for slander. In 278 BC, after the Ying Capital of Chu was broken by the Qin army, he sank himself in the Miluo River and martyred his country. Qu Yuan was a great patriotic poet in Chinese history and opened up the tradition of "Vanilla Beauty" [5].

The tradition of "Vanilla Beauty" began with Qu Yuan [5] and has been passed down as a spiritual and cultural symbol for thousands of years. Today, the lyrical mode and value orientation of "Vanilla Beauty" has been internalised as a potential value in the Chinese cultural context [6]. This comes from the fact that Qu Yuan's political ideals were difficult to realise, so he sought a spiritual outlet in literature to express his inner anguish, a creative motivation and creative behaviour inspired by it. The same anguish and poetry were repeated by countless literati in later generations, forming a large-scale literary tradition.

The expression "Vanilla Beauty" was not a direct statement by Qu Yuan, but a condensation of Qu Yuan's spirit by later generations. The term "Vanilla Beauty" originally referred to a metaphorical creative technique represented by Qu Yuan's *Li Sao*. The author used vanilla as a metaphor for the noble character of a person, such as in *Li Sao*, there are sentence reads, "Drinking the dew of Mulan in the morning and eating the fallen petal of the autumn chrysanthemums in the evening [7]." Mulan and chrysanthemum are both natural plants, and the poet's linking them with personal conduct is actually a man-made connection that captures a certain similarity between them, which is the fact that they can bloom quietly in valley in the late autumn when heaven and earth are cold and everything is

dead. That shows a characteristic of solitude and arrogance, which in turn represents a high and pure character.

Regarding the origin of Vanilla Beauty and the reasons for its creation, there have been many scholars who have put forward different views. In Wang Jian's article *A Brief Analysis of the Imagery of Vanilla Beauty*, he studies "vanilla" and "beauty" as two separate images. He points out that vanilla imagery is widely used in *ChuCi*, and the reasons for its creation may be related to the legends of the Chu state, the medicinal value of vanilla, and its relationship with witchcraft; the imagery of "beauty" is also related to the cultural qualities of the Chu state [8]. Since the focus of this essay is on the connotation of the literary tradition of "Vanilla Beauty", these will not be repeated here.

3.2. Under Vanilla Beauty

Hong Xingzu's *Supplementary Notes to the ChuCi* says: "Qu Yuan has used beauty as a metaphor for the king, 'fear of beauty's getting old' is also [9]." In traditional Chinese literary criticism, the imagery of "beauty" is often regarded as a reflection of Qu Yuan's pursuit of political ideals and the relationship between ruler and subjects. This statement is actually the mainstream understanding of "vanilla beauty". Li Zehou and Liu Zangji's *A History of Chinese Aesthetics* analyses the Chinese character for "beauty" from a philological point of view: "beauty" initially symbolised "big man", referring to the priests in witchcraft [10]. The king of Chu was, in fact, the highest level of sorcerer in Chu culture, whereas sorcerer meant beauty in ancient times, so the metaphor of beauty for the king had a kind of authority [8]. "Vanilla beauty" is an image of one, so later generations have inherited this image, using "vanilla beauty" as a metaphor for politics and kings.

To sum up, the imagery of "Beauty", whether analysed from the perspective of philology or from the perspective of metaphor, points to the King of Chu; and the King of Chu means the power centre of the country and the supreme ideal of politics for Qu Yuan, the patriotic poet who has been exiled from the country. Returning to the King of Chu means regaining power and realising his ideals, while being exiled means tilting between ideals and reality forever until death comes. Qu Yuan's end was certain: after the Qin army invaded the capital of Chu in 278 BC, his ideals fell along with the Chu state, and he eventually threw himself into the river and died for his country. His death also crowned himself, made "Vanilla Beauty" a symbol of loyalty to the monarch and his ideals, and ultimately an ideal archetype pursued by the Chinese literati.

"Vanilla Beauty" has been passed on to later generations and has become a cultural symbol that is still alive today. In China's two thousand years of feudal history, Confucianism has always been the mainstream of Chinese culture. Being an official and benefiting the people has always been the thinking mode of the literati. Along with the selection system of the imperial examinations, their political ideals became more easily to be broken (for failure of an exam means one cannot be an official). As a result, when the ideal is violently impacted by reality, they naturally turn to the "vanilla beauty" type of thing to express their frustration of not being able to do what they want. Secondly, China is an agricultural civilisation, and the way of thinking and living habits associated with it form the background of the national culture, and "Vanilla Beauty" is formed and coalesced on such soil [11]. It can be seen that throughout classical Chinese literature, there are countless "Vanilla Beauty" types of support and catharsis. The birth of "Vanilla Beauty" was originally a metaphor for kings and politics, and the Confucian aspiration was passed on to later generations, creating countless "Vanilla Beauties". Even in the most prosperous Tang Dynasty, there were many literati who sang about "Chang'an" they longed for: for example, Li Bai's disillusioned metaphor in the sentence "Chang'an is not to be seen and makes people sad", which shows the melancholy of being relegated; Bai Juyi's words about the Chinese lute girl "she said she was a woman in the capital, with a home in a shrimp toad" also conveys Bai's own disappointment of being relegated to a new post. In Lu You's later years, he often thought of a place called "Da San Guan", and he wrote about "the iron horse and the autumn winds of Da San Guan", but by his time, he himself is undergoing "another autumn at Da San Guan". These patriotic feelings of worrying about the country and the people, of wanting to display one's talents and dedicate oneself to the country, but at the same time being disappointed and sad, came

from the same source as Qu Yuan's. It can be said that "Vanilla Beauty" opened up a literary tradition of literary political anguish narrative and spiritual support. The best-talented people of all dynasties have their aspirations and ideals that are hard to put down, they are either happy or sad, but in the end all attributed their own "Vanilla Beauties".

4. The comparison between Laura and Vanilla Beauty

According to the analysis above, the image of "Laura" created by Petrarch and Qu Yuan's "Vanilla Beauty" have some similar characteristics, as well as some differences regarding cultures. They are both unreal objects created by the poet consciously or unconsciously, according to their own lyrical needs. They are highly comparable.

4.1. Similarities

"Laura" and "Vanilla Beauty" are similar to a certain extent. This conclusion can be argued from three aspects: firstly, both are a collection of characteristics and qualities that the poet adores and aspires to; secondly, the nature of the two is united, that is, they are unreal and unreachable; lastly, both are ultimately highly abstracted and became a kind of "ideal archetype" existing in literary works, symbolising the poet's ultimate ideal.

Taking together the analyses of *Canzoniere* and *ChuCi (The Songs of Chu)*, both Laura and Vanilla Beauty are a collection of traits and qualities revered by poets. In *Canzoniere*, Petrarch introduced the myth of Apollo and Daphne: Daphne's transformation into a stationary tree reflects Laura's existential characteristics that belong only to Petrarch. Throughout the poems, the poet endeavours to portray her as things in order to attach to her the characteristics of those things, and Laura's eventual becoming "veil" is a reflection of the hazy feeling that Laura brings to Petrarch, that Laura under the veil has an unreal and dreamlike character. In the following poems, Laura is transformed into gold, silver, garlands and a host of other objects whose general character is also beautiful, bright and dreamy. The poet also writes later that her hands and feet are magical and capable of evolving natural things to a more perfect and advanced state. Here, Laura has been deified, and her hands and feet have a divine aura. Overall, Laura has the qualities of a goddess of divine purity, light and supremacy, which clearly demonstrates the position that Petrarch adores. On the other hand, the imagery of "Vanilla Beauty" even relies on its own characteristics so it can complete its transfer of meaning. "Vanilla" itself is the fragrant plants, initially used as a metaphor for the noble character; "beauty" carries the characteristic of purity and nobility and becomes a kind of ultimate ideal to aspire to. The term "Vanilla Beauty" itself even indicates the poet's tendency to aspire to a fragrant, beautiful, bright and solemn image. It is precisely because Vanilla Beauty and the politics of kings share the same characteristics (that is, both are often far away and unattainable), and in combination with Qu Yuan's own experience, that the term "Vanilla Beauty" can be interpreted as Qu Yuan's political ideal. These attributes given by Qu Yuan allow the term "Vanilla Beauty" to successfully complete its final transformation from concrete things to an abstract symbol.

Laura's image, like that of Vanilla Beauty, has an ethereal beauty and unattainable nature. This is presented more by the known historical directions. In April 1327, Petrarch met Laura, and there was no more contact with her after that; Petrarch's love was not realised in his own spiritual and literary world. In the dimension of reality, it was still a kind of unrealistic and vain fantasy. On the other hand, Qu Yuan's vanilla beauty, as a metaphor and an ideal, survived only briefly in the poet's chapters: after the fall of Chu, he sank himself in the river and martyred his country. History ultimately did not let him get his own Vanilla Beauty. It can be said that both Laura and Vanilla Beauty are highly idealised, artistic and abstracted images presented by the poet after the presentation and purification of the poem, which originated from reality but eventually drifted away helplessly in the cruel light of reality.

Both Laura and Vanilla Beauty were ultimately highly abstracted, becoming a kind of "ideal archetype" that existed only in literature. Petrarch's love for Laura bordered on the obsessive, and

became even more paranoid and complete after her death. This can be better explained in the context of the times: before Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, which was written in Italian, noble poets wrote only in Sacred Latin, which was recognised by the Church. Minstrels could only depict their repressed love in obscure words; however, with the advent of *Canzoniere*, poetry and art progressed from metaphorical symbolism to straightforward expression, and poets began to boldly speak of love on earth. In contrast to the Church's labelling of "divinity", Petrarch explicitly called this liberation "humanity". In other words, the creation of Laura's image is inseparable from the poet's ideal of humanism: she, as a highly abstracted ideal archetype, ultimately points to humanism. On the other hand, Qu Yuan's ideal archetype is related to his own experience: he held an important official position in Chu in his early years and was later slandered and exiled. His ultimate trust is related to his relegated career. It is precise because he was far away from politics and dreams that he created the metaphorical symbol of Vanilla Beauty to touch upon the topic of monarchs and politics repeatedly and to express his hope of returning to the monarch and realising his ambitions. In fact, this ideal archetype is not only a support for ideals, but fundamentally concerns the poet's profound patriotic feelings.

4.2. Differences

In addition to their similarity, they also reflect some differences. Firstly, the starting point and result of the two are different: one comes from love and points to the practice of ideals; the other comes from disillusionment and bitterness and leads the poet to ultimate destruction. Secondly, there is a difference in the influence of later generations; that is, Qu Yuan's creation of "Vanilla Beauty" opened up a precedent of literati political lyricism in Chinese literary history, which is not the case with Laura.

Laura and Vanilla Beauty also differ significantly in their origins and endings. The image of Laura was born out of Petrarch's youthful love at first sight, out of an ecstatic love (which deepened in the course of literary creation) and eventually led the poet to an emotional ecstasy, a spiritual climax of humanism, whereas Qu Yuan's Vanilla Beauty began with his own relegation to exile and the bitterness of being far from the political centre and ideals. The fall of Chu is a historical fact, and Qu Yuan's bitterness also led him to his ultimate destruction.

In a sense, Qu Yuan's use of Vanilla Beauty as a metaphor for politics initiated a literary tradition of political lyricism in classical Chinese literature. In classical Chinese literature after him, there emerged a literary tradition of using objects as metaphors for politics and expressing bitterness. For example, Chang'an in the Tang Dynasty symbolised a complex and profound feeling for many literati: they were often relegated, so they always yearned for Chang'an just as Qu Yuan yearned for Vanilla Beauty; even in modern times, there was the cultural phenomenon of "going to Yan'an", which was a kind of political lyricism started by Qu Yuan. This is a kind of literary tradition started by Qu Yuan and inherited through the generations, the root of which is still not unrelated to the deep patriotic feelings. Also, the patriotic feeling is related to the emergence of civilisation. Western civilisation is obviously a civilisation less inclined to collectivism. In Feng Youlan's *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, it is mentioned that the Greek civilisation sprang up in the sea, and that they depended on trade to maintain their prosperity, and were therefore merchants first and foremost. Their social organisation was not based on the common interests of the family, but more a reflection of the common interests of the town. In contrast, the Chinese social system understood the state through the "family". While the former tended to have equality among citizens, the latter had power naturally held by the elders [12]. Thus, Chinese civilisation developed into a collective civilisation, which increasingly emphasised the concept of the state. This is also easily demonstrated in history, namely it seems as if there has always been a tendency towards unity in Chinese history. Thus the differences in literary traditions ultimately come down to the dimension of civilisational traditions and social systems.

5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the image of Laura in Petrarch's *Canzoniere* and Qu Yuan's imagery of "Vanilla Beauty". Laura is a woman whom Petrarch met when he was young and fell deeply in love with, but he could not have more contact with her until his death. Petrarch's infatuation turned to sublimation with Laura's death as the demarcation. Petrarch's almost sacred but empty love for Laura is an expression of his humanism, but the image of Laura can never be her own. The term "Vanilla Beauty" originates from a literary text created by Qu Yuan and has been condensed by later generations to encapsulate his spirit of loyalty to the emperor, love for the country, and longing for a return to politics. From both a semantic and literary perspective, "Vanilla Beauty" ultimately points to the king of Chu, Qu Yuan's last hope for realising his political ideals. Throughout the thousands of years of history, "Vanilla Beauty" has been passed down as a tradition of expressing the bitterness of being relegated to exile and the aspiration to return to political ideals, and although the forms are different, the core remains unchanged. The emergence of such a literary phenomenon is inseparable from the unique ideological system and the social system of ancient China.

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