
“For not just under kerchiefs [*bende*] Love resides . . .”. Tone, Lexicon, Context, and Symbol in a Petrarchan Crux Word

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In the seven hortatory stanzas of *Canzoniere* 28, “O aspectata in ciel beata et bella...,” Petrarch calls on Giacomo Colonna to become Christ’s orator by inspiring Christendom to undertake a crusade. But following those widely admired verses, the poet addresses to his song a *commiato* whose lines (106-14), especially the last two, have for centuries stirred controversy:

Tu vedrai Italia et l’onorata riva,
canzon, ch’agli occhi miei cela et contende
non mar, non poggio o fiume,
ma solo Amor che del suo altero lume
più m’invaghisce dove più m’incende:
ne’ Natura può star contra ’l costume.
Or movi, non smarrir l’altre compagne
ché non pur sotto bende
alberga Amor, per cui si ride et piagne.

(Contini 39)

[Song, Italy you’ll see, and see the shore
Revered, which neither stream nor sea nor hill
Can keep from me nor from my eyes conceal,
But only Love who, with his lofty lamp,
Attracts me more the more that I catch fire —
To habit Nature cannot stand opposed;
Now, Song, go forth; lag not behind your fellows,
Not just under kerchiefs
Does Love reside, who makes us laugh and weep.]

(Translations throughout, Cook)

The disagreement surrounding these lines arises from an apparent shift in tone that has perplexed and sometimes even offended commentators from the 16th century onwards. In the 18th, for example, Tassoni fulminated: “La chiusa di

questa Canzone, al mio giudizio, della nobiltà di tutto il resto è indignissima . . . perciocché venendo scritta ad una persona eminente . . . ,” [The close of this canzone, to my judgment, is most unworthy of the nobility of all the rest . . . especially as it is written to an eminent person], and he concludes that Petrarch here reveals himself “per un uomo vano, sensuale, e perduto . . . in un amor lascivo . . . ” [for a vain, sensual man, lost . . . in a lascivious love] (83). Muratori, citing the widespread public knowledge of Petrarch’s love and the freer attitudes of the *Trecento* as compared with the more severe ones of the *Settecento*, demurs from Tassoni’s strictures on Petrarch’s character, but concurs in judging the last verses of the song to be confused, imperfect, and infelicitous (Tassoni 84).

Rejecting this view, Rigutini and Scherillo place the poem in the Provençal tradition of the *Sirventes* — a genre often devoted to public issues — and they examine the analogues in some detail, noting especially resonances that they observe between *Canzoniere* 28 and Rambaldo di Vaqueiras, “Ara pot om conoisser . . . ” (39). Following them, Ramat too defends Petrarch on the grounds that the “conclusionone amorosa di canzone guerriera è tradizione provenzale” (83) [The amorous conclusion of the warrior canzone is a provençal tradition].

Zingarelli, however, objects to this line of reasoning: “Si è osservato che la scusa dell’amore servì a qualche trovadore per esimersi dal seguire la crociata che essi predicavano . . . ” (387) [One observes that the excuse of love made some troubadores exempt themselves from joining the crusade that they encouraged]. He argues instead that Petrarch employs a commonplace in composing the poem, and he further points out that troubadours are not supposed to make war. Beyond this, Zingarelli notes that the love that keeps Petrarch — not from joining the crusade, but rather from joining a friend in Rome — is a love of a high and noble order. Clearly, as Germaine Warkentin has pointed out, if Petrarch is employing the Provençal tradition, he is adapting it for his own purposes by including it as one mode of organization in a poem organized four ways:

1. As a description of the world and its peoples.
2. As a typologically structured history of the classical and modern worlds designed to encourage in contemporary Italians the achievement of the ancients.
3. As a prophetic instruction to the orator whose words must bring this about.
4. As a poem in the *Sirventes* tradition.

Partly agreeing with Zingarelli, Warkentin is prepared to argue, convincingly I think, that part of the problem of tone at the end of this canzone stems from Petrarch’s failure to assimilate adequately the *Sirventes* genre to the other three principles. Even granting this, however, neither establishing the *commiato*’s provenance nor understanding the ambitious organizational patterns of the poem entirely resolves the problem of a perceived tonal lapse. An unresolved lexical crux exists as well: the precise meaning of “bende,” and beyond that the associated difficulty of the way its meaning functions within the thematic and symbolic

context of the poem.

The commentators early displayed uneasiness about just what Petrarch literally meant by "*bende*." They seemed troubled by his poetic intention in selecting the word, and uncertain about its effect on the overall tone of the poem. The term was recognized as a provençalism with the apparent meaning of "veil." Accordingly, Gesualdo so glosses it; he found *bende* and *veli* synonymous and explained that the line signifies that Love's dwelling place is in ladies' faces (42). Partly following him, but perhaps also aware that in the Florentine dialect of Petrarch's contemporaries the term seems to have alluded to a variety of headdresses, some with veils and some without, which were worn in various forms — sometimes like a headscarf, sometimes like a turban, and sometimes like a wide band running across a woman's head from ear to ear — Castelvetro, while observing that Petrarch here contrasts the love of women with Platonic love, notes simply that the term alludes to women, who usually wear headdresses and veils, and later commentators frequently take this line (67).

Two centuries later, however, Tassoni calls verses 113-14, "very obscure lines, from the point of view of candor and of purity, different from all the rest" (83). For him, the lines seem void of denotative force, and, as I earlier mentioned, he finds what they connote for him inappropriate to the loftiness of the composition. Yet what escaped Tassoni is to be found in the etymological fibers of the word and in the symbolic function that I think it performs both here and elsewhere in the works of Petrarch, Dante, and others.

In ancient times, as Petrarch the classicist surely knew, the Latin word *vitta*, which Italian *benda* translates, alluded to a fillet worn by priests and sacrificial victims, by poets to symbolize their sacred office, and, somewhat ironically from a 14th century viewpoint, by brides and vestal virgins as a symbol of chastity. In the poet's lifetime, however, a *benda* regularly denoted the kerchief-like headdress described above. That headdress was worn almost exclusively by married women or by those who had been married. Women with living husbands wore "*bende*" in various colors. Black ones were funerary garments, and white ones were worn by widows, "sacred" ones were worn by nuns. Young, unmarried women and girls did not wear them at all (Battaglia 160-61). Thus, *bende* were popularly associated with maturity and, often, with sexual experience. With just such connotative force, Dante employs the word in *Purg.* 8.74, where Judge Nino complains to Dante that the judge's wife, Beatrice d'Este, "*trasmutò le bianche bende*" — that is, has been remarried (to Galeazzo Visconti). Judge Nino alludes to his former spouse, not as his wife, but as "his daughter's mother" — "a re-proof," says Tommaseo, "full of pity" (Singleton, 168-69) — and then the judge goes on to deprecate the fickleness of women. Elsewhere, Dante also uses "*benda*" in its sense of "veil" to figure forth moral blindness.

Likewise, in a *canzone frottola* that was first published in a letter by Bembo (531), and that the Cardinal attributed to Petrarch, "*bende*" is employed with sarcastic force as a metonymy for experienced women: "Deh, che sia maladetto

chi t'attende / e spera in treccie 'n bende" [Ah, how cursed is one who waits on you [Amor], / and hopes in braids (maidens) and kerchiefs (married women)] (Accademia della Crusca; Travi 2.250-53). In this connection too, assuming that the metonymy was pan-European in literary circles, one recalls the kerchiefs worn by Dame Alice of Bath — kerchiefs that must have weighed ten pounds — as a joking reference to her sexual *savoir faire*.

In addition, then, to probably having had for Petrarch through its Latin equivalent a connection with the sacrificial rites of classical antiquity, with poets and with chastity, the expression "*le bende*" seems also and ironically to have been surrounded with associations at once earthy, satirical, and deprecatory, and this matrix of double-edged association offers a threefold implication for the apparent shift of tone in the *commiato* of *Canzoniere* 28.

First, as the term occurs in an address to a song that will see Italy while, immobilized and victimized in his roles of Love's servant and priest, its author will not, it introduces in the voice of the poet's persona a self-deprecatory note. Second, in doing so, the *commiato* clarifies Petrarch's recognition that his own obsession with the spouse of another, however noble and ennobling he and the troubadours may have sometimes found such love to be, compares unworthily with devotion to Christ and country. Indeed, verses 110-13 recall by contrast verses 42-45: "Deh qual amor sì licito o sì degno, / qua' figli mai, qua' donne / furon materia a sì giusto disdegno?" (Contini 37) [Indeed, what love so lawful, of such worth? / What sons, what women ever / Have been the grounds for such a righteous wrath?]. The crusaders' fervor, he imagines, will be inspired by Divine love and by patriotism. Trapped in the toils of his obsessive love, he finds that his own habitual passion inhibits manly action. The symbolic force of "*bende*," then, far from confusing the more and less noble varieties of love, as Tassoni would have it, discriminates between them, throwing into sharp relief the poet's sense of his own failures.

A final point remains to be made. In the *commiato* the voice of the prophet has faded; the fiction of the narrative requires the reader to recognize that the poem's seven stanzas are presented in the voice of the poet as *vates*, interpreting God's will for the benefit of His chosen instrument, Cardinal Colonna. But in the *commiato* the poet speaks in a different voice, the characteristically romantic one that belongs to the poet's persona as maker, a voice introduced into the work as speaking to that most intimate of his companions, the personification of his own poem.

Admittedly, the assimilation of the lover's role to that of the Christian patriot or that of prophet proves less successful in this ambitious early canzone (Avignon, 1326-1336/37), than in a later poem like *Italia mia* (*Canzoniere* 128: Parma, 1343-45). Yet, although critical discomfort with verses 113-14 may have a legitimate source in the poet's failure to accomplish felicitously at this early date all he attempts, it seems likely that the commentators' sense of an inappropriate or even offensive tonal shift at the conclusion of the poem has its roots less

in the text than in unfamiliarity with a fashion fallen into disuse and in the forgotten complex of association that the word *bende* called up for Petrarch and his contemporaries.

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