Jonathan Gonzalez[1]
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Petrarch in Romantic England
(New York: Palgrave, 2008)
by Edoardo Zuccato

EVER SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF PETER BRAND'S SEMINAL WORK *Italy and the English Romantics* (1957), the engagement of the Romantics with Italian literature has been a central subject of discussion in Anglo-Italian and Romantic studies. The field has flourished in recent years, with the work of Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass (*Dante and Italy in British Romanticism* [Palgrave, 2011]), Maria Schoina (*Romantic 'Anglo-Italians'* [Routledge, 2016]), and Diego Saglia and Alan Rawes (*Byron and Italy* [Manchester University Press, 2017]), among others. These works demonstrate how, whilst the fashionable English interest in Italy was at its height in the first four decades of the nineteenth century, it was not exclusively the country that attracted the Romantics. As Brand prominently put it, 'early nineteenth-century England was in fact smitten with an Italo-mania, or Italianate fashion' (x). And yet, the Petrarchan revival in the Georgian era, as Edoardo Zuccato expounds in his influential *Petrarch in Romantic England* (2008), has been conventionally eclipsed by scholarly interest in the Romantic afterlife of Dante. Although no scholar would be likely to describe Romanticism as a Petrarchan age, Zuccato argues, Petrarch was by all accounts at the very core of this 'Italo-mania'. He was, indeed, both extensively read and rewritten throughout the period, in prose and verse, by both major and minor Romantic figures—becoming, in turn, a prime influence.

A decade after the publication of Zuccato's thought-provoking monograph, this review seeks to revisit its contribution to our understanding of Petrarch's afterlife beyond Italy and its particular impact on English Romantic culture, as well as to consider the role this book has had in prompting discussions on the influence of the Italian sonnet tradition upon the Romantic literary landscape. Zuccato marshals an examination of the Petrarchan revival in Georgian England across five closely linked chapters, ranging from an examination of Susana Dobson's 1775 abridged translation into English of the Abbé de Sade's *Mémoires pour la vie de François Pétrarque* (1764), to a carefully considered discussion of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's own investment in the Italian poet, with a bonus epilogue that sheds new light on the afterlife of Petrarch among the Victorians. The vivacious and enthusiastic yet informative style of Zuccato's prose, combined with his extensive research and generous quotation from primary and secondary sources, makes this book quite a rewarding read.
The first two chapters of *Petrarch in Romantic England* set the backdrop for the

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discussion of the ways in which both major and minor Romantics engaged with Petrarchan forms and themes by offering a nuanced discussion of the biographies, anthologies, translations, and imitations of the Italian bard that proliferated in late eighteenth-century England. Zuccato marks the beginning of the English revival of Petrarch with Dobson's 1775 translation and considers the reactions that this highly successful volume, modelled on Abbé de Sade's biography, elicited from historians Thomas Warton, Edward Gibbons, and Alexander Fraser Tytler. Following a discussion of the work of Pierre Luis Ginguené, Simonde de Sismondi, and Henry Hallam, Zuccato then shifts focus to the work of William Hazlitt and Ugo Foscolo. Drawing from a wide range of primary sources, Zuccato remarkably reveals how few of the eighteenth-century Petrarchans in England were exclusively attracted by Petrarch's style, its most influential aspect in Italy. The English approach was rather essentially biographical, and yet it focused on a limited number of Petrarch's love poems. This attitude yielded complex consequences, the most prominent being the fact that few readers in England paid any attention to the entire *Canzoniere* (also known as *Rime Sparse*), regarding it as a collection of 'scattered rhymes'.

In chapter two, Zuccato offers a nuanced view of how the work of anthologists, translators, and imitators of Petrarch shaped the form and content of the Romantic literary landscape, demonstrating a comprehensive knowledge of the major critical debates on the sonnet and lyric poetry in England in the process. Whilst men and women of letters in the early eighteenth century were prone to disregard Petrarch on the basis of his being 'effeminate' or an 'erudite weakling', the boost in anthologies, translations, and imitations of the Italian throughout the Romantic period serves Zuccato to make the transition between an examination of Petrarch's role in the sonnet revival and a comprehensive study of his influence in the work of individual Romantic poets. However, while this monograph elaborates extensively on the significance of the unique phenomenon of Petrarchism in Romantic England, one is left wondering about the 'uniqueness' of this enterprise since no light is shed on the poet's afterlife elsewhere throughout the Romantic period. The singularity that *Petrarch in Romantic England* advocates for relies chiefly upon François Mouret's *Les traducteurs anglais de Pétrarque* (1976). And while Mouret's study illustrates that the English translators of Petrarch certainly had no counterpart in European nations including France, Germany, Spain, and Italy, it only covers the span of years between 1754 and 1798.

Zuccato, it must be acknowledged, reaches a point of clarity and directness in this monograph in the following three chapters through a comparative analysis of the imitations of Petrarch produced by a wide range of Romantic figures, from Charlotte Smith, Anna Seward, and Mary Robinson to Samuel Taylor Coleridge. His line of enquiry showcases the full range of approaches that the influence of the Italian poet in Romantic England lends to and, quite

interestingly, demonstrates that unlike Dante, who inspired mostly male poets (though Wordsworth loathed his verse), Petrarch attracted male and female poets alike. Building from the work of Stuart Curran, who posits in *Romanticism and Feminism* (1988) that while Romantic women writers were active in all literary genres, they were most closely associated with the revival of the sonnet and the metrical tale, Zuccato makes the case that it was because the sonnet and Petrarch were synonymous in Romantic England (and inseparably linked to love poetry) that the Italian poet enjoyed such popularity among female Romantics (unlike Dante).

This monograph gives particular prominence to the work of Charlotte Smith, Anna Seward, the Della Cruscans, and Mary Robinson, while addressing the legacy of Petrarch in a wide range of Romantic figures, including Felicia Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, William Lisle Bowles, and Elizabeth Cobbold. Coleridge remains the only one of the 'Big Six' who has been warranted a chapter in his own right—though it is a spotlight he shares with Charles Lloyd. Zuccato traces back the origins of Coleridge's interest in Petrarch to the 1790s, with his earliest and yet most thorough reflection on the subject found in his preface to *Sonnets from Various Authors* (1796). While his interest in the Italian bard was initially restricted to the sonnets in the *Canzoniere*, this chapter illustrates how Coleridge soon felt compelled by the complexity of Petrarch's complete body of work. While Zuccato also addresses the Petrarchan poetics of Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, one wishes that more attention had been given to the afterlives of the Italian poet in their works. The book closes with an epilogue on how the Victorians reimagined the Italian in contrast to their Romantic counterparts, paying considerable attention to the role of the Brownings and the Rossetis in the transition from a Romantic to a Victorian Petrarch.

Harmoniously conceived and developed, this monograph is concerned, above all, with the various ways in which the revival of Petrarch in Georgian England is to be understood as a central phenomenon in the English Romantic literary landscape—one that encompassed an outstanding number of translators, scholars, and poets. The main drawback of this monograph, we must concede, lies in its introduction, where rather more attention may have been given to the characteristic interest in all things Italian in Romantic England, and the relevance that the configuration of this unique imaginary geography had for Petrarch's afterlife in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prose, fiction, and scholarship. Even so, a decade after its publication, *Petrarch in Romantic England* continues to deliver what it promises, still raising important questions about the influence of Italian literature and Petrarch on British Romanticism. These interrogations have already proven helpful and will continue to be hard for scholars to ignore.