

## In the Footsteps of Petrarch

Valeria Finucci  
 Duke University  
 Durham, North Carolina

The seventh centenary of Petrarch's birth in 2004 offered the occasion to assess and rethink the importance of Petrarch (1304–1374) in the artistic and cultural world of today. Petrarch's status as one of the most influential and celebrated poets of Italy is only matched by the lofty standing he enjoys in the republic of letters inside and outside Europe. His *Rime sparse*, a collection of 366 carefully arranged lyric poems, written for the most part to celebrate his own idolatrous relationship to an idealized and seemingly unresponsive woman, Laura, has been seen by many, Petrarch included, as concluding the "Dark Ages" and ushering in early modernity. Not only did the *Rime* give rise to Petrarchism in the Renaissance, which was the main medium of poetic dialogue in countries as far away from Italy as Portugal and the Czech Republic, but it was also instrumental in gendering literature by allowing women sonneteers a relevant, and altogether new, place in the literary landscape. Petrarchism and humanist culture strongly characterized the way bodies and subjects came to be represented in painting, redeployed Platonic ideas in philosophy, reshaped the historical understanding of the place of the individual in society, animated linguistic discussions on the propriety of using the vernacular idiom, and moved music toward polyphony with the success of the madrigal. Even today the sonnet form used by American poets derives primarily from the one Petrarch perfected seven centuries ago.

To pursue these topics at such a timely moment in the history of Petrarch studies, an interdisciplinary symposium on Petrarch was held at Duke University in March 2004; experts in art history, history, and music, and in Italian, Latin, English, and French studies participated. In what ways, we asked, did Petrarch determine, nourish, or gratify for so many centuries, and extending in so many different directions, our cultural values? What is so transhistorical in Petrarch's amorous poetics of unconsummated desire

*Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35:3, Fall 2005.  
 Copyright © by Duke University Press / 2005 / \$2.00.

that it became, as Roland Greene puts it, “one of the original colonial discourses”?<sup>21</sup> How fertile have been the many cultural misreadings of Petrarch, whose inherently evasive, ambiguous verse has been in essence untranslatable?<sup>22</sup> The original presentations at the symposium have been reworked into the essays that appear in this special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*.

Our reassessment of Petrarch and Petrarchism starts with two essays that mull over literary genealogy and its costs. In “Power Plays: Petrarch’s Genealogical Strategies,” Kevin Brownlee highlights the subtle and complex strategies that Petrarch employed to distance himself from Dante, whose towering canonical status as the father of Italian lyric and of Christian poetics continuously threatened to crush Petrarch’s efforts to authorize himself as a *magister poetarum*. Brownlee argues that Petrarch worked through this rivalrous relationship by splitting Dante into the epic poet and the love poet. Petrarch excluded Dante from the genealogical line of epic poets that Petrarch created in the *Africa*, but included him in a genealogy of love poets writing in the vernacular. This ad hoc poetic lineage culminates with Petrarch, the self-valORIZED love poet of the vernacular canon.

James Simpson’s essay ambitiously repositions Petrarch within his time by arguing against the “triumphalist” view of Petrarch as the father of a new way of expressing the individual’s desire and self-division, grounding him instead within a long line of classical predecessors. In “Subjects of Triumph and Literary History: Dido and Petrarch in Petrarch’s *Africa* and *Trionfi*,” Simpson examines two of Petrarch’s *Trionfi*, that of Cupid and of Chastity, to show that literary history is created as a result of repeated submissions to an imperial project. By reshaping both Virgil and Ovid’s narrative of Dido for his own needs, Petrarch ends the *Africa* with the triumph of the Aeneas/Scipio figure, as Virgil would have it. Fidelity to imperial ambitions requires discipline, Simpson shows, and thus erotic desire, as embodied by the Ovidian Cupid, in the end has to be reined in.

Much of Petrarch’s well-groomed identity comes from his work in Latin, and two essays here consider what kind of Latin Petrarch used and how his nonliterary output in that linguistic medium was used anecdotically. Christopher Celenza asks in what ways Petrarch conceived Latin differently from his contemporaries, given that all essentially saw Latin, unlike any of the vernacular idioms, as the best language to say most exactly and succinctly what one meant. In “Petrarch, Latin, and Italian Renaissance Latinity,” Celenza’s working hypothesis is that Petrarch did not write in the Latin he learned at school, but rather in a new Latin that, while not perfect

Ciceronian prose, made classical Latin the ideal language with which to interpret the past. Petrarch gave the humanists a sense that language can be reformed, and this in turn bestowed upon the author a social identity. By the middle of the fifteenth century, indeed it seemed possible for the humanists to write a Latin that was classical and, in Petrarch's wake, anti-institutional, philological, dialogical, and philosophical.

Moving to letter writing in "Petrarch and the Early Modern Critics of Medicine," Andrea Carlino examines the intertextual relationship between Petrarch's *Invective contra medicum* and some foundational texts of the skeptical tradition in medicine, such as Agrippa's *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum* and Montaigne's "De la ressemblance des enfans aux pères." Petrarch's polemical work addressed to an unnamed physician in the entourage of Pope Clement VI is often considered a personal diatribe by an annoyed author lashing out against an inept doctor, rather than a sustained argument against fourteenth-century practitioners of medicine and their esoteric remedies. But Carlino shows that Petrarch, by way of anecdotes and topoi, provided the context for and gave voice to similarly minded, skeptical thinkers, who subsequently concerned themselves with issues of patients' trust and doctors' competency.

Petrarch's relationship to women poets, whether as an authorizing or silencing figure, has a complex history. Yet Petrarch has never been examined in the context of humanist women writers expressing themselves in Latin. Margaret King brings her attention to the somewhat hidden appropriations of Petrarch by Laura Cereta, Isotta Nogarola, Cassandra Fedele, and Olympia Morata in "Petrarch, the Self-Conscious Self, and the First Women Humanists." King surveys the period from 1418, the year of Nogarola's birth, to 1558, the year of Fedele's death, when already a new generation of women writing in the Italian vernacular had started to catch the attention of the literate intelligentsia. King selects three aspects of Petrarch's self-image that we can observe being replicated in these women humanists writing in Latin: Petrarch's use of personal experience in the totality of his work; his desire to understand what he read and experienced; and his yearning to live in antiquity. In book-lined cells and in imaginative rewritings of Cicero, Virgil, and Livy, these early modern women writers found their voices, King argues, expressed their intellectual pursuits, and participated, even if from a distance, in the scholarly diatribes of their times.

Rivers of ink have flowed from scholars delineating how Petrarch's self-absorbed poetry excluded women. Against the common view that the *Rime sparse* established a long-lasting and often-imitated binary model of

active male onlooker and passive female object that then spread from poetry to painting and music, Virginia Cox argues that Petrarch not only gave authority to Laura by casting her as a figure of chastity—the highest praise for a woman in the early modern period was indeed that she was chaste—but also that his verses allowed women poets to adopt a Petrarchan persona in shaping their self-reflexive poetry. In “Sixteenth-Century Women Petrarchists and the Legacy of Laura,” Cox thus opens Petrarch’s work to positive appropriations on the part of female poets by showing that Petrarchan poetry could enable women both as fragmented objects of inquiry within a poetic text and, in a self-conscious way, as creative *auctores* of a text.

Entering the topic of Petrarch’s well-documented influence on the visual arts in “Eros in the Flesh: Petrarchan Desire, the Embodied Eros, and Male Beauty in Italian Art, 1500–1540,” Stephen Campbell examines portraits of men rather than women. Campbell hypothesizes that it is possible to approach some eroticized and ambiguously gendered portraits of men made in the early years of the sixteenth century in Rome, Venice, and Lombardy by studying them in the way that Petrarchan portraits of women have been studied within Renaissance iconography, as well as in terms of the mythological imagery of *eros* and *anteros* present in the *studiolo* of Isabella d’Este at the Mantuan court. Campbell demonstrates that even prior to Michelangelo’s poetic gendering of the male as both object and subject of a text, there was a space for male artists to explore the dialectics of difference and sameness involving a male figure choreographed according to Petrarchist conventions.

Two of these essays analyze the appropriations of Petrarch’s lyric vernacular output in music. In “Florentine *Petrarchismo* and the Early Madrigal: Reflections on the Theory of Origins,” Giuseppe Gerbino retraces the birth of the madrigal. Against the common view that it was the Venetian Pietro Bembo’s remarks on the importance of Petrarch’s sound and variation that ultimately brought music to shift from monody to polyphony, Gerbino proposes that the madrigal originated in Florence in the 1520s, rather than in Venice, and that the Florentine monopoly of the classic (Tuscan) Italian language had plenty to do with the madrigal’s development and ultimately unprecedented success. Petrarch’s poetry soon became in Italy a means for the poet or the artist to fashion a cultural persona that was socially acceptable and praiseworthy, and musicians fully staged the emotional implications of charm, desire, error, knowledge, and death that crisscrossed and sustained Petrarchan poetics.

Massimo Ossi sees Petrarch as the poet least present in the work of Monteverdi (with the exception of Ludovico Ariosto, who is even less present) and yet two madrigals based on Petrarch, “Zefiro torna” and “Or che’l ciel,” are among Monteverdi’s best works. In “Monteverdi as Reader of Petrarch,” Ossi applies the concept of *dissolutio* to the analysis of Monteverdi’s setting of “Vago Augelletto” in order to exemplify in music the Petrarchan practice of textual dismemberment, examined earlier in poetry by Cox and in painting by Campbell. Ossi then shows how Monteverdi used the aesthetics of disjunction and opposition not for a baroque, overblown musical rhetoric, but to signify stylistic *gravitas*, along the lines of Torquato Tasso’s famous “parlar disgiunto.”

We are continually dying, Petrarch famously wrote in one of his letters: he, the poet, was dying while writing, the reader while reading him, and others while they heard those words or failed to hear them. It is remarkable that for a man to whom death was so present and for whom the present was an unhappy, gloomy, and obscurantist *longue durée* of Lethean stupor, the future could reserve only light and radiance.<sup>3</sup> As generations of school children still visit Petrarch’s home in Arquà Petrarca to pore over his handwriting and look at his stuffed cat, so generations of writers, musicians, painters, philosophers, and intellectuals have in the last seven hundred years pored over his words and have refashioned them according to their needs and their subjectivities. In the wake of this everlasting curiosity for the Petrarchan persona, in 2004 even the poet’s monumental marble tomb was reopened to study his remains, following at least one other official opening in the nineteenth century. The grave, it was revealed, contained parts of a body that DNA tests showed was that of a male, but it also had a skull that forensic pathologists identified as unmistakably female.<sup>4</sup> Brought up to see the specter of Laura everywhere Petrarchist poetry took hold, and mindful, as Petrarch wrote, that Laura’s “shadow turns my heart into ice and tinges my face with white fear, but her eyes have the power to turn it to marble,” should we be surprised at such an extraordinary finding?<sup>5</sup>

Petrarch knew the power of naming—and, as the essays by Brownlee and Carlino show, he was famously stingy about it. As he wrote in the *Trionfi*, one’s fame “takes man away from his grave and keeps him alive,” so it was best to be hesitant about naming or praising someone.<sup>6</sup> In this volume, however, we will not observe this particular Petrarchan idiosyncrasy and name, loud and clear, the person whose scholarship we would like to extol: Ronald

G. Witt. This issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* is dedicated to Ron, our resident Petrarchist and Renaissance man of letters since 1971, on the occasion of his retirement.

Ron's humor, his love of life, his happy nature, and his gracious demeanor are so well known in the Duke academic community that they have become the subject of countless tales. Many of us are familiar with one version or another of "famous" accidents, like the time he was attacked by snakes in his backyard or was set upon by furious white swans while idyllically swimming in the countryside. Others are more aware of his lore abroad, as when he met "brigands" in Southern Italy and saved himself by claiming that he was going on a pilgrimage to a shrine of the Virgin with his bride. At other times his houseguests have been put on alert with tales of a ghost roaming through his upstairs rooms. Ron has always been a welcoming, steadfast, and loyal colleague, and a bighearted teacher and scholar. Indeed, if by moral gravity, as the historian and friend John Headley has remarked, "we understand this preeminent capacity for reliable, generous, unstinting engagement and service—a veritable life ministry," then we are most fortunate to have a colleague among us like Ron who is both witty and serious.<sup>7</sup>

On the serious side there is plenty to notice, for Ron's intellectual career has spanned almost fifty years. Ronald Witt began graduate school in history at Harvard in 1957, at a time when Eugenio Garin, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and Hans Baron were reshaping intellectual history just as Gene Brucker, Marvin Becker, David Herlihy, and Lauro Martines were rewriting early modern politics and culture. Ron had come to Harvard expecting to write on French institutional history but felt lured into Italian Renaissance intellectual history right away. He soon learned from Baron the importance of material social conditioning for the development of ideas; from Garin what the sense of historical perspective meant to the humanists; and from Kristeller that historical developments are continuous and the Renaissance cannot be understood without a good background in the Middle Ages.

Petrarch fascinated Ron from the very beginning, but the immense scholarly tradition involved in even starting to research his ideas led him first to look elsewhere for his thesis. In a seminar given by Myron Gilmore at Harvard during his first year of graduate training, he had read Baron's *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* and became convinced that Baron had shown a sharp change in attitude toward republicanism between trecento and early quattrocento humanism in Italy. But he had not been as certain of his argument that Salutati (1331–1406), the Florentine humanist who more or less inherited the leadership of the movement from Petrarch, was as

ambivalent to republicanism as Baron had suggested. Ron's work on Salutati turned out to be a long-term project since he devoted his thesis, "The Early Life and Education of Coluccio Salutati," to Salutati's life up to his arrival in Florence, using rich documentation that he discovered in archives of towns in the area of Salutati's birthplace to the west of Florence. Ron's aim in studying Salutati's public letters was to determine how this humanist thinker had presented Florentine policies to the contemporary world.

Salutati became, then, the subject of Ron's first book, *Coluccio Salutati and His Public Letters* (1976), which traced the history of Florentine public letter-writing back to Brunetto Latini, the first known chancellor. It also discussed Salutati's stylistic changes in Latin, described the mechanisms of his letter production, and examined his political ideas. A second book, a biography, *Hercules at the Crossroads: The Life, Work, and Thoughts of Coluccio Salutati* (1983), integrated Salutati's official life with his personal and scholarly interests. Opposing Baron's interpretation of the diplomat as a waffling political thinker, Ron endeavored to show that Salutati's statements regarding monarchy were all concerned with government at the imperial level and had nothing to do with city-state government. As for Salutati's sharply conflicting statements regarding the active and contemplative life, the role of emotions in human conduct, the quality of Petrarch's work in relation to that of ancient Roman authors, and the function of the will and of the intellect, Ron concluded that Salutati was a born polemicist prone to make absolute judgments and distort facts in order to win arguments.

In 1978, a Guggenheim fellowship took Ron to Paris where he intended to corroborate Kristeller's thesis that the humanists were the heirs of the medieval *dictatores*. Little did he know then that he was starting a substantial project that would take the best of his next twenty-five years in the form of a two-volume study. The first tome considers Medieval Latin documentary and book culture, spanning about four hundred and fifty years in Italy, from the Carolingian conquest until 1250. The book, entitled *The Italian Difference: The Two Latin Cultures of Medieval Italy* (forthcoming in 2006), explains why, following the early twelfth century, laymen figured so prominently in northern and north-central Italian intellectual life, the very area where humanism would begin about 1260. The "Italian difference" lies in the fact that, by contrast, in northern Europe laymen would not attain the same position in intellectual life until the sixteenth century.

The second volume of this project, as it turns out, has been published first as a separate study. *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (2000) is devoted to tracing the develop-

ment of early humanism from 1250 to 1420.<sup>8</sup> Ron argues here that Italian humanism began with Lovato dei Lovati of Padua (1240–1309) and not with Petrarch. Scholars have used the word *prehumanist* to describe Lovato and his immediate successor, Albertino Mussato (1261–1329), but Ron shows that the term is meaningless and that, although not equal to Petrarch, two previous generations of scholars shared his interest in ancient texts and in imitating a classicizing style. Once these earlier scholars are recognized as humanists, the question of the origin of the movement emerges as an Italian one, whereas when humanism is considered to begin with Petrarch, French and Italian influences become confused.

Ron shows that humanism was one of two intellectual responses to the civil crisis in the Italian city-states. Seeking a way out of the urban violence that had intensified in the thirteenth century, Italian intellectuals searched for a solution in the restoration of ancient Roman civic ideals, which emphasized the citizen's duty over loyalty to family or a patron. Whereas Lovato and Mussato sought to revive these ancient values through the imitation of classical Latin eloquence, Brunetto Latini provided a different answer to the predicament by initiating a translation project that within a century made a large part of ancient Roman history and literature available in Tuscan.

As opposed to the til-now dominant position that humanism began in the field of rhetoric, Ron points out that Lovato classicized only poetry and that Mussato did not begin to classicize prose until the 1310s. Consequently, humanism began in the field of grammar. Progressing slowly from one genre to another—from history to the private letter to the ethical treatise—by the early 1400s humanism invaded the field of rhetoric through the classicizing oration. The advent of the classicizing oration also meant the birth of Ciceronianism. Until that time, Petrarch's preference for an eclectic style of Latin had remained dominant and, although in the last decades of the century there were indications of a turn toward Ciceronian style, it was only with Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) in 1400 that the change occurred.

Ron also assigns Petrarch a new role in the development of humanism. Reacting to the secular character of the humanism of Lovato and Mussato, Petrarch attempted to Christianize the movement, and his influence carried over into the following generation with Salutati and Conversini. Bruni instead revived the civic concerns of early Paduan humanism. Already by the 1390s the upper class of Florence had become convinced that humanistic education had practical value: it rendered an individual more moral, provided political insight through the study of history, and taught oratorical



skills. Thus began the upper-class commitment to humanist education that continued to dominate the schools of western Europe down to this century.

Ron's insight that the origins of humanism should be redated by two generations (from the 1340s to the 1260s) has focused new attention on the Italian Middle Ages and has led to a rewriting of the intellectual history of Italy from the time of Lovato and Dante down to the early fifteenth century. As we address here Petrarch's enduring fascination through the centuries, we respectfully pay homage to Ron's scholarship, hail his intellectual generosity, and salute him as our *magister*.



## Notes

- 1 "The discourse of love," Roland Greene writes, "is not simply interpersonal, as one might expect, but political and imperial, and Petrarchism, the convention of writing about unrequited love derived from the work of the fourteenth-century poet Francesco Petrarca, is one of the original colonial discourses." See *Unrequited Conquests: Love and Empire in the Colonial Americas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1.
- 2 The case for Petrarch's untranslatability (*intraducibilità*) has often been made. Most authoritatively, see Gianfranco Contini, "Preliminari sulla lingua del Petrarca," in *Varianti e altra linguistica: Una raccolta di saggi (1938–1968)* (Torino: Einaudi, 1979), 162–92.
- 3 As Petrarch wrote pensively, "meliora supersunt / Secula: non omnes veniet Letheus in annos / Iste sopor!" [Better centuries will come; this Lethean stupor cannot last forever!]. In Petrarch, *Epistola metrica* 3.33, ed. Ferdinando Neri et al., *Rime, trionfi e poesie latine* (Milano: Ricciardi, 1951), 802, my translation.
- 4 The anthropologist Andrea Drusini reconstructs, in both cultural and medical terms, the various findings that have accompanied the openings and closings of Petrarch's tomb through the centuries—most recently a plaster cast of a skull catalogued as being Petrarch's was found in a cabinet of antiquities at the University of Padua—in an article that will soon appear in a collection of essays I am editing in Italian, *Petrarca e i canoni del sapere: La dinamica dell'eseplarietà* (Roma: Bulzoni, forthcoming). This book will include essays from this issue of *JMEMS* as well as others.
- 5 "Lombra sua sola fa 'l mio cor un ghiaccio / et di bianca paura il viso tinge, / ma gli occhi ànno vertù di farne un marmo." See Petrarch, *Rime sparse*, sonnet 197, in *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, ed. and trans. Robert Durling (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).
- 6 "trae l'uom del sepolcro e 'n vita il serba." *Triumphus Fame* 1.9, in Francesco Petrarca, *Trionfi, Rime Estravaganti, Codice degli abbozzi*, ed. Vinicio Pacca and Laura Paolino (Milano: Mondadori, 1996), my translation.
- 7 John Headley delivered his remarks on Ronald Witt at the symposium "In the Foot-

steps of Petrarch: Poetry, Music, Art, Culture,” Duke University, March 26–28, 2004.

- 8 This book has received numerous scholarly awards, such as the 2001 Phyllis Goodhart Gordan Prize from the Renaissance Society of America for the year’s best book, the 2001 Jacques Barzun Prize in Cultural History from the American Philosophical Society, and the 2001 Helen and Howard R. Marraro Prize in Italian History from the American Historical Association.