

“Human Glory Is Enough for Me”: Petrarch, the Father of Humanism

During the century before the Italian Renaissance, Petrarch experimented with new styles of poetry and letter-writing. He also revived interest in ancient Roman heroes and authors. By reconciling Christianity with ancient Greek and Roman culture, he gave birth to the movement of European humanism.

During the fifth century, St. Augustine laid the foundation for much Christian thought. Among other things, he wrote that everyone inherited sin from Adam’s original violation of God’s will. Only by believing in Jesus Christ could any individual hope to overcome “original sin” and achieve salvation from the fires of hell.

In the sixth century, a Christian scholar named Boethius wrote, “As far as you are able, join faith to reason.” Thus began a form of scholarship known as Scholasticism that dominated Christian theology (religious philosophy) in medieval Europe. The Scholastic scholars spent much time collecting, classifying, and commenting on the writings of earlier Christian authors like St. Augustine.

The center of Scholasticism was at the University of Paris, founded in the 12th century by the Roman Catholic Church. The Scholastics engaged in debates to prove different religious points by employing reason and logic. Over time, however, these theological debates became more theoretical and further removed from human concerns. For example, Scholastics debated how different angels could be distinguished from one another.

European scholars did not have access to many ancient Latin and Greek writings. For exam-



Petrarch (1304–1374), an Italian poet and scholar, was a devout Christian who loved the culture of ancient Rome.

ple, most of the works of the Greek philosopher Aristotle had been lost after the Roman Empire collapsed in A.D. 476. Fortunately, Muslim scholars translated Aristotle’s Greek writings into Arabic. In the 13th century, these Arabic texts were translated into Latin, the written language of the Scholastics.

Aristotle’s brilliant books on philosophy, ethics, politics, science, and other subjects presented the Scholastics with a different view of the world. But it was a non-Christian view. Aristotle had lived hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. Aristotle was a pagan, a non-Christian.

A new debate gripped the Scholastics over whether Aristotle’s ideas were relevant to Christian theology. At first, his views were so threatening that the church banned all his works.

Around 1270, a scholar at the University of Paris, Thomas Aquinas, attempted to reconcile Aristotle with Christian faith. Aquinas argued that Aristotle’s method of using reason and observable facts from nature to arrive at truth led to God. According to Aquinas, humans must use reason to understand “natural law,” which comes from God.

Many Scholastics adopted Aquinas’ new, revolutionary Christian theology. (The Catholic Church later made Aquinas a saint.) Soon after Aquinas’ death in 1274, however, the church condemned many propositions derived from Aristotle, some of which Aquinas had developed.

At the beginning of the 1300s, the church grew increasingly alarmed at Scholastics who seemed to depend more on reason than faith to make their arguments. William of Occam, an English Scholastic, disagreed that the pope was infallible in matters of faith. Occam used natural law as well as the Bible to reason that all humans were born free.

The time of Scholasticism, devoted entirely to religious matters, was fading. A new age of scholarship

and literature, centering more on human affairs, was beginning.

The Poet and Scholar

Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca) was born near Florence, Italy, in 1304, but soon moved with his family to Avignon in southern France. Petrarch's father was a lawyer and sought work at Avignon, the new seat of the Catholic popes. During Petrarch's lifetime, the popes were French and preferred residing in France instead of Rome.

As a young boy, Petrarch learned to love the Latin language and ancient Roman history. His father, however, insisted he study law, which he did both in France and at the University of Bologna in Italy. When his father died in 1326, Petrarch quickly abandoned his law studies at Bologna and returned to Avignon.

Petrarch wanted to be a poet and had already composed verse in both Latin and Italian. On an Easter Sunday, 1327, the 23-year-old poet spotted a beautiful woman at an Avignon church. She captured his heart, and he began to write love poems in Italian about this woman he called "Laura." Here are the first four lines from one of his most famous sonnets about her:

And if this be love, what is it then?
But if it is love, God, what can love be?
If good, why mortal bitterness to me?
If ill, why is it sweetness that torments?

Laura was apparently married with children. It is unclear if Petrarch ever even spoke to her. The sight of Laura, however, inspired him to write poetry about her for the rest of his life. In doing so, he perfected and popularized the Italian sonnet as a vehicle for love poetry.

Cheated out of his inheritance, Petrarch began to study for the Catholic priesthood. He took the vow of celibacy, but he never became a fully ordained priest. In 1330, an important official in the Catholic Church at Avignon employed Petrarch as a household chaplain. With this income, he continued his Latin studies and poetry.

In 1333, Petrarch traveled to northern Europe on a mission for his employer. While in the Netherlands, he discovered two lost manuscripts of Cicero, the ancient Roman orator. This discovery so excited him that he visited Rome for the first time to tour the ruins where Cicero and the other ancient Latin writers once walked. Petrarch spent the rest of his life prowling the

libraries and monasteries of Europe searching for other lost writings of famous Roman authors.

Back in Avignon, the almost-priest had an affair with an unknown woman and fathered two illegitimate children. He never married.

Around 1337, Petrarch began to read the works of ancient Roman historians like Livy and Sallust. He read them in order to write an epic poem about Scipio Africanus, the Roman hero who defeated Hannibal in the Second Punic War (218–202 B.C.). Petrarch also started writing biographies of famous Romans (later including Christian figures).

He worked on these two writing projects all his life, but never finished them. Even so, he established himself as a new kind of scholar. He looked back to the exploits of those he believed were glorious heroes, even if most of them were pagans.

Although he remained a devout Catholic, Petrarch viewed as immoral the Curia, the group of officials who ran the Catholic Church at Avignon. He also condemned the Scholastics as "oblivious to reality." He once wrote, "Among the many subjects that interested me, I dwelt especially upon antiquity [ancient times], for our own age has always repelled me."

In writing about heroic men of the past, Petrarch grew obsessed with fame. He dreamed he would someday equal his personal hero Virgil, the Roman poet. At age 36, Petrarch was overjoyed when the City of Rome crowned him its poet laureate.

The Man of Letters and Patriot

On a trip to Italy in 1345, Petrarch discovered more documents from Cicero. In a church library, he found many letters written by the Roman orator. The elegant style of Cicero's letters coupled with his focus on human concerns inspired Petrarch to become the first modern literary letter-writer, or man of letters.

Rather than writing on obscure religious topics as the Scholastics did, Petrarch often wrote about himself: his thoughts, feelings, and failings. He wrote about his travels and the people he met. He composed letters on the art of writing poetry and the value of pagan authors like Cicero as models of eloquence. He corresponded with other poets and writers like his close friend Boccaccio, debating what made good literature.

Petrarch also wrote letters about politics. He constantly lobbied the popes at Avignon to move back to

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Rome, which he believed was the true capital of the Catholic Church. He wrote to Emperor Charles IV, who resided in what is today Germany. He implored him to move to Rome as Italy's "new Caesar Augustus" and restore the glory of the Roman Empire. Petrarch wrote to the people of Rome, urging them to intervene in the trial of a Roman patriot accused by the church of heresy. "There is nothing less Roman than fear," he told them.

Petrarch wrote letters to his dead Roman literary heroes like Cicero and Virgil, sometimes even criticizing their writing. Altogether, Petrarch wrote more than 500 letters, all lively little essays with mostly humanist rather than religious themes.

At about age 50, Petrarch decided he could no longer stand living in Avignon with its church leaders, the Curia, which he called "a hell on earth." The woman he had loved from a distance, Laura, had died in the Black Plague a few years earlier. For the rest of his life, he lived in Italy, the country he considered his true homeland.

The "Father of Humanism"

Upon returning to Italy in 1353, Petrarch secured a position as a diplomat from Milan's despot (a ruler with absolute power). This shocked Petrarch's friends from more democratic Florence. But it did not seem to bother the humanist scholar and poet that a despot was his patron.

A decade later, a plague epidemic struck Milan. Petrarch moved to Venice. The city leaders gave him a house in exchange for his promise to leave his library to Venice when he died.

The contents of Petrarch's library tell something about his reputation as a humanist scholar. He owned almost all the available works of the great Roman poets and historians and most of the writings of Cicero and Seneca (a Roman statesman). He had Latin versions of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as well as Aristotle's main books (but thought the Greek philosopher was overrated). He owned St. Augustine's *Confessions*, but few books by the Scholastics and none by Thomas Aquinas. Of the great Italian literature during his time, he had copies of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

Petrarch wrote notes in his books, giving insight into his thinking. Unfortunately, his intact library never got to Venice after his death, and many volumes were lost.

Letter from Petrarch to Boccaccio c. 1366

In the following excerpts, Petrarch ridicules scholars who said the ancient Roman masters of Latin literature were not worth studying.

O inglorious age! that scorns antiquity, its mother, to whom it owes every noble art,—that dares to declare itself not only equal but superior to the glorious past.

* * * *

You see that I cannot speak of these matters without the greatest irritation and indignation. There has arisen of late a set of dialecticians [Scholastics], who are not only ignorant but demented. Like a black army of ants from some old rotten oak, they swarm forth from their hiding-places and devastate the fields of sound learning.

* * * *

What shall we say of men who scorn Marcus Tullius Cicero, the bright sun of eloquence? Of those who scoff at Varro [a Roman writer] and Seneca, and are scandalized at what they choose to call the crude, unfinished style of Livy and Sallust? . . . Arise, O Virgil, and polish the verses that, with the aid of the Muses, thou dost snatch from heaven, in order that they may be fit to deliver into hands such as these!

During the last two decades of his life, Petrarch spent much time trying to complete and revise earlier works. He reorganized the sonnets to Laura (that he continued to write even after her death) into a collection titled, "The Songbook."

Petrarch also collected his letters. This was before the invention of printing, so he or a secretary had to hand-write all copies. His penmanship was flawless, almost as if it had been printed.

Petrarch remained a Christian, and toward the end of his life included religious themes in his works. One, titled "The Secret," consists of a dialog between himself and St. Augustine. Sometimes called "Petrarch's Confessions," "The Secret" exposes his struggles with the state of his soul. He tells St. Augustine, "I do not ask to be God and possess eternity and fill heaven and earth. Human glory is enough for me."

In 1367, Petrarch wrote a defense of the ancient classics after four Scholastics judged him "a good man, but uneducated." About the same time, he completed a new biography of Julius Caesar.

A year before his death, Petrarch wrote a letter to Boccaccio, who had advised him to retire and leave something for young scholars to accomplish. Petrarch replied that if he stopped working, “I should cease to live. . . . I desire that death find me reading and writing.” He died near Padua on July 18, 1374, leaning over a book of Virgil’s poetry.

In his lifetime, Petrarch reconciled his two great ideals—Christianity and the classical culture of ancient Greece and Rome. By showing that the two were compatible, he began the humanist movement. Today, people call Petrarch the “father of humanism” and even the “first modern scholar.” Petrarch’s humanism appears in his many poems, letters, essays, and biographies that looked back to ancient pagan Roman times. His focus on the triumphs and failings of humanity inspired new directions in literature and the arts during the Italian Renaissance, which flowered in the century following Petrarch’s death.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Who was Thomas Aquinas? Why was he important?
2. What made Petrarch’s scholarship different from that of the Scholastics?
3. What do you think was Petrarch’s most important contribution to Western civilization? Why?

For Further Reading

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A C T I V I T Y

Letters to the Past and Future

- A. Write a letter to a person you have studied in world history. Tell this individual what you like and dislike about him or her and why.
- B. Write a letter to the American people of today. Tell them what sort of country they should be creating to leave to their children and grandchildren.
- C. Read your letters to the class. After everyone has done this, hold a class discussion on the most important things you learned in this letter-writing activity.

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