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# Vague Boundaries:

## Ideas of Public and Private in Petrarch's Seniles

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Even in the tradition of western intellectuals, Francesco Petrarca (hereafter Anglicised as Petrarch) is unique.<sup>1</sup> Born in central Italy in 1304, his lifetime straddles those years – namely the second half of the fourteenth century – that saw the modern period begin to emerge from the medieval. Moreover, he stands as an eloquent eyewitness to the tumult that characterised that particular age. Petrarch's letters, as well as his more 'literary' works, remain invaluable historical sources for catastrophic events such as the Black Death and the relocation of the papacy from Rome to Avignon.<sup>2</sup> From this grim context he would emerge as one of the most prominent thinkers of his time, and it is testament to the durability of his reputation that a recent monograph chose to highlight his ostensible designation as the 'father of humanism' when re-evaluating the movement.<sup>3</sup> Whilst that particular study questions the notion of Petrarch as the progenitor of Italian humanism, it does recognise the fundamental contribution he made to its development, and as a primary driving force behind the Renaissance, humanism was profoundly shaped by his work.<sup>4</sup> Historians in particular benefit from a more sophisticated understanding of his contribution; modern historiographical standards would emerge just a generation later and a great deal of what Petrarch did in fourteenth century laid a necessary foundation for many of the developments that would come to be synonymous with the often acclaimed fifteenth.<sup>5</sup>

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1 In the Introduction of a recent collection, the editors state that, '[i]f a single writer has played a constitutive part in the formation of the intellectual culture of the Early Modern Period in Western Europe, this is certainly true for Francis Petrarch. From 1366 on, his Italian and Latin works have been omnipresent in European libraries, either in manuscript or in printed editions. Already during his lifetime commentaries on his writings have been written in order to 'guide' readers through the various literary and philosophical levels of his oeuvre.' See, Karl A. E. Enkel and Jan Papy (eds), *Petrarch and His Readers in the Renaissance*, (Boston: Brill, 2006), 1.

2 For an accessible introduction to the upheaval of the period see, Barbara Wertheim Tuchman, *A distant mirror: the calamitous 14<sup>th</sup> century*, (New York: Knopf, 1978). For a recent reappraisal of the issue see, John Aberth, *From the brink of apocalypse: confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the later middle ages*, (New York: Routledge, 2000).

3 Ronald G. Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni*, (Boston: Brill, 2000). The title of the chapter focused on Petrarch is titled, 'Petrarch, Father of Humanism?', 230-91.

4 *Ibid*, 231.

5 The fifteenth century witnessed the wonderful intellectual and cultural developments of the Renaissance. I am referring specifically to Leonardo Bruni's *History of the Florentine People*, a text that without doubt benefitted from the advances made to historical inquiry by Petrarch two generations earlier. See, Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People*, ed. and trans.,

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Born in Arezzo, a small city some eighty kilometres southeast of Florence, Petrarch was destined to never quite settle in any one place. Indeed, his entire life was characterised by movement and a ceaseless struggle to balance a desire to stand still with the security and hospitality offered by his many patrons.<sup>6</sup> He would spend significant time in places such as Avignon, Vaucluse, Milan, Venice and Pavia, whilst he would eventually die at the age of seventy in Arquà. A fortunate consequence of this restlessness, and also of his ability to foster relationships wherever he stayed, was Petrarch's prolificacy as a letter writer. He had many correspondents and their collective diversity has ensured that his surviving epistles have attracted particular attention amongst the vast scholarly literature devoted to his career.<sup>7</sup> His two major collections, *Rerum familiarium libri* (hereafter *Familiars*) and *Rerum senilium libri* (hereafter *Seniles*), were revolutionary in a methodological sense, and according to one of the most important Renaissance historians of the late-twentieth century, recast a dormant genre 'that had no unambiguously authoritative model'.<sup>8</sup> Petrarch systematically collated and edited his personal correspondence, dragging the epistle into the realm of 'constructed texts'.<sup>9</sup> His were not letters as we would recognise them, rather, they were written to be disseminated amongst a particular audience and 'to project a calculated image of the sender'.<sup>10</sup>

Whilst the significance of his letters has long been established, much of the literature devoted to Petrarch's epistolography has focused on the earlier *Familiars*; the later *Seniles* has been largely ignored. Using the framework provided by three of Petrarch's most significant friendships – those he developed with Cicero, Augustine, and Boccaccio – the following discussion hopes to broaden the discourse and illuminate previously unexplored notions of public and private in the correspondence of his twilight years. An affinity for friendship resonates throughout Petrarch's letters, and his reliance on the structures of male intimacy in the *Seniles* serves as a fixed vantage point from which to examine the way he understood the interplay of public and private.

It must be noted, however, that extreme caution is necessary when attempting to describe the nature of their relationship with one another. Contemporary notions of each dictate an approach radically removed from any modern understanding. Indeed, the literature suggests a rather unfamiliar landscape whereby 'we must recognize that the humanists did not distinguish as insistently as we do between public and private letter-writing'.<sup>11</sup> Without doubt, this general

James Hankins, 3 vols., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001-07). In his introduction, Hankins labels Bruni's *History* 'the greatest historical work of the Italian Renaissance,' ix.

6 By far, the best text for gaining a sense of this ceaseless movement is, Ernest Hatch Wilkins, *Life of Petrarch*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

7 A definitive starting point is, Wilkins, *Life of Petrarch*. For a more recent collection that represents the latest scholarship on his entire body of work: *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, eds., Victoria Kirkham & Armando Maggi, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

8 Francesco Petrarca, *Rerum familiarium libri*, 3 vols., trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975-85). Francis Petrarch, *Letters of Old Age, Rerum senilium libri*, 2 vols., trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, Saul Levin, Reta A. Bernardo, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). The study I am referring to is, John M. Najemy, *Between Friends: Discourse of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli-Vettori Letters of 1513-1515*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 26.

9 Kenneth Austin, 'Petrarch's letters of recommendation,' *Renaissance Studies*, DOI: 10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00815.x, (2012), 1-18.

10 Anthony Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation: the intellectual genesis*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 78.

11 Judith Rice Henderson, 'On Reading the Rhetoric of the Renaissance Letter,' in *Renaissance-Rhetorik*, ed. Heinrich F. Plett, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 146. See also, Judith Rice Henderson, 'Humanist Letter Writing: Private Conversation or

assumption about the nature of letter writing in the early modern period has guided this study. In regards to Petrarch's letters specifically, it has been noted that his epistolary program manipulated the boundaries between public and private matters by utilising 'specific negotiating postures'.<sup>12</sup> Under this interpretation, the application of either as a frame for any of his letters is dependent on both the implied contract with the addressee, and whether they were intimately close or completely unknown.

More recently, the literature has moved towards a consensus that Petrarch was not only far less stringent about separating public and private than we today might be, but that each was used in a way that served the other; 'Petrarch reveals his most intimate feelings – his "real" (i.e., private) self [...] – in the letters, which were nevertheless meant to be circulated semipublicly'.<sup>13</sup> Further to this, the possibility of conflict between external needs and inwards desires is a feature of the current conversation, which acknowledges the 'full complexities of Petrarch's negotiations between "private selfhood" and the dependencies and coercive realities of a very public life'.<sup>14</sup> Of course, a large part of this blurred boundary between seemingly incompatible pressures is the idea of how much we can rely upon letters to reveal to us 'authentic' historical truths.<sup>15</sup> This article will again rely on the historiography by making the often-vexed nature of public/private interplay a feature; however, it will aim to extend the discourse toward a more comprehensive idea of Petrarch's wider epistolographic corpus by focusing on the thus far under-represented *Seniles*.

At the very least, the literature has generally demonstrated that we cannot assume any epistle grants unrestricted access to otherwise hidden narratives. In Petrarch's case this warning is particularly apt. The characteristics of the *Seniles* compel us to acknowledge that the notions of public and private contained within bear little resemblance to how we today might understand them. In fact, Petrarch's epistolary voice in this collection never wavers from the consistency of its message; both are one and the same. Whilst this certainly throws up the possibility of misinterpretation, we can sharpen the accuracy of our picture by realising that any private aspects are identifiable insofar as they relate to a broader public image. Trying to divorce one from the other relies upon an anachronistic methodology and heightens considerably the risk of erroneous conclusions.

Since it is certain that any modern sense we have of a boundary between the two can only obscure meaning in this context, we must begin with a clear outline of how notions of 'public' and 'private' in the *Seniles* should be applied. Essentially, Petrarch's vision of both is pervasively integrated, each acting in conjunction with the other to construct his broader message. The inevitable result of

Public Forum?', in *Self-Preservation and Social Identification: The Rhetoric and Pragmatics of Letter Writing in Early Modern Times*, eds., Toon Van Houdt, Jan Papy, Gilbert Tournoy & Constant Matheeuessen, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 17-38.

12 Nancy S. Struever, *Theory as Practice: Ethical Inquiry in the Renaissance*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 11.

13 Dolores Chapelle Wojciehowski, 'Francis Petrarch: First Modern Friend,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 47, No. 4, *The Culture of Early Modern Friendship*, (Winter, 2005), 289.

14 Albert Russell Ascoli, *A Local Habitation and a Name: Imagining Histories in the Italian Renaissance*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 128.

15 Worthwhile studies dealing with these issues are, Rebecca Earle, 'Introduction: letters, writers and the historian,' in *Epistolary Selves: letters and letter-writers, 1600-1945*, ed. Rebecca Earle, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 1-12. Claudio Guillen, 'Notes toward the Study of the Renaissance Letter,' in *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation*, ed. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 70-101. Mireille Bossis, 'Methodological Journeys Through Correspondences,' trans. Karen McPherson, *Yale French Studies*, No. 71, *Men/Women of Letters*, (1986), 63-75.

this collaboration is that the private Petrarch – his personality, individuality and sense of self - is put on display as his public persona.

Admittedly, it is possible to perceive at least a vague outline of what Petrarch might have considered private. In the opening letter of the *Familiars* he tells his close friend Socrates that the collection contains, ‘many [letters] written on a variety of personal matters in a rather simple and unstudied manner’.<sup>16</sup> The internal, however, is used in a way that serves an external persona when in the same letter he states, ‘many things having to do with personal matters while perhaps considered a worthy insertion when first written now appear unwarranted’.<sup>17</sup> In this instance, private concerns are subordinated to the editing process, which, in its turn, is driven by fundamentally public ambitions, namely, the dissemination of the collection amongst his audience.

Since they adopt a multi-faceted appearance in his correspondence, an accurate understanding of Petrarch’s public ambitions is somewhat problematic. His relationship with the broader community was nothing if not ambiguous. There are, for example, countless references in the letters to his desire for a life of quiet solitude. On receiving the laurel wreath of the poet in Rome in 1341, a classical ceremony that was only reinstated only a few decades earlier, Petrarch says, ‘without it I could have kept quiet and out of the public eye, which some think is the best kind of life.’<sup>18</sup> It has been recognised in the historiography, however, that his literary pursuits ‘offered the possibility of achieving fame’, meaning that we certainly cannot accept his musings on the wreath literally.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Petrarch’s desire to receive this honour, particularly in Rome, has been described as an obsession.<sup>20</sup> This rather obvious contradiction sits at the very heart of understanding Petrarch; indeed, there is a scholarly consensus that his life was characterised by ‘a conflict between his intense desire for inwardness and the demands of the external world, which [...] pressed strongly upon him.’<sup>21</sup>

Concealed by a façade of disdain, Petrarch’s complex yearning for public recognition was a constant negotiation between two internally mediated requirements. In the first instance, there simply had to be a harmony between any audience and his exacting intellectual standards. Inherently restrictive, Petrarch’s notion of a worthy public was built upon what has been labelled

16 Petrarca, *Familiars*, 11. ‘Socrates’ was Petrarch’s nickname for his close friend, Ludwig van Kempen, see *Familiars*, p.3. Petrarch used several names from antiquity when writing to his most intimate friends. See also, *Seniles*, 1; he uses the nickname ‘Simonides’ to address his close confidant, Francesco Nelli.

17 Petrarca, *Familiars*, 10.

18 Petrarch, *Seniles*, 652. For a discussion of the significance of the wreath see, Wilkins, *Life of Petrarch*, 24-9, and, Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 82. Receiving a wreath, usually from the Holy Roman Emperor, was a classical ceremony that had been resurrected when the grammarian Albertino Mussato was crowned at Padua in 1315, with Zanobi di Strada receiving the honour in 1355. Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II would receive the wreath almost a century later in 1442; see, William Boulting, *Aeneas Silvius (Enea Silvio de' Piccolomini - Pius II): Orator, Man of Letters, Statesman, and Pope*, (London: Archibald Constable and Co., Ltd., 1908), 112-3.

19 Maristella Lorch, ‘Petrarch, Cicero, and the Classical Pagan Tradition,’ in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy, Volume 1, Humanism in Italy*, ed. Albert Rabil, Jr., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 81. See also, Albert Rabil Jr., ‘Petrarch, Augustine, and Classical Christian Tradition,’ in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, 97. Rabil Jr. states Augustine’s *City of God* led Petrarch to, ‘realize the futility of human life and the fleeting character of fame, even though, as we shall see, he refused in his *Secret* to give up his quest for earthly glory.’ See also, Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, 251. In discussing the conflicts that characterised Petrarch’s life, Witt says, ‘[a]t bottom, the problem for Petrarch appeared to be not so much his love of ancient pagan authors in itself as his use of them to attain worldly fame.’

20 Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 82.

21 Lorch, ‘Petrarch, Cicero, and the Classical Pagan Tradition,’ 86.

‘his sense of superiority of Latin over the vernacular.’<sup>22</sup> Because of this prejudice, and since his Latin was so intellectually rigorous, it can be safely assumed that an audience capable of fulfilling his notions of proficiency would have been very small. In fact, Petrarch could be scathing when discussing the merits of particular audiences, and at one point his vitriol exploded when he rather caustically wrote ‘let us hear these detractors of ours some day saying or writing something pleasing in Latin instead of always belching forth their puzzles in the vernacular at street corners [...] present a man of letters to such muggers, and they are dumbfounded and harden into flint’.<sup>23</sup>

Complicating matters is the fact that Petrarch’s notion of the public was dependent upon the specific characteristics of each particular text, a notion this argument assumes to be a symptom of a desire to control every facet of the visible image. His diligent editing tells us that with clear intent he crafted his letters so that they would make a unified contribution to his public persona. Each was just a constituent part of a much larger structure, and whilst it may seem absurd to surmise that Petrarch believed a letter once delivered to an autonomous recipient remained within his sphere of influence, this is nonetheless how he thought. This fact is demonstrated by his appeal to Socrates to ‘urge those who may still have copies of these letters to destroy them forthwith’, lest their re-editing cause some sort of conflict amongst his audience and hence tarnish his public image.<sup>24</sup>

The influence of these two constraints over Petrarch’s interaction with the public is wonderfully illustrated in the *Seniles* when he laments the unwanted release of several excerpts of his *Africa*.<sup>25</sup> Having petitioned Petrarch for a selection from the unfinished work, an acquaintance was sent some verses, ‘still lacking polish and the time needed for revision, on condition that they should not fall into anyone else’s hands.’<sup>26</sup> To Petrarch’s overwhelming dismay, the recipient passed on the verses without consent. Since he was not personally responsible for revealing the text in this instance, the public immediately became to Petrarch the ‘barking Scyllas’, the ‘vulgar pack of dogs’ that would ‘endlessly pester those whom they cannot bite.’<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the fact the text was unfinished at the time it was disseminated meant that he had effectively no control over its impact on his public image. This episode prompted the comment: ‘I often warned myself and my friends – myself not to write anything new, and them not to make public anything that I happened to have already written.’<sup>28</sup> Intrinsic to the fascinating interplay between audience and text in this episode is a warning of the complexity we must contend with when approaching ideas of public and private in Petrarch’s correspondence.

This leaves us a final task in laying a foundation for this discussion, namely, an understanding of the outward persona Petrarch worked tirelessly to construct. The vast literature on Petrarch

22 Martin L. McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: The Theory and Practice of Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 34.

23 Petrarch, *Seniles*, 52-3.

24 Petrarca, *Familiars*, 10. The possibility of a negative impact upon his public persona is discussed in, Najemy, *Between Friends*, 29.

25 For a discussion of the *Africa* see, Simone Marchesi, ‘Petrarch’s Philological Epic (*Africa*),’ in *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, 113-30. Essentially, the *Africa* is a ‘nine-book epic poem drafted in Latin hexameter’ whose subject matter is ‘the decisive actions of Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus the Elder in the second Punic War [which] embraces the span of time between the end of hostilities in the Spanish campaign (205 BCE) and the Battle of Zama (202 BCE),’ 113.

26 Petrarch, *Seniles*, 39.

27 *Ibid*, 37.

28 *Ibid*, 38.

is indicative that attempts at an easy definition might possibly over-simplify the problem, but I would argue that the man himself performs this unenviable task in the final letter of the *Seniles*.<sup>29</sup> Addressed to posterity, it reads in parts like a quasi-guide to Petrarch's core-beliefs, and in others like a somewhat obsequious homage to the generosity of his patrons. The fact that Petrarch through this letter speaks directly to the future reader means that, as an illustration of the way he wished to be perceived, its authority is significant.

The opening paragraph draws our attention to an overriding humility and sense of place, both historical and philosophical: 'Perhaps you will have heard something about me, although this too is doubtful, whether a petty, obscure name would reach far into either space or time.' Acknowledging his existence as 'a poor mortal man', Petrarch places himself firmly in a linear framework – one that runs from adolescence to youth to old age – that is in itself encompassed by 'the Creator of all ages and times', who, incidentally, 'set [him] right.' By pointing out that he 'led a happier life with plain living and ordinary fair than all the followers of Apicius', Petrarch weds his humility to a pious austerity wholly in keeping with his overarching religious beliefs. This love for simplicity is manifest when Petrarch observes 'nothing has displeased me more than pomp, not only because it is evil and contrary to humility, but because it is troublesome and distracting.' That he labels pomp distracting is important. As we shall come to see, anything that diverted Petrarch, or more alarmingly, encroached upon his liberty, was anathema to his way of life. Freedom, of course, allowed him to pursue his life's work. Using his 'keen intellect, fit for all kinds of good and wholesome study', Petrarch 'dwelt single-mindedly on learning about antiquity'. Commensurate with his religious devotion, his love of learning, I would argue, constitutes the fundamental way Petrarch intended his public audience to perceive his outward persona.

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If Petrarch's piety and intellect constitute the foundation of his public persona, we should perhaps consider the transmission of an idealised picture of male friendship to be one of its fundamental purposes. As evidenced by the letter to posterity, Petrarch had an eye on his position within the broader historical narrative, and much of his literary work was directed towards this. Focusing purely on his contemporary impact, however, allows us to see how he used his extensive network of friends to reinforce his public image. Petrarch used the literary epistle in conjunction with his intellectual reputation to foster links that stretched across Europe; it was something he excelled at.<sup>30</sup> Many of his friendships were the result of cultural and social influences, such as those he forged with his patrons. On the other hand, many were reflections of a heartfelt desire for male companionship, like those that feature in this discussion, and it is these intimacies that provide us with a wonderful frame through which we might identify the more private aspects of Petrarch's life.

The desire for intimacy moved him to claim that 'dining with friends is so delightful that I have thought nothing more welcome than their unexpected arrival, nor have I ever willingly taken a

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 672-9.

<sup>30</sup> Lorch, 'Petrarch, Cicero, and the Classical Pagan Tradition,' 81. Lorch says, 'Political leaders in Italy found a scholar as renowned as Petrarch an ornament for their courts, which added to their prestige and credibility. For this reason, Petrarch was able to obtain for himself a social status that few intellectuals have enjoyed in any age.'

meal without a companion.<sup>31</sup> Of course, in the fourteenth century friendship, like the distinction between public and private, carried a very different meaning to our modern understanding. Often it was governed by instrumental concerns that reflected contemporary social realities. Petrarch had many patrons of which he says, 'I derived many advantages and no annoyances from their eminence.'<sup>32</sup> Such benefits, however, carried the threat of subservience, a risk Petrarch acknowledged by asserting: 'I fled [...] from many of those whom I loved a great deal; such love for freedom was implanted in me that I studiously avoided anyone whose name seemed incompatible with it.'<sup>33</sup>

In order to make better use of Petrarch's friendships as ciphers of his private character we must move beyond the idea of the utilitarian links between men. A worthwhile starting point is the outline of true friendship he offered to Donato Albanzani. By stating that 'in my friendships pure trust, burning love, harmonious interests, and easy, enjoyable communication are quite enough', Petrarch alerts us to a purer form.<sup>34</sup> The machinations of patronage were, at times, transcended by his letters, in which he asserts 'I have been a most eager and faithful devotee of honourable friendships.'<sup>35</sup> It is in this more 'equal' embodiment that we shall best find the interplay of Petrarch's public and private lives.<sup>36</sup> Nowhere in the *Seniles* was unadulterated friendship better illustrated than in the links Petrarch forged with his contemporary, Boccaccio, and with his ancient intellectual exemplars, Cicero and Augustine. The bonds he developed with each of these men were not only a reflection of his personal convictions, but the ideal of male friendship they were based upon became an essential element of his public persona. That Cicero and Augustine were long dead is irrelevant.<sup>37</sup> Their impact upon Petrarch was profound, and to consider the esteem with which he held them as falling outside the above definition would be rather myopic. Indeed, if we are to believe what Petrarch wrote regarding his emotional attachment to both, the bonds he forged existed at the fundamental level of his character.

Without exception, a discussion of Petrarch and his vision of friendship must begin with Cicero.<sup>38</sup> The vast network of intimate friends, acquaintances and patrons that were features of Petrarch's public character was inspired by Tully – his nickname for Cicero – whose collected letters have been described as demonstrating that 'friendship had at least to be presented externally as a warm

<sup>31</sup> Petrarch, *Seniles*, 673.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p.673. The Colonna family is perhaps the most salient example of the patronage enjoyed by Petrarch. He discusses their extensive impact upon his career in the final letter of the *Seniles*, 672-9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 393.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 673.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 585.

<sup>37</sup> Lorch, 'Petrarch, Cicero, and the Classical Pagan Tradition,' 74. She states, 'Cicero reigns supreme in Petrarch's world. There exists between the two a personal relationship inspired by a commonly shared faith in *humanitas* [...] time and space are cancelled in what can only be called a friendship; and friendship is, of all the human affections, the one Petrarch most cherishes.' It is interesting to see Petrarch's reaction upon the loss of some copies of Cicero. See, Petrarch, *Seniles*, 599-607. In this letter Petrarch relates a tale of a teacher dear to him who, because of poverty, pawned some of Petrarch's copies. They were never recovered.

<sup>38</sup> Cicero was a first-century BCE Roman noble whose work in oratory, poetry and political theory, amongst other things, resonated up until at least the Renaissance period. The literature on Cicero is understandably vast; a good introduction is, Torsten Petersson, *Cicero: A Biography*, (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1963). For a more recent study see, Thomas N. Mitchell, *Cicero: The Ascending Years*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); and the follow up monograph, Thomas N. Mitchell, *Cicero: The Senior Statesman*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

and close relationship; letters had to advance or sustain friendship by their manner.<sup>39</sup> Petrarch's recognition with Cicero was particularly special. It stretched back to 'early childhood', and according to Petrarch, 'when everyone else was poring over Prosperus and Aesop, [he] brooded over Cicero's books'.<sup>40</sup> Despite the intervention of his father, who he tells us threw some copies of Cicero into the fire, this reverence lasted his entire life. The retelling of the book-burning episode reveals how Petrarch wanted us to see the friendship; he laments that 'they were cast on the flames like heretical books, a sight at which I groaned just as if I myself had been tossed on the same fire'.<sup>41</sup>

Whilst his account of the book burning exudes melodrama, we shouldn't dismiss Petrarch's identification with Cicero as poetic embellishment. Finding in those ancient works the apotheosis of the intellect and eloquence he so coveted, it is clear that Petrarch to some extent saw himself as a modern day exemplification of the Roman statesman.<sup>42</sup> As suggested by the letters to Cicero in the *Familiars*, however, this reverence was not boundless.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, seeing this criticism as an emotional response to a perceived crisis of intellectual integrity on Cicero's behalf, means that even it can be seen as evidence of the extent of Petrarch's admiration. At the very least, Petrarch's comment in the *Seniles* that 'nothing from that great man should be overlooked', demonstrates that we must acknowledge that his personal affinity for Cicero was undoubtedly an intrinsic part of his public image.<sup>44</sup>

In particular regard to epistolography, this intellectual amity manifested itself in stylistic imitation. Remembering that Petrarch rediscovered Cicero's *Letters to Atticus* in 1345, the 'trusting intimacy and lack of formality' characteristic of the ancient collection were integrated into his redevelopment of the genre.<sup>45</sup> The result of this reinvigoration was that the literary epistle, utilising the informal manner inspired by Cicero, became a vehicle for the construction and cultivation of the aforementioned friendship network. More importantly, our understanding of Petrarch's *entire* persona, whether public or private, is only enhanced by an appreciation of Cicero's role in the evolution of his lifelong reverence for intellectual development. Petrarch saw a cessation of his literary pursuits as akin to death, and unquestionably it was Cicero who provided the stimulus and inspiration for this program.<sup>46</sup> Using Cicero's *De Oratore* for evidence, he states 'without being forced we willingly take on labours...for to do nothing at all is typical of the sluggard rather than the free man,' a remark that obviously links back to his love of liberty.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the intellectual drive that fuelled Petrarch's labour found its origins in, and was continually framed by, Cicero.

39 G. O. Hutchinson, *Cicero's Correspondence: A Literary Study*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 17. The translators of the *Seniles* note in the preface that, in the case of his favourite authors, Petrarch often 'refers [to] others either by their *nomen gentilicium* or by their *cognomen*; so our readers should be aware that Tully or Marcus Tullius = Cicero,' xiv.

40 Petrarch, *Seniles*, 600.

41 *Ibid*, 601.

42 This point was made by Lorch in, 'Petrarch, Cicero, and the Classical Pagan Tradition,' 74. She says, 'Petrarch accepted Cicero's relentless drive towards human perfection as akin to his own. The warmth of the style reflected this drive, which he felt to be present in all of Cicero's writings, the orations as well as the rhetorical works, the letters as well as the philosophical dialogues. Cicero longed – as did Petrarch – to share this drive for moral perfection with others around him. Thus while in search of a culture for a group of specialists (the orators), he came to establish a general culture.'

43 See, for example, Petrarca, *Familiars*, 317-20.

44 Petrarch, *Seniles*, 47.

45 Jon Hall, *Politeness and Politics in Cicero's Letters*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128. The text referred to is, Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Letters to Atticus*, trans., D. R. Shackleton Bailey, (New York: Penguin Books, 1978).

46 Lorch, 'Petrarch, Cicero, and the Classical Pagan Tradition,' 74. For the idea of how Petrarch equated intellectual inactivity with death see, Petrarch, *Seniles*, 673.

47 Petrarch, *Seniles*, 68. The text referred to is, Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans., E. W. Sutton, 2 Vols., (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1942).

When asked by his friends what he would like as gifts from their foreign travels, Petrarch simply responds, 'nothing besides books, Cicero's above all'.<sup>48</sup>

Although the dialogue with Cicero is the most obvious of its kind to be found in the *Seniles*, the spiritual relationship Petrarch forged with the fourth-century Church father St. Augustine of Hippo is equally relevant to this particular discussion.<sup>49</sup> As consequential as pre-Christian knowledge was to the overall shape his public figure adopted, it must be remembered that Petrarch operated within a staunchly Christian framework where his piety was the least negotiable of his values. Charles Trinkaus, an important historian of the mid-twentieth century, observed this fact when he stated 'never in his entire life did he waver in thinking himself the most orthodox of Christians'.<sup>50</sup> We are reminded of this when Petrarch states it is study that 'can contribute to general knowledge, character building, eloquence, and, finally, the defence of our religion'.<sup>51</sup> The significance he places on religion indicates that it was, in his eyes, Christian knowledge that promulgated the absolute truth, and the best way to approach this was through Augustine. He makes this point even more emphatically when he advises a contemporary to undertake a close reading of the second book of Augustine's, *On Christian Teaching*: 'learn all you can, and always remember that you are a theologian, not a poet or a philosopher, except insofar as a true philosopher is a lover of true wisdom, and the true wisdom of God the Father is Christ'.<sup>52</sup>

We know from the *Familiars* that Augustine occupied a special place in Petrarch's life. It has been argued that his famous account of the ascent of Mont Ventoux, in which the Church father acts as a guide, should be read as an allegory of the spiritual struggles of man.<sup>53</sup> In Augustine there is a repetition of the connection Petrarch developed with Cicero. However, where Petrarch lamented the burning of Cicero's books as if he himself were being burnt, the concomitance with Augustine adopts a more benign and peaceful appearance without sacrificing the depth of its gravity. Describing his own elation upon receiving a favourable reaction to his work from someone whose intellect he respected, Petrarch remarks, '[y]ou will not be surprised that this can happen to me when you recall that it happened to a man such as Augustine'.<sup>54</sup> Their affinity is further developed when Petrarch positions himself as one of the 'wretched mortals, puffed up with nothing', whom God allowed to 'go astray so that, being aware of their sins, however late, they may know themselves'.<sup>55</sup> This path follows the one Augustine laid out in his *Confessions*, in which 'he confesses all the errors and sins of his whole life from his earliest childhood when he was still a suckling'.<sup>56</sup> Taking Augustine as his 'personal leader', Petrarch expresses a deep admiration

48 Petrarch, *Seniles*, 603. It is interesting to see Petrarch's reaction upon the loss of some copies of Cicero. In this letter Petrarch relates a tale of a teacher dear to him who, because of poverty, pawned some of Petrarch's copies. They were never recovered.

49 The standard introduction to the life of Augustine is, Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Brown added an epilogue to his definitive study of 1967 in this new edition.

50 Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 3.

51 Petrarch, *Seniles*, 23.

52 *Ibid*, 579. The text referred to is, Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans., R. P. H. Green, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

53 Albert Rabil, Jr., 'Petrarch, Augustine, and Classical Christian Tradition,' 100-2. For the letter itself see, Petrarca, *Familiars*, 172-80.

54 Petrarch, *Seniles*, 610. Other examples of Petrarch comparing himself to Augustine include, '[i]f Augustine experienced how very dangerous the temptation of human praise was in his own case, how would you think this sinner will feel,' 193; '[n]or will you be surprised that the same thing could happen to me as to Augustine,' 225.

55 *Ibid*, 672.

56 *Ibid*, 293. The text referred to is, Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans., R. S. Pine-Coffin, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961).

whereby 'nothing is safer than to follow at the same time both the life and the doctrine of that man.'<sup>57</sup> Remembering that in Petrarch's mind it was Christian knowledge that expounded 'true wisdom', by actively learning to 'love that [sacred] literature, to admire and seek it out', he came to be changed by imitating Augustine in his attainment of a higher learned state.<sup>58</sup>

It is important to note that Cicero and Augustine appear incompatible as influences; one is amongst the most prominent pre-Christian intellectuals, whilst the other is one of the Church fathers whose teachings had contributed to the dominance of Europe by western Christendom. This apparent incongruity has often been the focus of historiographical analysis, which has by now arrived at a consensus that, to Petrarch, 'classical antiquity represented an almost inexhaustible source of wisdom that Christian thought could and should assimilate.'<sup>59</sup> There is hardly a letter in the *Seniles* without some sort of reference to either as a source of knowledge, and most interestingly, they are held up as complimentary provenances. The ease of this amalgamation is hardly surprising since Petrarch's convictions regarding the relevance of pagan wisdom to his Christian mission were resolved when he 'found in Augustine one who had experienced the conflicts he was experiencing and who had also experienced the solution that he sought.'<sup>60</sup> Speaking of his experiences in coming to love Christian literature, Petrarch remarked, '[n]or would it have been fitting for a Christian not to be changed at all by Augustine's eloquence when...Cicero's *Hortensius* had changed him so much.'<sup>61</sup> If a Church father could benefit from ancient wisdom there is no question that Petrarch, who defined himself within a fundamentally Christian framework, could as well. He found in Augustine a 'general legitimacy' that allowed him to use 'pagan works in constructing his own version of Christian morality.'<sup>62</sup>

Since he states in the *Seniles* that 'although no one but a Christian knows to whom and how he must confess, nevertheless the awareness of sin, the prick of conscience, repentance, and confession are common to all reasonable beings,' the notion of pagan knowledge informing Christian rectitude is clearly a consequence of Petrarch's personal religious narrative.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, we know from this statement that the coalescence was driven from within, rather than absorbed from an exterior source. Ultimately, Petrarch abandoned the pagan versus Christian dichotomy for one where virtue, born from wisdom, opposes sin. We know that he saw learning and study, either pagan or Christian, as the forerunner of wisdom.<sup>64</sup> Virtue becomes the ultimate benefit of wisdom and assumes the preeminent place in Petrarch's intellectual program; it 'acts on its own and, to use Tully's words, attracts the mind by its charms.'<sup>65</sup> The implication is that the reasonable mind, regardless of the source of its wisdom, will live a virtuous life – which in Petrarch's age was a virtuous, Christian life – rather than one of sin.

57 Petrarch, *Seniles*, 579-80. The entire passage reads, '[y]ou have many guides along this twofold path. For both, Augustine alone will suffice, your personal leader whom you see struggling most magnificently with noble passion at your very age against his errors and vices. If ever there was in him any error in his life or in his doctrine, the first was taken away by an antithetical way of life; the second was rooted out by his own hand in that finest of books, so that nothing is safer than to follow at the same time both the life and doctrine of that man.'

58 *Ibid*, 293.

59 Susanna Barsella, 'Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Peter Damian: Two Models of the Humanist Intellectual,' *MLN*, Vol. 121, No. 1, (Jan., 2006), 16.

60 Rabil, Jr., 'Petrarch, Augustine, and Classical Christian Tradition,' 98-9.

61 Petrarch, *Seniles*, 293.

62 Witt, 'In the Footsteps of the Ancients,' 254.

63 Petrarch, *Seniles*, 46.

64 *Ibid*, 51.

65 *Ibid*, 69.

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As stated in the introduction, this discussion relies upon a further relationship of Petrarch's, namely the close bond he forged with the other great Italian writer of the mid to late-fourteenth century, Giovanni Boccaccio.<sup>66</sup> Linked by an obvious affection, the correspondence between the men is a remarkable feature of the *Seniles*, and it strengthens the premise that his letters afford us the opportunity to glimpse the private Petrarch. He wrote to his contemporary with particular verisimilitude, and whilst the letters to Boccaccio do not in themselves guarantee the aforementioned 'unrestricted access', as legacies of what has been called 'the most intense and sustained relationship of Petrarch's life', we should certainly expect to find in them an accurate indication of his personal beliefs.<sup>67</sup> The thematic trends of the letters to Boccaccio are entirely in keeping with Petrarch's broader public image, and interestingly, are amongst some of the lengthiest epistles in the *Seniles*. Certainly, this is not a definitive measure of their authority; however, even the most cursory of glances reveals that many of the more meaningful discourses take place in this segment of the collection.

Petrarch's first letter to Boccaccio in the *Seniles* is a lengthy exegesis intended to mitigate his friend's reaction to the prophecy of a dying holy man.<sup>68</sup> Since this is the first time we encounter Boccaccio, the mode of affection it establishes has a profound impact upon how the reader should frame the relationship for the remainder of the collection. In the opening lines Petrarch writes, '[y]our letter, dear brother, filled me with great alarm...how else could I read the account of your tears and approaching death, except with tearful eyes?'<sup>69</sup> In the concluding paragraphs he essentially offers Boccaccio an equal share of all that is his.<sup>70</sup> The poignancy of this bond is more fully realised later in the correspondence when Petrarch complains, 'health left me along with you; I was never well after that, and I have a feeling I shall never again be well.'<sup>71</sup> The greatest indication of their friendship comes in the penultimate book of the *Seniles*, which consists only of letters to Boccaccio. In it Petrarch resolves to say a final farewell to his great friend, and to all his recipients for that matter, an admission that Wallace states was 'achieved only with the greatest wistfulness and regret.'<sup>72</sup> The legacy of this affection is that we can use the correspondence with Boccaccio, like that with Cicero and Augustine, as a means of perhaps gaining access to Petrarch's more fundamental beliefs.

The first letter to Boccaccio, for example, clearly suggests that Petrarch utilised his private convictions to sustain his public persona. To placate Boccaccio's fear of death and convince him not to abandon literature, Petrarch argues for the otherworldly over the mundane, offering the

66 Giovanni Boccaccio is best known for his collection of bawdy tales, *The Decameron*. The resonance of this masterpiece of Italian literature has a great deal to do with its horrific description of the Black Death that decimated Florence, and almost all of Europe for that matter, first in 1347, and then periodically after. See, Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans., G. H. McWilliam, (London: Penguin Books, 1972). For an introduction to Boccaccio's life see, Judith Powers Serafini-Sauli, *Giovanni Boccaccio*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982). As an addressee in the *Seniles*, of the 128 letters in the collection a significant portion, eighteen in total, are from Petrarch to his close friend.

67 David Wallace, 'Love Between Men, Griselda, and Farewell to Letters,' in *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, 323.

68 Essentially, it was relayed to Boccaccio that a dying holy man, renowned for his religious piety, had warned Boccaccio to cease his literary pursuits. See, Petrarch, *Seniles*, 15-26.

69 *Ibid*, 15.

70 *Ibid*, 25-6.

71 *Ibid*, 582.

72 Wallace, 'Love Between Men,' 329.

advice that ‘temporal life, compared to eternal life, should be called death rather than life.’<sup>73</sup> The logical conclusion of this reasoning is that man should not be apprehensive of death, but ‘fearlessly accept it as something often meditated upon, and not shudder at it as something unknown.’<sup>74</sup> Whilst it seems somewhat unnatural, this ‘reversal’ is a consistent theme in the *Seniles* and as such, reminds the reader of Petrarch’s piety and adherence to his Christian framework.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, the idea of constant contemplation offers Petrarch a platform from which to reiterate to Boccaccio the value of the learned life. Since it ‘arouses a love of virtue and either removes or lessens the fear of death...literature does not impede, but rather helps a man of good character who masters it; it advances the journey of life, it does not delay it.’<sup>76</sup> The implication is clear. Petrarch anoints himself as that ‘man of good character’ who is both liberated by a proper understanding of death, and bolstered by his love of learning.

The vigorous passion with which Petrarch pursued his goals is evident in this letter. Conveying the intellectual fervour of a man with a heavy personal investment in his arguments, Petrarch presents his convictions in such a deliberate and thorough way that the reader cannot help but acknowledge their strength. Adopting the register of a father guiding a son, Petrarch imparts on Boccaccio advice designed to lead him through troubled times. Without doubt the mantle of leader sat well with Petrarch, in both his correspondence and his wider persona. That he saw himself as privy to knowledge capable of guiding others onto the correct path only reinforces the view that he put his private self on display.

Late in the *Seniles* he rejects a plea by Boccaccio to give up writing in his twilight years. Responding to an inference that ‘yielding to younger minds I should interrupt the studies I have undertaken’, Petrarch asks, ‘how much better could I exhort the minds of those who follow me to persevere?’<sup>77</sup> We know he had a rather negative view of his own times; he remarks at one point, ‘this age has always displeased me, so that, unless love for my dear ones pulled me the other way, I always wish to have been in any other age whatever.’<sup>78</sup> What his rebuke of Boccaccio demonstrates is that his intellectual program was genuine. Since it was such an integral part of his character – it in fact *was* his character – Petrarch could no sooner give up his public persona as a prominent and learned thinker than he could change who he was. He says as much himself when he states ‘[c]ontinual work and concentration are my mind’s food; when I begin to rest and slow down, I shall soon stop living.’<sup>79</sup> Again, we should resist the urge to immediately dismiss this as melodrama. It was written in the final year before his death and the sentiment it expresses is wholly in keeping with the public image Petrarch spent much of his life creating.

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<sup>73</sup> Petrarch, *Seniles*, 19.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>75</sup> My point here is that Petrarch views the Christian eternal life, to which man is admitted by temporal death, as the ultimate goal of his earthly sufferings, which he calls death. It is interesting to note that Petrarch attributes this thought process to Cicero. He says, ‘[w]hile I am here, I am tormenting them, and I shall torment them, yet never more bitterly than after my death; then, as I hope indeed, I will live. For if we believe Cicero at all, and the great men both before and after him, what we call our life is death. I have expressed more fully in my recent letter to our Giovanni what not only I, but others, have thought about this saying,’ Petrarch, *Seniles*, 107. Petrarch at the end of this excerpt is referring to the first letter in the collection addressed to Boccaccio; Petrarch, *Seniles*, 15-26.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 649.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 674.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 653.

It has been the intention of this study to establish an understanding of the interaction between private beliefs and public images in Petrarch’s correspondence, particularly his last collection, the *Seniles*. As a correspondent, Petrarch employed a radical style that facilitated the creation of a new genre, one that vigorously sought the construction of an admired intellectual persona. Critical analysis dictates, however, that we must maintain the utmost caution when approaching ideas of ‘the private’ in Petrarch’s letters, especially since they were created at a time when the concept of distinct public and private spheres had little, if any, meaning. Whilst it is certainly possible to identify those elements of Petrarch’s character that might be described as private, we should do so only insofar as they relate to his broader public image. An understanding of the complex shape these ideas adopt in relation to one another in Petrarch is crucial if we wish to properly comprehend his literary image, of which his epistles are a significant part.

In the final year of his life, Petrarch wrote, ‘[a]lthough nothing anywhere on earth is dearer to me than friendship, I would except virtue alone, on Cicero’s advice.’<sup>80</sup> The brevity of this statement belies its ability to communicate a clear picture of how we should approach the man. The cultivation of friendship, as one of the fundamental purposes of his epistolary program, grants the scholar a wonderful frame through which they might consider the panorama of Petrarch’s public image. His relationships with Cicero, Augustine and Boccaccio in particular, reveal to us how Petrarch continually utilised his personal beliefs in the creation of this image. Each contained the variety of Petrarch’s private expressions that would ultimately become intrinsic elements of his broader countenance. Moreover, each friendship demonstrates how we can only understand the private in Petrarch by relating it to the public.

Since virtue was dearer to him than friendship, we should consider Petrarch’s understanding of it with heightened gravity. As the product of wisdom, virtue became the guiding principle of Petrarch’s life, a fact that explains his unshakeable bond to *both* Cicero and Augustine. In utilising his public image to argue for a conception of life where virtue confronts sin – as opposed to the old dichotomy of pagan versus Christian wisdom – Petrarch nullified the debate by making both sources of knowledge applicable to the attainment of virtue. Once again, Petrarch’s private beliefs, those that lay at the very core of his person, were manipulated so that they might transmit a unified image to a discerning public, with the literary epistle serving as the method of its dissemination.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 586.