



AP European History

Petrarch, the First Humanist

Name: _____
Section: _____
Score: ____/5

Directions: Read the following secondary source about Petrarch and then answer the thought questions at the end of the article.

Petrarch, the First Humanist

By Roderick Conway Morris

PADUA, Italy— "I am a citizen of no place, everywhere I am a stranger," declared the poet, scholar and man of letters Francesco Petrarch, making explicit that sense of alienation and angst that later was to win him the title of "the first modern man."

Elsewhere Petrarch recorded: "When you compare my peregrinations with those of Ulysses, aside from the fame of his enterprise and his name, he wandered neither longer nor further afield than I have." However, after several spells in Padua during his seemingly endless excursions, which took him all over Italy and much of Europe, it was here that he finally came to rest in 1368, and died at the house he had built in the village of Arquà amid the Euganean Hills south of the city in 1374.

To mark the 700th anniversary of the great man's birth, the Civic Museums here have staged a charming exhibition of manuscripts, books, miniatures and other objects devoted to Petrarch's life, work and influence on literature and the visual arts alike, which continues until July 31.

Petrarch was born in the Tuscan town of Arezzo, where his family had taken refuge after being exiled from Florence for supporting the same unsuccessful faction espoused by Dante, who was banished at the same time. During this period the papal court had removed itself to Avignon in Provence to escape the chronic anarchy into which Rome had sunk, and in 1312 Petrarch's household followed in the hope of finding employment.

Petrarch's father, a notary, forced his son to study law, which the boy loathed, at Montpellier and then Bologna. Early on Petrarch had developed a passion for poetry and Latin literature, and on one occasion he with difficulty rescued his editions of Virgil and Cicero, which his father had discovered and had thrown into the fire. On his father's death, the young man was at last able to pursue his true vocation, though the family was now in straitened circumstances. This poverty was one motive behind his continual peregrinations in search of patronage, but he was also driven by that insatiable curiosity that stimulated him even to go mountain climbing.

By this time Petrarch had attracted attention to himself as a first-class Latinist. But what distinguished him from his contemporaries was his attitude to the classics and his reasons for immersing himself in them. His attendance at various schools and universities had left him with a skeptical view of the pedantry and narrow-mindedness of the schoolmen and he on the whole avoided the academic establishment for the rest of his life. For Petrarch, Latin was not merely a self-justifying discipline, but the means to re-enter the realms of classical



thought and imagination, to find new ways of thinking and investigating oneself and the world at large. And Petrarch's attempts to revive the classics primarily for this purpose, not to mention his attempts to reconcile an admiration of the pagan past with Christian doctrine, amply justify his being considered the first fully-fledged humanist.

Petrarch spent a great part of his life seeking out, transcribing, editing, elucidating and making available the surviving works of Roman classical literature, and it was for this and for his letters and his biographies of famous Romans written in Latin that he himself above all expected to be remembered.

But he was also one of the first Italians to champion vernacular poetry, an enterprise that most of his educated contemporaries took little interest in or actively disdained. And in the long run it was Petrarch's Italian verses that made him a literary figure of immense celebrity and importance, not only in Italy but in distant lands. In many places he was frequently credited with having invented the sonnet. This was an exaggeration, yet he made this form so much his own that, in many ways, he might just have well have done.

The influence of Petrarch's poetry was not merely a matter of form, but even more so of content, not only a way of writing, but also a manner of thinking.

On April 6, 1327, Petrarch caught sight of a woman, known to us only by her first name, Laura, in a church in Avignon. He fell hopelessly in love with her, and this seismic emotional event led to an outpouring of verses that continued for many years. Laura appears to have been married, and it is uncertain whether Petrarch ever had a physical relationship with her. (It has been suggested that Laura was entirely a figment of the poet's imagination, but this seems unlikely.)

The lyrics to Laura and on other subjects came to constitute a long journey of self-examination of an unprecedented kind, almost an ongoing psychological autobiography in verse. And it is here that we find that sense of restlessness and alienation, those maladies of the modern age, most acutely and cogently expressed. At the same time, the poetry brilliantly captures Petrarch's spontaneous and precocious love of nature that helped to establish the natural world as one of the worthiest themes of poetry.

Nowhere was Petrarch's vernacular poetry more influential than in England, even though it was not to be for some 200 years that it became widely known there, notably through the translations and adaptations of Thomas Wyatt and Surrey. Of Wyatt's 31 sonnets, nearly a third were translations from Petrarch. And without Petrarch the story of Elizabethan and Jacobean literature would surely have been very different.

Petrarch's works had a very considerable impact on the visual arts in Italy. The poet loved books not only for their contents but as objects in themselves. Under his guidance, the painter Simone Martini illustrated Petrarch's edition of Virgil with an imaginary portrait of the Roman author in a pastoral setting with figures and scenes symbolizing his works. This and the many subsequent illustrations for Petrarch's works were a prime force in launching the secular humanist miniature as a genre. Petrarch's verse "Triumphs," a sequence of dreamlike visions the poet supposedly experienced one April dawn, of a series of ancient Roman-style processions, gave rise to thousands of artistic interpretations, from frescoes to prints and painted chests to tapestries, of which a representative selection are on show here.

In the course of his wanderings, Petrarch amassed the most valuable private library of the age. Before finally settling in Padua, he spent several years in Venice, where the government gave him a palazzo on condition that he leave his library to the Serenissima on his death. But in the end Petrarch could not find there the kind of company he craved. Indeed, this man who was generally esteemed to be the most cultivated and eloquent man of his times had already found himself described by some local Venetian aristocrats, who clearly had a high opinion of themselves, as being "un brav'uomo, ma ignorante" (a good fellow, but ignorant).

Thus Petrarch took himself off to Padua and then to his house, a lovely spot even today, amid vineyards and orchards at Arqua, later called Arqua Petrarca in his honor. He died in this house while working at his desk surrounded by his treasured books. Most of his library was bequeathed to his patron, Padua's ruler, Francesco da Carrara. But the manuscripts of his own works remained at Arqua, where they long continued to be copied and sent out to Petrarch's ever-expanding army of admirers.

Morris, Roderick C. "Petrarch, the First Humanist." The New York Times, 29 May 2004. Web. 10 Sept. 2013.

Thought Questions:

1. What were Petrarch's inspirations that shaped his thinking?
2. What were Petrarch's motivations for his writings and teachings?
3. What were the new ideas that Petrarch developed?
4. What is the lasting legacy of Petrarch's works?