# Petrarchan Humor:

## *An Interdisciplinary Approach to Irony*
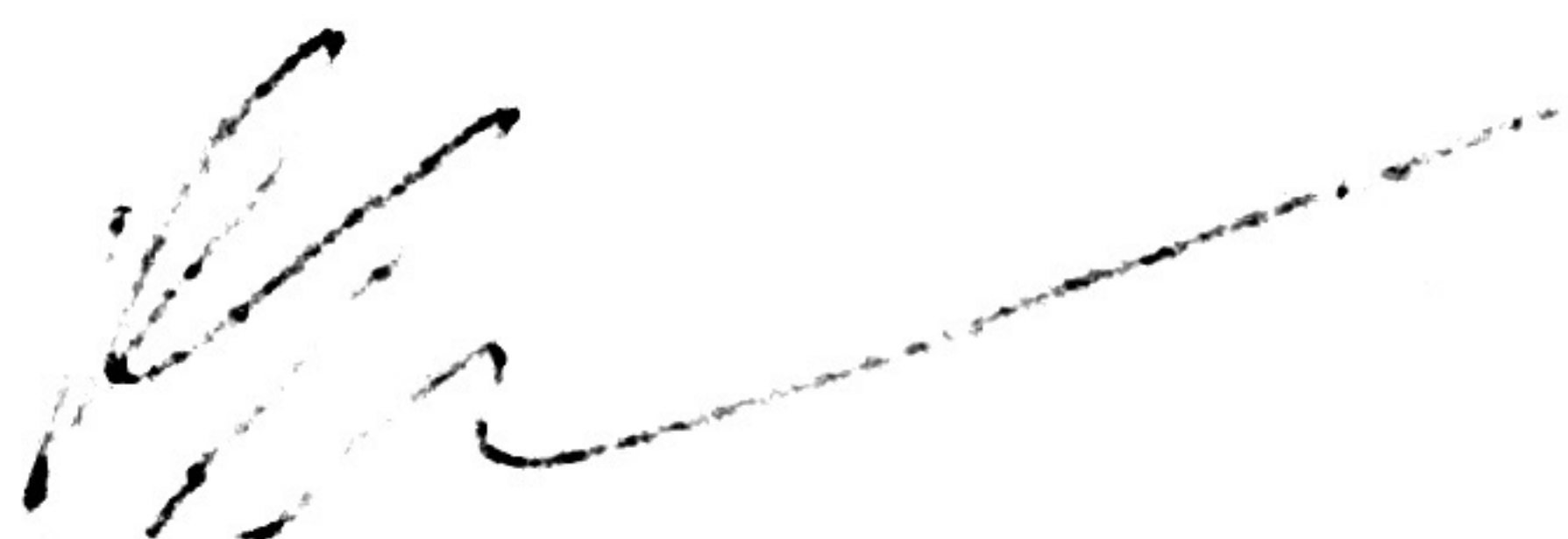
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-*PPL*

Petrarchan Humor: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Irony

### Introduction

Francis Petrarch was a fourteenth-century poet and moral philosopher who has come to

be known as the "Father of Humanism." Scholars have celebrated his literary gifts: his invention

of the sonnet in the *Canzoniere*, his exploration of his own subjective experience in the *Secret*

*(Secretum)* and in his letters. Only his contemporaries and friends, Boccaccio and Dante, rival

Petrarch's contributions to early humanist thought and the Italian language. The corpus of

Petrarch's works is vast and varied: *Africa*, his unfinished, medieval epic, *Letters on Familiar*

*Matters (Rerum Familiarum Libri)*, an edited, epistolary collection, and his *Guide to the Holy*

*Land (Itinerarium)*, a written pilgrimage from Genoa to Jerusalem. Petrarch's contributions to

philology helped pave the way for modern textual analysis.

Scholars have typically regarded Petrarch as a serious, stoic, historical figure. However,

two scholars, William Kennedy and Dilwyn Knox, have noticed and briefly noted that Petrarch

sometimes used humor within his works, without going into any great depth. Kennedy in "The

Economy of Invective and a Man in the Middle" describes Petrarch's use of humor in *On His*

*Own Ignorance and That of Many Others (De Sui Ipsius et Multorum Ignorantia)* as "playful wit

and gamesome paradox, droll sarcasm and lip-smacking one-upmanship."[1] Kennedy argues that Petrarch's use of humor expressed his "anxieties about human friendship, the rational and irrational faith upon which all human friendship is based, and the social and economic order that in turn is based on such faith." This is the extent of his analysis; he provides no further insight into Petrarch's humor. Knox also puts Petrarch into his discussion of humor and irony in the Middle Ages.[2] His discussion, however, glosses over the details of Petrarch's humor in favor of a broader discussion of irony and its development throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Petrarch's Latin works, such as his invective, *On His Own Ignorance,* his letters from *Letters of Old Age (Rerum Senilium Libri)*, and his *Remedies of Fortune Fair and Foul (De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae)*, certainly contain humorous elements. Petrarch used a tongue-in-cheek style of humor, exaggerating his points to a degree that can no longer be construed as serious. Petrarch's humor was there for a purpose. This style of humor serves a particular function in the transmission of these texts. Petrarch used comedy to convey precepts of his moral philosophy to his readers. The function of Petrarch's humor was quite simple; it allowed his message to be delivered to the reader with ease while enabling the reader to remember the content. The use of comedy made Petrarch's moral philosophy more accessible.

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[1] William J. Kennedy, "The Economy of Invective and a Man in the Middle," in *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works,* ed. Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 263.
[2] Dilwyn Knox, *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony,* Columbia studies in the classical tradition, v. 16 (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 90-110.

The first sentence of MacHovec's *Humor: Theory, History, Applications*, asks the question, "What's funny?"[3] This question highlights many of the problems with defining not just Petrarch's humor, but all humor. It is a subjective experience; no two people perceive humor in the same way. MacHovec uses Marcus Aurelius' simple explanation for the differences in perception of humor: "Different things delight different people."[4] MacHovec elaborates:

> Humor is a universal trait. It has existed in every culture, ancient and modern. It transcends language, geography and time. Everybody laughs at something. That something may vary with the individual, but it's there just the same. Everyone has a sense of humor, though it may be perceived as strange by others.[5]

No single or overarching description of humor exists. Several theories of humor, some dating back to Aristotle, attempt to analyze the function and processes of humor. I will use theories of humor to identify and deconstruct Petrarch's humorous constructions and overtones. Analysis of Petrarch's moral philosophy and application of comedy theory to some texts can provide a clearer picture of his moral philosophy.

Petrarch's sense of humor was understated; a reader expecting bombastic displays of farce and ridicule will be discontented and unamused. Humor, in an academic context, tends to be subdued, and not an extreme of comedy, such as "slapstick." Petrarch's approach to humor was not that of a comedian, but of an intellectual expressing himself in a memorable way.

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[3] Frank J. MacHovec, *Humor: Theory, History, Applications* (Springfield, Ill., U.S.A.: C.C. Thomas, 1988), 3.

[4] As cited in MacHovec, *Humor*, 3.

[5] MacHovec, *Humor*, 6.

Amusing the reader was not Petrarch's main goal—humor was a vehicle for his moral philosophy, not the purpose of the work. Recognition of Petrarch's use of comedy does not change the meaning of the works. The identification merely adds even more complexity to Petrarch's rhetoric.

Although I ascribe humor to Petrarch, I do not attempt to prove that Petrarch's intent was to be funny. With the fluidity of his texts, the cultural and linguistic barriers, and seven hundred years' separation, how could I ever prove Petrarch intended to say anything? Petrarch never admitted his works were farcical in any manner. There is not enough data to prove comedic intentions. A literary approach, however, to Petrarch's humor can be more fruitful. An analysis of Petrarch's literary constructs using comedy theory illuminates Petrarch's humor and the various structures that allow humorous interpretations throughout his works. Further, while I cannot prove intent, the frequency of his humorous constructions strongly suggests it. And in fact, Petrarch even wrote overt comedy. Sometime in 1338, he wrote a play called *Philologia Philostrati,* based on the classical comedian, Terrence. In his typical fashion, he destroyed the work, even though his contemporaries had lauded it.[6] Because Petrarch used humor to teach his moral philosophy, it is pertinent to first examine and understand his larger goals.

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[6] Morris Bishop, *Petrarch and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 90.

## *Petrarch's Moral Philosophy*

Charles Trinkaus in *The Poet as Philosopher* discusses Petrarch's moral philosophy and

his integration of classical philosophy into his moral philosophy. He states that Petrarch's

fondness for moral philosophy is "primarily for its contribution to the strengthening of human

virtue."[7] Petrarch's passage to moral perfection and salvation was the topic of many of his

works. He had two methods of attaining moral perfection; one was *sola gratia,* and the other

salvation through his rhetorical moral counsel.

Petrarch believed in *sola gratia*, "salvation by grace alone," as the main method of

attaining this human virtue. *Sola gratia* was the concept that people could only hope for grace

from God; all that man could do was pray and be virtuous. This was not a new concept, nor was

it unfamiliar to Petrarch or his contemporaries. The concept had, in fact, been a Ciceronian topic

of discussion and debate. Trinkaus argues that Petrarch's definition of *sola gratia* conflicts with

Cicero's: "[Petrarch] repudiates the classical notion, particularly as it is stated by Cicero, that

man's virtuousness is in his own hands, whereas we must thank the gods, or fortune, or

providence for our material well-being."[8]

Petrarch also had another process of achieving virtue: he sought to play the role of

rhetorical moral counselor. Petrarch believed his role as a poet, historian, rhetorician, and moral

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[7] Charles Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher: Petrarch and the Formation of Renaissance Consciousness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 27-35, 111.
[8] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 24-25.

philosopher was "to assist the ordinary man by exposition and exhortation to detach himself from his alienating and self destructive involvement in the affairs of the world."[9] In order to transmit these ideals effectively, Petrarch sought "to restore the relationship of man's intellectual and artistic activities—theology, philosophy, rhetoric, and poetry—with both the spiritual reparation he saw necessary in this life and man's needed certitude of salvation."[10] Petrarch's goal was to save souls, for a better experience both on earth and in heaven. He realized that in order to be an exemplar to others, he himself needed to attain virtue. Petrarch recognized the difficulties he faced as a writer, and he strove to place himself in a position where he could integrate his spirituality into his academic work.

Petrarch also adopted the long-standing tradition of a double consciousness. Trinkaus argues in *In Our Image and Likeness* that Petrarch's self-conceived position of rhetorical moral counselor conflicted with *sola gratia*.[11] The rhetorical moral counselor used his abilities to help people seek salvation, while those who espoused the idea of *sola gratia* could only hope for God's deliverance. Petrarch set up two opposing modes of reasoning through morality. However, these conflicts approached the same ultimate goal: to cure Petrarch's self-described "sickness of the soul" (*accidia, aegritudo, dolor*).

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[9] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 24-25.
[10] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 30.
[11] Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 2-25.

In his *Secretum*, Petrarch suggested that to attain desire of virtue (*desiderum virtutis*), one must continually meditate on death and always reflect on man's mortality. This highlights the contradiction Petrarch presented. Both *sola gratia* and Petrarch's role as a moral philosopher work in tandem for the ultimate goal of salvation. In the *Secretum*, *Augustinus*, as a rhetorical moral counselor tells *Franciscus* that he alone has the responsibility to attain virtue. Ultimately, *Augustinus* is able to convince *Franciscus* to perceive and recognize his errors in virtue, but *Augustinus* fails to persuade *Franciscus* to amend his ways.[12]

As an additional way of presenting his moral philosophy, Petrarch drew upon a myriad of classical figures, such as Cicero, Seneca, Plato, and Socrates, to convey philosophical points.[13] Yet the messages and philosophies of these intellectuals contrast with those of Christianity. Trinkaus states that Petrarch was "caught between the Christianity of late medieval culture and the paganism of the classical world toward which he was clearly drawn."[14] These conflicting ideals created both a medium and a framework for Petrarch's moral philosophy. Petrarch considered the rhetoric of these classical figures able to transmit his messages, without impinging on Christian theology.[15] As Trinkaus explains, "Any classical or philosophical position could be validly argued for the sake of its psychological impact, but not for its truth."[16]

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[12] Francis Petrarch, *The Secret*, ed. Carol E. Quillen, The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003)
[13] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 52.
[14] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 27.
[15] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 28-29.
[16] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 29.

This allowed Petrarch to draw upon the arguments of classical figures, as rhetorical strategies, and not "absolutes of rational thought."[17]

In *On His Own Ignorance*, Petrarch spent a great deal of time differentiating between rhetoric and philosophy. In this work, Petrarch, by his emphasis on the will, "rejects philosophy in favor of rhetoric and rhetorical poetry."[18] Petrarch showed his emphasis on the will by his pledge to be a good man: "...and [I] shall not tire until my last breath and my last sight."[19] Trinkaus also asserts: "Petrarch endorses the primacy of the will and man's striving to be good."[20] The concept of the will is Aristotelian, and both Petrarch and Aristotle sought to shape the will. However, Petrarch did not believe that Aristotle had achieved his goal: He claimed Aristotle "teaches what virtue is," "but that text does not have the incitements and the shaping of words by which the mind is urged and inflamed to love of virtue and hatred of vice, or has very little of them."[21]

Petrarch declared that the scriptures, "not writers and poets of antiquity, are the true source of Christian inspiration."[22] Even so, Petrarch attempted to reconcile the differences between Christian writers and the pagan writers of antiquity. In *On His Own Ignorance*, he tried

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[17] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 29.
[18] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 109.
[19] Francis Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance*, trans. H. Nachod in E. Cassirer *et al*, eds, *The Renaissance Philosophy Man : Selections in Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.), 49-133 as cited in Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 107.
[20] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 111.
[21] Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance*, trans. H. Nachod as cited in Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 108. (Trinkaus' Translation)
[22] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 109.

to reconcile his love of Cicero and love of Christ by attempting to identify Cicero, as Nicholas

Mann describes, as a "proto-Christian":

> Cicero, read with the heart of a believer and in a balanced way, is certainly not harmful to
> Augustine or anyone else; on the contrary, he was beneficial to them all in terms of
> eloquence and to many of them in their daily lives . . . When I have to think or speak of
> religion, that is of the supreme truth, true happiness and eternal salvation . . .it seems
> certain to me that Cicero himself would have  been a Christian if he had been able to see
> Christ or had known of his doctrine.[23]

Thus, Petrarch employs classical authors' rhetoric to inspire and rouse the attention of those

seeking virtue.  Petrarch argued that classical rhetoric has the ability to bring Christians to God.

"It is through virtues that the direct way leads to the place where [salvation] does lie."[24]  Petrarch

"utilizes [classical authors] rhetorically to transform men's wills to goodness and love of God."[25]

In *Remedies*, Petrarch, as a teacher of moral philosophy, presents himself as the exemplar

of piety and virtue, but realizes that he is unable to change his own habits.  By using his two

characters, he contrasts two points that he is unable to reconcile.  Reason, the first character,

recognizes the moral righteousness of the given situation.  On the other side, Joy (or Sorrow,

Hope, or Fear), symbolizes a human emotional reaction to a particular situation.  Using both

these characters, Petrarch reveals moral struggles, in which humans both recognize what is moral

and feel base human emotions.

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[23] Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance*, trans. H. Nachod as cited in Nicholas Mann, *Petrarch* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 70-71.

[24] Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance*, trans. H. Nachod, 105 as cited in Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher* 109.

[25] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 110.

This approach allows Petrarch to further his focus on the autonomous self. He places the spotlight on the responsibility of the individual as an individual. Petrarch focuses on personal autonomy by giving the reader everyday experiences to dwell upon. Petrarch's approach is pedantic as he painstakingly shows the reader many everyday experiences and gives a moral lesson. The reader learns how even the smallest everyday experiences are revealing of one's morality. Each individual must realize his own morality through every action.

Petrarch's moral philosophy is an intricate web of ideas, all leading to a single point: salvation though virtue. Trinkaus reiterates, "The function of philosophy thus becomes the correction of the errors of opinion in accordance with the immanent presence of truth in the mind of man..."[26] Petrarch's role as a rhetorical moral councilor drove him to show others the pathway to salvation, whether by the use classical rhetoric, or any other means. Nevertheless, he still expected people to find salvation on their own by *sola gratia.* These conflicting, yet parallel, ideas shaped Petrarch's views on the world and his role within in it.

### *Petrarch and Irony*

Petrarch uses irony as a prominent literary construction throughout his works. The term irony has been given different definitions by many authors. The standard, modern definition of irony is "an expression of meaning, often humorous or sarcastic, by use of language of a

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[26] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 38.

different or opposite tendency."[27] Irony is a literary device that was familiar to Petrarch and medieval authors. Dilwyn Knox, in *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony,* shows that medieval authors identified and frequently employed this literary technique. Medieval writers defined irony in a manner similar to our modern definition: "Irony negates that which is said."[28] These writers even recognized irony's Greek root and origin, εἰρωνεία, and noted irony in works by Boethius, Dante, the Vulgate, and everyday discourses.[29]

Irony is perhaps the most difficult type of humor to identify, as the author's intention can sometimes be unclear, and there is no guarantee that the audience will receive the humor in the manner that the writer intended. It is imperative that a reader have knowledge about the context of the writer's ironic comments in order for the humor to come across as intended. A well-known, literary example of irony is in Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal,* in which he proposes that the famine in Ireland could be solved by eating Irish babies.[30] Within Jonathan Swift's solution is a blatant logical fallacy, combining the two problems, overpopulation and famine, with the absurd proposition of cannibalism and infanticide to humorous effect. Regardless of the obvious irony, some readers in the eighteenth century took Jonathan Swift's anecdote literally.[31] Irony requires a perceptive ability to see past the literal interpretation of a written work. This is by no means an easy task, especially when the reader could easily take the ironic statement

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[27] Alison Ross, *The Language of Humour* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 50.
[28] Knox, *Ironia,* 37. "*Yronia negat quod dicitur.*"
[29] Knox, *Ironia,* 100.
[30] Ross, *The Language of Humour,* 50-51.
[31] Ross, *The Language of Humour,* 50.

literally. Context, linguistic awareness, and perhaps specific, personal knowledge of the writer are required for a proper understanding of the intent of the ironic passage.[32]

Petrarch used a specific type or sub-genera called Socratic irony. Petrarch plays with Socrates' idea of "I know that I do not know." Socratic irony is "Socrates' irritating tendency to praise his hearers while undermining them, or to disparage his own superior abilities while manifesting them."[33] Petrarch uses Socratic irony as a literary device to emphasize certain philosophical points by feigning ignorance in order to contradict himself later with his achieved knowledge. Petrarch uses absurdity as an indicator for his execution of Socratic irony: he fakes ignorance, then immediately demonstrates his knowledge with an outlandish statement, typically requiring some specialized knowledge.

The concept of Socratic irony appears to have been lost to medieval authors. No currently known post-classical authors mention Socratic irony. This may in part be due to the decline of the Greek language with accompanying loss of Greek classical literature. Medieval authors identified Socrates' use of wit and mockery, but these authors did not connect them back to irony. The reintroduction of Socratic irony was strictly a Renaissance development. The return of the classical Greek language into Western Europe in the fifteenth century allowed humanists to read the works that discussed classical Greek definitions and usage of εἰρωνεία.[34]

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[32] Ross, *The Language of Humour*, 50.
[33] *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. "socratic irony."
[34] Knox, *Ironia*, 98-100.

Significantly, Petrarch may have made the first known post-classical reference to Socratic irony. Even though scholars have definitively established Petrarch did not know Greek, he still somehow identified this literary technique. In a 1336 letter to Colonna, Petrarch reintroduces the concept to western literature. After Colonna proposed that Laura was solely a poetic, literary invention, Petrarch claims that Colonna "must have been using 'that Socratic humor called *yronia.*'"[35] Whether or not Petrarch's comment is truly the first statement about Socratic irony, it symbolizes a new outlook on irony and comedy that had not been seen since classical times.[36]

### On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others

Petrarch's Invective, *On His Own Ignorance*, was written in 1362 while he was living in Venice. During this time, his friends, Leonardo Dandolo, Tommaso Talenti, Zaccaria Contarini, and Guido Da Bagnolo, ensnared him in a debate, because they did not agree with his critical opinion of Aristotelian philosophers.[37] In the work, Petrarch approves the reading of Classical authors, if they enhance the reader's moral perceptions. He wrote this invective, in the form of an apology for his own ignorance, as a response to their dispute. In a playful, witty tone, Petrarch denounces his friends' claims, while bolstering his own position.

In Petrarch's invective, *On His Own Ignorance*, his assertions of his own self-worth contradict his own purported modesty, thus creating a humorous tone. For example, in

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[35] Francis Petrarch, *Edizione Nazionale Delle Opere di Francesco Petrarca* (Firenze: G.C. Sansoni, 1926) as cited in Knox, *Ironia*, 104.

[36] Knox, *Ironia*, 104.

[37] Francis Petrarch, *Invectives*, trans. David Marsh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), ix.

Petrarch's discussion of envy, he claims not to understand why his friends are jealous of him.[38]

Petrarch explores his friends' desire, asking himself if they are jealous of his possessions, knowledge, eloquence, virtue, or reputation. After a verbose examination of the possibilities, he finally concludes that his reputation is what his friends truly desire. Following several attempts to show how modest his reputation is, he finally identifies himself with Thersites, a character from the Trojan cycle, specifically from book two of the *Iliad*. Petrarch proclaims, "Those guys love me and all my things, besides the one name, which I do not refuse to change; let me be called Thersites or Choerilus, anything else they prefer."[39]

Petrarch's analysis of his friends' envy attempts to lead the reader to believe he is unassuming and rationalizing his friends' jealousy, but in reality, he carefully constructs this seemingly ignorant tone. Bombastically, he exclaims, "What [do they envy]? I do not know, I admit, I am astounded by [their] inquiring."[40] A short while later, he declares, "Indeed, they neither conceal well, nor do they check their flapping tongues by internal stings..."[41] He then "just happens" to realize that his friends are envious of his reputation. The envy of his fame boosts his ego, though he tries to suppress the outward signs of his arrogance by saying, "In

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[38] Petrarch, *Invectives*, *On His Own Ignorance*, Book II, 229-249.

[39] Petrarch, *Invectives*, 236. "*Amant isti me et mea omnia, preter unum nomen, quod mutare non renuo, ut Thersites dicar aut Choerilus, uel siquid aliud malunt.*"

[40] Petrarch, *Invectives*, 230. "*Quid? Nescio, fateor, et inquirens stupeo.*"

[41] Petrarch, *Invectives*, 234. "*neque enim bene dissimulant, nec internis pulsas stimulis linguas frenant; quod in hominibus, alioquin non incompositis nec insulsis*"

[regard to] this [fame], they fixed [their] sidelong gaze; would that I had been without it [fame] now and often."[42] Though outwardly detesting his friends' jealousies, Petrarch derives great pleasure from the recognition and jealousy he so emphatically dismisses. "Indeed, they envy this one empty thing, my name, however trifling it is, and this fame [which] befell [me] by living is perhaps greater when measured according to the impartial custom, which rarely celebrates the living."[43]

Petrarch's comparison of himself to Thersites is in no way humble. In the *Iliad*, Thersites was an ugly, old, non-noble soldier who dared to make his opinion known concerning the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles. Thersites called Agamemnon greedy and Achilles a coward. His dialogue highlights the soldiers' struggle for their own voice in a war that is not their own, whilst the Greek soldiers watch their leaders bicker over a woman (Briseis). He had no authority to make such judgment or claim, especially against a person of a higher rank. Odysseus then beat him with his scepter to silence him.[44] Nevertheless, he remains the only character in the *Iliad* wise and brave enough to question the authority of his betters. The presumably modest and unassuming Petrarch, through Thersites, declared to his audience how highly he thought of

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[42] Petrarch, *Invectives*, 234, 236. *"In hoc illi obliquos defixere oculos, quo et nunc et sepe utinam caruissem"*

[43] Petrarch, *Invectives*, 234. *"Unum enim hoc inane inuident, quantulumcunque est, nomen, et hanc famam, que uiuenti maior forsitan quam pro meritis aut pro comuni more obtigit, qui perraro uiuos celebrat."*

[44] Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 2:245-325.

himself, his reputation, and his opinion and the fact that others refused to acknowledge how right he was.

Petrarch exploited the use of double meanings. As he was one of the most well-read people of his time, Petrarch's identification with Thersites is an example of Petrarch's utilization of his classical knowledge to create the intentional ambiguity required for irony. Cleverly, Petrarch's use of Thersites' character leaves two vague elements hidden within the text. The first is the recognition of Thersites. If the reader is unable to recognize Thersites, the humor is lost. The Trojan cycle was well known to medieval intellectuals; Petrarch may have borrowed Thersites from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Herodies*, *Dares and Dictys*, Benoît's *Le Roman de Troie*, Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, or perhaps a Latin translation of the *Iliad*.[45] A reader who had not read any of these works could have easily glossed over Petrarch's mention of Thersites, and missed the humor entirely. The unlearned reader would be evidence of Petrarch's superiority in rhetoric and classical knowledge, without even knowing it.

Secondly, the reader must understand the values Petrarch ascribes to himself, and how he uses Thersites to illustrate his point. Superficially, Thersites is just an old and ugly peasant-soldier; Petrarch seeks to mislead the reader to this obvious conclusion. The reader must also recognize that Thersites is not just a two-dimensional character. The depth of Thersites' character comes through in his reputation. Thersites is one of the few, if not one of the only,

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[45] Jon Solomon, "The Vacillations of the Trojan Myth: Popularization & Classicization, Variation & Codification" *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 14, no. 3/4: 481-533. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 26, 2009).

non-nobles to get any voice within the epic. Petrarch uses the reputation of Thersites by attributing Thersites' characteristics to his own self-definition. Petrarch's specific, active selection of Thersites implies that that this character has particular functions: befuddling the unknowing reader and extending his personal voice through the text. Petrarch also appreciates Thersites' aptitude for correct judgment, even when faced by men greater than he is. Thersites, a seemingly simple character within the context of the story from the *Iliad*, enables Petrarch to draw out new interpretations of the story and apply this interpretation back to his own Petrarchan self.

Applying the incongruity theory of humor to the selected passage helps draw out Petrarch's sense of humor. Incongruity theory states the "humour is created out of a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke. This accounts for the most obvious feature of much humor: an ambiguity, or double meaning, which deliberately misleads the audience, followed by a punchline."[46] Incongruity theory derives from an Aristotelian idea of frustrated expectation. According to the theory, these frustrated expectations are perceived as funny because the sequence does not play out as anticipated. Petrarch follows this paradigm in this example. Petrarch's discussion about his friends' envy and his own ignorance is the ambiguity, or "expected," required for the foundation of the joke. The unexpected, or the "punchline," comes when Petrarch compares himself to Thersites and his ignorance is revealed to be false.

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[46] Ross, *The Language of Humour*, 7-8.

Could Petrarch also have intended to use this experience as a form of dramatic irony? Dramatic irony is "a literary technique in which the audience can perceive hidden meanings unknown to the characters."[47] If one considers Petrarch's voice within the invective as a character, perhaps the audience is meant to interpret Petrarch's use of Socratic irony as a form of this dramatic irony. The Socratic irony provides the reader with the intended information about Petrarch's thoughts on envy, while the character Petrarch, is completely in the dark. This could conceivably be working in tandem with everything else previously suggested, thus adding yet another humorous literary layer to his invective. Petrarch's use of dramatic irony could perhaps elevate his invective to a higher, literary genre.

Why would Petrarch use humor in such a manner? Petrarch's use of humor in *On His Own Ignorance* is a technique to convey his philosophical points to his readers in a lively and memorable fashion. Trinkaus highlights in his *Poet as Philosopher* Petrarch's moral philosophy and the many internal conflicts Petrarch had within himself.[48] Petrarch's struggle between *sola gratia* and his role as rhetorical moral philosopher is evident in his discussion of envy. In the example, Petrarch claims that he does not want envy or fame, but then humorously professes otherwise. Petrarch realizes that in a perfect, virtuous world, fame and envy are useless and bothersome, but in reality, he finds the envy and fame irresistible. However, in order for Petrarch to become worthy of his self-proclaimed title as rhetorical moral counselor, he must recognize and correct his own deficiencies. In conjunction with his moral philosophy, Petrarch

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[47] Ross, *The Language of Humour*, 113.
[48] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, 27-35.

uses humor to express the difficulty he has in attaining moral superiority or authority. He outlines those difficulties and reminds the reader that even he recognizes how hard it is to attain virtue.

### Letters of Old Age

In 1361, Petrarch decided to add another epistolary collection to his already existing *Epistole Familiares*. Petrarch's *Letters of Old Age* consist of one hundred and twenty-eight pieces of Petrarch's correspondence spanning eighteen books. Petrarch handpicked the content of the *Letters of Old Age* from over one thousand personal letters.[49] In his typical fashion, Petrarch edited, revised, omitted, and combined parts of these letters until his death in 1374. The contents of these letters were varied and show the wide range of people with whom Petrarch was in contact. Also included in the *Letters of Old Age* were Petrarch's *Letter to Posterity* and his Latin translation of Boccaccio's *Griselda*.

Petrarch's use of irony was not limited to his literature. Comedic elements are also evident in his correspondence. Unlike *On His Own Ignorance*, the humor in his *Letters of Old Age* is more overt, though its function is similar. In one of Petrarch's letters to Luca da Penna, a papal secretary, he makes a ludicrous claim about his father. He claims that his father burned all of his books to ensure that Petrarch not be distracted from his law studies in Bologna. Petrarch says:

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[49] David Wallace, "Letters of Old Age," in *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works,* ed. Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 321.

Since he wanted above all things to open for me a road to wealth, I had to apply myself to civil law, and to learn what the law decrees about commodate and mutual loans, about wills and codicils, about rural and urban property, and I had to put aside the works of Cicero, which contain the laws most salutary for life. In my law studies I spent, or rather entirely wasted, seven years. And, to amuse you or stir your pity, I'll tell you what once happened. With uncanny foresight, I kept in a hiding place all the books I had been able to collect of Cicero and of certain poets. Well, I heard Father condemn such books as impediments to that study which was supposed to be the source of fat earnings; and with these eyes I saw Father pull them out of their secret place and throw them in the fire with an air of scorn, as if they were heretical writings. Anguished by this spectacle, as if I were myself cast on the fire, I burst out in cries of woe. Thereat Father, as I well remember, was moved by my grief. He pulled out of the fire two volumes already scorched, and smiling at my tears he held out to me with one hand Virgil and with the other Cicero's *Rhetoric*, and said: "Here; take this one as an occasional recreation for your mind and the other to comfort and aid you in your law studies." In gratitude I dried my tears.[50]

One could argue that this letter simply shows a tempestuous relationship between Petrarch and his father, but this would be implausible. The anecdote is too dramatic to be serious. With Petrarch "bursting out with cries of woe" as his precious books burn, the tone, images, and usage of irony in the story do not support a literal interpretation. Petrarch cannot be taken at his word. Upon further analysis, several factors demonstrate that this story is farcical.

First, this account and the rest of Petrarch's *Letters of Old Age* were not written at or near the time of the incident, but approximately fifty years later. Memories of events are reconstructed and reinterpreted within the mind as time passes, perhaps enabling Petrarch to blow the incident out of proportion. However, I must dismiss this notion. If something so

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[50] Francis Petrarch, *Lettere Senili di Francesco,* trans. by Giuseppe Fracassetti (Firenze: Successori Le Monnier, 1892.), XVI, 1 as cited in Morris Bishop, *Petrarch and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 26-27.

dramatic and life-changing actually did happen to Petrarch, surely he would have written about it more profoundly and earlier in his career. Many of Petrarch's writings from throughout his life have survived, yet include no other mention of such an event.

In this episode, Petrarch shapes circumstance in order to create comedic effect; this is called situational irony. Situational irony, as defined by Allen Funt, is "to place something that makes sense in one setting in a completely inappropriate or bizarre setting."[51] He adds that the essential element of this humor is that "people don't acknowledge the bizarre but it must be apparent that they've seen it."[52] Petrarch uses Ser Petracco, his father, as a literary tool for creating this ironic episode. The archetype of the father-son conflict was a familiar story for the reader. Earlier in the letter, Petrarch described his father's love for Cicero and his father's influence on his own personal passion for Cicero.[53] Ser Petracco was also known for participating in the Cult of Cicero, and appreciated learning and education.[54]

When Petrarch's anecdote begins, the bizarre aspect of the story becomes apparent. For Ser Petracco to consider burning a book, especially one not considered heretical, would have been extreme and completely irrational. The mere idea of anyone burning a book as recourse against "wasted school time" is absurd. Destroying books would be so financially damaging that

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[51] P. G. Zimbardo, "Allen Funt: Laugh where we must, be candid where we can" *Psychology Today*, 19, 43-47 as cited in MacHovec, *Humor*, 19.
[52] Zimbardo, "Allen Funt: Laugh where we must," 43-47 as cited in MacHovec, *Humor*, 19.
[53] Francis Petrarch, *Letters of Old Age = Rerum Senilium Libri*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, Saul Levin, and Reta A. Bernardo, v.2 (New York: Italica Press, 2005) 2:600.
[54] Bishop, *Petrarch and His World*, 27.

it would be unthinkable. Books, at this time, were extraordinarily expensive, and copied and made by hand. These same books "destroyed" by Ser Petracco provided Petrarch with sources of learning material that Ser Petracco had reportedly lauded. Petrarch uses his father and the fire within the letter to convey his passion for and the significance of Cicero. Ser Petracco, as a character, is not the focal point of this letter; Petrarch only employs him as literary device to further his exaggerated claim.

Petrarch uses the letter to test and assert his opinions about Cicero, *sola gratia*, and his works. Using classical imitation, he makes his claims. Petrarch's reading of Livy's *History of Rome* comes into play here.[55] In the *History of Rome*, Porsena accused Mucius of being a traitor, threatening him with torture by fire. In order to demonstrate his loyalty to the Romans, Mucius thrust his hand into the fire. He hurt himself greatly, but sufficiently proved his loyalty to Porsena and the Roman Empire.[56] Using his ridiculous letter, Petrarch perhaps put his books to the same test. Like Mucius, Cicero's book survived Petrarch's literary test of fire, proving Cicero worthy of Roman honor (at least in Petrarch's mind).

Petrarch uses this letter to teach his reader about Cicero. As discussed earlier, Petrarch had an interest in Cicero's efforts of moral persuasion. As a main point of his own moral

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[55] Petrarch's familiarity with Livy is noted in Billanovich's "Petrarch and the Textual Tradition of Livy," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 14, no. 4 (1951): 137-208. http://www.jstor.org/ (accessed January 23, 2010)

[56] Livy, *The History of Rome, Books 1-5*, trans. Valerie Warrior (Boston: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 99.

philosophy, Petrarch had a significant investment in Cicero's works. Using the image of fire, Petrarch defends his philosophical stance. Petrarch proclaims the excellence of Cicero by allowing Cicero's book to survive the fire unscathed.

Petrarch uses humor in this Latin letter as a literary formula to convey his opinions to his readers in a dynamic and unforgettable manner. Just as in his *On His Own Ignorance*, Petrarch conveys his moral philosophy through absurdity and situational irony. Petrarch uses this story as a device for transmitting his belief in the importance of Cicero's moral philosophy. Petrarch's humor bolsters and defends his opinion of Cicero.

### Remedies

Petrarch wrote his *Remedies* between 1354 and 1366, for his friend Azzo da Correggio, as a dialogue on his moral philosophy. *Remedies* consists of two parts: The first is dedicated to the remedies of good fortune, and the second to the remedies of bad fortune. Both parts combined make up two hundred and fifty-four dialogues concerning everyday experiences of fortune. Using Reason as a persona, Petrarch emphasizes the moral possibilities of everyday experiences by juxtaposing conversations with Joy, Hope, Sorrow, or Fear. He perhaps derived these four speakers from Virgil's *Aeneid* 6.730-6.734 or Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*.[57] Nicholas Mann considered the work to be "the most encyclopedic of his works, the major

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[57] Timothy Kircher, "On the Two Faces of Fortune," in *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works,* ed. Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 245.

achievement of his maturity, [and] also the nearest [Petrarch] came to a systematic statement of his moral philosophy."[58]

As in *On His Own Ignorance* and *Letters of Old Age*, Petrarch uses his work as an instructional tool and employs comedy to convey his message. His presentation of internal discord is comedic because the conflicts never get resolved: his moral philosophy is unable to remedy the ailments of lived reality. Petrarch uses humor to help the reader to remember the material and to make the dialogue more active, and he does this in a unique way. He places two opposing, absurd characters in an absurd situation to show his moral philosophy within everyday experiences.

For example, Petrarch analyzes the morality of having many books in *Concerning an Abundance of Books* (*De Librorum Copia*). His two personas, Joy and Reason, take opposing sides on whether having many books is beneficial to the soul. Joy says, "My collection of books is great."[59] Reason, attempting to convince Joy that having many books is actually not in Joy's best interest, replies, "They are a laborious but delightful burden, and also a pleasant distraction for the mind."[60] To which Joy responds, "Enormous is the number of my books."[61] Then Reason counters back: "Enormous also are both the amount of labor and the need for quiet .

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[58] Mann, *Petrarch*, 76.

[59] Francis Petrarch, *Les Remèdes Aux Deux Fortunes = De remediis utriusque fortune*, trans. Christophe Carraud and Giuseppe Tognon, v.5 (Grenoble: J. Millon, 2002.), 1:216. *"Librorum larga copia est."*

[60] Petrarch, *Les Remèdes*, 1:216. *"Operosa sed delectabilis sarcina et animi iucunda distractio."*

[61] Petrarch, *Les Remèdes*, 1:216. *"Ingens est copia librorum."*

. . And so, a wise man does not wish for abundance, but a sufficiency of things. Indeed, the

former is often destructive, and the latter is always useful."[62] This banter continues for several

pages, with Reason giving increasingly verbose explanations of the morality of having many

books while Joy repeats the same answer, although reworded, back to Reason.

The humor from this example comes from the absurd interplay between the characters,

Joy and Reason. In no real, non-literary, circumstance would anyone find two opposing

characters placed together arguing their points. Incongruity theory portrays this type of humor.

The "double meaning" or "ambiguity" of the situation is Reason's desperate and repeated

attempt to convince Joy of his moral failings. The "punchline" follows when Joy simply ignores

the facts and rhetoric of Reason. The interchange between the incongruous characters creates a

humorous atmosphere.

Freud's idea of humorous comparison draws out why Petrarch uses this approach: "With

this technique, comparisons are strikingly grouped, often in absurd combination."[63] The

characters are ridiculous, and sit on opposites sides of Petrarch's moral spectrum. Lichtenberg, a

comedy theorist and professor of philosophy, observed usage of the comparison theory within a

moral setting: "Everyone has a moral backside which does not show except under the stress of

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[62] Petrarch, *Les Remèdes, 1:216. "Ingens simul et laboris copia et quietis inopia... Itaque
sapiens non copiam, sed sufficientiam rerum vult; illa enim sepe pestilens, hec semper est utilis."*
[63] Sigmund Freud, *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. A. A. Brill (New York: Moffat,
Yard and Co., 1916) as cited in MacHovec, *Humor*, 49.

necessity..."[64] The "stress of necessity" caused by this "absurd combination" of Joy and Reason makes both characters reveal their moral vantage point. The literary construction forces both characters to present their moral opinion, while making the situation comedic and memorable for the reader.

Using these two characters, Petrarch demonstrates his moral philosophy. Reason states Petrarch's view that books are essentially moral, in moderation. Joy, on the other hand, is a symbol of Petrarch's human reaction to the books. The situation sets up the moral conflict in which Petrarch recognizes both what is moral and how base human emotion reacts, without reconciling the two. Petrarch shows how minor issues pose moral dilemmas, recognizing the moral problems that exist in everyday experiences.

The conflicts Petrarch chooses throughout his work also make it entertaining. At the beginning of the work, Petrarch analyzes the morality of important issues, such as *A Splendid Body (De Forma Corporis Eximia)*, *Good Health (De Valitudine Corporis)*, *Memory (De Memoria)*, and *Virtue (De Virtute)*.[65] However, towards the end of the work, Petrarch chooses topics and incongruities that are seemingly bizarre, shallow, and arcane in nature. For instance, he writes on the morality of *Monkeys and Other Amusing Animals (De Delectatione Simiae)*, *Luck in Gambling (De Ludo Taxillorum Prospero)*, *Discovering Gold (De Inventione Auri)*, and

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[64] As cited in MacHovec, *Humor*, 49.

[65] Francis Petrarch, *Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul*, trans. Conrad Rawski, v.5 (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), Rawski's Titles.

*Fishponds (De Piscinis)*.[66] The maladies that Petrarch chooses to examine are not necessarily comedic alone, but the sheer amount and variety of lesser topics Petrarch chooses does make the work amusing.

In some instances, like *Monkeys and Other Amusing Animals*, Petrarch uses humor in a more absurdist fashion to convey points about his everyday moral philosophy and the individual. The manner in which he makes his moral arguments in this example is out of character for Petrarch, but this shift in character also highlights a different and interesting technique. Joy makes the statement, "I have a delightful monkey."[67] To which Reason responds, in his typical, verbose fashion:

> An animal goat-like to see, sad in action, from which what can you hope
> for other than tedium? Whatever things it should find in your house it either destroys or
> scatters about. In any case, if you are delighted by this behavior, by all means, your
> monkey is delightful. Cicero calls [it] a monstrous beast...[68]

This is a form of the superiority theory of humor. Thomas Hobbes, a seventeenth century English philosopher, defined superiority theory as "a 'sudden glory' at a triumph of our own or at an indignity suffered by someone else."[69] Through superiority theory, Reason elevates himself above those amused by monkeys. Because Reason elevates himself above Joy, he sets

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[66] Petrarch, *Remedies,* trans. Conrad Rawski, Rawski's Titles.

[67] Petrarch, *Les Remèdes, 1:290. "Simia delectabilis est michi."*

[68] Petrarch, *Les Remèdes, 1:290. "Fedum animal aspectu, triste animal effectu, de quo quid aliud quam tedium speres? Quicquid domi reppererit aut corrumpet aut sparget. Si his atque huiusmodi delectaris, utique delectabilis simia tua est. Monstruosam beluam vocat Cicero..."*

[69] As cited in Ross, *The Language of Humour,* 53.

up a situation where he can laugh at Joy because he could never lower himself to enjoy monkeys. With this example, Petrarch illustrates and reiterates to the reader that Reason is above Joy, morality is superior to human emotion.

Petrarch's use of elevation through the character of Reason allows him to focus on the autonomous self and the "individual as an individual." The monkey also plays into superiority theory. Reason does not hold a monkey, a subhuman and an animal, to the same virtues and status as a human. He takes great care to differentiate between man and beast, and to define attributes of moral and immoral. The monkey is unable is achieve virtue; unlike the monkey, however, man can attain virtue though demonstrating morality though all activities, actions, and interactions. The focus on the autonomous self shows that each individual must realize his own morality through every action taken.

*Remedies* seeks to help man "negotiate the inner conflicts between reason and the senses as he tries to cope with the *conflicts of the world*, the exigencies of life."[70] In the preface to his *Remedies*, Petrarch says: "Seeing the affairs and fortunes of men, I reflect on the uncertainty and unexpected movement of things. I find almost nothing frailer nor more restless than the life of mortals. "[71] Petrarch sees the fickle nature of human life and wishes to help the volatile nature of human existence solidify by way of morality. However, the models Petrarch draws upon,

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[70] Petrarch, *Remedies, trans. Rawski,* 1:xxiii.
[71] Petrarch, *Les Remèdes, 1:8. "Cum res fortunasque hominum cogito incertosque et subitos rerum motus, nichil ferme fragilius mortalium vita, nichil inquietius invenio."*

contrasting Reason with Joy, Hope, Sorrow, or Fear, never get resolved because each persona remains within its original vantage point. Petrarch sheds light on the internal conflict without resolving it.

## Conclusion

Petrarch's ultimate goal was to save souls, including his own, at whatever cost. In his *On His Own Ignorance, Letters of Old Age,* and *Remedies,* Petrarch used intellectual wit to get across his moral philosophy. Absurdity formed the base of his sense of humor, as shown by the examples presented: Thersites, book burning, copious books, and monkeys. All of these episodes highlight both Petrarch's self-appointed role as a teacher of moral philosopher and his sense of humor.

An important question that I have not addressed is reception. Did medieval and Renaissance readers find Petrarch's works funny? The answer to this question is unknown. There is not enough evidence to study a comedic reception; medieval and Renaissance writers are silent concerning this issue.[72] A probable cause for this apparent silence is his emphasis on moral philosophy. Because Petrarch's humor functions as a method of transmission and is not the focal point of the texts, his moral philosophy overshadows the comedy. The purpose of these texts was not to delight, but to lead readers to virtue. Readers, perhaps unfamiliar with Petrarch's intellectual style of humor, could have read and understood his moral philosophy

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[72] The leading secondary sources on Petrarch literature, such as Trinkaus, Quillen, and Mann, do not mention any comedic interpretations of Petrarch.

without recognizing the literary constructions or interpreting the constructions as funny. Perhaps

some authors did interpret these works as funny, but they would not prove or even suggest that

all of Petrarch's readers got the joke.

Modern academic reception, besides Kennedy and Knox, also ignores Petrarch's humor.

The divide between historical and literary approaches to Petrarch is a major contributing factor.

Historians describe Petrarch as a dry, cocky intellectual, while literary scholars portray him as a

deep, longing, and emotional poet. Carol Quillen in *Rereading the Renaissance* notes this divide

and an unintended effect that accompanies it:

> These two approaches to Petrarch—one historical and philological, the other based on
> contemporary literary theory—tend to divide students of Petrarch along disciplinary
> lines; scholarly literature has produced in effect two Petrarchs, one the 'Father' of
> humanism...the other a gifted vernacular poet...[73]

Trinkaus comments similarly:

> ...I do not believe that Petrarch's work and career as a poet should be thought of and
> studied separately from his role as a humanist. And yet the bifurcation between his
> Italian *Canzoniere* and his Latin prose works, together with the sad isolation of literature
> and history departments (not to mention philosophy, which too often disdains the past in
> all its aspects), has traditionally imposed such a division. [74]

The effect of the division is amusingly circular: Literary scholars focus on Petrarch's poetry and

do not look at his epistolary collections and invectives as works of literary merit, while historians

fail to fully examine or recognize literary elements of either genre.

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[73] Carol Quillen, *Rereading the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 11-12.
[74] Trinkaus, *Poet as Philosopher*, x.

Carol Quillen attributes the differences between historical and literary disciplines to a fundamental conflict over whether one can find Petrarch's voice within a text:

> While traditional philology defines its task as the reconstruction of the text originally intended by its author, contemporary [literary] theory denies both the recoverability of authorial intention and the interpretive significance of authorial presence. Whereas many historians use knowledge about Petrarch's life to establish the meanings of his writings, [literary] critics highlight both the inevitable disjunction between author and text and the alienation that results from it.[75]

Describing Petrarch's comedy from a strictly historical perspective would be nearly impossible; establishing comedic intentions by using knowledge of Petrarch's life would itself be a humorous project. Generally, a completely literary approach, focusing on deconstructing texts, denies the reader access to Petrarch's voice within the text. Both positions are in direct opposition to each other.

My goal with this piece is to further reconcile the differences between the "Petrarchs" by (comically, perhaps) applying literary theory and showing its relevance to the transmission of these particular works. After applying comedy theory to Petrarch's works, his voice within the texts is unmistakable. Petrarch, in fact, manipulated his voice for his own purposes. Using comedy, he accentuated and changed his tone to affect the delivery of his moral philosophy. Petrarch's poetic qualities interacted fully with his rhetoric and intellectual thought processes; neither existed on its own.

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[75] Quillen, *Rereading the Renaissance*, 12-13.

For far too long, we, as scholars, have stood divided on our approach to Petrarch. Historical and literary should not be antonyms; a middle ground must exist. The gap is too big be bridged by a single thesis, nevertheless, a "nudge" toward a collective, scholarly approach to Petrarch is appropriate. A redefined approach can combine both historical and literary methodologies, and perhaps adopt consistent descriptors to portray him: scholar, poet, moral philosopher, Italian linguist, Latin linguist, classical imitator, humanist, traveler, Christian, "Pagan," Italian, and "Roman."

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