



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

HUMANITIES SEMINARS

Francis Petrarch and Love Poetry of the Renaissance Fabian Alfie | Professor, Italian



William Shakespeare opens his sonnet #130 by proclaiming, “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the Sun.” In so doing, Shakespeare took an oppositional stance toward a European tradition that, by his time, already spanned more than two centuries. In the decades before Shakespeare’s birth, poetic primers insisted that lover-poets should portray their ladies as having eyes as bright as the Sun, along with cheeks as red as roses; their ladies should be more than flesh-and-blood, but veritable goddesses on Earth who speak with angelic voices. The primers, which also insisted on specific lexicon and expressions, maintained that the height of literary achievement had already been attained, and all that all living poets could do was imitate it. The person who developed that exalted style was Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374).

Francesco Petrarca—a man so important that his name was anglicized as Francis Petrarch—has been considered the father of the Italian Renaissance. He was among the earliest people to research the language, literature, and culture of ancient Rome, and he strove to imitate Cicero’s style in his Latin writings. He wrote numerous works in Latin, including *Secretum*, *De viris illustribus*, *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, and his epistles *Rerum familiarum liber*; he also composed an unfinished epic poem in Latin about Scipio Africanus, *Africa*. Throughout the Renaissance his thoughts about the importance of classical Rome were considered fundamental.

Today, he is better remembered as a love poet. He compiled 366 Italian poems in the book he titled *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (but it is more frequently called his *Canzoniere*, or

“songbook”). His *Canzoniere* was the second collection of poetry compiled by the poet himself, modeled upon—but far overshadowing—that of his predecessor, Dante’s *Vita Nuova*. In his poems, he charts his love for a woman, Laura, whom he depicts as a transcendental creature on earth. He incorporated the Latinate style into his vernacular poetry, bringing an elegance to the Italian language never seen before. Because of this, he was held up as the standard for all poetic writings in the vernacular, not just in Italy but across Europe. His name has become synonymous with the Italian sonnet, which is also called the “Petrarchan sonnet” in his honor.

In this course, we will focus on his love poetry, reading the works from Mark Musa’s translation of the *Canzoniere*. We will also deal with his precursors, as well as some of his imitators from the High Renaissance, the so-called Petrarchists. Additionally, we will deal with some of the musical versions of his poems.

Book: *Petrarch: The Canzoniere or Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, trans. Mark Musa (Indiana University Press, 1999). ISBN: 978-0253213174

PROPOSED SCHEDULE (subject to change):

WEEK ONE	HOURL 1	<p>Topic for the day: Introduction to Petrarch</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Biography and importance 2) Discussion of the literary tradition that informs Petrarch, particularly Dante and the <i>dolce stil nuovo</i> 3) Selections from his Latin writings, particularly from his epistolary
	HOURL 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Continuation of Hour 1 2) Discussion of Petrarch’s impact: selections from Boccaccio’s letters to Petrarch, and selections from Pietro Bembo’s <i>Prose de la volgar lingua</i>
WEEK TWO	HOURL 1	<p>Topic for the hour: Introduction to Petrarch’s vernacular poetry from the <i>Canzoniere</i> (<i>Rerum vulgarium fragmenta</i>)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Discussion of sonnets #1, 2, 3, 4, 15, 16
	HOURL 2	<p>Topic for the hour: Discussion of Petrarch’s sestinas from the <i>Canzoniere</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Discussion of poems #22, 30 2) Time permitting, a discussion of sonnets #24, 27, 35
WEEK THREE	HOURL 1	<p>Topic for the day: Love poetry</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Discussion of poems #50, 52, 61, 90, 106

- 2) Analysis of poetry by the light of the preceding love tradition, particularly Dante, Cino da Pistoia and the *dolce stil nuovo*, especially poem #70

HOURL 2 Continuation on the topic of the day: Love poetry

- 1) Discussion of poems #126, 159, 181
- 2) Analysis of the poetry by the light of the musical tradition:
 - Madrigals based on poems #1, 35, 106, 164, 310 and 353
 - Sonnet 61 was the basis for a piano sonata by Franz Liszt

WEEK FOUR HOURL 1 Topic for the hour: Politics and history in Petrarch

- 1) Discussion of anti-Avignon poems, #114, 136, 137, 138
- 2) Discussion of poem #128
- 3) Anticipation of the death of Laura (part 2 of the *Canzoniere*) through the discussion of the Black Plague of 1348: time permitting discussion of sonnets #267, 287

HOURL 2 Topic for the hour: Morality

- 1) Discussion of Petrarch's ambivalence towards love, and his yearning to turn from worldly matters—i.e., Laura—to God
- 2) Discussion of poems #264, 272, 273, 293
- 3) Analysis of final poem, the prayer to the Virgin Mary, with reference to its musical setting by Guillaume Du Fay (1397-1474)

Closing comments

- 4) Discussion of the 16th century movement known as Petrarchism: Vittoria Colonna and Veronica Gambara (Italy); Thomas Wyatt (England); Garcilaso de la Vega (Spain); Joaquim Du Bellay (France)