

Blending of Antiquity and  
Christianity in Petrarch's Writings  
on Laura

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## Introduction

During his lifetime Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) wrote extensively, combining study of ancient Christian and Roman texts. Petrarch played a formative role in the development during the early Renaissance of the *studia humanitatis*, or ‘humane studies’ that looked to ancient texts to improve contemporary style, combining ancient and Christian sources in his unique form of humanism. When Petrarch was in his mid-twenties, he caught sight of a woman, Laura, on Good Friday, 6 April 1327, outside the church of Sainte-Clare at Avignon. This event profoundly shaped the rest of his life. Petrarch would write about Laura throughout his lifetime.

This thesis will examine critically the relationship between antique imagery and Christian imagery in Petrarch’s writings that reference Laura. My research will focus on Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, a collection of poems written over the course of his life in an Italian Tuscan vernacular dialect,<sup>1</sup> and his *Secretum*, a dialogue between Petrarch and an imagined shade of St Augustine, composed in Latin between 1347-1353.<sup>2</sup> Petrarch pondered his feelings about Laura in *Secretum*, while depicting her as his muse in poems he composed for the *Canzoniere*. Initially he idolized Laura, but as he aged, he became increasingly concerned with the propriety of his idolization of her.<sup>3</sup> In creating her into an idolized figure, Petrarch’s Laura came to no longer reflect the real woman, but merely his idealization of the ‘perfect woman’. Because Laura appeared in the *Canzoniere* merely as an object of desire and veneration, rather than as a person in her own right, gender roles in Petrarch’s writing will factor into this discussion.<sup>4</sup>

The first chapter examines Petrarch’s use of ancient figures in the *Secretum* and the *Canzoniere*. For such figures, Petrarch drew primarily upon *Metamorphoses*, a collection of Roman myths written in the first century CE by the Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso, Ovid, as

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘*canzoniere*’ means simply a ‘collection of songs’. There are other names for the *Canzoniere*, including the *Rime sparse* meaning ‘scattered rhymes’, and the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* meaning ‘fragments of things in the vernacular’, however, the ‘*Canzoniere*’ is the most neutral title. Francesco Petrarca, *The Canzoniere, or, Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*, trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> The title *Secretum* in English means *My Secret Book*. Francesco Petrarca, *My Secret Book*, trans. Nicholas Mann, The I Tatti Renaissance library 72 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, any use of the term idolatry should be taken as ‘immoderate love’ rather than as a theological sin.

<sup>4</sup> Laura appears in another of Petrarch’s works, called *Trionfi/Triumphs*, in which she is granted the occasional right to speak. For the sake of conciseness in this essay, I shall focus my attention on only the *Secretum* and the *Canzoniere*. For translation of *Trionfi*, see: Francesco Petrarca, *Triumphs*, trans. E.H. Wilkins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

he is named customarily in scholarship and literature.<sup>5</sup> Petrarch draws on Ovid's retellings of the myths of Daphne and Apollo, Pygmalion and Galatea, and Orpheus and Eurydice, among others to represent his relationship with Laura. The ancient figures with whom Petrarch compares Laura are either goddesses – like Diana – or idealized women, like Eurydice and Galatea. In these works, Petrarch also links himself to mythological figures, like Orpheus, Narcissus, and Acteon and often likened Laura to precious materials: including various gemstones, ivory, and marble, as by his comparing her with Galatea – a marble statue of a woman brought to life by Pygmalion's love. Feminist scholars, however, often question this veneration, arguing that Petrarch is only admiring parts of Laura, not her entire person. Petrarch's decision to largely deny Laura a voice in either the *Secretum* or his poems likens her to Eurydice, who appears merely a ghostly figure in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

The second chapter studies the role of Christian figures in Petrarch's writings. Petrarch looked to St Augustine for guidance in the *Secretum* and makes several references to both the Bible and the writings of St Augustine throughout the *Canzoniere*. The warnings against idolatry in *Secretum* that Petrarch puts into the mouth of the imagined shade of Augustine reveals his concern regarding his feelings for Laura. It looks also at other Christian imagery in Petrarch's writing pertaining to Laura, including Petrarch's use of the Garden of Eden, by which he related Laura to Eve and himself to Adam, and his use of Marian imagery.

Finally, the third chapter looks at how Petrarch combined both Christian and antique ideas in his writing. Throughout the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch often references both antique and Christian figures in the same poem, relating them to one another through their invoking of Laura. One of the most prominent ways in which he does this is through his addressing Laura's death. It was after Laura's death that Petrarch's veneration of her became more extreme. This chapter also examines Petrarch's attempt at revival of the style of ancient Latin authors. Petrarch was unimpressed with the Latin style of his contemporaries, whose style we now call 'mediaeval', thinking their Latin ungrammatical and inelegant. This opinion was formed, in part, by the feeling that the culture of his time was far removed from the culture of antiquity he so admired, a feeling that became generalized among subsequent humanist scholars. His attempt to revive and

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<sup>5</sup> Publius Ovidius Naso, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Mary M. Innes, repr, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979).

emulate the antique Latinity has been understood by scholars of Renaissance humanism as evidence of his recognition of the ‘historical discontinuity’ between his time and antiquity. He attempted to reimagine and emulate the style he found in the writings of Cicero, Livy, Virgil, and St Augustine to revive the elegance of the ancient style. This chapter will also examine the links between Christian ideals of love and beauty to similar Platonic ideals, as these pertain to Petrarch’s writings about Laura. In order to understand the manner in which Petrarch wrote about Laura and his feelings for her in *Secretum* and the *Canzoniere*, however, it is necessary to lay out the principal pertinent facts and events of his life.

### **i. Petrarch’s Early Life**

Francesco Petrarca, or Petrarch, was born on 20 July 1304 at Arezzo – a region of Tuscany – to Ser Petracco de Parenzo (1267-1326) and his wife Eletta Canigiani (1270-1319).<sup>6</sup> Ser Petracco had been banished from Florence in October 1302 after being convicted for filing a fraudulent petition.<sup>7</sup> Ser Petracco and Eletta fled Florence, moving around Tuscany for several years before finally settling at Avignon, where Ser Petracco found a job as a notary for the papal court. In 1309 the Florentine authorities granted Ser Petracco a pardon, but the ban was reinstated in September 1311, when he was “excluded from a general amnesty.”<sup>8</sup>

Petrarch’s father was a notary, and, at his insistence, Petrarch studied law at the University of Bologna. Petrarch’s father decided he was to study law when he was just twelve years old.<sup>9</sup> When he turned sixteen, Petrarch undertook his first university degree at the Montpellier University, before leaving Avignon in 1320 to study law at the University of Bologna.<sup>10</sup> After his father’s death in 1326, however, Petrarch abandoned his legal studies and returned to Avignon.

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher S. Celenza, *Petrarch: Everywhere a Wanderer*, Renaissance Lives Series (London: Reaktion Books, 2017). 11.; Laurence Hooper, ‘Exile and Petrarch’s Reinvention of Authorship’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (2016): 1217, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26560058>.

<sup>7</sup> Hooper, ‘Exile and Petrarch’s Reinvention of Authorship’. 1220.

<sup>8</sup> Hooper, ‘Exile and Petrarch’s Reinvention of Authorship’. 1220.

<sup>9</sup> Petrarca, *Familiars*. 20.4. in Kristen Ina Grimes, ‘Petrarch’s Epistolary Ego and the Authorizing Maternal’, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 44, no. 1 (2011): 43–63. 51-52.

<sup>10</sup> Hooper, ‘Exile and Petrarch’s Reinvention of Authorship’. 1220.

Petrarch took religious orders after abandoning his legal studies. This meant Petrarch was a member of the clergy but was not required to proceed to the priesthood. In all likelihood, Petrarch's decision to take these orders stemmed from the financial benefits given to clergy, because clerical status provided him opportunity to receive benefices.<sup>11</sup> In his *Vita* of Petrarch, the Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) wrote that Petrarch had taken orders "not so much by his own choice as [he was] constrained to it by necessity."<sup>12</sup> Although Petrarch had some inheritance from his father, this money had either been poorly managed or embezzled, and so Petrarch was left near poverty.<sup>13</sup> This is not to say, however, that Petrarch felt no religious calling to the church. Indeed, by all accounts, Petrarch was a devout Catholic.

Petrarch fathered two children, although he was never married. His son, Giovanni was born in 1337, and his daughter, Francesca, was born in 1343. Despite Petrarch's idealization of and prolific writings about Laura, Petrarch never recorded the names of the women who bore him children, and he rarely wrote of the children themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Petrarch was closely associated with the Colonna family throughout his life. The Colonnas were a prominent family, tied closely to the papal court at Avignon. Petrarch formed an important friendship with Giacomo Colonna (1300-1341), who became bishop of Lombez<sup>15</sup> in 1328, while studying at Bologna.<sup>16</sup> In 1335 Petrarch was appointed the canon of a cathedral in Lombez, a position that did not involve Petrarch to exercise any sort of pastoral care or *cura animarum*, and, although he never resided among the Lombez canons, he collected the income associated with the position.<sup>17</sup> In 1330 Petrarch joined Giacomo's brother, Cardinal Giovanni Colonna (1295-1348)'s household, working as his chaplain until 1337.<sup>18</sup> While working for Giovanni Colonna, Petrarch traveled throughout Europe, and in his spare time, he visited monasteries looking for forgotten manuscripts of ancient Roman texts, often preserved in monastic libraries. While working for the Colonna family, Petrarch developed a close friendship

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<sup>11</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Leonardo Bruni in Celenza, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Celenza, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Celenza, 95.

<sup>15</sup> A city near Toulouse.

<sup>16</sup> Giacomo Colonna later invested Petrarch with the canonry at the Lombez cathedral.

<sup>17</sup> This circumstance left Petrarch involved in the clerical corruption he criticized harshly.

<sup>18</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 32-33.

with both Giacomo and Giovanni Colonna, and they became important patrons for Petrarch's scholarship.

In the year 1345, Petrarch discovered a previously lost manuscript copy of a codex of Cicero's epistles in the cathedral library at Verona, which he promptly began to copy. He later began arranging his own letters, writing more than five hundred epistles by his death in 1374.<sup>19</sup> Petrarch often emulated writing styles – particularly from antiquity. Petrarch's favourite writer was Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE), and although he imitated his style, Petrarch wanted to create his own voice. Ignacio Navarrete describes Petrarch: "Borrowing from Cicero, Petrarch advises an imitator to be like a bee, tasting from various flowers but transforming the nectar into a honey all its own. ... Petrarch stresses the transformatory aspect of imitation and the need to be true to one's personal style."<sup>20</sup> Thus Petrarch's aim was to create his own innovative writing, modeled on that of ancient sources.

Petrarch was crowned poet laureate in Rome in 1341 by Robert I, King of Naples (r.1309-1343), and was accompanied with a *privilegium*, a charter bestowing legal benefits, including Roman citizenship.<sup>21</sup> About two years after this ceremony, Petrarch began to collect the vernacular poems that make up the *Canzoniere*, with the bulk of the work taking place over the course of the 1350s, at which time he transferred his primary residency to Italy, however, he continued to work on the *Canzoniere* up until his death in 1374.<sup>22</sup> The *Canzoniere* is made up of three hundred and sixty-six poems, many of which were 'Dantesque *canzoni*'.<sup>23</sup> The number 366 is a reference to the days of the year (plus one), simulating the "eternal calendar of love" that Petrarch held for Laura.<sup>24</sup> These poems often focus on the theme of courtly love and Petrarch's unrequited passion for Laura. The equation of song and poem has ancient roots when poems would be recited in a musical or rhythmic fashion, and Petrarch often drew on this musical

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<sup>19</sup> These letters are in collections entitled: *Rerum familiarium libri/Letters on familiar matters* and *Rerum senilium libri/Letters of old age*. Grimes, 'Petrarch's Epistolary Ego and the Authorizing Maternal'. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Ignacio Navarrete in Luis Gonzalo Portugal, 'Petrarch's Poetics: From the Abyss of Representation to Creative Imitation', *Humanist Studies & the Digital Age* 1, no. 1 (2011): 145, <https://doi.org/10.5399/uo/hsda.1.1.1246>.

<sup>21</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1225.

<sup>22</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1226.

<sup>23</sup> The poetic form popularized by Dante. John Freccero, 'The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics', *Diacritics* 5, no. 1 (1975): 34, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464720>.

<sup>24</sup> Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*, Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies 14 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). 78.

history of poetry.<sup>25</sup> Despite its foundations in Petrarch's real life, "only the most naive reader would take it [the *Canzoniere*] for authentic autobiography."<sup>26</sup>

Petrarch despised his own time, writing in his autobiography: "I especially dedicated myself to learning about antiquity, inasmuch as I have always disliked my own age, so that, had I not been restrained by the love of dear ones, I would always have wanted to be born in any other age. In order to forget my own time, I have always tried to place myself in spirit in other times. Therefore I took pleasure in history."<sup>27</sup> Petrarch applied the classical texts to Christian ideas and typology, which is one reason for Petrarch's success in blending the two literary traditions.

Petrarch drew on the rich tradition of Italian writers – particularly those who were exiled – including Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Guido Guinizzelli (ca. 1230–1275), and Cino da Pistoia (ca. 1270–1336/37).<sup>28</sup> Dante was, by far, the most influential non-antique writer for Petrarch. Petrarch followed Dante's Christian assumptions about the "transcendent meaning and destination of existence".<sup>29</sup> In his *Vita Nuova*, Dante searched for a kind of poetry that would "bind together the various strands of experience against the partitions and fragmentations engendered by critical, analytic thinking."<sup>30</sup> Petrarch, on the other hand, viewed poetry as "the act by which fame is acquired and death is conquered", in which he does not lose sight of the vanity of art.<sup>31</sup> Although both Dante and Petrarch drew on ancient sources to write Christian literature, their emphasis lies in different places. While Dante placed his emphasis on theology, Petrarch placed his on oratory – a discipline encompassing ethics, poetry, and historiography.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For further discussion of Petrarch's use of music in the *Canzoniere*, see section 1.1. "Death and Song: The Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice", 31-32. Celenza, *Petrarch*. 84.

<sup>26</sup> Freccero, 'The Fig Tree and the Laurel'. 34.

<sup>27</sup> Petrarch in Ronald Witt, 'Francesco Petrarca and the Parameters of Historical Research', *Religions; Basel* 3, no. 3 (2012): 699–709, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.mta.ca/10.3390/rel3030699>. 702.

<sup>28</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1218-1219.

<sup>29</sup> By this Dante believed that life on earth was merely a passage to reach Heaven. Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Mazzotta, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Mazzotta, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Mazzotta, 130.

## ii. Petrarch's Perceived Exile and the Political Atmosphere of Fourteenth Century Italy

During Petrarch's lifetime, Italy was fragmented into a number of rival city-states. Petrarch lived during the Avignon Papacy, when Rome was not the seat of papal authority. When Petrarch visited in Rome in 1337, he described it as a city in ruins in a letter to his friend Cardinal Giovanni Colonna.<sup>33</sup> In poem 53 of the *Canzoniere* entitled *Spirito gentil/Gentil Spirit*, Petrarch laments the state of Rome, comparing the powerlessness of the city caused by the absence of the papacy to its seat of ancient power as the centre of the Roman Republic and later Roman Empire.<sup>34</sup> Petrarch laments that access to some of Christianity's holiest places was denied to pilgrims by the civil violence that terrorized Rome.<sup>35</sup> Petrarch blames the chaos and ruin of the city on the absent pope, who was forced to seek refuge at Avignon:

Noble spirit, you who informs those members  
inside of which there dwells in pilgrimage  
a lord of valor who is keen and wise:  
now that you have achieved the honoured staff  
with which you guide Rome and its erring people  
and call her back to her old way of life,

...

I who all night and day weep for her torment  
have placed almost all of my hope in you  
for if Mars' progeny  
should ever raise their eyes to their own honor,  
it seems such grace will come in your own times.

The ancient walls which all the world still fears  
and loves and trembles, every time it thinks  
of turning back to look at those past times,  
recalling those tombstones which hold the bodies  
of men who will not be without great fame  
until our universe dissolves away

...

Women in tears and the defenseless throng  
of all the young and all the old and tired  
who hate themselves and their lives overlived

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<sup>33</sup> Witt, 'Francesco Petrarca and the Parameters of Historical Research'. 702.

<sup>34</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, 53.; Celenza, *Petrarch*. 64-66.

<sup>35</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 66-67.

and the black friars and the grey, the white,<sup>36</sup>  
 and all the other groups of sick and weary  
 cry out: “O Lord of ours, help us, help us!”  
 and all of these poor people in bewilderment,  
 thousands and thousands show you all their wounds  
 which would make even Hannibal feel pity.  
 And if you take a good look at God’s house  
 that’s all aflame today, by putting out a few  
 sparks you could calm these wills  
 that show that they are so enflamed today;  
 whereby your good works will be praised in Heaven.<sup>37</sup>

In this poem Petrarch contrasts the heroes of the Roman Republic whom he believed to have embodied the ideals of patriotism and liberty, with the “warmongering aristocratic families” whose fight for power had rendered Rome a state of chaos.<sup>38</sup> Petrarch begs the aristocratic Roman families to lift their eyes towards God to find glory and cease their fighting, calling them “Mars’ progeny”,<sup>39</sup> with Mars being the Roman god of war. Petrarch goes on to berate the pope.<sup>40</sup>

More than a thousand years have now gone by  
 since all those noble souls did pass away  
 that made her what she was in their own day.  
 Ah, you newcomers haughty beyond limits,  
 irreverent to a mother great as she!  
 Be husband, be her father!  
 All help we wait to come from your own hand –  
 the greater Father is fixed on other work.<sup>41</sup>

The woman referred to here is the city of Rome, which was abandoned by the pope, whom Petrarch represents as her husband. The final line of this stanza “the greater Father is fixed on other work”,<sup>42</sup> references the pope’s absence, as the papacy resided at Avignon from 1309-1378.

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<sup>36</sup> The friars identified here by ‘black, grey, and white’ are the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Carmelites, respectively. Editor’s note, Alex Kline. *Canzoniere*.

<sup>37</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 53.1-6; 24-34; 56-70.

<sup>38</sup> Mike Hodder and Anne O’Connor, ‘Petrarch Goes West: Translation and the Literary Canon’, *Italian Studies* 72, no. 4 (2 October 2017): 345–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00751634.2017.1370791>. 351.

<sup>39</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 53.26.

<sup>40</sup> Although it is not known exactly when this poem was written, it was likely written before Petrarch’s coronation as poet laureate in 1341. After his coronation as poet laureate Petrarch became a Roman citizen, and as such would not have wanted to implicate himself in the negligence of the Roman aristocracy discussed in this poem. Hodder and O’Connor, ‘Petrarch Goes West’. 352.

<sup>41</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 53.77-84.

<sup>42</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 53.84.

Petrarch believed that by remaining at Avignon, the pope was “in dereliction of his duty to Rome.”<sup>43</sup>

Despite his lamentation for the state of Rome, Petrarch appears to have taken little interest in politics. He spent much of his time in Italy between 1353-1361 living under the patronage of the Visconti family at despotic Milan.<sup>44</sup> Despite calling himself a Florentine, and the city of Florence ‘adopting’ Petrarch after his death, Petrarch’s willingness to work for a despotic family seems to counter the staunch republicanism prevalent in Florence.<sup>45</sup> This speaks to one of the practicalities of Petrarch’s life; he had to go where he could find patronage regardless of political affiliations.

Throughout his writings, Petrarch asserts that he experienced alienation, expressed through his use of the term ‘exile,’ despite never having experienced political exile himself. Petrarch described himself as *peregrinus ubique* meaning ‘wanderer’ or ‘pilgrim’.<sup>46</sup> The description of Petrarch as a wanderer is more striking given that Petrarch never experienced any kind of political exile or *exilium* – the term used in Roman law.<sup>47</sup> Petrarch used this language to link himself to other historical and literary figures, including Dante, Cicero, and Christ, all of whom were held to have experienced exile in one or another fashion. Petrarch uses this position of ‘exile’ to assert a “prominent position in the Tuscan literary tradition” by linking himself to Dante.<sup>48</sup> Throughout his career, Petrarch had to negotiate and reconcile his reputation with Dante’s status as the most prominent Tuscan writer.<sup>49</sup>

During Petrarch’s lifetime, the notion that earth marked simply a pilgrimage through life to reach one’s final destination in heaven was prominent in Christian thought. Petrarch’s representation of his exile, however, is also strategic: an attempt to gain literary fame. In poem 128 of the *Canzoniere: Italia mia/My Italy*, Petrarch references Christ’s maxim “no prophet is accepted in his own country.”<sup>50</sup> Petrarch begins the poem:

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<sup>43</sup> Hodder and O’Connor, ‘Petrarch Goes West’. 352.

<sup>44</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 172-173.

<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Petrarch never resided in Florence, but rather chose to live in Milan when he moved permanently to Italy in 1353. Hooper, ‘Exile and Petrarch’s Reinvention of Authorship’. 1224-1225.

<sup>46</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 34.

<sup>47</sup> Hooper, ‘Exile and Petrarch’s Reinvention of Authorship’. 1220-1221.

<sup>48</sup> Grimes, ‘Petrarch’s Epistolary Ego and the Authorizing Maternal’. 44.

<sup>49</sup> Grimes, 47.

<sup>50</sup> Hooper, ‘Exile and Petrarch’s Reinvention of Authorship’. 1234; Luke 4:24

O, my own Italy, though words be useless  
 to heal the mortal wounds  
 I see covering all your lovely body,  
 I wish at least for my sighs to be one  
 with Tiber's hopes and Arno's  
 as well as Po's, where I sit sad and grieving.  
 Ruler of Heaven, I beg now  
 that mercy which once brought you down to earth  
 turn you again to your dear holy land.<sup>51</sup>

In this poem, Petrarch laments the state of Italy, torn apart by feuding city-states while the pope was absent at Avignon. By recalling Christ, Petrarch again uses the notion of exile to further his status as a writer. Petrarch's recalling of Christ has a dual meaning: from the pontificate of Innocent III (r. 1198-1216), popes had represented themselves, not as Vicars of St. Peter, as had been customary for centuries, but as Vicars of Christ.<sup>52</sup> Thus, Petrarch makes his criticism of the Avignon popes for hypocrisy and dereliction of duty even more potent.

In many of his letters to Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, Petrarch writes that to lament exile is weak. The best thing to do is leave one's homeland (*patria*) to then to return home in triumph, just as had Cicero, Alcibiades, Scipio Africanus, Alexander the Great, Pompey, Caesar, Ulysses, and Aeneas.<sup>53</sup> Thus, for Petrarch it was only through exile that he could become successful as Italy's first "fully professional author."<sup>54</sup>

Petrarch also describes himself in a state of exile when he refers to Laura. The poetry that appears after Laura's death that is marked in the *Canzoniere* at poem 267 is often characterized in relation to the experience of Petrarch's exile and alienation from Laura.<sup>55</sup> Other than 'exile' Petrarch also uses the terms 'banished' and 'wanderer' to describe his estrangement, and uses all three terms in poem 331: *Solea de la Fontana di mia vita/ I used to wander far from the fountain of my life:*

I used to leave behind my life's own fountain  
 and travel far in search though land and sea

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<sup>51</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 128.1-8.

<sup>52</sup> The claim that the popes were the Vicars of St Peter, was made by Pope Leo I (r. 440-461) to grant authority to the papacy.

<sup>53</sup> Alfred Hiatt, 'Petrarch's Antipodes', *Parergon* 22, no. 2 (2005): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2006.0019>; Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1224.

<sup>54</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1225.

<sup>55</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1233-1235.

following not my will by my star's calling,  
 and I went always (Love gave me such help)  
 into those exiles (he's known none more bitter)  
 feeding my heart on memory and hope.

A mist or dust caught in the wind, I flee  
 to be no more a pilgrim in this life,  
 and let it happen if it be my fate.

...

Within the eyes in which my heart once lived  
 (until my cruel fate began to envy it  
 and banished it from that rich dwelling place),  
 in his own hand Love had inscribed in letters  
 made out of pity telling what would come  
 quite soon from my long journey of desire.<sup>56</sup>

According to Laurence Hooper, the term 'exile', "suggests a challenge Petrarch voluntarily confronts", while 'wanderer', "has its Augustinian sense of a sojourner in this world", and finally 'banishment', "describes fate's imperious removal of Petrarch's heart from its residence in Laura's eyes."<sup>57</sup> All of these terms can be understood broadly, and each implies a different form of detachment from Laura, either physical or spiritual while all implying a connection to Christology.<sup>58</sup>

Poem 331 elaborates on Petrarch's spiritual alienation from Laura:

If all the little intellect I have,  
 when I needed, and another yearning  
 had not turned it elsewhere and made it stray,  
 clear on my lady's brow I might have read:  
 "Now you have reached where all your sweetness ends  
 and the beginning of great bitterness."  
 If I had understood this, sweetly freed  
 (and in her presence) of my mortal veil,  
 of this heavy, burdensome flesh of mine,  
 I could have gone before her  
 to watch Heaven prepare for her a throne –  
 but now I'll follow her, with my hair changed.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 331.1-6; 22-24; 37-42.

<sup>57</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1236.

<sup>58</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1236.

<sup>59</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 331.49-60.

The diversion expressed here describes Petrarch's inability to understand Laura during her lifetime.<sup>60</sup> The loss of the road "reflects a favored Augustinian metaphor for expressing humanity's exile in the 'region of unlikeness.'"<sup>61</sup> Augustine characterizes this world as a "faulty analogy of the divine oneness, questioning any distinction between figurative and proper reference. ... The necessary mediator between the faulty analogies of human thought and the divine is linguistic—the Incarnate Word."<sup>62</sup> In other words, the only path out of earthly exile is through figural interpretation, meaning "the access to one signifier, the ultimate one, through another."<sup>63</sup> This also speaks to Petrarch's assertion in the *Secretum* that Laura led him to God, drawing on the Augustinian notion that "inasmuch as he [Christ] is man, he is the Mediator, and as man he is the way [via]."<sup>64</sup> In this scenario, Laura functions as Christ, leading Petrarch to God.<sup>65</sup>

Poem 285: *Né mai pietosa madre al caro figlio/ Never did mother caring for her dear son*, offers a more personal experience of exile, as it inverts the narrative of poem 37 *Si è debile il filo a cui s'attene / The thread on which my heavy life hangs*. In poem 37 Laura eludes him:

That I may weep with still greater delight,  
the white and slender hands,  
and graciousness of arms  
and all her movements beautifully proud,  
and her disdain, sweet and so proudly humble  
and the fair, youthful breast,  
the tower of high intellect,  
these wild and rocky places hide from me,  
and I can hope to see her again before I die;  
because hour after hour  
hope surges but cannot sustain itself,  
and falling reaffirms  
it shall not see the one whom Heaven honors,

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<sup>60</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1237.

<sup>61</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1237.

<sup>62</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1237.

<sup>63</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1237.

<sup>64</sup> Augustine, 'City of God', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2, 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1887). 11.2.

<sup>65</sup> For further discussion on Petrarch casting Laura as a Christ-like figure, see 2.4. 'Biblical Imagery', 62-63.

in whom dwells honesty and courtesy,  
and where I pray that I may make my home.<sup>66</sup>

In poem 285, however, the scene is inverted, and Laura looks down on Petrarch in his exile, showing him the right path to take:

as she to me, who watching my grave exile  
from her superior, eternal home  
often returns to me with the same care  
and with her brow adorned with double pity,  
  
now mother and now lover. Now fearing, burning  
with a pure fire, she shows me with words  
what in this journey I should flee or follow<sup>67</sup>

By having Laura show Petrarch the correct path from her place in Heaven, Petrarch voices his belief, expressed also in the *Secretum*, that his love of Laura led him closer to God.<sup>68</sup> Petrarch clearly questioned this, however, as Augustinus<sup>69</sup> responds to this notion: “But why did this famous woman, who you claim was guiding you straight to the heavens, why did she not give you directions when you were hesitant and fearful, and why did she not take you by the hand, as one might another blind person, and tell you which way to proceed?”<sup>70</sup> While in the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch argues that Laura had shown him the path towards God, he second guesses himself – through the character of Augustinus – in the *Secretum*.

### iii. Petrarch and Laura

There are a variety of hypotheses concerning who Petrarch’s Laura may have been, including the notion that she never existed but was merely an invented muse to whom Petrarch gave the name ‘Laura’, reflecting his longing for the laurel crown associated with the status of Poet Laureate – a notion Petrarch himself, refuted. Petrarch’s contemporaries, including his

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<sup>66</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 37.97-112.

<sup>67</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 285.5-11.

<sup>68</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.5.2. “There’s no doubt that love of her has led me to love God.”

<sup>69</sup> The name Petrarch gave the shade of St Augustine in the *Secretum*. Here it is important to recall that Petrarch wrote the character of Augustinus, imagining himself what the historical St Augustine might have said regarding his situation.

<sup>70</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.5.13.

friend, Giovanni Boccaccio, and Giacomo Leopardi questioned Laura's existence.<sup>71</sup> Modern scholars continue to argue whether Laura existed or not, with some, viewing Laura as an allegory for the poetic glory symbolized by the laurel crown. One such scholar is Christopher Celenza who wrote: "his love for Laura as manifested so hauntingly in the *Canzoniere*, is an allegory."<sup>72</sup> Petrarch himself seems to deny this claim in poem 128, *Italia mia/My Italy*, writing: "and do not idolize / a name that is so empty",<sup>73</sup> while in a letter to Giacomo Colonna,<sup>74</sup> Petrarch refutes the notion that Laura was merely an allegory for the laurel crown.<sup>75</sup>

In the third book of the *Secretum*, Laura serves both to represent Petrarch's concerns that his regard for her might be idolatrous, but also as a literary device to transition between his desire for love and his desire for glory. Here, Petrarch also defends Laura's existence. Petrarch argues that his search for glory was stimulated by his "vision of Laura and by her qualities as a muse."<sup>76</sup> Augustinus argues:

your madness exceeds all sense of shock and amazement, for your deranged mind, not just captivated by her physical beauty but also by her name, led you with unbelievable vanity to worship anything that even sounded the same. You loved the laurels of rulers and poets so passionately because they were called by her name. And from that time on scarcely a poem flowed from your pen without some mention of laurels, almost as if you live on the banks of the river Peneus or were a priest on the heights of Cirrha. But since you couldn't aspire to a ruler's laurels, you began to desire those of a poet, for which you felt destined by the quality of your studies, just as passionately as you desired of the lady herself.<sup>77</sup>

This passage implies a kind of self-doubt in Petrarch, as he questions his love of Laura, but it also serves as a literary device that moves the dialogue forward and to its ultimate conclusion. It seems that Augustinus' attack was not the first levelled against Petrarch regarding his obsession

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<sup>71</sup> Unn Falkeid, 'Petrarch's Laura and the Critics', *MLN* 127, no. 1 (2012): S64; Giorgio Ficara, 'The Perfect Woman in Boccaccio and Petrarch', in *Petrarch and Boccaccio*, ed. Igor Candido, 1st ed., The Unity of Knowledge in the Pre-Modern World (De Gruyter, 2018), 305, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvbj7kck.18>.

<sup>72</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 89.

<sup>73</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 128.76-77.

<sup>74</sup> For further description of Petrarch's relationship with Giacomo Colonna see i. 'Petrarch's Early life', 4-5.

<sup>75</sup> Francesco Petrarca, *Rerum Familiarium Libri*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, 1st ed (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975). 102.

<sup>76</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 116.

<sup>77</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.7.5

with Laura and her name. In a letter to Giacomo Colonna, written in a December during the mid 1330s<sup>78</sup> and collected by Petrarch into the *Rerum familiarium libri*,<sup>79</sup> he writes:

What in the world do you say? That I invented the splendid name of Laura so that it might be not only something for me to speak about but occasion to have others speak of me; that indeed there was no Laura on my mind except perhaps the poetic one for which I have aspired as is attested by my long and untiring studies. And finally you say that the truly live Laura by whose beauty I seem to be captured was completely invented, my poems fictitious and my sighs feigned. I wish indeed that you were joking about this particular subject, and she indeed had been a fiction and not a madness! But believe me no one can pretend at great length without great toil, and to toil for nothing so that others consider you mad is the greatest of madnesses [*sic*]. Furthermore, while we may be able to imitate illness in our actions, we cannot simulate true pallor. My pallor and toil are known to you. Therefore, I rather fear that you are abusing my illness with that Socratic playfulness which they call irony in which you yield not even to Socrates. This wound will heal in time and that Ciceronian saying will apply to me: ‘Time wounds, and time heals,’ and against this fictitious Laura as you call it, that other fiction of mine, Augustine, will perhaps be of help. For by reading widely and seriously, and by meditating on many of his things I shall become an old man before I will have grown old.<sup>80</sup>

This letter’s fierce defense of Laura’s existence would imply that Colonna was not the first to question it.<sup>81</sup> For the purposes of this paper, however, I have accepted the position that Petrarch loved Laura de Noves, a noblewoman of Avignon who died in 1348, idealizing her, so that even though the ‘Laura’ he memorialized in the *Canzoniere* and his imagined dialogue with the shade of Augustine in *Secretum* was Laura de Noves, the woman in Petrarch’s mind was not an accurate reflection of the real woman.

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<sup>78</sup> This letter was sent from Avignon, on 21 December but Petrarch does not indicate the year. Scholars debate the chronology of the *Rerum familiarium libri*, with many believing that Petrarch wrote a number of the letters much later than the events they recorded. Giuseppe Billanovich argued that many of the letters written in the 1320s and 1330s were actually written in the early 1350s, when Petrarch began to collect and order his letters. As such, it is not possible to precisely date the writing of this and many other letters in the *Rerum familiarium libri*. Petrarca, *Rerum Familiarium Libri*. xxii-xxxii.

<sup>79</sup> This is a collection of letters Petrarch wrote to his friends and family. In English the title is *Letters on familiar matters*.

<sup>80</sup> For discussion on the turmoil Petrarch felt regarding his love for Laura see 2.5 ‘Relics and Icons’, 69-71, and 3.2.1. ‘Classical Philosophy and Religious Texts’, 90-91. Petrarca, *Rerum Familiarium Libri*. 102.

<sup>81</sup> Other critics include Giovanni Boccaccio and Giacomo Leopardi, who in his commentary on the *Canzoniere* wrote: “Rumor has it that the Phoenix lives hidden in the mountains of Arabia, when in fact she lives in our own parts, and flies majestically through our skies. This means that Laura is the true phoenix, and the other is a fable!” Falkeid, ‘Petrarch’s Laura and the Critics’. S64; Ficara, ‘The Perfect Woman in Boccaccio and Petrarch’. 305.

Petrarch apparently fell in love immediately upon seeing Laura, but Laura was unreceptive, probably because she was already married to Hugo de Sade, an Avignonese nobleman.<sup>82</sup> Despite her married status, Laura is called by scholars ‘Laura de Noves’ rather than ‘Laura de Sade’. This is because Laura de Sade was Hugo de Sade’s unmarried sister.<sup>83</sup> It should be noted, however, that Petrarch would have only known her as Laura de Sade.<sup>84</sup> This is because Laura de Noves was married to Hugo de Sade on 16 January 1325, and Petrarch first saw Laura on the steps of the Church of Sainte-Clare at Avignon on 6 April 1327.<sup>85</sup> Laura apparently avoided Petrarch’s presence, “except at church, in the brilliant *levées* of the papal court, or in the country”.<sup>86</sup> It is unlikely that Petrarch and Laura were ever alone together, because “[a]n interview with her alone would surely have been celebrated in a thousand verses; and as he has left us four sonnets on the good fortune he enjoyed in having an opportunity of picking up her glove, we may fairly presume that he would not have passed over in silence so happy a circumstance as a private interview.”<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, it appears that Petrarch was averse to most women other than Laura (with the exception being the mother or mothers to his children): “[f]or Laura he had conceived a sort of religious and enthusiastic passion, ... as Plato supposes to be the bond of union between elevated minds.”<sup>88</sup>

Petrarch’s portrait of Laura was painted by Simone Martini, the same artist who painted the frontispiece for the ‘Ambrosian Virgil’, Petrarch’s copy of the works of Virgil that he annotated.<sup>89</sup> It is from this copy that we know of Laura’s death on 6 April 1348, where Petrarch recorded in the flyleaf: “the light of her life was subtracted from the light of day, while I, alas,

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<sup>82</sup> Jacques François Paul Aldonce de Sade, *Mémoires Pour La Vie de François Petrarque, Tirés de Ses Oeuvres et des Auteurs Contemporains, Avec des Notes ou Dissertations, & les Pièces Justificatives* (chez Arskée & Mercus [i. e. Alexandre Giroud], 1764). 9.

<sup>83</sup> F. J. Jones, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’, *Italian Studies*, 18 July 2013, 27–46, <https://doi.org/10.1179/its.1984.39.1.27>. 45.

<sup>84</sup> Jones, 37.

<sup>85</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 211.12-14. “Thirteen twenty-seven, at the beginning / of the first hour, on the sixth day of April, / I entered the labyrinth, and see no escape.”; 285.5-11.

<sup>86</sup> A *levée* is a court ceremony in which the pope would receive visitors. Petrarch would have only been in Laura’s company when in public, for example, when gathering for worship or attending a reception at the papal palace. Sismondi, ‘Laura de Sade’, in *Women of History* (Edinburgh: Project Gutenberg, 1890), 75.

<sup>87</sup> Sismondi, 75.

<sup>88</sup> Sismondi, 76.

<sup>89</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 116.

was at Verona, unknowing of my fate.”<sup>90</sup> At her death, Laura de Noves had had eleven children.<sup>91</sup>

In the *Canzoniere*, Laura’s death occurs at poem 267: *Oimè il bel viso/ Ah me, the lovely face*:

O God! That lovely face, that gentle look,  
O God! That charming way of hers, so proud!  
O God! Those words that any wild, harsh heart  
could tame and cowards turn to courageous men!

And, O God, that sweet smile whence came the arrow  
of death, the only good I hope for now!  
Royal soul, the worthiest of all to rule,  
if only you had not joined us so late:

It is for you I burn, in you I breathe  
for I am yours alone; deprived of you,  
I suffer less for all my other pains;

With hope you filled me once and with desire  
the time I left that highest charm alive,  
but all those words were scattered in the wind.<sup>92</sup>

Whether Laura was real or not, it is fair to say that she came to represent “a faraway object of desire and longing”.<sup>93</sup> Petrarch’s love for Laura, begun on the date of Christ’s crucifixion (6 April 1327 was Good Friday), mimicked the “central mystery of Christian life, as Petrarch would have understood it: our life is driven forward by a mysterious force, one with which we will only be united after our death.”<sup>94</sup>

One of the most important sources regarding the problem of identifying Laura is the Abbé de Sade’s *Mémoires Pour La Vie De François Petrarque: Pieces Justificatives*, written in 1764.<sup>95</sup> Drawing on family records, de Sade argues that Petrarch’s Laura was the wife of Hugo de Sade tracing her lineage through their family tree. If this is the case, then Petrarch’s Laura was Laura de Noves. The issue, however, is that this hypothesis relies on the accuracy of the

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<sup>90</sup> Celenza, 87-88.

<sup>91</sup> Sismondi, ‘Laura de Sade’. 74.

<sup>92</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 267.1-14.

<sup>93</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 88.

<sup>94</sup> Celenza, 89.

<sup>95</sup> The Abbé de Sade was Jacques-François-Paul-Aldonce de Sade (1705-1778). He was the uncle of the philosopher and noted libertine, the Marquis Donatien Alphonse François de Sade (1740-1814).

dates of Laura de Noves marriage in 1325 and death in 1348 that are now almost impossible to check. This problem is further complicated by the disappearance of the de Sade family archives, which were presumably lost during the French Revolution.<sup>96</sup> Although it is unlikely that the Abbé Jacques de Sade would have been capable of knowing the precise conditions of Laura's life, it nevertheless offers an interesting insight into one possibility regarding the reality of Petrarch's Laura.

De Sade's argument is predicated on the notion that Laura de Noves married Hugo de Sade when she was eighteen years old.<sup>97</sup> Petrarch assures the reader that she was close to his age, although he was a few years older.<sup>98</sup> De Sade examines a marriage contract written on 16 January 1325 between Laura de Noves and Hugo de Sade at Avignon and hypothesizes that she would have been born in either 1307 or 1308, making her three or four years younger than Petrarch.<sup>99</sup> De Sade observes too that "Petrarch understood that his Laura came from illustrious blood and an ancient family, [and] the nobility of Laura de Noves would never have been in doubt. In her marriage contract, her father Audibert is given the title *Sir*, [or] *Knight* [*Messire*, *Chevalier*], and her brother Jean is called *Squire* [*Damoiseau*]. No one would ignore these titles given by the highest nobility in France at the time."<sup>100</sup>

Further evidence de Sade provides regarding the identity of Laura relates to her death. Petrarch recorded in the frontispiece of his *Ambrosian Virgil* that Laura died at Avignon on 6 April 1348, that she was to be buried in the church of the *Cordeliers* after Vespers, and, in a marginal note to the tenth *Eclogue*, that Laura died of the plague.<sup>101</sup> It appears that the death of Petrarch's Laura coincided with the death of Laura de Noves, who also died of the plague on 6 April 1348 and was buried in the *Cordeliers*, thus "we cannot doubt that they are not the same person."<sup>102</sup> De Sade writes that it is certain that Laura de Noves contracted a "dangerous illness"

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<sup>96</sup> Jones, 'Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch's Laura'. 27.

<sup>97</sup> Sade, *Mémoires Pour La Vie De François Petrarque, Tirés De Ses Oeuvres Et Des Auteurs Contemporains, Avec des Notes ou Dissertations, & les Pièces justificatives*. 9.

<sup>98</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.6.1.

<sup>99</sup> Sade, *Mémoires Pour La Vie De François Petrarque, Tirés De Ses Oeuvres Et Des Auteurs Contemporains, Avec des Notes ou Dissertations, & les Pièces justificatives*. 9.

<sup>100</sup> All translations of de Sade's account are my own. Sade, 10. Petrarque nous apprend que sa Laure étoit d'un sang illustre et d'un Maison ancienne. La noblesse de Laure de Noves ne sauroit être révoquée en doute. Dans son Contrat de Mariage, Audibert son père est qualifié *Messire*, *Chevalier*, Jean son frère, *Damoiseau*. Personne n'ignore que ces titres étoient affectes à la plus haute Noblesse de France dans ce temps-là."

<sup>101</sup> Sade, 10.

<sup>102</sup> Sade, 10. "on ne pourra pas douter que ce ne soit la même personne."

on 3 April 1348, noting that a notary, Guillaume Jacobi, was summoned to record her last testament.<sup>103</sup> We know from civic records that there was an outbreak of plague at Avignon in 1348 and that that outbreak was at its peak during the month of April, making it very likely that the illness Laura de Noves contracted was indeed the plague. Doctors at the time agreed that anyone who contracted the disease would likely die three days later.<sup>104</sup> Thus, if Laura de Noves first displayed symptoms on 3 April, it is likely that she died on 6 April. De Sade writes that during outbreaks of the plague, doctors did not observe the ‘twenty-four-hour rule’, whereby interment would be delayed twenty-four hours after the time of death, and therefore Laura would have been buried on 6 April, in accordance with the note in the *Ambrosian Virgil*.<sup>105</sup> Because both Petrarch’s Laura and Laura de Noves died on the same date and were buried in a chapel of the church of Sainte-Clare,<sup>106</sup> at least according to de Sade, they are very likely to have been the same woman. Although de Sade’s account cannot be verified, he presents a convincing argument regarding the identity of Petrarch’s Laura.

Scholars have spent many years trying to decipher the identity of Petrarch’s Laura, and F.J. Jones draws on the family records de Sade studied combined with external, ‘incidental’ historical information, to try to piece together the identity of the woman whom Petrarch loved. Jones begins by examining poem 185 of the *Canzoniere*: *Questa fenice de l’aurata piume/This phoenix with golden plumage*, that establishes a comparison between Laura and the phoenix:

This phoenix with the feathers made of gold,  
around her lovely, pure white, gracious neck  
forms naturally a necklace that’s so precious  
it sweetens every heart, but mine consumes;

She forms a natural diadem that lights  
the air around it; and the silent flint

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<sup>103</sup> Sade, 10.

<sup>104</sup> Sade, 11.

<sup>105</sup> Sade, 11. “Laure de Noves sent les premiers symptômes de la peste le 3 Avril, fait son testament ce jour-là, et meure le 6. Elle est enterrée le même jour, parce qu’en temps de peste, on n’observe pas la règle des 24 heures pour les enterremens.”

<sup>106</sup> Sade, 12-13. “L’an 1533, dans cette Chapelle près de cette inscription, on trouva le corps de la Laure de Petrarque avec un Sonnet Italien sur par chemin dans une boîte de plomb qui saisoit connoitre que c’etoit elle. Seroit-il possible de douter a présent que Laure de Noves et Laure de Petrarque ne soient une seule et même personne.”

of Love extracts from it a subtle liquid  
fire that makes me burn when it is coldest.

A purple gown all bordered with sky blue  
sprinkled with roses veils her lovely shoulders:  
new dress, beauty unique that stands alone!

Fame has her hidden in the rich and fragrant  
bosom of the mountains of Arabia,  
but she in majesty flies through our skies.<sup>107</sup>

In this poem, Petrarch references book ten of Pliny's *Natural Histories*, in which Pliny describes the phoenix: "In the front rank of these is the phoenix, that famous bird of Arabia ... We are told that this bird is of the size of an eagle, and has a brilliant golden plumage around the neck, while the rest of the body is of a purple colour; except the tail, which is azure, with long feathers intermingled of a roseate hue; the throat is adorned with a crest, and the head with a tuft of feathers."<sup>108</sup> Many commentators believe this poem to be simply Petrarch reminiscing on past literary influences, without reference to any real-life situation. F.J. Jones, on the other hand, argues that this is not the case, because Petrarch "almost always started with a real situation and then transfigured it progressively to suit his own symbolic purposes while using literary reminiscences simply as a means of enriching the texture of his poetic line."<sup>109</sup> Thus, if Petrarch is indeed drawing inspiration from real-life, he could be describing Laura's physical appearance, both in dress and jewelry.

One hypothesis is that Laura's dress could have reflected the de Noves coat of arms, but the de Noves coat of arms is described as "golden diamonds and red dye".<sup>110</sup> This notion raises the question whether or not it was common for women to represent their familial coats of arms by their dresses. The earliest documented example of this practice dates from the second half of the fourteenth century, although, judging by the *Scene courtoise – La carole*, a fresco from the

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<sup>107</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 185.1-14.

<sup>108</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, trans. John Bostock (London, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 1855). 10.2.1-4.

<sup>109</sup> Jones, 'Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch's Laura'. 31.

<sup>110</sup> My translation. Diamonds here being the geometric shape. "Losangé d'or et de gueules". Jones, 32.

Petit-Palais in Avignon depicting a woman wearing a red robe bearing a heraldic symbol,<sup>111</sup> it was already a common phenomenon.<sup>112</sup>

What is surprising is that the features of Laura's dress did not represent the de Noves coat of arms nor the de Sade coat of arms, but rather the dress represented the coat of arms of Pope Clement VI (r.1342-1352) that can be seen above the main entrance of the papal palace at Avignon.<sup>113</sup> Jones' contention is that Laura wore this dress in honour of the pope's election in May 1342.<sup>114</sup> This in turn, prompts the question: was such a choice of dress a "widespread fashion among the ladies of Avignon" or was Laura de Noves especially privileged?<sup>115</sup> If we are to believe the Abbé de Sade, then we might conclude that Laura was permitted to reference the new pope in her dress because of her social status. Furthermore, in the fourth section of de Sade's *Piece Justificative*, the marriage contract between Laura de Noves and Hugo de Sade was witnessed by Hugues Roger, the brother of Pope Clement VI (Pierre Roger before his election), who later became a cardinal.<sup>116</sup> Likely Hugues Roger was a friend of Hugo de Sade, and this might explain why two of Laura's sons, Audebert and Paul, were honoured by the pope, according to de Sade.<sup>117</sup> The connection of the de Sade family with the papacy could explain why Laura wore a dress reflective of the coat of arms of Clement VI.

It is possible then, that the necklace Petrarch describes in poem 185 holds a similar symbolic meaning.<sup>118</sup> The necklace is described by Petrarch in several of his Latin and Italian poems, and generally is made up of diamonds and topazes in a chain of gold and pieces of jasper and symbolizes Laura's chastity, steadfastness, and purity.<sup>119</sup> Pendants on chains were far more common in the fourteenth century, and were often engraved. Petrarch describes Laura's necklace

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<sup>111</sup> Likely her husband's coat of arms.

<sup>112</sup> Jones, 'Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch's Laura.' 32; *Fresque la Carole*, 1300s, Fresco, 1300s, Petit-Palais Museum, Avignon, <https://www.petit-palais.org/musee/fr/voir-la-collection-les-peintures-de-l-ecole-d-avignon>.

<sup>113</sup> Jones, 'Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch's Laura'. 33.

<sup>114</sup> Jones, 33.

<sup>115</sup> Jones, 33.

<sup>116</sup> Sade, *Mémoires Pour La Vie De François Petrarque, Tirés De Ses Oeuvres Et Des Auteurs Contemporains, Avec des Notes ou Dissertations, & les Pieces justificatives*. 25.; Jones, 'Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch's Laura'. 32-33.

<sup>117</sup> Sade, *Mémoires Pour La Vie De François Petrarque, Tirés De Ses Oeuvres Et Des Auteurs Contemporains, Avec des Notes ou Dissertations, & les Pieces justificatives*. 41-42.

<sup>118</sup> It should be noted that necklaces had fallen out of fashion for hundreds of years, before gaining popularity towards the end of the fourteenth century. Jones, 34.

<sup>119</sup> Jones, 'Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch's Laura'. 34.

in poem 190: *Una candida cerva sopra l'erba/ A pure white hind appeared to me*, appearing far more similar to these types of necklaces:

‘Touch me not,’ in diamonds and topaz,  
was written round about her lovely neck:  
‘it pleased my Lord to set me free.’<sup>120</sup>

The necklace could also have held different meanings for Petrarch and Laura. For example, jasper was connected to the idea of chastity, but it also had implications for the health of the wearer. This second understanding of jasper would have likely been particularly suitable for Laura, as she suffered from frequent illness, recorded in the *Canzoniere*.<sup>121</sup>

Further evidence that Petrarch drew on real life experiences in writing his poetry and that his Laura was Laura de Noves comes in poem 30 of the *Canzoniere*: *Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro/I saw a girl under green laurel*, that dates to 1334.<sup>122</sup> In this poem, Laura is transformed into the laurel, wearing a green dress gifted to her by her father, Audibert de Noves, possibly with the de Noves family crest woven into the dress, as was customary at the time in France and reflects a description of a dress recorded in Laura’s marriage contract.<sup>123</sup> The last stanza reads:

The laurel, topaz in sun on snow,  
is exceeded by blonde hair near the eyes  
that bring my years so slowly to shore.<sup>124</sup>

This stanza could represent a woman wearing a green dress, with the dress being described as the laurel tree.<sup>125</sup>

Furthermore, Petrarch compares Laura with celestial bodies in the *Canzoniere*: the sun, and Venus.<sup>126</sup> The association with Venus is quite straightforward, as Venus is also the Roman

<sup>120</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 190.9-11.

<sup>121</sup> Jones, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’. 34.; Petrarca. *Canzoniere*. 84.

<sup>122</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 30.28-30. “if I’ve not miscounted it’s seven years / today that I’ve sighed from shore to shore / night and day, in heat and snow.”

<sup>123</sup> “on lui donne deux habits complets avec leurs assortimens; l’un vert, l’autre d’écarlate”. Jones 37, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’; Sade, *Mémoires Pour La Vie De François Petrarque, Tirés De Ses Oeuvres Et Des Auteurs Contemporains, Avec des Notes ou Dissertations, & les Pièces justificatives*. 10.

<sup>124</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 30.37-79.

<sup>125</sup> For discussion on the significance of the laurel see 1.7. ‘The Myth of Daphne and Apollo and the dichotomy between Laura, *l’aura*, and *lauro*’, 45-48.

<sup>126</sup> Jones, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’. 39.

goddess of love, and appears throughout Italian love poetry. The image of Laura as the sun, however, appears to be an innovation. Petrarch first references the sun in poem 4: *Que' ch'infinita providentia et arte/What infinite providence and art:*

and now from a little village a sun is given,  
such that the place, and nature, praise themselves,  
out of which so lovely a lady is born to the world.<sup>127</sup>

These references to the sun continue throughout the *Canzoniere*. Another example is in poem 212: *Beato in sogno et di languir content/Blessed with sleep, and content with languor*: “and I gaze after the sun, until, with its splendour, / it extinguishes all my powers of sight”.<sup>128</sup> The de Sade coat of arms bore an eight-pointed gold star, clearly resembling the sun, and is thus another indication that Laura de Sade could have been the woman about whom Petrarch wrote.<sup>129</sup> Again, here it is important to remember that Petrarch only knew Laura after her marriage to Hugo de Sade.

In the Italian of poem 3: *Era il giorno ch'al sol si scoloraro/It was on that day when the sun's rays rays*, in which Laura is first introduced, Petrarch uses the word ‘*donna*’ to indicate that she was already married when they first met in 1327.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, the use of the word ‘*donna*’ in poem 3 was likely to distinguish Laura de Noves from her unmarried sister-in-law, Laura de Sade.<sup>131</sup>

In sonnet 5: *Quando io movo i sospiri a chiamar voi/When I utter sighs, in calling out to you*, Petrarch spells out ‘*Laureta*’ the diminutive form of Laura, through capitalizations in the poem:

When I summon my sighs to call for you,  
with that name Love inscribed upon my heart,  
in LAUdable the sound at the beginning  
of the sweet accents of that word comes forth.

Your REgal state which I encounter next  
doubles my strength for the highest enterprise,

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<sup>127</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 4.12-14.

<sup>128</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 212.5-6.

<sup>129</sup> Jones, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’. 39.

<sup>130</sup> Jones, 43. Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 3.4. “ché i be' vostr'occhi, donna, mi legaro.”

<sup>131</sup> Jones, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’. 45.

but “TAcitly” the end cries, “for her honor  
needs better shoulders for support than yours.”

And so, to LAUd and to REvere the word  
itself instructs whenever someone calls you,  
O lady worthy of all praise and honor,

Unless, perhaps, Apollo be offended  
that morTAl tongue be so presumptuous  
to speak of his eternally green boughs.<sup>132</sup>

It is in this poem that Petrarch covertly attempts to identify Laura. The diminutive form of Laura as ‘Laureta’ has been interpreted by some to be a Provençal form of endearment, rather than a Latinism of the name.<sup>133</sup> He elevates Laura’s status to ‘regal’,<sup>134</sup> and while Laura was of noble status, she was not of royal status. Laura de Noves mother’s maiden name, however, was Réal, and the phrase “REgal state” could refer to Laura’s mother Ermessende de Noves, née. Ermessende Réal.<sup>135</sup> It is possible that Petrarch knew Ermessende de Noves before her death in 1325. Poem 5 could then identify Laura through the diminutive form of her name, and her mother’s maiden name. Furthermore, the thirteenth line of poem 3 in Italian uses the phrase: “Ferir me de saetta” [to wound me with an arrow], which was a form of archaism in fourteenth century Italian, because it separates the pronoun ‘me’ from the infinitive, ‘ferir’ and uses the preposition ‘de’ rather than ‘di’ as would have been common in fourteenth century Italian.<sup>136</sup> Thus, if Petrarch were to have written in his contemporary style, it would read: “Ferirme di saetta”.<sup>137</sup> One possible reason for this literary decision was for Petrarch to make a pun on the surname ‘de Sade’, which appeared in a variety of spellings in the mediaeval era.<sup>138</sup> Puns on ladies names were commonplace in Provençal love lyrics, and this archaism would not have necessarily seemed out of place.<sup>139</sup> Petrarch reportedly detested the “ridicule of the crowd” and he may have chosen to identify Laura through obscure puns and acrostics to save himself from the scandal that may have arisen from openly celebrating his love for a married woman of a

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<sup>132</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 5.1-14.

<sup>133</sup> Jones, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’. 43.

<sup>134</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 5.5.

<sup>135</sup> Jones, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’. 42-43.

<sup>136</sup> Jones, 43. Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 3.13.

<sup>137</sup> Jones, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’. 43.

<sup>138</sup> Jones, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’. 44.; Sade, *Mémoires Pour La Vie De François Petrarque, Tirés De Ses Oeuvres Et Des Auteurs Contemporains, Avec des Notes ou Dissertations, & les Pièces justificatives*. 40.

<sup>139</sup> Jones, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’. 44.

prominent family, thus protecting her reputation and avoiding offending both the de Sade and the de Noves families.<sup>140</sup>

This evidence provides a plausible explanation for the identity of Petrarch's Laura. Having established the context in which he wrote the *Canzoniere* and the *Secretum*, I shall now proceed to my discussion of Petrarch's use of ancient sources and myths in his writings.

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<sup>140</sup> Jones, 46.

## Chapter One: Petrarch's Use of Ancient Figures with Laura

Petrarch draws on ancient figures throughout the *Canzoniere*, relying heavily on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a collection of Roman myths written in the first century CE. Petrarch invokes the myths of Orpheus and Eurydice, Pygmalion and Galatea, and Daphne and Apollo, among others to represent his relationship with Laura. The ancient figures with whom Petrarch compares Laura are either goddesses – like Diana – or idealized women, like Eurydice and Galatea. This chapter also addresses the imagery of the laurel and its prominence in Petrarch's writing, where the laurel serves three purposes. First, it references his status as Poet Laureate; second, the assonance of 'laurel' and 'Laura' links the two together; and third, it recalls the myth of Daphne and Apollo.

Petrarch also linked himself to mythological figures, such as Orpheus, Narcissus, and Acteon and often likened Laura to precious materials, including marble, ivory, and various gemstones, linking her, for example, to Galatea, a marble statue of a woman brought to life by Pygmalion's love. Feminist scholars, however, often question this veneration, arguing that by making such comparisons, Petrarch is only admiring parts of Laura, not her entire person. Petrarch denies Laura a voice in much of his writing, likening her to Eurydice, who appears merely a ghostly figure in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

### 1.1. Death and Song: The Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice figures most prominently in Petrarch's writings that pertain to Laura. Petrarch frequently likens himself to Orpheus in writings composed after Laura's death, attempting to resurrect her through his poetry, just as Orpheus attempts to resurrect Eurydice in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Petrarch's Laura is like Eurydice, as Ovid presents her, in that she is rarely given a voice in either the *Canzoniere* or the *Secretum*. Just as Petrarch venerates Laura after her death, Orpheus venerates Eurydice.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice comes from Book Ten of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The book opens with Eurydice dying, having been bitten by a serpent shortly after her marriage

to the Thracian poet Orpheus.<sup>141</sup> Orpheus was so upset by her death that he descended into Tartarus, the underworld, in an attempt to bargain with Hades, the Prince of the Dead, to release Eurydice's soul so she could return to earth. Orpheus sang for Persephone and Hades, impressing the couple, so they agreed to release Eurydice, on condition that "he must not look back until he had emerged from the valleys of Avernus or else the gift he had been given would be taken from him".<sup>142</sup> Orpheus agreed to these conditions and began his ascent to earth. As the couple neared the end of their journey, Orpheus, fearing that his wife's strength was failing, looked behind him, and Eurydice immediately fell back into the depths of Tartarus.<sup>143</sup> Orpheus was distraught and returned to earth alone, where he began to sing songs of his sorrow, recalling myths of other lovers, including Pygmalion and Galatea. Eventually, Orpheus was attacked by Ciconian women and torn apart limb from limb, because he had spoken negatively about many women in his songs:

By such songs as these the Thracian poet was drawing the woods and rocks to follow him, charming the creatures of the wild, when suddenly the Ciconian women caught sight of him. Looking down from the crest of a hill, these maddened creatures, with animal skins slung across their breasts, saw Orpheus as he was singing and accompanying himself on the lyre. One of them, tossing her hair till it streamed in the light breeze, cried out: 'See! Look here! Here is the man who scorns us!' and flung her spear at the poet Apollo loved, at the lips which produced such melodies. ... All their weapons would have been rendered harmless by the charm of Orpheus' songs, but clamorous shouting, Phrygian flutes with curving horns, tambourines, the beating of breasts, and Bacchic howlings, drowned the music of the lyre. Then at last the stones grew crimson with the blood of the poet, whose voice they did not hear. ... The frenzied women began by seizing upon these [animals surrounding Orpheus]; then, with bloodstained hands, they turned on Orpheus himself, flocking together just as birds do, if they see a bird of night abroad by day. It was like the scene in an amphitheatre when, for a morning's entertainment in the arena, a doomed stag is hunted down by dogs.<sup>144</sup>

Orpheus tried to charm them with his song, but the women could not be swayed, and the women beat him to death, tearing him apart.<sup>145</sup>

Thus, the connection between Petrarch and Orpheus is evident. Both turned to poetry after the woman each loved died (or in Petrarch's case, first rejected his advances and then died).

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<sup>141</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 10.9-11.

<sup>142</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 10. 49-51.

<sup>143</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 10. 53-56.

<sup>144</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 11.1-19.; 11.22-27.

<sup>145</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 11.20-67.

Thus, Orpheus serves as an influential figure throughout the *Canzoniere*, as Therese Migraine-George puts it, “as both a mythic muse and a poetic ‘father figure’”.<sup>146</sup> In sonnet 187 of the *Canzoniere* entitled *Giunto Alexandro a la famosa tomba/Alexander sighing before the famous tomb* Petrarch explicitly casts himself as Orpheus and Laura as Eurydice, writing:

She most worthy of Homer or Orpheus  
or the shepherd that Mantua still honours  
that they would have sung of her alone.<sup>147</sup>

This connection is made even more explicit in the poems written after Laura’s death. In poem 323: *Standomi un giorno solo a la fenestra/ One day, standing alone at my window*, Petrarch alludes to Laura’s death through likening Laura to Eurydice:

Lastly I saw a lovely graceful lady  
go pensive among the flowers and grass,  
so I can’t think of her without burning, trembling:  
humble in herself, she was proud before Love:  
and she had on so white a gown,  
so woven it seemed gold mixed with snow:  
but the crown of her head  
was hidden by a dark mist:  
then, stung by a little snake in the heel,  
she bowed like a flower when picked,  
glad and confident to depart.  
Ah, nothing but weeping lasts in this world!<sup>148</sup>

Here Petrarch references Laura’s death in 1348, comparing the tragedy of her death to the sorrow Orpheus felt upon Eurydice’s death.<sup>149</sup> Petrarch writes in poem 332 of the *Canzoniere*, *Mia benigna fortuna e ‘l viver lieto/ My kindly fate, and a life made happy*:

that I could bring my Laura back from Death,  
as Orpheus did Eurydice, without rhyme,  
then I would live, and still be more happy!<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Thérèse Migraine-George, ‘Specular Desires: Orpheus and Pygmalion as Aesthetic Paradigms in Petrarch’s “Rime Sparse”’, *Comparative Literature Studies* 36, no. 3 (1999): 226–46. 226.

<sup>147</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 187. 9-11.

<sup>148</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 323. 61-72.

<sup>149</sup> There is a shift in Petrarch’s poems between poems 263 and 264, marking Laura’s death.

<sup>150</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 332. 50-52.

A more subtle allusion to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is to be found in poem 311 entitled *Quel rosignol, che si soave piagne/ That nightingale who weeps so sweetly*, where Petrarch writes:

That nightingale who weeps so sweetly,  
perhaps for his brood, or his dear companion,  
fills the sky and country round with sweetness  
with so many piteous, bright notes,

and it seems all night he stays beside me,  
and reminds me of my harsh fate:  
for I have no one to grieve for but myself,  
who believed that Death could not take a goddess.<sup>151</sup>

This sonnet, includes a series of textual allusions, including to the Provençal lyrics<sup>152</sup> and more prominently to a simile in Virgil's *Georgics*:

As in the poplar-shade a nightingale  
Mourns her lost young, which some relentless swain,  
Spying, from the nest has torn unfledged, but she  
Wails the long night, and perched upon a spray  
With sad insistence pipes her dolorous strain,  
Till all the region with her wrongs o'erflows.  
No love, no new desire, constrained his soul:  
By snow-bound Tanais<sup>153</sup> and the icy north,  
Far steppes to frost Rhipaeon forever wed,  
Alone he wandered, lost Eurydice  
Lamenting, and the gifts of ungiven.  
Scorned by which tribute the Ciconian dames,  
Amid their awful Bacchanalian rites<sup>154</sup>  
And midnight revellings, tore him limb from limb,  
And strewed his fragments over the wide fields.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 311. 1-8.

<sup>152</sup> Provençal lyrics were a kind of poetic literature that flourished in the Provence region of France between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. These lyrics often focused on themes of courtly or chivalric love. These lyrics were often love songs meant to be sung by troubadours. For further discussion of the influence of music in Petrarch's writing see page 31-32.

<sup>153</sup> A city in ancient Greece at the foothills of the Rhipaeon mountains.

<sup>154</sup> The Bacchanalia was a festival to the Roman god of wine Bacchus (the Greek Dionysius), who is often associated with wild behaviour.

<sup>155</sup> Virgil, *Bucolics, Aeneid, and Georgics of Vergil*, trans. J.B. Greenough (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1900). 4.511-519.

In this passage Virgil compares Orpheus' laments for Eurydice to a nightingale crying for her lost child.<sup>156</sup> The passage ends with Orpheus' death, as he was torn apart by the Ciconian women because they were offended by his depiction of women other than Eurydice. Thus, we see one example of the layers of Petrarch's writings, using Virgil to reference the older myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Furthermore, it is only through Laura's death that Petrarch can identify with Orpheus completely, as their shared experience of loss is what creates the link between the two.<sup>157</sup> Thus, Petrarch uses Laura's death to compare himself to Orpheus, one of the greatest mythical poets of antiquity, as a way of elevating his own status.

Like Eurydice, Laura is rarely given a voice in Petrarch's works, and appears largely as a shadowy figure. Some scholars argue that this absence is because Laura poses a danger to Petrarch, just as Orpheus' mourning for Eurydice through song led to his eventual demise. In poem 135: *Qual più diversa et nova/Whatever varied and strange thing*, Petrarch references the stones that lacerated Orpheus at the hands of the Ciconian women:

so my soul is stripped  
(stealing the heart that once was whole,  
and making me now scattered and divided)  
a stone to draw flesh  
more than iron.<sup>158</sup>

This reference reappears in poem 359: *Quando il soave mio fido conforto/ When my gentle faithful comforter*:

I weep: and she dries my face  
with her hand, and then she sighs  
  
sweetly, and speaks  
words that might shatter stone:  
and afterwards departs, along with sleep.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry*, Elizabethan Club Series 7 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982). 121.

<sup>157</sup> Migraine-George, 'Specular Desires'. 234.

<sup>158</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 135.25-29.

<sup>159</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 67-70.

By drawing a relation between Laura and the stones that killed Orpheus, Petrarch shows her potential for danger, using Orpheus' physical danger as a metaphor for Petrarch's metaphorical distress at his separation from Laura.<sup>160</sup> Petrarch expresses this emotional distress in bodily terms in poem 198: *L'aura soave al sole spiega et vibra/ The gentle breeze loosens, and stirs in the sun*, writing:

There's no marrow in my bones, nor blood  
in my veins that doesn't feel the tremor,  
when I'm near one who too often sets death  
and life together in the balance.<sup>161</sup>

Thus, according to Migraine-George, "Eurydice and Laura appear as potential sources of physical threats and dangers for Orpheus and Petrarch".<sup>162</sup> It is the physical embodiment of emotional distress or danger that Migraine-George references here. Petrarch uses the metaphor of physical danger in poem 50: *Ne la stagionche 'l ciel rapido inchina/At the moment when the swift sky turns*, when he refers to Laura as "a wild creature that consumes me, / one I cannot catch, that hides and flees."<sup>163</sup> He continues with this metaphor, calling Laura "[t]his humble creature, with bear's or tiger's heart."<sup>164</sup> Petrarch searches for a medicine "ancient or new",<sup>165</sup> to heal the wounds inflicted by Laura's denial of his love.

The connection between Orpheus and Petrarch deepens when we examine the musical aspect of Petrarch's writings. While Orpheus was a poet who sang his poems, accompanied by a lyre, Petrarch relies heavily on the musical background of poetry. Growing up in Avignon, Petrarch was exposed from a young age to the songs of troubadours, with their songs of unrequited love. Petrarch then took this musical style, and blended it with Latin poetry, thus his writing is deeply imbued with musical influences.<sup>166</sup> The *canzone*, a poetic style defined as "a song, a ballad; a species of lyric, closely resembling the madrigal but less strict in style" in Italian or Provençal Literature,<sup>167</sup> is Petrarch's preferred poetic form throughout the *Canzoniere*.

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<sup>160</sup> Migraine-George, 'Specular Desires'. 231.

<sup>161</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 198.5-8.

<sup>162</sup> Migraine-George, 'Specular Desires'. 233.

<sup>163</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 50.41-42.

<sup>164</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 152.1.

<sup>165</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 214.21-23.

<sup>166</sup> Migraine-George, 'Specular Desires'. 241.

<sup>167</sup> 'Canzone, n.', in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed 30 October 2020, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/27334>.

Furthermore, troubadours originally used the *canzone* form, but during the thirteenth century, secular Italian poets assimilated the form into their works.<sup>168</sup> Thus, throughout the *Canzoniere* there is a musicality central to all the poems. Although inspired by the tradition of troubadour lyrics, Petrarch's intent in composing poems collected into the *Canzoniere* differs from that of the troubadour. While in songs of courtly love the troubadour celebrates a woman for her beauty and intellect only, Petrarch's poems lie "firmly in the celebration of the creative effect that the beloved produces."<sup>169</sup>

## 1.2. Creating the Perfect Woman: The Myth of Pygmalion and Galatea

The myth of Pygmalion is in book ten of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and occurs while Orpheus tells love stories after returning from Tartarus. Orpheus narrates all of book ten and the beginning of book eleven of the *Metamorphoses*. Orpheus tells these stories while singing in a grove of trees, charming the grove in which he sits:

such was the grove which Orpheus had drawn round him, and now he sat in the midst of a gathering of wild creatures, and a host of birds. He tested the chords of his lyre, striking them with his thumb, till his ear was satisfied that the notes they played, though different, were all in tune. Then he began to sing.<sup>170</sup>

In these songs Orpheus begins by telling his own story, and after completing his story, he moves on to tell the story of Pygmalion. The stories of book ten are all embedded narratives, as Orpheus narrates them all, including the stories of Pygmalion and Galatea, Hyacinthus, Myrrha and Cinryas, Venus and Adonis, and Atalanta and Hippomenes.

Pygmalion was a sculptor who was disgusted by the immorality of the women surrounding him and decided to create the perfect woman out of ivory.<sup>171</sup> He then fell in love with his statue, whom he named Galatea. During the festival dedicated to Venus, Pygmalion

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<sup>168</sup> Migraine-George, 'Specular Desires'. 241.

<sup>169</sup> Danijela Kambasković-Sawers, 'Carved in Living Laurel: The Sonnet Sequence and Transformations of Idolatry', *Renaissance Studies* 21, no. 3 (2007): 380, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-4658.2007.00365.x>.

<sup>170</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 10.143-147.

<sup>171</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 10. 45-60

prayed to the goddess of love that she might bring his statue to life, and she granted his prayer.<sup>172</sup> Galatea became a real woman, and she gave birth to a son, Cinryas.

The link between Petrarch and Orpheus is more profound when we remember that Orpheus tells the story of Pygmalion and Galatea in book ten of the *Metamorphoses*, and as such, he is Galatea's creator. Through his creation of Galatea, Orpheus fashions the statue after his wife Eurydice, effectively reviving her through his storytelling.<sup>173</sup> Just as Pygmalion created Galatea, so too did Petrarch create his idealized version of Laura.<sup>174</sup>

In many ways, Petrarch is like Pygmalion, as he creates the idealized woman in his mind, with whom he falls in love.<sup>175</sup> As we saw with Eurydice, Petrarch references beautiful and precious materials. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes Galatea as being made of "snowy ivory",<sup>176</sup> and Petrarch draws on this, referencing snow and ivory in his characterization of Laura,<sup>177</sup> thus creating the link between the two women. As Jennifer Rushworth observes, this connection "highlight[s] Laura as a created object and a work of art".<sup>178</sup> Petrarch, like Pygmalion, falls in love with an aesthetic ideal, rather than a real woman.

This is particularly evident in poems 77 and 78, called *Per mirar Policlito a prova fiso/ Polyclitus gazing fixedly a thousand years* and *Quando giunse a Simon l'alto concetto/When Simone had matched the high concept* respectively, that reference Simone Martini's portrait of Laura.<sup>179</sup> Petrarch loved this painting, just as Pygmalion loved his statue of Galatea. Petrarch first met Simone Martini (1283-1344) in 1336, when Martini arrived at Avignon after he was commissioned to contribute paintings for the new papal palace.<sup>180</sup> Petrarch commissioned

<sup>172</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 10. 70-97.

<sup>173</sup> Migraine-George, 'Specular Desires'. 243.

<sup>174</sup> For further discussion of Petrarch's self-referentiality see 2.5. 'Relics and Icons', 66-68.

<sup>175</sup> Giacomo Colonna accused Petrarch of falling in love with his own creation, as seen by Petrarch's response to Colonna in the second book of the *Familiars*. For further discussion of this letter see iii. 'Petrarch and Laura', 15.

<sup>176</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 10.246-247.

<sup>177</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 30.2; Petrarch. *Canz.* 199.10.

<sup>178</sup> Jennifer Rushworth, 'Icons and Idols in Dante and Petrarch', *Romance Studies* 35, no. 2 (3 April 2017): 81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02639904.2017.1341197>.

<sup>179</sup> References to this portrait appear also in poems 96.5-6. "But that sweet joyful face whose image I carry / engraved in my breast", and 130.9. "And I adhere to one image alone" of the *Canzoniere*.

<sup>180</sup> Martini was one of several artists commissioned to paint frescoes at the papal palace at Avignon. One other notable artist was Matteo Giovanni, who painted the frescoes in the Saint Martial Chapel, the Saint John Chapel, and in the Grand Audience Hall. Martini painted frescoes on the portal to the Notre-Dame-des-Doms cathedral. 'Priceless Frescoes | Palais Des Papes - Avignon', Palais des Papes, accessed 22 January 2021, <https://www.palais-des-papes.com/en/content/priceless-frescoes.>; Alexander Lee, 'The Look(s) of Love: Petrarch,

Martini to complete a portrait of Laura in 1336 that does not survive today.<sup>181</sup> Alexander Lee argues: “[w]orks that were composed merely to gratify the senses were, of course, execrable, and those who admired such tableaux for their own sake indulged a vain and futile pleasure *akin* [emphasis added] to idolatry.”<sup>182</sup> While writing the *Secretum*, Petrarch may have reflected on this occasion as he wrestled with the nature of his love for Laura.

In poem 78, Petrarch speaks to Pygmalion, wishing his portrait of Laura would come to life, just as Pygmalion’s statue of Galatea:

Pygmalion, what delight you had  
from your creation, since the joy I wish  
but once, you possessed a thousand times.<sup>183</sup>

Petrarch could have understood the portrait of Laura painted by Simone Martini as simply an icon of the real woman,<sup>184</sup> and the portrait’s failure to come to life, as had Pygmalion’s Galatea, served as a testament of Laura’s indifference towards Petrarch.<sup>185</sup>

In poem 77, Petrarch opens with a reference to Polyclitus, the fifth century BCE Greek artist who was considered the most excellent sculptor of his time.<sup>186</sup> Despite his status, however, Polyclitus was never able to find “adequate beauty for his art”.<sup>187</sup> Thus, Polyclitus has been surpassed, according to Petrarch, by the works of Simone Martini, as Martini had found in Laura a subject worthy of his work:

But Simone must have been in Paradise  
(from where this gentle lady came)  
saw her there, and portrayed her in paint,  
to give us proof here of such loveliness.<sup>188</sup>

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Simone Martini and the Ambiguities of Fourteenth-Century Portraiture’, *Journal of Art Historiography*; Glasgow, no. 17 (December 2017): 1.; Victoria Kirkham, *Chronology of Petrarch’s Life and Works, Petrarch* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), xv. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.7208/9780226437439-004/html>.

<sup>181</sup> Petrarch commissioned again in 1338 to paint the frontispiece for his *Ambrosian Virgil*. Kirkham, *Chronology of Petrarch’s Life and Works*. xvi.

<sup>182</sup> Lee, ‘The Look(s) of Love’. 4.

<sup>183</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 78.12-14.

<sup>184</sup> The woman about whom Petrarch wrote is believed to be Laura de Noves.

<sup>185</sup> Lee, ‘The Look(s) of Love’. 7.

<sup>186</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 77.1

<sup>187</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 29.

<sup>188</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 77.5-8.

Here we see another instance of Petrarch's immoderate love, writing that Laura had come from Heaven, so that for Martini to paint her must have been a divine experience. Petrarch's wishing for the portrait to come to life, just as Galatea had done, proves that his love was worldly, despite arguing that his love was purely spiritual. It is for this worldly love and his wilful blindness to it that the shade of St Augustine challenges Petrarch in the *Secretum*, that shall be examined in chapter two.

### 1.3. Narcissism in Petrarch and the Myth of Narcissus and Echo

Ovid presents the myth of Narcissus and Echo in Book Three of the *Metamorphoses*. It tells of a young woman, Echo, who was cursed by the goddess Juno to be able to speak only by repeating the last words of the phrases she heard. Echo was cursed because she had distracted Juno when she saw the Nymphs together with Juno's husband, Jupiter, who was notorious for his infidelity, so that the nymphs could flee.<sup>189</sup> Echo then secretly fell in love with a handsome young man named Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection. Narcissus spent all of his time looking at his reflection in the water, forgetting to eat, sleep, or drink, and after he died, was turned into the narcissus flower, to ensure that he would live on.<sup>190</sup>

There is a sense of narcissism in Petrarch, Orpheus, and Pygmalion, as they shun all women except the single woman they love.<sup>191</sup> Orpheus, for example, berated women in his songs, ultimately leading to his demise, and Pygmalion reject all women thinking them to be too immoral and impure, leading him to carve his own idealized woman out of marble. In Petrarch's writings this is visible in poem 16: *Movesi il vecchierel canuto et bianco/ Grizzled and white the old man leaves*, where Petrarch writes:

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<sup>189</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 3.358-367.

<sup>190</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 3.414-492.

<sup>191</sup> Petrarch had two children: a son, Giovanni, born in 1337, and a daughter Francesca, born in 1343. We can therefore assume that his shunning of all women was a form of his poetic expression, however, he never married and it is therefore reasonable to assume he never loved another woman as much as he loved Laura. Migraine-George, 'Specular Desires'. 238.

so, alas, I sometimes go searching,  
 lady, as far as is possible, in others  
 for the true, desired form of you.<sup>192</sup>

Thus, all three of these men, one real and two mythical, are using their artistic abilities to satisfy their need for beauty through the creation of ‘perfect’ women, achieved by putting down all others.

This narcissism is discussed in Giuseppe Mazzotta’s *The Worlds of Petrarch*, when he writes, “Pygmalion uncovers the narcissistic quality of his fixation: like Narcissus who is suspended in a self-fascination in the mirror of the water, Pygmalion is in search of an *eidolon*, which is a Greek term for an image or Phantom of his own mind”.<sup>193</sup> It is only in sonnet 45 entitled *Il mio adversaria in cui veder solete/ Mirror, my enemy*, in which the figure of Narcissus is explicitly recalled, but it is referenced more frequently throughout the *Secretum*. Interestingly, sonnet 45 presents Laura, and not Petrarch as Narcissus:

My enemy in which you often see  
 those eyes of yours that Love and Heaven honor  
 enamors you with beauties not its own  
 but sweet and happy supernaturally.

On his advice, lady, you have expelled me  
 from the sweet place that I had made my home:  
 miserable exile! Though I may not be  
 worthy to dwell where you alone reside.

But since I had been fixed there by strong nails,  
 no mirror should have made you harsh and proud  
 against me since you pleased yourself therein.

Indeed, if you recall to mind Narcissus,  
 both this and that course lead to the same end –  
 although no grass is fit for such a flower.<sup>194</sup>

Here we see Laura gazing at her reflection in the mirror, with the poem ending with a warning about Narcissus’ death. Mazzotta argues that the implication of this poem is that “whatever authentic self-knowledge is possible, it is equivalent to death... The idolatrous self-love of

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<sup>192</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 16.12-14.

<sup>193</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 31.

<sup>194</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 45.1-14.

Narcissus is the tragedy of self-knowledge, the unbearable experience of facing one's own finitude".<sup>195</sup> For Petrarch, this self-love is shown through his searching for the laurel crown, and his attempt at surpassing the inevitable 'finitude' of the world through achieving fame and glory.

In some ways, the correlation between Narcissus and Laura is superficial, comparing Laura's beauty to that of Narcissus. A more in-depth reading, however, offers the idea that in death, Laura will be removed from the temporal world, but unlike Narcissus, who lived on as a flower, Laura will exist nowhere.<sup>196</sup> Thus, "Laura is in the utopian domain of the imaginary, the poet is in his exile. Petrarch, as we know, gives thematic weight to the question of exile: the lover is always distant, always somewhere else, forever seeking the time and space of his encounter with Laura".<sup>197</sup> In this reading, Petrarch is not referring to the notion of political exile, but rather to emotional exile, as Petrarch is separated from the woman he loved because she had died.

This poem is typical of Petrarch's lament at the dichotomy between the lover and the beloved: "she is honoured in heaven, disdainful; he is inferior, banished from her and suffering."<sup>198</sup> Although Petrarch's reminder of the fate of Narcissus appears as a warning, the tone is still one of adoration, as Petrarch flatters Laura, ending with the compliment that if she were turned into a flower as was Narcissus, the ground would not be worthy of her.<sup>199</sup>

Another reading of the story of Narcissus is as a foil to that of Pygmalion. Narcissus melts into the waters of his reflection, causing his metamorphoses into a flower and resulting in the transformation of animate to inanimate.<sup>200</sup> Pygmalion, on the other hand, saw the transformation of inanimate to animate through the animation by Venus of his creation of Galatea. Narcissus' transformation links with Petrarch's feeling of exile, as though he were constantly placed outside a community, and as such, Petrarch resorts to writing as a form of

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<sup>195</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 65.

<sup>196</sup> Mazzotta, 66.

<sup>197</sup> Mazzotta, 66.

<sup>198</sup> Anthony Archdeacon, 'The Influence of Ovid's Echo and Narcissus Myth on English Petrarchan Poetry', *Early Modern Literary Studies* 20, no. 1 (2018): 1.

<sup>199</sup> Archdeacon, 1-2.

<sup>200</sup> John Ochoa, 'The Poet Becomes Poem: The Missing Object and Petrarch's Ends in the Canzoniere', *Romance Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08831157.2018.1396138>.

escape. This is especially prominent in Petrarch's mourning for Laura, when he turns to poetry as an escape from his grief, in a form of "linguistic self-enclosure".<sup>201</sup>

#### 1.4. Relics and Stags: The Myth of Actaeon and Diana

The myth of Actaeon and Diana comes from the Third Book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Actaeon was a Theban hunter, and while out hunting with friends, he separated from the group and stumbled upon the goddess Diana bathing. When Diana's attendants saw Actaeon watching them bathe, they shrieked and attempted to cover the virgin goddess with their own bodies, but Diana was taller than the nymphs. In her rage at Actaeon's violation of her privacy, Diana turned him into a stag. When his hunting dogs saw him, they attacked him, tearing him apart.<sup>202</sup> There are connections to be made between Actaeon and Orpheus, as both men were torn apart as a result of action by the gods; both men had to pay the price of their actions.

The theme of 'seeing' is referenced in poem 312: *Ne per sereno ciel ir vaghe stelle/ Not the stars that wander the calm sky*, when Petrarch writes:

It pains me to live so heavily and long  
who call for death, in my great desire, again,  
to see one it were better never to have seen.<sup>203</sup>

Like Actaeon, Petrarch wishes he had never seen Laura, and would thus be spared of his misery, amplified after her death. As Nancy Vickers writes: "he must both perpetuate her image and forget it: he must 'cry out in silence,'<sup>204</sup> cry out 'with paper and ink,'<sup>205</sup> that is to say, write".<sup>206</sup>

As was the case with Narcissus, although allusions to Diana are made throughout the *Canzoniere*, she is named only in poem 52, a madrigal entitled *Non al suo amante piu Diana piacque/ Diana was not more pleasing to her lover*:

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<sup>201</sup> Ochoa, 42.

<sup>202</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 3.108-252.

<sup>203</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 312.12-14.

<sup>204</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 71.6.

<sup>205</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 23.99.

<sup>206</sup> Nancy J. Vickers, 'Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme', *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 270.

Diana never pleaser her lover more,  
 when just by chance all of her naked body  
 he saw bathing within the chilly waters,

than did the simple mountain shepherdess,  
 please me, the while she bathed the pretty veil  
 that holds her lovely blonde hair in the breeze.

So that even now in the hot sunlight she makes me,  
 tremble all over with the chill of love.<sup>207</sup>

In the original Italian, Laura is referenced through the phrase '*l'aura*', meaning the breeze, thus Laura's presence is implied as Petrarch compares her to the goddess Diana. Here, Petrarch writes that, the sight of Laura washing her veil in the river was more pleasing to him than was the sight of the nude goddess Diana to Actaeon. There is a degree of irony in this analogy, because although it is fair to assume Actaeon enjoyed seeing the bathing goddess, that seeing had dire consequences. Ovid writes that the fates were directing Actaeon towards the grove where Diana was bathing, leading him towards pleasure then almost immediate pain.<sup>208</sup> This could mirror Petrarch's situation, because although he loved Laura, seeing her appears to only have caused him pain, because his love was never returned.

In poem 23 entitled *Nel dolce tempo de la prima etade/ I'll sing of the sweet time of my first youth*, Petrarch explicitly connects himself to Actaeon, writing:

I speak the truth (though I may seem to lie)  
 that I felt myself altered from my true form,  
 and swiftly transmuted to a lonely stag,  
 wandering from wood to wood:  
 and fleeing from my own pack of hounds.<sup>209</sup>

Through casting himself as Actaeon, Petrarch expresses his love for Laura, and, just as Actaeon (and Orpheus) are torn apart, so too is Petrarch because of his feelings of unrequited love.

Petrarch's remembering of Laura is his way of attempting to stabilize her presence, and "abolish time", but in this effort he is unsuccessful.<sup>210</sup> His lack of success in creating a stable

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<sup>207</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 52.1-8.

<sup>208</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 3.176-177.

<sup>209</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 23. 157-159.

<sup>210</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 63.

presence for Laura's apparition threatens his poetic voice.<sup>211</sup> Petrarch fears losing his poetic voice because of his inability to form a stable relationship with Laura: the source of his poetic inspiration. In this fear of losing his voice, Petrarch alludes to the myth of Actaeon, who lost his voice as a result of looking at the bathing goddess, Diana. By referencing this myth, Petrarch demonstrates "an awareness of a poetic crisis that depends on the unsettling nature of the imaginary experience".<sup>212</sup>

### 1.5. Queens and Goddesses: Laura as Dido and Venus

Although many of Petrarch's classical allusions are to the myths found in the *Metamorphoses*, Petrarch also refers to Virgil's *Aeneid*, and to the relationship between Aeneas and Dido. The *Aeneid* is an epic poem from the late first century BCE that is roughly contemporaneous with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>213</sup> It tells the story of Aeneas, a Trojan who sailed to Italy after the Trojan war, becoming the mythological ancestor of the Romans. On his way from Troy to Rome, Aeneas stopped in Carthage, where he met Queen Dido, and they had an affair before Aeneas continued on his journey to Italy.

In several of his poems, Petrarch quotes or adapts Virgil. In poem 183: *Se 'l dolce sguardo do costei m'ancide/ If that sweet look of hers can kill me*, Petrarch uses the phrase "woman my nature",<sup>214</sup> which is an adaptation of a phrase in Virgil's *Aeneid* "a mutable and shifting [nature,] this is woman".<sup>215</sup> Furthermore, as Thomas Greene writes in *The Light in Troy*, "Petrarch plays with the ambiguity of the woman's creaturely status which underlies the dramatic interplay in the *Aeneid*, but he reverses ... the direction taken by appearances: Venus is a goddess who looks like a woman, but Laura is a woman who looks like a goddess".<sup>216</sup> Greene continues that Petrarch highlights Laura's "superhumanity"<sup>217</sup> in poem 90 of the *Canzoniere*

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<sup>211</sup> Mazzotta, 63.

<sup>212</sup> Mazzotta, 63-64.

<sup>213</sup> The *Aeneid* was written between 29 and 19 BCE; the *Metamorphoses* was first published in 8 CE.

<sup>214</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 183.12.

<sup>215</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. H.R. Fairclough, vol. 63-64, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1916). 4.569

<sup>216</sup> Greene, *The Light in Troy*. 112.

<sup>217</sup> Greene, 113.

entitled *Erano I capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi/ She let her gold hair scatter in the breeze*, in which Petrarch writes:

Her way of moving was no mortal thing,  
but of angelic form: and her speech  
rang higher than a mere human voice.  
A celestial spirit, a living sun was what I saw.<sup>218</sup>

Petrarch echoes Virgil's description of Venus in poem 126: *Chiare, fresche et dolci acque/Clear, sweet fresh water*:

How often I would say  
at that time, full of awe:  
"For certain she was born up there in Heaven!"  
And her divine behaviour,  
her face and words and her sweet smile  
so filled me with forgetfulness  
and so divided me  
from the true image  
that I would sigh and say  
"Just how and when did I come here?"  
thinking I was in Heaven, not where I was;  
and since then I have loved  
this bank of grass and find peace nowhere else.<sup>219</sup>

Both these descriptions of Laura echo Virgil's description of Venus in the *Aeneid*: "for your face is not mortal nor has your voice a human ring".<sup>220</sup> Virgil further describes Venus, writing: "She spoke, and as she turned away, her roseate neck flashed bright. From her head her ambrosial tresses breathed celestial fragrance; down to her feet fell her raiment, and in her step she was revealed a very goddess."<sup>221</sup>

This superhumanity is another example of Petrarch's idealization of Laura. Greene observes that this superhumanity is juxtaposed in lines 14 and 15 of the same poem which read "and if she [Laura] is not such now, / the wound's not healed, although the bow is slack",<sup>222</sup> which highlight her "vulnerability to time".<sup>223</sup> Here Greene references Laura's death when she

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<sup>218</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 90.9-14.

<sup>219</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 126.53-65.

<sup>220</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*. 1.327-328.

<sup>221</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*. 1.402-405.

<sup>222</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 90.14-15.; Greene, *The Light in Troy*. 113.

<sup>223</sup> Greene, *The Light in Troy*. 113.

was relatively young. Although Petrarch paints Laura as superhuman because of her beauty and divine qualities, Laura was not divine but was subject to death, a reminder to the reader of the mortality of humans compared to the immortality of the goddess, Venus.

Sonnet 164: *Or che 'l ciel et la terra e 'l vento tace/ Now that the sky and the earth and the wind are silent*, dramatizes Petrarch's love for Laura, drawing on book four of the Aeneid which describes Aeneas and Dido at night:

Now that the heavens, earth and the wind are silent  
and sleep has beast and bird in its control,  
while night is driving round her car of stars  
and in its bed the sea rests wavelessly;

Awake, I think, burn, weep; and who destroys me  
is always in my mind to my sweet pain:  
war is my state, I'm filled with grief and anger –  
only the thought of her gives me some peace.

So from one clear and living font alone  
there springs the sweet and bitter that I feed on;  
one hand alone can heal and wound me both;  
and that my suffering may never end  
I'm born and die a thousand times a day,  
so far am I from my salvation.<sup>224</sup>

In this poem, Petrarch casts himself as Dido, who laments after Aeneas abandoned her:

It was night, and over the earth weary creatures were tasting the peace of slumber; the woods and wild seas had sunk to rest – the hour when stars roll midway in their gliding course, when all the land is still, and beasts and coloured birds, both those that far and near haunt the limpid lakes, and those that dwell in the thorny thickets of the countryside, are couched in sleep beneath the silent night. They were soothing their cares, their hearts oblivious of sorrows. But not so the soul-racked Phoenician queen; she never sinks into sleep, nor draws darkness into eyes or heart. Her pangs redouble, and her love, swelling up, surges afresh, as she heaves with a mighty tide of passion.<sup>225</sup>

In this passage, Petrarch once again alters gender roles, as he takes on the persona of Dido, the jilted lover. Dido ultimately ended up killing herself because of her despair after Aeneas left her

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<sup>224</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 164.1-14.

<sup>225</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*. 4.5.22-538.

to continue his journey. Petrarch highlights the oxymoronic quality of the situation through the phrase “sweet distress”,<sup>226</sup> to explain how he (and Dido) were suffering because of their love.<sup>227</sup> Petrarch continues that “one hand alone heals me and pierces me”,<sup>228</sup> reminding the reader of Dido’s suicide by stabbing herself.

### 1.6. Retaking Control: Laura as Mercury

The myth of Mercury and Battus comes from Book Two of the *Metamorphoses*. It tells the story of the shepherd, Battus, who witnessed the god Mercury stealing a herd of cattle. Mercury offered Battus a cow in return for his silence. Battus took the cow and replied: “Sooner will that stone tell of your theft than I”.<sup>229</sup> Mercury decided to try and trick Battus to see if he would tell anyone what happened to the herd, offering a bull in exchange for information. Battus was tempted by the prospect of gaining two animals in one day, and not realising he was being tricked, told the disguised Mercury what happened to the cattle. As a punishment, Mercury turned Battus’ heart into stone.<sup>230</sup>

In the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch relates Laura to Mercury, as she steals his heart, just as Mercury turned Battus’ heart into stone. She is depicted as Mercury in poem 23, where Petrarch writes:

and frozen thoughts about my heart  
had almost made a covering of enamel,  
so that its hardness left nothing lacking.<sup>231</sup>

This is one of the few instances where Laura exercises some agency, as Laura takes control of Petrarch’s heart, and in doing this, she takes control of the narrative.<sup>232</sup> She does not speak, but as Barbara Estrin describes:

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<sup>226</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 164.7.

<sup>227</sup> Jefferson Hunter, ‘Sleep, Wakefulness, and Space: Virgil, Petrarch, and Monteverdi’, *The Yale Review* 101, no. 2 (2013): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/yrev.12022>.

<sup>228</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 164.11.

<sup>229</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 2.696-697.

<sup>230</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 3.684-707.

<sup>231</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 23.24-26.

<sup>232</sup> Barbara L. Estrin, *Laura: Uncovering Gender and Genre in Wyatt, Donne, and Marvell*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 1994). 62.

What he can't [*sic*] see is first hidden by Laura's disguise and finally withheld by her revelation. She may look like a woman, but she does a man's work. She may look like a mortal, but she has a god's powers. The nature of her godliness pre-empts the nature of Petrarch's artfulness as the nature of her elusiveness annuls his prioritizing. She is his mirror image and his better as god.<sup>233</sup>

This instance of Laura's power over Petrarch also demonstrates a shift in gender dynamics, a theme Petrarch plays with throughout the *Canzoniere*. Petrarch takes on the female gaze, as he is rendered powerless against Laura-Mercury, because the divine takes precedence over the human. The stone of Petrarch's heart signifies his "psychologically terrified – already ghostly – self. ... [because] as woman, Laura-Mercury has many layers. As god, she retains her mystery".<sup>234</sup> Thus, this is a rare occasion in which Laura is able to assert her power. This ties in with the fear felt by Diana when looked upon by Actaeon, again playing with gender roles. In this circumstance, Petrarch may be understood to be both Diana and Actaeon. Petrarch represents Diana in her feeling of helplessness after she was seen by Actaeon, but he also represents Actaeon in his powerlessness against Laura, who in this circumstance seems to stand for Diana, because she becomes the goddess, and so more powerful than Petrarch. The powerful Laura also serves as the antithesis of Pygmalion, because "Petrarch's story rendered her an image carved out of his desire – a marble statue or cruelty that resulted in his weeping – Laura responds artistically, using his form against him".<sup>235</sup> In this circumstance, Laura opposes Pygmalion as she holds the power over Petrarch, stealing his heart and turning it to stone, rather than giving life to it as Pygmalion (with the help of Venus) gave life to the marble Galatea.

Laura-Mercury resurfaces again in poem 106: *Nova angeletta sopra l'ale accorta/ A new young angel carried by her wings*, as the "new little angel" who captures Petrarch.<sup>236</sup> Again she holds power over Petrarch, but this time not as an all-powerful Roman goddess, but rather as a sweet angel, the object of Petrarch's love. According to Estrin, she returns once more in the last lines of poem 129 entitled *Di pensier in pensier, di monte in monte/ Love leads me on, from thought to thought*: "There is my heart, and she who steals it from me: / here you can only see my ghost".<sup>237</sup> Here Petrarch reflects Laura, and in doing so he becomes the "Apollonian creator

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<sup>233</sup> Estrin, 62.

<sup>234</sup> Estrin, 64-65.

<sup>235</sup> Estrin, 64.

<sup>236</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 106.1-8.

<sup>237</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 129.71-72.

of her. ... He claims nature is already a poet. At the bottom, the rock is ‘like a man who thinks and weeps and writes’<sup>238</sup> – a Pygmalion who creates yet another Pygmalion, an infinite regression of carvers. The stone chisels itself as chiseler’.<sup>239</sup> Thus the rock of Petrarch’s heart is transported back in time, becoming the marble out of which Pygmalion carved Galatea, showing the cyclical nature of Petrarch’s relationship with Laura.

### 1.7. The Myth of Daphne and Apollo and the Dichotomy between Laura, *l’aura*, and *lauro*

The image of the laurel on which Petrarch relies heavily, comes from Book One of the *Metamorphoses*. Daphne was the unmarried daughter of the river god Peneus. The god Apollo was struck by one of Cupid’s arrows during an argument, and fell hopelessly in love with Daphne, who was not interested. Apollo pursued her, refusing to take no as an answer. Daphne fled, but realized that Apollo was bound to catch her, so she prayed to her father for help. Peneus’ response was to turn Daphne into the laurel tree, but Apollo was still in love and declared that the laurel would be ‘his’ tree.<sup>240</sup> Thus, the laurel became a symbol of music and literature, as well as military triumph, all of which were considered sacred to Apollo.

Throughout the *Canzoniere*, Daphne is used as a foil for Laura, as both women are unrelenting in their denial of their suitors. Petrarch also represents himself as Apollo, the god of the music, who created the lyre, and wrote music about his loss, as did Orpheus and Petrarch. A theme that runs throughout the *Canzoniere* is Petrarch’s loss of reasoning when he sees Laura, just as Apollo, in Ovid’s telling, was so overcome by love when he saw Daphne.<sup>241</sup> This loss of reasoning came from the belief that love was a “wild force that came from without”, a force often symbolized by Cupid’s arrow.<sup>242</sup> These assumptions about love were, as Christopher Celenza argues, the basis for arranged marriages, because marriage was a form of solidifying bonds between families and passing on property, and was no place for irrational decision-

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<sup>238</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 129.52.

<sup>239</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 83.

<sup>240</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 1.453-568.

<sup>241</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 41.

<sup>242</sup> Celenza, 41

making.<sup>243</sup> In poem 211: *Voglia mi sprona/ Desire drives me*, Petrarch tries to discern why he is so tormented by love:

Desire spurs me, Love sees and guides my way,  
Pleasure pulls me: Habit carries me away,  
Hope teases me, gives me encouragement,  
to my tired heart it offers its right hand,

and the poor thing accepts it unaware  
of how disloyal and blind our guide can be.  
The senses reign, and reason is now dead;

from one pleasing desire comes another.  
Virtue, honour, beauty, gracious bearing,  
sweet words have caught me in her lovely branches  
in which my heart is tenderly entangled.

In thirteen twenty-seven, and precisely  
at the first hour on the sixth day of April,  
I entered the labyrinth, and see no way out.<sup>244</sup>

In this poem, Petrarch notes the date when he first saw Laura as 6 April 1327, from which time he fell irrationally in love. He describes this irrationality through his characterization of love as “blind and disloyal”, creating the circumstance that “the senses reign, and reason is dead”.<sup>245</sup> This same irrationality is present in the story of Daphne and Apollo, where Apollo pursued Daphne relentlessly, eventually declaring the laurel tree ‘his’, because of his love for Daphne. This irrationality goes so far in the myth of Daphne and Apollo that Ovid writes:

Even as a tree, Phoebus<sup>246</sup> loved her. He placed his hands against the trunk, and felt her heart still beating under the new bark. Embracing the branches as if they were limbs, he kissed the wood: but, even as a tree, she shrank from his kisses. Then the god said: ‘Since you cannot be my bride, surely you will at least be my tree.’<sup>247</sup>

Thus, Petrarch invoked Ovid’s description of Apollo’s irrational acts in pursuit of his love of Daphne to describe the irrationality of his love of Laura.

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<sup>243</sup> Celenza, 41

<sup>244</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 211.1-14.

<sup>245</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 211.6-7.

<sup>246</sup> Another name for Apollo.

<sup>247</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 1.554-558.

Laura is named very few times in the *Canzoniere*; often she is referenced only by allusions and commonly by the assonance between, Laura and *l'aura* meaning a breeze, or *lauro* meaning the laurel crown. The use of the term *l'aura* is also used to represent Laura's elusiveness.<sup>248</sup> Moreover, Petrarch's creation of Laura through poetry, is another way in which Petrarch immortalizes both Laura and himself.<sup>249</sup> By his prolific writings about Laura, he ensured that his legacy will survive. Thus, he was very narcissistic in his pursuit of both Laura, and the Laurel crown. In the *Secretum* the shade of St Augustine confronts Petrarch about this narcissistic love of the laurel, saying "[y]ou loved the laurels of rulers and poets so passionately because they were called by her name. And from that time on scarcely a poem flowed from your pen without some mention of laurels".<sup>250</sup> The *Secretum* offers an interesting viewpoint of this issue, because it demonstrates a degree of self-awareness within Petrarch, as he wrestles with his own fears of the possibility that he committed idolatry.

The use of the wordplay between 'Laura' and *lauro*, is the link that ties the "erotic theme of the *Canzoniere* to that of poetic creation".<sup>251</sup> Although Petrarch claimed to be pursuing only Laura, he was, in fact, also chasing the crown of the poet laureate. Although he lost the battle for Laura, he won the battle for the laurel wreath, when he was crowned poet laureate at Rome on 8 April 1341.

In poem 188: *Almo Sol/ Kindly Sun*, Petrarch stands at Laura's birthplace in winter, with only the evergreen laurel retaining its leaves:

Sustaining sun, that branch alone I love  
and you first loved, alone in her sweet home  
now flourishes, unrivaled, since the time  
Adam first saw his own and our fair fall

Let's stay to gaze at her, I beg of you,  
O sun; but still you flee and cast your shade  
on every hillside carrying off the day.  
and in your flight you take what I most yearn for.

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<sup>248</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 63.

<sup>249</sup> Migraine-George, 'Specular Desires'. 236.

<sup>250</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.7.5.

<sup>251</sup> Martina Lauster, 'Stone Imagery and the Sonnet Form: Petrarch, Michelangelo, Baudelaire, Rilke', *Comparative Literature*; *Durham* 45, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 148.

The shadow falling from that low hillside  
 there where my gentle fire was a spark,  
 where the great laurel was a little sapling,

Growing as I speak, tales from my eyes  
 the lovely sight of that place which is blessed  
 and where my heart is dwelling with his lady.<sup>252</sup>

Petrarch, here, is praying to Apollo, addressed as the sun.<sup>253</sup> Petrarch uses the twig of the laurel to allude to Laura's childhood, while simultaneously alluding to Eve,<sup>254</sup> whom I shall treat in subsequent chapters.<sup>255</sup> There is a sense of fraternity between Petrarch and Apollo, who bond over their shared love of the laurel.

As we have seen, Petrarch addressed numerous myths drawn from classical texts throughout his *Canzoniere*. He related himself most prominently to Orpheus and Pygmalion and claimed a fraternal relation with Apollo through their shared experience of unrequited love. In making these connections, Petrarch compared Laura to idealized mythic women: Eurydice, Galatea, and Daphne, and connects her beauty to that of Narcissus. While Petrarch generally denied her agency, on rare occasions he relented, as in the case his creation of the Laura-Mercury duality. The following chapter examines the role of Christian figures in Petrarch's works.

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<sup>252</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 188.1-14.

<sup>253</sup> Apollo is the god of the sun in Greek and Roman mythology.

<sup>254</sup> Greene, *The Light in Troy*. 136-137.

<sup>255</sup> For discussion of Laura as Eve see 2.4.1. 'Laura as Eve', 63-66, and 3.3.2. 'Laura as Both Eve and Daphne', 104-105.

## Chapter Two: Christian Influences

In his writings, Petrarch was not only influenced by ancient mythology, but also by Christian traditions and philosophy. St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354-430) figured most prominently in Petrarch's work. Petrarch's *Secretum*, written between 1347-1353, is a dialogue with the shade of the Bishop of Hippo, in which the fictional Franciscus (representing Petrarch) and Augustinus (representing the shade of St Augustine) debate the moral values of literary life. As was the case with the *Canzoniere*, Laura figures prominently in this debate, with the third and longest book dedicated to debating the nature of Petrarch's relationship with Laura, his desire for glory, and the propriety of these things in a Christian life. The *Secretum* shows Petrarch's remarkable self-awareness, as he imagines both sides of the debate; in doing so, however, he tempers Augustinian views on desires for love and fame to suit his own purpose: to validate his love for Laura and search of glory.

The *Secretum* is a dialogue that takes place over the course of three days. It begins with a short Proem, in which Petrarch sets the scene for the dialogue, introducing Franciscus and Augustinus, as well as a third figure: a woman representing Truth, who does not speak in the dialogue, but watches over it, as if to remind the reader that what Petrarch is writing is truthful. The first day is the shortest and is focused on Franciscus' sins and sufferings. Petrarch represents St Augustine in such a way that the saint plays the role of confessor, or even therapist, who is "morally astringent and very directive."<sup>256</sup> Augustinus urges Franciscus to recognize his own mortality and meditate upon his death in order to experience greater happiness. Augustinus diagnoses Petrarch with *accidia* or sloth - what we would call today 'depression', on the second day of the debate,<sup>257</sup> that centres around the cardinal vices. In addition to sloth, Augustinus charges Franciscus with pride, avarice, and lust. In debating these sins, Franciscus and Augustinus discuss Franciscus' writing, and Franciscus eventually concedes the truth of Augustinus' charges. The third day of the debate does not come to a clear conclusion, as Franciscus and Augustinus debate the propriety of Franciscus' love for Laura and his desire for fame. Franciscus holds to the argument that his love for Laura, that borders on idolatry, only brings him closer to God, as Laura's beauty and virtue show him the divine in the world,

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<sup>256</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. viii.

<sup>257</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. xi.

allowing him to act in accordance with God. Augustinus counters Franciscus' argument saying "[f]or it is precisely the woman you praise, and to whom you claim to owe everything, who is destroying you. ... She has removed your mind from the love of Heavenly things, and turned your desire from the Creator to a creature."<sup>258</sup> Franciscus is never fully convinced to abandon his love of Laura, nor his search for literary fame, and ultimately Franciscus is given "permission to postpone the consideration of the eternal afterlife in order to attend first to the pressing needs of renown in his lifetime."<sup>259</sup>

Over the course of his lifetime, Petrarch's relationship with Christianity evolved. Several early Petrarchan scholars, including Guido Martellotti, Pier Giorgio Ricci, Ernest Hatch Wilkins, and Carlo Calcaterra, have argued that "Petrarch experienced a religious 'crisis' between 1342 and 1343 which marked the appearance of a more stringent attachment to Augustinian moral theology and the abandonment of his youthful flights of amorous fancy ... [including a] gradual shift away from enthusiastic classicism and towards a more pronounced emphasis on the patristic ethics."<sup>260</sup> This religious 'crisis' is perhaps best demonstrated in the *Secretum*, in which Petrarch addresses his moral shortcomings. As a result of this 'crisis' Petrarch began to examine more deeply Augustine's interpretation of ancient values, which in turn affected Petrarch's love poetry, which saw a spike in ethical and philosophical questions.<sup>261</sup> There are two levels to Petrarch's self-reflection<sup>262</sup>. The surface-level lament is that his passions surrounding Laura "did not sit well with the idealized, meditative Christian life he sees as best."<sup>263</sup> The more in-depth lament, however, relates to ageing, when youthful ideals are met with the realization that making one decision precludes another.<sup>264</sup> For Petrarch, this means that choosing to follow his youthful obsession with Laura could threaten his divine salvation.

Nevertheless, he is unable to renounce completely his desire for love and glory in lieu of a more virtuous life, as directed by Augustinus in book three of the *Secretum*.<sup>265</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>258</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.5.1-3.5.2.

<sup>259</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. x.

<sup>260</sup> Lee, 'The Look(s) of Love'. 8-9.

<sup>261</sup> Giona Tuccini, 'The Bard of Love: Memory and Antiquity in Petrarch', *Forum Italicum* 53, no. 1 (1 May 2019): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014585818812452>.

<sup>262</sup> It is important here to remember that both the characters of Franciscus and Augustinus are written by one author.

<sup>263</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 115.

<sup>264</sup> Celenza, 115.

<sup>265</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.18.

although Petrarch engaged in sexual activity, he viewed it through the lens of St Augustine, “as a sign of weakness and disorder and as something to be shunned if one could.”<sup>266</sup> Although Petrarch tries to run away to the wilderness to escape his visions of Laura, he is unsuccessful in breaking his ‘bad habit’ as he writes in several poems in the *Canzoniere*:

Whenever pine or hillside casts its shade  
 I sometimes stop, and on the first stone seen  
 with all my mind I etch her lovely face;  
 returning to reality I find  
 my breast softened with pity, and I cry:  
 “What have you come to? How far from her you are!”  
 But for as long as I  
 can hold my wandering mind on the first thought  
 and look at her and not think of myself,  
 I feel Love so close by  
*my soul is satisfied by its own error*; [emphasis added]  
 in many places I see her, so lovely  
 that all I ask is that my error last.

...

*but when the truth dispels  
 that sweet mistake*, right then and there I sit [emphasis added]  
 down cold as dead stone set on living rock,  
 a statue that can think and weep and write.<sup>267</sup>

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To love a mortal thing with such great faith,  
 the kind that should be placed in God alone,  
 is less becoming the more one looks for worth.  
 And this in a loud voice also calls back  
 my reason which went wandering with the senses;  
 by though it hears and means  
 to come back home, *bad habit drives it further* [emphasis added]  
 and paints before my eyes  
 the one born only so that I may die  
 because she pleased me, and herself, too much.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 20.

<sup>267</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 129.27-52

<sup>268</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 264.99-108.

Thus, even in later poems in the *Canzoniere*, written after his fictional debate with St Augustine in which he is confronted with his immoderate love, Petrarch remains unable to abandon his love for Laura, as he continues to create her image in his mind.<sup>269</sup>

## 2.1. Sacred Number Theory

Petrarch's understanding of Christianity appears in the five opening sonnets of the *Canzoniere*, which F.J. Jones suggests follow a pattern of "sacred-number theory".<sup>270</sup> According to Jones:

In sacred-number theory the figure one was considered to represent the unity of God, two the breaking of that unity in sin, three its restoration in the trinity, four the act of creation, and five the dominance of the senses. It, therefore, seems significant that in the original numbering of the sonnets<sup>271</sup> Laura's first appearance should be in sonnet 2 representing sin and that sonnet 3 should discuss the undermining of Petrarch's virtue, since the Trinity's divine powers might well have been regarded by the poet as offering some sort of protection against the onslaughts of sin. Sonnet 4, on the other hand, has clear references not only to the creation but to the creation of the sun as an analogue to his mistress's own birth; while the first name of Laura, the woman of the poet's senses, is spelled out acrostically in diminutive form in sonnet 5 as 'Laureta'.<sup>272</sup>

It is likely that the order of sonnets two and three were switched after Laura's death in 1348, when Petrarch "began to regard her more as a guardian angel than as a temptation of the flesh."<sup>273</sup>

The opinion that numbers expressed sacredness in spiritual contexts is a well-documented phenomenon of mediaeval culture. Although the Pauline epistles do not contain evidence of any kind of number symbolism, over the course of the early mediaeval period, it developed by drawing connections between the Old Testament and the New. For example, following sacred-

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<sup>269</sup> Lee, 'The Look(s) of Love'. 10. Other examples include: Petrarca. *Canzoniere*. 125.33-35: "For I seem to have him within / who always depicts my lady / and speaks about her: / wishing to portray her, / is not enough for me, and it seems I only waste away."; *Canzoniere*. 155.9-11.: "Love painted that sweet weeping for me, / or sculpted it rather, engraved her gentle words / on a diamond at the centre of my heart"; and *Canzoniere*. 158.1-4.: "Where ever I turn my weary eyes or rest them, / to quiet the longing that excites them, / I find that someone depicts that lovely lady / so my desire might be always fresh."

<sup>270</sup> Jones, 'Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch's Laura'. 39.

<sup>271</sup> In the original text of the *Canzoniere*, sonnets two and three were switched.

<sup>272</sup> Jones, 'Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch's Laura'. 40-41.

<sup>273</sup> Jones, 41.

number symbolism, the twelve apostles correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel described in Genesis 49:28, and the forty days of Christ’s temptation – recorded in Matthew 4:1-11 – “harks back to the 40 days of Elijah’s solitude [1 Kings 19:4-14], or the 40 days of trial by flood [Gen 7:12].”<sup>274</sup> Because these connections are not found in the original first-century texts, Vincent Hopper speculates that it was only after the church began to admit men of “scholarly and philosophical dispositions” that number symbolism began to appear because they were concerned “with the creation of a consistent body of Christian theology.”<sup>275</sup> These scholars, including Justin Martyr (†165), Clement of Alexandria (†c.215), and Origen (†254), drew on Pythagorean and Gnostic philosophical readings of numerology.<sup>276</sup> The church fathers then drew on this understanding, giving prominence to numerology.<sup>277</sup> St Augustine became well versed in sacred number symbolism, giving it the “final stamp of approval.”<sup>278</sup> According to Hopper, “[t]he dominant medieval attitude toward numbers, however, was the Christian, elaborated from the numerology of Augustine and his predecessors.”<sup>279</sup> It is likely that Petrarch adopted Augustine’s numerology, implementing it – either consciously or subconsciously – into his writing.

Ordering the poems of the *Canzoniere* took up much of Petrarch’s time near the end of his life, so it is reasonable to assume that Petrarch considered at least the most basic of numerology in his ordering of the poems.<sup>280</sup> Petrarch introduces Laura in the third poem, writing:

It was the day the sun’s ray had turned pale  
*with pity for the suffering of his Maker*  
*when I was caught* (and I put upon fight), [emphasis added]  
 my lady, for your lovely eyes had bound me.

It seemed no time to be on guard against  
 Love’s blows; therefore, I went my way

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<sup>274</sup> This is not to say that the numbers in the New Testament are entirely made up to correspond to the Old Testament – there is no real way of knowing exactly how much of the New Testament was written or invented as a means of linking the two. Vincent Foster Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning, and Influence on Thought and Expression* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 70-71.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015004297647>.

<sup>275</sup> Hopper, 73.

<sup>276</sup> Hopper, 73.

<sup>277</sup> Hopper, 76.

<sup>278</sup> Hopper, 78.

<sup>279</sup> Hopper, 89.

<sup>280</sup> Jones, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’. 40.

secure and fearless – so, all my misfortunes  
began in midst of universal woe.

Love found me all disarmed and saw the way  
was clear to reach my heart down through the eyes,  
which have become the halls and doors of tears.

It seems to me it did him little honor  
to wound me with his arrow in my state  
and to you, armed, not show his bow at all.<sup>281</sup>

Following Jones' theory, Petrarch's reminding the reader of his pity for Christ in lines two and three can be understood as his invoking the power of the Trinity to protect him from sin. Petrarch introduces a caveat or acknowledgement that he should be focused on the passion of Christ – as was nature itself – but he found himself so overcome by Laura that he could not.

The fifth poem represents the senses and, “the type of nature embracing all living things.”<sup>282</sup> Petrarch's revealing of Laura's name through an acrostic in the fifth poem represents Petrarch's invocation of the totality of his love for Laura encompassing all the senses:

When I summon my sighs to call for you,  
with that name Love inscribed upon my heart,  
in LAUdable the sound at the beginning  
of the sweet accents of that word comes forth.

Your REgal state which I encounter next  
doubles my strength for the highest enterprise,  
but “TAcitly” the end cries, “for her honor  
needs better shoulders for support than yours.”

And so, to LAUd and to REvere the word  
itself instructs whenever someone calls you,  
O lady worthy of all praise and honor,

Unless, perhaps, Apollo be offended  
that morTAl tongue be so presumptuous  
to speak of his eternally green boughs.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 3.1-14.

<sup>282</sup> Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*. 43.

<sup>283</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 5.1-14.

By spreading the syllables of ‘Laureta’ across the poem, Petrarch illustrates visually the totality of his love. Poems three and five are linked in their connection to Laura through their invocation of the senses.<sup>284</sup>

## 2.2. Petrarch’s Representation (or Misrepresentation) of St Augustine

In imagining the shade of St Augustine in the *Secretum*, there are several ways in which Petrarch altered the historical bishop to suit his purposes. Petrarch presents Augustinus as a mediaeval monk rather than as a bishop from the fifth century whose suggestions about contemplative practice does not resemble anything found in St Augustine’s spiritual writings.<sup>285</sup> In fact, the visualizing technique recommended by Augustinus to Franciscus was “developed from non-Augustinian sources and popularized during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries”.<sup>286</sup> Furthermore, the contemplative practices recommended by Augustinus in the *Secretum* are not found anywhere in St Augustine’s writings.<sup>287</sup> Augustinus does not expound on any of the Bishop of Hippo’s principal doctrines, including those of grace, the Trinity, or the sacraments, nor does he “echo the objections to the study on non-Christian literature that are found in the *Confessions* and *De Doctrina Christiana*”.<sup>288</sup> Rather, Augustinus supports the notion introduced by Petrarch<sup>289</sup> that the study of the classics should be combined with that of the Bible into what became known as Christian humanism.

According to Nicholas Mann, Petrarch constructs the character of Augustinus so that he “speaks more like an austere classical scholar than a Church Father.”<sup>290</sup> Augustinus cites ancient sources and philosophy far more frequently throughout the *Secretum* than he does the Bible or other Christian sources. This is one way in which Petrarch’s writing of the character of St

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<sup>284</sup> Jones, ‘Further Evidence of the Identity of Petrarch’s Laura’. 41.

<sup>285</sup> Brian Stock, ‘Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination’, *New Literary History; Baltimore* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 12.

<sup>286</sup> These techniques were popularized by authors like Julian of Norwich and Thomas a Kempis. Stock, ‘Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination’. 12.

<sup>287</sup> Stock, ‘Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination’. 12.

<sup>288</sup> Stock, ‘Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination’. 12.

<sup>289</sup> Although popularized by Erasmus.

<sup>290</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. viii.

Augustine is used to serve Petrarch's intent to support the study of classical texts, as will be examined further in chapter three.<sup>291</sup>

The literary format of the *Secretum* is based on a Socratic dialogue and on St Augustine's *Confessions*. The dialogue serves to prepare the soul for what happens after death. The notion of preparation, however, figures into the larger history of philosophy, as it fits in with the tradition of spiritual exercises and, in this case, the intersection of reading and writing with spiritual exercise.<sup>292</sup> The idea is to improve oneself by focusing on one's own character flaws and consciously trying to correct them.<sup>293</sup> This attempt at self-reflection and correction intersects for Petrarch in writing his flaws and struggles down, positing arguments both for and against them to achieve spiritual improvement.

Late antique Christians placed great emphasis on reading the Scriptures in silence and in incorporating Scripture into the liturgy and sermons. As the Biblical texts were translated from Hebrew or Greek into Latin, there developed a greater sense of displacement from the original texts, and a more philosophical approach shaped emerging theology, resulting in greater numbers of commentaries on religious texts, with the result that theological texts came to resemble philosophical writing.<sup>294</sup> It was in this atmosphere that Augustine wrote his texts on Christianity.

In writing the *Secretum*, Petrarch drew heavily on the works of St Augustine. According to Augustine, the best way to examine one's moral shortcomings was through the recreation of personal narratives in one's memories, examining them as "objects of thought, thereby meditating, so to speak, on ourselves."<sup>295</sup> One method Augustine devised to complete this form of meditation, was through the soliloquy, a form of self-interrogation, with the goal of creating "an internal conversation in which the individual gradually becomes acquainted with the fact of his or her own ignorance concerning the self."<sup>296</sup> It is this self-interrogation that Petrarch embraces in the *Secretum* as he reflects on the propriety of his relationship with Laura, fearing that he may have infringed upon idolatry. The works of St Augustine, above all else, stressed

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<sup>291</sup> For further discussion on Petrarch's Christian humanism see 3.1. '*Studia Humanitatis*', 80-83.

<sup>292</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 119.

<sup>293</sup> Celenza, 119.

<sup>294</sup> Stock, 'Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination'. 5.

<sup>295</sup> Stock, 'Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination'. 8.

<sup>296</sup> The first of Augustine's Soliloquies were written between 386-387. Stock, 'Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination'. 10.

“omnipotence and omniscience of God, drawing out the consequences of that view when contemplating humanity.”<sup>297</sup> Thus, “[i]f God is infinite and infinitely powerful, on the one hand, and human beings, His creations, are finite, on the other, then this human world we inhabit can only be a way station, a pilgrimage whose temporary pains and pleasures will be resolved in the afterlife, where matters eternal reside.”<sup>298</sup> Petrarch studied these messages and internalized them, informing his writing of the *Secretum*.

Petrarch drew also on Augustine’s notion that God was an internal light in poem 279 *Se lamentar augelli, o verdi fronde/If the birds lament, or the green leaves*, in which Petrarch described Laura’s eyes opening posthumously into ‘internal light’: “through death eternal; into internal light / my eyes were opened when they seemed to close.”<sup>299</sup> The use of the word ‘internal’ appears across several manuscript versions of the poem, despite some editors changing ‘internal’ to ‘eternal’.<sup>300</sup> The use of the term ‘internal’ can be understood as a reference to Petrarch’s internal reflection seen primarily in his dialogue with the shade of St Augustine in the *Secretum*, but also informs several later poems of the *Canzoniere*.<sup>301</sup>

### 2.3. Marian Imagery

Throughout his writings, Petrarch uses Marian imagery, the most evident instance being the final poem (number 366) of the *Canzoniere: Vergin bella, che di sol vestita/The Hymn to the Virgin*. Petrarch understands both love and beauty “as paths to spiritual elevation”,<sup>302</sup> through his adulation of the Virgin. Mike Hodder and Anne O’Connor interpret this poem as Petrarch’s attempt in old age to gloss over and make amends for the sinfulness of his previous idolatry of Laura by exaltation of the Virgin.<sup>303</sup> They accuse Petrarch of “sublimating his erotic desire for a mortal being (which he was always careful to characterise as chaste) into a conventional, pure

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<sup>297</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 98.

<sup>298</sup> Celenza, 98.

<sup>299</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 279.13-14.

<sup>300</sup> Kambasković-Sawers, ‘Carved in Living Laurel’. 381.; Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 677.

<sup>301</sup> According to Danijela Kambasković-Sawers, “[t]he idea of God as an interior light in an ethical sense belongs to St Augustine”, however Petrarch’s intent in using the word was to convey the message that “there is only one place where paradise is to be sought – inside the intellect.” Kambasković-Sawers, ‘Carved in Living Laurel’. 381.

<sup>302</sup> Lauster, ‘Stone Imagery and the Sonnet Form’. 148.

<sup>303</sup> Hodder and O’Connor, ‘Petrarch Goes West’. 355.

love for God and the divine.”<sup>304</sup> John Ochoa argues that “[t]he elusive and difficult Laura underwrote his long career as a poet, and he now wants a new and stable object of desire. The Virgin is a new guide for him, a familiar one to every well-oriented helmsman, and this dying poet wishes to include himself in their ranks of the well-directed.”<sup>305</sup>

Whatever the true intent behind Petrarch’s writing of this poem, it represents a radical shift in desires from his early works, yet it is not without its similarities those earlier poems. Petrarch presents to the Virgin his “qualifications as a suitor”<sup>306</sup>, citing his devotion to the mortal Laura:

For if a bit of mortal, fleeting dust  
can make me love with faith so marvelous,  
how then will I love you, a noble thing?<sup>307</sup>

Petrarch implies here that his love for the eternal Virgin will be much stronger than the love he had felt for Laura. According to Ochoa, “Mary is suitably qualified to replace Laura as object of desire in this new triangulation. She, too, had a long history of having served as the object of others’ obsessive—and creative—endeavors”,<sup>308</sup> such that the Virgin Mary made a suitable replacement as the subject of Petrarch’s love. Ochoa uses the analogy that “as God has been to Mary, so the poet has been to Laura”,<sup>309</sup> meaning that just as God created Mary and gave her importance, so too did Petrarch give Laura her importance through his writing about her in his poetry. Furthermore, just as God gave Mary a form a literary immortality, living forever in the words of the Bible, so too did Petrarch give Laura literary immortality through his poems.

Even Petrarch’s language in the *Hymn to the Virgin* is reminiscent of Biblical language. Petrarch writes:

Virgin so pure and perfect in all ways,  
mother and daughter both of your own child,  
who brighten this life and adorn the other;  
through you your Son, Son of the highest Father  
(O shining, lofty window of the Heavens)

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<sup>304</sup> Hodder and O’Connor, 357.

<sup>305</sup> Ochoa, ‘The Poet Becomes Poem’. 44.

<sup>306</sup> Ochoa, 44.

<sup>307</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 366.121-123.

<sup>308</sup> Ochoa, ‘The Poet Becomes Poem’. 44.

<sup>309</sup> Ochoa, 44.

came down to save us in the final days,  
and you among all earthly dwelling places  
*He chose – and only you.*<sup>310</sup> [emphasis added]

This language of God choosing Mary is reminiscent of the language of the Annunciation:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ... The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you *have found favour with God.*'<sup>311</sup> [emphasis added]

Petrarch then appeals to their shared 'common origin', writing:

Remember that it was our sin made God  
take on, for our salvation,  
the flesh of man in your virginal cloister.<sup>312</sup>

This could reference either their condition shared by all humans as children saved by God, or, "their more selective, shared circumstance as draftees in the service of the Lord."<sup>313</sup> If the latter is the case, then Petrarch is referring to the Marian paradox that the Virgin is both mother and daughter to Christ, while "Laura existed as both the creator and *cause d'être* of the poet *qua* poet, as both his progenitor and his object of desire."<sup>314</sup> Just as Mary was conscripted into God's service, Petrarch was conscripted as lover of Laura in the arc of the *Canzoniere*.<sup>315</sup> Petrarch links himself with the Virgin through this shared experience by having been 'subsumed' by "the power of the Most High",<sup>316</sup> reducing both Petrarch and Mary into "a state of introspection and solipsistic enunciations—hers in the form of rhetorical questions to herself and to secrets of the heart, his in the form of poetic, linguistic (and ontological) turmoil and [possible] idolatry."<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 366.27-34.

<sup>311</sup> Luke 1:26-30.

<sup>312</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 366.76-78.

<sup>313</sup> Ochoa, 'The Poet Becomes Poem'. 45.

<sup>314</sup> Ochoa, 45.

<sup>315</sup> Ochoa, 45.

<sup>316</sup> Luke 1:35.

<sup>317</sup> Ochoa, 'The Poet Becomes Poem'. 45.

This Marian Paradox is also found in the first lines Dante's prayer to the Virgin in *Paradiso*: "Oh, Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son".<sup>318</sup> It is this poem that sets the stage for Petrarch's appeal to the Virgin Mary in the *Canzoniere*. Petrarch draws on Dante's use of language in a way that is "necessarily formulaic."<sup>319</sup> Both poems are filled with biblical allusions, appealing to the Virgin to intercede in their salvation. Thus, Petrarch's *Hymn to the Virgin* can also be read as a form of mediation between Petrarch and God, with the Virgin playing the role of *mediatrix*.<sup>320</sup> For example, Petrarch writes:

Virgin, if toward mercy  
for extreme misery of worldly things  
you ever turned, then bend now to my prayer,  
and help me in my war,  
though I am dust and you are queen of Heaven

...

Virgin so sweet and pious,  
grace will abound where sin abounded once.  
And with the knee of my mind bent in prayer  
I beg you to be my guide,  
direct my twisted path to a good end.

...

Virgin, in whom I place all of my hope  
you can and will help me in my great need:  
do not abandon me at the last pass,  
not for my sake but His who made me man,  
let not my own worth but His own high likeness  
in me move you to care for one so low.<sup>321</sup>

This poem was written near the end of Petrarch's life, and he asks Mary to show him the way towards God and intercede with God to help Petrarch attain salvation. Petrarch draws on Mary's maternal role, writing "not my own worth but His own high likeness / in me move you to care for one so low".<sup>322</sup> Here he likens himself to Jesus to gain the Virgin's pity.

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<sup>318</sup> Dante Alighieri, *A Translation of Dante's Paradiso* (Bath., 1868), 33.1.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015034599780>.

<sup>319</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 164.

<sup>320</sup> Meaning a mediator between humanity and God. Mazzotta. 164.

<sup>321</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 366.9-13; 366.61-65; 366.105-110.

<sup>322</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 366.109-110.

The final stanza of the *Hymn to the Virgin* represents Petrarch on the day of his death (or, perhaps, the day of judgement), when he asks the Virgin:

commend me to your Son who is the true  
man, and the truth of God,  
that He might accept my final breath in peace.<sup>323</sup>

This is reminiscent of Jesus' final act on the cross, when he looked down at Mary and erased himself from the world by saying "this man [the beloved disciple, i.e., John the evangelist himself] is now your son",<sup>324</sup> releasing Mary from the paradox of being both mother and daughter of Christ. In referencing this passage, Petrarch "is now asking someone else to become the poet, so that *he* can be the one sent off, released into the world. He wishes for the Virgin to propel him as he once sent off his own songs: he is inviting her to take up the mantle of agency."<sup>325</sup> Ultimately, Petrarch is hoping for a second chance at salvation, absolving himself from the responsibilities he holds as the poet.

Interestingly, Petrarch chooses another woman, not God or Christ as the recipient of his poem, and therefore, falls back on the rhetoric used in his admiration of Laura, here simply reused for a new recipient.<sup>326</sup> Petrarch calls the Virgin the "true Beatrix",<sup>327</sup> implying that she is "truer than Dante's fictional Beatrice", but also truer than his fictionalized Laura, "the Beatrice I used in this work up to now".<sup>328</sup> Therefore, although Petrarch reallocates the recipient of his poetry, his "God-like guise" as creator and lover is still recognizable, even as he renounces his fears of his idolatry.<sup>329</sup>

Despite Petrarch's apparent reverence for the Virgin, it is important to note that the female body remains absent from his work.<sup>330</sup> Even as the 'new poet' she is transformed into the male body, and denied her own voice. In any reading of the poem, Petrarch remains the agent in

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<sup>323</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 366.135-137.

<sup>324</sup> John 19:26.

<sup>325</sup> Ochoa, 'The Poet Becomes Poem'. 46.

<sup>326</sup> Kambasković-Sawers, 'Carved in Living Laurel', 2007. 381.

<sup>327</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 366.52.

<sup>328</sup> Kambasković-Sawers, 'Carved in Living Laurel', 2007. 382.

<sup>329</sup> Kambasković-Sawers, 382.

<sup>330</sup> For discussion on Petrarch's fragmentation of Laura, see 3.4. 'Scattering' Laura, 106-108.

charge, not the Virgin nor Laura. Thus, despite renouncing his possible idolatry, Petrarch maintains his guise as a god-like figure.

## 2.4 Biblical Imagery

In his writings, Petrarch makes reference to several examples of biblical imagery, including the ‘Man of Sorrows’ prophecy, told in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. This prophecy tells of a man who was despised by everyone and filled with suffering and sorrow. This prophetic man was and is thought to be a foreshadowing of Christ, as this man “was wounded and crushed because of our sins; by taking our punishment, he made us completely well.”<sup>331</sup> The man in Isaiah’s prophecy ultimately died for the sins of all humans and was rewarded in Heaven, just as was Christ.<sup>332</sup> In the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch casts Laura as the Christ-figure, and himself as the prophetic author.<sup>333</sup>

Giorgio Ficara argues that Laura’s immortality through Petrarch’s writing is another way in which Petrarch casts Laura as a Christ figure because “her eternity, her eternal presence, competes with that of God.”<sup>334</sup> Poem 228: *Amor co la man dextra il lato manco/Love opened my left side with his right hand* says:

My heart finds this, wherever I may be,  
a happy burden! In chaste prayer I bow,  
adoring it as something that is holy.<sup>335</sup>

Here Petrarch refers to his love for Laura, because she is “the eternally reborn, the timeless phoenix, with her adorers, her churches and her Heaven, just like God.”<sup>336</sup> Petrarch accentuates Laura’s “majesty through any means possible” and here he accentuates it by comparing her with the highest and most majestic power he can imagine – Christ.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> Isaiah 53:5.

<sup>332</sup> Isaiah 53:3-12.

<sup>333</sup> Hooper, ‘Exile and Petrarch’s Reinvention of Authorship’. 1237.

<sup>334</sup> Ficara, ‘The Perfect Woman in Boccaccio and Petrarch’. 305.

<sup>335</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 228.12-14.

<sup>336</sup> Ficara, ‘The Perfect Woman in Boccaccio and Petrarch’. 305.

<sup>337</sup> Ficara, 305.

Petrarch casts Laura as a god-like figure again in poem 23, in which Petrarch casts himself as Daphne and Laura as Apollo:

What a state I was in when I first realized  
the transfiguration of my person,  
and saw my hair formed of those leaves  
that I had hoped might yet crown me.<sup>338</sup>

Here Petrarch manipulates gender roles in his poetry, thus making Laura the god and makes himself subservient to her. We also see in this passage Petrarch's double desire, both for Laura and the laurel wreath.

#### 2.4.1. Laura as Eve

Throughout the *Canzoniere*, Laura is cast as a figure of Eve. Poem 237 of the *Canzoniere*, invokes the imagery of Genesis, as Petrarch creates his world with Laura. According to Barbra Estrin: "Petrarch invokes Augustine in the first two lines when he speculates that the separation in that created the world in Genesis 1 anticipates the division to be enacted in the self at the end of time."<sup>339</sup> When, however, Petrarch invokes sleep in a desire to recreate the experience of a dreaming Adam in the Garden of Eden,<sup>340</sup> he inverts the Augustinian order:

Now day to day I hope for the last evening  
to cut in me the living earth from waves  
and let me go to sleep upon some shore;  
as many trials no man beneath the moon  
has suffered as I do – they know, those woods  
that I, alone, go searching day and night.<sup>341</sup>

While Petrarch sleeps, Laura is created in his dream, just as Eve was created while Adam slept. According to Estrin, "Laura-Eve can be found in Petrarch-Adam by a process of

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<sup>338</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 23.21-24.

<sup>339</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 44.

<sup>340</sup> Gen. 2:21-22. "So the LORD God made him fall into a deep sleep, and he took out one of the man's ribs. Then after closing the man's side, the LORD made a woman out of the rib."

<sup>341</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 237.7-12.

anamnesis.<sup>342</sup> She represents what he, earlier, dreamed.”<sup>343</sup> Here, Petrarch idealizes Laura in his mind, so that while she was likely a real woman, Petrarch’s visions of her are likely not accurate representations of the real woman. Thus, in his mind, Petrarch creates a woman who returns his love. In creating a woman who wants him, Petrarch is temporarily subverting his own narrative of chasing the woman who cannot be caught.<sup>344</sup> As Laura-Eve, the woman is a “conscious subject”, rather than the helpless victim – like that of Laura-Daphne – of the narrative.<sup>345</sup>

In poem 181, *Amor fra l’erbe una leggiadra rete/Love spread his graceful net of gold and pearls*, Petrarch is trapped by his love for Laura-Eve:

Love sets amid the grass his pretty net  
of gold and pearls, spread out beneath a branch  
of that tree, ever green, I love so much,  
though it gives shade of sadness more than joy.

The bait was that same seed he sows and reaps,  
the sweet and bitter which I fear and year for;  
the call was never, since the day that Adam  
opened his eyes, more soft of gently sung

And the bright light that makes the sunlight fade  
was lightening all around; the rope was wrapped  
around the hand that outdoes snow and ivory.

I fell into the net and I was captured  
by charming gestures, by angelic words,  
by pleasure and desire, and by hope.<sup>346</sup>

In this poem, Petrarch is in denial, believing that Laura could love him.<sup>347</sup> Here, Petrarch, cast as Adam, can only distinguish two features: Laura’s “graceful ways” and her Heavenly “angelic words”,<sup>348</sup> thus “[h]er presence connotes absence. Her being dissipates into impression. She isn’t [*sic*] someone to see or hear; she has already been translated into her aura.”<sup>349</sup> Petrarch-

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<sup>342</sup> “The recalling of things past; recollection, reminiscence.”

‘Anamnesis, n.’, in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed 16 January 2021, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/7055;jsessionid=AA5E6960C529DA2AD67855AD8A7B32D3>.

<sup>343</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 42-43.

<sup>344</sup> Estrin, 41.

<sup>345</sup> Estrin, 50.

<sup>346</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 181.1-14.

<sup>347</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 51.

<sup>348</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 181.13.

<sup>349</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 54.

Adam stands as a contrast to Laura-Eve. He clumsily falls into her net, opposing her “graceful ways”, as Laura-Eve simply functions as the adjectives describing her indicate, once again reminding us that we never see Laura as a whole woman, but only in fragments. It is her fragmentary presence that leads Petrarch to his “pleasure, and desire, and hope”,<sup>350</sup> even though the reader knows that Petrarch will remain unfulfilled in his love for Laura.

In poem 188 Petrarch’s love is internalized, as he slowly realizes it will never be reciprocated:

Sustaining sun, that branch alone I love  
and you first loved, alone in her sweet home  
now flourishes, unrivalled, since the time  
Adam first saw his own and our fair fall

Let’s stay to gaze at her, I beg of you,  
O sun; but still you flee and cast your shade  
on every hillside carrying off the day.  
and in your flight you take what I most yearn for.

The shadow falling from that low hillside  
there where my gentle fire was a spark,  
where the great laurel was a little sapling,

Growing as I speak, tales from my eyes  
the lovely sight of that place which is blessed  
and where my heart is dwelling with his lady.<sup>351</sup>

In this poem, Petrarch laments on the ‘ills’ of love, referring to the pain that it has brought him, by comparing it to the pain that Eve brought to Adam in the Garden of Eden. The shift in tone from hope to despair between poems 181 and 188, represents the shift from Genesis 2 to Genesis 3, the former seeing the creation of man and woman and the love they shared and the latter representing the downfall of humankind.

Laura as Eve appears for the final time in poem 354: *Deh porgi mano a l’affannato ingegno/Love, give your help to my troubled mind*, where, once again, the imagined Laura-Eve reciprocates Petrarch’s love. In this poem Petrarch praises her virtue and laments his inadequacy:

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<sup>350</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 181.14.

<sup>351</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 188.1-14.

A form like hers there never was since Adam  
 first opened up his eyes! – let this suffice.  
 I speak in tears, and now in tears you write.<sup>352</sup>

Unlike her appearances in poems 181 and 188, Laura-Eve can do no harm to Petrarch in 354: as Estrin describes, she is “[a]lready angelic, she is unreachable, except in memory.”<sup>353</sup> In poem 354 Petrarch idealizes Laura, proclaiming “her equality to the dreams that invented her. As woman, she fulfills the erotic dream. As poetic projection, she dwarfs the eroticized dreamer”,<sup>354</sup> thus perpetuating the cyclical nature of Petrarch’s love for Laura. Poem 354 is the last instance where Petrarch creates a version of Laura who validates his hope that she could return his love.<sup>355</sup> The character of Love speaks to Petrarch, reassuring him that Laura was capable of loving him in return in the line:

Whatever heaven and I can give,  
 and good counsel and honest converse,  
 was all in her, whom death deprived us of.<sup>356</sup>

Love’s statement, however, “converts Petrarch’s self-indulgent pleasures into divinely sanctified acts – validated (however momentarily) by Laura-Eve who imagines back.”<sup>357</sup>

## 2.5. Relics and Icons

As we examined in the first chapter, Petrarch used the laurel branch to represent both Laura and the laurel wreath, the symbol of poetic glory. In the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch reveals the lover to the reader through the use of the laurel to represent both the woman, and also his own poetic expertise. According, to John Freccero, “the laurel, the emblem both of the lover’s enthrallment and of the poet’s triumph, is the antitype of Augustine’s fig tree, under which the saint’s conversion took place.”<sup>358</sup> Thus, Petrarch made the laurel branch “the emblem of the

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<sup>352</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 354.12-14.

<sup>353</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 51.

<sup>354</sup> Estrin, 57.

<sup>355</sup> Estrin, 51.

<sup>356</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 354.9-11.

<sup>357</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 51.

<sup>358</sup> Freccero, ‘The Fig Tree and the Laurel’. 34.

mirror relationship Laura-Lauro, which is to say, the poetic lady created by the poet, who in turn creates him as poet laureate.”<sup>359</sup>

In poem 30 of the *Canzoniere*, entitled *Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro/A maiden beneath the green laurel*, Petrarch references Augustine’s conversion under a fig tree, while writing about his own conversion of sorts – the first time he saw Laura in the shade of the laurel branches:

A young maiden beneath the green of laurel  
I saw, more white, more cold than all that snow  
unstruck by sun for many, many years;  
those words of hers, her lovely face, her hair  
I loved so much – I keep her in my eyes  
and always shall, whether on hill or shore

...

But since time flies and fleeting are the years  
that bring us rapidly upon death’s shore,  
whether it be with dark or with white hair  
I’ll chase the shadow of that lovely laurel  
throughout the hottest day and through the snow  
until the final day closes my eyes.

Never have there been such lovely eyes  
now in our time or in the world’s first years  
as those that melt me as the sun does the snow,  
and from which springs a flow to tearful shore  
that Love leads to the foot of the hard laurel  
that’s made of diamond branches and golden hair,

I fear that I will change in face and hair  
before she shows true mercy in her eyes,  
my idol who is carved in living laurel,

...

All gold and topaz in sun above the snow  
are spent by the gold hair next to those eyes  
that lead my years so quickly to the shore.<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> Freccero, 37.

<sup>360</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 30.1-6; 13-27; 36-39.

In the cyclical nature of the laurel described by Freccero, Petrarch is following his love of Laura, represented by the laurel, while watching from under the shade of the tree itself, through the changing seasons, as the image of his beloved becomes a sort of idol.<sup>361</sup>

A further reason why Petrarch may have been concerned that he committed idolatry is presented by Robert Durling, who reminds us that this sestina is an anniversary poem celebrating their first encounter which occurred on Good Friday. The date is significant because Petrarch is too distracted by Laura to devote the day to God and the remembrance of Christ's sacrifice for humankind. Durling therefore contends that the poem is "a private liturgy of love ... substituted for the liturgy of the cross. Moreover, the laurel, with its branches of diamonds, has become an idolatrous cross of glory. In other words, the most significant of Christianity's signs has become virtually a [pun on a] proper name."<sup>362</sup> Durling contends that, rather than devote himself to God, Petrarch instead devotes himself to Laura. While improper at any time, Petrarch's impropriety is particularly prominent on one of the most sacred days in the Christian calendar. Petrarch may have realized this as he aged, and could have caused him concerns, sparking his meditation on his relationship with Laura through the debate with the shade of St Augustine in the *Secretum*.

In his texts, Petrarch uses the symbol of the laurel and his idealization of Laura to cast himself in a God-like figure. According to Danjiela Kambasković-Sawers, "Laura has a place in Heaven, but [only because] it is earned by the speaker's poetry."<sup>363</sup> This is demonstrated in poem 360: *Quel'antiquo mio dolce empio signore/My sweet old cruel lord*:

and I gave her such  
sweet speech, so soft a singing voice,  
that base or heavy thought  
could not last long before her.<sup>364</sup>

Thus, for Petrarch, he plays the role of God, as he creates his idealized version of Laura in his mind.

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<sup>361</sup> Freccero, 'The Fig Tree and the Laurel'. 38.

<sup>362</sup> Robert Durling, quoted in Freccero. 38.

<sup>363</sup> Kambasković-Sawers, 'Carved in Living Laurel', 2007. 380.

<sup>364</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 360.101-104.

Poem 360 also creates the analogy between Laura and the prince in a court of law, both sovereign but absent.<sup>365</sup> Petrarch begs the court to free him from his torment by summoning Love before the court of Reason. Petrarch argues that he spent his life narrating his love of Laura:

[Love] made me search among the wilderness,  
 wild beasts, rapacious thieves and thorny bush,  
 barbarous people, customs,  
 and all the hardships that entangle travelers;  
 the mountains, valleys, marshes, seas and rivers,  
 and with a thousand snares spread everywhere,  
 and winter in strange months,  
 with danger imminent and with fatigue.  
 Never did this one or my other foe  
 from whom I fled leave me a single moment;  
 so if I've not been taken  
 before my time by hard and unripe death,  
 Heavenly pity cares  
 for my salvation and not this tyrant here  
 who feeds upon my sorrow and my loss.<sup>366</sup>

Petrarch argues that this work should allow him to be released from the internal torture of loving a woman who does not love him in return. Love's rebuttal to Petrarch's argument is that it was his love of Laura that made his winning the laurel wreath possible:

and that he has often said in his rhymes.  
 Now he's forgotten me, and that lady  
 who I gave him as a column  
 to support his fragile life.<sup>367</sup>

Ultimately the magistrate presiding over the case refuses to give a final verdict, saying:

Then smilingly she says:  
 'I am pleased to have heard your pleas,  
 but need more time for such a verdict.'<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1248.

<sup>366</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 360.46-60.

<sup>367</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 360.144-147.

<sup>368</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 360.155-157.

Thus, according to Laurence Hooper “[t]his leaves open the question whether any human lawcourt, internal or external, is powerful enough to wield the delegated authority received from Christ via Laura.”<sup>369</sup> This suspension at the end of the poem leads into the final poems of the *Canzoniere* in which Petrarch blends his love of Laura into his divine charity, a repudiation of Laura and erotic love.<sup>370</sup>

In poem 284: *Sì breve è 'l tempo e 'l penser sì veloce/The time's so brief, the thought so swift*, casts Petrarch experiencing a state of Christ-like torment, as he is on the cross with love as his torturer:

Love, who bound me and keeps me on this cross,  
trembles to see her there upon the threshold  
of the soul, ready to slay me once more,  
so sweet the vision, so soft the voice.<sup>371</sup>

Petrarch's casting of himself as a Christ-like figure is most problematic when Laura is absent from the poem, as is the case in a discarded sonnet of the *Canzoniere*:<sup>372</sup>

Many times a day I turn crimson and dark,  
Thinking of the painful harsh chains  
with which the world involves and holds me back  
so that I cannot come to you.  
For to my weak distorted sight  
it seemed that at your hands I had some hope,  
and then I said: 'If life sustains me,  
there will be time to return to the air of Tuscany.'  
From both those territories today I am in exile,  
for every smallest stream is a great obstacle to me,  
and here I am a slave, though I dream of liberty.  
Not a laurel crown, but a crown of sorbs  
weighs down my brow. Now I ask you  
if yours is not a sickness similar to mine.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1248.

<sup>370</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1248.

<sup>371</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 284.5-8.

<sup>372</sup> This sonnet was excluded from the final version of the *Canzoniere* Petrarch settled upon, but was found among his drafts of the book. Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1244.

<sup>373</sup> Hooper, 'Exile and Petrarch's Reinvention of Authorship'. 1244-1245.

This poem references Philippians 2:7, which describes the humility of Christ: “Instead he gave up everything and became a slave, when he became like one of us.”<sup>374</sup> In this reference, Petrarch is asserting that he was like Christ in his humility and his suffering for his work,<sup>375</sup> and he is rewarded only with a crown made with branches of the common rowan tree,<sup>376</sup> rather than the luxurious laurel crown that he desired. Furthermore, just as Christ suffered when he wore the crown of thorns, so too does Petrarch because his love for Laura remained unreciprocated.

Petrarch wrestles with the notion that his writings about Laura may have become idolatrous in the *Secretum*. Augustinus tells Franciscus [Petrarch] that “[s]he has removed your mind from the love of Heavenly things, and turned your desire from the Creator to a creature”,<sup>377</sup> to which Franciscus responds: “Please don’t jump to conclusions. There’s no doubt that love of her has led me to love God. ... I never loved her body more than her soul.”<sup>378</sup> Here it is important to remember that Augustinus is merely Petrarch’s imagining of the real St Augustine and can be understood to represent Petrarch’s fear that his love for Laura had become immoderate. In his answer to Augustinus in the *Secretum*, Petrarch echoes the sentiment of much of the *Canzoniere*. For example, in poem 157, *Quel sempre acerbo et honorato giorno/ That day forever cruel and honoured*, Petrarch admires Laura’s physical attributes, thinking them to point towards Heaven:

That day forever more so cruel and honoured  
sent to my heart its image so alive  
there is no wit or style that can describe it;  
but often I recall it with my mind.

Her attitude, adorned with gracious pity,  
the bittersweet lamenting that I heard,  
caused me to wonder were she mortal woman  
or goddess, for she cleared the sky around her.

Her hair fine gold, her face was like warm snow,  
her eyebrows ebony, her eyes two stars  
from where Love never bent his bow in vain;

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<sup>374</sup> Philippians 2:7.

<sup>375</sup> Hooper, ‘Exile and Petrarch’s Reinvention of Authorship’. 1245.

<sup>376</sup> The species of the rowan tree is the *Sorbus domestica*.

<sup>377</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.5.2.

<sup>378</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.5.2.-3.5.3

Pearls and red roses where the gathered grief  
 was transformed into ardent, lovely words,  
 her sighs a flame, her tears as though of crystal.<sup>379</sup>

Here, Petrarch wonders if Laura is truly a mortal woman because “she cleared the sky around her.”<sup>380</sup> He continues on to compare her to gold, ebony, snow, stars, pearls, roses, and crystals. Through this characterization, Petrarch plays on the notion that Laura is, in fact, not mortal but a goddess sent from Heaven, because only the most Heavenly beings could possibly have physical attributes as precious as Petrarch describes.

In both the *Secretum* and the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch attempts to honor Augustine’s ‘depreciation of the earthly’.<sup>381</sup> Augustinus counters this by pointing out that by claiming that his love for Laura was leading him to God, Franciscus is inverting the true order, because “to worship the divine through the earthly . . . [is] to put the means over the end.”<sup>382</sup> It is this inversion, according to Barbara Estrin, that allows Petrarch to create the figure of Laura as Eve, while representing himself as Adam in poem 237: *Non à tanti animali il mar fra l’onde/The sea’s not so many creatures in its waves* of the *Canzoniere*. In this poem, Petrarch changes himself into Adam, reimagining the beginning of his relationship with Laura, in a manner by which she returns his love.<sup>383</sup> In the second stanza Petrarch invokes the Augustinian notion that “the separation . . . that created the world in Genesis 1 anticipates the division to be enacted in the self at the end of time.”<sup>384</sup> Petrarch writes:

Now day to day I hope for the last evening  
 to cut in me the living earth from waves  
 and let me go to sleep upon some shore.<sup>385</sup>

The Augustinian universe is based on the principal that differences fade and that sinful human nature lacking the healing effects of divine grace is chaotic.<sup>386</sup> When Petrarch inverts the natural order by praying for sleep, he moves backwards in time, towards a different beginning, repeating

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<sup>379</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 157.1-14.

<sup>380</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 157.8.

<sup>381</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 43.

<sup>382</sup> Estrin, 43.

<sup>383</sup> Estrin, 43-44.

<sup>384</sup> Estrin, 44.

<sup>385</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 237.7-9.

<sup>386</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 44.

the scene in the Garden of Eden when Adam falls asleep and wakes to meet a companion who reciprocates his love. Petrarch elaborates on this theme in the sixth stanza:

and she, who before vespers gives me evening,  
came with the moon and Love toward that shore,  
alone and were to stay there for one night,  
with day and sun forever under waves!<sup>387</sup>

The invention of a woman who reciprocates his love subverts the dialogue in the *Secretum*, in which Petrarch faces the reality that Laura will never return his love and must accept Augustinus' advice to abandon his love for Laura and devote his time to other, more moral and spiritual pursuits.<sup>388</sup>

### 2.5.1. Petrarch and the Veronica

Petrarch also makes reference to Christian icons, as well as Biblical teachings. Poem 16 of the *Canzoniere*, *Movesi il vecchierel canuto et bianco/Grizzled and white the old man leaves*, tells of an old man who make a pilgrimage to Rome to see the Veronica. The Veronica (derived from the Latin, 'vera icon'), was a veil on which an image of Christ on the path to crucifixion is printed, given to Christ by St Veronica.<sup>389</sup> The Veronica was considered to have been a stark contrast to icons and idols, as "it point[ed] beyond itself to Christ and [was], crucially, not man-made but composed by miraculous contact with the suffering face of Christ."<sup>390</sup> It is referenced by Dante in *La Vita Nuova* and *Paradiso*, and in poem 16 of the *Canzoniere*, where it is placed as the antithesis to Laura. Petrarch's use of the Veronica in poem 16 can be understood as his acknowledgement of the potential for idolatry in his works.<sup>391</sup> The difference between 'icons' and 'idols' must be made, in that 'idols' are man-made and are thus forbidden, while 'icons' have miraculous origins and are thus viewed as a sign of God's presence. Icons' divine origin exempt them from any sin of idolatry.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 237.33-36.

<sup>388</sup> Because Petrarch writes both sides of the dialogue, Petrarch must really accept his own advice, given to him through his imagining of St Augustine.

<sup>389</sup> Rushworth, 'Icons and Idols in Dante and Petrarch'. 73-75.

<sup>390</sup> Rushworth, 73.

<sup>391</sup> Rushworth, 74.

<sup>392</sup> Rushworth, 75.

The final stanza of poem 16 is the subject of much debate amongst scholars, as some believe it suggests blasphemy and infidelity.<sup>393</sup>

Just so, alas, sometimes I go, my lady,  
searching, as much as possible, in others  
for your true, desirable form.<sup>394</sup>

These lines could be interpreted as representing the Veronica as an image of Laura, with Petrarch casting Laura in the position of Christ. Petrarch would likely have been aware that casting Laura as Christ could be interpreted as idolatrous, wrestling with this idea himself in book three of the *Secretum*. Another reading of this poem is that this final stanza is suggesting infidelity on Petrarch's part, as he searches for other women who could fill the position Laura holds in Petrarch's heart.

Poem 23: *Nel dolce tempo de la prima etade/I'll sing of the sweet time of my first youth* can be read as Petrarch's unrepentant and immoderate love for Laura:

And if, unlike herself, she is insistent  
on one's insistent prayer, she mirrors Him  
in order that the sinning be more feared;  
for one about to sin  
again does not repent well of his sin.<sup>395</sup>

This passage can be understood to mean that although Petrarch prays to God, he does not repent, because he knows that he will continue to worship Laura as an idol. In equating Laura with Christ, Petrarch threatens himself with damnation, and is thus fitting that he characterizes Laura as a siren in poem 167:<sup>396</sup> *Quando Amor I belli occhi a terra inchina/When Love inclines her lovely eyes to earth*: "this, heaven's only siren here among us."<sup>397</sup> By this phrase, Petrarch asserts that Laura is a siren, a mythological figure who was half woman and half bird, who would lure sailors to their destruction by singing enchanted songs.<sup>398</sup> In asserting that Laura is a siren, Petrarch implies that she will lead him to his destruction. Describing Laura as a siren is a method

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<sup>393</sup> Rushworth, 76.

<sup>394</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 16.12-14.

<sup>395</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 23.127-131.

<sup>396</sup> Rushworth, 'Icons and Idols in Dante and Petrarch'. 80.

<sup>397</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 167.14.

<sup>398</sup> 'Siren, n.', in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed 4 February 2021, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/180372>.

in which he attempts to absolve himself of idolatry, arguing that he was trapped by her beauties, unable to escape. The term ‘siren’, however, could also be used to imply that Laura will lead Petrarch to Heaven, because she is “heaven’s ... siren”.<sup>399</sup> This interpretation would then align with his argument in the *Secretum*: “There’s no doubt that love of her has led me to love God.”<sup>400</sup> Therefore, Petrarch’s assertion in poem 167 serves a double meaning, both that Laura will lead him to destruction, but also to Heaven.

According to Jennifer Rushworth, Petrarch’s reference to the Veronica also ties in with his reference to the Virgin Mary in the final poem of the *Canzoniere*. In his *Testament*, Petrarch informs us that he owned a (now lost) painting of the Virgin, antithetical to the portrait of Laura, writing “my panel or icon of the Virgin Mary, a work of the eminent painter Giotto”.<sup>401</sup> Rushworth argues that the phonetic linking of “*Vergine*”<sup>402</sup> and “Veronica” are both derived from *veritas*, which points to Christ.<sup>403</sup>

In poem 52: *Non al suo amante piú Diana piacque/Diana was not more pleasing to her lover*, Petrarch writes of Diana washing her veil:

... while she bathed the pretty veil  
that holds her lovely blonde hair in the breeze.

So that even now in the hot sunlight she makes me,  
tremble all over with the chill of love.<sup>404</sup>

While the poem references the veil of the goddess Diana, it can also be read as a reference to the veil covering the face of Moses, to which St. Paul refers in his second letter to the church at Corinth:<sup>405</sup> “We are not like Moses. His face was shining, but he covered it to keep the people of Israel from seeing the brightness fade away. The people were stubborn, and something still keeps them from seeing the truth when the Law is read. Only Christ can take away the covering that keeps them from seeing.”<sup>406</sup> Furthermore, Laura’s name appears as *l’aura* in the sixth line, meaning ‘the breeze’, thus the reader is assured that Laura is present in this poem. As John

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<sup>399</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 167.14.

<sup>400</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.5.2.

<sup>401</sup> Petrarch, *Testament* in Rushworth, ‘Icons and Idols in Dante and Petrarch’. 81.

<sup>402</sup> Italian for ‘Virgin’.

<sup>403</sup> Rushworth, ‘Icons and Idols in Dante and Petrarch’. 81.

<sup>404</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 52.5-8.

<sup>405</sup> Freccero, ‘The Fig Tree and the Laurel’. 39.

<sup>406</sup> 2 Cor. 3:13-15.

Freccero reminds us: “the poem illustrates the fundamental strategy of the *Canzoniere*: the thematics of idolatry transformed into the poetics of presence.”<sup>407</sup> Thus, by her mere presence in his poems, Petrarch idolizes Laura.

Dante references the Veronica in both *La Vita Nuova* and *Paradiso*, but his references are not considered to be idolatrous. In *Paradiso*, the reader is led to believe that Beatrice leads Dante to God because she is made by God, and because God, in turn, helped shape Dante’s poem: “If e’er it happen that my sacred song, / In shaping which both Heaven and earth concurred”.<sup>408</sup> According to Dante, because of Beatrice’s divine origin she is iconic, and is thus able to grant the reader a glimpse of paradise “through and beyond Beatrice.”<sup>409</sup> Laura, on the other hand, is created in Petrarch’s writing as his idealized woman, and, therefore, it is Petrarch, not God who is her creator, and as such, is a foil to Dante’s Heavenly Beatrice.<sup>410</sup> The difference lies for Rushworth in the effect of the writing; for Dante, Beatrice formed a part of a “meaningful, spiritual dialogue”, while Petrarch offers only “an illusion of dialogue”.<sup>411</sup> This illusory nature of Petrarch’s work reveals only the “harsh, golden glitter of the illusion constituted by idols and idolatry themselves” created by Petrarch’s narcissism.<sup>412</sup>

## 2.6. Comparisons with Dante

Petrarch frequently draws inspiration from Dante with key differences. Perhaps the most evident difference between Petrarch and Dante is that Dante allows Beatrice a voice, while Laura does not speak throughout the *Canzoniere*, and is completely absent from the *Secretum*. In *Paradiso*, Beatrice serves as Dante’s guide through Paradise, explaining the workings of the divine realm, and describing “the action[s] of God in the universe”.<sup>413</sup> While Petrarch compares Laura to the divine, she is not granted insight into divine knowledge, nor is she allowed to speak for herself. Petrarch, however, gives far more details about Laura as a mortal being, than Dante

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<sup>407</sup> Freccero, ‘The Fig Tree and the Laurel’. 40.

<sup>408</sup> Dante Alighieri, *A Translation of Dante’s Paradiso*. Canto 25.1-2.

<sup>409</sup> Rushworth, ‘Icons and Idols in Dante and Petrarch’. 81.

<sup>410</sup> Although evidence suggests that Laura de Noves was a real woman, Petrarch through his writing idolized her into a being that did not reflect the real woman, in a sense creating her.

<sup>411</sup> Rushworth, ‘Icons and Idols in Dante and Petrarch’. 81.

<sup>412</sup> Rushworth, 81.

<sup>413</sup> Dante Alighieri, *A Translation of Dante’s Paradiso*. 5.16-18. “Thus Beatrice commenced what now I write, / And like to one who speaketh without pause, / she continued her divine discourse.”; Preface to Canto 29.

gives about Beatrice's life on earth. Petrarch offers the reader physical characteristics, "whereas Dante's descriptions of Beatrice concentrate on her effects on the lover."<sup>414</sup> Petrarch's works progress throughout his life and culminate with his *Hymn to the Virgin* that, despite taking the Virgin Mary as its subject, still revolves around his love for Laura. Dante's *Commedia*, by contrast, ends by moving beyond Beatrice as we are introduced to all of the divine women of Paradise, a process that brings us, ultimately, before the throne of the Virgin Mary.<sup>415</sup> The women Dante is introduced to near the end of *Paradiso* include many famous saints and biblical figures, including Rachel, Sarah, Rebecca, and Judith.<sup>416</sup> Much like Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, Dante's *Paradiso* ends with a prayer to the Virgin.<sup>417</sup> Thus, Petrarch draws heavily, albeit selectively, on the writings of Dante for inspiration on writing about women.

Both Dante's *Commedia* and Petrarch's *Canzoniere* and *Secretum* have, at their heart, the testimony to "an exemplary female figure".<sup>418</sup> Petrarch, unlike Dante, takes an 'earthlier' approach in his descriptions of Laura.<sup>419</sup> Petrarch focuses his writings about Laura entirely on earth, even after she died, evoking memories of her life, biographical details, and her physical characteristics, whereas after Beatrice's death in 1290, Dante shifts his writings about her to focus on her role in Heaven as his celestial guide as he ascends Paradise to sing her praises.<sup>420</sup> Petrarch's ties to the earthly reality are quite clear in the *Canzoniere*, because he references several other contemporary figures, including patrons Giovanni and Giacomo Colonna.<sup>421</sup> This differs from Dante, who rarely references living figures in the *Commedia*, with the exception of his references to Beatrice before her death in 1290.

In Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, he almost never mentions Beatrice's name in any of the poems that are set during her lifetime.<sup>422</sup> Only once in *La Vita Nuova*, written between 1283 and 1293, Dante identifies to Beatrice as 'Monna Bice' in sonnet twenty-four, written before Beatrice's

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<sup>414</sup> Hooper, 'Characterization and Eschatological Realism from Dante to Petrarch'. 296.

<sup>415</sup> Hooper, 'Characterization and Eschatological Realism from Dante to Petrarch'. 301.

<sup>416</sup> Dante Alighieri, *A Translation of Dante's Paradiso*. 33.7-9.

<sup>417</sup> Dante Alighieri, *A Translation of Dante's Paradiso*. 33.

<sup>418</sup> Hooper, 'Characterization and Eschatological Realism from Dante to Petrarch'. 296.

<sup>419</sup> Hooper, 'Characterization and Eschatological Realism from Dante to Petrarch'. 296.

<sup>420</sup> Dante did, however, write several sonnets about Beatrice before her death in 1290 in which he described her earthly beauty.

<sup>421</sup> Petrarch, *Canzoniere*. 10; 28; 58; 103; 266; 269.

<sup>422</sup> *La Vita Nuova* is a collection of poems and their commentaries in which Dante describes his love for Beatrice, published in 1294.

death in 1290.<sup>423</sup> After her death in *La Vita Nuova* Beatrice's name is used in full, and it is used very frequently. Petrarch, on the other hand, only ever mentions Laura's name as a nickname or a pun, for example, 'Laureta' or 'l'aura', even after her death. In Dante, the name is one of the dividing factors between earth and Heaven; a notion absent in Petrarch's writings. This could be because Petrarch never ascends into Heaven in his text as does Dante. He remains firmly on earth, and therefore does not see Laura again after her death, unlike Dante, who ascends into Heaven and is guided by Beatrice through the divine world. While Petrarch hopes to meet Laura again in Heaven, he does not imagine this scenario in his writing as does Dante.

Further references to Dante appear in poem 126: *Chiare, fresche et dolci acque/Clear, sweet fresh water*, where Laura sits enthroned in the Garden of Eden:

Falling from gracious boughs,  
I sweetly call to mind,  
were flowers in a rain upon her bosom,  
and she were sitting there  
humble in such glory  
now covered in a shower of love's blooms<sup>424</sup>

Petrarch's attributions of humility and glory echo Dante's characterization of the Virgin Mary in *Paradiso*: "[h]umblest and greatest of created things",<sup>425</sup> while the image of flowers raining down onto Laura is patterned on the cloud of flowers out of which Beatrice appears during the pilgrimage to the Garden of Eden in *Purgatorio*:

[e]'er so, encompass'd in a cloud of flowers,  
which upward by angelic hands were flung,  
and all about the chariot fell in showers.<sup>426</sup>

Here the influence of Dante on Petrarch is clear, as Petrarch creates a scene of total harmony, although Laura remains always veiled, and never seen unobscured.<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova Di Dante Alighieri*, trans. Kenneth McKenzie (Boston, [c1922]), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/nnc2.ark:/13960/t22c07n1n>. xix.

<sup>424</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 126.40-45.

<sup>425</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*. Canto 33.2.

<sup>426</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Purgatorio of Dante, Translated*. (London, 1836), 33.28-30. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101060908819>.

<sup>427</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 177-179.

In both the *Secretum* and the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch relies heavily on the use of Christian figures and icons to inform his writing. The most influential Christian source was by far St Augustine, but other sources, including passages from the Bible, number symbolism, and icons such as the Veronica and those representing the Virgin Mary also appear throughout his works. In the next chapter, I shall examine how Petrarch merged both these Christian influences with antique sources. This merging resulted in the proliferation of humanism – a movement in which Petrarch played a key role, and I shall examine this as it pertains to his depiction of Laura.

### Chapter 3: Blending Christianity and Antiquity

As we have seen, Petrarch makes reference to a variety of influences throughout his writing. From antiquity he drew on the myths of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and his writing style was influenced by the eloquence of classical authors like Cicero and Seneca. On the other hand, his *Canzoniere* and *Secretum* were also heavily influenced by Christian sources, primarily the work of St Augustine, as well as biblical stories and prophecies. Petrarch created an idealized version of Laura in his mind, to the point where his image of her reflected the real woman in name only. Petrarch's writings, both those that centre on Laura and those that do not, represent a shift in scholarship towards the *studia humanitatis*, or 'humane studies', in which scholars looked back to the writings of antiquity and incorporate them into their works, which were often influenced by Christian writers and doctrine.

#### 3.1. *Studia Humanitatis*

*Studia humanitatis* also called 'humanism' is the study of classical sources, developed during the Renaissance, with Petrarch as one of the leading figures in this movement. It involved the study of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. The movement began focusing on Roman antiquity, but it slowly branched out to include ancient Greek writings and early Christian works. One of the main critiques of humanist scholars was regarding Aristotelian scholasticism, the dominant form of scholarship during the mediaeval era, in which texts would be read in fragments, rather than as a whole within their context. The goal of humanism was to create a culture distinct from that of the preceding eleventh to thirteenth centuries, by opposing scholasticism through the introduction of classical philosophy and eloquence into scholarship, in an attempt to 'modernize' it.<sup>428</sup>

Although the notion that Petrarch was the 'father of humanism' has largely been discarded, it remains true that he was among the first to develop the study into one that had staying power, and he did so by "adapting it to his age with his own, very Christian sensibility."<sup>429</sup> Scholars now trace the origins of Renaissance humanism to Paduan scholars

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<sup>428</sup> Tuccini, 'The Bard of Love'. 18-19.

<sup>429</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 8.

including Lovato dei Lovati (c. 1240-1309), a notary, judge, and poet, and his student Albertino Mussato (1261-1329).<sup>430</sup> Thus, although Petrarch was the first to “formulate a program and a goal for humanists, he was preceded by two generations of scholars and literary men with interests in and attitudes toward the ancients much like his own.”<sup>431</sup> Petrarch’s conception of humanism was through the “expression of human essence, stating that man ‘ascends’ and is redeemed through Christian faith.”<sup>432</sup> Petrarch’s conception of humanism was a Christian one, redefining the entirely secular movement pioneered by Lovato and Mussato.<sup>433</sup> This is in part due to his contact with “deeply religious individuals” in Avignon, including the Colonna family, as well as his taking minor religious orders.<sup>434</sup>

Petrarchan humanism was able to take hold better than earlier forms of humanism due to its *homo christianus* model. This model is when morality derives its ethos from antiquity, ascending *through* the heritage of antiquity to the modern day.<sup>435</sup> Andrei Bereschi defines Petrarch’s form of humanism as “not a rebirth of Romanity, [*sic*] but a Christian fulfilment of Romanity”, rather than simply a revival of Roman culture and society.<sup>436</sup> Petrarchan humanism sought to find a Christian interpretation “of the pagan philosophical system of thought”,<sup>437</sup> because Petrarchan humanists believed the Roman philosophers “deserve[d] attention to the extent that they had approximated light and truth even in their historical situation which had been immersed in darkness and falsehood.”<sup>438</sup> In other words, Petrarchan humanists believed that ancient philosophers’ retained value, despite their ‘misfortune’ in having been alive before the advent of Christianity. Petrarch wanted to expand scholarly work to beyond just of the scriptures and religious commentaries, believing that in order to “morally perfect” oneself, then one must revisit the ‘illustrious’ or ‘enlightened’ men from antiquity.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> Ronald. G. Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2000), 81. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mta-ebooks/detail.action?docID=253443>.

<sup>431</sup> Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*. 81.

<sup>432</sup> Andrei Bereschi, ‘Petrarch’s Demarcation of Humanism’, *Philobiblon; Cluj-Napoca* 22, no. 1 (June 2017): 141, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.mta.ca/10.26424/philobib.2017.22.1.08>.

<sup>433</sup> Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*. 231.

<sup>434</sup> Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*. 232.

<sup>435</sup> Bereschi, ‘Petrarch’s Demarcation of Humanism’. 141.

<sup>436</sup> Bereschi, 136-141.

<sup>437</sup> Bereschi, 135.

<sup>438</sup> Bereschi, 135.

<sup>439</sup> Bereschi, 144.

Petrarchan humanism relies on the Roman conception of *mos maiorum* or ‘way of the ancestors’, referring to the transmission of the most essential and noble aspects of life.<sup>440</sup> This concept was present in Christian life before Petrarch, understood most famously by Bernard de Chartres’ (†c. 1124) reference to “dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants”, and could also be used within the context of Christianity’s approach to Judaic principles.<sup>441</sup> Petrarch simply took this concept and applied it to an ancient context, drawing on the learning and eloquence of ancient authors, rather than solely religious ones. For Petrarch, humanism meant “recognising one’s own essence through the study of the moral ascension of humanity based on its Roman heritage”.<sup>442</sup>

The term ‘humanism’ itself has interesting origins, and dates back to ancient rhetoricians. Aulus Gellius (†c. 180) suggested that “*humanitas* went beyond a concept that distinguished human beings from animals and even superseded the idea of ‘love for all human beings’. Instead, Gellius wrote, *humanitas* is ‘what the Greeks call *paideia* and what we mean when we say “education” and “instruction” in the good arts’.”<sup>443</sup> Cicero also adopted this definition in the *Pro Archia*, when he paired the term ‘humanity’ with ‘studies’.<sup>444</sup>

The Petrarchan humanist project was complex, as there was a duality in the work of these humanists because “on the one hand, it took the form of a laborious requalification of Christianity through the retrieval of antiquity, while on the other hand ... [it involved] an arduous amendment of antiquity through the retrieval of an authentic form of Christianity (that of its origins).”<sup>445</sup> Thus, some humanist scholars tried to reinterpret the Bible through the lens of classical scholarship, basing their argument in the fact that the fathers of the church received a classical education. These scholars had to be careful what parts of ancient ‘pagan’ culture they introduced into their scholarship, in order to avoid conflict with the church. The Petrarchan

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<sup>440</sup> Bereschi, 142.

<sup>441</sup> Meaning Christian’s adoption of the Old Testament and its teachings, incorporating them into the Christian liturgy. A visual example of this is in a stained glass window at Chartres Cathedral in France, in which the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are shown standing on the shoulders of the giant prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Bereschi, 143.

<sup>442</sup> Bereschi, 143.

<sup>443</sup> Celenza, *Petrarch*. 55.

<sup>444</sup> Celenza, 55.

<sup>445</sup> Tuccini, ‘The Bard of Love’. 18.

humanists aimed to refine the works of antiquity and incorporate that wisdom into their own scholarship.<sup>446</sup>

In his attempts to validate his study of Christian humanism, Petrarch invoked St Augustine in the *Secretum*, who, having earned his living as a rhetorician prior to his conversion to Christianity, frequently cites ancient sources. Therefore, although the *Secretum* is meant to be modeled on St Augustine's *Confessions*, some scholars argue that the dialogue aligns more closely with the dialogues and letters of Cicero, including those found in the *Tusculan Disputations*<sup>447</sup>, and *Epistulae ad Familiares*.<sup>448</sup> There are few direct references to St Augustine's writings in the *Secretum*, with far more references to Cicero's works, particularly the *Tusculan Disputations*, and other ancient authors including Horace and Virgil. Cicero was popular among humanists for his eloquent Latin, especially when compared with the Latin of the mediaeval period. Petrarch was deeply influenced by the writings of Cicero, as he references Cicero's *Tusculanae disputationes* several times throughout the *Secretum*. One example is in book three of the *Secretum*, in which Augustinus challenges Petrarch's love for Laura's beauty:

*Aug.* There is no doubt that very beautiful things are often love in a sordid way.

*Fr.* I've already replied to this. If the features of the love that holds me in sway were visible, they would resemble the face of the one on whom I have admittedly lavished much praise, though less than I should have. The woman in whose presence we are speaking [Truth] is my witness that in my love there was nothing sordid, nothing obscene, nothing even guilty, except its extent. Limit this, and nothing more beautiful could be imagined.

*Aug.* I can reply to you with Cicero's words: 'you are seeking a limit to vice.'<sup>449</sup>

Here, Petrarch, through the shade of St Augustine, references book four of the *Tusculan Disputations*:

He who seeks a limit for a fault, is like one who, throwing himself from Leucate,<sup>450</sup> should think that he can poise himself in mid-air when he pleases. As he cannot do

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<sup>446</sup> Tuccini, 19.

<sup>447</sup> Entitled *On grief of mind* and *On other perturbations of the mind*.

<sup>448</sup> Carol E. Quillen, 'A Tradition Invented: Petrarch, Augustine, and the Language of Humanism', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 2 (1992): 202-203, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2709870>.

<sup>449</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.4.2-3.4.3.

<sup>450</sup> A cliffside village in the Mediterranean, located in modern-day France.

this, no more can the mind when disturbed and excited restrain itself, and stop where it wants to stop; and, in general, whatever things are harmful in their growth are faulty in their birth.<sup>451</sup>

In referencing Cicero, Petrarch shows both his admiration for the ancient author, but also implies that Augustine would be familiar with the writings of Cicero, given his Roman education and training in rhetoric.<sup>452</sup> Thus, study of Roman texts in the fourteenth century was means by which humanists thought that scholars and theologians could better understand the writings of the fathers of the church, because the fathers “grounded their writings in the works of poets”.<sup>453</sup> By having the shade of St Augustine reference Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*, Petrarch was able to make a subtle argument for the validity of the *studia humanitatis*, as it could be used to blend the studies of antiquity with Christianity.

Although Petrarch cites Cicero most frequently in the *Secretum*, he also references other ancient authors. For example, in book one of the *Secretum*, while discussing the degeneration of the soul, Augustinus recalls a passage of Virgil:

Certainly Vergil seems to have been inspired when he touched on how the passions well up from the body, intertwined with the soul and how one forgets one’s higher nature, when he says:

There is a fiery energy of divine origin in these seeds  
as long as they are not held back by harmful bodies  
and dulled by earthly limbs and mortal bodies.  
This is why souls fear and desire, suffer and rejoice, and do not  
look up to heaven, enclosed in the darkness of a blind prison.<sup>454</sup>

The shade of St Augustine then helps Franciscus to interpret this passage as a description of the “four-part passion of the soul”.<sup>455</sup> Augustinus then ‘confirms’ this interpretation by citing the Apostle Paul, who says: “For the corruptible body weighs down the soul, and the earthly

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<sup>451</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations, The Republic, and the Nature of the Gods*, trans. C.D. Yonge, Harper’s New Classical Library (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877). 4.18.41.

<sup>452</sup> Of the four Latin fathers of the church, Jerome and Augustine were trained rhetoricians, while Ambrose and Gregory had successful careers in the Roman imperial bureaucracy before entering into religious and theological studies. They therefore would have all received training in Roman texts and eloquence.

<sup>453</sup> Quillen, ‘A Tradition Invented’. 193.

<sup>454</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 1.15.2; *Aeneid*. 6.730-34.

<sup>455</sup> Augustine expounds on this theory of the passions of the soul in his *On the Sermon on the Mount*. Augustine, ‘On the Sermon on the Mount’, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. William Findlay, vol. 6, 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1888). 4.11; Quillen, ‘A Tradition Invented’. 203.

tabernacle presses down the mind that muses upon many things.”<sup>456</sup> Interestingly, this is the same citation that is given by Augustine in the *City of God*, when he “dramatize[s] the fundamental differences between the point of view of the poet [Virgil] and that of followers of the Christian religion.”<sup>457</sup> Augustine argues that according to Christian beliefs, it is not the body that leads to the corruption of the soul as suggested by Virgil in the *Aeneid*:

There is a fiery energy of divine origin in these seeds  
as long as they are not held back by harmful bodies  
and dulled by earthly limbs and mortal bodies.<sup>458</sup>

Rather, it is sin itself that renders the soul corrupt: “it was not the corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful, but the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible.”<sup>459</sup> Thus, Virgil’s implication of the body in the corruption of the soul stands at odds with Christianity. Here, there are two distinct readings of the same passage. While Augustine draws differences between Virgil and Christianity, Petrarch’s Augustinus draws similarities, subverting the interpretation in *City of God*.<sup>460</sup>

In Petrarch’s representation of St Augustine, he creates an authorizing voice for the *studia humanitatis* and the study of ancient sources, despite the historical Augustine’s objections. Augustine’s reading of classical sources and citing of them in his own works allowed Petrarch to create Augustinus, who, both sanctioning and encouraging the reading of classical literature, however inaccurate that representation might be of the historical Augustine, allowed Petrarch and his successors an authorial figure in their attempts to challenge Aristotelian scholasticism.

Although he did not participate in the humanistic scholarship emerging at Padua during his lifetime, Dante recognized that “ancient Rome had been both the center of a perfect secular society and the site where Peter established Christ’s church.”<sup>461</sup> Furthermore, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* blended both ancient and Christian history together, something that may have inspired

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<sup>456</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 1.15.4.; Wisdom 9:15 “The body that is headed for destruction weighs down the soul. Our earthly container burdens our minds with cares and concerns.” Petrarch misattributes the passage to St Paul, repeating the misattribution by Augustine in *City of God* 14.3, where it is quoted alongside 2 Cor. 4:16. “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” Mann. Note 23.

<sup>457</sup> Quillen, ‘A Tradition Invented’. 204.; Augustine, ‘City of God’. 14.3

<sup>458</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*. 6.730-732.

<sup>459</sup> Augustine, *City of God*. 14.3.

<sup>460</sup> Quillen, ‘A Tradition Invented’. 204-205.

<sup>461</sup> Witt, ‘Francesco Petrarca and the Parameters of Historical Research’. 701.

Petrarch. While it cannot be known for certain, in all likelihood, Dante's emphasis on the importance of Rome would have resonated with Petrarch while growing up at Avignon, as his father worked as a notary in the Provençal-dominated papal court. As Ronald Witt hypothesizes: "Petrarca likely heard as a boy his father lament the desolation of Rome and the humiliation of Italy. Boasts of French superiority only sharpened his loyalty to his land of origin and to its Roman heritage."<sup>462</sup> This lamentation for, and loyalty to, the city of Rome can be seen throughout Petrarch's writings.<sup>463</sup> Petrarch largely blames this degradation of the papacy, whom he believes has shirked its duties to the city and become corrupted, as was discussed in the introduction.

### 3.2 Reconciliation of Antiquity with Christian Teachings

Petrarch's poetic writing style came about as a result of the rise of sonnets in the early thirteenth century in Italy. This style was developed during the early revival of classical learning in Sicily at the court of Frederick II (r.1215-1250), King of Sicily and Emperor of the Romans, where legal scholars in service of Frederick created the sonnet form.<sup>464</sup> The sonnet grew rapidly in popularity and soon became a feature of the mediaeval troubadour tradition. Imitation was often used in late mediaeval writing and was useful to Petrarch in two ways; it established a connection between Petrarch and the literary tradition of antiquity and early Christianity, while simultaneously allowing him to create his own voice.<sup>465</sup>

Rhetoric used by many scholars in fourteenth century Italy was based on the Ciceronian model, focusing on "successful and appropriate communication".<sup>466</sup> This was combined with frequent references to well-known literary and religious figures. These scholars drew on the *exemplum*, which had evolved from its classical definition: "what happens when we describe with our words some fair saying or deed of a wise and celebrated person", to a Christian form: "a brief narrative presented as truthful (that is, historical) and used in discourse (usually a sermon)

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<sup>462</sup> Witt, 'Francesco Petrarca and the Parameters of Historical Research'. 701-702.

<sup>463</sup> One example is poem 53 of the *Canzoniere*, *Spirito gentil/Gentle spirit*, in which Petrarch laments the degradation of the city of Rome since the time of the Roman Republic. For further discussion see ii. Petrarch's Perceived Exile and the Political Atmosphere of Fourteenth Century Italy, 7-9.

<sup>464</sup> Lauster, 'Stone Imagery and the Sonnet Form'. 148.

<sup>465</sup> Portugal, 'Petrarch's Poetics'. 149.

<sup>466</sup> Hooper, 'Characterization and Eschatological Realism from Dante to Petrarch'. 291.

to convince listeners by offering them a salutary lesson”.<sup>467</sup> The *exemplum* was used by both civic rhetoricians, who often used ancient figures in their treatises, and clergy, who often preferred well-known modern or Christian figures in their sermons to help the listener grasp the “continuing relevance of biblical precepts.”<sup>468</sup> The *exemplum* became most popular during the thirteenth century, with theologians like Jacques de Vitry (1180-1240) implementing the *exemplum* in his sermons as a means of relating the message of the sermon in a way that could be understood easily by his audience.<sup>469</sup> The *exemplum* was also used by civic rhetoricians, for example, Brunetto Latini (1220-1294) who wrote in his *Trésor*: “the master will now demonstrate with the help of the ancient examples of great authority, as was done by wise sages.”<sup>470</sup> Despite its growing popularity in the thirteenth century, the *exemplum* was developed in ancient Greek and Roman texts, and employed frequently by Herodotus (c. 484-435 BCE) among other ancient authors.<sup>471</sup> It remained in use throughout the rise of the Roman Republic and then Empire, becoming part of classical education. For Augustine, the *exemplum* meant that an individual could “best achieve spiritual progress by imitating the most exemplary figure from this historical record, namely Christ.”<sup>472</sup> Petrarch found a middle ground between the civic rhetoricians like Latini who relied on ancient figures, and the clergy who relied almost exclusively on Biblical figures (although sometimes drawing on the church fathers), as he used a wide range of characters, but, his selection is far more limited, and biased towards ancient figures, than was Dante’s use of figures in the *Divine Comedy*.

There are two main historical figures who serve as synthesizers of several forms of writing on whom Petrarch drew. For ancient texts, Petrarch relied on Seneca, who synthesized the Hellenistic and Latin literary traditions, while his Christian counterpart was Augustine.<sup>473</sup> Both authors made use of the soliloquy in their writings. While Seneca uses the soliloquy form in

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<sup>467</sup> Hooper, ‘Characterization and Eschatological Realism from Dante to Petrarch’. 291.

<sup>468</sup> Hooper, ‘Characterization and Eschatological Realism from Dante to Petrarch’. 291.

<sup>469</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 1992). 79.

<sup>470</sup> My translation. “les Maistres veult plus apertement demonstrer ce qui il a dit, metra il uns viels exemples de grant auctorité, sor quoi si dit par plusors sages.” Hooper, ‘Characterization and Eschatological Realism from Dante to Petrarch’. 303.; Brunetto Latini, *Li Livres Dou Tresor; Publié Pour La Première Fois d’après Les MSS. de La Bibliothèque Impériale, de La Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal et Plusieurs MSS Des Départements et de l’étranger*, (Paris, 1863), 505. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/osu.32435016656407>.

<sup>471</sup> Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*. 79.

<sup>472</sup> Brian Stock, ‘Ethics and the Humanities: Some Lessons of Historical Experience’, *New Literary History* 36, no. 1 (11 April 2005): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2005.0027>.

<sup>473</sup> Stock, ‘Ethics and the Humanities’. 9.

the *Moral Epistles* as a commentary on the books he is reading, Augustine uses the soliloquy form in the *Confessions* as the stage for his recollections of his life up until his thirty-second year.<sup>474</sup>

### 3.2.1. Classical Philosophy and Religious Texts

The first instance of using classical philosophy in biblical translations was by Philo Judaeus († c. 50) who used Platonic allegories in his Greek translation of biblical texts, but the most successful early translations of the scriptural texts were by Origen (†c. 254), a Jewish convert to Christianity, who translated scriptural texts from the original Hebrew.<sup>475</sup> St Augustine drew heavily on the works of Origen, and *The City of God*, completed in 427, can be described as “antiquity’s final statement on the possibility of incorporating the Hebrew and Greek traditions into the Christian worldview”.<sup>476</sup> Augustine’s *City of God* expounds on the problems of interpretation of theology and suggests solutions, and as a result, became one of the primary sources for Christian theologians from the middle ages to the present day. It was through reading Augustine’s texts that mediaeval monastic scholars combined philosophy and theology into one study of meditative reading as a means to explore one’s self.<sup>477</sup> Augustine endorsed this practice of meditative reading as a philosophical means to achieve spiritual growth, a notion that reaches back to antiquity, used frequently by Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (r.161-180 CE) and Neoplatonic thinker Plotinus (c. 205-270 CE), among other scholars.<sup>478</sup> Plotinus saw the potential of meditative reading in resolving “moral, ethical, or existential problems”, drawing on the philosophical background provided by Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus. Augustine differs from Plotinus, however, because he accentuates the distinction between “subject and object through patient line-by-line exegesis” while, Plotinus masks this difference.<sup>479</sup>

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<sup>474</sup> Stock, ‘Ethics and the Humanities’. 9.

<sup>475</sup> Stock, ‘Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination’. 5.

<sup>476</sup> Stock, ‘Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination’. 5-6.

<sup>477</sup> Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (London, United Kingdom: Harvard University Press, 1998), 2. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mta-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3300749>.

<sup>478</sup> Augustine was a student of both Plotinus, and his editor Porphyry, while Marcus Aurelius wrote his own book of *Meditations*. Aurelius’ writings, much like Petrarch’s *Secretum*, were not likely meant for public consumption. Stock, ‘Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination’. 6.; Celenza, *Petrarch*. 123.

<sup>479</sup> Stock, *Augustine the Reader*. 2.

Augustine's understanding of meditative reading was non-visual, as was practiced by ancient philosophers. Contemplative or meditative reading is also referenced in the Biblical texts, including the Psalms and the Book of Wisdom in the Old Testament, as well as the Gospels of Paul and John in the New Testament.<sup>480</sup> Visualization in reading did not become commonplace until the mediaeval era, and Augustine himself rejected the notion of visualization.<sup>481</sup>

The scene at the end of book two of the *Secretum* in which Franciscus and Augustinus discuss classical poets and philosophers is where the shade of St Augustine seems to most clearly reflect Petrarch's thinking. Augustinus quotes ancient sources that are never directly cited by the Bishop of Hippo,<sup>482</sup> and diagnoses Petrarch with melancholy, which, according to Brian Stock "is one of the best-known forms of inspiration for the classical epic poetry whose morality he [St Augustine] rejects."<sup>483</sup> Furthermore, Augustinus suggests to Franciscus that a remedy to his melancholy is to memorize and meditate on ancient philosophy including the works of Seneca and Cicero, making notes on useful statements,<sup>484</sup> so that "whenever and wherever there is an outbreak of disease [melancholy] which allows of no delay, you will, like a skilled doctor, have remedies which are so to speak engraved on your mind."<sup>485</sup> Here, Augustine recommends his practice of meditative reading to Petrarch.

Petrarch's understanding of visualization while reading is also derived from mediaeval practices, rather than ancient. Thus, Petrarch writes the shade of St Augustine in such a way that the shade of the Bishop of Hippo uses visual imagery in a manner that the historical bishop would have opposed. In his anti-Manichaean writing, *De Trinitate*, Augustine wrote opposing the use "sensorial qualities".<sup>486</sup> Nevertheless, imagery is introduced in the first lines of book one of the *Secretum*. When discussing the importance of meditation Augustinus says: "[one must]

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<sup>480</sup> Stock, 'Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination'. 6.

<sup>481</sup> Stock, 'Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination'. 15.

<sup>482</sup> One example is Petrarch's assertion that Augustine would cite Julius Caesar. Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 2.14.18.

<sup>483</sup> Stock, 'Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination'. 14.

<sup>484</sup> In the manner of Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights*.

<sup>485</sup> The imagery of the doctor is interesting, as it also serves as a reflection of canon twenty-one from the fourth Lateran council, in which priests are designated as doctors of the soul: "Let the priest be discreet and cautious that he may pour wine and oil into the wounds of the one injured after the manner of a skilful physician, carefully inquiring into the circumstances of the sinner and the sin, from the nature of which he may understand what kind of advice to give and what remedy to apply, making use of different experiments to heal the sick one." Petrarca and Mann, *My Secret Book*. 2.16.2.; H.J. Schroeder, ed., 'Decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council', in *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary* (St. Louis: Herder, 1937), 236–96.

<sup>486</sup> Stock, 'Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination'. 15.

meditate constantly upon death, on condition that such thoughts do not come upon us lightly and superficially, but worm their way into the very marrow of our bones.”<sup>487</sup> This use of visual language would never have appeared in Augustine’s own writings, and thus serves as a means of illustrating Petrarch’s misrepresentations of this revered father of the church.

Later in his life, as he wrestled with the prospect of death, Petrarch may have come to fear that his love for Laura and his desire for poetic fame were idolatrous as understood through the Augustinian definition of idolatry, which summarized by Jennifer Rushworth is: “the reification of the sign in an attempt to create poetic presence.”<sup>488</sup> This interpretation of idolatry can be applied to the *Canzoniere*, in which Petrarch frequently uses the abstract terms ‘*l’aura*’ and ‘*l’auro*’, meaning ‘aura’ and ‘breeze’ to allude to Laura, Petrarch using a poetic technique to evoke Laura’s presence.

There is a connection between an idol and the lack of existence, because, according to Origen’s Pauline definition of idolatry,<sup>489</sup> if Laura exists then she cannot be an idol. Petrarch appears to accept this definition of idolatry, because in poem 128: *Italia mia/My Italy*, he writes: “and do not idolize / a name that is so empty”.<sup>490</sup> Petrarch, however, contradicts himself, because in poem 30: *Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro/I saw a girl under green laurel*, Petrarch explicitly calls Laura his idol: “my idol sculptured from living laurel”.<sup>491</sup> Nevertheless, Laura’s death rendered her an idol, according to an opinion expressed by Fabius Planciades Fulgentius, a grammarian from North Africa who lived in the late fifth century, in describing the mourning of Diophantus of Sparta for his deceased son:

Then, in the grip of grief which always endeavors to relieve its need, he set up an effigy of his son in his household; but when he sought a cure thereby for his grief, he found it rather a renewal of sorrow, for he did not realize that forgetting is the true healer of distress: he had made something whereby he would acquire daily renewals of his grief, not find comfort from it. This is called an idol, that is *idos dolu*, which in Latin we call appearance of grief.<sup>492</sup>

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<sup>487</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 1.1.1.

<sup>488</sup> Rushworth, ‘Icons and Idols in Dante and Petrarch’. 78.; Freccero, ‘The Fig Tree and the Laurel’. 38.

<sup>489</sup> Origen, *De Principiis*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Frederick Crombie, vol. 4 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885). 4.4.

<sup>490</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 128.76-77.

<sup>491</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 30.27.

<sup>492</sup> Fulgentius, *Mythologies*, trans. Leslie George Whitbread (Columbus: Ohio State Press, 1971). 1.1.

Fulgentius' definition of an idol would have been known to Petrarch because he owned a copy of the *Mythologies*.<sup>493</sup> Although Fulgentius may not have understood the term 'idol' as an object that is improperly worshipped in a Christian sense, the term can be applied as it relates to Petrarch's relationship with Laura after her death. He used his painting of Laura by Simone Martini and his poems about her to fuel his idealization of her, even after her death, rendering Petrarch's grief endless.<sup>494</sup>

In the *Secretum*, Petrarch reflects on this definition through the shade of St Augustine. Augustinus draws on Fulgentius' understanding of idolatry, attacking Petrarch's portrait of Laura by Simone Martini:

And what's even crazier is that, not content with the sight of the face that had brought all this upon you, you went and had another version of it painted by a famous artist, so that you could carry it around with you everywhere and thus have a constant cause for everlasting tears.<sup>495</sup>

Here Augustinus chides Petrarch for his love of the portrait of Laura, which, according to both Augustinus and Fulgentius, only fuels Petrarch's mourning.

### 3.2.2. Petrarch's Description of Laura's Beauty

Petrarch's understanding of the world drew on an amalgamation of both Christian and classical influences. For example, his understanding of love and beauty "as paths to spiritual elevation" comes as a result of both Christian and classical influences.<sup>496</sup> Sonnet 90: *Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi/ She let her gold hair scatter in the breeze*, is often read as Petrarch evoking Laura's beauty and transforming it into 'absolute space', echoing Dante's *Tanto gentile/so gentle*.<sup>497</sup> In this poem, Petrarch seems to slow time to capture the essence of Laura's beauty, describing it as angelic rather than mortal:

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<sup>493</sup> Fulgentius' texts remained within the sphere of public knowledge throughout the mediaeval era, unlike many other classical texts.

<sup>494</sup> Rushworth, 'Icons and Idols in Dante and Petrarch'. 80.

<sup>495</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.7.4.

<sup>496</sup> Lauster, 'Stone Imagery and the Sonnet Form'. 148.

<sup>497</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 63.

The way she walked was not the way of mortals  
but of angelic forms, and when she spoke  
more than an earthly voice it was that sang:

A godly spirit and a living sun  
was what I now saw, and if she is not now,  
my wound still bleeds, although the bow's now unbent.<sup>498</sup>

This sonnet echoes Dante's *Tanto gentile/So gentle* which reads:

She appears so pleasant to those who look upon her,  
and through her eyes a sweetness touches the heart,  
which cannot be understood by those who feel it not:  
and it seems that from her lips emanates  
a delicate spirit full of love,  
that speaks to the soul: Sigh.<sup>499</sup>

Both these poems celebrate the otherworldliness of their subjects. For Petrarch, the poem begins, once again, with 'l'aura', a pun on Laura's name, a sign of her elusiveness.<sup>500</sup> Petrarch is threatened by this elusiveness, as Mazzotta describes: "The vision of Laura which binds his will and from which there is no escaping is obliquely cast in terms of a specifically poetic danger, namely, the danger of losing the poetic voice."<sup>501</sup> This danger of losing one's poetic voice is also present in Dante, because at the appearance of Beatrice in *Tanto gentile*, "my lady when she greets others, / that every trembling tongue becomes dumb".<sup>502</sup>

As in Dante's *Tanto gentile*, Petrarch offers an ambiguous description of Laura as partly angelic and partly as an object of erotic desire.<sup>503</sup> Just as in Dante's *Tanto gentile*, the poem's celebration of Laura's beauty is the pretext for the "fundamental question of the sonnet, the meaning of appearance."<sup>504</sup> Thus, the metaphor of appearance is reminiscent of Virgil's description of Venus in the *Aeneid*, and the Ovidian myth of Daphne,<sup>505</sup> but they also offer a

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<sup>498</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 90.9-14.

<sup>499</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Tanto gentile*. 9-14.

<sup>500</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 61-63.

<sup>501</sup> Mazzotta, 63.

<sup>502</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Tanto gentile*. 2-3.

<sup>503</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 90.10.; Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 62.

<sup>504</sup> Mazzotta, 62.

<sup>505</sup> For further description of this comparison see chapter one, section 1.5, 'Queens and Goddesses: Laura as Dido and Venus', 40-43.

parallel with Ovid's description of Diana in the story of Actaeon and Diana in Book Three of the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>506</sup>

Ovid describes Diana preparing to bathe in the lake: "Yet another attendant, more skilled than the rest, Crocale, the daughter of Ismenus, gathered up the tresses which lay scattered on the goddess' shoulders, and bound them into a knot, though her own hair hung loose."<sup>507</sup> This description mirrors Petrarch's opening lines:

She let her gold hair scatter in the breeze  
that twined it in a thousand sweet knots,  
and wavering light, beyond measure, would burn  
in those beautiful eyes.<sup>508</sup>

Petrarch draws on the action of the nymph Crocale, who ties Diana's hair, but in his poem, Petrarch replaces the nymph with the 'aura' that ties Laura's hair into "a thousand sweet knots".<sup>509</sup> The connection between poem 90 and the myth of Actaeon and Diana is furthered by the final lines of the poem:

A godly spirit and a living sun  
was what I now saw, and if she is not now,  
my wound still bleeds, although the bow's now unbent.<sup>510</sup>

This reference to the bow reminds the reader of the hunter Actaeon. In this scenario, Petrarch is Actaeon with his proverbial bow slack as he gazes in awe at Laura's beauty, just as did Actaeon when he saw Diana. Likewise, in Dante's *Tanto gentile* everyone who saw Beatrice became mute. For Petrarch, however, the loss of voice is "the consequence of his moral transgression",<sup>511</sup> as though he is aware of the dangers of idolizing Laura, whereas for Dante, the loss of one's voice is simply because of the awe Beatrice inspired in the onlooker.

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<sup>506</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 62.

<sup>507</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 3.167-170.

<sup>508</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 90.1-4.

<sup>509</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 62-63.

<sup>510</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 90.12-14.

<sup>511</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 63-64.

### 3.2.3. Petrarch, Orpheus, and the Poet-Theologian

Another way in which ancient mythology was reconciled to the teachings of the church was through reinterpretation of mythological figures. One such example is Orpheus, whose name means “best voice”, and as such, possess the power to tame “the brutishness of man”, who, as such, represents the ideals of the humanists.<sup>512</sup> The figure of Orpheus was thus interpreted by Petrarch as the *poeta-theologus*, or ‘poet-theologian’, someone able to embody the relationship between literature and theology.<sup>513</sup> Petrarch came to this conclusion by the theories on the *poeta-theologus* available to him in chapter eighteen of St Augustine’s *City of God*:

During the same period of time arose the poets, who were also called theologues, because they made hymns about the gods; yet about such gods as, although great men, were yet but men, or the elements of this world which the true God made, or creatures who were ordained as principalities and powers according to the will of the Creator and their own merit. And if, among much that was vain and false, they sang anything of the one true God, yet, by worshipping Him along with others who are not gods, and showing them the service that is due to Him alone, they did not serve Him at all rightly; and even such poets as Orpheus, Musæus, and Linus, were unable to abstain from dishonoring their gods by fables. But yet these theologues worshipped the gods, and were not worshipped as gods, although the city of the ungodly is wont, I know not how, to set Orpheus over the sacred, or rather sacrilegious, rites of hell.<sup>514</sup>

In this passage, Augustine expounds on the poet-theologians, including mythical poets such as Orpheus, Musæus, and Linus. Augustine, however, renounces these poets, as they were “unable to abstain from dishonoring their gods by fables.”<sup>515</sup> Thus, for Augustine, these poet-theologians symbolize “the rupture between knowledge and practice”, because they worshipped false gods, as well as the one true God.<sup>516</sup> Despite Augustine’s renunciation of the poet-theologians, Petrarch saw their value, and sought to use them as a means of reconciling antiquity with Christianity. Petrarch did not want to simply collapse theology into rhetoric, as had earlier Paduan humanist, Albertino Mussato.<sup>517</sup> Petrarch sought to create a dichotomy between style and meaning and validated it through the evocation of St Jerome’s “perception of the intractable,

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<sup>512</sup> Mazzotta, 155.

<sup>513</sup> Mazzotta, 155.

<sup>514</sup> Augustine, ‘City of God’. 18.14.

<sup>515</sup> Augustine, ‘City of God’. 18.14.

<sup>516</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 155.

<sup>517</sup> Mussato was among the first to develop the notion of “theological poetics” in which he fused philosophy, theology, and poetry into one entity. Brenda Deen Schildgen, ‘Poetry and Theology in the Fourteenth Century’, *Religion & Literature* 41, no. 2 (2009): 138.

untranslatable poetic specificities of the Bible.”<sup>518</sup> Thus, for Petrarch, poetry and the language of antiquity, embodied by Orpheus’ lyrics, were useful for his own time by their application of translating sentiments, not easily conveyed through direct translation.

With his charming of nature with his song, Orpheus was interpreted throughout the mediaeval era as a “divinely inspired poetic teacher”.<sup>519</sup> Characterizing this divine inspiration, Orpheus was granted “knowledge of human and divine things” in a form of divine revelation.<sup>520</sup> This ‘divine revelation’ was often compared to the prophets of the Old Testament. For example, Orpheus was often compared with David, who cured Saul’s madness in 1 Samuel.<sup>521</sup> The Greek fathers of the church also made references to the Old Testament, arguing that “anything valuable in Greek philosophy had been stolen from Moses”.<sup>522</sup> For most Renaissance authors, Orpheus was regarded as the oldest of the Greek poets, philosophers, and theologians.<sup>523</sup> Thus, Renaissance readings of the Greek fathers on the Old Testament would include Orpheus as someone granted divine inspiration and knowledge.

Dante also draws on the notion of Orpheus as a poet-theologian, using him as “as an illustration of how pagan poetry can have an allegorical meaning.”<sup>524</sup> In book two of his *Convivio*, Dante writes:

Ovid says that Orpheus with his lyre made beasts tame, and trees and stones move towards himself; that is to say that the wise man by the instrument of his voice makes cruel hearts grow mild and humble, and those who have not the life of Science and of Art move to his will, while they who have no rational life are as it were life stones.<sup>525</sup>

Dante, however, did not create the idea of Orpheus’ poetry as an allegory for teaching; it was a common theme throughout mediaeval commentaries on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.<sup>526</sup> Thus, it is safe to assume Petrarch would have been aware of these understandings of Orpheus, given his

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<sup>518</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 157.

<sup>519</sup> D. P. Walker, ‘Orpheus the Theologian and Renaissance Platonists’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 16, no. 1/2 (1953): 100, <https://doi.org/10.2307/750229>.

<sup>520</sup> Walker, 100-101.

<sup>521</sup> Walker, 101.; 1 Samuel 16:23. “Whenever the spirit from God came on Saul, David would take up his lyre and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.”

<sup>522</sup> Walker, 104.

<sup>523</sup> Walker, 106.

<sup>524</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Convivio* in John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970). 87-88.

<sup>525</sup> Friedman, 88.

<sup>526</sup> Friedman, 88.

knowledge of Dante and Augustine. Dante's work, however, signals "the emergence of early Italian humanism's recognition that poetry surpasses rationalism in its power to convey religious truth."<sup>527</sup>

Variations on this allegory extend to interpretations of Eurydice, by making her reflect either Orpheus' better or his worse side.<sup>528</sup> As John Friedman writes, "[o]ne account makes the love of Orpheus for Eurydice that of Christ for the church, still another sees the lovers as symbolizing the art of oratory and its subject matter."<sup>529</sup> This blending of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice serves as an example of one way in which classical mythology was modified or adapted to Christian sensibilities, both by the Greek fathers of the church, and later by mediaeval and Renaissance scholars.

In Petrarch's use of the poet-theologian, he explores the notion of poetry and fame as an avenue leading to God.<sup>530</sup> This idea is visible in poem 359 of the *Canzoniere*: *Quando il soave mio fido conforto/When that kind, faithful comforter*. In this poem Petrarch describes Laura, wearing both a palm and a laurel branch descending from Heaven to comfort him:

A little branch of palm  
and a laurel one she takes from her fair bosom  
and says: "From the serene Empyrean, and from those holy parts  
I came, and I come only to console you.

...

The palm is victory, and I still young,  
conquered the world and myself; laurel means  
triumph, of which I'm worthy,  
thanks to that Lord who gave me strength enough.<sup>531</sup>

In this example, the palm branch is used to represent Christianity. Shortly before his crucifixion, Christ's followers met him entering Jerusalem waving palm branches.<sup>532</sup> Upon his arrival in

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<sup>527</sup> In his commentary on Dante, *Travello*, Boccaccio wrote: "theology is nothing less than the poetry of God". Schildgen, 'Poetry and Theology in the Fourteenth Century'. 138.

<sup>528</sup> Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*. 88.

<sup>529</sup> Friedman, 88.

<sup>530</sup> Schildgen, 'Poetry and Theology in the Fourteenth Century'. 139.

<sup>531</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 359.7-11.; 359.49-52.

<sup>532</sup> Musa, *Canzoniere*. "Notes and Commentary". 718.; John 12:12-13. "The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

Jerusalem, Christ asserts his ‘victory’, saying “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”<sup>533</sup>

Petrarch then uses the laurel branch to represent both Laura, and also the laurel crown. Therefore, in this example, Petrarch asserts that both Laura and the laurel crown, symbolizing his poetic fame, are sent from Heaven to console him, and ultimately lead him back towards Heaven. This assertion aligns with Petrarch’s assertion in the *Secretum*, book three, that Laura leads him towards Heaven.<sup>534</sup> In his late sixteenth century commentary on Petrarch, Lodovico Castelvetro wrote of Petrarch’s “enjoyment of the victory, then, that another has won.”<sup>535</sup> By this, Castelvetro means that Laura’s virtue was a blessing that Petrarch was able to exploit to his own advantage, by writing poetry about her, in turn winning him the laurel crown.

#### 3.2.4. Medusa and Stony Love

Petrarch’s poetics draws on Dante – who in turn drew on Augustine – for an interpretation of love. Dante uses, “an unequivocally Augustinian doctrine of love”,<sup>536</sup> known as *pondus amors*, meaning “weight of love” or “stony love” that is described as the “metaphoric pull of gravity, the inner weight that urges the soul to seek its own place.”<sup>537</sup> This doctrine is illustrated by the movement of stone and fire. According to Augustine, love of God is like fire, as one is ‘inflamed’ and drawn upwards toward Heaven to meet God, while the love of earthly things weighs humans down, as if they were made of stone:

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<sup>533</sup> John 16:33.

<sup>534</sup> “There’s no doubt that love of her has led me to love God.” Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.5.2.

<sup>535</sup> Lodovico Castelvetro (1505 -1571) was an Italian scholar who wrote commentaries on Petrarch, Aristotle, and Dante. Castelvetro was an influential critic of Renaissance writing, but his commentaries are little known today. Castelvetro’s commentaries on Petrarch had Protestant reformist leanings, as he understood Petrarch as a critic of the Catholic church. Castelvetro also emphasizes Petrarch’s modeling his texts simultaneously on Greek and Roman writers and passages from the Bible including the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, in addition to the Church fathers. This quotation comes from his commentary *Le Rime del Petrarca brevemente sposte del Ludovico Castelvetro*, printed in Basel in 1576, translated in the notes of Musa’s edition of the *Canzoniere*. Lodovico Castelvetro in Musa, *Canzoniere*. 718.; Robert C. Melzi, ‘Castelvetro’s Annotations to the Inferno: A Second Look at a Scarcely Known Manuscript’, *Italica* 40, no. 4 (1963): 315, <https://doi.org/10.2307/476819>; William J. Kennedy, ‘Petrarchan Poetics’, in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. Glyn P Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 123–124, doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521300087.012.

<sup>536</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 74.

<sup>537</sup> Mazzotta, 74.

In Your gift we rest; there we enjoy You. Our rest is our place. Love lifts us up there, and Your good Spirit lifts our lowliness from the gates of death. In Your good pleasure lies our peace. The body by its own weight gravitates towards its own place. Weight goes not downward only, but to its own place. Fire tends upwards, a stone downwards. They are propelled by their own weights, they seek their own places. ... My weight is my love; by it am I borne wherever I am borne. By Your Gift we are inflamed, and are borne upwards; we wax hot inwardly, and go forwards. We ascend Your ways that be in our heart, and sing a song of degrees; we glow inwardly with Your fire, with Your good fire, and we go, because we go upwards to the peace of Jerusalem.<sup>538</sup>

Augustine borrows this notion from Aristotle's *Physics* dealing with the locomotion as one of the laws of nature.<sup>539</sup> Petrarch in turn borrows this idea, interpreting as fire his love for Laura, who draws him closer to God.

Petrarch reinterprets the *pondus amors*, through the *rime petrose*, meaning 'stony rhymes'.<sup>540</sup> This interpretation of 'stony love' can be seen most clearly in Petrarch's references to the myth of Medusa and Perseus, told in books four and five of the *Metamorphoses*. Medusa was a monster, called a 'gorgon', whose hair was made of snakes. Unlike all other gorgons, however, Medusa was a mortal. She had been turned into a gorgon because of her vanity. Ovid writes:

Medusa was once renowned for her loveliness, and roused jealous hopes in the hearts of many suitors. Of all the beauties she possessed, none was more striking than her lovely hair. I have met someone who claimed to have seen her in those days. But, so they say, the lord of the sea [Poseidon] robbed her of her virginity in the temple of Minerva. Jove's daughter<sup>541</sup> turned her back, hiding her modest face behind her aegis; and to punish the Gorgon for her deed, she changed her hair into revolting snakes.<sup>542</sup>

Anyone who looked at a gorgon would be turned to stone. Perseus beheaded Medusa by looking at her only in the reflection of his shield: "he himself looked at dread Medusa's form as

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<sup>538</sup> Augustine, 'Confessions', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J.G. Pilkington, vol. 1, 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1887). 13.9.10.

<sup>539</sup> "If each of the simple bodies has a natural locomotion, e.g., fire upward and earth downward and towards the middle of the universe, it is clear that the void cannot be the cause of locomotion." Aristotle. *Physics* in Jean-Luc Marion, 'Resting, Moving, Loving: The Access to the Self According to Saint Augustine', *The Journal of Religion* 91, no. 1 (2011): 35-36, <https://doi.org/10.1086/656605>.

<sup>540</sup> Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 73.

<sup>541</sup> The goddess Minerva, born from the head of Jove. This corresponds with the birth of the Greek goddess Athena from the head of Zeus.

<sup>542</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 4.793-801.

it was reflected in the bronze of the shield which he carried on his left arm. While she and her snakes were wrapped in deep slumber, he severed her head from her shoulders.”<sup>543</sup> On his way home to Seriphos, Perseus stopped in the kingdom of Aethiopia, ruled by King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia. Perseus fell in love with the Princess Andromeda, who was betrothed to another man, Phineus. Perseus then used Medusa’s head to turn Phineus to stone and married Andromeda.<sup>544</sup>

Allusions to the myth of Medusa appear throughout the *Canzoniere*. The most extended allusion is in poem 197: *L’aura celeste che ‘n quell verde lauro/The heavenly aura breathing in that green laurel*:

The heavenly aura breathing in that green laurel  
where Love wounded Apollo in his side,  
and placed a yoke of sweetness on my neck  
from which it is too late to free myself,

Has power like Medusa’s when the old  
and famous Moor she transformed into rock;<sup>545</sup>  
nor can I now break loose the lovely knot  
which gold and amber and the sun surpasses:

I mean her golden hair, the curly snare  
that with such softness binds and tightens round  
my soul armed only with humility.

Her shadow is enough to turn my heart  
to ice and tinge my face with whitened fear –  
her eyes, however, can turn them into marble.<sup>546</sup>

In this poem Petrarch makes both Christian and classical allusions. The “yoke of sweetness” in line three refers to the Gospel of Matthew: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”<sup>547</sup> The line “my soul armed only with humility”,<sup>548</sup> refers to Petrarch’s desire to serve Laura, who

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<sup>543</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 4.781-784.

<sup>544</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 5.1-235.

<sup>545</sup> In the *Metamorphoses*, Atlas is turned into a mountain after looking at Medusa’s severed head: “and, turning his [Perseus’] own face away, he produced in his left hand the horrid head of Medusa. Atlas was changed into a mountain as huge as the giant he had been.” Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. 4.655-657

<sup>546</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 197.1-14.

<sup>547</sup> Matt. 11:28-30.

<sup>548</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 197.11

disarms him by her beauty and virtue. This idea is also present in poem 179: *Geri, quando talor meco s'adira/Geri my sweet enemy*, where Petrarch, cast as the unshielded Perseus, looks at Laura and is turned to stone:

Wherever she in anger turns her eyes  
with hopes of cutting short my life of light,  
I show her mine full of humility,  
and she is forced to draw back her disdain.

Were this not so, my going to behold her  
would be like looking at Medusa's face,  
which turned a person's body into stone.<sup>549</sup>

According to the Augustinian doctrine of love, in being turned to stone by Medusa, Petrarch is rendered immobile by love.

A further reference to Laura as Medusa is found in the final poem, number 366, the *Hymn to the Virgin*, in which Petrarch asks the Virgin for forgiveness, saying that Laura was his Medusa, turning him to stone:

Medusa and my sin turned me to stone  
dripping useless moisture.  
Virgin, now with repentant  
and holy tears fill up my weary heart;  
at least let my last weeping be devout<sup>550</sup>

Here Petrarch claims he was helpless before Laura's beauty, having been immobilized the moment he saw her. While in earlier poems in the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch uses this immobility as a means of praising her beauty, here, he uses it as a means of excusing or trying to exonerate himself from his concern that he may have committed idolatry, claiming that he had no control over the matter, just as those turned to stone by Medusa could not help their fate. In earlier poems, Petrarch admits to looking voluntarily at Laura, writing in poem 179, "my going to behold her",<sup>551</sup> while in poem 366, he tries to make it seem as though his looking at Laura was involuntary, being pulled by her gravity in an Augustinian interpretation.<sup>552</sup>

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<sup>549</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 179.5-11.

<sup>550</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 366.111-115.

<sup>551</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 179.9

<sup>552</sup> Augustine explains that love is "a metaphoric pull of gravity." Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 74.

### 3.3. Allusions to both Antiquity and Christianity in the same Text

There are several instances throughout the *Canzoniere* and the *Secretum* in which Petrarch alludes to both classical antiquity and Christianity almost simultaneously. Throughout the *Canzoniere*, Laura is represented by different figures: Laura as Daphne, Laura as Eve, Laura as Mercury, and Laura as Selene, with Petrarch playing the corresponding male figures: Apollo, Adam, Battus, and Endymion.<sup>553</sup> The main trait Laura undertakes in Petrarch's representation of her is the woman who denies sexuality, but, however briefly, as Eve and as Selene, Laura reciprocates Petrarch's love. The sonnets of the *Canzoniere* revolve around Petrarch's profiting from Laura's unavailability, as Nancy Vickers argues:

At base the speaker's investment in his song reveals itself to be not only – if at all – in winning the lost lady (“Laura”) but rather in winning a lost, or as yet unwon glory (the poetic champion's crown of laurel, “lauro”) through the exercise of an overpowering stylistic mastery. A battle is indeed fought to victory: Laura may be gone but the manifestations of “lauro” (fame) persist to inform, through conscious and unconscious assimilations, an ongoing discourse of love.<sup>554</sup>

Therefore, despite Petrarch's failure to win Laura's love, he is able to win poetic glory, achieving one, at least, of the two aspirations book three of *Secretum* expresses.

#### 3.3.1. Laura as Selene

As he did with the creation of Laura-Eve, Petrarch briefly imagines a lustful Laura through casting her as Selene in poem 237: *Non à tanti animali il mar fra l'onde/ The sea's not so many creatures in its waves*. Apollonius of Rhodes records the myth the moon goddess, Selene, who fell in love with Endymion, who was mortal, but whose father was Zeus. Selene so loved Endymion that she asked Zeus to grant Endymion eternal youth.<sup>555</sup> Zeus granted this wish by putting Endymion into an eternal sleep, and every night Selene visited him, and had fifty

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<sup>553</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 3.

<sup>554</sup> Nancy Vickers, “Vital Signs: Petrarch and Popular Culture.” in Estrin. 11.

<sup>555</sup> Apollodorus, *Library*, trans. James George Frazer, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1921), 1.7.5 “Calyce and Aethlius had a son Endymion who led Aeolians from Thessaly and founded Elis. But some say that he was a son of Zeus. As he was of surpassing beauty, the Moon fell in love with him, and Zeus allowed him to choose what he would, and he chose to sleep for ever, remaining deathless and ageless.”

daughters by him: “[t]he Moon, they say, fell in love with this Endymion and bore him fifty daughters.”<sup>556</sup> Although this is a Greek myth, it was likely known to Petrarch as it was referenced by Plato in *Phaedo*,<sup>557</sup> and Cicero in the *Tusculan Disputations*: “Endymion, indeed, if you listen to fables, slept once on a time on Latmus, a mountain of Caria, and for such a length of time that I imagine he is not as yet awake. Do you think that he is concerned at the Moon’s being in difficulties, though it was by her that he was thrown into that sleep, in order that she might kiss him while sleeping.”<sup>558</sup>

Poem 237 casts Petrarch as both Adam and Endymion, and Laura as both Eve and Selene. As we saw in the last chapter, this poem can be read as a reference to Adam sleeping in the Garden of Eden, while God created Eve. The poem also references Endymion:

Ah if, like Endymion, lover of the moon,  
I was asleep somewhere in the green woods,  
and she, who before vespers brings me evening,  
came with the moon and Love to that bank.<sup>559</sup>

In this poem, the roles are reversed. The woman is cast to reciprocate the man’s love. It is here where the stories of Adam and Endymion are merged, because Adam loved the woman who was made from his rib and dreamt of her while he slept, while we do not know if Endymion ever reciprocated Selene’s love, or if he were an unwilling participant in that love, as was Laura. In this poem, Petrarch reimagines his relationship with Laura, now casting himself as the lustful Selene, and, on one hand, Laura becomes the unknowing Endymion, while, on the other hand, through Endymion, Petrarch imagines himself as a man whose love was reciprocated, just as was Adam’s love for Eve.<sup>560</sup> In creating a Laura “who is free – one whose autonomous existence is premised on her being both like the poet in pursuit (Laura-Eve) and unlike him in her success (Laura-Selene)”, Petrarch subverts the dialogue of the *Secretum*.<sup>561</sup> Poem 237 is one of the few

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<sup>556</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trans. W.H.S. Jones, D. Litt, and H.A. Ormerod, 4 vols (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1918). 5.1.4

<sup>557</sup> Plato, ‘Phaedo’, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, trans. Harold North Fowler, vol. 1, 12 vols (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966). 72c. “in the end, you know, that would make the sleeping Endymion mere nonsense; he would be nowhere, for everything else would be in the same state as he, sound asleep.”

<sup>558</sup> Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*. 1.38.

<sup>559</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 237.31-34.

<sup>560</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 44.

<sup>561</sup> Estrin, 44-45.

examples where characters are doubled simultaneously as both ancient and Christian figures, as the sleeping Adam becomes Endymion, and lustful Eve is consolidated with Selene.<sup>562</sup> By “[c]oupling biblical expectation with mythic realization, Petrarch’s evocation of Endymion in his wish brings on the possible Selene.”<sup>563</sup>

Poem 237 makes use of the Augustinian notion of division presupposing future disintegration.<sup>564</sup> Petrarch juxtaposes urban and rural as a means of explaining his hatred for the city, by turning it into the city that hates him, thus allowing for his retreat to the friendlier woods “Cities are hostile to my thoughts, the woods / are friendly”.<sup>565</sup> Through this division, Petrarch divides his world, both spatially (city and woods) and in time (day and night). In this juxtaposition, Petrarch inverts the normal order of things:

The sun makes way for the moon. Apollo yields to Selene. The ‘I’ who made the world now is made *by* the worlds. The ‘I’ who pursued the woman is now pursued by her. The creative ‘I’ in this poem decreates [*sic*] himself so that he can, in sleeping, be mothered by nature and loved by Selene.<sup>566</sup>

By inventing Laura as Eve, Petrarch acknowledges that the woman has the potential to be the desirer, and by inventing Laura as Selene, Petrarch imagines a scenario in which this reversal of roles occurs, and in doing so, Laura-Selene achieves what Petrarch can never accomplish: consummation of their love.<sup>567</sup>

### 3.3.2. Laura as both Eve and Daphne

Poem 188: *Almo Sol/Sustaining Sun*, again merges the classical with the Christian, as Laura becomes both Daphne and Eve, and Petrarch becomes Apollo and Adam. Petrarch invokes both the poison of Eve, and the flourishing of the Daphne, represented by the laurel:

Sustaining sun, that branch alone I love  
and you first loved, alone in her sweet home

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<sup>562</sup> Estrin, 45.

<sup>563</sup> Estrin, 47.

<sup>564</sup> Estrin, 46.

<sup>565</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 237.25-26.

<sup>566</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 47.

<sup>567</sup> Estrin, 49.

now flourishes, unrivalled, since the time  
Adam first saw his own and our fair fall.

Let's stay to gaze at her, I beg of you,  
O sun; but still you flee and cast your shade  
on every hillside carrying off the day.  
and in your flight you take what I most yearn for.

The shadow falling from that low hillside  
there where my gentle fire was a spark,  
where the great laurel was a little sapling,

Growing as I speak, tales from my eyes  
the lovely sight of that place which is blessed  
and where my heart is dwelling with his lady.<sup>568</sup>

Here Petrarch references the downfall of mankind, brought about by Eve in the Garden of Eden in chapter three of Genesis. Petrarch argues, however, that humanity was redeemed through the growth of the laurel. This poem seemingly inverts the chronology, placing the Judaeo-Christian myth before its Greek counterpart, suggesting it is the Greek mythology that brings redemption.<sup>569</sup>

Unlike the Adam of 237, Petrarch asks the sun, Apollo, to remain, and where Apollo retreats, Adam appears, dreaming of a woman who loves him. As Apollo retreats, Petrarch remains, gazing on the growing laurel shoot, and as his sight is gradually taken from him by Apollo and the darkening night, Laura takes his heart:

Growing as I speak, tales from my eyes  
the lovely sight of that place which is blessed  
and where my heart is dwelling with his lady.<sup>570</sup>

In this poem, Laura appears as a menace, as she holds Petrarch's heart, and he is gradually consumed by it. Just as Actaeon was pursued by his hounds after being transformed into a stag

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<sup>568</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 188.1-14.

<sup>569</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 55.

<sup>570</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 188.12-14.

by the furious Diana, Petrarch is pursued by love.<sup>571</sup> As night falls and Apollo is abandoned by Daphne, Laura-Eve emerges, and the laurel tree becomes the poison tree of Eden.<sup>572</sup>

### 3.3.3. Poetry and Art

Another example of Petrarch's combining both classical and Christian influences in the same text is by his referencing of sculptures in his works. Somewhat ironically, Petrarch's writing style regarding sculptures mimics ancient Greek authors, who wrote frequently about art and sculptures. Petrarch, however, did not read classical Greek competently and, although he may have been aware of the Greek tradition, he could not reference any of the ancient Greek texts directly.<sup>573</sup> One example of Petrarch's referencing of sculptures is in his writings on Laura as Galatea, from the story of Pygmalion, the statue brought to life by Venus because Pygmalion loved her more than any other woman. Furthermore, many believed in Petrarch's time that cult images, particularly statues and Marian images, could communicate with their viewers and that veneration of such statues and images provided a means of communicating with God.<sup>574</sup> People encouraged these statues to communicate with them through prayers and songs. This notion of religious images speaking is also seen in antiquity, for example, Lucian of Samosata (c.125-after 180CE) describes the statues at the temple dedicated to Atargatis, whom he calls the 'Syrian Goddess' at Hierapolis Bambyce saying "[f]or statues among them sweat and move about and give oracles, and a shouting often occurs in the temple when the sanctuary is locked, and many have heard it."<sup>575</sup> Petrarch, drawing on both ancient and Christian understandings of this notion, contributed to this culture of writing songs to communicate with images and statues in the *Canzoniere*, as he gave images (both statues and Simone Martini's portrait) of Laura, a voice.<sup>576</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> For further discussion of the myth of Actaeon see above, sections 1.4. 'Relics and Stage: The Myth of Actaeon and Diana', 38-40, and 3.2.2 'Petrarch's Description of Laura's Beauty', 92-93. Estrin, *Laura*. 56.

<sup>572</sup> Estrin, 56.

<sup>573</sup> Andrew Chen, 'Vividness, Voice, and the Imagination According to Petrarch', *Word & Image* 33, no. 2 (3 April 2017): 127, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2016.1276822>.

<sup>574</sup> Chen, 129.

<sup>575</sup> Lucian *On the Syrian Goddesses* in Chen. 129.

<sup>576</sup> This notion of allowing art a voice can be seen in Simone Martini's painting, *The Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus*, in which Martini painted words coming from the angel Gabriel's mouth as he announces to Mary that she will bear a son. Simone Martini, *The Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus*, 1333, Le Gallerie degli Uffizi, <http://catalogo.uffizi.it/it/29/ricerca/detailiccd/1185814/>.

It was not uncommon during antiquity that reports would circulate that a cult image became animated and ‘spoke’ to people.

### 3.4. ‘Scattering’ Laura

Throughout the *Canzoniere*, the Italian verb *spargere*, meaning ‘to scatter’ appears forty-three times. Nineteen uses of the verb are made in direct reference to Laura’s body, with another thirteen uses to describe Petrarch’s mental state.<sup>577</sup> This represents a theme throughout the *Canzoniere* in which Laura is reduced to her parts and is not seen as an entire person. Thus, as Nancy Vickers argues, “within the context of Petrarch's extended poetic sequence, the lady is corporeally scattered; the lover is emotionally scattered and will be corporeally scattered, and thus the relation between the two is one of mirroring”.<sup>578</sup> This mirroring plays into gender roles represented in Petrarch’s works too, where Petrarch often reverses genders in his retelling of myths, for example, when he appears as Echo to Laura’s Narcissus and she is Apollo to his Daphne.<sup>579</sup>

Laura is presented as parts of a woman, described in terms of different metals and stones, and “her image is that of a collection of exquisitely beautiful, disassociated objects.”<sup>580</sup> Petrarch describes Laura through a series of allusions and metaphors comparing, for example, her hair as “the golden hair spun fine as silver”;<sup>581</sup> her eyes as “sacred”;<sup>582</sup> and her cheeks “that a sweet fire adorns.”<sup>583</sup> Although each part of her gains immortality through their characterization as precious or semi-precious stones, she loses her vitality, and thus her agency. Furthermore, Petrarch’s use of precious gems references Psalm 119, that reads: “I have loved your Commandments above gold and topaz”.<sup>584</sup> One such example is in poem 30 of the *Canzoniere*: *Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro/A maiden beneath the green laurel*:

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<sup>577</sup> Vickers, ‘Diana Described’. 273-274.

<sup>578</sup> Vickers, 274.

<sup>579</sup> Vickers, 274.

<sup>580</sup> Vickers, 266.

<sup>581</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 12.5.

<sup>582</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 108.3.

<sup>583</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 127.79.

<sup>584</sup> Psalm 119:127

All gold and topaz in sun above the snow  
 are eclipsed by the gold hair next to those eyes  
 that lead my years so quickly to the shore<sup>585</sup>

Another explanation of Laura's absence from her story, is that this it serves as a way by which Petrarch creates her 'mythic' status. Throughout the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch references only parts of Laura's body, never the woman as a whole. He writes of her "angelic form" in this case referring to her 'essence' or 'aura' rather than her body,<sup>586</sup> and later comparing parts of her body to pearls and gold,<sup>587</sup> but never are we given an image of the entire woman. In Ovid's telling of the myth of Orpheus, Orpheus treats Eurydice in a similar way. This allows readers of both the *Canzoniere* and *Metamorphoses* to create idealized women in their minds, either taking the form of Laura or Eurydice, each perfect for every reader. Furthermore, by never fully defining either of these women, both Petrarch and Orpheus allow themselves to create "aesthetic substitutes for their lost and impossible loves".<sup>588</sup> Petrarch's view of Laura is continually reworked and "obsessively remembered", which adds to the mythic ideal of Laura.<sup>589</sup> Vickers argues that Petrarch's choice not to give Laura a voice was an intentional decision, intended to limit the power he gives to both Laura, and the women with whom he compares her, most prominently, Diana, a woman with agency in her own myth, but in Petrarch's retelling, a woman reduced to the foil of the male gaze.<sup>590</sup>

Throughout the *Canzoniere* and *Secretum*, Petrarch blends both classical and Christian imagery together. In the *Secretum* he often does this through the words of the shade of St Augustine in an attempt to create an authority in the Christian church who condones the study of ancient texts. These allusions are more subtle in the *Canzoniere*, but they are nevertheless present. Petrarch compares Laura to Eve and Selene simultaneously in poem 237, as a means of creating an idealized woman who returns his love unlike the real Laura de Noves. Thus, it is only through his imagining Laura as both Eve and Selene – women who lust for Adam and Endymion respectively, that Petrarch is able to imagine a scenario in which Laura loves him in return. Petrarch's success in blending antiquity and Christianity was influential in the development of

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<sup>585</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 30.37-39.

<sup>586</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 90.10.

<sup>587</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 126.51; 157.12; 192.6; 200.11; 220.5; 263.10; 325.81.

<sup>588</sup> Migraine-George, 'Specular Desires'. 236.

<sup>589</sup> Vickers, 'Diana Described'. 271.

<sup>590</sup> Vickers, 278.

the *studia humanitatis*, because of its placing Christian humans at the centre of classical stories, making them relatable to their fourteenth century readers.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, throughout his life, Petrarch worked to blend both classical and Christian sources in his writing, believing that classical ‘pagan’ writers provided useful examples of elegant writing that could be used to improve contemporary style. Petrarch was among the first to reference both Christian authors and combine them with classical mythology, drawing largely on the myths told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In Petrarch’s writings there is a double meaning to the laurel branch: Laura, and poetic glory, symbolized by the laurel wreath.

Laura figured prominently in Petrarch’s texts, particularly in the *Canzoniere*, in which Petrarch fashioned her into an idealized woman, and in the *Secretum*, in which he wrestled with the possibility that his love for Laura had become immoderate and bordered upon idolatry. Petrarch debated this possibility internally by creating for the *Secretum* the shade of St Augustine with whom he engaged in dialogue and so emulated the literary form pioneered by Cicero and Plato, whom he regarded as fonts of the wisdom he believed the *studia humanitatis* offered his contemporaries. This debate, a means of reflecting on his writing and relationship with Laura, brought him to the conclusion that he had done nothing wrong, because Laura had led him closer to God.<sup>591</sup>

Petrarch frequently compared himself to mythological figures including Orpheus, Pygmalion, and Actaeon, equating Laura with the female counterpart in these myths: Eurydice, Galatea, and Diana. After Laura’s death, Petrarch attempted to resurrect her through his poetry, just as Orpheus tried, mythically, to resurrect Eurydice. Petrarch’s linking himself with Orpheus also served as a means of elevating his own poetic status by comparing himself and his situation with that of the greatest mythical poets of antiquity.

Petrarch emulates the mythical Pygmalion as both men create and fall in love with idealized women of their own creation, frequently comparing them to precious materials, rendering them merely objects of love and veneration rather than persons in their own right. By creating an idealized woman in his mind, Petrarch’s Laura likely reflects the real Laura de Noves in name only. This idealization of the real woman allows Petrarch to subvert reality, permitting

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<sup>591</sup> “There’s no doubt that love of her has led me to love God.” Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.5.2.

him to create a narrative in which Laura returns his love, as he does through his characterizations of Laura as Eve and Laura as Selene.<sup>592</sup>

The real Laura de Noves is largely absent from Petrarch's text, possibly as a means of creating her 'mythic' status. Petrarch only references parts of her body, but never the whole woman. He describes her "angelic form" and compares her body to gold, pearls, and topaz, but never is she described as a whole and fully articulated person, a circumstance epitomized by his play on 'Laura', 'l'aura', and 'l'auro'.<sup>593</sup> Petrarch constantly reimagines Laura, obsessively remembering her as a means of endowing her with a mythic status. He objectifies her by denying her agency to represent herself.<sup>594</sup> Petrarch grants Laura immortality by likening her in his writings to precious materials, but in doing this, he deprives Laura of her vitality and, thus, her agency.

In the *Secretum*, Petrarch demonstrates his remarkable self-awareness, as he imagines both sides of the debate, in which he wrestles with the possibility that he committed idolatry in his love for Laura. In this debate, however, Petrarch tempers Augustinian views on love and fame in order to justify his love for Laura and his desire for poetic fame and glory. Petrarch is unable to renounce entirely his search for love and glory in quest of the more virtuous life towards which Augustinus urges him in book three of the *Secretum*.<sup>595</sup>

In his imagining the shade of St Augustine Petrarch modified the historical Bishop of Hippo to serve his purposes. Petrarch presents Augustinus instead as a mediaeval monk, whose practices often do not reflect the historical Augustine's spiritual writings, and stand, sometimes, at odds with them.<sup>596</sup> Augustinus does not reference the Bishop of Hippo's principal doctrines of the Trinity or the sacraments. Rather than objecting to the study of non-Christian literature that is found in the *Confessions* and *De Doctrina Christiana*, the fictional Augustinus supports their study to support Petrarch's argument for Christian humanism.<sup>597</sup> The literary style of the dialogue aligns more closely with the writings of Cicero than it does with those of St Augustine, and in contrast with his repeated references to Cicero, Petrarch's references to Augustine's

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<sup>592</sup> Estrin, *Laura*. 41.

<sup>593</sup> Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 90.10.; 126.51; 157.12; 192.6; 200.11; 220.5; 263.10; 325.81.

<sup>594</sup> Vickers, 'Diana Described'. 271.

<sup>595</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.18.

<sup>596</sup> Stock, 'Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination'. 12.

<sup>597</sup> Stock, 'Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination'. 12.

writings in the *Secretum* are few and far between.<sup>598</sup> In his representation of St Augustine, Petrarch creates an authorizing voice for the *studia humanitatis* and rejects Aristotelian scholasticism, disregarding the historical Augustine's reservations concerning the study of classical texts without safeguards necessary to protect Christian faith and individual Christians. Petrarch also uses the shade of St Augustine to reassure himself that his love of Laura is not idolatrous because it leads him to God, a sentiment restated in the *Canzoniere*.<sup>599</sup>

Petrarch draws heavily on Dante, but these two authors took different approaches to describing the women they loved. Dante allows Beatrice some agency, permitting her to speak as she guides him through Paradise to explain its inner workings.<sup>600</sup> Petrarch, on the other hand, although comparing Laura to divine beings, denies her agency. Both Dante and Petrarch deal with the Marian Paradox, which Petrarch uses in the final poem of the *Canzoniere*, the *Hymn to the Virgin*, appearing, as in the *Secretum*, to reflect on his potential for idolatry, as he asks the Virgin Mary for her aid in guaranteeing his salvation.<sup>601</sup>

Influential in the establishment of the study of Renaissance humanism, Petrarch based his ideas on the concept of the *homo Christianus*, recognizing that the moral universe he and his contemporaries inhabited had its foundation in apostolic teaching. For the *homo Christianus*, ancient philosophers retained their value, despite the 'misfortune' of their birth before Christ. Petrarch believed that in order to "perfect himself morally, he had to revisit the learning of the 'enlightened' men from antiquity."<sup>602</sup> Furthermore, Petrarch argued that the Christian fathers had studied the classical texts, and thus reading the texts that the fathers had read could offer deepened insight into the writings of the fathers of the church.<sup>603</sup>

Petrarch supported his argument for the study of classical texts by the notion of the poet-theologian. Petrarch likely came to this theory through his reading of Augustine's *City of God*, again reimagining the historical bishop of Hippo. While Augustine rejected the notion of the

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<sup>598</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. viii.

<sup>599</sup> Petrarca, *My Secret Book*. 3.5.2.-3.5.3; Petrarca, *Canzoniere*. 157.1-14.

<sup>600</sup> Dante Alighieri, *A Translation of Dante's Paradiso*. 5.16-18. "Thus Beatrice commenced what now I write, / And like to one who speaketh without pause, / she continued her divine discourse."; Preface to Canto 29.

<sup>601</sup> Hodder and O'Connor, 'Petrarch Goes West'. 355.

<sup>602</sup> Bereschi, 'Petrarch's Demarcation of Humanism'. 144.

<sup>603</sup> Quillen, 'A Tradition Invented'. 193.

poet-theologian, represented by Orpheus, Petrarch embraces it, using it as a means to reconcile antiquity with Christianity.<sup>604</sup>

Petrarch was influential in combining both classical and Christian sources in the fourteenth century. His writings on Laura allow us insight into how he combined these two genres, literatures that, on the surface, stand at odds with one another. In his middle age Petrarch grappled with the realization that his love for Laura may have violated Christian injunctions against idolatry, and he wrestled with this possibility in the *Secretum*, as he debated with his imagined St Augustine. In imagining St Augustine, however, Petrarch modified the reality of the historical figure to suit his purpose and reassure himself that his love for Laura had only led him closer to God. Many scholars still debate the nature of Petrarch's relationship with Laura, some arguing he committed the theological sin of idolatry, while others regard his love as immoderate, but not sinful. While it is unlikely that we will ever truly understand the nature of his relationship with Laura, what can be said is that his relationship led to the creation of a massive body of vernacular poetry that won him the crown of Poet Laureate in 1341, and led to his achieving poetic glory, if not the reciprocation of his love.

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<sup>604</sup> Augustine, 'City of God'. 18.14.; Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*. 155.

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