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Doyeeta Majumder

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article part du principe que, dans les textes (épistolaires et autres) qui sont associés explicitement à son frère Gherardo, Pétrarque ne se contente pas de mettre en valeur le style familier et intime qui caractérise l'ensemble du corpus de ses lettres familières, mais présente également certaines des réflexions les plus abouties sur ses propres pratiques stylistiques et, par extension, littéraires. Dans les lettres qu'il a envoyées à Gherardo, comme dans la première églogue du *Bucolicum Carmen* (Parthenias) qui est attachée à l'une de ces lettres, Pétrarque passe en revue les points saillants des débats sur le style qui s'étaient répandus dans l'Europe du Trecento, tout en rendant compte de ses tentatives de proposer des alternatives aux modes d'écriture cicéroniens – tant élevé que familier. Dans ces oeuvres, le frère de Pétrarque en vient à incarner cette alternative stylistique.



“*Mon semblable, mon frère*”: Brothers Petrarch and Literary Self-Construction

DOYEETA MAJUMDER

Jadavpur University

This article posits that in the texts (both epistolary and otherwise) associated explicitly with his brother Gherardo, Petrarch does not just showcase the familiar, intimate style that characterizes the whole corpus of his familiar letters but also presents some of the most acutely reflexive ruminations on his own stylistic and, by extension, literary practices. In the Gherardine letters, as well as in the first eclogue of the Bucolicum carmen, which is attached to one of these letters, Petrarch rehearses the highlights of the debates surrounding rhetorical style that were being played out in Trecento Europe, while simultaneously demonstrating his attempts to engage with alternatives to the modes of Ciceronian writing, both grand and intimate. In these works, Petrarch’s brother comes to embody this stylistic alternative.

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“**M**y dear brother, dearer to me than the light of day, I am impelled to break my long silence. And if you think that was caused by my forgetful spirit, you are much mistaken; I would no sooner forget you than my own self.”¹

The first of the six familiar letters Francesco Petrarch addressed to his brother Gherardo begins with an effusion of fraternal affection, couched in a rhetoric that lays claim to emotional authenticity and frames Gherardo as an extension of Francesco’s own self—a literal “alter ego.”² It ends with Petrarch

1. Petrarch, *Epistolae familiares* 10.3. The English quotations from *Epistolae familiares* are taken from *Rerum familiarium libri* (trans. Aldo S. Bernardo). I have also consulted Morris Bishop’s 1996 translation, *Letters from Petrarch*. The Latin quotations are from a digitized version of *Le familiari* (ed. V. Rossi-U. Bosco), accessed via <https://www.mlat.uzh.ch/home>.

2. The six letters addressed to Gherardo are *Fam.* 10.3, 4, 5; 16.2; 17.1; and 18.5.

revealing to his brother that the whole letter was also an exercise in a new literary style that he was trying to cultivate—“peregrino stilo”—a style foreign to his usual sophisticated Ciceronian rhetoric. Kathy Eden argues that Petrarch’s *Familiars*, inspired by Cicero’s *Ad Atticum*, which Petrarch discovered by chance during one of his sojourns in Italy, resurrected the “intimate” epistolary rhetoric of classical times and made it available to later writers of the early modern period.³ This article posits that in the texts (both epistolary and otherwise) associated explicitly with Gherardo, Petrarch does not just showcase the familiar, intimate style that characterizes the whole corpus of his familiar letters but also presents some of the most acutely reflexive ruminations on his own stylistic and, by extension, literary practices. In the Gherardine letters, as well as in the first eclogue of the *Bucolicum carmen* (*Parthenias*), attached to one of these letters, Petrarch rehearses the highlights of the debates surrounding rhetorical style that were being played out in Trecento Europe while simultaneously demonstrating his attempts to engage with alternatives to the modes of Ciceronian writing—both grand and intimate. In these works, Petrarch’s brother comes to embody this stylistic alternative.

The brothers Petrarch

Gherardo Petracco was the youngest son of Ser Petracco, born a few years after his illustrious brother Francesco. Soon after his birth, the family was exiled from Tuscany and moved to Avignon. Gherardo was not just Francesco’s only living sibling but also an intimate companion throughout Francesco’s childhood and youth. Petrarch’s own letters to Gherardo testify to the nearly identical lives the two brothers led prior to Gherardo’s religious conversion. They studied grammar and rhetoric together at Montpellier, they were law students together at Bologna, they were fashionable young dandies painting Avignon red together in the late 1320s, even falling in love (with different women, thankfully) around the same time. But what could have been a lifelong comradeship was abruptly interrupted when Gherardo renounced the world to join a Carthusian monastery in 1343. It is common belief that the death of Gherardo’s beloved, commemorated by Petrarch in sonnet 91 of the *Rime Sparse*, was the immediate reason for his entry into the monastic order. The majority of Petrarch scholars identify Gherardo’s conversion as the trigger that set off or, at the very least,

3. Eden, *Renaissance Rediscovery*, 51–71.

intensified the conflict between Petrarch’s Christian faith and his deep, abiding commitment to the study of pre-Christian literature and philosophy. According to E. H. Wilkins,

To Petrarch it brought not only the knowledge that their dear companionship was at an end, but also a personal challenge and a sense of need for thorough self-examination. [...] [H]is religion was by no means in complete control his life: he felt that it ought to be, that his brother had chosen the better part.⁴

Recent scholarship surrounding Gherardo has built on this psychologized approach, wherein he is seen as a part of Petrarch’s self-conscious, self-reflexive selfhood—both the cause and the emblem of “the tormented soul of Petrarch.”⁵ The historical Gherardo Petracco and what psychological impact he may have exerted upon Francesco is not the central preoccupation of this article, not least because for us Gherardo only exists insofar as Petrarch allows him to exist: not as a real person, but as a literary creation. Reams have been written on the need to distinguish between Laura, the historical person—if she ever existed at all—and Petrarch’s Laura, the subject and object of a lifelong erotic and aesthetic passion. A similar distinction is applicable to Gherardo as well. Apart from what Francesco tells us about him, we know next to nothing about Gherardo; he has no existence beyond that which the authoritative Petrarchan text grants him. Like Laura, Gherardo becomes a part of Petrarch’s project of “self-fashioning”—that most characteristic aspect of Renaissance culture, which routinely blurred the distinction between the literary and the social.⁶ As with Laura, physical absence/death makes for literary intimacy. The *in morte* poems, written after Laura’s death, are characterized by an aesthetic intimacy that the poet found difficult to imagine or voice while the lady was still alive.⁷

4. Wilkins, *Life of Petrarch*, 36.

5. Warner, *Augustinian Epic*, 1. See also Robbins, *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother*; Lokaj, “Petrarch vs. Gherardo.”

6. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 3.

7. The erotic force of the *in morte* poems was commented upon, unsurprisingly, by female translators and poets as early as the eighteenth century. Charlotte Smith, for example, rued the fetishization of a dead woman. See Zuccato, *Petrarch in Romantic England*, 64. As Nancy Vickers points out, “Once dead [...] she can often address her sleeping, disconsolate lover; while she is alive, direct discourse from her is

Gherardo, too, only starts making an appearance in Petrarch's literary works after his retreat into the Carthusian cloister. Only after the real Gherardo absents himself permanently from Petrarch's life does his literary avatar come into being.

The tense, ambivalent, "explicitly loving, and covertly aggressive" relationship Petrarch shared with his brother has been the focal point of more than one reading of *Parthenias* and its accompanying letter (*Fam.* 10.4).⁸ My analysis takes as one of its points of departure Albert R. Ascoli's "Blinding the Cyclops," which suggests that although initially it seems that Petrarch's emphasis in these two texts is on the "residue of style" that connects Christian revelation and secular literary texts, ultimately this emphasis is subtended by a conflict between "the history of two kinds of writing, Virgilian and biblical," which mirrors the subtle fraternal hostility.⁹ Having broached the question of

extremely rare" (Vickers, "Diana Described," 277). John Freccero writes in one of the most influential critical essays on Petrarch that Laura "gains immortality at the price of vitality and historicity" (Freccero, "Fig Tree," 39).

8. Ascoli, "Blinding the Cyclops," 124. As Ascoli argues so persuasively, both in the form of the "eclogue and epistle complex" of *Parthenias*, and in the "self-staging" enacted therein, Petrarch, despite his vehement disavowal elsewhere, was indebted to Dante's epistolary exchanges with Giovanni del Virgilio. It is necessary to acknowledge here that no discussion of Trecento stylistic practices is possible without taking into account Dante's contribution to the theory and praxis of eloquence. In *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante replicates the tripartite division of Latin rhetoric in the vernacular, reserving the high style for tragedy, the middle for comedy, and the low for elegy. Petrarch, despite his ongoing tryst with vernacular literature, is ostensibly preoccupied with the levels of style in "grammatica" (i.e., Latin). Thus, although he has no qualms in handing over the "palm for vernacular eloquence" to Dante, he snidely adds in the same letter to Boccaccio (*Fam.* 21.15) that there could be no reason for him to be jealous of Dante because he himself had outgrown the need to achieve eloquence in the vernacular tongue in his youth. For Petrarch, as Ronald G. Witt puts it, the vernacular could never be a vehicle for "truly elegant speech" (Witt, *Footsteps*, 240). Christopher Celenza sees this as "a symbolic leap over Dante," in which Petrarch offers a "carefully staged presentation" of himself as "Petrarch the serious, pious, scholarly intellectual who has left vernacular poetry behind" (Celenza, *Intellectual World*, 5). Thus, the anxiety of Dante's influence eating away at his own poetic genius is at least partially responsible for Petrarch's emphatic rejection of the vernacular, and even then, as Ascoli and others have shown, he could not fully exorcise Dante's shadow—neither in his vernacular work, nor in Latin. For the purposes of this article, we shall limit ourselves to the consideration of Petrarch's Latin rhetorical practices. See also Petrarch, *Rerum familiarium libri*, 3:204–5, and for more on Petrarch and Dante and the tussle between vernacular and Latin, see Celenza, *Intellectual World*, 27–29.

9. Ascoli, "Blinding the Cyclops," 129.

style, Ascoli shifts focus to Dante’s presence in Petrarch’s Virgilian eclogues. I will look further into the congruences between the two oppositions—fraternal and stylistic—and simultaneously complicate the rather stark Virgilian/Biblical binary, replacing it with a more nuanced framework of rhetorical conflict—a conflict that was the very essence of the literary and religious milieu in which Petrarch was born. Petrarch’s fraught relationship with Gherardo is, I argue, framed in his works as the dilemma between the two styles of rhetorical and literary expression to which the Trecento litterateur was heir: the Augustinian, Christian style of the *sermo humilis*, and the grand *genus vehemens* style associated with Ciceronianism. In each of the Gherardine texts, however, Petrarch also deconstructs and complicates this simplistic binary opposition between classical and Christian, Ciceronian and Augustinian, “grand” and “plain,” until the levels, offices, and models of style start bleeding into each other. This nuanced stylistic conflict can also be seen as the centre that holds together the threads of a larger psycho-spiritual conflict, which characterizes Petrarch’s entire *oeuvre* and casts its shadow on Christian humanists for centuries to come.

This article will offer brief readings of the first eclogue of the *Bucolicum carmen* (1346),¹⁰ five of the six familiar letters addressed to Gherardo, and refer occasionally to *Secretum* (1347–53) and *De otio religioso* (1347) to show exactly how Petrarch frames this stylistic conflict and situates it vis-à-vis Gherardo.¹¹ But before that, given the pivotal importance of rhetoric in the intellectual life of fourteenth-century Europe, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by the “Augustinian” and “Ciceronian” styles of speaking and writing, and to review the disjunction as well as the overlaps between the two.

Genera dicendi: classical to Christian

Petrarch stands at the inaugural moment of the humanist project of recovering, editing, and translating the texts of Greco-Roman antiquity. The treatises of Greek rhetoric—Isocrates’s *Against the Sophists* (390 BCE), Plato’s *Gorgias* (380 BCE), and Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (322 BCE)—destined to become influential in the years to come, were not available to Petrarch. Of the Romans, he was

10. Petrarch probably finished composing the first eclogue by 1346–47, but the autograph manuscript of the finished text is dated from Milan, 1357. See Mann, “Petrarch’s *Bucolicum carmen*,” 128–36; Petrarch, *Petrarch’s Bucolicum carmen*, xi, 217.

11. Dates, as with all Petrarchan texts, are approximate and indicative.

familiar with parts of Cicero's *De Inventione* (88 BCE), fragments of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* (95 CE), and the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (c. 90 BCE).¹² Curiously, or perhaps entirely of a piece with Petrarch's unique historical moment, the texts that were critically important to his understanding of pagan classical rhetoric were the early medieval Christian treatises by Saint Augustine—*De doctrina Christiana* (397 CE) and *Confessions* (400 CE).

Cicero's division of the levels of oratorical styles into high, middling, and low, each suited to a particular purpose as well as to a particular kind of subject matter, had become a commonplace in medieval European rhetoric, but primarily via the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica*. In *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine cites Cicero to assert that he who can fit his subject matter to his style is truly eloquent—that is, he who can speak of small things simply, middle things in the intermediate style, and great things in the grand style (though any kind of effective oratory would require a judicious admixture of the three).¹³ Ciceronian theory was also influential in determining the *officium*, or the ends, of each style of oratory: “the plain style for teaching (*docere*), the middle style for delighting (*delectare*), and the grand style for moving the emotions (*movere*).”¹⁴ In *Orator*, Cicero writes that the three *genera dicendi* (types of speaking) are to be used in the following situations: “subtile in probando, modicum in delectando, vehemens in flectendo; in quo uno vis omnis oratoris est” (*Orat.* 69).¹⁵

Both Erich Auerbach's masterful study of Latin rhetoric in late antiquity and, more recently, Debora Shuger's work on sacred rhetoric have shown the ways in which the advent of Christianity upended both the *genera dicendi* as well as their respective *officia*. As the contexts of oratory shifted from the agoras, senates, and law courts to the sphere of Christian evangelism, so too did the *ars dicendi* (art of speaking) undergo a thorough re-evaluation, particularly at the hands of early Christian fathers—Saint Augustine of Hippo chief among them.¹⁶

12. See Eden, *Renaissance Rediscovery*, 48; Conley, *Rhetoric*, 111.

13. Auerbach, *Literary Language*, 35.

14. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 262.

15. “The plain style for proof, the middle style for pleasure, the vigorous style for persuasion; and in this last one is summed up the entire skill/force of the orator”; Cicero, *Ad M. Brutum orator*, 78.

16. But even before the climactic intervention of Christianity, the tripartite division between the levels of style and their corresponding fields of application were far from absolute or uncontested. Shuger has shown how the differences between Isocrates's and Alcidas's conceptions of the grand style generated

With the rise of Christianity, the simple, even crude style of scriptural writings became a source of anxiety for early Christian rhetoricians who, steeped in the classical tradition, were accustomed to the inseparability of style and subject matter.¹⁷ Augustine writes in *Confessions* that when as a youth inflamed by Cicero’s rhetoric he turned to the Scriptures, “they seemed to me unworthy to be compared to the stateliness of Tully: for my swelling pride shrunk from their lowliness” (*Conf.* 3.5).¹⁸ Scriptural literature, with its Hebraisms and its harsh, alien syntax, thus created a need among the early Christian fathers—most of whom were trained in the niceties of classical rhetoric—to reclaim the Ciceronian plain style, the lowly style, and show it to be a fit vehicle for sublime matters, to demonstrate in the Bible’s stylistic barrenness a kind of “holy lowliness.”¹⁹ For the Christian speaker/writer, the subject matter was always sublime, and all three styles could be made into vehicles of this sublime content. In *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine reiterates the Ciceronian division of style, but relates it to the three-fold purpose of oratory (low, middle, high: to teach, to admonish, to exhort), omitting completely the question of levels of content; for the Christian speaker, all oratory was aimed at spreading the soteriological message of the gospel, all subjects were thus imbued with divine significance, and all three levels of speech were shot through with divine sublimity.²⁰

It was not only the crudities of the language of the Bible that triggered the Christian preoccupation with the “low style,” or the *sermo humilis*, but also Christianity’s early history as a religion whose survival hinged on its pitched

a controversy that lasted for centuries—the former calling for a more ornamental, crafted, ostentatious prose, and the latter focusing on the *ex tempore* authenticity of “the practical orator,” a kind of rough-hewn, impassioned grandeur (Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 14–17, 21–28). Around the same time, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* introduced the tripartite division of forensic, deliberative, and epideictic based on *kairos*, or occasion-specific timeliness, without explicitly making “loftiness” the exclusive prerogative of any of the three. In post-Aristotelian Greece, the Isocratic definition of a well-crafted, effete loftiness was eschewed in favour of a more sinewed, vigorous, grand style. The lines between grand and moderate styles were shifting, and multiple hierarchical structures coalesced at various historical crossroads. So too the Ciceronian grand style, as evinced in Cicero’s own speeches and his rhetorical theory, was emphatically not a conceptual monolith but an ever-evolving stylistic mode that was symptomatic of the syncretism of the culture of Roman antiquity.

17. Auerbach, *Literary Language*, 25–67.

18. Augustine, *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, 39.

19. Auerbach, *Literary Language*, 48.

20. Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, 239–40.

battle against the might of the Roman Empire and thus, by extension, on its ability to proselytize the masses through rhetorical persuasion. The Augustinian project was to devise a style that would be sublime but that at the same time “could embrace fishermen, carpenters, and old women.”²¹ While Augustine was clearly deeply enthralled by Ciceronian rhetoric, he, along with other Christian rhetors, was also unwaveringly invested in the project of exalting the *sermo humilis* style, making it a fit vehicle for divine matters. This *sermo humilis* mode shared with the Ciceronian plain style a restraint in expression, but it was suffused in a kind of sublimity that did not strictly fall within the purview of the plain style. Shuger argues that the effects of this restructuring of style resonated for a thousand years, culminating, during the Renaissance, in the total collapse of the distinctions between the *genera dicendi*. The purpose of all rhetoric was now subsumed under the single office of “*movere*,” and thus it was not the *genus vehemens* that was lowered, but the *sermo humilis* that was elevated to the stature of grandeur.²²

For Petrarch, caught, as he was, between the classical *genus vehemens*, as exemplified by Cicero, and the sacral grandeur of Augustinian *sermo humilis*, the accidental discovery of Cicero’s *Ad Atticum* in 1345 added another dimension to his stylistic dilemma. In that text he encountered most vividly another, radically unfamiliar aspect of Ciceronian rhetoric—the humble, familiar style, the style of intimate conversation.²³ The Gherardine letters conjure up a dialogue between Ciceronian grand and intimate styles, as well as two kinds of grand style—Ciceronian and Augustinian—and Petrarch’s brother becomes his interlocutor as he adapts, rehearses, and works his way through these overlapping yet antagonistic discursive practices. It is within this larger framework of intersecting modalities of stylistic commitments, as well as spiritual angst and fraternal envy and affection, that we must situate the Gherardine letters.

21. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 44.

22. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 62.

23. Celenza notes that Petrarch, who was acquainted with the “stoically virtuous Cicero,” is overwhelmed when he discovers that in his familiar letters Cicero reveals another side of himself—someone with a predilection for “scurrilous gossip” and a preoccupation with family and other humdrum things. To come to grips with this initial shock, Petrarch naturally writes a disapproving letter to Cicero (Celenza, *Intellectual World*, 42).

Cicero, Augustine, Francesco, Gherardo

The Petrarchan canon—by Petrarch’s own admission, in the eyes of contemporaries, and in the judgement of later readers—is often explicitly aligned with the Ciceronian grand style. Particularly in the eyes of the later humanists, Petrarch’s writings often became associated with the worst excesses of the lofty Ciceronian style. A century and a half after Petrarch, Erasmus identifies him as the man responsible for the “reflowering” of eloquence in Europe, but also the one who inadvertently inaugurated the trend of slavish imitation of Cicero across Europe.²⁴ Erasmus’s own cultivation of the intimate style is marked by a total erasure of the Petrarchan precedent.²⁵ In a study of the plain style in Ben Jonson’s poems, Wesley Trimpi shows how the reaction against Ciceronianism in Elizabethan and Jacobean England was entangled with the reaction against Petrarchism in poetry.²⁶ Even his contemporaries viewed Petrarch’s style as “too lofty,” as Petrarch admits in a letter to Nelli (*Fam.* 13.5). In the same letter, he expresses his outraged disdain towards people (mainly the papal curia) who expect him to “humble my talents [...] and subdue my style” (*humiliare ingenium [...] et inclinare stilum*).²⁷ In fact, when asked to do so, in a fit of perversity, he writes with a kind of loftiness that even Cicero would have been proud of, and which, according to him, the imbeciles at the curia found utterly incomprehensible.

Rerum familiarum libri, however, starts with Petrarch’s explicit declaration, made to “his Socrates” (i.e., Ludwig van Kempen), that he intended to write in a “plain, domestic and friendly style, forgetting that rhetorical power of speech which I neither lack nor abound in,” as Cicero himself deigned not to use his “great power of speech” in his familiar letters, “though he was most distinguished in it” (*Fam.* 1.1).²⁸ But though he avowedly declares the whole epistolary project as an exercise in the Ciceronian *sermo*, or conversational style, within this larger rubric Petrarch finds room to display a range of stylistic

24. Erasmus, *Ciceronianus*, 94.

25. As Eden notes, “In spite of not only differences in their literary sensibilities but also Erasmus’s near silence about his Italian predecessor, it is Petrarch’s rhetoric and hermeneutics of intimacy [...] that the Dutch humanist imports to northern Europe” (Eden, *Renaissance Rediscovery*, 72).

26. Trimpi, *Ben Jonson’s Poems*, 95–114.

27. Petrarch, *Rerum familiarum libri*, 2:189.

28. Petrarch, *Rerum familiarum libri*, 1:6–7.

practices, as it is impossible to “nourish a single mind at all times with the same style.”²⁹ Petrarch’s preoccupation with literary style, which sounds a recurring note through all twenty-four books of the work, reaches a startling crescendo in his letters to Gherardo.³⁰ Of the six letters written to his brother, only one (*Fam.* 16.2) omits the question of literary and rhetorical style altogether, and the whole of *Parthenias* is a thinly veiled allegory of a stylistic debate between the two brothers.

In the first three letters (*Fam.* 10.3–5), like in the famous letter on the ascent of Mont Ventoux (*Fam.* 4.1), Francesco depicts Gherardo as his spiritual “other,” who has succeeded in casting aside the temptations of the world and dedicating his life to the pursuit of otherworldly glories. The moment of conversion that Francesco had been yearning for his whole life had come for Gherardo; ostensibly, the tone of these letters is admiration tinged heavily with envy. This *agon* between the brothers is repeatedly framed as a conflict between two styles of self-expression. *Fam.* 10.3 and 10.4, together with the eclogue, comprise the most substantial discussions of style. I will begin with the eclogue and the accompanying letter (*Fam.* 10.4), then proceed to *Fam.* 10.3, and finish with the remaining letters.³¹

The first eclogue of *Bucolicum carmen* is an encounter between two shepherds: the cave dwelling Monicus and the wanderer Silvius. Silvius tells Monicus how he was inspired in his youth by the song of the shepherd Parthenias (Virgil) and has ever since wandered around the hills and vales trying to emulate that lofty sweetness. Monicus counters this by inviting Silvius to stay with him in his cave, where “in the depths of night” they can hear a shepherd (David) sing “notes of unrivalled sweetness” (*dulcius*). While Silvius’s master sings lofty songs of Rome and Troy, Monicus’s shepherd only sings of the one almighty God. However, what to Monicus are “notes of unrivalled sweetness” to Silvius are nothing but “unmusical groanings” (*raucus*). In the

29. Petrarch, *Rerum familiarium libri*, 1:9.

30. Other letters on style and eloquence include one to Tommaso da Massina (*Fam.* 1.9) and one to “Lelius” (*Fam.* 3.22).

31. The order of arrangement, as with most Petrarchan texts, does not always correspond to the dates of composition. Thomas Bergin surmises that *Fam.* 10.4 and the first eclogue were probably written in 1346, and *Fam.* 10.3, according to both Bernardo and Bishop, in 1348–49 (see Petrarch, *Petrarch’s Bucolicum carmen*, 217).

accompanying letter, Petrarch reiterates this opinion: David’s style “at first sight [...] appears rough and mournful” (*asperum et flebilem stilum*).

Even though in this particular exchange it is the issue of poetic, rather than oratorical/rhetorical, styles and models that are the point of contention, the key features of grand style and plain style are routinely invoked in conjunction with the songs of Virgil and David respectively.³² For instance, Gur Zak argues that in *Parthenias*, and throughout the *Bucolicum carmen*, the fabric of the poetry is woven with the threads of two kinds of consolation and mourning: the elegiac (associated with the low style), and the resolute epic style. David’s Psalms “emerge as a type of elegy, a poetry that is dedicated to the poet’s outpouring of his sorrow,” displaying a loss of control that renders it “unmanly” next to the lofty notes and warlike ethos of the Virgilian epic.³³

Silvius’s enchanters here are Virgil and Homer, the two greatest practitioners of the grand style in literature, while Monicus’s loyalties lie with the Scriptures, the centrepiece of the sublime plain style. Silvius’s stance, in fact, almost exactly echoes the young Augustine’s own initial abhorrence of the *sermo humilis* style of Christian writing and his valorization of the classical models of lofty eloquence. The controversy between the brothers—Francesco and Gherardo—is generated through Silvius’s inability to recognize the sublimity of the humble, which is, as in Augustine, indicative of Silvius’s own spiritual inadequacies—his “bad Christian conscience,” which is “balanced by the creator’s Humanist pride.”³⁴

To Silvius’s criticism of scriptural style, Monicus replies that his shepherd sings not “hoarsely” but “firmly” (*solida*) with a “mysterious sweetness” (*dulcore latenti*). In the end, Silvius promises to give this hoarse style another chance at some later date, after he has finished composing a song in the heroic mode (by default composed in the grand style) about a certain Roman youth (Scipio) and his exploits on the African shore. Though the text ends with Silvius still unconvinced by the superiority of the humble style, Monicus has at least been able to engage him in a dialectic and opened up his mind towards

32. It is worth pointing out in this context that from the Greek Classical period onwards, the vocabulary associated with the *genera dicendi* had also been used to inform the basic tenets of literary genres—namely, the grand style for tragedies and epics, the middle style for comedies and lyric poetry, and the low style for elegiac poetry. See Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 27.

33. Zak, “Ethics and Poetics,” 41.

34. Greene, “Petrarch’s ‘Viator,’” 37.

the possibility of a stylistic alternative. Here, as in so many of Petrarch's texts, we leave the author on the brink of a conversion—a conversion that is, in this particular instance, conceived of in stylistic terms but is, in essence, spiritual.

The letter that frames this eclogue and explains its complex allusions to Gherardo, however, constructs the debate in precisely the opposite terms. In the letter, Francesco is the agent and not the object of conversion, trying to convince Gherardo that stylistic sophistication in literature is not opposed to the basic tenets of Christianity. As an ascetic and a monk, Gherardo might feel it his duty to despise the sample of secular pastoral poetry (emulating a pre-Christian style and genre) enclosed with the letter, but he would be wrong in doing so. Petrarch argues that the difference in the Christian style of writing as evinced in scriptures and psalms and the classical literary styles is a difference of degree, not of kind:

In truth, poetry is not in the least contrary to theology. [...] I might almost say that theology is the poetry of God. What else is it if not poetry when Christ is called a lion or a lamb or a worm? In Sacred Scripture you will find thousands of such examples too numerous to pursue here. Indeed, what else do the parables of the Savior in the Gospels echo if not a discourse different from ordinary meaning or, to express it briefly, figurative speech, which we call allegory in ordinary language? [...] Even the fathers of the Old Testament made use of heroic and other kinds of poetry: Moses, Job, David, Solomon, Jeremiah; the Psalms of David that you sing day and night possess poetic meter in Hebrew.³⁵

Each style uses ornaments and embellishments to a different degree. Metrical regularity and versification were features of the earliest Hebrew Scriptures that were subsequently lost in translation, but the sections of chapters are still called verses—vestigial remains of the poetic style to which they once adhered. The argument then moves towards a critique of the unmitigated glorification of the *sermo humilis* style: as Petrarch says, “To praise food served in an earthen vessel while feeling disgust at the same meal served on a golden platter is a sign either of madness or hypocrisy.”³⁶ By this point in time, the

35. Petrarch, *Rerum familiarium libri*, 2:69–70.

36. Petrarch, *Rerum familiarium libri*, 2:69–70.

inherent sublimity of the Christian low or humble style—endowed with its holy subject matter, independent of the skill of the practitioner—had become the socially and culturally accepted standard, and it was ornamentation and stylistic vigour that were often seen as problematic. As Auerbach says, Christianity gave rhetoric “new life, but at the same time chang[ed] its character. The keynote now was *humilitas*.”³⁷ Petrarch’s task in this letter—of justifying the worth of the grand style, or anything approximating grandeur in literature and discourse—is thus the exact obverse of the early Christian fathers’ project of elevating the humble style.

In *Parthenias*, Ascoli argues, Petrarch briefly considers the possibility of a stylistic continuity between theology and poetry only to discard it and uphold, instead, the “seemingly unbridgeable gap” between the two.³⁸ Unlike the eclogue, however, the letter (*Fam.* 10.4) carefully avoids pitting a “classical” style against a “Christian” one, and instead seeks to persuade Gherardo by acknowledging the inherent musicality and stylistic excellence of scriptural literature, and by foregrounding the essential commonality between secular and religious writing. Silvius’s abhorrence of Biblical poetry is replaced by Francesco’s recognition of its beauty; Monicus’s admiration for the songs of mysterious sweetness is replaced by Gherardo’s alleged inability to see poetry in scripture. Petrarch’s spiritual inadequacies are replaced by Gherardo’s aesthetic/hermeneutic shortcomings. Perhaps because of this set of complex reversals between the poem and the letter, the dialectic ultimately remains unresolved in *Fam.* 10.4.

However, the letter immediately preceding this, *Fam.* 10.3, both anticipates and indicates a resolution of this contest, as Petrarch seems to accept the superiority of Gherardo’s convictions and attempts to alter his own literary style. The “unmistakable condescension” towards “the untutored Monicus”³⁹ displayed in *Fam.* 10.4 is replaced with helpless envy and self-castigation. Petrarch begins by bewailing his wretched, sinful condition, trapped, as he is,

37. Auerbach, *Literary Language*, 53. He also writes, “The lowly or humble style is the only medium in which such sublime mysteries can be brought within the reach of men” (Auerbach, *Literary Language*, 51). Shuger writes of post-Reformation rhetorical theory: “Instead, Melanchthon warns against solicitude for eloquence and figural ornament; these distract from the sincerity of the preacher and the power of the Spirit” (Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 67).

38. Ascoli, “Blinding the Cyclops,” 127.

39. Greene, “Petrarch’s ‘Viator,’” 37.

in worldly sorrows and petty jealousies while his younger sibling has found his calling and managed to retreat into a life of tranquility and religious contemplation. He draws attention to the remarkable similarity in the lives he and his brother had led prior to Gherardo's conversion, and how, for some inexplicable reason, God had chosen to save Gherardo from that mire of worldliness while Francesco himself was left behind. It is in this section that Petrarch introduces the topic of literary styles through the metaphor of costumes and hairdressing. Speaking of the unreasonable importance they were wont to attach to their external appearances in their callow youth, Petrarch writes:

[W]hat trouble we used to take repeatedly putting on and taking off fancy clothes morning and evening; what fear we felt that a single hair might fall out of place or that a light breeze might spoil our elaborate coiffures; or how we tried to avoid animals coming from any direction so that any dirt they kicked up might not soil our perfumed, spotless clothes or so that in the encounter they might not crumple our pressed creases. [...] What shall I say about our shoes? How heavy and continual a battle did they wage against our feet, which they were intended to protect! [...] What should I say about the curling irons and the care we took of our hair? [...] What pirate could have given us a more cruel torture than we inflicted upon ourselves with our own hands?⁴⁰

This entire section can be read as an allegorical indictment of literary fashion as well as of sartorial and cosmetic choices—of the tortuous syntax and elaborate rhetorical ornaments the classical models of eloquence demand. The traditional association of literary and sartorial styles resonates through Petrarch's *oeuvre*, notably in his letter to Boccaccio (*Fam.* 22.2) on the uses and abuses of literary imitation where he says, "I much prefer that my style be my own [...] made to fit, as a garment, to the measure of my mind."⁴¹ In *Fam.* 10.3, Petrarch says that as young men, they undertook all this pain voluntarily to "suit popular fads, and call in as judges of our lives those whose own lives we despise." This passage is echoed almost exactly in *Secretum*, in the context of

40. Petrarch, *Rerum familiarium libri*, 2:59–60.

41. Petrarch, *Rerum familiarium libri*, 2:213. For the emotional effect of attire in Roman forensic oratory, see Dyck, "Dressing to Kill," 119–30.

literary fads, as Augustine berates Francesco for mistaking popular adulation for his literary skills as true poetic glory:

I have observed that no man more than you abhors the manners and behaviour of the common herd. Now see what perversity this is! You let yourself be charmed with the applause of those whose conduct you abominate. [...] It is the height of madness to squander the best years and the best parts of your existence on pleasing only the eyes of others.⁴²

Pushing the analogy between verbal and vestimentary styles further, Petrarch compares their youthful vanity to that of the Roman orator Quintus Hortensius, who was “as particular about his appearance as his literary style,” and who had brought action for damages against a friend for having bumped into him and (inadvertently) dislodged his toga (*Fam.* 10.3).⁴³ In any discussion of rhetorical styles that involves Petrarch, Cicero, and Augustine, Hortensius occupies an important place. As an orator and contemporary of Cicero, Hortensius was a key figure in both Ciceronian and Augustinian negotiations with rhetoric. Apart from the eponymous *Hortensius* (lost after the sixth century), he figures prominently in Cicero’s *Brutus*, a dialogue occasioned by the death of Hortensius, and *Orator*, wherein Cicero lists him as one of the greatest speakers to have ever graced the forum. Hortensius was (in)famous for his florid, “Asiatic” style of writing and speaking,⁴⁴ and despite his obvious admiration, even Cicero, the great master of the *genus vehemens*, expresses in *Orator* his reservations regarding Hortensius’s excesses.⁴⁵

The Hortensian excesses of style are then contrasted with the simplicity of the *sermo humilis* represented by Gherardo’s monastic vestments:

42. Petrarch, *Petrarch’s Secret*, 167–8, 175.

43. Bishop translates this as “Horatius” for some reason, but both the Latin original and Aldo Bernardo’s recent translations specify “Hortensius.”

44. “Asiatic” rhetoric was associated with an excessive ornateness in speech, as opposed to the more restrained “Attic” style; the modes were named after the kinds of rhetoric practised in the academies of Asia Minor and Greece, respectively, during the Hellenic period.

45. “Hortensius was more admired for his Eloquence in the younger part of his life, than in his latter years, we shall find it owing to the following causes. The first was, that an Asiatic style is more allowable in a young man than in an old one” (Cic. *Orat.*, trans. Jones, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/9776/pg9776-images.html>).

Your wide shoe [*sic*] no longer is a chain on your feet, but a protection; your hair combed high and gathered together no longer interferes with your ears or your eyes. Now your dress is simpler, its purchase and care easy, no more laborious to put on than to take off, thus protecting your mind from folly as much as the body from coldness.⁴⁶

This apparently straightforward indictment of the grand style—and the elevation of the humble style—is, however, slightly complicated by the fact that Petrarch’s acquaintance with Hortensius/*Hortensius* was mediated by Augustine, and Augustine explicitly mentions *Hortensius* as the one Ciceronian treatise that was pivotal in his conversion to Christianity. Ronald G. Witt asserts that “the touchstone for Petrarch’s belief that pagan literature was relevant to Christian faith was Augustine’s avowal in the *Confessions* that his reading of Cicero’s *Hortensius* had given him the initial impetus to reform his life.”⁴⁷ The grand rhetoric of *Hortensius*—which was framed as a dialogue between four friends, among them Cicero and Hortensius, debating the relative merits of poetry, rhetoric, and philosophy, and ending with the triumph of philosophy over all others—persuaded the young Augustine to turn away from the meretriciousness of superficial eloquence and embark on the pursuit of true wisdom and salvation:

But this book altered my affections, and turned my prayers to Thyself O Lord; and made me have other purposes and desires. Every vain hope at once became worthless to me; and I longed with an incredibly burning desire for an immortality of wisdom, and began now to arise, that I might return to Thee. For not to sharpen my tongue (which thing I seemed to be purchasing with my mother’s allowances, in that my nineteenth year, my father being dead two years before), not to sharpen my tongue did I employ that book; nor did it infuse into me its style, but its matter. (*Conf.* 3.4)⁴⁸

In light of this passage, which even in its rejection of eloquence highlights its indispensability in turning the mind towards true wisdom, Petrarch’s reference

46. Petrarch, *Rerum familiarium libri*, 2:60.

47. Witt, *Footsteps*, 254.

48. Augustine, *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, 38. See also Taylor, “St. Augustine,” 487–98.

to Hortensius introduces a certain degree of ambiguity in the dialectic played out between him and Gherardo.

After a long and rather unexpected *discursus* on the vagaries of servants, *Fam.* 10.3 ends with Petrarch giving his brother a spiritual bibliography of sorts, exhorting him to read *Confessions* with particular care, and the reader is left to wonder at what lesson he hoped Gherardo would learn from that text regarding rhetoric and eloquence. Having paid obeisance to the humble style, Petrarch anticipates the stance he will take in *Fam.* 10.4 and the eclogue by announcing his intention to send to his brother at a later date his ruminations, in “poetic form,” on theological learning and the Psalms of David.⁴⁹ When one recalls Silvius’s evaluation of these psalms, one cannot help but think that the lengthy disavowal of *genus vehemens* in *Fam.* 10.3 was neither entirely sincere nor final.

Fam. 10.3 finally ends with the declaration that Petrarch had been, in fact, attempting to cultivate a “foreign” style, an almost “monastic” style, more suited to Gherardo’s way of life: “peregrino stilo ac prope monastico dictavi.” In *De otio religioso*, a treatise he dedicated to Gherardo and his brothers at the Carthusian monastery, there is a similar promise to “control his pen” or “style” (*moderabo stilum*) and eschew the grand style for a more conversational approach (*sermo*, or conversation, once again recalling the *sermo humilis* mode).⁵⁰ This purported alteration of style seems like a demonstration of his willingness to embark upon the journey of salvation, with his younger brother leading the way, but the references to Hortensius and his own pastoral eclogue render this reading a little uneasy. It is possible, however, to read *Fam.* 10.3 as both a critique of the style he had earlier championed in the eclogue and a tentative exploration of the alternatives available to him. But above all, it is a display of Petrarch’s stylistic virtuosity—from the bombastic Hortensian/Ciceronian style he refers to in the letter to Nelli to the humble monastic style, he had mastered every mode of literary self-expression and could deploy any one according to the needs of the situation—as a skillful litterateur/rhetor ought to be able to. The figure of Gherardo, and the monastic ideal he represents, provides Petrarch the

49. It is probable that *Fam.* 10.4 and the eclogue were written before *Fam.* 10.3, but the ordering suggests that Petrarch wanted the reader to proceed from a position of self-critique and submission to the humble style, to a subsequent indictment of the same.

50. For the Latin *De otio religioso*, I have followed the digitized version of volume 3 of *Opere Latini* (ed. A. Bufano), accessed via <https://www.mlat.uzh.ch/home>. The English translation comes from *On Religious Leisure* (trans. Schearer).

opportunity to display his mastery over a style with which he had hitherto, by and large, chosen not to engage.

De otio religioso, composed immediately after Petrarch visited his brother at Montrieux in 1347, gives us (and Gherardo) a taste of the full range of Petrarch's protean style.⁵¹ With its explicitly homiletic manner, the text is a remarkable exhibition of Petrarch's mastery of the *sermo humilis* style that he had rejected emphatically in *Parthenias* barely a year before, and through this praxis it is as if "the author himself is transformed, becoming like the object of his meditation."⁵² In this treatise, addressed to not just his brother but a whole monastery, Petrarch plays to the gallery and significantly alters his ideological positions vis-à-vis eloquence and secular literature, assuming, temporarily, the stance of a moral didact who seems to have finally achieved the existential peace for which he had hitherto envied Gherardo.⁵³ At the very outset, *De otio* rejects the verbal arts altogether in favour of a contemplative, meditative silence. Petrarch reminisces about his visit to Montrieux, the spiritual impact of which left him literally, and completely uncharacteristically, bereft of speech: "Why should I say more? Thus it happened that I departed, almost in silence, intent and gaping in wonder at everyone."⁵⁴ In his article on the dialectic between silence and eloquence in Petrarch's works, Jerrold E. Seigel cites a similar passage from *De vita solitaria* (1346), where Petrarch reminds the reader that "nor should we seek the empty glory of the tongue, but the lasting quiet of the mind."⁵⁵ Seigel characterizes *De vita* as Petrarch's most "anti-rhetorical" text, but does not include *De otio* in his analysis; this omission is a significant one given the latter's melodramatic renunciation of classical eloquence.

The speaker of *De otio* is soteriologically superior to both the misled but arrogant Silvius of *Parthenias*, and the devout but envious Francesco of *Fam.* 10.3. The unmistakable mark of this is Petrarch's rejection of eloquent speech as the catalyst in the journey towards divine salvation. Instead, with a hostility

51. See Ronald Witt's introduction to Scheerer's translation for the dates. Witt also asserts that, stylistically, "Petrarch's Latin is less classicizing than in most of his other work. Apparently designed to be read aloud in a refectory, the sentence structure is essentially paratactic with almost no clausal subordination" (Witt, "Introduction," loc. 139–42, Kindle).

52. Zak, *Petrarch's Humanism*, 97.

53. Zak, *Petrarch's Humanism*, 50.

54. Petrarch, *On Religious Leisure*, loc. 272, Kindle.

55. Seigel, "Ideals of Eloquence," 157.

reminiscent of Plato in *Gorgias* and *Republic*, he thunders, “What evil sprang from the Greeks, whose shallowness arose from their skill in speaking? Is it incredible what great clouds of lies this crowd stirred up?”⁵⁶ The doleful elegiac style of the psalms he had scorned in *Parthenias* becomes the antithesis of carnal desire; to praise “God with sad sighing and ponderous tones” (*mestis suspiriis et duris semper accentibus Deum laudante*) becomes the coveted salubrious remedy for the disease of desire.⁵⁷ In a swift act of prestidigitation, Petrarch now sheds the persona of Silvius and assumes that of Monicus. Literalizing the proverb of “preaching to the choir,” and without any trace of irony, Petrarch advises the monks at Montrieux not to be put off by the “*vilitas*” of the style of the Scriptures, but to focus on the inner sweetness thereof. He admits freely that he had only recently, and very late in his life, learnt to appreciate the *sermo humilis* style of the Scriptures, and in this tardiness he claims Jerome and Augustine as his forbearers. And now that he knows better, David’s Psalms have become for him “a source from which I have eager to drink.”⁵⁸

It is possible to read *De otio* as the chiasmic image of *Parthenias*, wherein Petrarch systematically reverses every stand taken by Silvius. Despite its monologic tone, however, the text is not without its contradictions. Although it is often seen as the “least humanistic”⁵⁹ of Petrarch’s works, any reader of *De otio* will be immediately struck by the overwhelming preponderance of citations from classical and pagan authors, numerically far exceeding the references to the Bible and other Christian texts.⁶⁰ Even his rejection of classical authors has to be justified by classical authors: this fundamental paradox makes the rejection itself suspect. The post-conversion stasis of *De otio* is soon replaced by further angst in both *Secretum* and the letter on the ascent of Mont Ventoux (*Fam.* 4.1). It seems as if Petrarch’s salvation hangs in the balance of his stylistic choices; the practice of *sermo humilis* in *De otio* lends credence and validity to his altered spiritual state, which vanishes as soon as his pen is stilled. In the letters that follow, he is thus forced to relinquish this brief moment of spiritual certainty and resume his dialectic with Gherardo.

56. Petrarch, *On Religious Leisure*, loc. 1854, Kindle.

57. Petrarch, *On Religious Leisure*, loc. 1576, Kindle.

58. Petrarch, *On Religious Leisure*, loc. 2214, Kindle.

59. Witt, “Introduction,” loc. 136, Kindle.

60. See Vickers, “Leisure and Idleness,” 113.

In *Fam.* 10.5, the pendulum of stylistic felicity has decisively swung in Gherardo's direction, as the letter begins with Petrarch marvelling at his brother's powers of persuasion, which moved Francesco in the direction of spiritual salvation. Gherardo's conversion had brought about a change in his literary style, and Petrarch says he admires "the steadfastness of [his] mind and the strength of [his] style" (*animi tui constantiam et stili robur*), as well as the consummate skill with which Gherardo had woven together the arguments of great *auctores* of the classical and Christian past in order to persuade Francesco of the folly of his ways. Petrarch ends this eulogy of Gherardo's newly improved prose by subtly drawing attention to the latter's excessive modesty, which holds him back from speaking his mind in his own voice, unaided by the great thinkers of the past, and hopes that someday Gherardo will overcome this hesitation and say something that is truly his own ("tuo aliquid dicere"), which would establish him as a serious practitioner of literary self-expression.

Gherardo's spiritual instruction is countered with Francesco's stylistic tutelage, the latter's superiority in literary skill and aesthetic judgement, yet again, vaunted to combat the former's morally immaculate existence. While Petrarch's own spiritual conversion, as seen in *Secretum* or in the letter on the ascent of Mont Ventoux, seems constantly, endlessly delayed,⁶¹ Gherardo's stylistic conversion, on the other hand, seems to have become a *fait accompli* by the time we come to the next letter.

In *Fam.* 17.1, it appears that Gherardo has been co-opted to practise the vigorous classical literary style. The letter was written in response to a brief religious pamphlet Gherardo had sent his brother, and in it Petrarch engages in a longer encomium on the vast improvement in Gherardo's own literary style—an encomium that also included a subtle and entirely unnecessary indictment of his earlier literary inadequacies:

61. As Victoria Kahn shows, invoking the famous Augustinian plea "O Lord give me chastity but not yet," Petrarch too continues to extend this drama of spiritual conversion—of turning away from worldliness with a degree of finality—by constantly delaying the actual pivotal moment (Kahn, "Defense of Poetry," 101). Kahn goes on to show how in *Secretum*, Petrarch "reoccupies" what the medieval Christian theology had condemned as vain worldliness, and appropriates and abrogates the spiritual model of Augustine's *Confessions* in order to create a "defense" of "secular" poetry. Greene, looking at Petrarch's self-construction as a viator, suggests that "the traveller wants to arrive at his destination but he also fears to arrive" (Greene, "Petrarch's 'Viator,'" 35).

Dear and only brother of mine, I enjoyed it more than words could express, for it helped me understand not only the firmness of your holy purpose, which I had always expected of you, and your contempt for fleeting things, which for some time had been very familiar to me, but your unexpected and surprising literary ability, which you almost completely lacked upon entering that religious order so dear to God. Though salvation may not lie in literature, it still is and was for a great many men a way to salvation; to have such a capacity without a teacher is a sign of excellence and of a mind disposed to rise on high.⁶²

The last line can be read as an explicit, cheeky (non-)compliment to himself: as evinced in the preceding letters, Francesco had left no stone unturned in his mission to impart a proper rhetorical education to his brother, even as Gherardo strived for the spiritual upliftment of Francesco. We are offered the tantalizing prospect of Gherardo's eloquent treatise, which might just propel Francesco's long overdue conversion, just as *Hortensius* had done for Augustine.

Augustine's shadowy presence frequently inserts itself as a third interlocutor in this fraternal dialogue, not just in the actual letters to Gherardo but also in the letter on the ascent of Mont Ventoux, which is arguably the starkest, most theatrical representation of the diverging destinies of the brothers Petrarch. In *Secretum*, Augustine stands in for Gherardo. Enrico Fenzi's rich and evocative reading of *Parthenias* and *Secretum* has shown how the two texts are joined with “il cordone ombelicale” (the umbilical cord), and Monicus/Gherardo and Augustine emerge as mirror images of one another, both of whom are finally defeated by the hectoring, wheedling Francesco/Silvius.⁶³ Fittingly then, the last letter to Gherardo (*Fam.* 18.5) is attached to a very special gift: Francesco's copy of Augustine's *Confessions*. He sends his brother the first book he ever possessed, the book that formed the basis of his spiritual and philosophical orientation, not because his brother was in any need of spiritual guidance but in the hope that Augustine's “truly fiery eloquence” (vere ignitum eloquium) would inflame Gherardo like “the sharp arrows of a warrior with

62. Petrarch, *Rerum familiarium libri*, 3:1.

63. “Se Agostino concede, Monico accetta” (If Augustine concedes, Monicus accepts) (Fenzi, “Verso il ‘Secretum,’” 19).

consuming coals of brushwood.”⁶⁴ It would make him weep and rejoice at the same time, just like Silvius had been inflamed, delighted, and moved to tears by Parthenias’s songs, and Augustine himself had been by the prose of Cicero. This letter recalls Augustine’s own ambiguous attitude towards rhetorical style and his sustained attempts to restructure and repurpose classical rhetoric to Christian ends—that is, to use pagan rhetoric to convert those minds enchanted by the allurements of world and redirect them to the glory of God. In this last letter to his brother, Petrarch reverses this Augustinian project by appropriating Augustinian rhetoric and deploying it for the purposes meant to be served by the Ciceronian grand style—to move the reader/audience to tears, to create ecstasy, to inflame passion for literary sophistication in a mind that had already been turned to God.

Scattered across four of the twenty-four books of the *Familiars*, the Gherardine letters form a tightly knit web of references. While in these letters, as with the rest of Petrarch’s *oeuvre*, “no consistent development from one attitude to the other” can be traced, taken together they give us a unique insight into how Petrarch absorbed and reproduced the ideological opposition between poetry and spirituality, and between his self and his fraternal alter ego, in stylistic terms.⁶⁵ The exact chronology of composition is impossible to ascertain, and the order of arrangement is the only narrative available to us, but this narrative indicates a shift in Gherardo’s style as well as Petrarch’s own. On the one hand, Petrarch converts Gherardo, and Gherardo begins to write in the vehement style; on the other, Gherardo converts him, and Petrarch chooses to explore the humble style.⁶⁶ Added to this is the tantalizing prospect of Francesco’s spiritual conversion, which is explicitly linked to Gherardo’s stylistic conversion, but this prospect never comes to fruition. As Thomas M. Greene writes, while Petrarch “admires those who achieve their quest,” he remains “wary of minds with too single a purpose.”⁶⁷ The singleness of style, like the singleness of purpose, remains abhorrent to Petrarch.

64. Petrarch, *Rerum familiarium libri*, 3:51.

65. Seigel, “Ideals of Eloquence,” 172.

66. In the first letter to Socrates, Petrarch laments that, in an attempt to emulate the conversational mode, he has gone too far, and the later letters have at times “seemed to lack strength of character.” He begs Socrates to conceal these lapses (Petrarch, *Rerum familiarium libri*, 1:12).

67. Greene, “Petrarch’s ‘Viator,’” 35.

Whether or not Gherardo actually wrote in the *stili robur*, we shall never know. But Francesco’s inexhaustible curiosity, his willingness to explore multiple rhetorical modes, and his insistence that Gherardo experiment with literary expression in a similar manner are all on record and can be read as a repudiation of stylistic, and thereby intellectual, rigidity. In the epistolary dialogue with Gherardo, a conversational, at times even playful rehearsing of stylistic conflict becomes a stand-in for larger spiritual anxieties, and the exchange between Gherardo and Francesco also becomes simultaneously an exchange between Cicero and Petrarch and between Augustine and Petrarch on the one hand, and Augustine’s own negotiations with Cicero on the other. But the lasting significance of the Gherardine texts lies in the way in which they celebrate the diversity of literary styles and the fluidity of expressive modes, which the encounter between “medieval” and “classical” had made available to the Renaissance man.

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