

**PETRARCH'S LETTERS
TO CLASSICAL
AUTHORS**

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Petrarch's Letters to Classical Authors by Francesco Petrarca & Mario Emilio Cosenza

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FRANCESCO PETRARCA & MARIO EMILIO COSENZA

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**PETRARCH'S LETTERS
TO CLASSICAL
AUTHORS,**

TRANSLATED FROM THE LATIN
WITH A COMMENTARY

BY

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	ix
✓ I. LETTER TO M. T. CICERO	1
Notes to Letter I	5
✓ II. LETTER TO M. T. CICERO	21
Notes to Letter II	29
III. LETTER TO ANNAEUS SENECA	43
Notes to Letter III	55
IV. LETTER TO MARCUS VARRO	69
Notes to Letter IV	76
V. LETTER TO QUINTILIAN	84
Notes to Letter V	90
✓ VI. LETTER TO TITUS LIVY	100
Notes to Letter VI	104
VII. LETTER TO ASINIUS POLLIO	112
Notes to Letter VII	118
✓ VIII. LETTER TO HORATIUS FLACCUS	125
Notes to Letter VIII	132
✓ IX. LETTER TO PUBLIUS VERGIlius MARO	136
Notes to Letter IX	141
✓ X. LETTER TO HOMER	148
Notes to Letter X	172
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	205

INTRODUCTION

It is hardly necessary to dwell upon Petrarch's extensive correspondence. He was the leader of the learned men of his age; and it is common knowledge that all his prominent contemporaries—whether in the political world, or in the religious world, or in the scholarly world—were numbered among his friends.

Corresponding so incessantly with all men and on all topics, Petrarch's letters soon grew into an unmanageable mass. One day in 1359 (Frac., Note to *Fam.*, XXIV, 13) Petrarch, with a sigh, consigned to the flames a thousand or more papers, consisting of short poems and of letters, merely to avoid the irksome task of sifting and of correcting them. He then noticed a few papers lying in a corner, which (after some hesitation) he spared because they had already been recopied and arranged by his secretary (*Praefatio ad Socratem*, I, p. 15). Petrarch divided these "few" letters into two groups, dedicating the twenty-four books of prose epistles to Socrates (*Praefatio, loc. cit.*, and *Fam.*, XXIV, 13), and the three books of

poetic epistles to Marco Barbato (*Praefatio, loc. cit.*, pp. 15, 16, and *Fam.*, XXII, 3).

Farther on in his prefatory letter to Socrates, Petrarch points out the vigor and the courage to be seen in his earlier letters, and advances extenuating circumstances for the laments which begin to crop out in the later ones. He excuses these by arguing that they were occasioned by the misfortunes which befell his friends, and not by those which he had suffered in his own person. At this point Petrarch does not lose the opportunity for comparing himself with Cicero. The passage gives so completely the information needed by the reader that it is hereby translated in full (*Praefatio*, I, p. 25):

Cicero, however, exhibits such weakness in his adversity that, although I am delighted with his style, I am oftentimes equally offended by his actions. Add to this his quarrelsome letters—the altercations and the reproachful language which he employs against the most illustrious men whom he has but recently been praising. It all reveals a remarkable fickleness of disposition. On reading these letters, I was soothed and ruffled at the same time. I could not restrain myself, and, indignation prompting me, I wrote to him as to a friend of my own years and time, regardless of the ages which separated us. Indeed, I wrote with a familiarity acquired through an intimate knowledge of the works of his genius, and I pointed out to him what it was that offended me in his

writings. This letter served as a precedent. Years later, on re-reading the tragedy entitled *Oclavia*, the memory of the letter which I had addressed to Cicero prompted me to write to Seneca also. Thereafter, and as occasion offered, I addressed letters to Varro, Vergil, and others. Some of these I have placed at the end of this work, and I hereby forewarn the reader of this fact, lest he should be perplexed at coming upon them unawares. The rest perished in that general holocaust of which I have told you above.

In the last letter of the collection *De rebus familiaribus* (XXIV, 13, likewise addressed to Socrates, and dated 1361), Petrarch refers again to the grouping together of the letters to the classical authors. He says (III, pp. 305, 306):

In ordering these letters, I have been guided entirely by their chronology, and not by their contents. [But compare *Frac.*, 5, p. 201, on the matter of the chronology.] Nearly all of them have been arranged in the order in which they were written, with the exception, indeed, of these last letters addressed to the illustrious authors of antiquity. These I have purposely gathered together on account of their strange character and the similarity of their subject-matter. A second exception must be made in the case of the first letter, which, though written later, I have placed at the head of her companions to serve as a preface [a reference to the *Praefatio*, I, pp. 13-27].

The material embraced in these pages has been partly treated in English and to a greater extent in French (by Robinson and Rolfe, and by Develay; see Bibliography). In both cases, however, the letters chosen have been merely translated, with only the barest attempt at annotating. Even the notes of the Italian translation by Fracassetti are only such as pertain to the life of Petrarch and to those of his correspondents.

Thus much concerning the history of the text proper. The notes have been made as detailed as seemed necessary and consistent with the character of the work. Some of the quotations from the original sources, or from translations, may appear somewhat lengthy at first glance. In all instances, however, it has been deemed quite essential to reproduce in the mind of the reader the conditions and the attitude of Petrarch's mind. Only in this way do many brief expressions and pregnant allusions of Petrarch become perfectly clear.

It is a privilege and a pleasure to acknowledge my great indebtedness to two authors in particular, without whose labors the present study would have been impossible, or, at any rate, vastly more difficult: Giuseppe Fracassetti

and Pierre de Nolhac. The Latin edition and the complete Italian translation of Petrarch's letters *De rebus familiaribus* (both by Fracassetti) have been absolutely indispensable; while P. de Nolhac's fascinating work has provided all the minute details concerning the actual composition and appearance of the tomes which once formed part of Petrarch's library.

All quotations from the letters are made from the Latin text and from the Italian version as published by Fracassetti. The volumes of the former are referred to by Roman numerals, those of the latter by Arabic numerals. Passages from other works of Petrarch are cited from the Basle edition of the *Opera omnia*, except the *De remediis utriusque fortunæ*, for which the 1649 edition has been used. All other titles have been abbreviated in such manner as to be readily identified by consulting the Bibliography. The texts used in referring to the works of the classical authors themselves are (except when otherwise indicated) those of the Teubner series.

The number of persons interested in the absorbing period of the Italian Renaissance is increasing daily. The present study deals with only one phase of that truly wonderful period—