



Petrarch

The humanist literature of Europe begins with Francesco Petrarca (1304-74), who was born in Arezzo but brought up in southeast France, his parents being exiled by the same Florentine decree as Dante a generation before. Petrarch spent much of his early life in Avignon, was educated in Montpellier and Bologna, but returned to work in various clerical offices in Avignon when his father died in 1326. His Latin poetry and scholarship made him famous, and in 1341 he was crowned as poet laureate in Rome, which brought various diplomatic duties. Petrarch's best work was inspired by young love — of an unidentified Laura, met in Avignon on 6th April 1327 and immortalized long after her death from the bubonic plague in 1348. Petrarch was better educated in the classics than Dante and more likable, traveling happily between courts in Italy, France and the Rhineland. He consciously emulated the classics, assembling a large library and personally finding, publishing and popularizing the manuscripts that languished unread in cathedral libraries.

Most of Petrarch's writing was in Latin, and is now forgotten — not because Latin is a dead tongue, but because in rigidly following classical models, Petrarch put too little of his own thoughts and times into their composition. What does survive are the works written in Italian: letters, *Trionfi* and *Canzoniere*. *Trionfi* was an allegorical procession of figures: Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, Time and Divinity, with Divinity finally triumphant. The *Canzoniere* were his love lyrics to Laura. They drew on popular literature and folk song, but Petrarch gave them an entrancing form that evoked enthusiasm throughout Europe, and which still shapes western literature. Even in English,

much of the poetry of Chaucer, Wyatt, Surrey Shakespeare and Donne is unthinkable without Petrarch — in the popularization of the sonnet sequence, in the intimate reference to antiquity and in the appreciation of the human body and the feelings it inspires. Did Laura exist? Probably, but like many poets, Petrarch loved her platonically through the poetry he created: actual matrimony was never an option for this most passionate of idealists.

Though romantic love begins with 11-13th century troubadour poetry in its adoration of a noble lady as the earthly representative of spiritual beauty — and was given unforgettable expression in Dante's *Divine Comedy* — it was Petrarch who developed the pangs of love into an extended series of poems, describing: her dazzling beauty, her angelic purity, and the anguish of rejection versus desire for possession. Petrarch introduced the catalogue of physical perfections and the extended metaphors that sees eyes as “windows to the soul” etc., which feature so prominently in 300 years of Renaissance poetry, and which can only be suggested to be outdone in range and ingenuity by medieval Islamic poetry. Petrarch's influence was immediate and overwhelming: many of the great figures of European literature draw on and extend his legacy: Chaucer, Shakespeare. Alexander Pope, Lord Byron, Christina Rossetti and Ezra Pound continued the tradition, which is still much alive in popular literature.