

The Laurel, the Stag and the Oxen: Greek myths' references in Petrarch's poetry

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Introduction

Hiraeth. According to the Oxford Dictionary, this means the deep longing for a thing or a person that is absent or lost. That feeling was precisely what Francesco Petrarca felt about Ancient Greece and Rome, which led him to use those influences in his work, something that will be further analysed in this essay. However, it is essential first to understand the author of such works. Francesco Petrarca, known in the English language as Petrarch, was born in Arezzo on 20 July 1304 and was one of the most notary Italian poets¹. Petrarch was also known for his letters², such as “Letter to Prosperity”, “The Ascent of Mount Ventoux”³, “Letter to Cicero”, and “Letter to Homer”³. However, he also wrote the Epic “Africa”, the biographical work “*Secretum*”, and the works in poetry, “*Trionfi*” and “*Canzoniere*”⁴, the latter being from where the poems analysed in this essay were extracted. *Canzoniere* was a self-examination of love and glory in Petrarch’s life⁵. The love is represented by the figure of Laura, a mysterious woman Petrarch loved in his youth. Still, the love was never reciprocated. The glory was represented by wanting to be immortalised and possessing fame⁶. Petrarch⁷ never gave the *Canzoniere* a proper title, but it is still one of the most essential works in European history. The collection comprises 366 poems: 317 sonnets, 29 *canzoni* (a

¹ Petrarch Francesco, *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. ix

² Petrarch Francesco, *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. xiv

³ *Renaissance Humanism An Anthology of Sources*, trans. King. L Margaret (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), p.8

⁴ Petrarch Francesco, *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. xvii

⁵ Petrarch Francesco, *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. xiv

⁶ Petrarch Francesco, *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. xv

Type of Italian verse), nine *sestine*, seven *ballate*, and four *madrigali*⁷. The poems covered a broad set of themes, for example, the passage of time, mortal fragility, nature, and life as a journey⁸, and of course, love, Laura being the centre of most love sonnets. After reading these poems, it was possible to notice Petrarch's references to important Greek Myths. It was realising that and conducting further studies into those myths that the thesis for this essay was created.

The thesis is that a reader with a deep knowledge of Greek mythology would have a completely different interpretation of the poem than one without prior insight. Nevertheless, to explore this thesis, three poems will be analysed, focusing on the references to the specific myths; this would not only show Petrarch's genius but also how much the Greek culture was embedded in the Renaissance tradition.

Poem 34

To understand this poem, it was necessary to know the myth of Apollo and Daphne to understand the comparison between their tragic love story and the story of Petrarch and Laura. Poem 34 is a sonnet, one of the many that acknowledged Laura and, this time, her illness⁹. Apollo was one of the most important gods of the Greek Pantheon; he was stated to be the God of healing, prophecy, music, poetry, and the Sun¹⁰. Like in Greek culture, he played different roles in the sonnet: as a lover, exiled, and healer. Petrarch drew the parallels between his situation and the myth of Apollo and Daphne, where, in summary, the God fell in love with the nymph, Daphne, after being struck by Eros' love arrow. However, Daphne was also struck by Eros's arrow, but that one had the opposite effect of love, so Apollo's

⁷ Petrarch Francesco, *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.xvi

⁸ Petrarch Francesco, *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.xvi

⁹ Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. Mortimer Anthony, (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p.155.

¹⁰ *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, ed. Price. Simon and Kearns. Emily, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.38.

passion was rejected by the nymph who so desperately ran away from the Sun God and begged her father, Peneus, to help her escape Apollo, so he turned her into a tree¹¹.

“[...] Consumed the God, his whole heart was aflame,
And high the hopes that stoke his fruitless passion...”¹²

In the sonnet, Petrarch compared his unreciprocated love with the one of Apollo's, where the God tried to reach his lover but was rejected many times by Daphne who preferred to be turned into a tree for eternity than be with Apollo. Although there are debates about the existence of Laura, it is hard to argue that Petrarch invented such a character since she was present in many of his texts. In this sonnet, it can be interpreted that not only Laura did not love Petrarch back, but also preferred to be somewhere else or turn into something different so she could not stay with him, which ties with the idea that this sonnet was written regarding her illness which eventually led to her death. Most poetically and dramatically, Laura's death was her way to escape him, just like Daphne did with Apollo. From the research, Laura was Petrarch's first love and maybe the only true one he had¹³ since she was important in his poetic writings.

“[...]and by the power of love's hope that then
sustained you in a hard and humble life,
dispel the noxious vapours that pervade;
so shall we both marvel to see again
our lady sit upon the grassy turf
and make with her own arms her own sweet shade.”

¹¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Melville. A.D (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.14

¹² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Melville. A.D (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.16.

¹³ Petrarch Francesco, *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. xvii

Another curious fact that ties this sonnet with the Greek myth was that the tree that Daphne was turned into was a Laurel, which, according to the Oxford Dictionary, was a type of tree with rich green leaves and was also associated with victory in ancient Greece and Rome. Petrarch wished to be successful and acquire glory, receiving the Laurels for his works and thoughts, besides the fact that alongside love, glory was a recurring theme in the *Canzoniere*. This attributed a double meaning to the character of Daphne, the one being the love he never conquered and the hope for glory.

“[...]At least, sweet laurel, you shall be my tree.
 My lyre, my locks, my quiver you shall wreath;
 You shall attend the conquering lords of Rome
 When joy shouts triumph, and the Capitol
 Welcomes the long procession; you shall stand
 Beside Augustus' gates, sure sentinel
 On either side, guarding the oak* between.”¹⁴

By analysing this poem, it can be argued that without the pre-knowledge of the myth of Apollo and Daphne, the reader could maybe understand the poem in a different way from the one that understood the references, or maybe not understand the meaning at all since Petrarch only mentioned Apollo once in the first verse and never actually mentioned Daphne by name, proving that known the myth was necessary to understand the theme of the poem and also how much of his life Petrarch could mirror with the myths of the culture he loved so much.

¹⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Melville. A.D (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.17

Poem 50

Even though Petrarch only mentioned Hercules directly in one verse, this poem has a big influence on the myth of Hercules that can only be understood after getting to know the myth. Poem 50 is a *canzone* of five fourteen-line stanzas with an eighth-line envoy¹⁵. This poem contains much to be interpreted, but the most obvious connection with a Greek myth was the mention of the “Pillars of Hercules”.

“ [...]And mariners in some secluded bay,
when the sun hides himself, let fall their limbs
on the hard deck and under hodden grey.
But as for me, though he dips in the main,
leaving behind Granada's walls and Spain
Morocco and the pillars of Hercules,
and though all creatures that draw breath...”¹⁶

The Pillars of Hercules is known today as the Strait of Gibraltar¹⁷, and back in the ancient times, those pillars were known to be the limit of the world¹⁸. Knowing this, it already attributes a meaning to the poem, where Petrarch was addressing maybe a journey to the unknown, an unexpected trip, this one being literal or metaphorical. However, it can also bring a deeper meaning to the poem, accompanied by other rather subtle references only identified after reading it more than once. The Pillars were attributed to Hercules because, in Greek Mythology, he was the first man to go beyond those pillars “to the end of the world”. In the myth about the twelve works Hercules needed to complete, it was on his tenth job that

¹⁵ Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. Mortimer Anthony, (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p.156

¹⁶ Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. Mortimer Anthony, (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p.31

¹⁷ Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. Mortimer Anthony, (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p.156

¹⁸ *The Pillars of Hercules*, (Harvard), <https://chs.harvard.edu/permanent-collection/the-pillars-of-herakles/>

he needed to cross those pillars¹⁹. The tenth job involved stealing the Cattle of Geryon, a monster living beyond the Pillars²⁰. After successfully stealing the cattle, he took them back, but once arriving in Liguria (a region in Italy), he was confronted by two men wanting to steal the cattle but did not succeed²¹. However, Hercules lost a bull that he could only find miles away from where he previously was, and there he confronted the man who took his bull and defeated him, getting his animal back and taking the man's cattle with him²². After arriving in Thracia, Hercules's cattle were dispersed by the Goddess Hera, and Hercules could not get all the animals back, resulting in some of them becoming wild²³. But what does all of this have to do with Petrarch's poem? Well, the stanza following the one citing the Pillars of Hercules says so:

“And, since in speech I seek to vent my ills,
I see at eve the unyoked oxen come,
returning from the fields and furrowed hills:
why does no hour ever come to take...”²⁴

Even though there were other themes on the poem, such as the unknown land referenced by the Pillars of Hercules. It is important to cite that this poem, like the previous one, also

¹⁹ Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Hard Robin, (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1997), p.80.

²⁰ Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Hard Robin, (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1997), p.80.

²¹ Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Hard Robin, (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1997), p.81.

²² Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Hard Robin, (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1997), p.81.

²³ Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Hard Robin, (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1997), p.81

²⁴ Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. Mortimer Anthony, (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p.31

discusses Laura and her eventual death. Petrarch used the myth of Hercules' tenth job to address that.

After going into an unknown land just like the demigod did, Petrarch returns to his land just to lose what he found: his love for Laura. “Unyoked oxen” refers to the bull that got lost from Hercule’s cattle and Laura, whom Petrarch lost to illness, even though she was never his, just like the oxen were never Hercule’s. Another point that proves this analogy is that Petrarch had previously compared Laura to a wild animal in an earlier stanza in the same poem²⁵.

“[...]Ah, cruel Love, that is when most you spur
me into following the voice, the steps
of the wild creature who destroys me here,
uncaptured, for she crouches and escapes.”²⁶

In this stanza, it is possible to see that Laura is like a wild animal that he cannot capture. And the next time he addresses her in that way, he tells the reader that now she is truly gone from him and belongs to death. In this poem, even for those with knowledge of Greek mythology, it might be a bit more challenging to identify the references, but it cannot be denied that they were there. For a “common reader” without prior knowledge of the myth, the poem's interpretation can be rather complicated, and the final understanding might be completely different from what Petrarch was trying to say. This poem serves as another example of the complexity of Petrarch’s poetry and how critical Greek myths were to him.

²⁵ Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. Mortimer Anthony, (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p.156

²⁶ Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. Mortimer Anthony, (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p.31

Poem 52

Although a short and straightforward poem, understanding its meaning is only possible by knowing the myth of Artemis and Acteon since the opening verse already cites it. This poem is one of the four Madrigals in the *Canzoniere*, and just as in the previously commented poem 34, Petrarch compared an event of his life with a Greek Myth; however, it is unclear to what event he was referring to and who²⁷.

“The pleasure of Actaeon was no greater
when chance revealed in all her nakedness
Diana bathing in the icy water,

than mine at the raw mountain shepherdess
washing the airy veil she binds to save
her golden tresses from the wind's distress:

so, even now, when heaven burns above.
it makes me shiver in a frost of love.”²⁸

To fully understand this poem, it's necessary to understand the myth he was referencing. Perhaps all of the poems analysed in this essay are the one that most depends on the reader's

²⁷ Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. Mortimer Anthony, (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p.157

²⁸ Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. Mortimer Anthony, (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p.35

knowledge of Greek myths since it is a short poem and does not give room to try to comprehend the poem from other stanzas that do not require such insight. The myth reference in the poem tells the story of Acteon, a man who one day left with his companions and dogs for a hunt. After arriving at the forest, Acteon left his companion to bathe. Once he arrived at the river, he encountered the Goddesses Artemis (referenced in her Roman version, Diana, in the poem) being bathed by her nymphs²⁹. However, Artemis was known to be one of the virgin goddesses. When she realised that Acteon was watching her, she punished him by turning him into a stag once he ran away from her, his companions and dogs hunted him to death³⁰

“[...]Their master's flesh, the stag that is no stag;
And not until so many countless wounds
Had drained away his lifeblood, was the wrath,
It's said, of chaste Diana satisfied...”

It was evident it was not a happy story, which makes Petrarch's poem much more intriguing since the situation he might have lived in could have been similar to this tragic myth. One could argue that he only relates to the first part of the myth when Acteon was observing Artemis, just as Petrarch put in his poem, since he compared Acteon's pleasure with his own, not indicating what happened with Acteon and himself, only the reader with the insight of the myth could have understood the message he was trying to pass. A person without previous knowledge of the story could have just interpreted the lyric self, being surprised and enchanted by the beauty he found in the forest. This poem might be the best

²⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Melville. A.D (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.57.

³⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Melville. A.D (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.57.

example of such references since it could change its meaning depending on the reader; it also sparks the question of who Petrarch might have talked about in this poem. Why could it not have been Laura? Or maybe he created his poetry from situations he lived or out of the inspiration of the myths? Some of these questions will probably never be answered; only debate might be possible with the material historians already have. However, it does show how deep Petrarch's mind went into the Greek culture and maybe how a researcher can use those myths to understand the poet better.

Conclusion

A sonnet, a *canzone* and a *madrigali*. The poems of Petrarch left its mark in the Renaissance period and the present day. His geniuses in giving such subtle references to the Greek Myths and how he matched them with his thoughts and pains cannot be denied. Poem 34, a sonnet exploring his love for Laura and her illness using some parallels with the tragic love story of Apollo and Daphne, where Apollo lost a love that was never his, just as Petrarch did after Laura's death and also his wish for glory portrayed by the Laurel's of Daphne. Poem 50 brings a fascinating insight into only a mere part of the myth of Hercules and how his journey to the beyond and the capture and loss of his cattle represented Petrarch's loss of Laura, who, just like the bull from the myth, was lost with no chance of return. Poem 52 brings a rather curious interpretation since that one did not appear to be about Laura, but researchers do not know about what or who it could be; it was only clear that Petrarch chose a rather tragic myth with a terrible ending to its hero, Acteon, raising questions of what could have happened to Petrarch for him to chose such myth to reference. It was clear that Petrarch made it necessary for the reader to know about the Greek myths, whether it was his intention

or not; it cannot be denied that only by understanding his references can the reader fully grasp Petrarch's mind.

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