

## REVIEWS

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*Francesco Petrarca Selected Letters, Volume 1.* Elaine Fantham, trans.  
The I Tatti Renaissance Library 76. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.  
xlvi + 748 pp. \$29.95.

*Francesco Petrarca Selected Letters, Volume 2.* Elaine Fantham, trans.  
The I Tatti Renaissance Library 77. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.  
viii + 808 pp. \$29.95.

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This new translation in English of Petrarca's letters was Elaine Fantham's last labor. She died a few months before the two beautiful hardcover volumes were published, without having had the opportunity to correct the proofs. One of the major Latin studies scholars and translators in the English-speaking world, Professor Fantham died like Petrarca himself had wished to die: "scribendi enim vivendique unus, ut auguror, finis erit" ("for the same end, as I hope, will come to my writing and my living"), he wrote at the end of the first letter of his major collection of letters (1:23), the *Familiares* (Letters on familiar matters). And because of the complete identification between the poet and his works—literary activity as the exclusive vocation of one's life—Petrarca's last letter, which belongs to his other major collection, the *Seniles* (Letters of old age), written a few days before dying, ends with a farewell both to his dear friends and his letters: "Valet amici, valet epistole."

In May 1345, during one of his numerous journeys between France and Italy, while in Verona in the Biblioteca Capitolare, Petrarca discovered Cicero's epistles (it was actually a rediscovery, since they were in fact already known). Right then, thrilled by his finding, he personally transcribed the epistles to Atticus, Brutus, and Quintus. It is with a letter to Cicero—with Seneca, his Latin mentor—that Petrarca conceives the idea of collecting his letters in a unitary work. Cicero's letter is the first of ten addressed to the ancients, the *Antiquis Illustrioribus*, which Petrarca incorporates at the end of the *Familiares* as a sort of conclusion. Although he refers to his letters as *nuge*, or trifles (1:11), together with his vernacular poems, they are actually Petrarca's major works. If we count all of his letters (*Familiares*, *Seniles*, *Epystole*, *Sine Nomine*, and the *Disperse*, his uncollected letters), we reach the remarkable number of 639. As one of his biographers wrote, "we know far more about his experiences in life than we know about the experiences of any human being who had lived before his time" (Ernest Hatch Wilkins, *Life of Petrarch* [1961], v).

Petrarca's letters have enjoyed great popularity among humanists, who received from him the inspiration for their own epistles. In present-day Italy, however, Petrarca's letters do not meet the same favor anymore—for a long time mirrored by the rather confused publishing history of the Italian translation of both the *Familiares* and the *Seniles*. Ugo Dotti finally completed their translation into Italian in 2010 (Aragno Editore), but the critical edition of the *Seniles* was concluded only a year ago (Le Lettere). It is therefore for-

tunate that a new translation into English was commissioned for the I Tatti Renaissance Library of Harvard University Press. Of Petrarca's two major collections, we already had an English translation by Aldo S. Bernardo. Done between 1975 and 1992, at the dawn of digital humanism, Bernardo's computer-assisted pioneering translation is not without errors, but has the great merit of being the only integral translation, given the anthological organization of the I Tatti volumes. Fantham's two-volume edition contains ninety-seven letters, including eighty *familiars* (three abridged) and seventeen *seniles*, with the *Posterity* as the last letter of the second volume. To understand why an anthological choice could be problematic, let us briefly consider the *Familiars*. The final version comprises 350 letters sorted into twenty-four books, each divided in a variable number of letters—from a maximum of twenty-two in book 3 to a minimum of six in book 10. The letters are addressed to more than a hundred different correspondents who constitute a veritable crowd, most of them intellectual friends, humanists like Petrarca, but also cardinals, rulers, the pope, his brother Gherardo, and his son Giovanni. The enormous variety of the correspondents goes hand in hand with the heterogeneous content of the letters, ranging from an exhortation to the emperor Charles IV to descend to Italy (2:189), to the description of a leisurely walk in the Provençal country with a dog (*Familiars* 13.11). Most of the letters indicate the day and month when they were written and the place from where they were written. By admission of Petrarca himself, in the last letter of the collection, his letters are arranged in chronological order so that “the reader will recognize the sequence of [his] progress . . . and the course of [his] life” (1:37)—although the chronological order is fairly loose, and the text is organized according to a complex temporal configuration based on continuous returns, like flashbacks to the major events in Petrarca's life, which creates a dense network of allusions affecting the entire text.

The story develops not only from the order of the letters, but also from the order and interaction of the correspondents, places, and dates. The letters in the *Familiars* cover a time span ranging from 1326 (the year when Petrarca returned to Avignon after studying in Bologna for six years) to 1361 (at this point he had been in Italy since 1353, and 1361 was his last year in Milan in the service of the Visconti family). After 1361, in order to not exceed the proper size for books of this sort, as he writes in the last letter of the *Familiars* (1:39), Petrarca started another *volumen*, the *Seniles*. Fantham's choice to abridge the letters in fact transforms them into a different book, whose guiding principle is thematic instead of chronological. As she clarifies in her long and thorough introduction, after “consultation with interested members of the board of the I Tatti Renaissance Library” she “developed their suggestions into an arrangement grouped by topics rather than chronology” (1:xxvi), which had been her initial approach. The two volumes are divided into nine parts, reflecting different aspects of Petrarca's intellectual contributions (but missing is his important translation of the last novella of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the so-called Griselda [*Seniles* 17.3], although it is referenced in a translation note [1:620]): “On His Letters,” “His Life and His World,” “The Scholar and Man of Letters,” “The Moralist,” “Education and the Prince,” “Rome, Italy and Its Rulers,” “Re-

ligion and the Church,” “Letters to the Ancients,” and “Memory.” This thematic reading—where the last letter of the *Familiars* becomes the third, with a somewhat alienating effect for those familiar with the original—inevitably modifies the numbering of the letters, making it necessary to add at the end of both volumes a few pages of concordances between this edition and the standard order, and vice versa. However, although seemingly arbitrary, this different order echoes the way Petrarca’s letters have historically been read. Because of their own nature, letters, like poems, are part of the collection as well as individual works, and they were, and still are, circulating independently, in some cases as parts of different collections set up by some of Petrarca’s correspondents, as evidenced by the manuscript tradition.

The great virtue of Fantham’s edition, in addition to the rigorous translation, the Latin original facing the English, and the numbering of paragraphs in accordance with the critical editions of the letters, is the extensive translation notes, which are a very valuable tool in orienting the reader to the many layers of meanings of the letters. A rich bibliography and an index of names—unfortunately missing is an analytical index—completes both volumes. In the second volume, three useful appendixes cover Petrarca’s life, his literary works, and biographical information on his numerous correspondents.

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*Humanism and the Latin Classics.* Aldus Manutius.

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This is the second (and final) volume for the I Tatti Renaissance Library of the prefaces of the Venetian printer-humanist Aldus Manutius, following the prefaces to the Greek classics edited and translated by Nigel Wilson and published in 2016, which I also reviewed in these pages. Aldus published over thirty Greek editiones principes, but his only two of classical Latin authors were Pliny the Younger, whose complete letters he was able to publish based on a manuscript discovered in France, and the rather less renowned *De prodigiis* of Julius Obsequens, printed together with Pliny in 1508. Certainly, there was little to rival his monumental edition of Aristotle (1495–98), his Plato (1513), or his Aristophanes (1498), Sophocles (1502), and Euripides (1503)—the sort of works with which he made his name. But if Aldus was less active as an editor of the Latin classics, they nevertheless were subjects of his greatest innovations as a publisher. The 1501 Virgil was the first book printed in italic type and the first work of literature printed in octavo. The new format enabled vastly expanded print runs: in the preface to his edition of Catullus, Tibullus, and Propertius (1502), Aldus refers offhand to having printed 3,000 copies (24–25). Aldus was never a popularizer, but his insight into how the printing press could make