

Petrarch’s discovery in 1345 of a manuscript containing Cicero’s correspondence with Atticus, Brutus, and Quintus, as well as a letter to Octavian, is famous in the history of classical scholarship. Equally famous, at least in Petrarchan scholarship, is a fictive letter that Petrarch wrote in June of that year to Cicero himself in which he expressed his shock at Cicero’s folly and fickleness (*Fam.* XXIV.3). Six months later Petrarch wrote a second letter apologizing to Cicero for the harshness of his first letter but explaining that he was complaining of Cicero’s life, not his *ingenium* or *lingua*. There is a problem, however, with Petrarch’s first letter. In that letter Petrarch upbraids Cicero for leaving the quiet retirement of old age to reenter the strife of civil war, reproaching him with what he claims are Cicero’s own words of self-imposed lamentation: “*O preceps et calamitose senex,*” a quote from the letter to Octavian which is not, in fact, by Cicero. Two more quotes, both from letters attributed to Brutus (*Ad Brut.* 1.16, 17), are used against Cicero but these too are now seen to not be genuine. My first goal in this paper is to examine the scholarship on the ancient letters and the scholarship on Petrarch’s letter so that Petrarch’s problematic use of the three quotes, which is overlooked in most scholarship, can be explicitly corrected.

Secondly, Petrarch had a great deal more to say about Cicero, and his first letter to Cicero needs to be contextualized in that broader perspective. Petrarch’s initial response to reading all the many letters of and about Cicero was just that, an initial, reactionary response, but the very enthusiastic, “honest” immediacy of that response in his first letter to Cicero has become something of a curse: his accusations in that letter are so memorable that subsequent centuries and readers cannot forget them and too often cannot get beyond them to discover Petrarch’s more balanced, as well as more historically valid, reading of Cicero’s writings and life story. To blame Petrarch for having such a good story to tell in 1345 and for telling it so well may seem unfair, but he, in part, is at fault for our failure to appreciate his broader assessment of Cicero. In addition, as we credit Petrarch so often as the father or the catalyst for modern scholarly analysis of Cicero, his initial, negative response in 1345 established a perspective on Cicero that may be more than just incidentally similar to subsequent negative assessments of Cicero’s character. We should compensate for this additional complication by looking to Petrarch’s later, fuller view of Cicero.

Thirdly, most modern scholarship is at fault for the failure to reassess Petrarch’s charges against Cicero in 1345. Excellent scholars from Nolhac and Wilkins to Quillen and Witt recount the thrilling story of Petrarch’s discovery of Cicero’s long lost letters and quote his first letter to Cicero with almost no mention of the pseudonymous quotations. Even where the problematic authorship is noted, the implications for Petrarch’s letter to Cicero and his overall reading of Cicero are not examined. What we must do is to heed the very advice that Petrarch himself once gave and endeavor to enrich, i.e., complicate, our reading of both Cicero and Petrarch. That advice is preserved in a letter of 1351 in which he recounts how a conversation in Vicenza roused the unwavering opposition of one older man who remained stubbornly distressed at what Petrarch had written and argued about Cicero (*Fam.* XXIV.2). Petrarch closes that letter with the challenge to any and all that no one can be an (*a*)*equus iudex* without reading *all* Cicero’s letters *thoroughly*. That old man in Vicenza, along with Cicero, can now respond back Petrarch, “*Falsum!*” We, in turn, can present from Petrarch’s later, less caustic quotes and observations about Cicero, evidence of a more seasoned reading of Cicero’s letters and character. Such a reading may at first be less exciting than the famous letter of June 1345 but Petrarch’s more nuanced assessment of Cicero is what we should emphasize, in fairness both to Cicero and to Petrarch.