

Between Epic and Elegy: The Love Story of Sophonisba and Massinissa in Petrarch's *Africa*

The tragic tale of Dido and Aeneas has always been the most popular passage of Vergil's *Aeneid* and inspired many responses, rewritings, and imitations over the centuries. In this paper, I will examine a less well-known, but not less engaging adaptation of Vergil's narrative, the love story of Sophonisba and Massinissa in the fifth book of Petrarch's Latin epic *Africa*. The work, provisionally completed in 1343/44, but continuously revised for the next thirty years and never released for publication during the author's lifetime, was the centerpiece of Petrarch's humanist program. Conceived as a response to the more traditional medieval heroic epics, the *Africa* was designed to introduce a new kind of classicism and to promote Petrarch as the leading intellectual and scholar-poet of his era.

The unhappy love story of Sophonisba and Massinissa in *Africa* V is a prime example of Petrarch's notion of creative imitation as a fusion of multiple models and generic traditions and his vision of the renaissance of ancient literature in post-medieval times. I will show that he draws on Livy for the historical facts of the episode, but models the poetic design on Vergil, *Aeneid* IV, thus not only recreating Sophonisba as a new Dido, but also illustrating his successful re-appropriation and amalgamation of key texts from classical antiquity.

In addition, I will argue that Petrarch is indebted to Roman elegy for his portrayal of Massinissa, in particular Ovid's *Amores* and *Heroides*. Massinissa's love for Sophonisba, for instance, is repeatedly characterized as *servitium amoris*, and his long monologues recall the epistles of Ovid's aggrieved heroines in both theme and language. By combining epic and elegiac elements, Petrarch expertly manipulates the reader's sympathies and adapts the morally problematic story for a Christian context. At the same time, he highlights the exemplary nature

of Massinissa's – and Sophonisba's – love, which parallels the exemplary *virtus* of Scipio Africanus, the hero of the epic, even though neither is met with long-term success. The episode thus also sheds light on the function of *exempla* in Petrarch's work and early Humanism in general, the standards – literary, didactic, and ethical – they set and the forms of memory and historical consciousness they propagate.

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