

# The Rumor of Scipio Africanus' Divine Birth in Petrarch's *Africa*\*

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## *Abstract:*

In this essay, I explore a sophisticated example of Petrarch taking over two prose sources, Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* and Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae*, in his discussion of Scipio Africanus' divine birth in his epic poem *Africa*. Petrarch skilfully combines both texts and carefully avoids both the former's emphatic rejection of and the latter's qualified neutrality toward the tale, without however endorsing its full veracity. Evoking Fama (Rumor), Petrarch deepens Vergil's notion of Fama as singing of truth and fiction in equal measure by reframing the stakes of the question in accordance with his own interpretative categories ('sermo' vs. 'sensus'). The story, although not taken as historical fact, is understood as a most fitting reflection of Scipio's supreme virtue, which far surpasses what can be expected of humans.

## *Keywords:*

Petrarch, Livy, Aulus Gellius, Vergil, *Africa*, Fama, Scipio Africanus.

Of the many Vergilian influences on Petrarch's incomplete epic *Africa* the repeated presence of Fama deserves special mention. Fama of course makes her most famous appearance in book 4 of the *Aeneid*, where she spreads the rumor of Aeneas and Dido's love affair with an equal measure of truth and fiction (Aen., 4, 190: "pariter facta atque infecta canebat"). Unsurprisingly, Fama figures in the exactly corresponding situation in Petrarch's poem, where she spreads the news of Massinissa's rash and morally dubious marriage to Syphax's wife Sophonisba (*Africa* 5, 273–285). But Petrarch by no means limits himself to this literary echo. As part of his sweeping and ambitious book *Rumour and Renown*, Philip Hardie tracks a number of the occurrences of "fama" in the work, linking the recurring theme to Petrarch's personal interest in fame and glory. For he writes, "In general *Fama-as-rumour* plays a less prominent and complex role in the *Africa* than in the *Aeneid* ... this reflects the predominant bias of Petrarch's interest in *fama*, directed more to ethics, poetic immortality, and the revival of classical tradition, and less to issues relating ... to fictionality".<sup>1</sup> Without denying that 'fama' in the sense of 'fame' occupies far more of Petrarch's attention throughout the *Africa* and his entire corpus, this down-

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Hardie, *Rumour and Renown: Representations of 'Fama' in Western Literature*. Cambridge 2012, 464.

playing of the prominence of *Fama qua Rumor* with respect to Petrarch's epic might be considered surprising in light of the explicit metapoetic reflections on truth in poetry that we find on several occasions in the work, most importantly in 9, 92–102.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Petrarch uses dreams throughout the poem to reflect on how deeper truths can be hidden in oneiric visions.<sup>3</sup> The issue of truth and fiction is hence of profound importance for Petrarch, and Hardie himself grants certain examples.<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I will explore one particularly sophisticated example of Petrarch using *Fama* to reflect on questions of fictionality in his prose sources. As far as I can tell, the depth of Petrarch's conceptual reflection and intertextual engagement in this specific case has not been fully understood.

By way of setting the stage for my argument, it will be helpful first to consider a passage in the second book of the *Africa*. Book 2 continues Scipio Africanus' dream, initiated in the prior book, in which he is counseled by his father Publius Cornelius Scipio. As part of the lengthy exchange between father and son, the former prophesies to the latter that he will defeat Hannibal in battle only to meet him once again later in Ephesus. This prompts the following commentary (2, 94–97):<sup>5</sup>

Fama quidem mendax falsa cum laude<sup>6</sup> nefandos  
 Equat iniqua bonis. Facinus dum grande, tremendum,  
 Horrendum dictu invenit, canit orba per Orbem,  
 Nec dirimit causas

For indeed mendacious Rumor with false praise inequitably equates the wicked with the good. When she has discovered a deed grand, terrifying

<sup>2</sup> The issue of truth in the *Africa* is the subject of Paul Colilli, *La poetica dell'aletheia nell'«Africa» del Petrarca*. Rovito 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Simone Marchesi, Petrarch's Philological Epic (*Africa*), in: Victoria Kirkham / Armando Maggi (ed.), *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*. Chicago 2009, 113–130, at 123–128. See further Paul K. Hosle, *A Note on the Status of Ennius' Dream in Petrarch's Africa*, in: *Illinois Classical Studies* 48 (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, Hardie (as in n. 1), 466–468 treats the example provided by Enrico Fenzi, *Scipione, Annibale e Alessandro nell'«Africa» del Petrarca*, in: *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 148 (1971), 481–518, discussed below.

<sup>5</sup> For the Latin text of the *Africa*, I follow Rebecca Lenoir (ed.), *Pétrarque: L'Afrique*. Grenoble 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Most manuscripts have “lance” “pair of scales”, and this is the text supported in Pierre Laurens (ed.), *Pétrarque: L'Afrique: Affrica I–V*. Paris 2006, 43, 214. While “laude” is the *lectio facilior* and thus perhaps more suspect, a corresponding passage from the beginning of Petrarch's *Vita Scipionis* (i.e., *De Viris Illustribus*, 21, 1, 4), cited in Laurens 214, speaks of the mixture of “laudes” with respect to the two generals. In any event, the sense is not fundamentally altered.

and horrendous to say, bereaved she sings it throughout the world, nor does she parse the motives.

Strictly speaking, what is at stake here is ethical confusion. Petrarch has in mind the famous anecdote which he would have known most directly from the primary historical source of his poem. In Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 35, 14, Scipio and Hannibal discuss amicably amongst themselves who the greatest generals of history were. Hannibal lists first Alexander the Great, secondly Pyrrhus, and thirdly himself. When Scipio laughs and asks what he would have replied had he defeated Scipio, Hannibal replies that he would have placed himself first in rank, at which Scipio is moved with emotion. Petrarch takes strong issue with the suggestion that the two generals can engage in such a way on symmetrical terms and thinks that Livy's version allows the commanders to appear too much to be on the same scale of reference. Scipio's friendly laughter in Livy, 35, 14, 11 is qualified by Petrarch's deflating "Verum illa iocosum / Qualicumque tibi risum fortasse movebunt; / Nil aliud" (2, 108–110: "But those comments, of whatever kind they be, will perhaps stir up a jocose laughter in you; nothing more.") To be sure, Petrarch himself will claim in *Africa*, 7, 161–214, in the context of Hannibal and Scipio's face-to-face meeting before their respective armies, that these two generals are the greatest that the world has seen, and each is described as sharing respect for the other. But critically, he will compare the scene to a renewal of the Giants' "indigna bella" (7, 164–165) against Jupiter, so that moral equivocation is thereby avoided. Even more generous to Hannibal are Scipio's own words after the battle of Zama in which the Roman asserts and then doubles down on Hannibal's superiority over Alexander and Pyrrhus (8, 102–111, 156–209). But also here Scipio, while praising certain noble characteristics of Hannibal, reflects on his lack of piety (8, 133).<sup>7</sup> We are subsequently led by Laelius to understand that Scipio stands even higher than Hannibal (8, 220–231).<sup>8</sup>

As Enrico Fenzi has astutely noted,<sup>9</sup> what helps Petrarch bring Fama into the picture in 2, 94–97 is that Livy himself adduced prior sources for his story: "Claudius, secutus Graecos Acilianos libros ... tradit ..." (35, 14, 5: "Claudius,

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Thomas G. Bergin / Alice S. Wilson (ed.), *Petrarch's Africa*. New Haven 1977, 267: "And of course on both military and moral grounds the reader will perceive that Scipio is himself superior to Hannibal."

<sup>8</sup> If Alexander, Pyrrhus and Hannibal are like Lucifer, Arcturus and Bootes, Scipio is like the sun, which stands without peer (8, 220–225). This is not in fact so different from Livy, 35, 14, 12, which states that Scipio was moved by Hannibal's comment that he would rank himself first had he defeated Scipio, "quod e grege se imperatorum velut inaestimabilem secrevisset."

<sup>9</sup> Fenzi (as in n. 4), 500–502.

following the Greek books of Acilius, reports ...”).<sup>10</sup> Livy follows Claudius Quadrigarius,<sup>11</sup> himself dependent on the Greek annals of Acilius, thereby signaling a certain degree of distance from his own account.<sup>12</sup> Petrarch, Fenzi argues, exploits this to suggest that Livy’s sources are embodiments of a mendacious and morally undiscerning Fama. It is then by vindicating Scipio’s reputation that Petrarch can later justly be termed a future second Ennius who will sing of Scipio’s deeds motivated only by love of truth (2, 454 “solus amor veri”). Here we can see Petrarch moved by “l’esigenza di presentare la propria opera *non* come nuova manifestazione della Fama ... ma come l’adesione sincera, amorosa e moralmente prescritta all’espressione concreta della più alta virtù antica.”<sup>13</sup> Hence, by condemning Fama, Petrarch signals to the reader that he is polemically taking issue with his source text.

If in the example just adduced Petrarch uses the negative image of deceptive Fama to give voice to spurious traditions that he wishes to correct, in the case to which I now turn Petrarch shows more subtlety still. In book 4, Gaius Laelius, asked by Syphax to tell about the character and person of Scipio, reports the story of his supernatural birth according to which his mother was impregnated by Jupiter who would make his appearances in the form of a serpent. He is aware that the story is on the surface incredible, so he is compelled to qualify the truth-value of the story. Salient here is the degree to which Laelius avoids coming down on any one side too strongly. Thus he says (4, 100–103):

Stat vera fateri:

Non illum nostro iuvenem de more creatum  
Dixeris; atque ideo non omnia falsa locuta est  
Fama virum super astra levans

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<sup>10</sup> I cite Livy according to the editions of Robert Seymour Conway / Stephen Keymer Johnson (ed.), *Titi Livi Ab Urbe Condita: Tomus IV. Libri XXVI–XXX*. Oxford 1963 and Alexander Hugh McDonald (ed.), *Titi Livi Ab Urbe Condita: Tomus V. Libri XXXI–XXXV*. Oxford 1965.

<sup>11</sup> At least, this is the most common supposition of scholars, although some cast doubts. For a defense of the position that Claudius Quadrigarius is the referent here, see Alfred Klotz, *Der Annalist Q. Claudius Quadrigarius*, in: *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 91 (1942), 268–285, at 270–272.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. A. Haimson Lushkov, *Narrative and Notice in Livy’s Fourth Decade: The Case of Scipio Africanus*, in: *Classical Antiquity* 33 (2014), 102–129, at 107: “In itself, the report of a variant tradition through source citation is a regular occurrence in Livy’s history, but in this case, Livy goes out of his way to demonstrate the distance between his own text and that of his sources.”

<sup>13</sup> Fenzi (as in n. 4), 502.

It stands to profess the truth: you would say that that youth was not begotten according to our manner; and so not everything that Rumor has spoken is false, Rumor who lifts the man above the stars.

The opening confidence expressed in “Stat vera fateri” is quickly softened although not negated by the following “non omnia falsa locuta est / Fama”, which seems to imply that the rumor is still largely false. He follows these comments immediately with (4, 103–106):

Nam protinus alto  
Persuasum est multis hominem hunc descendere celo.  
Nam quid cuncta sequar? Piget illa minuta referre;  
Fabula sed vulgo nota est

For straightaway many were persuaded that this man descended from the high heaven. Why, then, should I follow through on everything? It irks me to relate those minute details. It is a tale but it is commonly known.

It irks him to go into the details, the suggestion being that the essential core of the story has something to it even if one cannot take every aspect of the tale at face value. It is a ‘fabula’, a word which can but does not necessarily imply fictiveness, but when followed by the adversative qualification “sed vulgo nota est”, the point appears to be that he grants that it has all the trappings of a tall-tale, but the fact that it has persuaded many people (cf. also “Persuasum est multis”) gives it some reason to be taken seriously. Laelius then provides as further evidence of Scipio’s affinity to the deity the following (4, 115–122):

Namque ubi sol oritur, solus solet ille remotis  
Omnibus in cellam Iouis, augustissima nobis  
Tarpeio que colle sedet, cui sacra paentes  
Rite sacerdotes celebrant, securus ad aram  
Intrare et limen foribus firmare reductis.  
Hic quasi multa loquens tempus terit, inde repente  
Digreditur, summosque animos portendere vultum  
Celestemque oculos videas preferre vigorem.

For when the sun rises, he is wont, alone, with all at a distance, to enter into the shrine of Jove, which sits most august for us on the Tarpeian hill where the trembling priests celebrate the rites with due observances, to approach the altar and to seal off the threshold with the doors closed behind him. Here he passes the time as if in lengthy conversation, whence suddenly he departs, and you would see his visage display his lofty spirits, and his eyes possess a heavenly vigor.

The relevance of this passage will promptly be clarified.

To understand the reason for this seeming vacillation on the plausibility of the story, it is necessary to see that Petrarch is responding not to one but to two separate texts. Petrarch's immediate presence and perspective stands thinly veiled behind the character of Laelius.<sup>14</sup> The first text, unsurprisingly, is Livy, 26, 19, as all commentators note.<sup>15</sup> It will be relevant to quote at length (26, 19, 5–7):

[5] nullo die prius ullam publicam privatamque rem egit quam in Capitolium iret ingressusque aedem consideret et plerumque solus in secreto ibi tempus tereret. [6] hic mos per omnem vitam servatus seu consulto seu temere volgae opinionioni fidem apud quosdam fecit stirpis eum divinae virum esse, [7] rettulitque famam in Alexandro Magno prius volgatam, et vanitate et fabula parem, anguis immanis concubitu conceptum, et in cubiculo matris eius visam persaepe prodigii eius speciem interventuque hominum evolutam repente atque ex oculis elapsam.

On no day did he carry out any public or private matter before he had gone to the Capitol and, upon entering, would contemplate the sanctuary and generally would spend the time there alone in secret. This custom, maintained throughout his whole life, whether by intent or not effected among certain people faith in the commonly known supposition that he was a man of divine stock, and it brought back the rumor that had previously been commonly circulated with respect to Alexander the Great, and which is equal to it in emptiness and fictiveness, that he had been conceived by means of intercourse with a huge snake, and that the form of this monster was often seen in his mother's bedroom, but which suddenly glid away and slipped out of sight whenever any people came in.

A second text is no less important, even if its significance has been much less appreciated. I refer to Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 6, 1, 1–11, from which I cite major extracts:<sup>16</sup>

[2] Nam et C. Oppius et Iulius Hyginus aliique, qui de vita et rebus Africani scripserunt, matrem eius diu sterilem existimatam tradunt ... [3] Postea in

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Florian Schaffnerath, *Petrarca in Africa: Selbstbezüge in Petrarca's Africa-Epos*, in: *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 54 (2005), 49–62, at 56–62 on “Laelius als Petrarca”.

<sup>15</sup> See Bergin / Wilson (as in n. 7), 254, Lenoir 2002 (as in n. 5) 484, and Laurens (as in n. 6), 261.

<sup>16</sup> The passage is referred to without comment in Bergin / Wilson (as in n. 7), 254, but ignored by Lenoir (as in n. 5) and Laurens (as in n. 6). Petrarch's thorough knowledge of the *Noctes Atticae* is mentioned in Hans Baron, *Aulus Gellius in the Renaissance and a Manuscript from the School of Guarino*, in: *Studies in Philology* 48 (1951), 107–125, at 109. I cite the Latin text of Peter K. Marshall (ed.), *A. Gellii Noctes Atticae Volume I*. Oxford 1968.

cubiculo atque in lecto mulieris, cum absente marito cubans sola con-  
dormisset, visum repente esse iuxta eam cubare ingentem anguem ... [4]  
exinde mense decimo peperisse natumque esse hunc P. Africanum, qui  
Hannibalem et Carthaginenses in Africa bello Poenico secundo vicit. [5]  
Sed et eum inpendio magis ex rebus gestis quam ex illo ostento virum esse  
virtutis divinae creditum est. [6] Id etiam dicere haut piget, quod idem illi  
quos supra nominavi litteris mandaverint, Scipionem hunc Africanum so-  
litavisse noctis extremo, priusquam dilucularret, in Capitolium ventitare ac  
iubere aperiri cellam Iovis atque ibi solum diu demorari, quasi con-  
sultantem de republica cum Iove, aeditumosque eius templi saepe esse  
demiratos, quod solum id temporis in Capitolium ingredientem canes sem-  
per in alios saevientes neque latrarent eum neque incurrent. Has volgi de  
Scipione opiniones confirmare atque approbare videbantur dicta factaque  
eius pleraque admiranda.

For both Gaius Oppius and Julius Hyginus, as well as others who have  
written concerning the life and deeds of Africanus, relate that his mother  
was deemed for a long time to be infertile ... Afterwards in the woman's  
bedroom and bed, when with her husband absent, lying down she had  
fallen asleep, suddenly a huge snake appeared lying next to her ... After-  
wards, on the tenth month, she gave birth and this Publius Africanus was  
born, who conquered Hannibal and the Carthaginians in Africa in the Sec-  
ond Punic War. [5] But it was believed that he was a man of divine virtue  
a great deal more due to his exploits than due to that prodigy. [6] It does  
not irk me to say also this, that the same authors whom I mentioned above  
have put on the record that this Scipio Africanus had the habit, at the very  
end of night before the break of dawn, to come often to the Capitol and  
to order the shrine of Jove be opened and there to tarry a long time alone,  
as if having a consultation with Jove about the Republic, and the custodi-  
ans often marveled that the dogs which were always ferocious towards  
others neither barked nor rushed at him as he entered the Capitol alone at  
that hour. His many admirable sayings and deeds seemed to confirm and  
establish these opinions of the common people concerning Scipio.

Petrarch's own word at times follows one (cf. e.g. 4, 120: "tempus terit" ~ Livy,  
"tempus tereret"), at times the other (4, 105: "Piget illa minuta referre" ~ Aulus  
Gellius, "Id etiam dicere haut piget"). The highly stylized wordplay in 4, 115,  
"Namque ubi *sol* oritur, *solus sol* et ille remotis",<sup>17</sup> has been effected by modifying

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Laurens (as in n. 6), 261 and Robert Maltby, *A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies*.  
Leeds 1991, s.v. "sol", with reference to Cic., *nat. deor.*, 2, 68: "cum sol dictus sit vel quia  
solutus ex omnibus sideribus est tantus vel quia cum est exortus obscuratis omnibus solus

Gellius' pre-dawn temporal specification ("priusquam diluculet") – Livy's "nullo die prius ullam publicam privatamque rem egit quam in Capitolium iret" is too vague to be directly reversed – to have Scipio instead ascend to the Capitol at sunrise, which in turn reinforces the symbolic connection between Scipio and the sun that Petrarch evokes elsewhere (cf. esp. 4, 99–100: "Solque velut radiis fulgentia sidera vincit, / Scipio sic omnes superat" = "And just as the sun overpowers the shining constellations with its rays, so Scipio surpasses all").

When selecting distinctive phrasing from one or the other author, Petrarch would have been confronted by a far more substantive differentiation. For Livy the story is nothing more than a readaptation of the "famam in Alexandro Magno prius volgatam, et vanitate et fabula parem".<sup>18</sup> Gellius' personal view is less easy to pin down. He too acknowledges that it is a version of the story told of Alexander (6, 1, 1),<sup>19</sup> although this is not explicitly used to cast doubt on its applicability to Scipio. His observation that Scipio's "divina virtus" (itself ambiguous in terms of how literally we should take the adjective) was believed more on account of his 'res gestae' is an attempt not to put too much weight on the truth of the tale. But subsequently he mentions in similar fashion how Scipio's admirable deeds support the common beliefs, although the use of the verb "videbantur" makes Gellius non-committal in either endorsing or rejecting these opinions. He then follows by giving a concrete example that gives credence to the popular notions (6, 7–11). If Livy is the critical skeptic, Gellius adopts the pose of a detached, non-biased reporter of the tale who neither wishes to appear too gullible nor to tear down Scipio's reputation. He is happy to relay the story without offering any aggressive or direct resistance, as long as he has left the door open to claim that he never explicitly agreed with it either.

It is only with this background that we can understand Petrarch's own approach to this question. Petrarch's approach is different from both of his sources. On the one hand, he sides with Livy in his concession that he is repeating a 'fabula' that is widely known (cf. "famam ... volgatam, et vanitate et fabula parem" ~ "Fabula sed vulgo nota est").<sup>20</sup> And yet as we have seen, Petrarch has also acknowledged the truth that Syphax would claim Scipio to be of different stock. We find nothing as emphatic in Gellius. But also in another form of contrast to Gellius' "Id etiam dicere haut piget", Petrarch chooses a more self-distancing

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apparet" and Fulg., myth., 1, 12, p. 23,9 "sol vero dicitur aut ex eo quod solus sit aut quod solite per dies surgat et accidat". Note also *Africa*, 8, 223–225: "Solem ... imo stat per se solus, et inde / Nomen habet."

<sup>18</sup> For some further discussion on Livy's judgement here, see Hardie (as in n. 1), 262–263.

<sup>19</sup> Tangentially, one may note the similar story told of Augustus' birth in Suetonius, *Vita Divi Augusti* 92.

<sup>20</sup> Note also *Africa*, 7, 80: "Fabula ... ortus".

“Piget illa minuta referre” (4, 105). Petrarch rejects Livy’s blanket dismissal without, however, totally endorsing the tale, and he does all of this without falling into the impersonal neutrality of Gellius. One potential way to understand this would be to say that Petrarch follows the Vergilian principle that Fama sings of truth and falsehood in equal measure (cf. *Aeneid* 4, 190, cited above). In other words, Petrarch would be adopting an explicit evaluative stance, but one where the ‘fable’ consists half of truth and half of fiction. But besides the fact that Petrarch does not state that the measure of the two is equal, this interpretation would suggest that for Petrarch the story consists of a mixture of literal truths and falsehoods, whereas Petrarch’s relevant categories are somewhat different.

This is clarified by consideration of how Petrarch deals with this story elsewhere in his œuvre. In *Bucolicum Carmen* 1, Silvius, a thin mask for Petrarch himself, refers to the fact that he has embarked on writing the *Africa* (I here cite verses 112–116):<sup>21</sup>

Vrget amor Muse; quoniam modo litore in Afro  
Sidereum iuuenem genitumque a stirpe deorum  
Fama refert magnis implentem pascua factis;<sup>22</sup>  
Te, Polypheme, tuis iam vi<sup>23</sup> stravisse sub antris  
Dicitur et lybicos silvis pepulisse leones

Love of the Muse urges me on, since now Rumor tells of a starry youth born from the stock of the gods, on the African shore filling the pastures with mighty deeds. He is said to have forcibly laid you low, Polyphemus, under your caves and to have driven the Libyan lions from the forests.

The presence of this same motif of Scipio’s divine conception in this poem is significant, as Petrarch himself makes clear in *Epistolae Familiars* 10, 4, written to his brother Gherardo, that the poem is an extended example of allegorical poetry. Thus, Polyphemus and the Libyan lions that this youth is said to defeat are interpreted as direct stand-ins for Hannibal, made blind in one eye, and the other Carthaginian leaders respectively (*Epistolae Familiars* 10, 4, 32; cf. further *Africa* 6, 128–136). Petrarch then specifically comments on “sidereum iuuenem” that it is to be understood with reference both to his valor that surpassed the common rung of men and to the fact that the Romans admired him so much

<sup>21</sup> I use the text of Luca Canali (ed.), Francesco Petrarca: Bucolicum carmen. San Cesario di Lecce 2005.

<sup>22</sup> The use of “pascua” makes pointed the incongruity of epic and bucolic.

<sup>23</sup> Petrarch, by using “vi”, distances Scipio from the more problematic associations involved with Ulysses’ guile and trickery. In *Africa*, 2, 48 (and other similar passages could be cited, e.g. 7, 137–138, 7, 611–616), Hannibal is associated with “ars” and “dolus”.

that they deemed him to be of divine birth (10, 4, 33: “Et hic quidem iuvenis sidereus dicitur sive propter heroycam virtutem qua maxime vigit ... sive propter opinionem celestis originis, que admiratione viri illius tunc apud Romanos erat” = “And he indeed is called a ‘starry youth’ whether on account of the heroic virtue by which he has been held in the highest repute ... or on account of the supposition of his celestial origin, which at that time existed among the Romans because of their admiration for that man”).<sup>24</sup> This makes clear that Petrarch does not actually believe that the story occurred in this manner – which is revealed still more directly in the *Vita Scipionis* included in Petrarch’s *De Viris Illustribus*<sup>25</sup> – even if he thinks it accurately portrays his moral character and virtue.<sup>26</sup> And this latter point is why he has no difficulty using “genitumque a stirpe deorum”, here without the qualifications that we find in the *Africa* because he has provided a separate conceptual framing in his epistle.<sup>27</sup>

This approach accords with his words to his brother, “sensibus intende, qui si veri salubresque sunt, quolibet stilo illos amplectere” (10, 4, 8: “pay attention to the senses, which if they are true and wholesome, then embrace them in whatever style they may be”). It is demented or hypocritical to praise food served in earthenware but to make a fuss when it is presented on gold dishes, the suggestion being that style is the external ornamentation that does not contaminate the essential content by its excess (10, 4, 9). Petrarch does not speak here of multiple layers of ‘senses’ (literal/historical, allegorical, moral, anagogical, the last three of which can all be broadly termed allegorical) as we find, for example

<sup>24</sup> I cite according to the edition of Vittorio Rossi (ed.), Francesco Petrarca: Le Familiari. Volume Secondo: Libri V–XI ~ con un ritratto. Firenze 1934.

<sup>25</sup> *De Viris Illustribus* 21, 1, 7: “populus de eo fiduciam ingentem valida opinione conceperat prospere eventurum quicquid ille promitteret; erat enim non ea sola credulitas animis insita, divino monitu atque instinctu fieri omnia, sed divina illum quoque stirpe progenitum. Que res fabulis quibusdam, ut fit, locum fecerat; et ipse hunc honorificum sibi suorum civium errorem mira arte fovebat, neque quod credebatur affirmando, ne audacis in mendacii vanitatem incideret, neque negando, ne minueret aut tolleret quod auctum potius ac perpetuum cupiebat.” Note the reference to the citizens’ “error” as well as the use of “vanitas”, which recalls Livy. I cite the text of Silvano Ferrone (ed.), Francesco Petrarca: De Viris Illustribus. Vol. I. Firenze 2003.

<sup>26</sup> And there can be no doubt concerning the depth and sincerity of Petrarch’s admiration for Scipio’s character. See Aldo S. Bernardo, Petrarch’s Scipio and the ‘Africa’: The Birth of Humanism’s Dream. Baltimore 1962, esp. 8–10 and 163–167. The excess of Petrarch’s idealization of Scipio has led Tobias Gregory, From Many Gods to One: Divine Action in Renaissance Epic. Chicago 2006, 58 to assert, not without justification, that Petrarch’s hero is “worse than too good to be true – he is too good to be interesting.”

<sup>27</sup> But it is also in light of the reflections in *Africa* 4 that Ennius can address Scipio in *Africa*, 9, 24–25 as “O flos Italie, iuvenis, stirpisque deorum / Certa fides”. See also 9, 340–341: “generisque ferebat / Etherei frons alma fidem”.

in the Epistle to Cangrande – to be sure, he presupposes this distinction – but rather opposes the ‘sensus’ conceived together to the ‘stilus’ or, as in 10, 4, 2, the ‘sermo’. Allegory as described here consists in the ‘sermo’ being different from the ‘sensus’ (10, 4, 2, the latter in the plural: “sermonem a sensibus alienum”). And yet the ‘sermo’, properly speaking, should be directed toward upholding the ‘sensus’ (cf. 10, 4, 9: “nunc ad propositum sermo vertendus est”). This accords with Marchesi’s reading of *Africa* 9, 90–102 where fiction “should be limited to the elocutionary sphere of the poet’s activity”.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, the truths to which the poet aspires consist in historical facts (“labor historiarum”), moral lessons and natural philosophy. Walking this fine line probably constituted one of the major challenges in the composition on the epic.

Sticking with this system, Petrarch would evidently say that the story of Scipio’s divine birth is the ‘sermo’ that conceals a profound and true ‘sensus’. Important to stress here is that the story is not so much a literal falsehood that teaches a general or timeless allegorical truth<sup>29</sup> but rather an elegant and attractive linguistic covering or veil (to use the language of *Africa* 9, 100–102) for a literal, historical truth about the character and moral rectitude of Petrarch’s hero.<sup>30</sup> In this we see the commitment to historical veracity and reliability that marks the entire composition of the epic. Indeed, Petrarch’s attraction toward Scipio should be explained in no small part by the fact that his firmer historical grounding made him a superior model than other figures like Aeneas, who could be more subject to fanciful tales, as Petrarch believed to be the case with Vergil’s depiction of Aeneas and Dido.<sup>31</sup> Petrarch’s work on the *Africa* overlapped with that on his

<sup>28</sup> Marchesi (as in n. 3), 118.

<sup>29</sup> As in the example of allegory provided by Dante in *Convivio* 2, 1, 3: “come quando dice Ovidio che Orfeo faceva con la cetera mansuete le fiere, e li arbori e le pietre a sé muovere; che vuol dire che lo savio uomo con lo strumento de la sua voce faria mansuescere e unliare li crudeli cuori, e faria muovere a la sua volontade coloro che non hanno vita di scienza e d’arte.”

<sup>30</sup> For a recent argument that Dante reacts to Vergil’s Fama by using the literal-allegorical distinction where Vergil had used literal fiction vs. literal truth, see Paul K. Hosle, *New Light on Dante’s Construction of Geryon*, in: *Bibliotheca Dantesca* 4 (2021), 67–86. The dynamics of how each poet engages with Vergil deserve comparison, although I do not see a strong reason to assume influence from Dante on Petrarch in this particular case. On Dante’s impact on the *Africa*, see Kevin Brownlee, *The Concealed and the Revealed: Dantean Subtexts and Petrarchan Identity in the Africa*, in: *Modern Language Notes* 135 (2020), 1–16, although in my assessment some of the concrete arguments provided are more suggestive than fully probative.

<sup>31</sup> See Bernardo (as in n. 26), 10 and Gregory (as in n. 26), 57. Petrarch’s historical ambitions in composing the *Africa* are not given their full due in the interpretation of J. Christopher Warner, *The Augustinian Epic: Petrarch to Milton*. Ann Arbor 2005, 20–50, which sees the *Africa* as an allegorical epic heavily interested in thematizing the overcoming of lustful

complementary *De Viris Illustribus*. Given the fact that he viewed his poetic and historical work as mutually reinforcing and sharing a same foundation, it is appropriate that at his coronation on Easter Sunday 1341 he received the title of ‘magnus poeta et historicus’.<sup>32</sup> While it was noted that Petrarch, suitably enough, offers a skeptical appraisal of the story in his more strictly historical work, even his epic poem, while more tolerant of allowing embellished language to run its course, by no means simply gives up its allegiance to historical veracity. Rather, such stories are employed as an artistic means to shed light on the historical character of Scipio.

Petrarch agrees with the words of personified Rome in the council of the gods in *Africa* 7. She too brings up the ‘fabula’ of Scipio’s divine birth and claims she is not persuaded (7, 628–629: “non ... michi ... persuadeat”). But this in no way negatively affects her belief that Scipio is truly inspired by the divine mind (7, 634–636: “Non hec me vera negabo / credere: nempe animos divinam accendere mentem / illius ...”) = “I will not deny that I believe these truths: without a doubt a divine mind inflames his spirits ...”). Scipio’s moral virtue far surpasses human standards of expectation and is thus divinely inspired. This is the distinction that Petrarch is aiming at through Laelius’ cagey comments on the truth-status of Fama’s report, even if of course the speech within the epic poem is not the place to explicitly introduce such concepts. But already the transition from the claim that one would be compelled to assert divine lineage to the subsequent claim that Fama is therefore (“ideo”) not entirely false must be understood as saying that, insofar as Scipio’s charismatic personage imposes this belief,<sup>33</sup> the story is not inessential to his character but rather the mythic lenses through which his virtue expresses itself. And it is precisely this nuanced differentiation that Petrarch found lacking in both Livy and Aulus Gellius. Livy’s curt dismissal did not allow him to dwell on the aptness of the story to its subject. Gellius had only claimed that Scipio’s valor was a more reliable sign of divine virtue. Petrarch incorporated but then expands upon this insight.

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passions, modelled on an allegorically understood *Aeneid*. On Petrarch’s correction of Vergil’s story of Dido in particular, cf. *Africa*, 3, 424–427 and more broadly James Simpson, Subjects of triumph and literary history: Dido and Petrarch in Petrarch’s *Trionfi* and *Africa*, in: *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35 (2005), 489–508.

<sup>32</sup> For more discussion of the *Africa* as both a historical and poetic work in the context of the coronation, see Gerhard Regn / Bernhard Huss, Petrarch’s Rome: The History of the *Africa* and the Renaissance Project, in: *Modern Language Notes* 124 (2009), 86–102, esp. 88.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. also *Africa*, 7, 199–200 (in the words of Hannibal): “cuius dant credula summis / Secula numinibus – Virtus quia suggerit – ortum”. Hannibal fittingly uses the less charitable “credula ... secula”.

Gellius had not yet seen that the myth is not wholly false and hence partly true precisely qua being the most fitting *sermo* to conceal the *sensus* of Scipio's virtue. Rumors often have a core of truth. This notion familiar to us was no less familiar to Petrarch. Vergil had given powerful poetic expression to this destabilizing and fascinating feature of this phenomenon. To do justice to this aspect of rumor is not easy. Rejecting it or endorsing it wholesale will both more often than not stray from the complete picture. But merely relaying it without qualification or judgement can also be irresponsible; at any rate it is unsatisfying. And yet one may justifiably feel that Vergil's solution to see an equal balance of truth and falsehood fails to grasp (or perhaps better, express) that if rumors are frequently both false and true, they are usually not false and true in the same way. The present essay has demonstrated the care with which Petrarch has applied these considerations to the story of Scipio Africanus' supernatural birth and how in doing so he has introduced distinctions not present in his various models (Vergilian, Livian, Gellian). Besides providing a close study of a concrete passage whose subtleties have not been fully appreciated, these reflections may serve as a prod to consider these dynamics more extensively in Petrarch's *Africa* and wider corpus.

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