

Petrarch's Africa (c. 1343)

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Petrarch's *Africa* (c. 1343)

Extract from Book II (lines 1–326), translated from the Latin by Samuel Agbamu.¹ Commentary by Samuel Agbamu. Line numbers in the translation and commentary are for practical purposes and do not correspond to the Latin original.

In the first book of Petrarch's Africa, the Roman military commander Scipio Africanus has a dream in which he is visited by the spirits of his dead father and uncle. In this dream, they assure Scipio of his coming victory over Carthage. They take Scipio up into the heavens and explain to him the eternal rewards of those who die for their homeland. The dream continues in the second book.

1 Scipio's father brought his son's mind back from such thoughts [of death] and said, in a kindly way, 'It's time to descend from the heavens. The grace to come to this place is granted only to a few: you should graciously leave now.'

5 'Don't hurry off, dear father, I beg of you', said Scipio, 'don't disappear while I remain uncertain about some things. Send me back once I am certain about the future.'

10 'My son, you ask for the solace of a passing moment,' replied his father. 'The dream you are having tonight and everything you see now in a confusing and ambiguous way will vanish suddenly from before your eyes. If, by chance, some vestige of the memory of this dream remains in your mind, you will nevertheless think it to be a meaningless vision and that your mind has been wandering. But I don't want to refuse your request. Tell me, my son, what it is that bothers you most, but be concise, given the short time that remains before Phoebus Apollo brings the dawn.'

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‘Father, if the divine will is known to you, and if the time that is to come is visible to your eyes, I would like to know what fate has in store. Now we see harsh war shaking Latium with violent force.
20 Perfidious Hannibal stands at the gates. Every effort against him is repelled and fails. The fields grow sodden with our blood. So many of our distinguished leaders are dying. You two – such bright lights of so great an empire – fell at the same time. The sun has been snatched from Italian lands and great Rome falls to ruin under this twin disaster of your deaths. What is left? What death now awaits the supreme city? Will it fall or stand? Because, if it is in vain that we take up arms, relieve me of all these worries and lift this heavy burden from my mind: let me go back to sleep and rest my limbs. For if I and the homeland are destined to fall by God’s will, what use is it to resist fate and to lift human hands against the inevitable? Let us die without the need for weapons! Let savage Hannibal live and rule the whole world!’
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35 Scipio's great father did not allow his son to have such unworthy thoughts in his mind: 'No! No! It will be by arms that the one-eyed brigand will be expelled from the borders of Ausonia [Italy]. Then he will go away with hateful thoughts, afraid to leave a land foreign to him, thirsty for blood and for plunder. His mournful mob, fearing war and greatly disturbed by its approach, will summon him back to his home. Afterwards, he will reach the shore of Africa and there, fearing a deadly clash on the field of battle, he will seek a meeting with you. Beware of the tricks and the guile of that man. Let both of our terrible deaths, savagely brought about by that barbarian city, teach you a lesson. But go and look carefully at the cruel face of the enemy and strain your ear to his words. Staying cautious and vigilant, take note of the insidious words of that old trickster. If you refuse or draw back from meeting, believe me, you will be seen throughout the world as timid or perhaps arrogant. He will try to twist your mind in different ways and using new tricks, each time repeating the sweet word 'peace, peace' and hiding deceit under the name of peace. He alone is the destroyer of peace. Be firm, hold fast and keep your word. Do not act in a way unworthy of your dignity or that of our homeland. When he is forced to confront his sad fate, he will rage. He will utter words of humility and submission with a lying mouth. He will warn you, a great young man, accustomed to things always turning out well, to weigh up the different possible outcomes. He will enumerate for you, in a duplicitous speech, the

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many frightening things that have happened to leaders in the past, and their fates. When he sees that none of his words move your great spirit, then, boiling with sorrow and with rage, he will return to his camp.

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'There will be a battle which fate will watch over with uncertain favour and whose outcome will be feared by the whole world. A holier man will command this camp, and a more impious man than one. Here, Virtue, opponent of evil, and the cultivation of Modesty, and Devotion, well-guided Faith, Piety and her companion Justice, along with the rest of her sisters, brandish their weapons. On the other side, Fury, Trickery, Madness, hearts ignorant of Truth, Contempt of God, burning Lust, and blind Anger rising under constant disputes – horrible sights and crimes by many names.

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At last, you will be victorious in war, but you will not get carried away by your victory. Adverse fortune will suddenly lay Hannibal low. Defeated, he will flee and reach a foreign shore, where the tide of the Hellespont Sea separates Greek lands from Asia. He will try everything and will grasp the knees of unworthy kings as a suppliant. He will plead for mercenary arms, burning to bring ruin to Italian shores once again, if Fortune allows. But Fortune is more friendly towards us. Now, sated by long-lasting evils, she will turn his deadly plans upside down.

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'What more should I say? He will wander, a pitiful exile, and spread venom in every land, attacking Romans even in death. Just like when, by chance, a rain of stones falls on a snake at a crossroads, it rages, and dying, spits out threats and poison, twisting its tail and scaly body into a thousand knots, a uniquely horrible sight, and at last lets out a bloody hiss and raises its dying eyes before attacking

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the perpetrator in vain – so Hannibal, disturbed, will try a thousand tactics, all in vain. At that time, by chance, while you are fulfilling your public obligations, you will, quite safely, see him unarmed. You will see the face that terrorised the world. That happy day will witness a friendly talk and lucky Ephesus will see a conversation

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between two great men. Indeed, dishonest fame equates the wicked with the good, using false praise. It finds great crime, things terrible, horrible to say, and sings its praises throughout the world, and it does not discriminate between motives. One man helps his dying country and is praised; the other man, amidst great bloodshed, seizes power amidst bloodied spoils, so that he can recline upon a heap of gold – this man too is praised. Hannibal and Scipio will

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be praised. All of posterity will admire them both. But alas! Each of them was brought to earth under different and opposed stars! And the common people do not know how to tell how great the difference is between a magnificent deed and a foul crime. Look at what sudden and astounding flattery that man will use to try to bend your will with his words! Either Punic hearts are always like this, or virtue deserves praise even from an enemy, however rare this may be. But maybe his attempts will give you a bit of a laugh and nothing more. When he surrenders to death and looks back at the serious events of his life, driven mad by false hope, he will at last rush, totally without fear, to the palace of Bithynia. There, that awful leader will rid our city and the whole world of fear. You will see the fate of the enemy, whom the Ausonian land endured for 100
105 so long. 110

'But if you still want to know a bit more about Roman affairs, carefully study from the source what the Fates have in store. This particular victory over Hannibal will create a straight and easy route to what comes next, and no one will be ashamed to take the port that mighty Carthage once held. This victory will teach people to bear the Roman yoke and bring tribute. Suddenly, the vain Aetolian will rise in arms, Antiochus will rush into the fray; under the auspices of your brother, you will win.² The eastern world will know you, as before the west and the rainy south had known you. Then, other wars will give rise to further wars still, but Rome will defeat 115
120 all threats and trample the whole world underfoot. Conquered kingdoms will take up the yoke: soon Galatia and the Macedonian madness will come under Rome's laws.³ Neither the royal names of Macedon nor the outstanding achievements of its ancestors will be able to save it. Even if Alexander the Great, called back from this 125
130 funerary urn, should return, you know what my opinion is: the whole world of Greece, in a very short time, will fall, defeated, and will pay a terrible price for our fallen ancestors. Here, let Glabrius and Memmius, with his much-admired sense of modesty, and spirited Flaminius begin to achieve great deeds and to rival you in fame. There will be different events and a long series of labours. A flourishing age is coming for men powerful in arms. Here now, the Scauri, the Drusi and the Metelli, distinguished in honour. Now the Nerones, of famous name, are brought forth before my eyes. At one 135
140 point, a pestilential branch will sprout from this tree and will harm people with its wicked shade. Now, with their rigid sense of virtue,

the Catones rise gradually. If only that house were less hostile to our own! The Aemilii rise, and from this family, you will choose an heir who will deserve our ancestral name with his great deeds. He will complete what you left unfinished, with fire and sword, inflamed by a righteous anger and harsher to those who deserve it.

140 'I will go on further. Before my eyes now I have fierce Sulla, the solemn Pompeys, and noble-hearted Brutus. I am astounded by where he directs his dagger! From here, we come to the culmination of everything; I see the Caesarean clan dominating the entire world. Why am I telling you all of this? The city will never be richer in outstanding spirits or supreme leaders. Would anyone believe this? There will be someone who, taken away from his Campanian plough, will be distinguished in war. He will bring our standards to the south and again oppress Libya. As victor, he will break the necks of noble kings under a triumphal arch. Twice he will release Latium from a terrible siege beset by extreme fear. Turned back from hot shores and suddenly ordered to cross the snowy Alps by Aquae Sextiae – so they call this valley – let him halt the German madness with glorious bloodshed. Next, let him lay low the fanatical Cimbrians with similar blows.⁴

145 150 155 160 165 170 175 'In the hidden places at the ends of the earth, where you placed your camp, a young man who will be remembered through the ages for his unprecedented deeds, a young man of similar greatness, will arrive. Indeed, there will be no other more deserving of the name "the Great". This man will force the Tagus, Baetis and Ebro to bear the yoke and recognise the Tiber as their master.⁵ This same man will subdue a rebellious spirit with excessive force. Let no envy contaminate his honest soul; let others also fly high. There has never been and never will be anyone to whom all glory falls. Glory, always whole, gives a part of itself to different people. Life is short, but the order of things goes on for a very long time. What will happen if each of those ages to come does not bring forth those who meet their fate willingly? If one man were enough for the whole span of time, the republic would be content with you as its leader. If only you could happily stay here with me while wars are waged, and praise the outstanding young man from on high. I remind you of a few of his innumerable deeds: the greatest of his deeds live on and will be sung by others with greater songs. For this man, rapid in his victories – if I can say such a thing – will arrive again as a victor, marching from the place where the sun rises to where it sets and will

raise the name of Italy above the stars. All will succumb: generous fortune will want to enrich this leader with many triumphs. However, he will be more moderate in his soul and will be satisfied with little. He will go away happy with his head encircled by laurel three times, and with his Rome seeing him standing in that revered triumphal chariot three times. This man will drive the pirates out from the whole sea. Stubborn Judea will be conquered, the two Armenias, Cappadocians, Arabs, and the wide-bodied Ganges, along with the Persians and the Parthians: conquering all of them, we will come from the shores of the Red Sea to the frozen Arctic sea. We will arrive at icy lands, Tanais, harsh Maeotis, and come close to the Riphaeen mountains, high in the sky.⁶ Worn down by harsh war their kings will flee, despising their lives, their kingship, and war. Our conquerors will trample underfoot Caspian gates and the homes of the incense-burning people of Sheba.⁷ They will cross the thresholds of undefiled temples and peer into the most secret parts of their shrines. Royal purple will not move our victors, nor will gems and gold. With unsheathed sword, Roman austerity will come amongst treasures and not be moved by them.

‘No island in the whole sea will retain its freedom – no land, whether washed by the waves or situated under the unmoving stars. The rich palace of Cyprus will come under our empire, and Crete, the monstrous home and origin of superstitious practices, then the shore of Euboea, and Rhodes, famous for its sun and sea, the Cyclades, scattered in the middle of the salty Aegean like stars in the serene sky, the shield of mighty Sicily, and wealthy Sardinia with its heavy sky and Corsica, poorer in soil but with its sunny rocks, and whatever else lies in the Tuscan Sea, the Iberian or Adriatic.

‘But who will lead a fleet into the raging sea? There will be one, the bravest of all our descendants, who will always be the subject of song in this wide world. He will fill the fields of Gaul with a variety of terrors and will violate their rivers with streams of black blood. From there, in a swift war, he will trample the golden-haired Britons, situated in a faraway land in a faraway sea under a faraway sky. He will span the unruly Rhine with bridges and, taking hold of hostile frontiers, with military might, will bring sad war to the blue-eyed Germans. Oh, how happy things would have been if he had known where to put a limit to his fighting! But, alas, he will not know how to do this. Nor will the wretched man even want to. Instead, with a disturbed mind he turns his hand, victorious against

everything else, against the guts of the Republic, befouling his external conquest with civil bloodshed, his deserved triumphs with unworthy war. It shames me to associate infamous madness with so many glorious achievements. How shamefully ambition tramples upon everything, just so that one man can win total power for himself, the first one to do so and an example for others to follow. The proud man will despoil the state treasury and choose poor senators from a new order! This, and Pharsalian death and Ephirean arms, Thapsus, Munda, and the Capitol stained with blood – I pass over all of this.⁸

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‘Next, his great nephew will succeed, coming from the glorious branch of his sister’s family. This one will bring the distant Indians under our laws, will seize fierce Egypt and the wife of the Latin leader, shaking her barbarian rattles. His gleaming sword will flash throughout his life and he will trample other kings underfoot. He will teach the wild Ister and the land that lies beneath the twin bears to obey the Roman fasces. Carried into Rome in a triple triumph, according to custom, he will give laws, hitherto unknown, to the entire world. Raised upon his high throne, he will see sceptres submitted to him, leaders and crowds of common people bringing him gifts, everyone burning with the desire to please him. Now older, he will crush the stubborn Iberians in war. That will be his last labour. From this, peaceful ages will follow. Then the mournful threshold of two-faced Janus will be closed and the bronze posts joined at the hinge. Then venerable old age will send him, now weighed down by age, to his tomb, taking him from the loving embrace of his wife’s arms.

‘After the funeral of this man, I see Roman fate take a backwards turn and its beautiful morals fall into shameful practice. Alas, why did you have to die? The progeny of our name will die with you. But you, after you have obtained what is owed to you, will reach the high dome of heaven. But what about the remaining crowd, a joke to the world and a shame to their earlier forebears? They will get what they deserve: Tartarus and the Stygian caves.

‘But I’m going too fast. I see a father and son, equal in nobility, in a twin triumph on the happy Capitoline. The hill is verdant with their twin laurels. I also see two sets of the purple triumphal toga. But I don’t seem to be able to see two triumphal chariots. Piety goes along, happy with one chariot: a new sight and, indeed, most deservedly famous. Jerusalem will fall to these leaders and its famous religion

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conquered by the sword. It will be right for swords to break into its sacred places and this people to reap what their sins deserve. I am ashamed to go on. Foreigners belonging to the Spanish and African race will seize the glorious sceptre of empire, built upon the foundations of so much of our work. Who can bear the idea that this scum of humankind, the shameful survivors of our sword, should reach the apex of government?’

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Since he was not able to restrain his grief, Scipio, with a tearful voice, interrupted his father, who was about to continue his narrative: ‘What terrible things you speak of, father! Surely fortune will not allow such things! Let the stars, shaken from their places, fall into the Stygian swamp! Let the keeper of the underworld conquer the heavens and thunder from the celestial citadel rather than Africa, as conqueror, steal the justice and eternal name of Rome.’

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He did not grieve for long before his father spoke: ‘I beg you, put aside your tears and your fears: Latin honour stands, and will always be called by the name of the Roman Empire. But it will not always be a Roman driver who holds the reins. Soft Syria will stretch out her hand, soon harsh Gaul, loquacious Greece, and Illyricum. At last, that power will fall to the North: thus fate turns human affairs. By chance, in the distant future and at the end of the world, fortune will return to her proper home. But look deeper and find out what else lies in store for our city. This one thing out of many, God in heaven hides in cloud; but as far as can be said for what the soul is allowed to know in advance, Rome will not fall, conquered by an enemy. This glory is not given to any other nation, nor so great an honour to another people. Rome will be worn down by the years and tired from the cracks in her foundations, will fall to pieces. There will never be a time, no age free from war. And there will come a time when scarcely a real Roman citizen is to be found in the city, but instead the dregs of humanity, gathered from across the world; however, this mob, barely sane, will harm itself with bloody swords, and unless a very strong man, someone worthy of being born in better times, puts himself in the middle of the fighting, and shows his face and reveals his hand, this mob will bleed out whatever blood remains in their miserable hearts. But take solace: Rome, once born under powerful stars, although harmed by the plans of gangs of evil men, will endure for a long time. In the midst of these plagues Rome will be queen of the world, if only in name. This sacred title will never desert her. Just as when strength and

spirit drain away from an aged lion, even though the prior majesty of his appearance and terrifying roar still remain, he is slow to do anything. He may be a shadow of his former self but the whole forest still obeys this toothless old man. But who would presume to know things for certain or to predict the end of such things? Do you want me to go on? In the end, although ruined, your Rome will live out her days and will come to her end only when the entire world perishes.'

* * *

Commentary by Samuel Agbamu

Francesco Petrarca (1304–74), known in English as Petrarch, was an Italian poet and humanist scholar. Although most of what he wrote was in Latin, he is best known today for his Italian lyric poetry, the *Canzoniere*. Petrarch was born in Arezzo, Tuscany, in 1304. In 1311, his family moved to Avignon in France, where the papacy was at that time located. In 1316, Petrarch began to study law in Montpellier, France, and then moved to continue his studies in Bologna, Italy, in 1323.

He returned to Avignon after the death of his father, in 1326. It was during this stint back in Avignon that Petrarch discovered his love for Roman antiquity. While working for Cardinal Giovanni Colonna in the 1330s, he travelled all over France, Belgium and Germany on official business. He also used this as an opportunity to scour monastery libraries for manuscripts of classical texts, recovering and reconstructing numerous Latin texts previously lost or fragmented. In 1337, he visited Rome for the first time and described, in a letter to a friend, being amazed by what he encountered. It was this experience, Petrarch claims, that moved him to write two of his major Latin works: the anthology of biographies of men from biblical and classical antiquity, *On Famous Men* (*De viris illustribus*), and his nine-book Latin epic about the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE), fought between Rome and the North African city of Carthage. The latter is titled *Africa*.

Petrarch often confounds neat placement into a historical period, being neither 'medieval' nor 'Renaissance', in his own mind sitting somewhere between Roman antiquity and the Christianity of his own day. For related reasons, constructions of 'race' in Petrarch's texts are frequently missing in current scholarship on race in the Middle Ages and on race in the Renaissance. Today race is frequently bound up, in

everyday contexts, with skin colour, but in the context of Petrarch's texts, it is more constructive to think in terms of racial formation, a process whereby Petrarch applies labels to Others in order to bolster identities – such as Roman, Italian or Catholic – with which he identified.⁹

Africa, begun in 1337 and incomplete at the time of Petrarch's death, is an important text for interpreting how Petrarch saw himself and others, historically. This Latin epic represents Petrarch's attempts to reconcile the Christian beliefs prevalent during his time with his admiration for pre-Christian Roman antiquity. His Scipio Africanus resembles a Christianised, saint-like Roman conqueror – a figure too good to be convincing, according to Thomas Bergin and Alice Wilson, the translators of the only published English translation of the poem.¹⁰ Yet, despite modern scholars' unsympathetic view of the epic, this was the poem, still then unfinished, for which Petrarch was awarded a laurel crown by the city of Rome in 1341. The poem remained unpublished until 1397, however, and was seen as a poetic failure in the following centuries. The epic began to receive attention again in the middle of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century, in the context of Italian liberal and later Fascist imperial ideology. During this time it was praised as an early attempt to revive the spirit of the Roman Empire.

Africa tells the story of Scipio Africanus' campaigns against Hannibal during the Second Punic War, culminating with Scipio's victory at the Battle of Zama (202 BCE). The action begins with Scipio in Africa while Hannibal is ravaging the Italian peninsula. In the first two books of the nine-book epic, Scipio has a dream in which he is visited by the spirits of his father and his uncle, both of whom had been killed in battle earlier on in the Second Punic War. In this dream, a reframing of the 'Dream of Scipio' from the last book of Cicero's *De Republica*, Scipio's father and uncle assure Scipio of the value of waging war on Carthage, a conflict in which Rome is destined to prevail and which will initiate a series of triumphs for future Romans. This sequence of imperial triumphs is modelled on Book Six of the *Aeneid*, in which the spirit of Anchises, the father of Aeneas, shows to his son the coming glories of Rome, reaching a zenith with Augustus' reign.

In the extract, Scipio's father, Publius Cornelius Scipio, tells his son about the significance of the inevitable defeat of Hannibal in terms of Rome's imperial mission. Publius Cornelius' prophecy is significant in expressing Petrarch's imperial ideal based on the sense of an Italian identity, formulated in opposition to non-Italians and non-Christians. Rome is represented as a brutal, civilising force, visiting violence upon other populations. Roman identity is constructed along bloodlines:

those who spill blood are Roman and those who have their blood spilt are not. This is why Sulla is characterised in un-Roman terms (line xx) and the memory of Caesar's role in civil war suppressed (lines xx–xx). This consanguinity built through bloodshed is inherited by Italy. A preoccupation of Petrarch's literary project as a whole – and of *Africa* in particular, and especially the dream of Scipio – is, therefore, the construction of an Italian identity based on a triumphant narrative of Roman history, a history that the Italy of Petrarch's day must recover. Every Italian triumph rests on the defeat of perceived enemies of Italy, and the glory of Rome is transferred to Petrarch's Italy so long as this dynamic continues. The extract therefore demonstrates how Petrarch uses models drawn from Roman history as an expression of his politics of empire, built at the expense of non-Italian Others. Petrarch's Christianised ancient Rome also draws into question the role of religion in developing conceptions of racial otherness.

The war against Carthage is set up by Petrarch as a clash of civilisations. Scipio's father represents the coming Battle of Zama as a conflict between good and evil. The absolute evilness of Hannibal is emphasised through frequent reference to his dishonesty and perfidy, adapted from Livy's description of the Carthaginian commander as possessing a 'more-than-Punic perfidy'.¹¹ *Perfidia* was a word that had highly charged meaning in the fourteenth century. In 1348, the decade of the first phase of the composition of *Africa*, a papal bull was promulgated, entitled 'Quamvis Iudeorum perfidiam' ('although the perfidy of the Jews . . .'). The bull addresses Christian suspicions that the Black Death was being spread by Jewish communities in Europe, a suspicion that the bull aims to dispel while acknowledging the legitimate Christian hatred for the 'perfidy of the Jews'.¹² In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, numerous scholars and writers viewed Carthage as a Semitic city due to the Near Eastern origins of its Phoenician settlers. For example, the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet (see Chapter 10 in this volume) referred to Carthaginians as an 'impure race' and spoke of the Punic Wars as determining which civilisation would prevail, the 'Indo-Germanic' Romans, or 'Semitic' Carthage.¹³ *Africa* plays an important role in the burgeoning racialisation of Carthage as Semitic, representing the Punic city as not only hostile to ancient Rome, but, in Book Seven, hostile also to the Catholic Church, which would later be centred on the Eternal City.

Later in Scipio's dream, Petrarch makes more explicit his anti-Jewish commitments, which were closely related to Petrarch's hopes for a renewed crusade to the Holy Land. When Publius Cornelius tells his

son about the coming conquests of Pompey the Great (106–48 BCE), he begins by enumerating Pompey's victories in Spain before turning to his conquests in the Mediterranean and in the East. Pompey, Publius Cornelius says, will drive the pirates from the sea and conquer Judea, Armenia, Cappadocia (Turkey), Arabia, the Ganges and Persia. In Petrarch's mind, all of these regions are associated with the crusades to the Holy Land, save the Ganges, which instead represents the eastern extent of Pompey's triumphs (lines xx–xx). In this way, Pompey is represented as a proto-crusader against the East.

Such links between Roman antiquity and the non-Christian world are made explicit in another of Petrarch's Latin texts, *De vita solitaria*, translated as *The Life of Solitude*. Here, Petrarch explains Islamic antipathy towards Rome by claiming that the Prophet Mohammed bore a grudge against Romans, 'recalling the great number of defeats and serious misfortunes that had been inflicted by Rome at different times on the Persians, the Medes, Egyptians, Chaldeans, and his Arab ancestors'.¹⁴ Notably, Carthage is absent here, associated more with Judaism than Islam. Petrarch's explanation of the conflicts between the Latin West and the world beyond through reference to Roman antiquity can therefore be seen as a unifying feature of his historical imaginary that runs through *Africa*. Petrarch's epic framing of this binary opposition between the Latin West and the East – since he was almost as antipathetic towards the Greek Orthodox Church as he was towards Islam and Judaism – contributed to later humanists' views of the Islamic East, particularly after the Ottoman capture of Constantinople, as the mortal enemy of both the Church and of classicism.¹⁵ Such conceptions of the relationship between humanism and the Muslim world shaped ideas of the Renaissance as a self-enclosed European phenomenon, eliding the contribution of scholars in the Islamic world to the transmission of ancient Greek texts.

As in the *Aeneid*, Publius Cornelius represents Augustus' civil wars as wars of external conquest. He will bring the Indus under Roman laws and will capture fierce Egypt (*Egyptumque ferox*, line xx) and the wife of the Latin leader, who shakes the barbarian sistra, the rattles used by worshippers of Isis. Cleopatra is shown, rattling her sistra, in the shield of Aeneas in Book Eight of the *Aeneid*,¹⁶ where India also features among the allies of Egypt, contributing to a generalised picture of East versus West. *Ferox*, meaning fierce and describing Egypt, is a word used by Petrarch in *Africa* to refer exclusively to non-Italians, except when he refers to the tyrannical antagonist of civil war, Sulla, whose fratricidal conflicts make him un-Roman.

The only specific example of Roman imperial triumph drawn from the period of the principate is the sack of Jerusalem (70 CE) during Vespasian and Titus' Jewish War, which allows Petrarch to restate his anti-Jewish commitments (lines xx–xx). The plundering of the Temple of Jerusalem, as divine retribution against the Jewish people, also has clear crusading connotations, with Jerusalem rightfully belonging to Christendom rather than to Judaism (or Islam). Elsewhere, Petrarch explicitly points to the execution of Christ as the sin of the Jewish people and positions Vespasian and Titus as Christ's avengers. Petrarch wishes to call them back to avenge Christ once more, presumably again against Judaism.¹⁷

The grandeur of Roman imperialism declines when power passes into the hands of foreigners, especially foreigners of 'foreigners belonging to the Spanish and African race' (lines xx–xx), 'this scum of humankind, the shameful survivors of our sword' (lines xx–xx). These representatives of the filth of mankind must be the emperors Trajan (53–117 CE), Hadrian (76–138 CE) and Septimius Severus (145–211 CE). *Stirps* – root, stock, or 'race' – used to refer to the African and Spanish emperors here, carries racialising connotations; for example, Jewish people are referred to as *Iudaica stirps* – the Jewish race – in the 1348 papal bull mentioned earlier. Geraldine Heng argues that the Crusades to the Holy Land beginning at the end of the eleventh century, and coinciding with the growth of anti-Jewish violence in Europe, contributed to the congealing of an identity of *homo europeaus* – European man. In the context of Holy Wars overseas and holy violence against Europe's Jewish populations, blood – that of Christian martyrs spilt in the Middle East and that of persecuted Jews shed in Europe – was central to the formation of racial identities structured along religious lines.¹⁸ Petrarch applies such proto-biological racial thinking to Publius Scipio's words about Africans and Spaniards. For these races, these survivors of Roman aggression, to grasp the levers of power is especially shocking. Publius' horror is amplified by Petrarch's own context of foreigners occupying seats of power traditionally centred on Romans: a French pope had taken the papacy to France, and the closest approximation to a Roman emperor was not an Italian. Secondly, Septimius Severus is characterised as a persecutor of Christians by Church historians such as Eusebius.¹⁹ Furthermore, his son Caracalla promulgated an edict in 212 CE which granted Roman citizenship to all free men of the empire, uncoupling the idea of Rome from Italian nationhood. This would, much later, be cited in Italian Fascist historiography of the 1930s as the beginning of the decline of the empire.

Despite the degraded state of Rome since the Spanish and African ‘scum of humankind’ (line xx) had grasped Rome’s imperial sceptre, ‘Latin honour stands, and will always be called by the name of the Roman Empire. But it will not always be a Roman driver who holds the reins’ (lines xx–xx). Instead, ‘soft Syria’ (*Siria mollis*), ‘harsh Gaul, loquacious Greece, and Illyricum’ will take turns ruling Rome, until at last, power falls to Boreas, the North, by which Petrarch means Germany. The characterisation of Syria as soft falls within Petrarch’s wider anti-Arabic rhetoric. For example, in a letter to a Paduan doctor friend, Petrarch rails against Arabic poetry, saying that there is ‘nothing more fawning, softer [*mollius*], more annoying’.²⁰ Petrarch would no doubt have received such characterisations of Arabs as ‘soft’ from Latin authors such as Catullus, who also described Arabs as *molles* (soft).²¹

The result of this foreign power over Rome is that there will come a time when scarcely a single, true Roman citizen will be found in the city; rather, ‘the dregs of humanity’ (line xx) from every land will fill Rome. Once again, Petrarch’s perception of Rome in his own time shines through in this characterisation. In a letter to Giovanni Colonna, he bemoans the fact that ‘nowhere is Rome less known than in Rome’. However, ‘who can doubt that Rome would rise again instantly if she began to know herself?’²² *Africa* stood to serve as precisely that education in empire so sorely needed by Romans, in order for them to restore the imperial dream of their progenitors.

Petrarch’s vision of Roman history as a sequence of triumphs over non-Romans and non-Italians contributes to narratives of history as civilisational progress. For Petrarch, such progress can be resumed with the recovery of Rome’s imperial mission. Such narratives of progress contribute to the construction of the fiction of ‘Western civilisation’. Western civilisation is frequently seen as being built on a particular view of Greek and Roman antiquity, the spirit of which was recovered during the Renaissance by figures such as Petrarch.²³ It was the rediscovery of antiquity, according to such narratives, that ushered in the idea of modernity. The restoration of Rome and its empire formed an important part of the early humanist project of modernity. In Scipio’s dream in *Africa*, the bloody conquests of Rome are justified by the idea that the Roman Empire became the vehicle for the Christianisation of much of the Mediterranean.

However, this dream of a Christian empire falls apart when non-Italians take imperial power, and when the Arab conquests see Islam sweep into North Africa (the arena of Scipio’s triumphs), the Middle East and even into Spain. Thus, in his treatise *The Life of Solitude*,

Petrarch imagines the anger that ancient Roman conquerors would feel if they returned as Christians and saw the regions of their conquests no longer under the sign of the cross. This goes beyond religious prejudice since, for example, the Carthaginians were not Jewish, nor were the ancient Persians and Egyptians Muslim. Instead, the narrative of a millennia-long struggle between a Christianised ancient Rome and Rome's enemies – who can variously be represented as Jewish, Muslim or, indeed, German and French barbarians – requires the transference of negative characteristics across different peoples and time periods through the technology of race. Only in this way could Carthaginians and early modern Jewish communities, for example, be lumped together as Semitic.

Such racialisations of Carthage as found in *Africa* have had more recent manifestations. Twentieth-century Italian Fascism and German Nazism saw the Second World War as a Fourth Punic War, between the Aryan heirs of ancient Rome – Italy and Germany – and the external ‘modern Carthaginians’, represented by Islam or the British Empire, or the internal Carthaginians, represented by Europe’s Jewish populations. Even before then, Rome’s destruction of Carthage in 146 BCE was claimed to be the beginning of the millennial Semitic hatred for Rome. Italian scholars and ideologues of empire and nation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries specifically referred to Petrarch’s *Africa* in the promotion of such antisemitic and imperial ideologies, for example reading it for inspiration in Fascist Italy’s war in North Africa against the New Carthaginians of Britain or as inspiration against the Muslim Ottoman Empire during the 1911 Italian invasion of Libya.²⁴

The vision of history put forward by Scipio’s dream in Petrarch’s *Africa* presents a teleological sequence of Roman imperial triumphs which, despite the degraded present of the city in Petrarch’s own day, secures for it the perpetual title of queen of the world. Each of these triumphs requires the defeat of the non-Roman, non-Italian Other. The work of the contemporary South African artist William Kentridge (b. 1955) reflects upon such triumphal narratives of history. On 21 April 2016, the anniversary of the mythical founding of Rome, William Kentridge inaugurated his monumental frieze *Triumphs and Laments* on the embankment wall along the Tiber in Rome.²⁵ This series of images subverts the triumphal narrative of the city of Rome, itself taking the form of a triumphal procession. It tells the story of the city from its foundations up to the present day, emphasising the laments of those oppressed by the empires of ancient and modern Rome.



Figure 2.1 Interior of the Arch of Titus, Rome. (Photo: Tommaso Cuccioni/Getty Museum. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program)

Among these moments is the sack of Jerusalem, as monumentalised on the Arch of Titus (see Figure 2.1) in the Roman Forum, replicated in Kentridge's frieze and celebrated by Petrarch. In *Triumphs and Laments* (Figure 2.2), it is juxtaposed with depictions of Jewish inhabitants of Rome being humiliated in the Renaissance carnival and rounded up by the Nazis during the German occupation of the city during the Second World War. For Kentridge, himself of Jewish heritage, the triumphs of Rome are tightly bound up with histories of imperial violence enacted upon the Other, including Rome's own Jewish population.²⁶

This is an intertwined history in which Petrarch's triumphal vision of Roman imperial revival, at the expense of the religious and racial Other, takes a central place. Yet, it was after confronting the ruins of ancient Rome's empire – the undeniability of its collapse – that Petrarch was inspired to compose his poem of Roman triumph. Petrarch's hope must then have been for a restored Roman empire that would not fall, that would heed the lessons of the past and keep Roman power in Roman hands, excluding those who had caused the collapse of the Empire of antiquity. This too has been a source of anxiety for all powers that have positioned themselves as Rome's heir – how to emulate Rome without following it in its eventual fall. Frequently, such anxieties manifest as a



Figure 2.2 *Triumphs and Laments*, by William Kentridge. Opening night, Rome, 21 April 2016. (Photo: Sophie Hay)

fear of the barbarian at the door, often the racialised Other. *Triumphs and Laments* offers a model to read against the anxiety-ridden triumphalism of texts such as Petrarch's *Africa*, and to probe how the idea of ancient Roman imperialism has been used to promote racial and religious prejudices in the post-classical world.

Notes

- 1 To date, there is only one full English translation of *Africa*: Thomas Bergin and Alice Wilson's 1977 *Petrarch's Africa*, now out of print. The standard text for the Latin is Nicola Festa's 1926 edition. More recent editions have been produced by Pierre Laurens, with facing French translation and commentary (in 2006 and 2018), and by Bernhard Huss and Gerhard Regn, with German translation and commentary (in 2007).
- 2 Also called the Roman–Seleucid War, the Aetolian War (192–88 BCE), after the Aetolian League of central Greece, was fought between Rome and the Seleucid King Antiochus III. Hannibal fought under Antiochus against Scipio's brother, Lucius Cornelius Scipio, who was given the agnomen Asiaticus after his victory.
- 3 Galatia refers to the Celts of Anatolia.
- 4 The Cimbrians were a Germanic people.
- 5 Rivers of the Iberian peninsula.
- 6 Tanais refers to the River Don, Russia; Maeotis refers to the area around the Sea of Azov, Ukraine and Russia.
- 7 Sheba refers to southern Arabia, today Yemen.
- 8 These are sites associated with the civil war between Caesar and Pompey.
- 9 Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*.
- 10 Bergin and Wilson, *Petrarch's Africa*, xv.
- 11 *Perfidia plus quam Punica*; Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 21.4; author's translation.
- 12 Martinez, 'The oblique glance of the muse', 18.
- 13 Michelet, 'L'histoire Romaine', 2:440.

- 14 Petrarch, *Le vie solitaire*, 2.9.16, author's translation.
- 15 Bishaha, *Creating East and West*, 43–93.
- 16 Virgil, *Aeneid* 8.696.
- 17 Petrarca, *Le Familiari: Epystole Familiares* 23.1.
- 18 Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 122–4.
- 19 Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.1.1.
- 20 Petrarca, *Res Seniles: Epystole Seniles* 12.2.
- 21 Catullus, *Carmina*, poem 11.
- 22 Petrarca, *Le Familiari: Epystole Familiares* 6.2.
- 23 Kim, 'The politics of the medieval preracial', 3.
- 24 Agbamu, 'The reception of Petrarch's Africa in Fascist Italy'.
- 25 Kentridge, *Triumphs and Laments*.
- 26 Agbamu, 'Smash the thing', 270–4.

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