

Underworld scenes are a constitutive element of ancient epic poetry. Usually occupying a key position in the narrative, they document the exceptional courage of the hero who dares to transgress the normal boundaries of human existence by getting in touch with the world of the dead. At the same time ancient necyiae are a privileged place for last encounters and the communication of essential information or 'deeper' truths, thus allowing the author to include programmatic statements and to connect the story of the epic with his own times. Furthermore, the underworld as a space of collective memory provides an important occasion for the poet to revisit the literary tradition and to identify the predecessors he chooses to follow and the relations he entertains with them, while simultaneously establishing his individual position.

In this paper I shall argue that the underworld scene at the beginning of the sixth book of Petrarch's epic *Africa* (provisionally completed by 1343 but continuously revised by the author for the rest of his life and not published until 1397) serves a similar poetological function and illustrates in an exemplary way the poet's vision of the renaissance of classical literature in post-medieval times. I will demonstrate that Petrarch makes use of a number of model texts, both ancient and contemporary, and in doing so not only appropriates the pagan topic for a Christian audience, but also showcases his idea of creative imitation as an amalgamation of various traditions "blending many very different flavors into one, which shall be unlike them all, and better," as famously expressed in one of his letters to Boccaccio (*Fam.* 23.19.13).

The necyia scene in *Africa* VI (ll. 1-73) describes the descent of the Numidian queen Sophonisba to the underworld after having committed suicide in order to escape Roman captivity at the suggestion of her husband Massinissa. The unhappy love story of Sophonisba and Massinissa is recounted in Livy (cf. Liv. 30.12.5-30.15.14), who is Petrarch's main historical source for the *Africa*. However, since echoes of the portrayal of Dido in *Aeneid* IV and of Vergil's description of her final resting place in the realm of the dead in *Aeneid* VI abound, past scholarship on this section of the poem has focused almost exclusively on Petrarch's *imitatio Vergilii*. It was not until recently that the author's indebtedness to Ovid for both the depiction of Sophonisba and her romance with Massinissa and the account of her arrival in the underworld has been recognized.

But the web of intertextual relations is much more complex. As I will show, Petrarch also engages in a literary dialogue with Statius who describes the catabasis of the seer Amphiaraus at the beginning of book VIII of the *Thebaid*, repeatedly emphasizing the innovative character of this descent and its epic portrayal, just as the first lines of *Africa* VI highlight the unprecedented amazement of the underworld inhabitants at the entrance of Sophonisba. Moreover, Petrarch follows Dante's model in grouping Sophonisba with the victims of love, thereby assigning her a better place in the underworld than she would have been accorded by the Christian doctrine which condemned suicide (cf. *Inf.* V).

Petrarch's interaction with several poetic predecessors in the necyia scene reflects his critical evaluation of the ancient literary tradition in general and the epic motif of catabasis in particular. Taking the historical events from Livy, Petrarch uses the structural framework provided by Vergil and later modified by Statius for encounters with the underworld and simultaneously draws on the elegiac themes and language established by Ovid for his conceptualization of the tragic love story between Sophonisba and Massinissa. Finally, by adopting Dante's strategy of integrating a suicide into the category of love victims Petrarch manages to mitigate the tensions between pagan and Christian beliefs, thus creating an episode which truly combines many different 'flavors' into one that is new and unique.