

This paper aims to open a new avenue of interpretation into Petrarch's Latin epic poem *Africa* by locating it in the context of thirteenth and fourteenth century debates about the nature and truth status of poetic fiction. Petrarch himself invites readers to consider the *Africa* in relation to poetic theory by placing an extended meditation on poetry in the mouth of the Roman poet Ennius in Book 9. Ennius offers his patron Scipio Africanus an account of the "integumentum" theory of poetry: the idea that poetic language acts a fictional "shell" which conceals a "kernel" of truth inside. Recent studies of the *Africa* have taken Ennius' speech as a programmatic statement for interpretation of the epic as a whole. J. Christopher Warner, for example, in *The Augustinian Epic, Petrarch to Milton* (University of Michigan Press: 2005), argues that Ennius' articulation of the "shell/kernel" theory warrants an interpretation of the poem as an allegory of virtue overcoming lust. My paper argues that the poetic practice of the *Africa* tells a different story. The body of the poem, based on a careful re-writing of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, reveals Petrarch rethinking his idea of poetry in an effort to create a new kind of poem immune to the attacks of scholastic theologians—an epic grounded in the truth of history.

The scholastic argument against poetry, originating with Aquinas, was based on the idea that poets, unlike philosophers, make use of metaphorical language which at the literal level is a lie. Fables invented by poets might provide readers with pleasure, but they obscure the truth and impede the Christian on his path to salvation. Petrarch's predecessor Dante responded to this challenge by basing his *Commedia* on the "allegory of the theologians," in which the literal sense of each event in his poem is treated as if it were true. The protagonist's entire experience of the next life is presented as if it belonged to the rhetorical category of *historia*, something which actually happened, rather than *fabula*, a fiction constructed by the poet. The *Africa* reveals Petrarch attempting a similar if more radical defense of the truth value of poetry. Contrary to Ennius' endorsement of the integumentum theory in Book 9, in the narrative of the *Africa* the so-called "shell" consists in the historical events of the Second Punic War as related by Livy, a historian who for Petrarch had almost unimpeachable authority. In many cases, Petrarch follows Livy so closely that the "shell" of poetry might be said to consist only in versification. This feature of the poem has provoked complaints from many readers who argue that the *Africa* is merely derivative, but this is to miss the important innovation Petrarch makes in response to the scholastic critique of poetry. Petrarch's *Africa* confronts the shadow of Aquinas by arguing that if poetry is to be truly unassailable, it must be based on history, shell and kernel.

As a test case for this hypothesis, I examine the episode in the poem which bears the closest resemblance to what medieval rhetoricians would call *fabula*: the council of the gods in Book 7, in which allegorical representations of Rome and Carthage appear before the court of Olympus on the eve of the battle of Zama to plead to Jupiter on behalf of Scipio and Hannibal. It is one of the few episodes in the epic for which Petrarch does not rely on a historical source, building the scene instead from epic models in Vergil and Ovid. Unlike his literary prototypes, however, Petrarch's Jupiter does not promise success to either of the petitioners, but rather foretells his own intervention in history to bring about a moral regeneration on earth. By assimilating Jupiter to Christ and associating the pagan god's metamorphic love affairs with the Incarnation, Petrarch goes beyond Dante in arguing for the truth value of poetry. In the kind of historical poetry which the *Africa* hopes to exemplify, even the most extreme forms of *fabula*, also have a basis in the truth-claims of *historia*. In unpacking the details of this argument, I hope to focus greater attention on this often-neglected poem, one of the canonical texts of Neo-Latin poetry.