# Petrarch's Sophonisba Between Antiquity and Modernity

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*This article traces developments in representations of Sophonisba between antiquity and early modernity. In particular, the article considers how Petrarch's representation of the Carthaginian woman can illuminate an important moment in the development of modern discourses of "race". After outlining the ancient sources available to Petrarch, the article hones in on Sophonisba in Petrarch's* De viris illustribus*, the* Africa*, and* Triumphus Cupidinis*, and how she relates to Dido and Cleopatra. The article takes Mantegna's "A Woman Drinking" as a pivotal moment in the reception of Sophonisba during the early Renaissance between her story in Petrarch's texts and later dramatic re-presentations.*

## Introduction[1]

A visitor to Room 54 of London's National Gallery will come face-to-face with two "exemplary women of antiquity", depicted as "fictive bronzes" – paintings made to look like bronze reliefs. One of these women, part of a cycle of four images, is enigmatically named "A Woman Drinking" (c. 1495-1500) in the National Gallery's catalogue (*Figure* 1). It most likely represents Sophonisba. In the past, the authenticity of this painting had been questioned, and its subject has at times been thought to be a personified Autumn or the Carian queen Artemisia II. However, the consensus is now that the painting is by Andrea Mantegna (c. 1431-1506) and that it shows the Carthaginian noblewoman Sophonisba, the subject of this special issue.[2] I start with Mantegna's painting for two main reasons. Firstly, the fact that Sophonisba can be numbered among the four exemplary women of antiquity, alongside her compatriot Dido, Tuccia the Roman Vestal Virgin, and the Biblical

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[1] The research for this article was carried out thanks to the generous support of a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship. This article was submitted prior to Robert Clines' excellent 2023 article on the question of the racialisation of Sophonisba in Petrarch's *Africa* being published in *postmedieval*. Although I have tried to take Clines' article into account, his use of Fanon's concept of the epidermalization of race contributes much to discussions of the Sophonisba of the *Africa*, which cannot fully be addressed in this article.

[2] Tietze-Conrat 1955, 186.

heroine Judith, is significant for reasons that I will explore in this article. Secondly, the fact that she is represented as a virtuous woman, adjacent to Europeanness, is equally noteworthy. In this article, I will explore how Sophonisba was transformed into the exemplary woman of Mantegna's fictive bronze, what this says about developing ideas around "race" in the Renaissance, and how this impacts upon later versions of Sophonisba.

I begin by raising some considerations on "race" in pre-modern representations of Sophonisba before moving on to outline the ancient literary representations of Sophonisba that shaped her characterisation in early Renaissance texts. Petrarch's reception of these texts in his Latin epic, the *Africa* (c.1338-1350s), in his Latin biography of Scipio in *De viribus illustris* (1338-1357), and in his Italian poem *Triumphus Cupidinis* (1351-1374), I suggest, were of pivotal importance in representations of the Punic woman in the subsequent centuries. Part of this investigation involves looking at how Sophonisba is positioned in Petrarch's texts as a substitute for the Carthaginian founder-queen Dido, as portrayed in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Finally, I explore how Mantegna's painting indicates a shift in perceptions of Sophonisba and consider possible reasons behind this shift. Refracted by so many historical lenses, we might very well therefore ask: who was Sophonisba in reality?

While the relationship between Petrarch's Sophonisba and Virgil's Dido has been well-discussed in existing scholarship,[3] and a 2021 article by Ronald Martinez has foregrounded the theme of antisemitism and anti-Islamic prejudice in the *Africa* (although not addressing the Sophonisba episode),[4] this article represents the first attempt to situate Petrarch's version of the Carthaginian woman in relation to developing conceptions of "race".[5] Why, for example, can Petrarch represent Dido as virtuous and assimilable to Roman and Christian constructions of virtue, but Sophonisba remains irreconcilably "Other"? How, furthermore, are we to account for Sophonisba's threatening alterity at the same time as accepting her idealised somatic beauty, equivalent to Petrarch's own beloved, and *Italian*, Laura? What are we to make of the notion that, by the time of Mantegna, Sophonisba is indistinguishable from a generic, tragic woman? Such questions require a closer look at what I mean when I talk about "race" in the context of Petrarch's texts.

[3] Wilhelm 1976; Simpson 2006; Cazeaux 2015.

[4] Martinez 2021.

[5] See, however, Gilman 1997, who suggests that questions of race and historicity are subordinated to Petrarch's representation of Sophonisba as a generic seductress.

## Sophonisba and the question of "race"

Sophonisba was a Carthaginian, a people of Phoenician, Near Eastern origins who migrated to the North African coast sometime in the late second millennium BCE or early first millennium BCE, depending on which foundation myth you choose.[6] In ancient Greek and Latin literature, Phoenicians and Carthaginians were subject to a range of negative stereotypes, chief among which being perfidy, treachery and cruelty.[7] Livy's description of Hannibal is emblematic as a caricature of the Carthaginian character:

> Has tantas viri virtutes ingentia vitia aequabant, inhumana crudelitas, perfidia plus quam Punica, nihil veri, nihil sancti, nullus deum metus, nullum ius iurandum, nulla religio. (21.4.9)
>
> The enormous vices of this man equalled his great virtues: inhuman cruelty, a perfidy more than Punic, he held no respect for the truth or the sacred, had no fear of the gods, no adherence to oaths, and no religious convictions.[8]

The distinction between "Punic", here an adjective to refer to Hannibal's *perfidia*, and "Carthaginian" is a notable one. George Franko suggests that *poenus*, 'Punic', is commonly an ethnic tag, frequently with negative connotations, while *Carthaginiensis*, "Carthaginian", is a more neutral, civic one, referring to Carthage as a city of origin, rather than ethnic identity.[9] Jonathan Prag suggests that the negative stereotypes attached to the ethnic tag of *poenus* played a role in the development of antisemitic stereotypes in early modernity:

> The overwhelmingly negative image of early modern, anti-Semitic [*sic*.] accounts finds its justification and reinforcement in the ancient texts, in the commonplace *perfidia plus quam punica*.[10]

If there is a relationship between representations of Carthaginians in classical Latin literature and antisemitic stereotypes in early modernity, the role of Petrarch's depictions of the Punic people therefore occupies a pivotal space. The concept of "race" thus lurks underneath the surface of Petrarch's portrayal of Sophonisba.

"Race", in the words of Michael Omi and Howard Winant in their important 1986 work *Racial Formation in the United States* is a "way of making up people. It is socially constructed, and its contours shift through

[6] See Quinn 2017. App. *Pun.* 1. lays out the different foundation legends.
[7] Isaac 2004, 324-351.
[8] All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.
[9] Franko 1994.
[10] Prag 2006, 2.

time and space". The process of racialisation involves making people Other which in turn justifies structural oppression, expropriation and/or extermination. While "race" is tied to so-called phenotypes – observable biological traits such as skin colour, hair texture, or the shape of facial features – these phenotypes are historically mutable and shift in meaning in social life. Generally speaking, "race" as we understand it today is considered a modern phenomenon arising during the Enlightenment. For example, Omi and Winant see Christian hostility towards Jews and Muslims as distinct from racial formation since these were antagonisms structured along religious rather than racial lines.[11]

There are a number of ways in which Petrarch's representation of Punic alterity, embodied by Sophonisba, complicates and is complicated by Omi and Winant's widely accepted conception of race. Firstly, phenotype plays little role in Petrarch's representation of Sophonisba. In fact, when Petrarch does draw attention to the physical appearance of Carthaginians, it is to flatten the somatic difference between Sophonisba and an idealised Italian woman. Secondly, although Ronald Martinez has shown how antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiment comes into play in Petrarch's depiction of the Punic Wars,[12] thus supporting Jonathan Prag's suggestion quoted above, Carthage was not a Jewish city. Therefore, Omi and Winant's assertion that Christian hostility towards Muslim and Jewish people is not properly race-based but religious runs into a problem. What happens when religious prejudice is translated into a racial one? I use the term "racial" rather than "ethnic" advisedly. Ancient Roman and Petrarch's representations of Carthage and Carthaginians promotes an image of alterity and attaches negative traits to geographic origin. These negative traits are transferable from generation to generation, such that Carthage's "semitic" character allows for similar stereotypes to be attached to early modern Jewish communities. Finally, Petrarch's prejudice against Carthage is not religious. It is based on the idea of a "semitic" race to which Jewish and Muslim people also belong.

Nancy Bisaha argues that Petrarch's representation of "the East", which I expand to North Africa in order to take account of Carthage, served to assert cultural supremacy over the East at a time when Europe lacked political hegemony in the eastern Mediterranean, especially after the rise of the empires of Islam. In some respects, Bisaha suggests, Petrarch can be seen as a bridge between classical constructions of the East and West, and later colonial discourses.[13] Bisaha does not consider Petrarch's representations of Carthage or Carthaginians when formulating her argument. This article

[11] Omi and Winant 2015, 4, 110-113.
[12] Martinez, 2021.
[13] Bisaha 2001, 286.

therefore also aims to address this absence and to build on Bisaha's work.

Petrarch's Sophonisba then is an especially illuminating figure through which to explore the development of such discourses. Before I move on to Sophonisba in Petrarch, however, it is necessary to outline the ancient source material to which Petrarch had access.

## Sophonisba in ancient literature

Sophonisba was the daughter of Hasdrubal, a Carthaginian general who fought against Rome during the Second Punic War (218-201 BCE). Sophonisba was married to the Numidian king Syphax of the Masaesyli tribe, who became allied to Rome. However, under the influence of his marriage to the Carthaginian noblewoman, he switches to the Carthaginian side. In 203 BCE Syphax is then defeated and handed over to the Romans by Massinissa, another Numidian king ruling the Massyli confederation. At this stage of the war, Massinissa is allied to Rome, although he initially fought against Scipio in Spain. Upon entering Cirta, Syphax's capital, Massinissa meets Sophonisba, who begs him not to hand her over to the Romans. Massinissa agrees and marries Sophonisba. However, Scipio prevails upon him to remember his loyalty to Rome and to give her up to the Romans to be paraded in triumph. In order to keep his word to both Scipio and Sophonisba, Massinissa has poison sent to his new wife, which she willingly accepts as a wedding gift, drinking it to avoid the shame of capture.

For Petrarch, the Roman historian Livy's *Ab urbe condita* (27-9 BCE) is the most important text to treat the story of Sophonisba. Livy expands on Polybius' earlier, Greek-language account significantly, elevating it to the status of a moralising drama, imbued with the language of elegy.[14] Jacqueline Fabre-Serris indicates that we do not know how Livy first found out about the story of Massinissa and Sophonisba, suggesting possible sources in Coelius Antipater or Valerius Antias.[15] As with Polybius' account, Sophonisba and Massinissa first meet after Syphax's defeat. Also, like Polybius, Livy characterises Syphax as emotionally fickle and driven by libidinous impulses, and this due to his ethnic identity, telling us that "the

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[14] Haley 1989; Fabre-Serris 2021. The Greek historian Polybius, who accompanied Scipio the Younger on his campaign during the Third Punic War (149-146 BCE), gives us our earliest surviving source for the life of Sophonisba. In Polybius' account Sophonisba and Massinissa meet for the first time upon the latter's capture of Cirta in 203 BCE. Sophonisba's appearance is brief and she remains unnamed, referred to instead as "the girl" (παιδίσκη). More illuminating is how Syphax and his relationship with Sophonisba is represented. Scipio, hoping that Syphax's infatuation with his new wife might have worn off, knows "both the easily-pleased nature of the Numidians and their faithlessness to gods and men" (Polybius 14.1).

[15] Fabre-Serris 2021, 95.

Numidians are immoderate in love, beyond all other barbarians" (*sunt ante omnes barbaros Numidae effusi in uenerem*, 29.23.4). After Syphax's defeat and capture, Massinissa enters Cirta, where he meets Sophonisba on the very threshold – *in ipso limine* (30.12.11) – of the palace. This is the first point in Livy's narrative at which Sophonisba is named. She begs Massinissa not to give her up to the Romans, even if her death be the only thing to prevent it, appealing to their common Africanity. At this point, Livy describes Sophonisba's physical appearance: she is of remarkable beauty and at the most flourishing age (*forma erat insignis et florentissima aetas*, 30.12.17). Again, Livy emphasises the libidinousness of the Numidians, this time with reference to Massinissa:

> ut est genus Numidarum in uenerem praeceps, amore captiuae uictor captus (30.12.18)
>
> As the Numidian race are inclined to matters of love, the victor was captured by love to the captive.[16]

The juxtaposition of *captivae victor captus* draws attention to the inversion of the natural order of things. Not only is it the case that Sophonisba, the defeated, is now vanquishing the conqueror, Massinissa, but it is also a woman influencing the actions of the male.[17] This inversion is rectified by Scipio's exemplary sexual continence and with the Roman commander's injunction upon Massinissa to give up Sophonisba.

The Livian Sophonisba forms part of a triptych of dangerous African queens who stand in opposition to Roman imperial power, along with the Virgilian Dido and Cleopatra whose representations in Augustan Latin texts share key characteristics.[18] The story of Virgil's Dido as presented in the *Aeneid* (29-19 BCE) is well known. Aeneas, the Trojan prince fleeing the destruction of his city, sets sail to found a new homeland, along with other survivors from Troy. He is washed up after a storm on the shores of North Africa, where he meets Dido. Dido is a Phoenician queen, also an exile and refugee, who is in the process of founding a new city, Carthage, when Aeneas meets her. Through the interference of the gods, she falls in love with Aeneas,

[16] Cf. Horace, *Ep.* 2.1.156: *Graeca capta ferum victorem cepit*, and Propertius 3.11.16, on Achilles being seized by love for the defeated Penthesilea. See also Ov. *Met*. 3.95; *Epist.* 9.2; Luc. 10.6, which Fera 1984, 156 suggests took inspiration from Livy 30.12.18. See also Petrarch *Canzone* 232.1: "Vincitore Alexandro l' ira vines" (anger conquered Alexander the conqueror).

[17] Fabre-Serris 2021 suggests that this inversion is taken from the language of elegy, along with Massinissa's amorous *furor*. Cf. *furor* in the Medea of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Seneca's *Medea*. See Auhagen 2005.

[18] Wilhelm 1976; Haley 1989; 1993; Cazeaux 2015. Petrarch saw Sophonisba and Cleopatra as sharing certain characteristics. See *Fam.* 18.7.3.

who is compelled, again by the gods, to leave her, sailing away to pursue his destiny of founding a new homeland for the Trojans. In rage and despair, Dido kills herself, but not before cursing Aeneas and his descendants, calling forth a future avenger, the here-unnamed Hannibal, to pursue the Romans with fire and iron. In an influential article, Nicholas Horsfall suggests that Virgil's depiction of Carthage's founding queen embodied deeply held Roman hatred towards, and fear of, Carthage, despite the North African city having been destroyed more than a century prior to Virgil's commencing writing the *Aeneid*.[19] Virgil's Dido has been shown to show deep intertextual links with the African woman who posed the greatest threat to Augustan imperial power: Cleopatra.[20] This triadic relationship between these African queens went on to play, as we will see, a major role in shaping representations of Sophonisba in the early Renaissance, particularly in Petrarch's writing.

The later, Greek-language historians of Rome, Appian and Diodorus Siculus give us an alternative narrative to that presented by Livy and Polybius, in which Sophonisba had already been betrothed to Massinissa, and in the case of Diodorus, even married, before she is wedded to Syphax. These competing traditions would shape differing reimaginations of Sophonisba in the late Middle Ages and in early modernity. However, it would be the Polybius-inflected account of Livy which influenced the most significant Sophonisba of the late Middle Ages or the early Renaissance: that of Petrarch.

## Petrarch's Sophonisba

Sophonisba appears in three of Petrarch's texts: in the *Life of Scipio* within the Latin anthology *De viris illustribus* (On Illustrious Men); in the Latin epic of the Second Punic War, the *Africa*; and in the Italian poem, *Triumphus Cupidinis* (The Triumph of Love), part of series of allegorical poems themed around the triumph of different virtues and entities. Since his treatment of the story of Sophonisba is fullest in the *Africa*, it is this epic that will take up most of my discussion in this section.

Petrarch was a keen reader of Livy and is credited with reconstructing much of the Latin text of *Ab urbe condita* that we have today.[21] Such was Petrarch's dedication to Livy that, in a series of letters written to Roman authors such as Virgil, Cicero, and Varro, alongside Homer as the sole Greek representative, Petrarch also addressed the long-deceased historian over whose works he had laboured so much in his twenties. In his letter to Livy (*Fam*. 14.8), Petrarch bemoans the fact that he was not born in ancient Rome,

[19] Horsfall 2020.

[20] See, for example, Benario 1970 on Dido in the *Aeneid* and Cleopatra in Hor. *Carm.* 1.37; Hexter 1992; Haley 1993.

[21] Billlanovich 1951; Mann 1984, 29-30.

before explaining his own efforts to restore Livy's text. Since Petrarch's ability to read Greek was insufficient for any Greek text – be it Polybius, Appian, or Diodorus Siculus, none of whom was accessible in Latin at the time – to inform his representations of Sophonisba, and in the context of his devotion to Livy, the reasons for Livy being his primary source for Sophonisba are abundantly clear.

I will begin with *De viris illustribus*, the inspiration for which Petrarch claimed was his first visit to Rome in 1337 (*Fam.* 2.14), and which prompted his younger contemporary fellow-poet, Giovanni Boccaccio, to respond with his *De mulieribus claris* (On Famous Women, 1361-2). Within the first book of *De viris*, which is concerned with figures from classical antiquity, the life of Scipio is the second longest after Caesar's, and it is here that we read of Sophonisba.[22] In this version of Sophonisba's story, Petrarch follows Livy's account very closely, introducing her in very similar language, meeting Massinissa on the threshold (*in limine*) of Syphax's palace and as being "of an illustrious family and flourishing age, and excellent in the shape of her body" (*genere clara et etate florens et forma corporis excellens*, 21.6.54). The rest of the account given in Petrarch's *Life of Scipio* continues to closely follow Livy, including references to the Numidian tendency towards lustful behaviour (21.6.56), and the emphasis on the inversion caused by the conquered Sophonisba conquering the heart of the conqueror Massinissa (*ibid.*).

The *Africa*, a nine-book epic poem about the Second Punic War, which Petrarch began around 1337, inspired by the same trip to Rome, is where Sophonisba starts to take on features which make her more than just a supporting character in the *Life of Scipio*. There are diverging readings of the Sophonisba of the *Africa*, with Craig Kallendorf, for example seeing her as "an evil character by the *Africa*'s standards",[23] while Donald Gilman rehabilitates her to an extent by suggesting that she demonstrates many of the virtues for which Scipio is praised: devotion to her homeland and to her father.[24] I suggest that it is difficult to maintain that she is to be read in a positive light, given that she is introduced in Book Five of the *Africa* as *malefida regina* (5.11), a faithless queen, in keeping with Punic stereotypes.[25] Carthage was a republic, and thus Sophonisba's characterisation as a queen

[22] Martellotti 1941; Bartuschat 2000, 113. The *Life of Scipio* comes down to us in three redactions, the first of which, written in 1341, the year in which Petrarch was laureated for the *Africa*, did not contain the story of Sophonisba. Instead, the story is inserted into the second redaction (1341-42).

[23] Kallendorf 1989, 40.

[24] Gilman 1997; cf. Elwert 1982; Visser 2005, 154-6.

[25] Cf. Dido as *male sana* (*Aen.* 5.8). See Visser 2005, 163. Auhagen 2005, 124-6 points to parallels between Sophonisba's story and Seneca's *Medea*.

serves to portray her in terms of Carthage's founding queen, Dido. Sophonisba's story occupies the entirety of the fifth book of the *Africa* and the beginning of the sixth book of Petrarch's epic, mirroring the insertion of the love story between Aeneas and Dido in Book Four of the *Aeneid*.[26]

As with Livy's account, Massinissa meets Sophonisba on the threshold of Syphax's palace in Cirta.

> Hec subitis turbata malis in limine uisa est
> Obuia uictori, si quam Fortuna pararet,
> Tentatura uiam dureque leuamina sortis. (Africa 5.12-14)

> She was seen on the threshold, distraught at the sudden misfortunes,
> Standing in the way of the victor. If fortune allowed her,
> She would try to find a way to alleviate this difficult situation.

According to Vicenzo Fera, "alleviations" (*levamina*, from *levare* – to lift) invites comparison with "falls" (*casus*, from *cadere* – to fall) thanks to their juxtaposition in Book Three of Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas is telling Dido about his ordeals between departing from Troy and arriving at Carthage.[27] Here, he tells Dido about the death of his father, Anchises, whom he describes as *omnis curae casusque levamen* (*Aen.* 3.709) – the alleviation of every worry and misfortune. Already, then, at the first encounter between Massinissa and Sophonisba, we are encouraged to bear in mind the meeting of Aeneas and Dido.

However, Petrarch's Sophonisba represents an even more subversive figure than Virgil's Dido, and this is underscored by Petrarch through constant and explicit references to Sophonisba's liminality. Thomas Greene points out that throughout its narration in the *Africa*, Massinissa's affair with Sophonisba is narrated in terms of crossing thresholds. After defeating Syphax, Massinissa enters Syphax's capital, Cirta, like a wolf entering a sheepfold, and meets Sophonisba, as in Livy's account, on the threshold *(Africa* 5.12, *in limine*). Similarly, when entering the citadel of Cirta, he passes the *secreta limina* (5.166). Scipio, when prevailing upon Massinissa to forsake his relationship with Sophonisba, speaks in the same terms, speaking of the "ruinous pleasure" of this forbidden love, which is able to bypass any barrier or "armed boundaries", *ferrata…limina* (5.410-11). At the end of Book Five, Sophonisba kills herself and at the beginning of Book Six, when we see her in the underworld, she is hesitating on the threshold of Hades (*sub ipso limine*, 6.51-52), an infernal mirroring of how she first met

[26] Bartuschat 2000, 116. See also Visser 2005, 202-3 for parallels between Massinissa and Aeneas.

[27] Fera 1984, 151.

Massinissa.[28] Witnessing Sophonisba in the underworld also calls to mind Aeneas' encounter with Dido in the underworld in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*.

The emphasis on Sophonisba's liminality draws attention to her transgressive nature and her power to subvert social relations, as emphasised by Petrarch's repetition of the trope of the conqueror being captivated by the captive, although the extremity of Massinissa's attraction to her is amplified and extended from Livy's account:

> […] Ilicet ergo
> Vulnus inardescens totis errare medullis
> Ceperat: estivo glacies ceu lenta sub estu,
> Cera vel ardenti facilis vicina camino,
> Liquitur ille tuens, captiva captus ab hoste,
> Victaque victorem potuit domuisse superbum. (*Africa* 5.270-5)

> […] Immediately a
> burning wound, making its way right through to his very marrow,
> took hold of Massinissa. Just like ice melts in the warm summer,
> or wax melts easily close to a burning forge,
> so he, looking at her, melted, captivated by the captive enemy,
> and the vanquished woman was able to subdue the proud victor.

Here, again, we are reminded of the intensity of emotion felt by Dido towards Aeneas, which is also characterised as a burning wound (*Aen*. 4.1-2). In the case of Sophonisba, however, it is a Carthaginian woman having this effect on a male hero, rather than vice versa. The sheer helplessness of Massinissa – like ice in summer or wax close to fire – emphasises Sophonisba's sexual power, made explicit by Petrarch reiterating the *captiva* / *captus* pairing inherited from Livy, but here put in immediate juxtaposition, with the *victa / victorem* contrast.[29] Sophonisba and Massinissa are bound by a "wild love" (*ferus amor*, 5.155), *ferus* being a word most frequently used in the *Africa* to describe Hannibal, as at *Africa* 2.30, or war (6.151), thus highlighting the threatening nature of their affair. Similarly, the love between Dido and Aeneas is also characterised as *ferus* in the *Aeneid*. For example, in a state of lovesickness, Dido has a dream in which she is pursued by Aeneas, who is described as *ferus* (*Aen.* 4.466). Later, while Dido contemplates a path of celibacy, she refers to such a choice as living a life *more ferae*, in the manner

[28] Greene, 1982b.

[29] This contrast is also made by Petrarch when referring to Hannibal's love for the Apulian *meretrix*. See *De viris* 1.17.46, 19.71; *Rem.* 1.69. For the imagery of melting snow in the *Canzoniere* see Corradini 1874, *ad loc.*

of a wild animal (*Aen.* 4.551).[30] By describing Sophonisba and Massinissa's romance in this manner, their love is not only doomed, but dangerous, since Dido's love for Aeneas ends not only with Dido's death, but also with an undying hatred between Carthage and Rome.

Sophonisba's subversiveness and liminality are further emphasised by Petrarch's description of her when Massinissa first encounters her. She looks like an idealised vision of beauty according to fourteenth-century Italian norms, as we will see, but appearances can be deceiving. The description of her starts from her head and moves down her body, as common in medieval descriptions of beauty:[31]

[…] Stabat candore niuali
Frons alto miranda Ioui, multumque sorori
Zelotipe metuenda magis quam pellicis ulla
Forma uiro dilecta uago. Fulgentior auro
Quolibet, et solis radiis factura pudorem,
Cesaries spargenda leui pendebat ab aura
Colla super, recto que sensim lactea tractu
Surgebant, humerosque agiles affusa tegebat
Tunc, olim substricta auro certamine blando
Et placidis implexa modis: sic candida dulcis
Cum croceis iungebat honos, mixtoque colori
Aurea condensi cessissent uascula lactis,
Nixque iugis radio solis conspecta sereni. (Africa 5.22-34)

[…] With its snowy whiteness
Her face was enough to astonish Jupiter on high,
and much more worrying for his jealous sister than
the beauty of any adulteress, pleasing to an unfaithful
husband. Brighter than any gold, and putting the sun's rays to shame,
her hair flowed down, spread by a light breeze
over her neck, which rose gradually in a straight milky line.
Her hair, falling, covered her slender shoulders,
and was then bound up carefully with smooth gold
and tied in a pleasing way. Thus, gentle whiteness
joined with the dignity of gold, and the golden strands
of hair fell into the vessels of milk,
the changeless snow lying beneath the rays of a bright sun.

[30] In his commentary to the *Aeneid*, Servius points to Pliny the Elder's description (*NH.* 8.43) of lynxes monogamy and celibacy after the death of their partners. Serv. *ad Aen.* 4.551.

[31] Raimondi 1970, 168.

For the first time, she is explicitly racialised as white.[32] Interestingly, the word used to refer to Sophonisba's hair, *cesaries*, was, in medieval lexicography, usually used to refer to the hair of men and animals, with *crinis* more usual for the hair of women.[33] Although Petrarch seems not to have observed such distinctions between the hair of men and women, using *cesaries* to refer to hair belonging to people of both genders (e.g., *Africa* 8.958-59 for men; *Epyst*. 1.2.15-16 for Rome personified as a woman), the ambiguity of the word here does speak to the ambivalent representation of Sophonisba, able to subvert gendered hierarchies. Similarly ambiguous, while *candida* might be translated as shining, fair, or beautiful, the comparison with milk and lilies makes it clear that here we are to understand Sophonisba as being white.[34]

However, despite this description of Sophonisba as physically attractive, there is something deeply sinister about her characterisation. In spite of her somatic white-washing, Petrarch is unable to fully suppress the fact of Sophonisba's Africanity. When introducing Sophonisba in terms of her physical beauty, Petrarch refers to her glance as being capable of turning hearts into "Medusan marble", such that "the African land did not lack a second monster" (*Africa nec monstris caruisset terra secundis.* 5.40).[35] Not only is Sophonisba adjacent to monstrosity, but this is an African monstrosity, since we hear of Perseus' slaying of Medusa among the African stories told by Syphax's bard in Book Three of the *Africa* (3.407-417). Moreover, as further proof of Sophonisba's sinister nature, she curses Scipio as she is about to drink her cup of poison at the end of Book Five in addition to Massinissa should he remain faithful to his allegiance to Rome (Ibid 5.748-766). In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dido foretells the coming of a nameless Punic avenger – Hannibal – who will rise up from her bones against Rome (*exoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor. Aen.* 4.625), the subject of Petrarch's epic. In a similar way Sophonisba curses Massinissa's family to internal strife, predicting his descendant Jugurtha's eventual defeat at the hand of Marius (*Africa* 5.763-766), both of whom of course remain unnamed in Sophonisba's prophecy. Petrarch thus makes Sophonisba represent the most dangerous elements of Virgil's Dido.

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[32] See Clines, 2023.

[33] Fera 1984, 152-3.

[34] Cf. the contrast between white snow (*nivem candidam*) and a black crow (*corvum nigrum*) in *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* (*Africa* 4.55). Cf., for example, *candida Dido* in Virg. *Aen.* 5.571, repeated in *Africa* 4.5, where *candida* can more reasonably read as "fair" or "radiant".

[35] See Corradini 1874, *ad loc.* for Medusa as an angry woman (*Canz.* 179) or a "heavenly breeze" (*l'aura celeste*) capable of freezing Petrarch to the spot (*Canz* 197). NB. "l'aura" and Laura. On this pun, see Greene 1982, 113.

This whitewashing of a North African woman would become more obvious when Sophonisba became a popular subject for paintings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but it is Petrarch who first describes her as white, influencing later visual representations of her. In this respect, Petrarch follows the tradition of French medieval Romances written and set at the time of the crusades. In these texts Saracen princesses – Saracen being a racialised and derogatory term for Muslim – are become explicitly described as white when they become the virtuous objects of desire for crusading knights. These white Muslim heroines display their virtue by betraying their family and faith – Muslim women who remain faithful to their kin and religion are represented as dark-skinned and ugly.[36] Petrarch, as a vocal proponent of a renewed crusade against Islam, exemplified in, for example, *Canzone* 27 or his *De vita solitaria*, doubtless drew parallels between Rome's wars against Carthage and Christendom's against the Muslim world.[37] In emphasizing her threatening liminality and her insidious seductiveness, Petrarch has to make Sophonisba legibly desirable to his readers, and this means making her white. This preempts the orientalizing trope of the odalisque, the harem woman with western complexion, which would come to play such an influential role in later imaginings of Cleopatra, and indeed Sophonisba, in visual arts.[38]

Further considerations exist about the whitewashing of Sophonisba. For example, there are certain physical similarities between the *Africa*'s Sophonisba and Petrarch's characterisation of Laura, the beloved of the *Canzoniere*. Similar to Sophonisba's snowy complexion, Laura is described as having "a head of pure gold and a face of hot snow" (*la testa òr fino, et calda neve il volto*, *Canz.* 157, l. 9).[39] The effect of Petrarch's affection for Laura is comparable to Sophonisba's power over Massinissa, as for example in *Canzone* 211 in which Petrarch describes first setting eyes on Laura and being pulled along by pleasure (*piace mi tirar*), his reason dead (*la ragion e morta*). Petrarch's love for Laura is impossible in the same way Massinissa's love for Sophonisba is.[40]

However, the characters of Laura and Sophonisba greatly differ. Laura is almost perfectly virtuous, and it is Petrarch's love for her which is at fault, rather than there being any sense of her actively seeking to seduce Petrarch, as Sophonisba does Massinissa (see *Secretum* 4.1). Aldo Bernardo points to

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[36] De Weever 1998.

[37] See Martinez 2021, 20-22.

[38] See Carlà-Uhink and Wieber 2020; Brown 2004.

[39] Laura's blond hair is mentioned in numerous poems of the *Canzoniere*, for example 1, 12, 90. 185, 196, 197. See also Raimondi 1970, 181-7 and Corradini 1874*, ad loc*.

[40] Bartuschat 2000, 119-20. See also Auhagen 2005, 131-2 for Petrarch's possible identification with Massinissa.

Sophonisba's descent to Hades at the beginning of Book Six of the *Africa* as the inverse of Laura's ascent into heaven in *Canzone* 346.[41] Where Laura is surrounded by angels and the blessed spirits (*l'anime beate*) who marvel at her beauty upon her arrival in paradise, Sophonisba, descending to the underworld as a *violentus spriritus (Africa* 5.773), is surrounded by crowds of Carthaginians (*agmina Penarum*. *Africa* 6.5) and the Furies. Sophonisba as a "violent sprit" in some respects corresponds with Dido, in the *Africa*, being referred to as *ferox* (3.424), a word with generally negative, un-Roman connotations in Petrarch's epic. Petrarch's use of the adjective also places Dido in conversation with that other dangerous African queen, Cleopatra, who is described by Horace (*Carm.* 1.37.29) as *ferocior* – more fierce – for her deliberate death.[42] *Ferox,* its cognate *ferus*, and *violentus* being adjectives associated with African women in Petrarch's epic, contributes to a semantic field of wildness and savagery into which Sophonisba, and by extension Dido and Cleopatra, are placed.

After her descent to the underworld in the sixth book of the *Africa*, Sophonisba is condemned to the third circle of hell, reserved for those whose lives were governed by love, rather than the second circle, where those who kill themselves are confined, as Rhadamanthus, one of the keepers of hell, initially rules before being overruled by Aeacus, another of hell's guardians. Although, in Dante's *Divina Commedia* it is the second circle of hell that is reserved for those guilty of lust, this is also the circle in which we find his Dido (*Inferno* 13.61-62), a representation of the Punic queen that follows the Virgilian tradition. In Dante's *Inferno*, Dido is *placed* alongside Cleopatra, among others, in the second circle.[43] However, when the *Africa*'s Sophonisba descends to this third cell of hell, Dido is missing from the number of legendary lovers encountered by Sophonisba.

The absence of Dido can be explained by the *Africa*'s resistance to the Virgilian model of the Carthaginian queen, whose story I outlined earlier. In a letter penned in his old age to a younger poet, Petrarch claimed to be the first of his era to "shatter the lie" of the Virgilian Dido (*Sen.* 4.5), restoring the 'historical' Dido of earlier authors. As Ralph Hexter suggests, this claim does not hold much water. Anyone who had access to Servius (*ad Aen.* 1.267), and indeed to Augustine (*Conf.* 1.13), Macrobius (*Sat.* 5.17.5), or Jerome (*Ep.* 123.7), would also have known the chaste Dido.[44] Prior to the *Aeneid* there was another tradition of the Dido story in which she never met Aeneas, since

[41] Bernardo 1962, 30 n.7.
[42] Fratantuono (2007) 119.
[43] On Dante's Dido, see Desmond 1994, 94-98.
[44] Hexter 1992.

Dido's foundation of Carthage and the fall of Troy are traditionally dated to be three hundred and forty years apart, according to Servius.[45]

The relationship between the *Africa*'s Sophonisba and Petrarch's pre-Virgilian Dido bears further consideration. The *Africa* presents us with both a negative and positive representation of Dido. For example, in Book One, during Scipio's dream in which he is visited by the spirits of his deceased father and uncle, the elder Scipio says to his son,

> […] viden illa sub Austro
> menia et infami periura palatia monte
> femineis fundata dolis? (Africa 1.180-3)

> Do you see those walls in the south
> And that perjured palace set on an infamous mountain
> Founded by feminine trickery?

Of course, this is Publius Cornelius Scipio speaking. As a Roman who died fighting Carthage, the antipathy towards the Punic city and its founding queen that he demonstrates here are understandable. The trickery that Scipio's father here refers to is Dido's ingenious solution to being granted as much land as is covered by an ox-hide by cutting the hide into strips that could then encircle the Byrsa, the citadel of Carthage, βύρσα being the Greek for "ox-hide" (Virg. *Aen*. 1.365-8). While this does not necessarily contradict the pre-Virgilian Dido found elsewhere in the *Africa*, it does at least portray her in a more negative light than is found in Book Three of the *Africa*. In this book of the epic, Scipio's lieutenant Laelius has been sent to lead a delegation to the Numidian king Syphax in order to secure his allegiance against Carthage.[46] As part of this diplomatic mission, Syphax's bard and Laelius trade exemplary stories, an African one for a Roman one. The pattern of exemplary Roman deeds being mirrored by foreign ones closely follows Valerius Maximus' *Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium libri* (Books of Memorable Deeds and Sayings), a work more explicitly emulated by Petrarch in his *Rerum memorandarum libri*. The story of Dido presented here is explicitly pre-Virgilian, with Dido choosing death over dishonouring her dead husband by marrying a local African king. The bard acknowledges that an alternative version of Dido will one day come to differ from the virtuous queen presented here:

[45] On the "historical Dido" see Davidson 1998. Boccaccio would also come to represent Dido along the lines of the "historical" version in the 1350s, during which time he read Servius' commentary on the *Aeneid* and met Petrarch. See Cerbo, 1979. See also Desmond, 1994 for a broader discussion on the reception of Dido in the early modern period.

[46] In Livy 28.17 it is Scipio himself, rather than Laelius, who goes to Syphax's palace.

> Huic fiat, si forte aliquis - quod credere non est -
> Ingenio confisus erit, qui carmine sacrum
> Nomen ad illicitos ludens traducat amores! (*Africa* 3.425-7)

> What will happen to her, if by chance there be someone
> – this is unbelievable – who, confident in his skill, will in a poem
> drag Dido's sacred name into illicit loves.[47]

This skilful poet is Virgil, although Anna Cerbo in her study of Dido in Boccaccio's work suggests it may be Dante, and his representation of Dido in the *Commedia*.[48] The unreliability of Virgil's representation of Dido also shows up in Petrarch's *Secretum* in which Saint Augustine chastises Petrarch for his excessive desire for Laura. Augustine uses Virgil's Dido as an example of the effects of such desire, saying that Dido burned with love (*ardet amans Dido*), even if what the poet wrote is a total fabrication (*fabulosa narratio tota sit*. *Secretum* 5.12).[49] The frequent reference to the pre-Virgilian, "historical" model for the founding queen of Carthage in the *Africa* as well as the *Triumphus Pudicitie* and the *Secretum* opens up for Petrarch a space to be occupied by an African woman in the tradition of the Dido of the *Aeneid*: one given over to her libidinous impulses, who threatens the progress of Roman imperialism, and whose suicide is accompanied by an undying hostility towards Rome. The fact that the Sophonisba of the *Africa* takes the place of the Dido of the *Aeneid* allows for Petrarch to represent Dido as the virtuous founding figure found in the competing tradition to Virgil's. As we will see, if Dido could so effectively be rehabilitated in the imaginary of early Renaissance authors such as Petrarch and Boccaccio, then Sophonisba could later benefit from this same revisionary phenomenon.

Besides showing how representations of North African women – principally Dido – shaped the Sophonisba of the *Africa*, her characterisation also allows Petrarch to construct different forms of racialised masculinities around her. He emphasises the fact that North African men are those most prone to lustful behaviour, in this regard following Polybius and Livy's account of this episode. In the *Africa*, the description of Sophonisba is from Massinissa's point of view and is characterised by its prevailing tone of lasciviousness. Massinissa's racialised lack of discretion is contrasted with Scipio's exemplary masculine chasteness which is later mobilised to persuade

[47] See Corradini 1874, *ad loc.*

[48] Cerbo 1979, 181.

[49] Cf. Dido in Servius' commentary to the *Aeneid*, a late antique source much used by Petrarch and other early humanists. Servius ad *Aen*. 4.36; 4.674. On Servius and other Virgilian commentators in shaping twelfth-century Latin epic, see Haynes 2021. On Petrarch's "Ambrosian Virgil" which included Servius's commentary, see Mann 1984.

Massinissa to forsake Sophonisba and to help Syphax to see the error of his ways in betraying his allegiance to Rome for the sake of Sophonisba.

In the second book of his poem *Triumphus Cupidinis*, Petrarch again introduces us to Massinissa and Sophonisba. The poem takes the shape of Petrarch observing a triumphal procession, led by Love himself, trailed by his famous victims. Among the parade of the vanquished, he notices a pair who are marked out by their "strange dress" and "foreign speech" (*Triumphus Cupidinis*, 2.7). Although marked out as different by their clothes and language, with Sophonisba further distinguished by her hatred for Rome, no mention is made to any somatic difference. By comparison, later in the same book of the *Triumphus Cupidinis*, Andromeda is described as a "dark (haired) maiden" (*vergine bruna*). In the *Triumphus Cupidinis*, Massinissa narrates to Petrarch the story of his love with Sophonisba, while Sophonisba maintains her silence, breaking it only to declare her hatred for Rome (lines 77-78). The resentful silence of the spirit of Sophonisba in the *Triumphus Cupidinis*, along with her professed hatred for Rome, once more puts Sophonisba in dialogue with the Dido of the *Aeneid*, whose spirit in the underworld refuses to speak to Aeneas. The suggestion that Massinissa's and Sophonisba's difference lies in clothes, language, and character, but not physical appearance, is reinforced by art from the century following Petrarch's career.

Sophonisba also features in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, Boccaccio's answer to Petrarch's *De viris illustribus* mentioned earlier. Boccaccio's narrative of Sophonisba essentially paraphrases Livy's account, complete with the representation of the North African men in her life as hypersexual. Such characterisations of African male hypersexuality are also present in Boccaccio's narration of Dido, which, following Petrarch, follows the pre-Virgilian tradition of a virtuous, chaste queen who never met Aeneas. Here, the Numidian king Iarbus' love for Dido is explained by the fact that African men are most prone to lust (*cum in libidinem pronissimi homines Affri sint. De mulieribus* 42.10). In Boccaccio's accounts, therefore, there are clear parallels between Sophonisba's story, and that of the virtuous pre-Virgilian Dido, both subject to the hypersexuality of Numidian men but responding to it in different ways.[50] However, if, in Petrarch's and Boccaccio's later writing, Dido is held up as a "positive" image of femininity and Sophonisba as its "negative" counterpart, this would later be inverted. By the later Renaissance, the Virgilian Dido had become the hegemonic version once again, and Sophonisba had been transformed into the tragic victim in Appian and Diodorus Siculus.

[50] On Boccaccio's Dido, see Desmond 1994, 58-73.

### A white-washed Sophonisba?

A key document for the changing attitudes towards the figure of Sophonisba is the painting by Andrea Mantegna with which I began my article. I suggest that although Mantegna's work engaged with Petrarch's poetry in a sustained and profound way, his representation of Sophonisba breaks away from the Livian narrative favoured by Petrarch, and indeed Boccaccio, and plays a part in shaping her characterisation in dramatic texts of the following centuries. Mantegna is critical in post-Petrarchan versions of Sophonisba. Not only was he a close reader of Petrarch's *Triumphi*, but he was significantly associated with the Gonzaga court of Mantua, from which the earliest dramatic representations of Sophonisba emerged. He therefore stands between these two moments and competing strands of Renaissance representations of the Carthaginian woman.

Mantegna was a keen antiquarian whose works were deeply influenced by the remains of Roman antiquity.[51] His fixation upon the ruins of Rome finds a precedent in Petrarch's fascination with the ruinscape of the imperial city, as expressed, for example, in Petrarch's letter to Giovanni Colonna (*Fam.* 6.2). The inspiration for Mantegna's paintings of Roman triumphs, including the "Triumphs of Caesar", which Vasari saw as Mantegna's greatest achievement and are now in Hampton Court Palace, can probably be attributed to Petrarch's representations of triumphs.[52] These nine large paintings were commissioned by Mantua's Gonzaga family between 1484 and 1492, prior to the exemplary women of which Sophonisba is a member.

The fictive bronzes of Sophonisba and Tuccia the vestal virgin were at one point thought to accompany another representation of a triumph, this time one associated with Scipio (*Figure* 2), painted by Mantegna from 1505 onwards for Francesco Cornaro in Venice.[53] The painting shows the introduction of the worship of the goddess Cybele into the city of Rome in 204 BCE (Livy 21.10,11,14; Ovid *Fast.* 4.30) and being welcomed into the city by Scipio Nasica, cousin of Scipio Africanus. According to Burckhardt, the Cornaro family believed themselves to be descended from the Cornelii, the family of which Scipio Africanus was a member.[54] Given the subject matter of this painting, it would certainly make sense for Sophonisba to be included within this context, although Tuccia has a less immediately relevant subject matter. All four exemplary women painted by Mantegna feature in Petrarch's *Triumphi*: Dido and Tuccia in the *Triumphus Pudicitie* (1343-44); Judith and

[51] See Bodon 2010.
[52] See Martindale 1979, 47-55 on triumphs in the early Renaissance.
[53] Lucco 2006, 94.
[54] Burckhardt 1990, 127.

Sophonisba in the *Triumphus Cupidinis*.[55] In Mantegna's painting of Dido, she is shown holding the funerary urn of her husband Sychaeus, making it explicit that we are viewing the pre-Virgilian representation of her as also depicted in Petrarch's *Triumphus Pudicitie.*[56] Mantegna's Sophonisba is more challenging to interpret. In the *Triumphus Cupidinis*, Petrarch recognises Sophonisba and Massinissa because of their strange dress (*Triumphus Cupidinis* 2.7), yet in Mantegna's paintings, she is dressed as a virtuous Italian matron, without the exoticized accoutrements of, for example, Dido in this same series of paintings, who wears splendid jewellery and a crown.

As mentioned in the introduction, Mantegna's Sophonisba has occasionally been identified as Artemisia II, queen of Caria in Asia Minor, who is reputed to have designed the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus for her dead husband (and elder brother) Mausolus.[57] Matthew Sears describes Artemisia as belonging to a "philhellenic Persian dynasty", and in iconography, she is depicted in Greek attire.[58] According to Valerius Maximus (4.6 *ext.*), Artemisia was so distraught by the death of her husband-brother that she mixed his ashes into her daily drink, which is what may be shown in Mantegna's painting. However, the uncertainty as to whether this is Sophonisba or a Hellenised queen is significant in itself. Although Carthage was also influenced by Hellenic culture, in the iconography of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it is substantially orientalised.[59] Already in Mantegna's painting, Sophonisba or Artemisia is starting to lose the morality-based alterity which marks her in Petrarch's representations, facilitating her transformation into a generic tragic woman. By the time of Giovanni Battista Zelotti's 1565 frescoes in the Sophonisba Room in Villa Caldogno, in Caldogno, Italy, Sophonisba had become a generic, tragic woman, no longer marked by her North African identity.

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[55] Lucco 2006, 96.

[56] See Franklin 2000.

[57] Franklin 2000, 119 n.2. Rembrandt's "Artemisia" (1634) has similarly been thought to represent Sophonisba. See Golhany 2000. Artemisia appears in the *Triumphus Cupidinis* III, and Petrarch also wrote about her in his *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae*, and her story is told by Boccaccio in *De mulieribus claris* and *De casibus virorum illustrium.* See Lummus 2017, 464-465.

[58] Sears 2014, 213.

[59] On Hellenised Punic material culture, see Acquaro 1986. On orientalised representations of Carthage, cf. the near-contemporaneous frescoes by Jacopo Ripanda (attr.) in the Capitoline Museums' Hall of Hannibal.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced Petrarch's reception of the story of Sophonisba, as he encountered it in Livy, through three of his texts that include the Carthaginian woman, especially the *Africa*. Petrarch's emphasis on the story of Sophonisba impacted Boccaccio's *De mulieribus* as well as Mantegna's fictive bronzes, via Petrarch's *Triumphs*. I suggest, in closing, that Petrarch's presentation of Sophonisba's and Massinissa's romance highlights anxieties around miscegenation – the biological reproduction between people of different "races". Although Carthage was founded by migrants from the Levant, and thus frequently seen as not properly African in classical Latin texts such as the *Aeneid*, Petrarch frequently conflates Carthage and Africa. Thus, for Massinissa – a Numidian – to be romantically involved with a Carthaginian does not automatically trouble any proto-racial boundaries. In order to present this romance as the threat that it is to Massinissa's character and his allegiance to Rome, the attraction exerted by Sophonisba on Massinissa must be made to be subversive. This subversion is represented by Sophonisba's ability to crossing boundaries, including racial ones. Numidian alterity, when compared with Romans, is emphasised. Petrarch, in keeping with his classical sources, presents Numidians as fickle and hypersexual, contrasted with Scipio's pious chasteness. Carthaginians are Other too, mainly due to their perfidy and cruelty. However, in order to accentuate the boundary-crossing subversiveness of Sophonisba and Massinissa's affair, as well as to emphasise Sophonisba's attractiveness, she is made to be white. Although Massinissa is not explicitly described as having darker skin, a well-travelled fourteenth-century Italian such as Petrarch would have known that North Africans generally have darker complexions. Thus, Massinissa's phenotypic alterity is to be taken for granted, whereas Sophonisba's whiteness is not, hence the extended description of her appearance. Indeed, in later Renaissance visual depictions of Sophonisba – such as Zelotti's – she is shown to be white and contrasted with darker Carthaginians and Numidians. This also corresponded with a gradual reframing of Sophonisba as an innocent victim of a tragic love, rather than a subversive schemer.

Mantegna's painting demonstrates a particular moment in this development. By the time Mantegna depicted Sophonisba, the first Latin translation of Appian's works had been published by Petrus Candidus in 1452, thus allowing non-Greek readers access to the other version of Sophonisba's story, in which she appears as a more virtuous, heroic figure. Although I have argued that Mantegna builds on the Sophonisba of Petrarch's *Triumphs*, there are hints of a more praise-worthy figure than that of the *Africa*, since she stars alongside other heroines who are more unambiguously

virtuous. Thus, I argue, part of the "whitewashing" of Sophonisba's morals meant a more explicit whitewashing of her somatic differences.

If "race" is a modern concept that evolved into what we currently understand of it during the Enlightenment, then we need to trace its developments by investigating that awkward period of history that sits somewhere in between the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. Petrarch, frequently cited as a key figure of early humanism, therefore represents an important thinker for the elaboration of this fraught concept. Since part of Petrarch's apparent "modernity" was in his project to revive classical models drawn from his reading of Latin literature, then the most "classical" of his works, the *Africa*, is also the most obvious place to start in probing Petrarch's "modernity". And if it is the idea of "race" that we are investigating, then where better to start than with the story of Sophonisba, that curiously pale-skinned, blond-haired African temptress. In the centuries following the *Africa*, Sophonisba would go through multiple, diverging iterations on the dramatic stage, in literature, and in the visual arts. All of them are indebted in some way to Petrarch, and thus, the afterlives of Sophonisba in early modernity are anchored in this curious fourteenth-century Latin epic, which looked to antiquity to articulate a vision of modernity.

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## Illustrations

Figure 1: Andrea Mantegna, A Woman Drinking, from Two Exemplary Women of Antiquity, about 1495-1506. Image: © The National Gallery, London (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0), https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/andrea-mantegna-a-woman-drinking

Figure 2: Andrea Mantegna, "The Introduction of the Cult of Cybele at Rome" / "The Triumph of Scipio". Image: © National Gallery, London (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0), https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/andrea-mantegna-the-introduction-of-the-cult-of-cybele-at-rome