**Soft Hearts: Vulnerability, Compassion, and Community in Petrarch’s Letter-Collections**

Gur Zak, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Petrarch’s efforts to fashion a devout community of friends by means of letters were often seen as a central feature of his life and writings.[[1]](#footnote-1) Returning to the ancient style of letter-writing, especially as practiced by Cicero and Seneca, Petrarch employed the free-style familiar letter to forge and maintain connections with friends that were spread throughout Europe of his day.[[2]](#footnote-2) Through this elaborate epistolary network, Petrarch facilitated the dissemination of his classicized ideals as well as cemented his reputation as the leader of the nascent cultural movement known as “humanism”, destined to occupy a pivotal role in European letters for centuries to come.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Scholarly assessments of Petrarch’s epistolary community, however, have shifted in the past few decades from celebratory accounts of his enlightened universalism – considering his epistolography as the origin of the global “republic of letters”[[4]](#footnote-4) – to critical assessments of the exclusive, authoritative, and masculinist aspects of both his humanist community and the letters that formed it. In an influential study, the medievalist David Wallace has described Petrarch’s humanist community – which he names the “Petrarchan academy” – as “a small, consciously exclusive, masculine group of initiates dedicated to the pursuit of Latin culture”.[[5]](#footnote-5) The elitist and masculinist tendencies inherent in Petrarch’s choice of his prized classicized Latin – “the language of the father” – over the emotional vernacular,[[6]](#footnote-6) were accompanied, according to Wallace, by his authoritative literary practice in the letters – namely his efforts to control the letters’ meaning and reception by carefully editing them.[[7]](#footnote-7) These exclusivist and authoritative predilections were in turn also complemented by the Petrarchan tendency to look down upon those who did not belong to his “in-group” of learned men – particularly women.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Wallace’s unfavorable assessment of Petrarch’s epistolary community – shared recently in part by Albert Ascoli[[9]](#footnote-9) – can no doubt be supported by some of his letters included in his massive letter-collections. Yet as I would like to argue in this article, Petrarch’s formation of a community of friends in his letter-collections is marked by an ongoing tension, which undermines and modifies this community’s authoritative and masculinist tendencies. This tension revolves in particular around the very nature of the global community of friends Petrarch strives to establish, the specific bond that ties together its disparate members. While Petrarch aims to fashion a community of virtuous, self-sufficient, and like-minded individuals, who come together through shared Stoic ideals of reason, virtue, autonomy from outer constraints, and control over the passions, the letters also repeatedly and unwittingly acknowledge their protagonists’ inescapable vulnerability and suggest that what brings them together is in effect the affective bond of compassion – of shared suffering and feeling[[10]](#footnote-10) – no less than that of reason and virtue. The ongoing oscillation between the letters’ Stoic dimensions – which complement well Wallace’s argument – and their vulnerable counterparts brings to light a vision of community that is much more open-ended and affective than recent criticism has suggested.

To highlight this underlying tension in Petrarch’s epistolary community, I would like to offer below a close-analysis of several key letters from Petrarch’s *Familiares* and *Seniles*. By beginning with a relatively early letter of the *Familiares* (6.3) and concluding with the penultimate letter of the *Seniles* (17.4), the following discussion will allow us to offer a chronological overview of the development of Petrarch’s community-formation over the course of his two major letter-collections, which Ascoli has aptly described as one “mega-macro-text”.[[11]](#footnote-11) The analysis will show how classical literature informs and provides the foundation for both sides of Petrarch’s vision of community – both his ideal of a virtuous society of friends and its vulnerable counterpart. In addition, the following discussion will highlight how in his later years Petrarch’s vision of friendship and community received a persistent opposition from the parallel epistolography of his central correspondent in his later years – Boccaccio – an opposition that may well have influenced in turn his own continuing oscillation between virtue and vulnerability. These persistent fluctuations, I will ultimately argue, suggest that while remaining elitist in nature, Petrarch’s letter-collections – and the humanist community they forge – also open the way for a universalism that is not necessarily “rational” and masculinist, but which is rather based on the recognition of human fragility and need for compassion and external support.[[12]](#footnote-12)

\*\*\*

A good place to begin exploring the tension between virtue and vulnerability in Petrarch’s epistolary community is letter 6.3 of the *Familiares*, which Petrarch addressed to his friend and patron Giovanni Colonna in 1342. The letter is a response to a previous letter sent to him by Colonna, in which he apparently complained about his recent ailments. Petrarch opens the letter with a harsh reproach of his addressee for his “softness” in the face of fortune: “Una michi tecum lis est, cum ceterarum rerum omnium sit tanta concordia: nimis es querulus, nimis indulges tibi sortem propriam deflere, miserari res tuas, excusare te ipsum, accusare fortunam; denique nimis molliter humana toleras, cum sis homo” (*Familiares* 6.3.1) [“Though we agree fully on almost everything, there is one basic disagreement between us, and that is that you are too querulous, too self-indulgent in lamenting your lot, too complaining about your affairs, excessively involved in excusing yourself and accusing fortune, and finally too soft in tolerating the human condition since you are yourself a man”].[[13]](#footnote-13) Petrarch’s reference to the perfect “concord” between him and his addressee recalls Cicero’s famous definition of friendship in the *De amicitia*, in which he alludes to the “consensus” that unites true friends: “est enim amicitia nihil aliud nisi omnium divinarum humanarumque rerum cum benevolentia et caritate consensio” (*De amicitia* 20.6) [“For friendship is nothing else than an accord in all things, human and divine, conjoined with mutual goodwill and affection”].[[14]](#footnote-14) Yet while recalling this Ciceronian statement, Petrarch also points to one specific thorn in his and Colonna’s attachment – the fact that the latter fails to live up to the Stoic ideal of virtue and self-control to which Petrarch ostensibly subscribes.[[15]](#footnote-15) To be truly of one mind, according to Petrarch, him and his addressee must be united in their aspiration to virtuous detachment and self-control, and it is to this moral task that he dedicates his efforts in the letter, directing his addressee to the stronghold of reason.

And yet, immediately following this blunt opening reproach, Petrarch admits that when he read Colonna’s letter he himself could not hold back his tears: “quid enim occultare cogitem affectus meos, et ubi constantiam tuam requiro, illic propriam dissimulare mollitiem?” (*Fam*. 6.3.2) [“why should I consider hiding my own feelings, and where I demand firmness from you why disguise my own softness?”] Petrarch then justifies his tearful response by suggesting that it is more noble to shed tears for others than for oneself,[[16]](#footnote-16) adding that “Idque non modo in tanta amicitia, sed ne in comuni etiam societate hominum dici posse Satyricus ait, ubi viro ‘bono nullum alienum malum’, et ‘humano generi’ pietatis ad indicium ‘datas a natura lacrimas’ docet (*Fam*. 6.3.3) [“This is true not only in close friendships but even in the general society of men, as the Satirist said in teaching that no evil is foreign to the good man and that tears are given to human beings for an indication of their natural compassion” (translation modified)].

This statement, which not only justifies Petrarch’s emotional response but also establishes compassion – the sharing in another’s sorrow – as an essential and universal human trait – repeats verbatim lines from Juvenal’s *Satire* 15, in which the ancient satirist presents “softness” and compassion as the kernel of humanity: “mollissima corda / humano generi dare se natura fatetur, / quae lacrimas dedit. haec nostri pars optima sensus” (15.131-133) [“Nature declares that she has given the human race the softest of hearts by the gift of tears. This is the finest element of our sensibility” (slightly modified)].[[17]](#footnote-17) A little later, Juvenal adds that such compassion is that which led humans to gather together into communities in the first place: “mundi / principio indulsit communis conditor illis / tantum animas, nobis animum quoque, mutuus ut nos / adfectus petere auxilium et praestare iuberet, / dispersos trahere in populum” (15.148-151) [“To them [animals], at the beginning of the world, our common creator granted only the breath of life. To us he gave souls as well. His intention? So our mutual feeling would urge us to seek and offer help, to draw together scattered individuals into communities”]. Having a soft heart, according to Juvenal, is what separates humans from beasts and forms the very foundation of human community. By alluding to this passage of Juvenal, Petrarch inevitably challenges the Stoic approach dominant in the opening of the letter, stressing the essential role of both vulnerability to fortune and compassion in human interaction.[[18]](#footnote-18) Letter 6.3 thus brings to the fore a critical conflict over the very foundation of Petrarch’s community of friends: while the opening statement implicitly equates humanity with reason and self-control and suggests that friendly communion should ideally be based on common reason and virtue,[[19]](#footnote-19) the following lines adhere to Juvenal and consider vulnerability and compassion as a central feature of Petrarch’s attachment to friends. In both instances, classical sources provide Petrarch with the language to establish a vision of humanity that is markedly universal in nature – transcending religious and local loyalties – yet he is divided over the particular nature of this universality – whether it depends on Stoic virtue or rather Juvenalian compassion.

\*\*\*

The tension over the foundation of Petrarch’s humanist community of friends is further developed in Book 8 of the *Familiares*, which was written mostly in 1349, following the devastation of the Plague of 1348. Book 8 contains a series of letters in which Petrarch urges a group of his friends to come live together, forming thereby an actual community. Scholars have often touched upon the literary and constructed nature of Book 8 and the way Petrarch meddled with the original letters (whose copies we have) to intensify the drama he portrays.[[20]](#footnote-20) This drama, I would like to suggest, revolves to a large degree around the nature and characteristics of the humanist community of friends.

Book 8 begins with one of the most Stoic letters of the entire *Familiares*, in which Petrarch commends Stefano Colonna the elder for the incredible constancy with which he bore the recent deaths of several of his family members, telling him in a Senecan manner that “Nichil metuit armatus et iugi meditatione preparatus animus” (*Familiares* 8.1.9) [“The well-armed mind, prepared by constant meditation, fears nothing” (p. 388)]. The following four letters, which were originally a one lengthy letter written from Parma in 1349, are addressed to his friend “Olimpio” (Luca Cristiani). Petrarch urges him in the letters to act upon their intention to come live together, forming a community of friends with two of their other friends – Ludwig van Kempen (“Socrates”) and Mainardo Accursio. All four of them served under the patronage of cardinal Giovanni Colonna (the addressee of *Familiares* 6.3), who recently died from the Plague.

In his enthusiastic endorsement of the idea, Petrarch outlines to Cristiani the ideal features of their friendly community, describing it as a desired port reached after many tribulations: “Nos vero quid impedit quominus has vite reliquias, quantulecunque sunt, simul in pace animi bonarumque artium studiis transigamus, et ‘si in freto viximus’ ut ait Seneca, ‘moriamur in portu’?” (*Familiares* 8.4.23) [“What impedes us from completing together what remains of our life, however little that may be, through peace of mind and in the study of the arts, and, as Seneca says, ‘if we have lived on the waters (to) die in port?’”] The humanist community of friends, as this statement indicates, is for Petrarch a continuation and extension of his prized solitary life, a means to withdraw from the tumult of the world and dedicate oneself to the life of study and contemplation.[[21]](#footnote-21) Furthermore, the fact that he and his friends share a similar social standing and material means, Petrarch insists, will ensure that their friendly community will not be based on interest and need but rather solely on virtue,[[22]](#footnote-22) fulfilling thereby Cicero’s and Seneca’s assertion that true friendship must depend on virtue alone, untainted by mundane interests.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Over the course of this cluster of letters, Petrarch implicitly contrasts between the virtuous humanist community they now intend to form and the impaired one which emerges from his vernacular love lyrics. In the second letter in the series addressed to Cristiani, *Familiares* 8.3, Petrarch recalls his time in Vaucluse, where he spent in relative seclusion most of his adult life thus far and recently decided to leave behind. The recollection of Vaucluse leads Petrarch to reflect on the many works he composed there, including his vernacular love lyrics of which he is now “ashamed”: “hinc illa vulgaria iuvenilium laborum meorum cantica, quorum hodie pudet ac penitet, sed eodem morbo affectis, ut videmus, acceptissima” (*Familiares* 8.3.13) [“From all of this emerged those vernacular songs of my youthful labors which today I am ashamed of and repent, but are, as we have seen, most acceptable to those who are affected by the same disease” (p. 1.399)]. His collection of vernacular love poems, he suggests, appeals to those suffering of similar amorous “disease”, forming thereby a textual community of the vulnerable and the impaired. In the opening sonnet of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, we should remember, Petrarch addresses specifically those who know love from experience and asks them to show him “pietà, nonche perdono” (1.8) – “pity, not only pardon”[[24]](#footnote-24) – pointing thereby to the way his collection is meant to form a bond of compassion with readers. The allusion to this “shameful” vernacular community in *Familiares* 8.3 thus serves to highlight the contrast between it and the virtuous humanist community Petrarch is now bent on forming.

And yet, following the cluster of four letters to Olimpio, the mood strikingly changes. After a brief letter addressed to the Augustinian friar Bartolomeo Carusio, commending him for a compendia of Augustine’s works he recently completed (*Familiares* 8.6), Petrarch turns to the second cluster of letters of Book 8, which consists of three letters addressed to Ludwig van Kempen (as in the case of the previous cluster, these three letters were originally one). In this second cluster, the optimism regarding future co-habitation turns into a bitter lamentation. In fact, just as *Familiares* 8.1 is among the most Stoical in the collection, *Familiares* 8.7-9 are among the most mournful and elegiac. While *Familiares* 8.7-8 consist of bitter laments over the deaths of Petrarch’s friends and acquaintances in the Plague of 1348, *Familiares* 8.9 returns to the plan of co-habitation discussed in *Familiares* 8.2-5, yet now to recount its catastrophic ending. As Petrarch informs his addressee, he was recently notified that on their way to visit him in Parma both Cristiani and Accursio were attacked by robbers. While the latter died in the attack, the former managed to flee yet his condition is still uncertain. Petrarch, as might be expected, is utterly devastated: “Nondum satisfeceram fortune, nisi acutiori cuspide rursus impeterer essetque ad iram Dei malignorum quoque hominum furor additus. Hei michi!” (*Familiares* 8.9.1) [“I had not yet satisfied fortune for it had to attack me again with sharper weapons and had to add even the madness of wicked men to the wrath of God. Woe is me!”].

The transition from letters 8.2-5 to 8.7-9 thus serves to highlight in a common Petrarchan manner the fickleness of fortune and the futility of worldly aspirations. At the same time, it also shows how Petrarch’s dream of establishing a community of virtuous friends untainted by worldly attachments and the passions that accompany them is no more than a mere fancy. He himself, as he admits in *Familiares* 8.7, is not the strong Stoic he believed himself to be, but rather a vulnerable human in need of the compassion and emotional support of his friends. As he tells van Kempen: “scio viri esse primum quidem dolorem propellere, proximum extinguere, tertium moderari, ultimum abscondere. Sed quid agam? moriar nisi dolorem in fletum ac verba profudero. Illud me solatur, quod quicquid scripsero, molle quamvis ac frivolum, cum ad tuas venerit, non ad alienas pervenisse, sed ad proprias manus meas rediisse videbitur” (*Familiares* 8.7.8) [“I realize that a man must either drive away grief or destroy it, or control it, or finally conceal it. But what can I do? I shall die if I cannot pour out my grief in tears and words. My one consolation is that whatever I shall have written, though weak and empty, will reach your hands not as if to a stranger’s but as if to my own” (p. 416)]. Rather than on their common virtue and self-control, Petrarch admits that his communion with van Kempen depends in this case on the emotional support he can provide him in his time of need, serving as a holding sounding-board. Furthermore, as Book 8 makes plainly clear, friendship is in effect one of the main causes of Petrarch’s vulnerability, as it is his deep attachment to his friends and concern for their well-being that makes him prone to the vicissitudes of fortune and the inevitability of death in the first place. While in letters such as *Familiares* 19.11 Petrarch declares that his attachment to friends is based on “honestas immortalis” (*Familiares* 19.11.6) [“immortal virtue”], and that hence friendship for him is unbound by time – “temporales amicitias non novi” (*Familiares* 19.11.6) [“I do not recognize temporary friendship”] – Book 8 highlights how Petrarch’s attachment to friends has an unavoidable worldly and bodily dimension – a fact which inevitably makes it a source of anguish. In a manner which recalls the discussion of Franciscus’ love for Laura in Book 3 of the *Secretum* – written in the very same years as the letters of *Familiares* 8[[25]](#footnote-25) – Book 8 of the *Familiares* shows how that which is meant to serve as a source of virtue and unhindered contemplation – friendship – is also a cause of vulnerability and malaise.[[26]](#footnote-26) The oscillation between virtue and vulnerability as the foundation of the humanist community of friends is thus a central undercurrent of Book 8 of the *Familiares*, indicating that the gap that separates Petrarch’s humanist community from the impaired textual community of his vernacular lyrics is not as wide as he initially suggested.

\*\*\*

As we turn from the *Familiares* to the *Seniles* and into Petrarch’s later years, his epistolary voice becomes ever more serene and austere. Over the course of the *Seniles*, Petrarch repeatedly asserts that he does not intend to allow himself to succumb to his previous vulnerability and burden his friends with his sorrow, committing himself instead to the task of directing his friends to virtue and self-control.[[27]](#footnote-27) In parallel to such assertions, Petrarch also presents his community of friends as ever-more steadfast and united in their shared ideals and disposition. Such assertions, however, are not free of tensions and vacillations, as we will now see.

The diptych of letters *Seniles* 10.4-5 is a good case in point. Written in 1368 to Petrarch’s friend, the grammarian Donato Albanzani, upon the death of his son, Petrarch strives to assuage in the letter Donato’s immense grief by guiding him to the stronghold of reason. While acknowledging human fragility in the face of the death of loved ones, Petrarch nonetheless stresses the need to rise above such “softness”, claiming that sorrow is not inevitable. In a remarkable passage, Petrarch tells Albanzani: "Nempe excusat hoc nostrum desiderium natura que nescio quid enerve et liquidum animis nostris inseruit…. Ex diverso natura eadem mollitiem hanc accusat, que virile quiddam ac solidum ipsis nostris in mentibus posuit, sed profundius, sic ut nisi virtutis auxilio erui atque effodi nequeat ac negotiis applicari. Primum illud ultro sensibus obvium; hoc secundum sine studio vix pervium rationi" (*Seniles* 10.4.17-8) [“Nature excuses us for missing them, since she has injected something listless and watery into our spirits… On the other hand, that same Nature censures this softness, since she has put a certain firm, manly quality squarely in our minds, but quite deeply, so that it cannot be dug up… except with the aid of virtue. The former quality is by itself obvious to the senses, the latter is scarcely accessible to reason without effort” (2.382)].[[28]](#footnote-28) Echoing again Juvenal’s allusion to Nature as injecting a certain “softness” within us, Petrarch at the same time insists that humans contain a still deeper “manly” quality – reason and self-control – to which they should aspire and which they should bring to light, even in horrific situations such as a death of a son. His entire discussion is organized around a series of loaded binary oppositions: “soft” and “hard”, “feminine” and “masculine”, “outer senses” and “inner reason”, to which he would later add that between the false beliefs of the “vulgus” (*Seniles* 10.4.22) [“multitude,” 2.383] and the true ones of the learned few.[[29]](#footnote-29) His stated aim is clearly to form a steadfast community of the learned few, those who know better and do not let themselves be affected by circumstances beyond their control.

Towards the end of the letter, Petrarch tells Albanzani that whatever he tells him is also said by “nostrum… Iohannem” (*Seniles* 10.4.51) [“our Giovanni” (2.391)] – that is, Giovanni Boccaccio, who was visiting Petrarch’s house in Padua at the time. In the following letter, *Seniles* 10.5, which is also addressed to Albanzani, Petrarch mentions Boccaccio again and tells Donato that both of them are with him in spirit, urging him “perque amicitie sanctam fidem et quicquid pium ac dulce nobis est tecum – ut puerum tuum ex misero factum esse felicem, non equo tantum sed leto animo patiaris” (*Seniles* 10.5.23-25) [“by the sacred trust of friendship and all that me and you hold holy and sweet: accept not only calmly but joyfully that your child has moved from misery to happiness” (2.392)]. In this diptych of letters, we thus receive a central example of the way Petrarch envisions – and constructs – a community of friends who come together through shared ideals of reason and self-control, encouraging one another to rise above outer vicissitudes and the passions that accompany them.

At the same time, the inclusion of Boccaccio – Petrarch’s central correspondent in his later years – in these two letters complicates its seemingly straightforward message and directs our attention to the fact that Petrarch’s friendly community is not as harmonious and like-minded as he presents it to be. To grasp the significance of the mentioning of Boccaccio in these letters and the way it complicates Petrarch’s Stoic assertions, a brief consideration of Boccaccio’s own views on the relationship between compassion and community is in place.

Boccaccio, we should remember, opens his vernacular masterpiece *Il* *Decameron*, composed between 1349-1353,[[30]](#footnote-30) with the aphorism “umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti” (Proemio 2) [“To have compassion for the afflicted is a human quality;” translation modified],[[31]](#footnote-31) thus making manifest his view of the centrality of compassion as a defining human trait. In the Introduction of Day 1 of the work, which focuses on the devastation of the Black Death, Boccaccio concentrates on the way the Plague severed the most basic human ties and mutual compassion in Florentine society: “l'uno cittadino l'altro schifasse e quasi niuno vicino avesse dell'altro cura e i parenti insieme rade volte o non mai si visitassero” (1.Intro.27) [“It was not merely a question of one citizen avoiding another, and of people almost invariably neglecting their neighbours and rarely or never visiting their relatives” (p. 53)]. A little later, Boccaccio describes how the devastation of the Plague led to the suspension of traditional burial practices and expressions of public mourning: “pochissimi erano coloro a' quali i pietosi pianti e l'amare lagrime de' suoi congiunti fossero concedute” (1.Intro.34) [“Few indeed were those to whom the lamentations and bitter tears of their relatives were accorded” (p. 55)]. Compassion and mutual care emerge in the *Decameron* as the foundation of human society, features that were lost due to the Plague and that Boccaccio, as critics have pointed out, strives to revive by means of his storytelling.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Following the writing of the *Decameron*, as is well known, Boccaccio turned most of his attention to Latin composition – a transition that was motivated to a large degree by his encounter with Petrarch, whom he met in person for the first time in 1350. Yet while influenced by Petrarch, Boccaccio’s attitude in his later years to the question of human vulnerability and the foundation of friendship and community remained strikingly similar to that expressed in the vernacular *Decameron*, offering thereby a clear alternative to Petrarch’s position. In Boccaccio’s *Epistle* 9, written in 1353 to his longtime Florentine acquaintance Zanobi da Strada – another admirer and correspondent of Petrarch – Boccaccio directly criticizes the Stoic-Petrarchan ideal of self-control and exalts in opposition the value of compassion as the basis of friendly bondage and human society at large. Zanobi served at the time as the right hand of Niccolò Acciaiuoli, another Florentine acquaintance of Boccaccio and the powerful grand seneschal of the Kingdom of Naples. The relationship between Boccaccio and Acciaiuoli were strained at the time, and Boccaccio refers in the beginning of the letter to a mocking nickname given him by Acciaiuoli – “Iohannem tranquillitatum” (*Epistole* 9.2) [“tranquil Giovanni”][[33]](#footnote-33) – a nickname which apparently referred to Boccaccio’s predilection for an easy and comfortable life.[[34]](#footnote-34) Deeply offended, Boccaccio offers a long refute of Acciaiuoli’s characterization of him by insisting on the compassion he often felt for Niccolò: “in adversis autem compatientem ac deplorantem, persepe viderunt me plurim” (*Epistole* 9.4) [“many have seen me most often showing compassion and weeping for his adversities”]. This compassion was especially strong, Boccaccio declares, following Acciaiuoli’s recent tragic loss of his firstborn son in battle, over which Boccaccio declares to have wept day and night: “casum gravissimum, tanquam meum abundantissimo ploratu deflevi;… nec ut ipse resciscat ad te scribo, sed ut videas quoniam in conscientia mea iam video, non me ‘tranquillitatum hominem’ sed miseriarum misericordem essistere” (*Epistole* 9.13) [“I wept over this gravest misfortune with so much tears as if it were my own… nor do I write you this so that he might come to know of it, but so that you may see what I already see in my conscience: that I am not a ‘tranquil man’, but rather a compassionate one, merciful of others”].

Boccaccio’s exaltation of compassion is contrasted in the letter with Acciaiuoli’s remarkable steadfastness in the face of the calamity he suffered, bearing his wound with “incommutato vultu” [“steadfast face”] and “inflexo animo” [“unbent soul”], as if he were made of “saxeum” [“stone”] and “ferreum” [“iron”] (*Epistole* 9.25). Unable to hide his scorn of Acciaiuoli’s reaction, Boccaccio refers to it as a monstrosity – “monstruosam… virtutem” (*Epistole* 9.24) [“monstrous virtue”]. This explicit critique of Stoic steadfastness amounts to a direct rejection also of Petrarch’s frequent praise of such Stoic virtue. When describing Acciaiuoli’s inhuman self-control, Boccaccio compares him to the ancient Roman consul Aemilius Paulus (*Epistole* 9.26), who is reported not to have wept when he lost two of his sons in battle. Petrarch makes use of the exact same example in *Seniles* 10.4.45 mentioned above, yet he significantly mentions the Roman consul as a *positive* example aimed to convince his addressee that weeping over the death of loved ones is an outcome of false social conventions, not nature.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Boccaccio’s stress on the value of compassion and critique of Stoic stoniness is accompanied in *Epistle* 9 by an elaborate description of the funeral of the young Lorenzo Acciaiuoli, which took place in Florence, the city of his forefathers. The entire city, as Boccaccio describes, participated in the sorrowful event: “quasi ab omnibus conclamatus atque defletus Laurentius est, in tantum, militie visis insignibus postergatis et amicorum servitorumque squalore obsitis vestibus, reviguit pietas” (Epistole 9.38) [“Lorenzo was lamented and mourned by practically everyone, in a manner that, seeing the military insignia put aside and the clothes of friends and servants covered with squalor, compassion grew”]. Shortly after his portrayal in the *Decameron* of the collapse of civic compassion in Florence due to the Plague, Boccaccio thus offers a description of a shared public mourning which intensifies compassion and brings about a sense of a unified civic community. Compassion thus emerges from *Epistle* 9 as “a basic social emotion”,[[36]](#footnote-36) an ethical as well as a civic ideal according to Boccaccio. While Petrarch strives to fashion in his letters a universal community of friends who come together through the bond of virtue – reluctantly admitting at times that it is in effect mutual vulnerability and compassion that brings friends together – Boccaccio’s *Epistle* 9 champions compassion as the foundation of both intimate friendships and civic society at large.

Boccaccio’s rejection of Stoic detachment and praise of open expressions of vulnerability and compassion between friends emerge in yet another Latin letter written in the early 1370s, shortly after Petrarch’s letter to Albanzani discussed above. The letter is written again to a Florentine who holds an important political role in Naples – Mainardo Cavalcanti. Recalling his earlier critique of Acciaiuoli in *Epistle* 9, Boccaccio again describes those who are able to fully control their emotions in the face of calamity as “obstinati ferreique non minus quam fortes” (*Epistole* 22.10) [“no less obstinate and stone-like than strong”]. He also tells Cavalcanti that expressions of vulnerability and compassion between friends should not be a cause of shame, but are rather “humanitatis ac passionem passi cordis est signum” (*Epistole* 22.9) [“a sign of a humane and compassionate heart”].[[37]](#footnote-37) Like Juvenal in *Satire* 15, Boccaccio stresses that having a “soft heart” is the basis of humanity and the tie that brings friends together. Petrarch’s explicit mention of Boccaccio in his two letters to Albanzani and assertion that Boccaccio shares in his Stoic admonitions therefore brush aside the tensions within Petrarch’s humanist community over the specific bond that ties it members together, indicating that his adamant focus in the letter on the need to uproot “softness” is not without alternative undercurrents.

\*\*\*

These undercurrents will indeed emerge directly to the surface near the very end of Petrarch’s massive epistolary project – Book 17 of the *Seniles*, which consists entirely of letters to Boccaccio. In fact, nowhere does the tension between virtue and vulnerability emerges more forcefully in Petrarch’s letters than in this final dialogue with Boccaccio. Composed shortly before Petrarch’s death in 1374, Book 17 of the *Seniles* revolves around Petrarch’s celebrated Latin translation of the closing tale of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, that of “patient Griselda”, who withstood with complete equanimity and steadfastness the harsh trials she suffered at the hands of her husband, the marquis Gualtieri. In his translation of the tale, as critics have observed, Petrarch sets aside many of the ambiguities of Boccaccio’s original, turning Griselda into a perfect exemplum of constancy in the face of outer tribulations.[[38]](#footnote-38) In the closing of his translation, Petrarch also instructs the readers on the proper allegorical way to interpret and respond to his tale, a fact which critics saw as another example of his authorial practices in the collection:[[39]](#footnote-39)

Hanc historiam stilo nunc alio retexere visum fuit, non tam ideo, ut matronas nostri temporis ad imitandam huius uxoris patientiam, que michi vix imitabilis videtur, quam ut legentes ad imitandam saltem femine constantiam excitarem, ut quod hec viro suo prestitit, hoc prestare Deo nostro audeant. (*Seniles* 17.3.9)

I decided to retell this story in another style not so much to encourage the married women of our day to imitate this wife's patience, which to me seems hardly imitable, as to encourage the readers to imitate at least this woman's constancy (*constantiam*), so that what she maintained toward her husband they may maintain toward our God.

The transformation of the story of Griselda from its humble vernacular origins to Petrarch’s noble Latin is thus accompanied by the heroine’s metamorphosis into an unequivocal model of manly virtue. Nonetheless, following this authorial statement, Petrarch encloses another letter, in which he portrays the responses of two of his and Boccaccio’s friends to his translation – thus offering another description of Petrarch’s community of friends. As Petrarch describes, the first reader, a man “of the highest intellect and broad knowledge”,[[40]](#footnote-40) was so overcome with emotions and tears while he was reading that he could hardly finish the tale. This intelligent reader, as is evident, completely misses Petrarch’s authorial intention, for instead of reading the story allegorically and admiring Griselda’s remarkable resilience, he reads it literally and identifies with the heroine’s vulnerability and suffering. Despite his misguided response, however, Petrarch praises this friend, declaring that “ego in optimam partem traxi mitissimumque viri animum intellexi: vere enim homo humanior quem ego quidem noverim nullus est. Rediit, illo flente ac legente, ad memoriam satyricum illud: Mollissima corda/ Humano generi dare se natura fatetur,/ Quae lacrimas dedit, haec nostri pars optima sensus” (*Seniles* 17.4.2) [“I interpreted [this incident] in the best light and understood the man’s heart was very sensitive; for in truth, there is no more kindly man, at least not that I know. As he was weeping and reading, those words of the satirist came to mind: “Nature admits / She gives the human race the softest hearts; / she gave us tears – the best part of our feelings”].

Immediately following his exaltation of Griselda’s remarkable constancy and ability to subdue her emotions, Petrarch thus praises the reader’s “softest heart”, returning again to the same quotation from Juvenal’s *Satire* 15 we encountered in *Familiares* 6.3, written some thirty years earlier. The vulnerability of the translation, open to differing responses despite Petrarch’s efforts to control its meaning, is accompanied by a Juvenalian assertion of vulnerability and compassion as the essence of humanity and the foundation of human community, even in the case of Petrarch’s own group of highbrow learned friends. At the very end of his letter-collections, the tension over the foundation of his humanist community of friends thus comes again to the fore: while striving to establish a community of friends held together by the bond of reason and virtue – motivating one another to perfect self-control and autonomy – the final note of the *Seniles* shows that affective features constitute an essential part of this community and that Petrarch himself commends such softness.

In the beginning of this article, I referred to the recent tendency to portray Petrarch’s humanist community of friends – and the letters that construct it – as elitist, masculinist, authoritative, and like-minded. While there can be little doubt regarding the elitist nature of Petrarch’s community, the ongoing tension over the foundations of his humanist community also undermines in significant ways its masculinist and authoritative dimensions. The persistent conflict over the foundation of community and the repetitive recognition that it is in effect human inescapable vulnerability and compassion that ties together its disparate members render Petrarch’s epistolary community much less masculinist and authoritative than first appears. Furthermore, although compassion is often reserved within the letters to Petrarch’s in-group of learned friends, the recurring allusions to Juvenal’s *Satire* 15 and the fact that the penultimate Book 17 ends with the Paduan friend’s deep compassion for the suffering of the peasant Griselda indicates how Petrarchan humanism also opens the way for a vision of compassion that is universal in nature, aimed at both men and women, both pagans and Christians, both people of high and low classes.[[41]](#footnote-41) Albeit reluctantly, the Juvenalian assertion that having a “soft heart” is the foundation of human community continues to linger in Petrarch’s letter-collections and emerges as a crucial feature of his humanist community as a whole.

1. On Petrarch’s epistolary community of friends, see Enrico Fenzi, “Petrarca e la scrittura dell'amicizia (con un' ipostesi sul Libro VIII delle *Familiari*)”, in *Motivi e forme delle Familiari di Francesco Petrarca*, ed. Claudia Berra, (Milano: Cisalpino, 2003), 549-589, and Fenzi, “Amicizia,” in *Lessico critico Petrarchesco*, eds. Luca Marcozzi and Romana Brovia (Rome: Carocci, 2016), 29-43, Ernest H. Wilkins, *Life of Petrarch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 251-252, and Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski, “Petrarch and His Friends”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Petrarch*, eds. Albert R. Ascoli and Unn Falkeid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 26-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the revival of the “familiar” style in Petrarch’s letters, see Ronald G. Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 264-275. See also Kathy Eden, *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 49-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Wojciehowski, “Petrarch and His Friends”, 27-28, and Albert R. Ascoli, “Epistolary Petrarch”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Petrarch*, eds. Ascoli and Falkeid, 120-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See especially Marc Fumaroli, “The Republic of Letters”, *Diogenes* 36 (Sept. 1988): 129-152, now in Fumaroli, *La République des Lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), 20-25, 338-361. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The characterization of Latin as “the language of the father”, associated with reason and rules and contrasted with the “mother tongue” – the vernacular, was common in Petrarch’s age. See Elena Lombardi, *Imagining the Woman Reader in the Age of Dante* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). 111-116. On Petrarch’s disparaging view of the vernacular and idealization of classicized Latin, see also Alison Cornish, *Vernacular Translation in Dante’s Italy: Illiterate Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 161-163, and Martin Eisner, *Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 79-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 265-267. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 270-277.See also Cornish, *Vernacular Translation*, 161-163. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Ascoli, “Petrarch’s Private Politics,” in *A Local Habitation and a Name: Imagining Histories in the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Fordham, 2011), 118-158, especially his comment on Petrarch’s “mechanisms of closure” in the *Familiares* (121n4). Ascoli, at the same time, also sees Petrarch’s letters as a possible precursor of the Habermasian public sphere: “[The] immense weight given to his personal perspective and to the value of conversation among peers (whose equality derives not from social class but common humanity) may be read as genealogically related to the Habermasian Enlightenment” (119n2). For a nuanced account of the later Erasmian republic of letters and the tensions that characterize it, see Hanan Yoran, *Between Utopia and Dystopia: Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Humanist Republic of Letters* (Lanham: Lexington, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The noun “compassion” is etymologically based on the Latin words *cum* + *patior*, indicating “suffering-with.” On the genealogy of the term in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, see Michael Papio, “‘Non meno di compassion piena che dilettevole’: Notes on Compassion in Boccaccio,” Italian Quarterly 37 (2000): 107-125, 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ascoli, “Epistolary Petrarch,” 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In her magisterial study *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Martha Nussbaum has distinguished between two types of communities according to their attitude to human vulnerability – a distinction that is especially pertinent to the present discussion of Petrarch. She writes: “[There are], in effect, two visions of political community and of the good citizen and judge within it… One sees the human being as both aspiring and vulnerable, both worthy and insecure; the other focuses on dignity alone, seeing in reason a boundless and indestructible worth. One sees the central task of community as the provision of support for basic needs; bringing human beings together through the thought of their common weakness and risk, it constructs a moral emotion that is suited to supporting efforts to aid the worst off. The other sees a community as a kingdom of free responsible beings, held together by the awe that they feel for the worth of reason in one another; the functions of their association will be to assist the moral development of each by judgments purified of passion” (pp. 367-368). Petrarch’s letter-collections, I would argue, oscillate precisely between these two visions of community – that founded on reason and that recognizing vulnerability – serving thereby as an important precursor to the modern debate delineated by Nussbaum. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Petrarch, *Le familiari*, eds. Vittorio Rossi (vols. 1-3) and Umberto Bosco (vol. 4), 4 vols. (Florence, 1933-1942). Translation: *Rerum Familiarium Libri*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, 3 vols. (Albany, 1975-1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cicero, *On Old Age, On Friendship, On Divination*, ed. William A. Falconer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1923). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This Stoic notion is significantly introduced in one of Seneca’s central discussions of friendship – letter 9 of his *Moral Letters to Lucilius*: “[S]e contentus est sapiens ad beate vivendum, non ad vivendum. Ad hoc enim multis illi rebus opus est, ad illud tantum animo sano et erecto et despiciente fortunam” (*Ad Lucilium* 9.13) [“the wise man is sufficient unto himself for a happy existence, but not for mere existence. For he needs many helps towards mere existence; but for a happy existence he needs only a sound and upright soul, one that despises Fortune”]. While sufficient unto himself, the wise man, according to Seneca, needs friends so to exercise his noble qualities and perform virtuous actions on their behalf (*Ad Lucilium* 9.8). Seneca, *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales*, trans. R. M. Gummere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “[H]onestiores lacrime sunt in alienis calamitatibus quam in nostris” (*Fam*. 6.3.2). This position, however, is not entirely coherent: if the goal is recognizing that outer circumstances have no bearing on human flourishing, then weeping for others is just as misguided as weeping for ourselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Juvenal, “Satires”, in *Juvenal and Persius*, ed. and trans. Susanna Morton Braund (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It is highly striking that following his reference to humans’ “soft hearts”, Juvenal offers an example of a pitiful image in which the gender of the protagonist is problematized: “plorare ergo iubet causam dicentis amici / squaloremque rei, pupillum ad iura uocantem / circumscriptorem, cuius manantia fletu / ora puellares faciunt incerta capilli (15.134-137) [“[Nature] accordingly urges us to weep for the ward who summons his defrauder to court, with his girlish hair making indeterminate the sex of his face, streaming with tears”]. For Juvenal, “softness” and tears render masculine identity indeterminate, and this notion is also possibly inherent in Petrarch’s letter. It should be noted, in this regard, that the fact that Colonna is not only a friend in need but also Petrarch’s patron adds another dimension to the letter, as it indicates how despite his claims for virtue and autonomy Petrarch himself is inevitably vulnerable and in need of his addressee’s (material) support. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The association of the essence of humanity with Stoic reason and virtue is common in Petrarch’s letters. In *Familiares* 12.14.1, for example, he tells his enraged addressee: “peto autem, vir insignis, ut animum rationi sive, ut aliter idem dicam, te tibi subicias” [“I recommend that you subject your mind to your reason, or, to express it differently, you to yourself.”] [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. On Petrarch’s editing of the letters of Book 8 of the *Familiares*, see Roberta Antognini, *Il progetto autobiografico delle Familiares di Petrarca* (Milan: LED, 2008), 167-180, Aldo S. Bernardo, “Letter-Splitting in Petrarch’s *Familiares*,” *Speculum* 33.2 (1958): 236-241, Ugo Dotti, *Petrarca civile: Alle origini dell’intellettuale moderno* (Rome: Donzelli, 2001), 163-172, Enrico Fenzi, “Petrarca e la scrittura dell'amicizia,” 579-589. On the general literary dimension of Petrarch’s letter-collections and the need to be attuned to the relationship between the individual letters (“microtext”) and the collection as a whole (“macrotext”), see Ascoli, “Epistolary Petrarch,” 120-140. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. On the parallels between Petrarch’s ideal of friendship and his prized solitary life see also Fenzi, “Petrarca e la scrittura dell'amicizia,” 578. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “Quodsi singulis sat est, quid omnibus eventurum suspicemur, ubi vicissim alter alteri manum dabit et quicquid necessitatis inciderit, alterna ope supplebitur?” (*Familiares* 8.4.23) [“But if we are individually self-sufficient, what can we suppose will happen to all of us when we can offer one another a hand and can satisfy whatever needs another may have” (p. 407)]. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “[U]t enim quisque sibi plurimum confidit et ut quisque maxime virtute et sapientia sic munitus est, ut nullo egeat suaque omnia in se ipso posita iudicet, ita in amicitiis expetendis colendisque maxime excellit” (*De amicitia*, 30) [“For to the extent that a man relies upon himself and is so fortified by virtue and wisdom that he is dependent on no one and considers all his possessions to be within himself, in that degree is he most conspicuous for seeking out and cherishing friendships”]. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Petrarch, *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems*, trans. Robert M. Durling (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. On the relationship between *Familiares* 8 and the *Secretum*, see Francisco Rico, “Precisazioni di cronologia petrarchesca,” *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 155 (1978): 481-525. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. While Franciscus declares in Book 3 of the *Secretum* that Laura is a woman whose mind “celestibus desideriis ardet” (*Secretum* 3.9 [“burns only with heavenly desires” (p. 106)] and hence serves as “honestatis exemplar” (*Secretum* 3.9) [“an example of virtue” (p. 107, modified)], Augustinus insists that the love for her inevitably makes Franciscus vulnerable to fortune and death: “Atqui cum oculos illos, usque tibi in perniciem placentes suprema clauserit dies … et que nunc tam pertinaciter astruis, cum rubore recordaberis” (Secretum 3.10 [“when the eyes that have fatally captivated you are closed forever… what you now so relentlessly extol will make you burn with shame” (p. 107)]. Edition: Petrarch, *Secretum*, ed. Ugo Dotti (Milan: BUR, 2000); translation: Petrarch, *The Secret*, trans. Carol E. Quillen (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003). The recognition in *Familiares* 8 that Petrarch’s attachment to friends is ultimately bodily and earthly and hence renders him vulnerable has strong Augustinian dimensions. In Book 4 of the *Confessions* Augustine warns specifically of too strong attachment to friends who are bound to die (*Confessions* 4.6.11). The inclusion of *Familiares* 8.6 – addressed to an Augustinian friar – may thus serve as a means of highlighting this Augustinian subtext in Book 8. While both Bernardo (“Letter-Splitting,” 240) and Fenzi (“Petrarca e la scrittura dell'amicizia,” 582) consider 8.6 as no more than a transition between the two clusters of letters that dominate Book 8, I would argue that 8.6 serves an important ideological function within the overall scheme of Book 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Consider, for example, the following statement from the introductory letter of the *Seniles*, addressed to Francesco Nelli: “Multa michi tunc permisi que nunc nego. Spero, non me flentem sternet amplius fortuna: stabo si potero; si minus, siccum sternet ac tacitum. Turpior est gemitus quam ruina” (Seniles 1.1.3) [“Earlier I had allowed myself much that I now reject. I do hope that Fortune will never again catch me in tears; I shall stand erect if I can, and if not, she will lay me low, tearless and silent. A groan is more shameful than a fall”]. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Petrarch, *Lettres de la vieillesse [Rerum senilium]*, ed. Elvira Nota, 5 vols. (Paris, 2002-2013). Translation: *Letters of Old Age*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, Saul Levin, and Reta A. Bernardo, 2 vols. (Baltimore, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. “At si viri sumus, si a vulgo ulla ex parte differimus, nil vulgare nos deinceps, nil plebeium decet” (Seniles 10.4.22) [“But if we are men, if we differ in some way from the multitude, nothing vulgar or plebeian becomes us from now on” (2.383)]. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Marco Cursi, *Il “Decameron”: Scritture, scriventi, lettori* (Rome: Viella, 2007), 19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca, 2 vols. (Turin, 1992). Translations are from: *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (London, 1972). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Teodolinda Barolini, “The Wheel of the Decameron,” *Romance Philology* 36.4 (1983): 521-538, 526-527. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Boccaccio, “Epistole e lettere,” ed. Ginetta Auzzas. In *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, vol. 1 (Milan: Mondadori, 1992). Translations are my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Vittore Branca, *Giovanni Boccaccio: Profilo biografico* (Florence: Sansoni, 1977), 99, and Francesco Bruni, *Boccaccio: L’invenzione della letteratura mezzana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1990), 422-424. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. “Emilii Pauli laudem adequavit qui, in statu simili, consolatus fertur populum romanum” (10.4.45) [“He was as praiseworthy as Aemilius Paullus who, in like circumstances, is said to have consoled the Roman people” (p. 389)]. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. On compassion as “the basic social emotion”, see Martha Nussbaum, “Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13.1 (1996): 27-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. “[H]umanitatis ac passionem passi cordis est signum” (*Epistole* 22.9). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. On the exemplary nature of the translation, see Gabriella Albanese, “La novella di Griselda,” in *Petrarca e il petrarchismo. Un ideologia della letteratura*, ed. Marziano Guglielminetti (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1994), pp. XXXIX-XLIX, XIX-XLIX, and Guido Martellotti, “Momenti narrativi del Petrarca,” in *Studi Petrarcheschi* 4 (1951): 7-33. On Petrarch’s setting aside of the ambiguities of Boccaccio’s original, see Wallace, *Chaucerian polity,* 277-283, and Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The world at play in Boccaccio's Decameron* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 123. According to Mazzotta, “Petrarch's allegory is a veritable "translation" because it deliberately transforms into a pietistic tract and considerably simplifies the ironic complexities of Boccaccio's story” (123). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See Cornish, *Vernacular Translation*, 161-163, Robert R. Edwards, *'The sclaundre of Walter': The clerk's tale and the problem of hermeneutics*, in *Mediaevalitas. Reading the Middle Ages*, eds. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996),15-41, 22-23 and Warren Ginsberg, *Chaucer's Italian tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 267-268. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. “[V]ir altissimi ingenii multiplicisque notitie” (*Seniles* 17.4.2). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. It would not be amiss to mention in this context Petrarch’s defense of the passage from his *Africa*, which describes the lament of the Carthaginian warrior Mago. Enclosed in a letter written to Boccaccio in 1363, Petrarch defends this passage against accusations that he puts the Christian sentiments of grief and repentance in the mouth of an African. Such sentiments, Petrarch insists, are not particularly Christian but rather *human*: “Quid enim, per Cristum obsecro, quid cristianum ibi, et non potius humanum omniumque gentium comune? Quid enim nisi dolor ac gemitus et penitentia in extremis, de qua quid Cicero ipse scripserit audivisti? (*Seniles* 2.1.44) [“In Christ’s name I ask, what is Christian in those verses rather than human and common to all nations? What, if not grief and groaning and repentance at the last moment, about which you have heard what Cicero wrote?” (2.45)]. In this case as well, Petrarch puts forth a universal vision of humanity founded on common vulnerability. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)