

Reading Antiquity: Statius *Silvae* lecture

A) Background

- P. Papinius Statius, b. Naples c. middle C1st AD; d. c. 96AD; married to Claudia; childless. Father (elder Statius) = professional poet and a grammaticus in Greek colony of Naples and then Rome who educated sons of elite in Roman religion (cf. *Silvae* 5.3.176-84) and Greek poetry (cf. *Silvae* 5.3.146-58) and probably tutored the young Domitian

- Made living through poetry: patrons from aristocracy; competed for prizes at games (won at Augustalia and Alban Games).

- Extant works = epic *Thebaid*, (unfinished) *Achilleid* and five books of *Silvae*, collections of occasional poems (first three books probably published after January 93; Book 4 in 95; Book 5 posthumously); now lost libretto *Agave* and the epic *De Bello Germanico*

- Importance of Greek and Roman culture: biculturalism in Flavian Rome: elites' need for Greek education; Statius' links to Hellenized Naples

1) “The goddesses admitted me, when I sought the groves of song / And Boeotia’s valleys, I who claimed descent from your stock. / It was not simply the sea, land and sky, you granted me, every Son’s debt to his father, but this lyrical grace, however unworthy, / Language beyond the common, hope of fame beyond the grave” (*Silv.* 5.3.209-14: Statius, speaking of his father’s poetic teaching)

2) “Hence ... noble / Youths [were] guided by you, as they learned of the ways and deeds / Of bygone peoples: the tale of Troy and Ulysses’ wanderings; / Of Homer’s power to parade heroes’ horses, battles, in verse; / Of the riches Hesiod and Epicharmus showed honest farmers; / Of what governs the recurring strophes of Pindar’s subtle lyre; / Of Ibycus, who prayed to those birds, and Alcman, sung in / Strict Laconia, bold Stesichorus and rash Sappho, without / Feminine fear, who leapt to her death at Leucas; as well as

/ Others worthy of the lyre. You were skilled at interpreting / Callimachus' verse, the obscurities concealed in Lycophron, / Sophron's entanglements, and Corinna's hidden subtleties." (*Silv.* 5.3.146-58: curriculum taught by elder Statius)

- *Silvae*: 32 occasional poems, concerning family/friends and Domitian; mixed content (e.g. dining, nature, imperial power, family life, sexuality, patronage, marriage, death, rhetoric, education, the arts)

B) Relationship to Domitian

- poems addressed to Domitian/associated with court (*Silv.* 1.1, 1.6, 2.5, 3.4, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3)> lavish flattery?

3) "the first poems in Latin literature to deal extensively with the relation between the poet and a court circle" (Newlands, of the *Silvae*)

- *Silvae* 1.1: equestrian statue of Domitian erected 91 AD (destroyed 96!), commemorating campaign in Germany and Dacia

4) "This statue fears not winter rain, nor Jove's triple fires, / The tribe from Aeolus' windy cave, nor passing years: / It shall endure as long as do earth and heavens, / As long as the Roman era shall" (*Silv.* 1.1.91-4: of statue of Domitian on horse)

- not at Domitian's poetic bidding and Domitian only one figure; NB poems on private individuals' villas (*Silv.* 1.3; 2.2) and estate (3.1)
- only 7/ 27 poems published in Statius' lifetime concerned the emperor (e.g. *Silvae* 1.1, 4.2, 3.4); none of 4 books published in lifetime dedicated to Domitian; no evidence of imperial commission (claim to be to be improvisational, spontaneous pieces)

5) "When Caesar asks the great men of Rome and the ranks / Of robed knights all to recline here at a thousand tables" (*Silvae* 4.2 32-3: Statius one of many guests)

- Domitian provided water to Alban property BUT differences to Horace's Sabine farm; prefers to stay at villa of Pollius Felix

6) "For myself, though I had my own estate beneath Dardan / Alba's hills, with a running stream, by grace of our great / Leader, sufficient to ease my care at home and alleviate / The heat, I was staying with eloquent Pollius, at his house / At Sorrento, by the cliffs, said to be named from the Siren" (*Silv.* 3.1.61-5)

7) "No stranger, studying his peaceful way of life assiduously, / Working away at virgin songs, new flowers of the Muses." (*Silv.* 3.1.66-7, of host/friend Pollius Felix)

8) "Statius detaches himself from the Horatian model of the country property that inspires poetry but is dependent on the *beneficium* of the emperor or a Maecenas close to the emperor" (Newlands 28)

C) addressees:

- mostly private friends and patrons among the Roman and Neapolitan elite (e.g. Lucan's widow, Polla Argentaria). Two most important patrons = Ateius Melior (dedicatee of Book 2) and Pollius Felix (dedicatee of Book 3). Addressees mostly wealthy/elderly/ not holding important political positions at court

- Last poem of Book 3 = to wife, at Naples (not Domitian at Rome)

D) Case study: 1.2

- epithalamium (wedding poem) in hexameters: shaping in line with his patron's interests. Stella (groom; a love elegist) marrying Violentilla (identified with his elegiac mistress, Asteris). Contrast adulterous world of elegy

9) "Philetas, / Would have competed to celebrate this day, to Cos's / Applause; old Callimachus; Propertius in Umbrian cave; / And Ovid too, joyful though exiled in Tomis; Tibullus / As well, counting himself rich in owning a well-lit hearth" (*Silvae* 1.2.251-5)

10) “Now she [Venus] recalls to mind /The poet’s gifts, prayers, sleepless sighs at the threshold, /His Asteris sung throughout the whole city, his Asteris /Before nourishment, Asteris by night, Asteris at dawn;” (*Silv.* 1.2.194-8)

11) “In the end, Statius’s Violentilla is an amalgamation of two very different literary traditions, that of the chaste bride of the epithalamium, and that of the powerful *domina* [mistress] of Latin elegy” (Zeiner)

12) “That errant love has bowed to rule, /And yielded to the bridle” (*Silv.* 1.2.28–9).

13) “all have seen those kisses so widely talked about” (*Silv.* 1.2.30)

14) “No more sighing, sweet poet, / She is yours.” (*Silv.* 1.2.33–4)

15) “You may go to and fro freely over / The open threshold. No more doorkeepers, rules, / Or modesty. Sate yourself at last with her long-sought / Embrace (now won) remembering nights of harshness.” (*Silv.* 1.2.34–37)

16) “Among them Elegy’s impudent face draws close,” (*Silv.* 1.2.7, personified Elegy attending)

17) “Elegy arrived, her perfumed hair in a knot, / and with one foot, I think, shorter than the other. / Her form was lovely, her dress refined, her looks loving, / and even the defect of her foot was a source of charm.” (Ovid *Am.* 3.1.7–10: pentameter has one “foot” less than the hexameter> limping)

18) “Haughtier than of late, exhorting and wooing them, / Hiding her lame foot, wishing to be the tenth Muse, / And mingle barely noticed among those Sisters” (*Silv.* 1.2.7–10, of Elegy)

E) Case Study: 3.4

- composed c. 94 AD; celebration of the dedication of hair of Domitian's freedman/favourite Flavius Earinus at Pergamene

temple of Asclepius.

19) “Aesculapius, Apollo’s son, take the renowned tresses, / Caesar’s lad offers you, accept them,” (*Silv.* 3.4.6-7)

20) “Go, locks of hair, go swiftly over favourable seas, /Go now, I pray, softly couched in encircling gold” (*Silv.* 3.4.1-2)

21) “in all probability, the young eunuch was little more than a passing fancy of the emperor” (Verstraete 1989: 408).

- NB Earinus= eunuch. According to Henriksén, Earinus arrived in Rome after Domitian’s ascension to throne (i.e. late 81 at the earliest); castrated on arrival; castrated in Rome as infant (without any wound, i.e without surgery as an infant- crushing rather than excision of testicles). Anti-castration edict in earlier part of Domitian’s reign (no later than 85 AD).

22) “With silent art, Apollo’s son gently suppressed his sex, / No wound apparent. For Venus had been anxious lest / The lad suffer; the noble Leader had not yet ordered/ Male children left intact; now it is illegal to castrate, /And mutilate manhood;” (*Silv.* 3.4.69-75)

- poem recalls (heterosexual) *Silv.* 1.2 (cf. e.g. quasi-aetiological digression on how wedding came about; Venus and Cupids: boy from crowd (*puer e turba*) speaks at 1.2.61 and 3.4.93; Violentilla worthy to have sat in Venus’ shell, 1.2.118; 1.2.140-4 Venus journeys by swan to Rome); Earinus recalls Violentilla (1.2.107f. *formae / egregium ... decus* cf. 3.4.26 *egregiae praeclarum sidere formae*; beautification by Venus 1.2.110-2, 1.2.121-30) and Stella (e.g. male; stars link)

23) “She knew the Leader’s celestial gaze, she had linked / The wedding torches, openly handed him his bride. (*Silv.* 3.4.53-4, Venus: matron of honour at Domitian's wedding)

24) “Then the goddess took close care how best to dress / His hair, what clothes might now highlight his looks, / What gold was fittest to circle his neck and fingers.” (*Silv.* 3.4.50-2, Venus adorning Earinus)

- difficulty of task. Made deliberately difficult? Criticizing Domitian? (Garthwaite 1984, following Ahl)

- i) praising a eunuch (usually negative press)

- ii) praising (ex?)slave

- iii) dealing with castration. What would Earinus think? Verstraete (1989: 410) argues painful subject for him. What about Domitian? (banned it: cf. Suet. *Dom* 7; Martial 2.60; 6.2)

- iv) treating erotic relationship between Domitian and Earinus (though for pederastic relationships see Nauta 2002 and cf. *Silv.* 2.6.)

- v) hair anxiety? Vessey (1973: 29) argues potentially sensitive issue for balding Domitian (though see Morgan 1997).

- vi) heir anxiety? NB sterility of Earinus and wish for extra years for Domitian in light of succession issue. See Newlands (2002: 115).

25) “Gentlest guardian of mankind, in return for these,/ If I have merited it, and you so will, renew our master’s / Youth and preserve him to the world.” (*Silv.* 3.4.100-2)

- deliberately pushing limits? What can one do in panegyric?

- responses to problems

- i) draws on positive portrayals/ associations of eunuchs

- ii) slaves praised previously e.g. *Silv.* 2.1; 2.6. Spin= “slavery of love”

- iii) castration made out to be painless. Myth adds dignity. Took place before edict. Nauta (2002) sees as example of Statius presenting idealised version of truth, instead of adverse rumours. Still problematic? Why mention? Not explicit in Martial.

26) "Statius may wish to show that he is not content to let fantasies of luxury and physical beauty reign supreme in this poem with unchallenged continuity, but also address himself to painful and perhaps even unpalatable facts." (Verstraete 1989: 411, comparing boldness of poison allusion at *Silv.* 5.2.75-96)

iv) use of myth and fantasy in depiction of relationship. Language of elegiac love. Emphasis on Earinus' beauty (e.g. 15; 26): fitting prize for Emperor.

v) plays on various associations of hair, esp. in connection with manhood and death

vi) play with immortality of various kinds (perpetual youth of Earinus; immortality of image; immortality conferred by poetry)

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