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ORIGINALITY AND MANNERISM
IN STATIUS' USE OF MYTH
IN THE *SILVAE*¹

Since the 1960's Statius' *Silvae* have finally begun to receive their due from both Continental and Anglo-American critics, although at this point the amount of literary study that has been done on this fascinating collection of personal and occasional poetry from the Flavian period still does not bulk very large². One of the most constructive approaches in contemporary criticism has been a willingness to understand and appreciate the *Silvae* as mannerist poetry³. Whether or not the term is specifically employed, in nearly every study that has appeared over the past few decades, sensitivity to one or more aspects of the mannerist character of the *Silvae* is evident⁴. Mannerism in literature is best defined as a strong tendency

¹ I wish to record my indebtedness to the Harvey Reid Summer Study Fund at Acadia University for a financial subsidy which permitted me to work on the *Silvae* at the John Robarts Library at the University of Toronto in June, 1980.

² For a recent bibliography of literary studies of the *Silvae*, see S. Th. NEUMEYER's recent monograph, *The Silvae of Statius : Structure and Theme*, Leiden, Brill, 1979, pp. 134-5.

³ The concept of mannerism was first introduced into literary studies by Ernest CURTIUS, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, translated from the German by W. R. TRASK (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), ch. 15, "Mannerism"; see also, David W. T. C. VESSEY, *Statius and the Thebaid*, Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 9 ff. : it is a useful concept, I think, in any typology of literary styles and deserves currency also in Roman literary studies.

⁴ For a felicitous use of the term with reference to the *Silvae*, see David VESSEY, in his work cited in the previous note : Hubert CANCIK, *Untersuchungen zur Lyrischen Kunst des P. Papinius Statius* (Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1965), ch. 3, "Der Manierismus und die Einheit des Statianischen Werkes", somewhat more tenuously seeks to establish a typical mannerism of theme and motif in the *Silvae* (e.g. the motif of the lock of hair in III, 4), which, in my estimation, is too narrowly focused – the thematics of manneristic literature is not really radically different from that of classical literature, and mannerism is best understood as a phenomenon of style : thus, classical poets in Roman literature will use mythological references with restraint in a personal or occasional poetry (cf. Horace's *Odes*), whereas a more manneristically inclined poet (cf. Propertius or Ovid) will use them with prolific freedom.

towards hyperstylization, in which thematic and stylistic possibilities offered by literature in its more classical phase or mode are exploited in a more concentrated and, as it were, specialized fashion: Horace's classical dictum *ars est celare artem* is certainly not a hallmark of mannerist literature. In his study of mannerism in the poetry of the early imperial period, Burck usefully distinguishes between what one might call the mannerism of grandiloquence, which leaves its heaviest imprint on epic, and what might be termed the mannerism of preciousness, whose special sphere is the 'lesser' genres of poetry: the former is marked by a conspicuously exhaustive striving for grandeur, amplitude, and forcefulness, whereas the latter aims at small-scale brilliance and refinement (in *e. g.* metre or imagery)⁵. The mannerism of the *Silvae* is, on the whole, clearly of the latter type, although, not surprisingly, in the panegyric poems in praise of Domitian (especially I, 1: IV, 1 and IV, 2) the mannerism becomes, to a considerable degree, epic in its impact.

It is worthy of brief emphasis that the mannerist strain runs deeply in Roman literature and should not be regarded as a phenomenon that is almost unique to the so-called Silver Age. The poetry of the 'classical' Augustan Age already shows strong manneristic tendencies in the lesser genres, especially in the elegiac poetry of Propertius and Ovid: in fact, Roman elegy as a whole is very much an expression of literary mannerism. The neoteric poets of the late Republic, including Catullus, who introduced most of the non-epic genres of poetry (above all, lyric and the epyllion) into the mainstream of Roman literature were also, in many respects, literary mannerists. The mannerism of the *Silvae*, then, has real affinities with earlier thematic and stylistic tendencies in Roman poetry.

Our definition of literary mannerism as a tendency towards hyperstylization, even if we strip it of any immediate pejorative connotations, makes plain the dangers of excess and inappropriateness. Even if we accept the *Silvae* on the premises of literary mannerism, we are still entitled to wonder how successfully and effectively that mannerism is, in fact, sustained. I wish to address myself to this

⁵ Erich BURCK, *Vom Römischen Manierismus: Von der Dichtung der Frühen Römischen Kaiserzeit*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971, pp. 17-18.

question a little more critically than most previous scholars have done so far, and to select one important and characteristic aspect of Statius' mannerism in the *Silvae* as my testing-ground, namely, his use of myth.

A few critics have rightly singled out the idealizing function of myth in the *Silvae* ⁶. Statius indeed draws very extensively on myth to heighten and glamorize human events and actions. Hanna Szelest, in particular, calls attention to the degree with which the world of contemporary reality is merged with that of myth ⁷: in some poems, in fact, as we shall see, a contemporary event or occasion is invested with an almost completely enveloping mythical dimension, with gods and goddesses, whose actions are described in great detail, intervening directly in the lives of persons addressed and eulogized by the poet. This almost startling intermingling of mythical and contemporary reality in the *Silvae* is, as Szelest emphasizes, a novel phenomenon in Roman poetry, although there is some precedent for it in Roman elegy (compare, for instance, Propertius' description in II, 29a of his nocturnal encounter with a band of Cupids). Statius goes well beyond the more conventional mode of drawing upon myth in personal and occasional poetry, which is to use myth simply as a frame of reference with which to compare contemporary reality; this is the usual idealizing function myth possesses in the lesser genres of poetry, with the exception, of course, of the epyllion, in which a mythical narrative forms the core of the poem. In this use of myth, as we shall see near the conclusion of this paper, Statius is not particularly original (as an earlier poet such as Propertius certainly had been) ⁸. The main question, however, that faces us is how well mythical and contemporary reality are played off against one another in the poems where the mythical element looms very large.

I, 2, the epithalamium in honour of Stella and his bride Violentilla, shows the poet at his most skillful and inspired in his handling of myth.

⁶ Especially by David VESSEY, *Aspects of Statius' Epithalamium*, in *Mnemosyne*, Ser. 4, 28 (1972), pp. 183-184; Hanna SZELEST, *Mythologie und ihre Rolle in den Silvae des Statius*, in *Eos*, 60 (1972), pp. 309-317.

⁷ SZELEST, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

⁸ For a discussion of Propertius' often imaginative use of mythological paradigms and allusions, see Beert C. VERSTRAETE, *Propertius' Use of Myth in Book Two*, in Carl DEROUX (ed.), *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History*, II [Brussels, Latomus, Revue des Études Latines, 1980 (Collection Latomus, 168)], pp. 259-268.

weaving a mythological fantasy, centred around the figures of Venus and her Cupids, around the reality of the couple's marriage⁹. The fiction of how the goddess intervened in Stella's hitherto fruitless wooing of Violentilla and persuaded her to accept him as her husband is told in pretty and elaborate detail. The blending of mythical fantasy and human reality succeeds particularly well in this poem, for it serves a genuinely festive and encomiastic purpose and nicely harmonizes with the artistic interests and activities of the groom. Stella, we are told (92-102), is a love-poet – after the Propertian or Ovidian model, one might say – expounding in his verse *iuvenum lapsus suaque aut externa .../vulnera* (100-101). The mention of *petulans Elegea* (6) keeping company as a kind of unofficial tenth Muse with the nine 'regular' Muses, who have come down from Mt. Helicon to celebrate the marriage, already contains a hint that Stella's relationship with Violentilla has been, for some time, more than a simple courtship between two members of the Roman aristocracy, but, thanks to Stella's imagination and creativity as a poet, has become a literary cause-célèbre, namely a hapless lover-poet's quest after a *dura puella*. The same literary fantasy animates Venus' chiding words to Violentilla (162-193) and the young women's subsequent repentance of her former coldness (194-200); especially from Violentilla's recollection of Stella's ardent pursuit of her do we learn the extent to which the relationship, in Stella's literary fantasy, has conformed to the stereotypes of a typical affair in elegiac poetry (195-199):

*... redeunt animo iam dona precesque
et lacrimae vigilesque viri prope limina questus,
Asteris et vatis totam cantata per urbem
Asteris ante dapes, nocte Asteris, Asteris ortu,
quantum non clamatus Hylas ...*¹⁰

Stattius, then, has taken a relationship and a playful literary fantasy built around it and, in his imaginative epithalamium in honour of the happy

⁹ For a fine analysis and appreciation of I, 2 as a whole, see Vessey's article cited in n. 6.

¹⁰ Note especially that Violentilla has been celebrated, according to the convention of love elegy, under a pseudonym, Asteris; the reference to Hylas surely would have brought to mind to Statius' audience PROPERTIUS, I, 20, with its story of Hylas' abduction by the water nymphs.

couple, has taken both the actual courtship and the elegiac fiction surrounding it a crucial step further: thanks to the beneficent intervention of Venus and her Cupids, Stella and Violentilla have been able to crown a still tentative relationship with the more solid blessings of marriage. In formal terms, one might say that the poet has combined the literary conventions of love-elegy with those of the epithalamium, a novel combination in Roman poetry, in which myth and fantasy are very effectively introduced.

III, 1, too, is remarkable for its delightful intermingling of mythological fantasy and contemporary reality. While it is ostensibly a poem with a religious theme, Pollius' construction of a new shrine to Hercules on his estate, a spirit of *ludus*, rather than of *religio*, predominates. Thus, the circumstances leading up to Hercules' epiphany to Pollius are described with a sense for the absurd and incongruous: Pollius, his guests, and servants are compelled by a sudden downpour to seek shelter in Hercules' tiny, sadly neglected shrine, causing the humble sanctuary to overflow with people (82-88) – it should be noted that the allusion in 73-75 to Vergil's episode (*Aen.*, IV, 160 ff.) of Dido and Aeneas in the cave has already given a mock-serious tone to the preceding lines describing the sudden arrival of the rainstorm. The god, we are told (89-90), blushed (*erubuit*, 89) – presumably with embarrassment over the commotion that had invaded his totally inadequate shrine – but then smiles (*risitque*, 89) and proceeds to address Pollius in private on the most affectionate of terms (... *dilectaque Polli/corda subit blandisque virum complectitur ulnis*, 89-90), berating him for his failure to erect an adequate shrine for him (91-116), and promising to lend his own personal assistance to the undertaking (91-116). Then, as Pollius starts the work without delay (117-124), Hercules keeps his promise and during one night demolishes a huge mass of cliff rock (125-135). The god ends his role in the poem by pronouncing, from his newly completed shrine, a blessing upon Pollius and his family and sealing it with an inviolable oath (166-186). Also in III, 1, then, the mythological fantasy is appropriate, well modulated with playfulness and gaiety, and deftly introduced into the real-life fabric of this poem.

III, 4, which commemorates the dedication of a lock of hair of the emperor's favourite, Earinus, is not quite as successful in its interplay of the mythical and the non-mythical, not so much because of the relative triviality of the occasion that is celebrated, but rather because of

a major and tasteless interruption in the mythological fantasy with which the poet has idealized Earinus' background and his position at the court. Both the details of the dedication ceremony itself as well as the story of how the young Earinus was 'discovered' and selected to be the emperor's favourite *puer delicatus* are overlaid almost entirely with a pretty fiction, in which Venus and her Cupids once more play a central role. It may have been the emperor himself who commissioned this poem, as Vessey suggests¹¹ (although in his preface to book III Statius says simply that he was complying with a long-standing request of Earinus himself), but this piece has little of the stiffness and somewhat forced striving after hyperbole that marks the more typical panegyrics in honour of Domitian, such as I, 1 : IV, 1 and IV, 2. The poet develops his fantasy with inventive skill, and with enough freedom, one might note, to establish a humorous contrast in marital concord between the imperial couple, Domitian and Domitia, and their Olympian counterparts, Jupiter and Juno : Juno could only sulk in jealousy over her consort's Ganymede, but the new imperial cup-bearer secured the whole-hearted approval of both the emperor and empress (14-19).

However, the playful manipulation of mythological fantasy and the realities at the court of Domitian begins to break down when Statius too crassly lets one fact in Earinus' past speak for itself – namely his castration, presumably at the court, although this is left ambiguous (68-72). The poet attempts to mitigate the harsh reality of his fact by introducing a fantasy of how the god Aesculapius was summoned from Pergamum to perform the surgery on his former protégé. We can only speculate why the poet has let the unpalatable fact of Earinus' castration intrude upon an otherwise flawless piece of light, mythological narrative and description. His ultimate intention appears to be panegyric, for he proceeds immediately (73-77) to eulogize Domitian for his decree prohibiting castration. This might stand as a suitable, although awkwardly exploited compliment. But the poet does not put the business of Earinus' castration to rest : if, as he says (78-82), the emperor's favourite has been born later (and therefore had enjoyed the protection of the emperor's decree against castration), he would now be in possession of all the physical features of a fullgrown man

¹¹ VESSEY, *Statius and the Thebaid*, p. 28.

and would have been able to send more (*e.g.* a cutting from his beard) than a single lock of hair to Aesculapius' shrine in Pergamum. The remark is obviously intended as a pleasantry, but it is singularly inept: if it had occurred in a recognizably satirical context, it might even be construed as ironical at Earinus' and Domitian's expense. The only reasonable conclusion regarding this whole rather tasteless passage is that the poet's overriding desire to interject a piece of superficially topical and relevant panegyric has caused him to mar an otherwise nicely sustained piece of myth-making and fantasy.

In I, 4, the poem of thanksgiving for the recovery of Rutilius Gallicus, myth-making and fantasy play a less predominant, although still major, role than in I, 2; III, 1 and III, 4. The mythological fantasy consists of an account of how Apollo and Aesculapius intervened to turn the crisis in Gallicus' illness (58-114). However, in the remainder of the poem, Statius dispenses with any substantial amount of myth-making. Especially noteworthy is Statius' quite realistic explanation of the cause of Gallicus' illness (50-57). There is no resort to any mythological or supernatural aetiology¹², but rather, Gallicus' condition is described as the result of a physical and nervous collapse, brought on, so the poet emphasizes, by overwork in the emperor's service:

*sed labor intendens animique in membra vigentis
imperium vigilesque suo pro Caesare curae,
dulce opus. hinc fessos penitus subrepsit in artus
insidiosa quies et pigra oblivia vitae* (54-57).

These fine lines, proclaiming a realistic and sensitive insight into the cause of Gallicus' illness, are more effective than any poetic attempt at a more gilded and mythologically coloured diagnosis. Also psychologically convincing is the poet's insistence that Gallicus himself aided Apollo and Aesculapius in effecting his recovery: *adiuvat ipse deos morboque valentior omni/occupat auxilium ...* (111-112). In I, 4, then, while still giving over a good portion of his poem to mythological fantasy, Statius has opted for a larger amount of realism. His choice has

¹² As is done in II, 6, 69 ff., where the fatal illness of Philetas is described in heavily allegorical and mythological terms as being brought on by *Invidia* and *Nemesis*; the almost grotesque scene, reminiscent of the descriptive style of the *Thebaid*, is clearly intended to represent as graphically as possible the cruel injustice of Philetas' premature death.

probably been dictated by the position and background of the person whose recovery he is celebrating. Although Gallicus, like Stella in I. 2, appears to have poetic aspirations and to be a practising poet (25-30), he is, above all, a man of high office in the state, who has served with distinction both at home and abroad (71-93). The occasion of such an eminent's person restoration to health really did not need to be much embellished by literary fantasy, and in opting for a certain measure of restraint in his style and manner here Statius shows a fine sense of discrimination.

Whereas in the previous four poems, a mythological fantasy has been, to varying degrees, superimposed on a contemporary event or occasion, in II. 3 it stands virtually by itself and serves little in the way of any ulterior purpose. The poem is ostensibly a genethliacon, a birthday poem in honour of Atedius Melior, but unlike more traditional poems of this genre, such as PROPERTIUS, III, 10, or III, 8 (= IV, 2) in the *Corpus Tibullianum*, its primary concern is not to celebrate the occasion of the birthday itself, but to honour Melior with a delightfully invented aetiological myth concerning a plane-tree on his estate. This story forms the bulk of the poem (1-61), and is presented to Melior as a birthday gift (62-63). The poem concludes with praise of Melior's honourable character and way of life and with wishes for his longevity and continued well-being (64-77). Only in this final part has Statius introduced any of the major traditional ingredients of the genethliacon; the *aition* itself has no intrinsic connection with the theme of Melior's birthday and, as an almost self-contained mythological narrative, might properly be called an epyllion. A few decades ago, a scholar called attention to the influence of the epyllion on Statius' narrative and descriptive technique in the *Silvae*¹³. This influence is, of course, apparent in all the poems in which mythological fantasy plays a prominent role, but in the four poems we have first examined the myth ultimately serves the purpose of lending an ideal and heightened dimension to a contemporary event or occasion, so that contemporary reality may become, as it were, mythical, while, *vice versa*, the world of myth may turn contemporary. With this novel and original use of myth, epyllion in its typical form as self-contained mythological

¹³ J. H. BISHOP, *The Debt of the Silvae to the Epyllia*, in *PP*, 121 (1951), pp. 427-432.

narrative cannot be realized : only II, 3 among the *Silvae* comes close to being a full-fledged epyllion.

A very different and considerably less dramatic, although still original, use of myth is marked by a few lengthy panegyrics which are put into the mouths of mythological (or near-mythological) figures. Here the figures remain more or less static mouth-pieces for the poet's own sentiments, and they do not function in the more dynamic context of an on-going story. Three panegyric speeches in honour of Domitian are assigned in this manner : to the god Janus in II, 1, 11-43, praising Domitian for entering upon his seventeenth consulship ; and to the river-god Volturnus in IV, 3, 67-94 and the Cumaean Sibyl in IV, 3, 114-163, celebrating the completion of the *Via Domitiana*. More artistically effective is the assignation of a major eulogy of Lucan to the Muse Calliope in II, 7, 36-106. Here the link between the eulogist and the deceased Lucan is indeed very real ; Calliope's speech is resonant with an almost maternal pride over Lucan's precocious talents as well as with angry grief over his premature death by suicide at Nero's behest. The Muse, then, does not remain a mere cardboard figure¹⁴.

Fantasy and myth also lend at times a surrealistic touch to largely descriptive passages. II, 1, which highlights the beauties and amenities of the villa of Pollius Felix, has Nereids, Satyrs, and Pan-gods gambolling in the vineyard and in the sea alongside the estate (100-106). Statius gives even fuller play to his fantasy in his invocation in III, 2 of a number of sea deities to give safe passage to his friend Maecius Celer ; especially picturesque is his series of injunctions to the Nereids (25-34) to assist in the various tasks of launching Celer's ship. The mythological colouring of I, 5, a description of the bathhouse of Claudius, seems more forced, but it does enliven a very limited subject matter on which the poet obviously wishes to elaborate with imagination (cf. Martial's much briefer poem on the same topic, VI, 42 : one will observe that, also in its realistic descriptions of architectural detail, Statius' poem has more verve and colour than Martial's) ; Statius' address to the nymphs inhabiting the nearby

¹⁴ See Vincenz BUCHHEIT, *Stattus' Geburtstagsgedicht zu Ehren Lucans* (Silv. 2, 7), in *Hermes*, 88 (1960), pp. 244-245, for an excellent appreciation of Statius' originality in portraying the Muse as Lucan's 'spiritual' mother, who at his birth is moved to deliver a prophetic eulogy and lament.

waterways and aqueducts (23-31) lends a particularly pleasant and jocose touch to this poem.

Stattius' innovative use of myth in I, 2 ; I, 4 ; II, 3 ; III, 1, and III, 4 contrasts sharply with his more conventional mention of mythological material almost anywhere else in the *Silvae*, where myth and the world of myth function simply to supply the poet with a ready-made frame of reference with which to compare and judge contemporary reality. In the profusion of mythological comparisons and allusions that one encounters there is relatively little imaginative force. The mythological material is not, in general, played off against the realities of the present and developed as such for its dramatic, psychological, or ironic possibilities, but usually appears as a conglomeration of bland clichés.

In a context of deep feeling, it is true, mythological references are sometimes introduced with some imaginative flair and do acquire some impact. This can be said, for instance, of III, 5. Stattius' charming *suasoria* to his wife Claudia, in which he pleads with her to accompany him in his retirement to his native city of Naples. His comparisons of Claudia to Penelope (6-10, 46-47) are nicely modulated : praise in 6-10 for Claudia's loyalty as a wife, and implicit criticism in 46-47 of her reluctance to move to Naples with him. Moreover, as Vessey has well pointed out¹⁵, these comparisons underscore the faintly Odyssean theme of physical and spiritual home-coming that emerges from the poem as a whole. The praise of Claudia's devotion to her daughter through a comparison of her maternal virtues to those of Alcyone and Philomela (57-59) is perhaps technically rather inept (Alcyone should be an example of marital rather than maternal loyalty, whereas Philomela is more apt as a symbol of domestic retribution), but Stattius' selection of these mythological paradigms speaks of some imagination, and the comparison is enlivened by a description of the two mythical mother-birds tenderly caring for their brood. One might also turn to the extensive mythological comparisons in II, 1 and II, 6, both *epicedia* or *consolationes* that commemorate very similar events : in II, 1 the death of Atedius Melior's young adopted son, who had been born of slave parents, and in II, 6, the death of a Flavius Ursus' young slave companion (who still officially possessed slave status, *famulum*, 8) ; in both poems the very prolific mythological comparisons serve the

¹⁵ VESSEY, *Stattius to His Wife : Silvae III, 5*, in *CJ*, 72 (1977), pp. 139-140.

poignant function of further emphasizing the heroic and ideal stature these young men have assumed, despite their humble social status or origin, in the memory of their loved ones. Here the mythological symbolism, unlike the more perfunctory mythical images in the imperial panegyrics, carries real psychological impact.

As a whole, however, Statius is more successful in his adaptation of mythological material when his poetic design permits him to construct a more or less full-scale story or fantasy out of it rather than exploit it more conventionally as a storehouse of paradigms and symbolic images. Then, what is otherwise a standard literary mannerism available to any Roman poet of the first century A. D., truly springs to life.

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