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EXTRAIT

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## Panegyric and Candour in Statius, *Silvae* 3.4

*Silvae* 3.4, which is, on the whole, a playful and fantasy-filled encomium to Domitian's favourite, Earinus, as well as to the emperor himself, contains what is, at least on first impression, one of the most bizarre passages in Roman literature, namely the lengthy reference in lines 65-82 (line 82 as far as the first caesura, which comes after *nauiget*) to Earinus' castration, to Domitian's subsequent outlawing of this cruel practice, and finally to some of the less than fortunate physical after-effects of the operation on the young man. David Vessey, in his *Statius and the Thebaid*, feels compelled to comment on this passage that it produces "an effect hardly less than emetic upon the modern reader" <sup>(1)</sup>, a judgment that may be echoed by others after an initial reading <sup>(2)</sup>. It is, above all, the festive occasion of the poem as a whole (Earinus' dedication of a lock of his hair to the shrine of Aesculapius at Pergamum), together with the buoyantly lighthearted tone which prevails in first 64 as well as in the concluding 25 lines, that makes the underlying purpose of this passage seem so baffling. No real warning has been signalled to the reader that the poet is going to raise a exceedingly painful matter ; and it is not unreasonable to imagine that Statius' abrupt turning to this traumatic event in Earinus' past must have startled his original audience and circle of readers as well.

Vessey is content to leave the poet's intention behind these lines as irrecoverably enigmatic ; however, two recent critics, Frederick Ahl and John Garthwaite <sup>(3)</sup>, have put forward a strong argument that the real thrust of this passage, and indeed of *Silvae* 3.4 as a whole, is ironical and casts in fact, although obliquely, aspersion on Domitian's private life and calls into serious question his moral consistency. Ahl discusses this passage only in passing as

(1) D. W. T. Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1973), 35.

(2) A. Hardie, *Statius and the Silvae* (Liverpool : Francis Cairns, 1983), in his discussion of 3.4 (pp. 121-124), offers an analysis of literary form only and appears to ignore the real difficulties raised by the passage in question.

(3) F. Ahl, *Lucan : An Introduction* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1976) ; J. Garthwaite, *Domitian and the Court Poets Martial and Statius* (Dissertation, Cornell University 1978).

support for his position that, even under the more despotic Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperors, it was possible, within certain limits, for an author to criticize and satirize with impunity the excesses and eccentricities of the ruling emperor by using such time-honoured stratagems as ambiguity, innuendo, and double-entendre<sup>(4)</sup>; he draws rightly upon Quintilian's discussion of *emphasis* or double-entendre (9.2.64-75) to demonstrate that the Flavian audience and reading public were keenly aware of the effectiveness of these rhetorical and literary devices<sup>(5)</sup>. Garthwaite, who examines both *Siluae* 3.4 as well as a number of Martial's epigrams (in particular, those epigrams that eulogize Domitian's policies on social reform and also those that celebrate the charms of Earinus), argues the case even more forcefully and elaborately<sup>(6)</sup>. It is, therefore, especially to his argument that I shall address myself. Garthwaite's conclusions are valuable, for they are the result of a sophisticated and careful reading which does not want to dismiss the passage in question as an inexplicable aberration from Statius' usual taste and sensitivity.

The first question that should be posed is whether there is any significance in the fact that in the preface of book 3 (which is addressed to Pollius Felix) Statius mentions that he had been under some pressure from Earinus to write this poem and that he had not immediately complied with the young man's wishes (*scis quamdiu desiderium eius [sc. Earinus'] moratus sim*, 18-19)<sup>(7)</sup>. Statius' procrastination needs hardly be taken as implying an actual reluctance to compose a complimentary poem to a young eunuch who was obviously being kept as the emperor's favourite *puer delicatus* (the phrase in line 38, ... *Palatino famulus deberis amori*, clearly points to the erotic aspect of the relationship), for elsewhere in the *Siluae*, in 2.6, a eulogy to the recently deceased Philetas, a favourite young slave of Ursus, the poet shows that a paederastically coloured relationship was not uncongenial to his sensibility and could be treated by him with a large measure of emotional

(4) Ahl, *Lucan* 25-35.

(5) *Ibid.* 32.

(6) *Siluae* 3.4 is the subject of ch. 2, "Flattery's Double Edge in *Siluae* 3.4," with some further discussion in ch. 3, "Statius' Departure from Rome" (see note 24 below); Martial is discussed in ch. 1, "Martial and Domitian: The Moral Reforms," and ch. 4, "Hercules and Domitian."

(7) A. Hardie, *Statius*, 121, note 11, thinks that *quamdiu ... moratus sim* is ironic and means that Statius did not delay at all. However, patent irony of this sort, in which the author obviously means quite the opposite of what he is saying, is out of keeping with Statius; I have not found a parallel for it in the *Siluae*. It makes more sense, therefore, to assume some exaggeration, rather than complete irony, on Statius' part.

empathy and even moral conviction<sup>(8)</sup>. Therefore, no real significance should be read into Statius' delay in composing 3.4. It may have been simply the young man's relative lack of political influence and social standing that kept Statius from granting immediate priority to his wishes<sup>(9)</sup>.

It is striking that in 3.4 the poet focuses his praise almost exclusively on Earinus' physical beauty. No great constellation of moral virtues is associated with him, as with Philetas in 2.6, and indeed with almost any person eulogized in the *Silvae*. However, this narrowness of panegyric focus, while unusual for Statius, is well in keeping with what is surely the central purpose of this poem, namely to celebrate the enchanting powers of luxury and physical beauty<sup>(10)</sup>.

This spirit predominates especially in the first 59 lines. The poem starts off as a playful propempticon<sup>(11)</sup> (1-11) directed to the lock of hair which Earinus is sending across the seas to be dedicated at the shrine of Aesculapius at Pergamum. Next (12-20) comes a *laudatio* of Pergamum, the native city of Earinus, which is extolled as being superior to Mt. Ida, where Jupiter's Ganymede was abducted. This implicit comparison of Ganymede and Earinus in favour of the latter leads into a contrast which is drawn between the marital discord created between Jupiter and Juno upon the arrival of Ganymede and the wholehearted acceptance which Earinus enjoys from both Domitian and his wife (*Iuppiter Ausonius pariter Romanaque Juno*, 18). A note of light humour is obviously struck in this last comparison; but unlike Garthwaite, I see no reason for detecting here a dark, ironical allusion to Domitian's past difficulties with Domitia<sup>(12)</sup>. The poet then launches upon

(8) One will also observe that Statius' portrayal of Parthenopaeus in the *Thebaid* (especially 6.571-582 and 9.701-712) has a strong homoerotic colouring, with the young man appearing as a kind of *pais kalos*; for discussion see W. Schetter, *Untersuchungen zur Epischen Kunst des Statius* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harassowitz, 1960) 44 ff. (especially 53-54).

(9) Note, by way of contrast, the speed with which Statius says he complied (*Praef. Silvae* 1.18-20) with Domitian's order (*iussus sum*) to compose a poem on the emperor's newly dedicated equestrian statue.

(10) Among the other poems in the collection, perhaps *Silvae* 1.5, the panegyric to the baths of Claudius Etruscus, comes, with its singleminded celebration of human comfort and luxury, closest to the spirit of 3.4.

(11) S. Th. Newmeyer, *The Silvae of Statius* (Leiden: Brill 1979) 90-92, gives a good structural analysis of 3.4, which he formally classifies as a propempticon; it will be noted that there is a major structural division at line 78, where the propempticon motif is resumed again; however, in my discussion I shall consider lines 65-82 (the latter as far as the first caesura only, after *nauiget*) as a unity in view of the fact that the castration-theme extends into line 82, cf. also A. Hardie, *Statius*, 121-124.

(12) Garthwaite, *Domitian* 98-99; on Domitia's adultery with Paris see Suetonius *Dom.* 3; on Domitian's alleged sexual involvement with his niece Julia, *Dom.* 22.

a lengthy account (21-59) of how Earinus was discovered as a young boy by the goddess Venus at the temple of Aesculapius, brought by her to Rome, and introduced with lavish (almost quasi-marital) ceremonies to Domitian and his court to become the emperor's favourite cupbearer. All this is, of course, fantasy and hyperbole; with an imaginative sweep that is typical of some of the best poems in the *Siluae* (e.g. 1.2, the epithalamium in honour of Stella and Violentilla, and 3.1, the panegyric to the new shrine of Hercules built by Pollius Felix) <sup>(13)</sup>, Statius has invested contemporary human events with mythical, Olympian glamour, making in 3.4 Venus herself the beneficent deity who forges the relationship between Domitian and his young favourite.

It would be, therefore, a critical error to attempt to read any substantial amount of factuality into this highly fanciful story, apart from the mere historicity of Earinus and his relationship with Domitian. If we were to take Statius' account more or less literally, then we should have to conclude that the young man moved at Domitian's court for many years and was among the most prominent (if not the most prominent) among the emperor's favourites. But this is quite unlikely, for there is no mention at all of Earinus in Suetonius' biography of Domitian, which is otherwise informative enough about his private life and sexual escapades. It is difficult to believe that a long-lasting and conspicuously displayed – as Statius would have us believe – intimate relationship between Domitian and Earinus would not have rated at least a glancing reference. In all probability, the young eunuch was little more than a passing fancy of the emperor <sup>(14)</sup>.

After the elated first 59 lines, which are followed by a brief passage in which the poet for the first time directly addresses Earinus himself, congratulating him on his good fortune in being Domitian's favourite, the passage in which the young man's castration is the central topic comes as a jarring surprise. Statius tries to mitigate the trauma of this unhappy event by claiming fancifully that the operation was performed by Aesculapius and therefore was

(13) On Statius' use of myth in the *Siluae*, see H. Szelest, "Mythologie und ihre Rolle in den *Siluae* des Statius," *Eos* 60 (1972) 309-317; cf. also B. C. Verstraete, "Originality and Mannerism in Statius' Use of Myth in the *Siluae*," *L'Antiquité Classique* 52 (1983), 195-205; for an excellent appreciation of Statius' use of myth and the Olympian figures of Venus and Cupid in *Siluae* 1.2, see D. W. T. Vessey, "Aspects of Statius' Epithalamion," *Mnemosyne* Series 4, 25 (1972), 172-187.

(14) Making, of course, full allowance for poetic hyperbole, cf. Statius' mention in lines 56-57 (... *cessere priores / deliciae famulumque greges* ...) of other favourites, who must now make way for Earinus; cf. also Martial's humorously exaggerated remark (which he puts into the mouth of Jupiter) in 9.36.9-10 on the numerous fine-looking young men at the emperor's disposal.

quite painless, although he adds that Venus was still consumed with anxiety lest her young protegee suffer any discomfort. Next, Statius praises Domitian for outlawing castration, and finally reminds Earinus that if he had been born later (and therefore could have benefitted from Domitian's humane edict), he would have been able to send more than just this one *munus* (80, i.e. a lock of hair) to Pergamum, implying, of course, that in that case he would have grown up as a physically normal male and thus could have dedicated a clipping from his beard as well <sup>(15)</sup>.

The entire passage inevitably strikes the modern reader as quite bizarre, even perverse, and, as I have already suggested, may have startled even the original audience. One is, therefore, tempted to read into these lines (and, indeed, into the poem as a whole) a great deal of unflattering innuendo at the expense of Domitian, as Ahl and Garthwaite have done, who in this way hope to rescue the artistic integrity of this poem. Certainly, Statius could have easily avoided the subject altogether, as Martial does in his Earinus-epigrams (9.11, 12, 13, 16, 17 and 36), although the last epigram does contain a strong hint that Earinus, unlike Ganymede, is a eunuch, and Garthwaite has detected elsewhere in these epigrams a few allusions to the young man's procreative sterility <sup>(16)</sup>. If we must actually assume that the castration was performed while Earinus was already Domitian's favourite cupbearer and *puer delicatus*, then the emperor's moral consistency is certainly called into serious question, at least by implication. But, as I have already emphasized, it would be quite mistaken to attach any serious historical value to Statius' account of how Earinus was discovered as a young boy and then introduced to Domitian, and consequently to assume that the emperor's close relationship with his young favourite must have been in existence for many years by the time [probably the year 94 <sup>(17)</sup>] *Silvae* 3.4 was composed. It is worth noting that the use of *olim* in line 65 places Earinus' castration in the distant past and that the anti-castration edict, too, dated from the earlier years of Domitian's reign, certainly no later than 85 <sup>(18)</sup>.

Of course, the singularity of Statius' frankness in bringing up this dramatic event in Earinus' boyhood remains, and it is tempting to join Ahl and

(15) Equally pathetic is the hint in *adultos fortior artus* (79) that the castration has robbed Earinus of his adult bodily strength and development.

(16) Garthwaite, *Domitian* 68, 69-70, 76.

(17) See F. Vollmer (ed.), *P. Papinii Statii Silvae* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1898) 8, for the chronological evidence.

(18) For a comprehensive discussion of the date of this edict, see Garthwaite, *Domitian* 22-23.

Garthwaite in seeing an almost subversive irony, largely at the expense of Domitian, lurking behind this troubling and enigmatic passage. Nevertheless, the poet's boldness in raising an issue that must have been extremely painful to the recipient of the poem has one very strong parallel elsewhere in the *Siluae*, namely 5.2. This is addressed to the young Crispinus, who has just been appointed as a military tribune, a fine starting point in his military and civil career, on which he is heartily congratulated by the poet. However, after a lengthy passage (1-74) in praise of Crispinus and his deceased father, Statius feels free in lines 75-96 to bring up a shocking recent tragedy in the young man's family: Crispinus' mother tried to kill him with poison<sup>(19)</sup>, and the woman is now dead (Statius says in line 91 that the emperor *exegit poenas*, but it may be that she was simply given a chance to commit suicide after being detected in her crime). The poet has high praise for Crispinus during the traumatic aftermath to which the family now is subjected; he commends him for his attitude of forgiveness to his mother and quotes the young man as expressing a plea to others for a similar understanding as well as uttering a prayer that she may not suffer the torments of the guilty in the afterlife. Statius' lengthy exposition upon this grievous tragedy in the family of Crispinus is startling, and certainly most unusual by the standards of conventional panegyric<sup>(20)</sup>. Almost paradoxically, the poet himself seems to be aware that this tragedy had best be buried in darkness, for in lines 89-90 he puts the following words into the young man's mouth: ... *nos certe taceamus et obruta multa / nocte tegi propriae patiamur crimina gentis*, although *nos certe taceamus* seems to imply that Crispinus felt (at least according to the poet) that, while his family (*nos certe*) ought to consign this tragedy to oblivion, a sympathetic and sensitive poet such as Statius might be granted the freedom to deal with it in a responsible and compassionate manner.

*Siluae* 5.2, then, also shows Statius breaking away from the more honeyed and unruffled variety of panegyric and confronting an issue that must have been quite painful for the recipient of his poem<sup>(21)</sup>; in the light of this

(19) P. White, "Notes on Two Statian *ἹΠΟΘΗΜΙΑ*," *CP* 68 (1973) 279-284, suggests plausibly that Crispinus' father may have named his wife as the *substituta pupillaris* in his will since his son was still *impubes*; Crispinus' mother therefore set out to murder him in order to secure his inheritance before he could assume the *toga virilis*.

(20) A. Hardie, *Statius*, 146-151, while offering an excellent analysis of the rhetorical structure and conventions underlying 5.2 ignores the real boldness of this passage, which flies in the face of conventional expectations.

(21) A less extreme example of this willingness is provided in *Siluae* 3.3, a *consolatio* directed to Claudius Etruscus on the death of his aged father (whose name is not known), a

parallel, his *excursus* in 3.4 upon the castration of Earinus will seem somewhat less bizarre. Here, too, Statius' boldness in raising a quite delicate subject at such great length and with such explicitness is remarkable, even if, as already noted, he attempts to mitigate the trauma of the operation itself by resorting in his account to mythological fiction. However, unlike Ahl and Garthwaite, I prefer not to speak here of irony and double-entendre, with implicit denigration of Domitian's moral consistency. Instead, there may be a more straightforward moral and poetic principle at work in this passage: 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 must also address himself to painful and perhaps even unpalatable facts. He does so, of course, with tact and discretion: the surgery is portrayed as a painless one, while the emperor is not implicated in this unhappy event (which, as already noted, lay in the distant past, in all likelihood before Earinus was even introduced to Domitian) and indeed receives high praise for his anti-castration edict. Statius clearly reveals his own ambivalence (and perhaps Earinus' as well) about the practical effects of the operation, for he starts the castration-episode with a statement that the surgery was performed to preserve Earinus' extraordinary beauty (... *ne prima genas lanugo nitentes / carperet et pulchrae fuscaret gratia formae*, 65-66), but later roundly condemns the practice in general as *nefas* (75), and then concludes with what appears to be a note of regret (perhaps echoing Earinus' regret as well) that the young eunuch has lost his full physical manhood. Thus, after an apologetic and euphemizing start, explaining the rationale for the operation and the painless manner in which the surgery was performed (65-72), the poet registers a strong moral outcry against this cruel practice and is even bold enough to hint at a feeling of sadness at the damage done to Earinus' physical manhood. My own conclusion, therefore, is that, rather than sly

freedman who had enjoyed a very distinguished career (including the secretariate *a rationibus*) in the imperial civil service; Statius dwells in lines 154-171 on the disfavour and exile that the father suffered under Domitian, excusing the old man on account of his old age and feebleness, while praising the emperor for punishing his subordinate only with a mild relegation to the south of Italy and finally recalling him back to favour, and also warmly commending Claudius Etruscus and his brother for their intercession before the emperor on behalf of their father; Statius' sympathetic account of this painful and humiliating episode during the final years of Claudius Etruscus' father, while still noteworthy, is not as striking as the passage in 5.2, given the eulogized person's freedman status and subordinate position; Martial commemorates the old man's recall from exile in 6.83 and also seems to allude to his banishment in the epitaph composed for him (7.40.2, *pectore non humili passus utrumque deum*).



innuendo directed against Domitian, a quite complex train of thought, in which honesty and moral feeling are set over against rationalization and mitigation, emerges from the castration-passage.

We can hardly speculate about Statius' real feelings about Domitian and his autocratic airs<sup>(22)</sup>. Certainly, it is remarkable that in *Siluae* 3.5.31-33, Statius expresses with such sharpness his disappointment at failing to win the poetry prize in the Capitoline contest of 94, which was presided over by Domitian: the words (*saevum ingratumque ... Iouem*, 32-33) with which he castigates the patron deity of the festival can be taken, as I agree with Garthwaite at this point<sup>(23)</sup>, as an expression of criticism also of the emperor himself. However, this single outburst in 3.5 does not warrant the reading of ironical and uncomplimentary undertones into 3.4, even if we assume with Garthwaite that the latter was composed after Statius' defeat<sup>(24)</sup>. My own surmise (which finds support from the unconventional revelations about the family of Crispinus in *Siluae* 5.2, as discussed above) is that the poet would have raised the sensitive subject of Earinus' castration in any case. Statius' evident freedom in raising the delicate fact of Earinus' castration in more than simply allusive fashion should cast some doubt on the general picture drawn in our literary sources for this period of Domitian as the paranoiac and ruthless dictator of letters and free expression of opinion<sup>(25)</sup>.

(22) A comprehensive discussion of the theme of *libertas* versus autocracy, as developed in Statius' *Thebaid*, is provided by I. R. McDonald, *The Flavian Epic Poets as Political and Social Critics* (Dissertation, University of North Carolina 1970), 94-116; McDonald rightly argues against a narrow partisan interpretation of the political and moral themes of this epic; Statius was not of senatorial rank and therefore lacked an immediate political motive for at least covert hostility to Domitian.

(23) Garthwaite, *Domitian* 138-144.

(24) *Ibid.* 145-146: "Siluae 3.4 may well have been the bitter farewell of the poet resolved to abandon Rome and, with it, any further hope, however remote, of imperial support" (145); Garthwaite therefore suggests (133) that *Siluae* 4.2, with its hopeful mention of the Capitoline contest (62), was composed in 93 rather than 95.

(25) Above all, of course, Tacitus (*Agr.* 2.45) and Pliny (e.g. *Ep.* 7.19.5-6); also Suetonius *Dom.* 10; the ferocity of Domitian's attack on 'subversive' literature has been sharply questioned by R. C. Rogers, "A Group of Domitianic Treason-Trials," *CP* 55 (1960) 19-25, in his careful examination of the notorious treason-trials in 93 of the younger Helvidius Priscus, Herennius Senecio, Junius Mauricus, Junius Arulenus Rusticus, the younger Arria, Fannia, and Gratilla; he concludes that literary compositions "were not ground of indictment, but no more than trivial incidentals" (25); the growing consensus that has emerged over the past few decades on the necessity of a more favourable estimate of Domitian's character and reign is well represented by K. H. Waters, "The Character of Domitian," *Phoenix* 18 (1964) 49-77. — On the unlikelihood that Domitian demanded for himself the appellation, *Dominus et Deus*, see L. Thompson, "Domitianus Dominus: A Gloss on Statius *Siluae* 1.6.84," *AJPh* 105 (1984), 469-475.

In my estimation, Statius wished to demonstrate in *Silvae* 3.4 that even in a poem of lighthearted fantasy, after paying tribute to Earinus' extraordinary beauty and Domitian's exquisite taste, he could confront an issue both delicate and serious. Perhaps, he was aware of Martial's Earinus-epigrams, if these had been already circulated, and may have wanted to move beyond that author's clever but still fairly predictable compliments. At any rate, he chose to inject, a note of real, even painful gravity into his otherwise smoothly playful encomium to Earinus and Domitian. By our standards, Statius' candour may intrude awkwardly upon this poem, disrupting its consistency of tone and feeling, but this frankness has produced an arresting document to the poet's refusal to remain totally confined by the conventional demands of panegyric.

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