

Dominature: Overcoming Nature in the *Silvae* and *Georgics*

A considerable number of Statius' *Silvae* address man's need to tame his barren, natural surroundings (1.3, 2.2, 3.1, and 4.3). For Bright (1980), Newlands (2002), and Zeiner (2005), taming nature lends thematic unity to the *Silvae*. Although Ganiban (2007) has recently provided an exhaustive study of the influence of the *Aeneid* on the *Thebaid*, much work remains on Statius' engagement with another poem of Vergil, the *Georgics*. In this paper, I examine *Silvae* 1.3 (the villa of Milius Vopsicus) and 4.3 (the *via Domitiana*) through the light of the *Georgics*, comparing the poems through the rhetorical and philosophical framework of ecphrastic passages in each work.

The farmer of the *Georgics*, a symbol of Iron Age man, must struggle to win a pyrrhic victory against nature. Thomas (1988) notes the copious use of military language describing the farmer's struggle against nature. Even if through his own labor and tools he manages to grow meager crops in the difficult soil, he may lose them to storms, floods or draughts. A strong sense of moral ambiguity arises from man's need to destroy and dominate nature in order to render it useful (Perkell, 1989). Conversely, Statius' villas and buildings are not just impervious to storms: storms cease to exist around them (e.g., 1.3.29-30). The moral tension caused by man's subjugation of nature is resolved through that same subjugation in the *Silvae*, as nature itself welcomes its conqueror. An example of this resolution of moral tension is evident in *Silvae* 4.3, Statius' poem about the completion of the *Via Domitiana*. The former road was dangerous to travelers (*maligna tellus*, 29) because it made travel difficult. The process of controlling the nature is described in detail as the land is excavated and leveled, flat stones are arranged, trees are felled, and mountains are strip mined for material (40-54). Nature does not hamper or begrudge this process. Instead, Vulturnus, the local god whose river was bridged, lifts his head in praise of the berms placed on his regularly flooded banks (72, 79-80).

In his ecphrastic poems of such man-made structures, Statius uses hyperbolic encomia to represent the shift from the Iron Age of the *Georgics* to his own new Golden Age. The features of these ecphrases typify the shift from the genre of epic—the former home of ecphrasis—to the genre of occasional poetry. Statius' use of ecphrasis does possess similarities to that of his epic predecessors: a strong emphasis on vision and an interactive relationship between the narrative and the object described. For Vergil and Homer, however, ecphrasis typically described a static object in some detail (Barchiesi, 1997, 272). Statius' ecphrases, on the other hand, are frequently

descriptions of change, such as how a new building or road has improved the barren land. While descriptions of Achilles' or Aeneas' shields often focus on an idealized potential or remembrance of the past, Statius' descriptions identify the present as the optimal time. *Silvae* 1.3 and 4.3 reveal a new social reality, when great statues and homes and roads are erected in a short time, and seem to have been made by the gods themselves.

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