

Dum vagor aspectu: Vision, Otium, and the Patron in Statius' Silvae

This paper argues that the villa poems in Statius' *Silvae* display anxieties about the impotence that *otium* could engender. The landscapes and architecture of the villas which Statius describes repeatedly threaten to rob the poet's patrons of their status as dominating Roman male subjects.

These poems have come under a great deal of scholarly scrutiny recently. Many critics feel that Statius, breaking with an older moralistic tradition that decried the spread of luxury, effectively normalized the decadent Epicurean lifestyle enjoyed by his addressees. K. Sara Myers and Carole Newlands argue that Statius' depiction of the lavish architecture and landscapes that serve as the backdrop for the leisurely lives of his addressees serves an encomiastic function, because various aspects of the villascapes suggest the virtues of their inhabitants (Myers, 2005; Newlands, 2002). Such an interpretation, I argue, overlooks some of the threatening elements which Statius includes in these landscapes.

My exploration of this phenomenon focuses on two poems from the *Silvae*: 1.3, on the villa of Manilius Vopiscus at Tibur and 2.2, on the Surrentine villa of Pollius Felix. Statius's addressees all eschewed high political office and the cares of the city in order to live a life in Epicurean splendor. While Statius does not openly criticize this choice, the poems contain protreptic about the effects of a luxurious lifestyle. The trappings of *otium* threaten again and again to objectify the patron, making him into an entity to be acted upon or subjected to violent treatment. In the *Silvae*, the very act of looking at extravagant decoration and landscapes makes the patron/reader vulnerable. In a society where masculinity implies both personal autonomy and a certain impenetrability, such objectification could be deeply problematic (Williams, 2010).

The villasapes that Statius depicts offer his patron wondrous sights on which to feast his eyes. But spectatorship was always a disconcerting issue for the Romans. Shadi Bartsch argues that while the spectator might on occasion train an aggressive eye on someone, he might just as easily find himself on display and at the mercy of another's penetrating gaze. Furthermore, certain sights had the power to damage or to corrupt the viewer (Bartsch, 2006). The *Silvae*, intensely visual poems, dramatize this slippage between the active and the passive, and, in so doing, threaten the patron's status as active male subject.

The luxurious world represented in these poems is peopled with mythological figures whose invariably tragic suffering sets an alarming precedent for observers, and particularly Epicureans. In 2.2, for example, Statius introduces a number of mythological figures, including the nymph Galatea. As the traditionally unobtainable object of the Cyclops' desire, Galatea is something of an Epicurean nightmare. Lucretius, after all, denounces men's lustful desires precisely because they are so often unfulfilled (*DRN* 4.1084ff). Why should Statius introduce a figure who might upset his addressee's *ataraxia* into an otherwise idealized Epicurean gardenscape? Given Epicurean theories about the mechanics of the gaze and the physiological causes of desire, it would be immensely difficult for Felix to ignore Galatea's charms. Epicurus and Lucretius both advanced a theory of optics that involved "intromission." According to them, objects emitted very small atoms (*simulacra*) that kept the shape of the object from which they originated and entered the body through the eyes. In this scheme, the eye functions as a passive receptacle penetrated by *simulacra*. In a society where the sex/gender system is centered on the distinction between penetrator and penetrated, this penetrative model of vision became eroticized (Bartsch, 2006). Given the presence of Galatea's desirable body in the villa, how could Felix avoid this emasculating process?

The problems raised by Statius's treatment of Felix's villa are not unique. Statius subtly raises questions related to vision, *amor*, and masculinity throughout the *Silvae's* villa poems. I trace these themes in order to complicate our conceptions about the nature of Statius' praise.

Bibliography

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