

The Herculanean Labors of Statius *Silvae* 3.1. and 4.6: Poetic Ekphrasis as Self-Representational Metaphor

Although many poems of Statius' *Silvae* engage mythological persons as points of reference and comparison, only two among his broad spectrum of characters, places and monuments take a mythological personage as their central subject. This in both cases is Hercules, viewed in one instance through an architectural framework and in the other as a sculptural embodiment. Poem 3.1 celebrates a new temple that the villa owner Pollius Felix has built on the Punto di Sorrento, and 4.6 the small bronze Hercules Epitrapezios that stands on the convivial table of Vindex Novius. Different as their objects may be, the two poems have much in common including improbable narratives of making that add new chapters to Hercules' legendary history while giving both owners and poet opportunity to negotiate personal representation with the culture of the past.

Consensus views of Statius' overall approach to these poems acknowledge a variation on the Roman practice of ekphrasis. Carole Newlands is representative when she states "Statius makes a major innovation in the *Silvae* by devoting entire, full-length poems to the description of works of art and buildings; he was the first Roman poet to do so." Nevertheless a hard look at the poetic texts in quest of information concerning Flavian material culture discovers that their technique of viewing facts through a haze of impressions doesn't tell us very much. In fact they quite resemble the archaeological remnants they are supposed to illuminate by yielding bits and pieces needing a great deal of reconstructive intervention. In the two Hercules poems, however, the descriptive components, although brief, are so precisely focused as to make the subjects visible. At the same time the details of these descriptions are so presented as to situate each object within an understood narrative of Hercules' career. At Sorrento he cooperates hypothetically with villa owner Pollius Felix in rebuilding for himself a temple whose brilliant physical aspect resembles that of the funeral pyre he built on Mt Oeta for his own consumption and apotheosis. The banquet statue shows Hercules resting amid not-yet completed labors in a manner that recalls his frequent presence as guest. In the history related by Vindex, the sculptor Lysippos crafted this piece as a table companion for Alexander's travels from whose possession it had passed to Hannibal and then to Cornelius Sulla. Although we need not take this account literally, what it does show is the role of Vindex as rescuer of the demi-god whose exploits become a subject for poems of his own.

Comparing the two poems we see Hercules in two contrasting attitudes yet each related to his servitude. In his present embodiments the deity is *mitis* as suits a tutelary role but we are reminded of this benevolence against a background of fierce strength. At Sorrento the transformation from rustic shrine to monument establishes Hercules' place within the society of local gods in keeping with the poem's metaphorical theme of Olympian apotheosis. We may recall how often this translated hero serves as an icon of social mobility as for instance in the mythological panels of the Herculanean College of the Augustales. Still temple building is not among his accustomed actions and the service ranks as another labor. Conversely the Hercules who rests from his labors on the banquet table is completely passive, and has been so throughout his sculptural life as a receptor for the actions of his owners, Alexander's bragging, Hannibal's brutality of Hannibal and finally the aesthetic discrimination of Vindex. Although Statius celebrates Lysippos' miniaturization of Hercules heroic vigor as a miracle of artistry inspired by the demi-god himself, it can also be seen as taming or confinement. The mythology of Hercules' career tames strength by enslavement and compensates enslavement by apotheosis. As Statius' two owners have appropriated images of Herculean labors and apotheosis to enhance their own social profiles, they have similarly coopted the services of the poetic voice for a metaphorical elevation of this enhancement.