

The Weakness of Poetry in Flavian Epic

The Flavian epic poets consistently and consciously distinguish themselves by their limitations: they define their work as limited in scope, and specifically as inferior to the reach of the emperor. This constrained ambition is linked to the political position of the poets and the circumstances of their writing, but aims more broadly to question the value of poetry in general in the face of military and political power. The conscious sense of “decline” often noted in imperial poets (see Hinds 1998) thus extends to a pessimistic view of the power and value of poetry.

This limiting of ambition can appear in the epic *recusatio*, where the poet declines to write of imperial accomplishments. Statius, in the *Thebaid*, postpones an epic on Domitian’s achievements to the future (in the unfinished *Achilleid*, he does the same), and to a time when he will be “stronger” (*Theb.* 1.32). He thus defines a *limes carminis* (*Theb.* 1.16) that keeps the poem clear of contemporary relevance – and recognizes that restriction as evidence of poetic weakness.

But the *Thebaid* is limited not only in comparison to hypothetical future works. Describing the madness of Eteocles and Polynices, who abandoned justice fighting over the “poor kingdom” of Thebes, Statius asks: what if the boundary (*limes*) in each direction had been the end of the earth? To ask the question is to invoke the spectre of Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*, whose subject is just such a boundless war. Lucan is an important model for Statius’ epic – but here his influence is implicitly rejected. Statius emphasizes the lesser scope of his own project, and its safe distance from political relevance (with the implied hope, perhaps, of warding off the unhappy fates of Lucan Nero, and Rome at the end of the 60s). The great accomplishments of the previous generation are out of the Flavian poet’s reach, or too dangerous to attempt.

The emperor Domitian's status as a fellow poet is mentioned by all the epic poets of his time, but paradoxically limits their ambition even further. Even before he becomes emperor, Domitian is an impossible rival for any author outside of the imperial family: Valerius explicitly leaves the celebration of Titus' victories in Judaea to Domitian, taking a mythological subject for his own epic. But the existence of an emperor-poet can seem to make all other poetic activity useless, as it appears in the portrayals of poet-characters within Flavian epic.

In Statius' *Achilleid*, Achilles performs a song for Thetis, before leaving Chiron's care; the poet has explicitly compared his hero to Domitian, and this is likely a compliment to the emperor's literary accomplishments. But Achilles (like Domitian - *Ach.* 1.16; see Heslin 2005) abandons singing for warfare. Poetry is only a prelude to more serious business. And the other poetic performance in the *Achilleid* is that of Deidamia, who is taught by the disguised Achilles, as a means of seduction, to sing unknowingly of his own heroism (*praesentem cantat Achillem* - 1.579). The singer (of a song similar to the *Achilleid* itself) is manipulated, then raped, by her heroic subject and audience. The implied relationship between poet and warrior is utterly one-sided, without a hint that a song confers any benefit on the one it celebrates.

In Silius' *Punica*, poetry is similarly contrasted with more glorious forms of power (see Marks 2010). The Capuan poet Teuthras, modeled on Vergil's Iopas and Homer's Demodokos, appears in Book 11; but his song, along with other luxurious distractions, serves to sap Hannibal and the Carthaginians of their strength. Far from inspiring or immortalizing military valor, poetry undermines it. In the following book, we find a heroic poet - Ennius, who appears fighting in Sardinia. It is exclusively his fighting, however, and not his poetry, that earns him praise: he is compared to Orpheus (12.398-400), but specifically at the moment when Orpheus put aside his

lyre to throw a spear. A poet may be a hero (like Domitian, the dedicatee of the *Punica*), but poetry, as an activity, is assigned no real value.

The Flavian epics celebrate martial and political power at their own expense. These characterizations of poetry and poets as debased, helpless, and effeminate are not veiled criticisms of the emperor - even Achilles' rape of Deidamia is presented as a heroic act, and - but signs of an acceptance that real power is found elsewhere than in poems.

Bibliography

Heslin, P. J. *The Transvestite Achilles: Gender and Genre in Statius' Achilleid*. Cambridge: CUP, 2005

Hinds, Stephen. *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry*. Cambridge: CUP, 1998

Marks, Raymond. "The Song and the Sword: Silius's *Punica* and the Crisis of Early Imperial Epic," in Konstan and Raafaub, *Epic and History*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.