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STATIUS, ORPHEUS, AND THE POST-AUGUSTAN VATES

HELEN LOVATT

The poetics of the *Silvae* are a subject that is becoming a well-trodden path.¹ This paper aims to interrogate how Statius presents himself in the *Silvae* by looking at two themes that recur and connect in several poems throughout the collection. The first is the figure of Orpheus, whose story of poetic triumph and loss is emblematic of both the power of poetry and its ultimate powerlessness. There is no one controlling representation of Orpheus in the works of Statius, as there is in Virgil and Ovid. Instead he becomes a topos scattered throughout Statius's poetry. This paper attempts to put the pieces together and learn from the experience. The scattering of Orpheus reflects the complex poetics of Statius and the dangers of espousing a clear poetic role in a culture of collusion.

The second theme is the concept of the *vates*, a word frequently used to describe Orpheus in the *Silvae*. J. K. Newman's 1967 study of the concept has a two-page afterword on "Silver Latin" in which he claims: "No longer does the *vates* represent poetry in a serious aspect."² In the face of this claim, however, I will show that Statius is deeply concerned with the issue

1 Most importantly, Newlands 2002. Hardie 1983 emphasises the influence of Greek epideictic rhetoric on the *Silvae*; see also Newlands 1991, Malamud 1995, Myers 2000, Nagel 2000, Rosati 2002, Markus 2003, and Wray in this volume. The text of the *Silvae* used is Courtney's 1990 Oxford Classical Text; all translations are my own.

2 Newman 1967.124. Newman's concept of the *vates* in Augustan poetry is somewhat monolithic; it has been challenged by, for instance, O'Hara 1990.181, who says: "The Augustans in the unreliability of the *vates* and his associations with deception and illusion find a fitting representation of the basic ambiguities and complexities of their work in the troubled political situation of the times." Even if we accept that Virgil's *vates* is by no means securely Augustan, it is clear that the "troubled political situation" in Flavian

of how to be a serious (and indeed political) poet, and that he articulates this through his representation of Orpheus and the *vates*.³ The paper will begin by briefly looking at a Horatian connection between Orpheus and the idea of the *vates*. It will go on to trace this conjunction in the *Silvae*, from 2.2 and 2.7, through 3.1, to the great poems of lament in Book 5 (1, 3, and 5), and conclude with a few words on the *vates* in the *Thebaid*.

There is a marked difference between the uses of the word *vates* in Statius's epic poetry and in the *Silvae*.⁴ In the *Thebaid*, *vates* is usually found in its prophetic sense to describe Amphiaraus or Tiresias, and is rarely used of poets, let alone of Statius himself.⁵ In the *Silvae*, however, the situation is reversed, with *vates* used almost entirely in its poetic sense, and six times of Statius.⁶ Clearly this distinction between poet and prophet is foreign to the word itself: the *vates* is a poet-prophet, both poets and prophets sing and their words have power. Two examples in the *Silvae* show clearly how the two senses overlap and interact: first, the Sibyl. In 4.3, Statius introduces her as an alternate poetic voice for his praise of Domitian's road: "cedamus; chely, iam repone cantus: / uates sanctior incipit, tacendum est" ("Let us retreat; lyre, set aside your song: a holier prophet begins; we must be silent," 4.3.119–20). Here the Sibyl explicitly replaces Statius as the mouthpiece of the poem; *sanctior* marks her role as prophetic, and she provides a guarantee of the authority of Statius's praise of Domitian, while also offering distance, a release from imperial control.⁷

Rome was quite different in quality from that of Augustan Rome. See also Jocelyn 1995 for a study of *poeta* and *vates* up to Horace and useful bibliography.

- 3 Markus 2003.440–41 makes Statius the one exception to the devaluing of the concept of the *vates*: "Statius re-establishes the dignity of the vatic role for the second time despite the fact that his contemporaries Martial and Tacitus use the word as synonym of *poeta*, while Persius and Juvenal use it in an ironic sense." Zeiner 2005 also uses the word to describe Statius's poetic *auctoritas*: "Statius' voice exudes a firm literary *auctoritas*, an understanding of his political and cultural surroundings and his place within that context. The voice of the poet-*vates* speaks loudly and clearly not only for Domitian, but for other aspirants of distinction in Domitianic Rome" (47).
- 4 Two recent contributions on the intersections between the *Silvae* and epic are Gibson 2006b and Van Dam 2006.
- 5 In the *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*, the word *vates* is used 39 times—36 times of prophets or prophet figures (17 times of Amphiaraus, 8 times of Tiresias) and 3 times with reference to poets: at 4.60 to describe the spring created by the hoof of Pegasus at Cenchreae (*conscius vatum*); at 4.181 of Thamyris; and at 10.829 to describe the customary singing which Statius needs to leave behind for the madness of Capaneus.
- 6 *Silvae*: 28 times in total: 25 times of poets, 3 times of prophets.
- 7 On the Sibyl in 4.3, see Newlands 2002.309–23 and Smolenaars 2006.

She is both prophet and poet, and, in Carole Newlands's account, a study in the complexities of political poetry under Domitian.⁸

The Sibyl returns in Statius's lament for his father (5.3); here, too, she bridges the divide between poetry and prophecy. At 172–75, Statius compares the students who came from all over Italy to be taught by his father to those who came to seek the advice of the Sibyl. The songs of prophecy are equated with the songs of poetry, and in the following section (176–84), Statius shows how his father's poetic education moulded the priests of Flavian Rome.

Statius self-consciously manipulates the overlap between poetry and prophecy in the concept of the *vates* in *Silvae* 5.2 also.⁹ At the climax of his praise of Crispinus, he prophesies that Crispinus's political career will go from strength to strength: “sed uenies melior (uatum non inrita currunt / omina)” (“But you will come back even more prosperous—not vain run the omens of poet-prophets,” 5.2.164–65), and immediately fulfils this promise of his own expertise as a prophet by staging the announcement of Crispinus's appointment as military tribune: “dicebam certe ‘uatum non inrita currunt / auguria’” (“I was speaking truly: ‘the auguries of poet-prophets do not run in vain,’” 5.2.172–73). Statius stakes his claim on the role of the *vates* immediately after drawing attention to his status as epic poet. At 5.2.160–63, he imagines reciting without the presence of Crispinus,

sed coetus solitos si forte ciebo
et mea Romulei uenient ad carmina patres,
tu deris, Crispine, mihi, cuneosque per omnes
te meus absentem circumspectabit Achilles.

But if by chance I stir up my customary gathering,
and the Romulean fathers come to my songs,
I will miss you, Crispinus, and my Achilles will look
around
through the whole audience for absent you.

8 Newlands 2002.310 points out that, as the speaker of the last speech of imperial praise in Book 4, she is a figure of closure; she also marks the climax of Newlands's book, the last section of the last chapter, reflecting on the “faultlines” in Statius's “poetics of empire.”

9 On this poem, see Bernstein in this volume.

Here he represents his poetic role as one both public and Roman, drawing in the Roman senators, like Lucan as Orpheus in 2.7 (which we will examine below), but still anxious about his reception. The Sibyl, too, is a consciously epic figure, a reworking of Virgil and Lucan (Newlands 2002.309). We have a question, then, about genre: can the *vates* in the *Silvae* straightforwardly represent the power of epic poetry? Is being epic all there is to being serious?¹⁰

Let us turn now to Orpheus. Orpheus is a figure often used by poets and critics, ancient and modern, for exploring the power of poetry, and Newman points to Horace's description of Orpheus and Amphion at *Ars Poetica* 391–401 as the clearest presentation of the idea of the *vates*.¹¹ In this passage, Horace rationalises the myths of Orpheus and Amphion.¹² The image of Orpheus's poetry enchanting the beasts is read as an image of poetry civilising men. Amphion's literal poetic building of Thebes, in which the stones moved of their own volition where he sang them, becomes the more prosaic idea of a poet who founded a city. Allegorical readings of the myths tame the power of poetry: it is not the literal power to build, and magically quieten wild beasts, it is the everyday magic of persuasion and civilisation (Brink 1971.384–90, Rudd 1989.214–15). On the other hand, Horace emphasises the social and political importance of poetry, suggesting that the poet should have power in the political realm. The religious nature of the power of the *vates* in this passage is the only concession to the supernatural. The poet is able to have this social and political power because he is sacred (*sacer*) and the interpreter of the gods (*interpresque deorum*); his

10 Epic is not the only genre to claim the role of *vates*: in Statius, as in Augustan poetry, the elegiac poet is also a *vates*. For instance in *Silvae* 1.2, the elegiac poet and bridegroom of Statius's epithalamium, Stella, is repeatedly described as a *vates* (1.2.33, 46, 94, 98, 197, 201, 209). Stella's position as one of the *quindecimviri*, who were responsible for interpreting the Sibylline books (1.2.176–77), might make him doubly appropriate as a *vates*: both a poet and a prophet. On the other hand, 1.2 is deeply concerned with genre. For example, at 7–10, a personification of Elegy reworks Ovid *Amores* 3.1, but she is *cel-sior adsueto* ("taller than normal," 1.2.8), wants the goddesses to support her lame foot, is ambitious to be the tenth Muse, and mingles with the Muses, pretending to be one of them. This represents Stella's elegy as elegy with epic ambitions, a trope that is taken further in 11–15, when Venus leads out Violentilla. Venus is described as *genetrix Aeneia* (11), immediately pointing us towards the *Aeneid*, and, in a striking reversal of *Aeneid* 1, she downplays her own looks rather than enhancing Violentilla's. See further on genre in 1.2: Pederzani 1991 and 1995. See also Hersch and Zeiner-Carmichael in this volume.

11 Newman 1967.26. Ovid also refers to him as a *vates* at *Metamorphoses* 10.12.

12 Horace is an important model for Statius in the *Silvae*, see Laguna Mariscal 2006.

song is prayer (*prece*); his honour and fame raise him towards the divine (*diuinis uatibus*). For Horace, divine inspiration gives only influence over humans; the poet cannot mould reality with his words.

This side of the Orpheus myth, the image of poetic power over nature, animate and inanimate, wild beasts and men, enshrines the power of poetry;¹³ the story of Eurydice, the fatal backward glance of the *Georgics*, Orpheus's *sparagmos*, and his head floating down the river point to the ultimate futility of this power in the face of death. Yet still, Orpheus has a political function: Virgil's Orpheus is a counterpoint to Aristaeus, the Augustan founder of beehives, the poet whose tragedy seems to underpin the success of the statesman. M. O. Lee, for instance, says of the Orpheus episode in *Georgics* 4 that "it casts both Virgil and Octavian in mythic guises and shows in two interdependent myths the interdependent roles they must play in finding a future for the Roman world."¹⁴

In *Silvae* 2.2 and 3.1, both written to Pollius Felix, Statius compares his patron to Orpheus and Amphion.¹⁵ When Pollius built his villa in 2.2, he tamed the surrounding countryside and moved mountains and trees, just as Arion bewitched the dolphins, Orpheus persuaded the groves to follow him, and Amphion charmed the rocks (*Silvae* 2.2.54–62):

mons erat hic ubi plana uides, et lustra fuerunt
 quae nunc tecta subis; ubi nunc nemora ardua cernis
 hic nec terra fuit: domuit possessor, et illum
 formantem rupes expugnantemque secuta
 gaudet humus. nunc cerne iugum discentia saxa
 intrantesque domos iussumque recedere montem.
 iam Methymnaei *uat*is manus et *chelys* una
Thebais et Getici cedat tibi gloria plectri;
 et tu saxa *moues*, et te nemora alta sequuntur.

13 There is an extensive literature on Orpheus; the reception of the myth is also fascinating. See, for instance, Segal 1989.1–35. See also Anderson 1982 and Heath 1994.

14 Lee 1996.124. See also Morgan 1999, who reads Orpheus's story as "poetry of the victim" (161) and suggests that it is "constructive" suffering, representing the civil war which is necessary for peace, the death and disaster which are integral to victory and success (207).

15 On Pollius Felix, see Hardie 1983.67–68, Nauta 2002.223–25. On 3.1, see Newlands 1991; 2.2 is the focus of Newlands 2002.154–98. On nature and culture in the *Silvae*, see Augoustakis in this volume.

Here was a mountain, where you see a plain,
 and this was wilderness, which now you enter as a house;
 where now you see high groves,
 this was not even land: the owner has tamed it,
 and the soil rejoices when it has followed him as he
 shapes cliffs
 and storms them. Now see the rocks learning the yoke,
 and the houses as they enter, and the mountain ordered to
 recede.
 Now the hand of the Methymnian *poet* and the one
 Theban lyre
 and the glory of the Thracian plectrum give in to you;
 you both *move* rocks, and the high groves follow you.

The comparison with Orpheus and Amphion is anticipated in the in the first lines of the extract. First, Pollius is described as taming nature (*domuit*) as if it were a wild animal;¹⁶ the cliffs and the soil follow him like the groves follow Orpheus (*secuta*, 57; *sequuntur*, 62; both positioned at the end of a line). He is a sculptor *and* a soldier, forming and storming his material.¹⁷ The soil, the rocks, the houses, and the mountain are all personified, learning and obeying orders. Where Horace took the legends of poetic power over inanimate objects and allegorised them as examples of the civilising power of poetry, Statius makes the builder's concrete power over the landscape into poetic power. Pollius moulds the landscape as effortlessly as Amphion built Thebes with his lyre alone.¹⁸ The epic idea of the foundation of cities through poetry, with its hint of the *Thebaid* smuggled in, chimes with Horace's idea of the *vates* as founder of cities and giver of laws. Pollius literally moves the rocks, but the word *moves* in this poetic

16 See Newlands 2002.164–74 on Pollius as a philosopher dominating nature.

17 For Pollius as military victor, see Newlands 2002.178, Myers 2000.113–15, and Van Dam 1984.227–28.

18 We assume that *una chelys Thebais* refers to Amphion, but *chelys* is a programmatic Statian word (used once in Ovid, Calpurnius Siculus, and Valerius Flaccus, 3 times in Silius, 5 times in Seneca's tragedies, not at all in Catullus, Propertius, Tibullus, Horace, Virgil, Lucretius, Manilius, Lucan, and 27 times in Statius). It is also featured at key programmatic moments, e.g., *Thebaid* 1.33: *nunc tendo chelyn*. And *Thebais*, while found nowhere else as an adjective (Van Dam 1984.232), smuggles in the name of Statius's epic. There is a hint of Statius himself graciously ceding victory to Pollius Felix, while counting himself amongst the paradigms of poetry.

context might point towards a programmatic Virgilian epic claim: *maius opus moueo*, “I set in motion a greater work” (*Aeneid* 7.44). But this larger claim is complicated by the fact that this is, after all, a private villa, not a city; it is as if Pollius recreates in microcosm the power of Rome to tame nature. This poem displaces the role of the *vates* from public to private, from Rome itself to Greek Naples. To quote Newlands: “The imperialistic impulse to conquer and control new lands becomes redirected to the private citizen, who reformulates civic virtues within the confines of a private estate that he owns, controls and shapes perfectly to his own needs” (2002.191).

The image of Pollius as Orpheus continues at 2.2.116–20:

hinc leuis e scopulis meliora ad carmina Siren
aduolat, hinc motis audit Tritonia cristis.
tunc rapidi ponunt flatus, maria ipsa uetantur
obstrepere, emergunt pelago doctamque trahuntur
ad chelyn et blandi scopulis delphines aderrant.

On one side, the fickle Siren flies from the cliffs to better songs, on the other, Tritonia listens, with her crest moved. Then the swift winds set themselves down, the seas themselves are forbidden to rage, the sweet dolphins emerge from the sea, are drawn to the learned lyre, and wander towards the cliffs.

Here Pollius betters the Orpheus of Seneca’s *Medea* 355–60.¹⁹ Newlands suggests that Pollius teaches the Siren better songs (2002.192), but another interpretation might be that he *replaces* the song of Siren with

19 quid cum Ausonium dirae pestes
 voce canora mare mulcerent,
 cum Pieria resonans cithara
 Thracius Orpheus
 solitam cantu retinere rates
 paene coegit Sirena sequi?

What about the time when those cursed creatures
soothed the Ausonian sea with melodious voice,
when, echoing on his Pierian lyre,
Thracian Orpheus
nearly forced the Siren to follow him though she was used
to stopping ships with her singing?

better songs, essentially silencing her. Like the statesman in *Aeneid* 1, Pollius silences the sea, reversing simile and referent, substituting poet for politician, but he seems still to be replacing the Sirens only too effectively, as Arion's dolphins are dragged towards the rocks. Pollius is a post-Augustan *vates*, a private Orpheus who moulds the landscape to his own agenda, confined to his personal space, and aiming only for self-mastery.²⁰

In *Silvae* 2.7, Statius reflects on the role of the *vates* through the figure of Lucan.²¹ The opening hymnic lines end with the image of Lucan as priest: *Romani colitur chori sacerdos* ("He is worshipped as priest of a Roman choir," 2.7.23). The main section of the poem is spoken by Calliope; Statius represents her making a prophecy over the newborn Lucan: "tum primum posito remissa luctu / longos Orpheos exuit dolores" ("Then for the first time, when her grief had been set aside, she was released and put off her long mourning for Orpheus," 2.7.39–40). Lucan is a consolation for the death of Orpheus, a new version of Orpheus. Calliope's first lines fill out this idea (2.7.41–47):

puer o dicat Musis,
longaeuos cito transire uates,
non tu flumina nec greges ferarum
nec plectro Geticas mouebis ornos,
sed septem iuga Martiumque Thybrim
et doctos equites et eloquente
cantu purpureum trahes senatum.

O boy dedicated to the Muses,
swiftly about to surpass the ancient poet-prophets,
you will not move the rivers, nor the herds of wild beasts,
nor the Thracian ash trees with your plectrum,
but you will draw with your eloquent song
the seven hills and the Martian Tiber
and the learned knights and the purple senate.

Calliope portrays Lucan as a Neronian *vates*, reclaims the idea of the *vates* for an anti-imperial message, and represents the idea of Rome

20 On Pollius as artist, see also Wray in this volume.

21 On 2.7, see Malamud 1995, Newlands 2002.43–44.

as a political entity through its hills and river, the herds of wild beasts by the equites and senate. His nihilistic call to arms in the *Civil War*, recreating the battles which he loathes, is paradoxically recuperated as an essentially civilising gesture.²² Later, Calliope mentions Orpheus as the subject of one of Lucan's poems (2.7.58–59), which self-consciously points out Statius's own strategy of turning Lucan into a reflection of his own subject matter, just as he imagines him consorting with his own heroes in the afterlife (111–15). Finally, she laments his inevitable death by comparing him to Alexander the Great, Achilles, and Orpheus himself. He is a hero and a man of action as well as a poet.²³ Calliope imagines Thetis grieving for Achilles and herself for Orpheus; the comparison with Polla remains unspoken.²⁴ Instead, a different point of comparison between Orpheus and Lucan comes to the fore: the head of Orpheus floating down the murmuring Hebrus is not silent (*non mutum*, 2.7.99), but Nero will silence Lucan. The final word of her lament is *tacebis* ("You will fall silent," 2.7.104). Lucan is a Roman *vates* who attempts to change the political world, yet his fate is to be silenced in the middle of his song; or, as Martha Malamud points out (1995.20–21), by figuratively killing him off in infancy, Statius silences him completely before he begins. In many ways, this is the most explicit exploration of the political role of poetry in the *Silvae*, and I will come back to it in my conclusion.

I now want to explore the poetry of lament in Book 5 of the *Silvae*: 5.1 is a lament for Priscilla, apparently a friend of Statius's wife, who was the wife of Abascantus, Domitian's secretary (see Hardie 1983.185–87); 5.3 mourns the death of Statius's ultimate poet-figure, his own father; 5.5 is the beginning of a lament for his own slave boy.²⁵ In all three poems, Orpheus features both as a demonstration of the power of poetry and of

22 Fantham 2006.162 argues that Statius does not have a Lucanian split voice: "With Statius, delay is not an expression of personal aversion from his war narrative: it is simply a compositional device to prolong and elaborate the complexities of his narrative."

23 Heath 1996 argues that Ovid's Orpheus is set in opposition to the heroic Hercules in that he attempts to accomplish heroic feats through song, but ultimately fails, figuratively petrified by his own poetic techniques.

24 On Polla and the family, see Henderson in this volume.

25 Book 5 was published posthumously and is different in character from the other four books; for a recent treatment of the production and reception of Statius's poetry, see Nauta 2002.249–90. Since the poems may not have been polished for publication in the same way, and three (5.3, 5.4, and 5.5) were not written for patrons but on personal subjects, they may reflect a more intimate and less "figured" representation of Statius's thoughts on his own poetic role. Though *contra*, see Henderson in this volume.

its failure. 5.1 begins with a claim for the power of poetry as Abascantus wants to bring Priscilla back from the dead by commissioning representations (*Silvae* 5.1.4–15).²⁶ Here Statius reworks all the major myths about loved ones returning from the underworld. He turns the commissioning of statues and paintings into a literal struggle with mortality (*ingens / certamen cum Morte*, “a huge struggle with Death,” 5.1.7–8), replaying Hercules’ rescue of Alcestis. Abascantus’s reliance on statues, reminiscent of Admetus in Euripides’ *Alcestis*, is also a reference to the story of Protesilaus and Laodamia, where Laodamia has a statue of her husband made to replace him and is caught embracing it before she commits suicide. Abascantus’s struggle with death becomes more Herculean later when he attempts to carry off Priscilla’s shade from its funeral pyre.²⁷

Statius offers poetry as an alternative to painting and sculpture, a *mortalis honos* (“mortal honour,” 5.1.10). The focus moves from the literal immortality of the body to the immortality (and mortality) of the representations. It is the poetry which will survive (cold comfort, perhaps, to Abascantus), as Statius recalls Horace’s claim of immortality in *Odes* 3.30 both with the word *perenni* (“perennial,” 5.1.12) and the idea of the poem as a physical monument: “haud alio melius condere sepulchro” (“She will not be better buried in any other grave,” 5.1.15). The burying of the body is also the building of an immortal monument and the writing of an immortal poem (*condere* carries all these connotations).²⁸ This lament will not restore Priscilla to Abascantus; instead, it will bury her under its own monumentality—the only immortality it guarantees is its own.

There is an explicit reference to Orpheus and the power of poetry shortly afterwards: even Orpheus as *vates*, with all the poetic power and bardic ammunition in the literary world, could not succeed in assuaging the superhuman grief of Abascantus (*Silvae* 5.1.23–29):

licet ipse leuandos
ad gemitus siluis comitatus et amnibus *Orpheus*
adforet atque omnis pariter matertera *uatem*,
omnis Apollineus tegetet Bacchique sacerdos,
nil cantus, nil fila deis pallentis Auerni

26 On 5.1, see Gibson 2006b.175–76 and Henderson in this volume.

27 In addition to *Alcestis* and *Laodamia*, this passage reworks Statius’s own reference to Polla’s continued veneration of Lucan’s statue at 2.7.124–31.

28 See Markus 2003.455–56 on *condere* in Virgil and Statius.

Eumenidumque audita comis mulcere ualerent:
tantus in attonito regnabat pectore luctus.

Even if *Orpheus* himself,
accompanied by the woods and streams,
was present, and all his mother's sisters equally,
all the priests of Apollo and Bacchus, protected the *poet*,
no song, no strings, heard by the gods of pale Avernus
and the hair of the Furies, would be strong enough to
sooth him:
such great grief reigns in his stricken heart.

Orpheus's sacred power over nature is evoked in his bizarre retinue and his mesmerisation of the snaky hair of the Furies. We have seen Orpheus as an image of the poetic competitor; here Statius reflects on an image of poetic co-operation. Orpheus is reinforced not only by his retinue from the natural world, but also by all his mother's sisters, all the other eight Muses and the priests of Apollo and Bacchus. Statius presents an idea of the family of poetry; just as in 2.7, where Calliope is Lucan's mother in poetry and Orpheus is his brother, here Orpheus has a supportive and protective family. Later on, Statius's father, too, is his own poetic sponsor and guarantor (5.3.209–14). *Mulcere* at 5.1.28 also points to the passage in 5.3 where Statius himself "soothes the Latin fathers with song" ("Latios quotiens ego carmine patres / mulcerem," 5.3.215–16).

Orpheus here in 5.1 is a version of Statius, a super-poet, who can compete with the stupefying power of grief. Yet the point of this presentation of poetic power is to underline its ultimate failure. Abascantus's grief is presented as *reigning* and, in a way, grief affects Abascantus in the same way as Orpheus's poetry affects his listeners: it leaves him *attonitus*, as the birds, snakes, and beasts are in the *Metamorphoses* (for instance at 11.20–21). This image slips away from what you might expect: Orpheus triumphant over death, who succeeded up to a point in resurrecting his wife, should be a version of Abascantus. Instead, he is Statius, in competition with Abascantus's grief for control of his mind. Far from resurrecting Priscilla, Statius instead encodes the defeat of the function of his own poem: he cannot even console.²⁹

29 The contrast between *tunc* (20), when Priscilla had just died, and Statius could not even gain access in order to console, and *nunc* (30), when he is at least writing the poem, is

Later on, Orpheus the *vates* returns in an even more pessimistic image. Abascantus's wild grief on the death of his wife is like that of Orpheus (*Silvae* 5.1.202–04):

qualis conspecta coniuge segnis
Odrysius uates positis ad Strymona plectris
obstupuit tristemque rogum sine carmine fleuit.

Just as the Odrysian poet was inert when
he had caught sight of his wife,
and when he had set aside his plectrum on the bank of
the river Strymon,
he was struck dumb, and he wept at the sad pyre
without song.

Here Statius equivocates between the two deaths of Eurydice: Mozley translates *conspecta coniuge* as “seeing his wife’s corpse,” pointing strongly to her first death.³⁰ The pyre supports this reading: it is difficult to have a pyre with no body (but not impossible). *Conspecta coniuge*, however, with its emphasis on catching sight of his wife, also points us to the moment when Orpheus’s fatal look back loses her for good. Perhaps this is a reflection of what it means to console a husband a year after his wife’s death; Abascantus’s grief is doubled by Statius’s representation of it, a version of Eurydice’s two deaths which authenticates his grief. Either way his silence and songlessness are unusual: in Virgil, Orpheus’s grief is extremely vocal (*Georgics* 4.509–10; image of nightingale singing lament, 514–15; *querens*, 520). In Ovid, Orpheus’s narration comes after the final death of Eurydice and his conversion to pederasty. In his passage, Statius intensifies the effect: Orpheus is sluggish (*segnis*), stupefied (*obstupuit*); he puts aside his plectrum (*positis plectris*) and weeps without song (*sine carmine*). Statius places Orpheus’s silence after the first death of Eurydice,

set up only to fall down: Abascantus is still inconsolable. Thanks to Philip Hardie for this point.

30 Shackleton Bailey 2003 amends the text to remove this ambiguity, replacing *coniuge segnis* with *coniugis igne*. He finds *segnis* “dead-weight.” Statius, however, piles up the concepts of stupefaction here, so one more might not be amiss, and the ambiguity adds richness to the reference.

and thus cuts off his voice before the majority of his miraculous singing. Orpheus, the emblem of the power of poetry, becomes the emblem of the failure of poetry.³¹

Abascantus's grief and Statius's self-assumed role as its consoler (or perhaps valoriser) are not simply private matters.³² In the preface to this poem, Statius emphasises Abascantus's relationship with the emperor as one of priest to god: "praeterea latus omne diuinae domus semper demereri pro mea mediocritate conitor. nam qui bona fide deos colit amat et sacerdotes" ("Moreover, I always attempt to be worthy of any appendage of the divine house despite my mediocrity. For he who worships the gods in good faith also loves their priests," *praef.* 5.8–10). By consoling Abascantus, he represents himself as doing a service to the emperor. After the first Orpheus passage, Statius suggests that Abascantus's continuing grief for Priscilla is proof of his loyalty to Domitian (37–42); Statius's poem is a witness to the fact that he refuses to be consoled and can be used as proof of his loyalty to the emperor. Domitian is watching over Abascantus at 79–83 and seeing even into his heart. After the second Orpheus passage, there is another reference to the emperor as audience. Unlike Orpheus, Abascantus has a good reason not to commit suicide: his loyalty to Domitian: "sed prohibet mens fida duci firmandaque sacris / imperiis et maior amor" ("But his mind, faithful to his leader, which ought to be strengthened by sacred powers, and a greater love forbids him," 5.1.207–08). If Pollius's power over the landscape turns public rhetoric to private use, Statius's consolation for Abascantus makes private grief a very public matter.

Statius's great lament for his father, his poetic mentor, begins with a request to his father for inspiration in writing this particular poem, claiming that his grief has dried up all other poetic inspiration and led to *torpor* and voicelessness (*Silvae* 5.3.1–18).³³ At lines 14 to 18, he imagines himself as a *vates*, surrounded by the Muses, while Calliope mourns as she did after the death of Orpheus (5.3.14–18):

31 Although, as Philip Hardie has pointed out to me (*per litteras*), *Silvae* 5.1 eventually fills this poetic gap. But does it succeed in consoling Abascantus or placating Domitian?

32 See Hardie 1983.185–86 for historical background on this poem. He suggests that the well-born Priscilla was essential in supporting Abascantus's career and that he probably lost his job as *ab epistulis* around the time that this poem was written. Hardie describes it as "a kind of political advertisement" for which Priscilla's death was "an appropriate domestic pretext" (186). See, further, Zeiner-Carmichael in this volume.

33 On this poem, too, Henderson in this volume.

stant circum attonitae uatem et nil dulce sonantes
 nec digitis nec uoce deae. dux ipsa silenti
 fulta caput cithara, qualis post Orpheus raptum
 adstitit, Hebre, tibi, cernens iam surda ferarum
 agmina et immotos sublato carmine lucos.

The stricken goddesses stand around their poet and make
 no sound sweetly,
 neither with finger nor voice. Their leader
 supports her head on her silent lyre, just as she stood by
 your bank,
 Hebrus, after Orpheus was snatched, seeing the ranks of
 animals
 now deaf and the groves unmoved now the song has
 been taken away.

The Muses are *attonitae*, as was Abascantus in 5.1, and silent like Orpheus at the end of 5.1. Orpheus's power over nature has evaporated with his song. Again the grief takes on the power of Orpheus's song: the animals and trees are deaf and unmoved; only the Muses are silent from grief. This is the climax of Statius's negative invocation; his song is *malas* ("evil," 5.3.1), *lamentabile* ("grief-stricken," 5.3.1) from the touch of an inauspicious lyre (*sinistrae lyrae*, 5.3.2–3); the places of song must not be stirred (5.3.3–4); his poetic initiation is undone (5.3.5–7); the poet's ornaments, the sacred ribbons and the victory wreaths, are gone, withered or changed to the accoutrements of mourning (5.3.7–9). Calliope has become an anti-Muse and the dead Orpheus is the ultimate lack, the absence of poetry and poetic power. Statius specifically contrasts his present state with his accustomed role as an epic poet; a *vates* who is used to "raising up the deeds of great-souled kings" ("magnanimum qui facta attollere regum," 5.3.10) is presented in a situation of silence and powerlessness. The phrasing of the reference to his role as an epic poet is reminiscent of the invocation in *Thebaid* 10 when he claims to be surpassing previous *vates* (the only use of *vates* in the *Thebaid* to refer specifically to epic poets): "hactenus arma, tubae, ferrumque et uulnera: sed nunc / comminus astrigeros Capaneus *tol-lendus* in axes. / non mihi iam solito uatum de more *canendum*" ("This far weapons, trumpets, swords, and wounds: but now Capaneus must be raised in hand-to-hand combat with the star-bearing poles. I must sing no longer in the accustomed manner of a *vates*," *Thebaid* 10.827–29). Statius as an

epic poet and, in particular, the poet of the *Thebaid*, in his role as *vates* is voiceless in the face of grief.

In contrast to this Orphean moment is the poetic temple of 5.3, which Statius imagines himself building for his father (*Silvae* 5.3.47–63). This poetic temple occurs in a passage where Statius clearly expresses his epic ambitions; inevitably, we think of Virgil's temple to Augustus in *Georgics* 3 with their games (and prominent chariot race). He also compares this imagined *opus* for his father with the epic funerals of both *Aeneid* 5 and his own *Thebaid* 6 (51–52). Yet he rejects these epic games with a side-swipe at Virgil: line 55 is yet another reminiscence of *Aeneid* 8.596 (“quadripedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum,” cf. *Thebaid* 6.401, 459), already twice repeated in *Thebaid* 6.³⁴ There will be no athletics and no competition, only poets celebrating the victor—not Virgil as in *Georgics* 3.17, but Statius's father, praised and crowned. There is no celebration of deeds and politics, only poets celebrating each other, finally allowing Statius to claim his place in the pantheon of epic poets. This poetic temple is constructed entirely within a poetic universe with no connection to the real world of politics and war. Here Statius's father is the figure of Eurydice, but a Eurydice successfully returned to the world of the living by the imagined lament (or is the lament this poem itself?), Statius a successful Orpheus and a successful epic poet. However, this poetic temple is only a possibility: he only wishes that he could build it (*utinam*) (compare this to Virgil's assertive future tenses), and he imagines only his father in his appreciative audience, led on by *pietas* and even then only “perhaps” (*fors et*).

The poetic temple, which seemed at first a positive image of poetry cheering on poetry, is undercut by the tentative nature of the claims. Similarly, Statius works with mythical comparisons at 5.3.267–76 both to suggest that his own subject (here his own grief) is more elevated, and more serious, and, simultaneously, to underline the impossibility of ever living up to the myths of his predecessors. First, he compares himself to Aeneas, led down to the underworld by the Sibyl, the “ancient poet-prophet of Diana below” (*infernae uates longaeua Dianae*, 270). Then he complains that a lesser cause allowed Admetus and Orpheus down to the underworld, and asks why Protesilaus can return, yet the combined poetic powers of Statius father and son have no effect on the infernal deities.

34 See, further, on Statius's games with Virgil's epic games, Lovatt 2005.

There is a double bitterness to this passage. Statius cannot succeed like his mythical predecessors, yet each of his examples of success in going down to the underworld contains its own undoing: Aeneas is presented as longing to bring his father back, reminding us of the moment of their futile embrace. Orpheus's success, as we know, was short-lived, and Protesilaus returned for only a short time, and his return led to the early death of Laodamia. Admetus caused his own wife's death and did not bring her back to life by his own agency but purely through the good fortune of having Hercules as a friend. The repetition of the characteristically Statian word *chelys* links Statius (and his father) most strongly to Orpheus, and the passage again links heroes and poets (Van Dam 1984.81). The final plea shows that even the *vates*, with all his religious power, his special connection with the gods, will not necessarily be heard; in the end, the effectiveness of poetry in the world is severely limited.

The final poem of Book 5 stops in full flow after eighty-seven lines, leaving the collection eternally in the midst of lament.³⁵ Throughout, 5.5 is obsessed with the voicelessness, the anti-poetry, that began 5.3; this time it wins out. The poem begins with a claim that Statius will not begin at all (*Silvae* 5.5.1–3):

Me miserum! neque enim uerbis sollemnibus ulla
incipiam nunc Castaliae uocalibus undis
inuisus Phoeboque grauis.

Wretched me! For I will not begin at all with any
hallowed words,
hateful as I now am to the singing streams of Castalia
and burdensome to Phoebus.

Later, he demands that Orpheus, twinned with Apollo and Linus from *Thebaid* 1, must keep silence or make their songs inauthentic simply by singing (*Silvae* 5.5.53–56):

a durus, uiso si uulnere carae
coniugis inuenit caneret quod Thracius Orpheus
dulce sibi, si busta Lini complexus Apollo
non tacuit.

35 Henderson in this volume also comments on the ironies of textual transmission here.

O how hard it would be, if Thracian
 Orpheus, when he had seen the wound
 of his dear wife, found something sweet that he might sing
 to himself,
 if Apollo, having embraced the corpse of Linus,
 was not silent.

Statius brings in a moment from the *Thebaid*: the story of Linus is told by Adrastus at *Thebaid* 1.557–672. After Apollo rapes the unnamed daughter of the king of Argos, she hides her baby and he is accidentally killed. The father, the god of poetry, lamenting over his baby son seems appropriate for this poem in which Statius laments over his adopted son. The reference to Orpheus links this poem to all the other Orphean moments in the *Silvae*. This reference certainly does look to the first death of Eurydice (the wound makes that clear), and demands silence from Orpheus, prematurely cutting off his chance for redemption by singing. Grief becomes a self-indulgence; Statius's poem reinterprets Orpheus's expedition to the underworld and his poetic *aristeia* as essentially selfish and self-serving. How then to read the fact that Statius himself nevertheless sings? The ironies of textual transmission have conspired to force Statius to enact this voicelessness by bringing the poem to a premature end, ceasing mid-song.

We have seen, then, an Orpheus characterised by silence, competing in the public arena with the concrete power of the patron, in the private, with the paralysis of grief. The scattered parts of the image do not easily combine to make a coherent whole: repetition and confusion claim the different parts of Orpheus's story. Orpheus as a figure for Statius offers the optimistic possibility of poetic inheritance and co-operation, but also the pessimistic problem of the inadequacy of poetry. We can compare Orpheus in the *Silvae* with the figure of the *vates* as prophet in the *Thebaid*.³⁶ Donald McGuire's 1997 study of suicide in Flavian epic shows how silence characterises political protest in the *Thebaid*: the most compelling example is the suicide of the *vates* Maeon in Book 3. Spared by Tydeus, he is the sole survivor of the fifty Thebans sent to ambush him. Statius introduces him as a prophet who had foreseen the disaster and had not feared to tell the king, but was not believed (2.690–95). He brings news of the massacre

36 Markus 2003.436–37 compares poetic and prophetic inspiration; Fantham 2006 explores the role of Amphiaraus.

to Eteocles and, in the face of the tyrant's anger, a sword is drawn; he is called *magnanimus vates* ("great-souled poet-prophet," 3.82) and kills himself mid-speech just as he begins to prophesy Eteocles' death at the hands of his brother. He takes control of his own body and kills himself before Eteocles can order his death, but his suicide also silences his protest and his prophecy. His first prophecy is ineffective because it is not believed, his second is silenced by his own suicide.³⁷

Other prophets in the *Thebaid* are similarly ineffective. Later in Book 3, Amphiaraus and Melampus are sent to read the future in the flights of birds; Amphiaraus sees an almost absurdly accurate rendition of the different fates of the Argive seven, but when he returns to Argos, he attempts to stay silent about what he saw. Capaneus forces him to speak out and immediately disregards his words.³⁸ Amphiaraus is even forced to join the expedition himself, despite knowing that it will lead to his own death, because his wife sells his services in return for the necklace of Harmonia. In Book 4, Tiresias raises the ghost of Laius from the underworld to attempt to find out the future from the Theban perspective; this episode builds on Lucan's Erichtho episode, *Aeneid* 6, and the Odyssean *nekuia* to produce yet another basically ineffective prophecy (4.626–44) that promises victory for Oedipus and leaves his audience confused by his equivocal words (Vessey 1973.257). Both this episode and the death of Amphiaraus, when he is swallowed up by an earthquake and taken down to the underworld alive, are versions of the *katabasis* of Aeneas, but strangely hollow versions. Prophecy in the *Thebaid* looks in on itself, drawing us continually towards the fratricidal climax of the poem, but offering only silence on the poem's significance for Rome.

In her investigation of *Silvae* 2.7, Newlands concludes that "Statius attempts to avoid silence, the fate of Lucan" through "a 'poetics of empire' that constitutes the art of obliquity practised in extravagant and stylish ways."³⁹ Does he succeed in this attempt? In one obvious sense, yes: as we have seen throughout, his songs about silence constitute an overturning of

37 Markus 2003.467 reads Maeon as a figure for Statius: "In adopting a self-suppressing style, the vatic *persona* emulates Maeon in a metaphorical sense by carrying out on a verbal level the self-destruction that Maeon performs on the body."

38 Vessey 1973.152–59; see also Fantham 2006.

39 Newlands 2002.44. Markus 2003.441 takes a similar line when she says that "the vatic figure has to negotiate its authoritative self-presentation with the dominant rhetoric of the day—the rhetoric of praise."

silence. On the other hand, just as the over-determination at the end of the *Thebaid* is another way of denying closure, so the multiple voices, expansive writing, and complex, difficult poetry of the Statian *vates* ultimately refuse to be pinned down.⁴⁰ Not being able to say what you want to say is another sort of enforced silence. Statius longed to inherit the public role of poetry, to bring the *vates* back from the underworld, but at the last minute, his nerve failed;⁴¹ he looked back, only to see the possibility slipping away from him for ever.⁴²

University of Nottingham

40 On the over-determination at the end of the *Thebaid*, see Lovatt 1999.

41 Rosati 2002.251 suggests that Statius brings the Muse back from the dead to use for his own purposes: a *Laius* or a *Eurydice*?

42 This paper has been presented in various forms at various times in Manchester, Oxford, and Nottingham. Thanks to members of the audiences on those occasions for insightful comments. I am also grateful to John Henderson and Philip Hardie for reading earlier drafts, and to Carole Newlands and Antony Augoustakis for helpful comments.