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PERFECTING THE IDEAL: MOLDING ROMAN WOMEN IN STATIUS'S *SILVAE*

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Four of the thirty-two poems comprising Statius's *Silvae*¹ explicitly focus on women (1.2, 2.7, 3.5, 5.1), and two others (4.8, 5.2) highlight (unnamed) women in significant ways. Indeed, the women of Statius's *Silvae* occupy a prominent position in the work. Who are these women, and why do they attract so much attention from Statius? Are we to understand them as historical figures who reflect Domitianic society? Or are we to interpret them only as literary constructs? Suzanne Dixon suggests that to "read" Roman women one must consider both their socio-historical and literary contexts; the latter involves "bringing some understanding of the conventions and focus of each *genre* to bear, along with a method for sifting and combining differing generic constructions to throw light on the lives of 'real' Roman women and their relations with men" (2001.19).² Using Dixon as a starting point, this paper will show how Statius's literary portrayals of women reflect cultural and artistic realities, and more significantly, how they function as an instrumental force in Statius's poetic methodology, namely in his creation of distinction (i.e., symbolic capital) for his male addressees.³

My approach, like that of others in this volume, presupposes that the *Silvae* represent serious poetry,⁴ not mere flattery. The poems are powerful and transformative, and their purpose, I argue, rests in making the addressees

1 *Silvae* quotations are taken from Courtney's 1990 Oxford edition. All translations are my own.

2 For the role of male idealizing in the representation of imperial women as "types," see Hemelrijk 1999 and Shelton 1990.

3 For a full examination of Statius's creation of distinction in the *Silvae*, see Zeiner 2005.

4 See, in particular, Wray and Lovatt in this volume.

(and, no less, the poet) distinctive. In Statius's hands, non-material forms of capital, such as family pedigree and literary pursuits, surpass economic forms, namely the acquisition and display of material wealth, to which all classes of society had access (cf. Bourdieu 1984.227–51).⁵ The *Silvae* offer a glimpse into a phenomenon of exchange, whereby one form of capital (e.g., cultural, in the form of a pedigree) could be converted into another (e.g., symbolic, in the form of status). As a result, the wealthy senator, for example, could be distinguished from the equally wealthy freedman. The extraordinarily wide range of addressees and poetic occasions offers ample evidence for not only the varied ways in which Romans sought distinction, but for how poetry functions in this creative process by offering the supreme form of symbolic capital: literary immortality for both the addressees and the poet.⁶

Statius's methodology for distinguishing his addressees is consistent throughout the *Silvae*; customarily he exploits the immediate, celebratory occasion of the poem to highlight a significant form of non-material capital for the addressee (or the addressee's relational counterpart). The specific nuances of his approach, however, vary according to his relationship with the addressee, the purpose of the poem, and the type of "capital" for which the addressee is being celebrated. Here I will focus on one such tactic, namely the way in which Statius fuses real women with idealized constructs. The ensuing portrait serves to create distinction not so much for the woman (although she can be distinctive in her own right), but for her male counterpart. The Violentilla of *Silvae* 1.2 and the Priscilla of *Silvae* 5.1, on whom I will focus, both reflect the poet's attempt to resolve the tension arising from the need to conform to an immediate occasion or request (and thus a genre) and the deeper poetic objective of distinguishing his male addressees (who, in each case, have requested the poems, and whose distinction resides outside the immediate poetic occasion). In so doing, Statius constructs Violentilla and Priscilla in accord with both the immediate genres (epithalamium and *epicedion*) and with two conventional feminine

5 Applications of Bourdieu's theories (1984 and 1991) in classical studies include Hinds 1998, Habinek 1998, Bowditch 2001, Leach 2003, Corbeill 2004. My approach is grounded in Bourdieu's economic theory, which although emerging from his observations of twentieth-century French society, nonetheless can be applied (albeit not monolithically) to the similarly competitive society of Domitianic Rome.

6 Numerous literary and archaeological sources attest to the Romans' obsessive pursuit of distinction, often in the form of literary immortality. See, e.g., Cic. *ad Fam.* 5.12, Hor. *Carm.* 3.30, Ov. *Met.* 15.871–79, Plin. *Ep.* 1.3, 9.3, Mart. 1.1, 1.25.

ideals, *forma* and *pietas* respectively. Additionally, Statius's literary portrayals of Violentilla and Priscilla parallel the artistic and political ideology of Domitianic Rome so vividly captured throughout the other poems, providing valuable evidence for how idealized versions of women function both in a realistic setting and within a literary context.

I begin with *Silvae* 1.2, an epithalamium to Stella and Violentilla that commences with a celebratory call to the nine Muses. The presence of Elegea (1.2.7–10), who desires to be counted as a tenth Muse and participate in the festivities, immediately signifies a more profound poetic intention, since the groom himself writes elegy. In keeping with the poetic occasion, Statius follows the literary conventions of the epithalamium genre, but he also deftly interweaves elegiac motifs throughout the poem to underscore his addressee's profession as a serious poet.⁷ The success of Statius's poem derives from the literary interaction between epithalamium and elegy, yet this interplay is achieved only through a carefully constructed double portrait of Violentilla, around whom much of the poem pivots. Deploying conventional as well as contemporary visual and literary images of women associated with these two genres, Statius depicts Violentilla as both the traditional bride of the epithalamium (chaste and demure) and the relentless, powerful *domina* of traditional elegy (an echo of Stella's real-life professional activity).

Violentilla's two literary portraits are contradictory, however, and fall on opposite ends of the moral spectrum. Her portrayal as the chaste bride (and future wife) is positive and adheres to traditional Roman mores; her portrayal as a *domina* is negative and a foil to conservative Domitianic ideology that emphasized *pudor* and other sexually-related morals.⁸

7 A point well-noted by others: Hardie 1983.112–15, Nauta 2002.300, Newlands 2002.93. Statius's objective is further reinforced by the book's preface in which Statius emphasizes his and Stella's shared literary bond (*praef.* 1.1–3). See Hersch in this volume; her examination of *Silvae* 1.2 and Apollonius's *Argonautica* also takes into account the significance of Stella's professional activity in terms of Statius's poetic methodology.

8 Suetonius (*Dom.* 8) and Martial (e.g., 6.2) both attest to Domitian's morality campaign citing particular actions implemented with regard to sexual issues. In A.D. 81–82, he passed an edict forbidding the practice of castration, and in A.D. 85, assumed *ensoria potestas*, appropriating the title in perpetuity by the end of the year; see Waters 1964.66. For Domitian's interest in moral reform in general (*correctio morum*), see Grelle 1980 and Garthwaite 1990. Domitian's stringency when it came to matters of traditional morality, particularly sexual behavior, is further illustrated by the actions he took as *pontifex maximus* against several Vestal Virgins who were found guilty of adultery, even ordering a chief Vestal to be buried alive and her lovers to be clubbed to death; see Suet. *Dom.* 8.4, Grelle 1980.345.

For example, in A.D. 89, Domitian reinstituted Augustus's *lex Iulia*, a law against adultery,⁹ and also restored the shrine dedicated to Plebeian Chastity, a cult established for plebeian *univirae* (Pomeroy 1975.212). Thus the institution of marriage (and fidelity within it) seems to have constituted a significant aspect of the ideal early imperial Roman woman—at least in the eyes of the emperor.

While Violentilla is at times portrayed as an ideal, faithful wife, her alternate characterization as a *domina*, the conventional elegiac mistress, is quite contradictory. Statius reconciles this dichotomy by modeling Violentilla's image around one feminine virtue: beauty. He uses the word *forma* three times to describe her beauty in general terms, (166, 273, 277) and, throughout the poem, refers in other ways, according to the specific context, to her various attractive features: (12: *dulci probitate rubentem*; 20: *niveos artus*; 23: *niveis a vultibus*; 110–11: *colla genasque / comere*; 113: *celsae frontis honores*; 114: *suggestum comae*; 167: *tale decus vultusque superbos*). *Forma* as a feminine ideal generally fits all literary and cultural contexts, including, for example, funerary epitaphs and elegy;¹⁰ it is sexually charged, an image associated with intercourse and the production of children. But it is also a physical image associated with the erotically beautiful and fashionable woman who offers sex outside marriage. Thus unlike other conventional virtues associated specifically with the female (e.g., *pudicitia*, *fides*, etc.), *forma* can satisfy the needs of the two contrasting female types and the two literary genres associated with them (epithalamium and elegy). In other words, beauty is a form of female cultural capital traditionally associated with the ideal (i.e., chaste and fertile) bride and wife (as the symbolic vehicle for the *matrona*'s fertility), and it is also one of the requirements for the elegiac *domina* (as the symbolic vehicle for sexual power and pleasure outside marriage).

Conventionally, an epithalamium includes an encomium of the wife, enumerating the many idealized virtues that recommend her as a suitable spouse, such as lineage, wealth, and chastity.¹¹ Violentilla has her own forms

9 For the legal implications and punishments of Domitian's reenactment of the *lex Iulia*, see McGinn 1998.106–16.

10 E.g., *Laudatio Murdiae* (CIL 6.10230 = ILS 8394), *Laudatio Turiae* (CIL 6.1527 = ILS 8393; both first century B.C.), Prop. 1.2.8, 24, 1.4.5, 2.25.44, 2.29a.30, 3.20.7, Tib. 1.4.36, 1.8.24, 1.9.51.

11 See, for example, *Silv.* 2.7.85–86 where Statius (via Calliope) enumerates Polla's many (conventional) virtues; these include: *forma*, *simplicitas*, *comitas*, *census*, *sanguis*, *gra-*

of cultural and economic capital, including a respectable pedigree (108–09) and wealth (as indicated by her jewels and villa, 122–29, 147–57), that make her distinguished in her own right. With these forms of capital, Violentilla enhances the distinction of her husband.¹² Nevertheless, despite the manifold assets that make her an exceptional match, it is her *forma* (a type of cultural capital) around which Statius deliberately molds Violentilla's literary portrait; accordingly, the Goddess of Beauty herself assumes a decisive role in the poem. While it would not be especially unusual to find Venus (or an erotic tone) present in an epithalamium (Hardie 1983.112), here she is ubiquitously conspicuous, replacing Hymen, the god of marriage, who would normally occupy this large role.¹³ Statius even has Violentilla's beauty mirror that of the goddess, *mihi dulcis imago / prosiluit* ("She sprung up in my image," 112–13), and, appropriately, makes Venus Violentilla's foster mother and constant companion.¹⁴ Moreover, so similar is her beauty to Venus's that, should she appear in the heavens, the Cupids would mistake Violentilla for the goddess herself (117–20). This strong connection between the two women makes more sense if we understand that Statius is exploiting the dual nature of Venus (whom Violentilla mirrors) whose "beauty" (*forma*) could represent both erotic sexuality (associated with elegy) and matronly fertility (associated with marriage).

In fact, Violentilla's divine, yet dual beauty corresponds to contemporary trends in female hairstyles and portraiture: she is lauded for her high forehead and piled-up coiffure (113–14). Statius surely has in mind a growing trend of late first-century sculpture that represents private (not just imperial) women as the goddess Venus, including veristic portrait heads

tia, and *decor*. Cf. Hersch in this volume, who explores the implications of Apollonius's *Argonautica* as a non-epithalamial model for *Silvae* 1.2.

- 12 Wives typically served as a form of cultural capital for their husband's distinction. In *Ep.* 6.32, for example, Pliny gives Quintilianus a monetary gift to be spent on aesthetic accoutrements (clothing, etc.) for Quintilianus's daughter, who is soon to marry Nonius Celer. Though not of consular rank like Stella, Nonius (*honestissimo viro*, 6.32.1) is a distinguished court advocate (*civilium officiorum*), whose public prominence demands that the appearance of his future wife match his own elegance (*nitor*, 6.32.1) and distinction. As in the case of Quintilianus's daughter, Violentilla's clothing, jewelry, and villa symbolize her good taste and culture, thereby reflecting positively upon her husband.
- 13 "The god of marriage is almost entirely suppressed in this poem. Venus and Amor play a correspondingly larger role . . . this is because they are more appropriate attendant deities for an elegiac lover-poet," Hardie 1983.113.
- 14 Contrast Prop. 2.28.9–10, where Venus is described as a jealous goddess whenever a mortal's beauty vies with hers.

towering with ornately arranged coiffures.¹⁵ Previously, empresses were commonly depicted in the guise of Venus Genetrix, identifiable by a more modest (clothed) pose and hairstyle that symbolized the empress's fertility, "with its implications for the continuation of the imperial dynasty."¹⁶ Completely nude representations of the goddess, like the Knidos or Capitoline type, which typically symbolized the goddess's erotic sexual sphere, were, before this time, not used in such contexts. What is new about the first-century trend is the representation of private women as the nude or mostly-nude Capitoline or Knidos Venus.¹⁷ This nude pose, in which the hand somewhat covers the breasts and/or genital area, mocks its own modesty by actually drawing attention to the women's sexuality. The portrait heads with their realistic features and serious expressions, communicating the *dignitas* of the Roman *matrona*, balance the eroticism of the body, as Eve D'Ambra points out (2000.102). This balance allows us to interpret the full breasts, fleshy limbs, and ample hips in another way, as symbols of the woman's fecundity, a type of *forma* at its reproductive prime and a virtue treasured in the ideal wife. Nevertheless, the ambiguous nature of the statue, as we consciously or subconsciously recall the original erotic connotations of this nude type, cannot be readily ignored.¹⁸ While the posed nude body, balanced, as it were, by the serious portrait head, may not have shocked the Roman viewer and may have been successful in communicating the ideal of reproductive *forma*, it did not necessarily preclude the original eroticism suggested by the facetious *pudicitia* pose.¹⁹ Like a sculptor, Statius has exploited the dualistic nature of the goddess and the feminine ideal of *forma* to fit his poetic purpose and the construction of his female portrait of Violentilla, whose characterized beauty—modeled after Venus herself—meets the demand of both the epithalamium and elegiac context(s).

Thus Venus, Violentilla's foster mother and mirror image, represents

15 As an additional literary parallel, in *Silvae* 5.1, we hear how Priscilla's tomb incorporates portrait statues of Priscilla in the likeness of Roman goddesses, Venus included.

16 Matheson 1996.185, who cites the Cameo of Livia and Tiberius (MFA 99.109).

17 E.g., Portrait of a Woman as Venus (second century, Museo Capitolino, Rome); Portrait of Marcia Furnilla as Venus (A.D. 79–81, Carlsberg Glyptotek 711).

18 This is also pointed out by D'Ambra 2000. She admits that despite the serious, dignified portrait heads of several of her examples, the nude or semi-nude body in a Venus pose still has the power to connote eroticism (e.g., "The figure of the Naples statue, interrupted while bathing, is frankly erotic," 103).

19 I.e., if we had such a statue without its head, we would be hard-pressed to identify it as an image of a fertile Roman *matrona*.

both types of beauty; her *forma* is ambiguous, depending upon context—at times representing a *matrona*'s reproductive fertility and, at other times, symbolizing the unrestrained erotic qualities associated with mistresses and prostitutes.²⁰ Illustrative of this dual sexual nature are specific cults and associated temples established for the goddess's contrasting spheres and the women associated with these different spheres (e.g., prostitutes versus respectable women).²¹ In particular, the cult of Venus Verticordia illustrates the dual nature of the goddess, since it was designed to sway the inclinations of virgins and other women away from illicit sexual acts to sexual virtue (*Ov. Fast.* 4.157–60, *Val. Max.* 8.15.12).²² The cult served “as a public admonition to adulteresses,” and, as a Changer of Hearts (towards sexual virtue), Venus Verticordia was appropriately worshipped by respectable women “for the sake of domestic harmony and a life of marital fidelity” (Pomeroy 1975.208).²³

20 This dual nature as it variously appears in literature, cult, and art is a result of the Romans' assimilation of the Greek Aphrodite with the Roman Venus, the mother of Aeneas, and subsequently promoted as the mother of the Julian line and Rome itself (Venus Genetrix). Obviously, the sexual seductress of Greek mythology was unsuited to the modesty and restraint required by the Venus of Augustan (and later Domitianic) propaganda and moral reform, just as the moderate Venus Genetrix would be inappropriate for a cult of prostitutes.

21 For example, by the time of Augustus, Venus Genetrix was widely recognized as the mother of Rome and the goddess of marital procreation, and in this capacity, she was worshipped in temples such as Caesar's Temple of Venus Genetrix in the Forum. Similar is the Templum Venus et Roma, built by Hadrian and dedicated in A.D. 135 (Richardson 1992.409). Roman mothers and brides celebrated Venus in this matronly capacity on April 1st (*Veneralia Fastus*, cf. *Ov. Fast.* 4.133–62). Temples would have been a center of worship appropriate for sexually respectable women, but “*meretrices* were banished to the rites [and temple] of *Venus Erycina extra portam Collinam*,” McGinn 1998.25. The cult was inherited from the Aphrodite of Eryx that belonged to prostitutes, and its temple was located outside the city. For the Aedes Veneris Erycinae, see Richardson 1992.408.

22 Palmer 1974.136 argues that the establishment of the cult of Venus Verticordia was deliberately meant to offset the “unwholesome influences” of Venus's erotic sphere (Venus Erycina), carried over from Aphrodite Eryx. Statius refers to Venus Erycina at 1.2.160 and 3.4.21.

23 The cult of Venus Verticordia aligns with the similarly conservative attributes of Venus Genetrix. The festival of Venus Verticordia occurred on April 1, coinciding with the festival celebrating Fortuna Virilis (dealing with the sexual fortune of women). According to Pomeroy 1975.208–09, once the cult to Venus Verticordia was established, respectable women did not participate in the festival to Fortuna Virilis, and a strong dichotomy “between respectable women and whores” developed, with the former worshipping Venus Verticordia and her associated “conjugal ideals” and the latter worshipping Fortuna Virilis and “sexual relationships having nothing to do with wedlock.” Kraemer 1992.60–61

As a goddess recognized for both erotic love and matronly fertility, Venus is able to reconcile the otherwise conflicting cultural values associated with the traditional Roman wife (and Domitianic ideology) and the traditional elegiac *domina*. She thereby serves as vital intermediary in *Silvae* 1.2. Here we first meet Violentilla as a *nupta*, a young bride led to the ceremony by the mother of Aeneas, that is, Venus Genetrix; the “maiden’s” beauty, represented by downcast eyes and blushing cheeks (12), symbolizes her virginity, but this is, of course, a clever literary reconstruction demanded by the poetic occasion: it is Violentilla’s second marriage and she can hardly be considered virginal.²⁴ Venus (*ipsa*) oversees the marriage rites and thus acts within her cultic domain as Venus Genetrix (*genetrix Aeneia*, 11), the goddess associated with marriage and procreation. Violentilla’s maidenly beauty and its symbolic potential for producing children is confirmed later by the traditional epithalamial closing prayer that beseeches Cynthia (Diana) to hasten children for the new wife who is now described as *parens* and *mater*. Her “exceptional beauty” (*pulcherrima forma*, 373), defined by the physical features of pregnancy (a tender womb and swollen breasts), is associated with the ideal Roman *matrona*, who, in the context of Domitian’s reinstitution of Augustan legislature, was expected to produce children.²⁵ Bound by the “chains” (*vincla*, 275) of legal marriage, she now comes under the *manus*—(*possessa*, 274)—of her new husband and subsequently produces children for him.

This idealized portrait of submission and matronly perfection culminating in the birth of children is a far cry from the image of the powerful, controlling *domina* we find elsewhere in the poem. A mere eleven lines after Violentilla’s first appearance as a *nupta* (12), and then again as a *coniunx* (20), Statius refers to her as *domina*, characterized by a beautiful porcelain complexion (*dominae niveis a vultibus*, 23). Pale skin (or that not overdone by makeup) was, of course, a much-appreciated feature not only in a wife but also in a beautiful mistress, and similarly, Violentilla’s “snow-white arms” (*niveos artus*), described in connection with her role as a wife (20),

argues that, in his explanation of the Veneralia Fastus on April 1, Ovid conflates the two festivals to Fortuna Virilis and Venus Verticordia to eliminate the sharp contrast between the two opposing types of women and their cults.

24 Cf. Hersch in this volume; she views Violentilla’s “maidenhood” as an epithalamial construct when, in fact, Violentilla’s independence needs to be “mastered” by her new husband.

25 For the cultural and ideological importance attached to children during this time period, see, for example, *Silv.* 4.7 and 4.8, where Statius celebrates the birth of children and condemns *orbitas* (“childlessness”).

can also be considered an alluring physical feature of the fashionable, beautiful mistress.²⁶ The specific features that make Violentilla beautiful can be applied to her portraits both as bride/wife, as well as *domina*.

Statius goes on to adapt the conventional epithalamial history by refashioning it into a mythological *aetion* in which Venus claims responsibility for the union. This is no ordinary epithalamial history, however; Statius innovatively reformulates it into a narrative that recasts Stella and Violentilla as conventional elegiac figures who experience a complete cycle of elegy. Venus is no longer referred to by her reproductive epithet (Genetrix), but instead she is simply *illa* (105) and described in terms of her original Greek mythology with reference to Cupids, Nereids, and birth myth. Moreover, instead of assuring the marriage and production of children, she is now described in terms of her responsibility for enhancing the beauty that has attracted Stella and inspired him to compose elegy.²⁷ As a result, Violentilla is so captivating that she could lure Apollo away from Daphne or Bacchus away from Ariadne. The sexually charged mythological references are designed to emphasize Violentilla's alluring *sexual* (not reproductive) beauty, since it is precisely this physical virtue that incited both Apollo and Bacchus to pursue their respective maidens with the hope of sex. These new details transform Violentilla into a mistress—quite different from the young, blushing bride we see at the beginning of the poem or the proud matron at the end.

Correspondingly, elegiac vocabulary converts Stella into the conventional love-sick *victus amator* who suffers under the yoke of his “powerful mistress” (*dominae potentis*, 77) and endures the usual maladies (e.g., anguish, 81; tears, 92–93; and distress, 94) caused by his lover's stubborn repudiation.²⁸ Moreover, while earlier in the poem Violentilla's hesitation to remarry was ascribed to the memory of her previous husband—an adaptation of the conventional epithalamial *pudor*—now her hesitation is employed as the conventional elegiac refusal. Venus finally comes to the

26 E.g., Prop. 1.2.6, 1.4.13, 2.3.9, Tib. 1.5.66, 1.8.33.

27 Venus enhances her natural beauty with jewels (122–29). It is a common topos in Roman elegy (e.g., Prop. 1.2, Tib. 1.8) to disparage women who rely heavily on make-up and jewels to make themselves beautiful or, perhaps more accurately, to disguise their ugliness. Statius, however, explicitly notes that Violentilla's beauty is natural (formed in the image of Venus herself) and the jewels merely *enhance* her beauty and signify her wealth (to parallel her equally expensive townhouse).

28 For Violentilla as the *dura puella*, see Hersch in this volume.

rescue, interceding on behalf of her devoted *vates*; she firmly urges Violentilla to employ her god-given gifts (i.e., her *forma*, 166–69). Like her own dual beauty, Venus's exhortation is conveniently vague; for in exercising her chief asset, her *forma*, Violentilla will consummate the marriage and produce children. But she also thereby completes the elegiac cycle, and both are actions necessary for the poem's successful outcome.

The mythological *aetion* and Violentilla's portrayal within it are, of course, a clever literary mimesis of Stella's own elegies. Violentilla's portrait as the idealized elegiac *domina* echoes and promotes Stella's real-life poetic production (197–200) in which Violentilla served as a form of capital as both the inspiration of composition and the *domina* character within the poem (identified by the pseudonym Asteris). Significantly, within the *aetion*, it is the recollection of her lover's poems that convinces Violentilla to yield to and ultimately obey Venus's command (197–200):

Asteris et vatis totam cantata per Urbem,
Asteris ante dapes, nocte Asteris, Asteris ortu
quantum non clamatus Hylas. iamque aspera coepit
flectere corda libens et iam sibi dura videri.

. . . and [she recalls] the poet's Asteris sung throughout
the whole city; Asteris at dinner, Asteris at night, Asteris
at dawn, such as Hylas was never shouted. Now, by her
own will, she begins to sway her stubborn heart and thinks
herself harsh.

Her acquiescence symbolizes the success and literary expertise of the real-life poet. Without Violentilla—and, more specifically, without her sexualized beauty transmitted onto the page—Stella has no poetic inspiration, no elegiac output, no literary distinction.

In the end, Statius's Violentilla is an amalgamation of two very different literary traditions, that of the chaste bride of the epithalamium, and that of the powerful *domina* of Latin elegy; Statius has craftily intertwined these two contrasting images by exploiting Violentilla's *forma*, whose dual nature and association with Venus's ambiguous sphere reconciles the opposition. The Violentilla of Statius's epithalamium fulfills the requirements of the genre and therefore the immediate occasion of celebrating a wedding; yet Statius's chief purpose is to celebrate Stella's elegiac expertise, and, with this goal in mind, he has manipulated the poetic occasion to create

a second Violentilla who, as the poet's Asteris, reminds us of her real-life function as the elegiac mistress in Stella's real-life poetic production. The significant role that the virtue of idealized beauty plays in the construction of Violentilla's portrait, and in the poem's deeper purpose, is exemplified by the poem's closing line, in which Statius prays that Violentilla's "beauty age slowly" (*tardeque haec forma senescat*, 277). The sentiment is, of course, conventional, but also anticipates that Violentilla's beauty will be an enduring poetic inspiration for Stella's elegiac production and, thus, his distinction.

While we can safely admit that the real-life Violentilla was certainly distinguished by her own various forms of economic and cultural capital—her independent wealth, beauty, and pedigree—her beauty is her chief asset. As such, Statius's carefully crafted image of Violentilla, aided by the intermediary of a dual Venus, functions as a form of cultural capital designed to enhance the symbolic capital—or distinction—of her husband. A beautiful, rich, esteemed woman, she enhances his social status, but also forms the chief inspiration for his poetic output. Finally, it is important to note that literary professionalism or expertise—in contrast to that of the mere dilettante—was a highly valued form of distinction in the first century A.D.²⁹ Domitian's restoration of libraries and devotion to the cult of Minerva implies general intellectual interests.³⁰ More importantly, his institution of poetic contests (both the Alban and the Capitoline) suggests a personal interest in literature as well as a desire to patronize the arts, perhaps in an attempt to employ professional poets in advertising imperial exploits or military victories. K. M. Coleman's seminal work (1986) on Domitian's relationship to literature not only revises previously held views regarding literary oppression under his reign, but successfully illustrates the emperor's active role in the literary world. Thus Stella's distinction as a professional

29 "Their poetry describes otium, love, and elegy . . . as activities which in importance rival accepted pursuits: the law and politics, financial acquisition, and the military, all pursuits which, in addition, supplied the elegists' male peers with livelihood, challenge, glory, and security . . . To the elegists, their mistresses and the satisfactions—sensual, artistic, and emotional—they provided were end enough," Hallett 1973.114.

30 Possibly the library of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus or that of the Templum Augusti Novum; see Coleman 1986.3096. For the cult of Minerva, see Sauter 1934 and Scott 1936. See Suet. *Dom.* 20 ("exemplaribus undique petitis missisque Alexandream qui describerent emendarentque") where *undique* suggests the zeal with which the emperor desired to restore the libraries.

poet separates him from the mere dabbler and firmly places him within the context of the emperor's ideology and his serious literary interests.

Statius employs exactly the same type of literary technique in *Silvae* 5.1, an *epicedion* to Abascantus on the death of his wife. In the same way that he focuses attention solely on Violentilla's *forma*, here Statius primarily idealizes Priscilla's *pietas*. Funerary contexts generally include an encomiastic enumeration of many conventional feminine virtues such as modesty, lineage, chastity, wool-working skill, industry, and loyalty. For example, Statius mentions Priscilla's *origo* (53), *felix species* (54), *pudica* (62), *simplex hilarisque fides* (65), and *mixta pudori / gratia* (65–66). But aside from enumerating these virtues, he fully elaborates upon the feminine ideal of *pietas* and constructs her portrait around this form of capital only. In denying the existence of her previous marriage in order to elevate her status to that of a *univira*, the ultimate symbol of spousal fidelity (55–56), Statius fashions Priscilla as the quintessentially faithful wife. Why, then, does he go to such lengths to emphasize her *pietas* above all?

The answer can be found in Statius's intent to create distinction for Priscilla's husband, Abascantus. Alex Hardie (1983.185–86) and R. R. Nauta (2002.302) persuasively argue that the delay of the poem's composition by one year (*Silv.* 5.1.16–32)—well past the conventionally recognized period for the production of an *epicedion*—raises the suspicion that its publication may have coincided with the imperilment of Abascantus's position as Domitian's secretary *ab epistulis*, a job from which he was later dismissed. Thus it is quite possible, if not probable, that Statius produced the poem at the request of Abascantus, who may have wanted to advertise his own loyalty (*pietas*) to the emperor in the hope of retaining his privileged court position. In light of this context, Statius's construction of Priscilla's perfected portrait assumes additional significance. Statius not only idealizes Priscilla in terms of *pietas*, but interweaves this theme throughout the poem; he thereby exploits the poetic funerary occasion and Priscilla's idealized image in order to promote her husband's *pietas* to the emperor.

In addition to recreating her *univira* status, Statius molds Priscilla's idealization in several ways through allusion, exempla, and explicit encomium. For example, he likens her to Penelope, the epitome of the loyal wife (58), and denies her the temptation of wealth in exchange for chastity (60–61). He rounds out her portrait with exempla illustrating her marital devotion: if necessary she would risk confronting “armed troops” (*armiferas catervas*, 67), “lightning bolts” (*fulmineosque ignes*, 68), and “the dangers of the sea” (*pericula ponti*, 68), all *pro coniuge*, “on behalf of her husband.”

The various possible imperial commissions that could have been given to her husband (and by which Priscilla would have displayed her *pietas* by accompanying him) also implies that Abascantus's loyalty to the emperor runs deep: he would willingly do whatever the emperor asked of him. Thus Priscilla's marital *pietas* is illustrated, in part, by concern for her husband's position relative to the imperial court. Statius narrates how she prays to the emperor's genius on her husband's behalf (70–74) in order to ensure him a favorable post. Despite her prayers—which are answered—Statius explicitly emphasizes that Abascantus's job as secretary is not the result of his wife's appeal, but the due reward for his many excellent qualities, above all, loyalty: “vidit quippe *pii* iuvenis navamque quietem / intactamque *fidem* succinctaque pectora curis,” 76–77. In the guise of extolling her *pietas*, Statius has deliberately manipulated Priscilla's idealized portrait to re-center the focus on her husband's *pietas*. In addition, Statius illustrates how Priscilla—and by association Abascantus—is religiously dutiful when it comes to the emperor.

Statius subsequently provides a significantly lengthy account of Abascantus's important duties as Domitian's secretary (80–107), enumerating more specifically the “great burden he carries on his shoulders” (*molem immensam umeris*, 84). The passages serve as a reminder (to the emperor) of Abascantus's past loyal service. Abascantus's complete selflessness in regard to the emperor is further illustrated when Statius imagines a hypothetical situation whereby Priscilla accompanies Abascantus on a dangerous military campaign (127–34):

Parva loquor: *tecum* gelidas comes illa per Arctos
 Sarmaticasque hiemes Histrumque et pallida Rheni
 frigora, *tecum* omnes animo durata per aestus,
 et, si castra darent, vellet gestare pharetras,
 vellet Amazonia latus intercludere pelta,
 dum *te* pulvereae bellorum nube videret
 Caesarei prope fulmen equi divinaque tela
 vibrantem et magnae sparsum sudoribus hastae.

I speak of small matters. *At your side*, she would willingly endure the icy north, the Sarmatian snows, and the pale cold of the Rhine; *with you* she would brace herself throughout the heat of the summer and, if permitted, would gladly bear the quiver and guard her body with

an Amazonian shield; all this just to see you amidst the
dust cloud of battle at the side of Caesar's mighty steed,
brandishing divine weapons and sprinkled with sweat
from his powerful spear.

While the excerpt clearly highlights Priscilla's *pietas* towards her husband, the real intent is to distinguish Abascantus's steadfast loyalty to the emperor. The military context of the hypothetical situation illustrates the depths of Abascantus's loyalty, since he is willing to risk his life on behalf of the emperor. That he is described as the emperor's "right-hand man" (*Caesarei prope fulmen equi*) reminds the reader (Domitian) of Abascantus's constancy and closeness to the imperial court. The anaphora of *te* communicates Priscilla's selflessness when it comes to her husband, but also indicates the real focus of the passage.

Just as Statius models Priscilla as the most pious wife, he correspondingly portrays Abascantus as equally devoted to her. His loyalty is so profound ("pietas quam Priscillae tuae praestas," *praef.* 5.2) that he even deserves her return from the underworld (*egregia pietate meretur . . .*, 4). Their deep mutual *pietas* is confirmed by Concordia, who oversaw the couple's marriage, linking the two heart to heart ("Nec mirum si vos conlato pectore mixtos / iunxit inabrupta concordia longa catena," 43–44), and thus Abascantus possesses a general *modus vitae* characterized by *pietas*. Yet perhaps the greatest external, visual symbol of marital *pietas* is the display of grief at the death of a loved one. Statius describes Abascantus's tears as "faithful" (*pios fletus*, 32) and narrates how Domitian himself witnessed the devotion of his "chosen minister" (*lecti ministri*, 39) in carrying out her funeral rites. And while the threat of committing suicide is a typical funerary conceit to illustrate proof of true devotion and grief, Statius exploits this convention of the *epicedion* by redirecting attention from Abascantus's marital *pietas* to his imperial devotion. Despite a desire to end his life, Abascantus stays his sword out of "loyalty" (*mens fida*, 207) and a "greater love" (*maior amor*, 208) to the emperor (205–08). His *pietas* is connected precisely to his position as secretary (*sacris imperiis*) and sends a crystal clear message of devotion. In eschewing a release from personal despair and pain in favor of a deeper loyalty to Domitian, Abascantus has favored the state over the individual.

Statius even fashions Priscilla's last words (177–83) to express not strictly marital concerns but imperial ones. On the surface, the passage again extols Priscilla's idealized devotion but serves more to highlight her hus-

band's *pietas*; we hear that she rejoices in being able to witness Abascantus growing "closer and closer" to the emperor (*propius propiusque accedere dextrae*, 184), and she encourages him to continue along his path of service and devotion ("tu limite coepto / tende libens sacrumque latus geniumque potentem / irrequietus ama," 186–88), thereby anticipating his future job security. Moreover, Priscilla provides her husband with explicit instructions that he erect a gold statue of Domitian in honor of her death and her own devotion (188–91). There seems to be an implication that, given her loyalty to the emperor (and her respect for her husband's deep loyalty), Domitian should return the favor by ensuring that Abascantus fulfills the dying words of his beloved wife by maintaining his imperial service as secretary. Her request signifies that both she and her husband are steadfast, dutiful citizens, who both worship the emperor's genius—proof of their mutually shared *pietas* and loyalty to Domitian's political ideology.

Finally, in addition to this gold statue, it appears that Abascantus has also utilized his wife's funerary monument as a symbol of his *pietas*, a point explicitly developed by Statius. It is the unusual features of Priscilla's particular type of temple-monument that would allow the unnamed passerby to recognize Abascantus's *pietas* (238: "hac merito visa pietate mariti," "after witnessing this husband's *pietas*") and further exclaim: "It is he, I recognize him, the minister of that one who recently founded a temple for his immortal family and set his own stars in a different heaven" ("est hic, agnosco, minister / illius, aeternae modo qui sacraria genti / condidit inque alio posuit sua sidera caelo," 239–41).³¹ Regardless of whether or not Abascantus was directly influenced by Domitian's Templum Gentis Flaviae (and there exist similarities between the monuments),³² at the very least, Statius likens the depth of Abascantus's *pietas*, externalized by the lavish funerary monument, to that of the emperor. This point is reinforced by a

31 She was embalmed and preserved in an Egyptian-style tomb containing household furniture and sculpted servants (229–38) to accompany her in the afterlife ("domus ista, domus! quis triste sepulchrum / dixerit?" "A house, a house it is! Who would call it a gloomy tomb?" 237–38), and statues of Priscilla in the likeness of Ceres, Maia, and Venus (232). These images of Priscilla recall a similar act of devotion to Julia, Domitian's deified niece, who was honored with portrait statues in the likeness of Venus and Juno (Mart. *Ep.* 6.13). For a fuller description and examples of this particular tomb type, see Toynbee 1971.130–32; for the cultural meaning of funerary monuments, see Shaw 1991. Nauta 2002.302 argues that Abascantus was indeed directly inspired by Domitian's temple to his deified family and, in erecting Priscilla's tomb, had "shown himself a true servant of Domitian."

32 For a full discussion of the Templum, see Hartwig 1994, Davies 2000.24–27, 148–58.

subsequent metaphor in which Domitian and his *Templum* are compared to a “great ship” (*magna puppis*, 242) and Abascantus and his wife’s funerary monument to a “small sailboat” (*angusta phaselos*, 245), yet both occupy the “same sea” (*eodem aequore*, 245–46). Like Domitian, Abascantus provides not just an ordinary funerary stele, but a monument and temple. Statius has created an explicit analogy: Priscilla’s tomb is to Domitian’s *Templum* as Abascantus is to the emperor. Both monuments are symbols of *pietas*, both men are dutiful individuals. Again, it is important to note a distinction between Abascantus’s real-life motivation for Priscilla’s tomb and the way in which Statius articulates it; Statius’s expertise in creating distinction for his addressee rests on his ability to manipulate real-life details into idealized images that convey a deeper message.

Service to the imperial court certainly generates forms of cultural and symbolic capital, especially for a freedman, and Abascantus seems to have possessed a significant amount. Yet rather than producing a poem specifically extolling Abascantus’s imperial service, which may have appeared too obvious given the precarious situation, Statius utilizes a different poetic context to achieve his purpose. By crafting an idealized image of Priscilla as the devoted wife, he integrates the general theme of *pietas* into the poem and craftily extends it to Abascantus. As we have seen, Statius exploits specific funerary conventions and his constructed feminine portrait to direct attention away from Priscilla and towards Abascantus. Like Violentilla, Priscilla (and her *pietas*) serves a literary function as a form of cultural capital that helps to create distinction for her husband. The precise nature of Priscilla’s idealized image and the subsequent deliberate manipulation of the dramatic occasion only make sense if we accept that Abascantus’s imperial position was threatened at the time of composition, and thus the poem—intended as a consolation for Abascantus—may, in fact, have served a much more profound political purpose.

These two poems, I think, amply illustrate Statius’s innovative manipulation of both traditional virtues and genre, through which his deftly crafted feminine portraits reaffirm positive cultural, social, and imperial values recognized not only in the idealized Roman woman, but also in the idealized Roman man. His literary constructions of women thus both reflect and reassert the values of Domitian’s ideology. The emphasis given to women as both historical and literary figures in the *Silvae* certainly reflects a social parallel in which women and their associated virtues continued to be important considerations in the real and literary formation of male distinction (i.e., symbolic capital) during the Domitianic period. Statius’s ability to craft his

women according to the specific needs of each poem reflects a highly self-conscious art and a recognition of the power of literature as a vehicle for creating (potentially immortal) distinction for the addressees. Yet despite the perfected idealizations Statius creates for his women, the depictions are ultimately imperfect, unfinished images of who these women really were. The above analysis suggests that we should “read” the women of the *Silvae* as only partially accurate representations—as portraits carefully shaped and molded according to the idealized virtues traditionally associated with women and the conventional genres that represent them. Nevertheless, the ability of Statius’s feminine portraits to promote male ideals reflects a power and strength paralleled by a cultural reality in which an influential woman of Domitianic Rome was more than just another pretty face.

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