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## Staius. Silvae 5. Edited with Introduction, Translation and Commentary. [book review]

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**Bruce Gibson, *Statius. Silvae 5. Edited with Introduction, Translation and Commentary. Oxford Classical Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. liii, 492. ISBN 0-19-927715-X. \$145.00.***

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[A note to the reader: this is a collaborative review by the participants of the "Poetry and Patronage in Flavian Rome" seminar held at Bryn Mawr College. In addition to contributing to the general assessment of Gibson's commentary, each reviewer focused his or her attentions on one poem in *Silv.* 5 and assisted in revising the review.[1](#)]

As Gibson (hereafter G.) says in the preface to his commentary, these indeed are "exciting times for scholars working on the *Silvae*" (vii). The first commentary on Book 5 of Statius' *Silvae* since F. Vollmer's edition (1893), this thorough and learned text, translation and commentary promises to encourage yet further attention to this challenging work by a major figure in post-Vergilian literature. G.'s commentary is an invaluable resource for those reading *Silv.* 5; whether student or expert, this commentary not only serves to clarify the particulars of individual poems, but suggests new directions of scholarly inquiry.

G. begins his commentary with a general introduction, followed by the Latin text and full apparatus criticus with his own translation on the facing pages. After the commentary proper, G. includes a robust bibliography and three indices ("General," "Latin Words and Phrases," and "Passages").

In his General Introduction, G. quickly dispenses with the basic outlines of Statius' life and literary production (indicating, as always in this commentary, where interested readers should go for fuller treatments). Tellingly (and to his credit), G. begins his discussion of the nature of the *Silvae* with Statius' comments in his prefaces and "the 'poetics' exhibited in the poems themselves", rather than dilating on putatively similar, but now lost, ancient collections or the possible meaning and implications of the cryptic title (xviii). By way of discussing this question, G. manages to contextualize *Silv.* 5 within the rest of the *Silvae* and Statius' epic works, and suggests how narrative self-consciousness, the importance of Domitian, "Callimachean"

aesthetics (xxiii-xxvii) and the relationships between poet and addressees play out over a range of topics and genres found in the *Silvae*. Drawing a parallel to "the tension between caution and confidence" in Catullus 1, G. astutely notes that Statius' protestations of celerity and levity should be understood as part of a calculated pose in crafting his narrative persona (xvii).

*Silv.* 5 is perhaps the most challenging book of the *Silvae*, lacking as it does a formal preface and ending with the apparently fragmentary *Silv.* 5.5. G. carefully revisits the arguments in favor of the hypothesis that *Silv.* 5 could have been published posthumously, as has been thought since Markland (1728), before settling on the lack of a formal preface as the clearest sign of posthumous publication (xxx). He refuses to accept that the unsettled nature of the book permits "an abdication of critical responsibility" (xxx), noting especially the balanced arrangement of *epicedia* (5.1, 5.3, 5.5) separated by intervening poems. Such comments are typical of this commentary, as G. engages challenging material, but shows appropriate restraint in the face of the ultimately unknowable.

As *epicedia* dominate *Silv.* 5, G. devotes the bulk of his introduction to the role of "Consolation and Self-consolation" in this book (xxxi-1). After outlining the models and expectations of the consolation genre(s), G. proceeds to a general consideration of "poems of lamentation" in the *Silvae* (xxiiiiff.). His description of consolation in the *epicedia* of *Silv.* 5 culminates in the most stimulating section of the General Introduction, a consideration of "the failure of consolation," in which G. sees Statius incorporating epic models of failed consolation to comment on the limitations of self-consolation in the face of "the violent combination of consoler and consoled, since both are conflated into the same first-person voice." (1).

As befits an edition intended for scholars, G. has produced a fluid translation that nevertheless keeps close to Statius' text. In so doing, he steers a middle course between the "domesticating" approach to Statius offered by B. R. Nagle (2004) and the more literal translation in D.R. Shackleton Bailey's Loeb (2003).<sup>2</sup> To take an example from the best known poem in *Silv.* 5, Nagle renders 5.4.11-13 as:

I've had enough. Oh, for the thousand eyes  
that Juno's bird-to-be kept open wide--  
in shifts, of course, and never all on guard.

Shackleton-Bailey's translation of the same passage reads:

How am I to bear it? Not if I had the thousand eyes of sacred Argos, who kept  
them alert only by turns, never wakeful over all his body.

G.'s translation reads (with an emendation of *piger* for *sacer* in v. 12):

How am I to endure? I could not, if I had the thousand eyes which sluggish Argus  
kept only alternately vigilant, and was never awake in his whole body.

Although the text of the *Silvae* once provoked general despair--in 1983 M.D. Reeve memorably declared that "scholars will argue until doomsday about what Statius could and could not have written"--the recent efforts of E. Courtney, D.R. Shackleton Bailey, and others

have wrestled the work into a manageable, if still often elusive, form.<sup>3</sup> G. is thoughtful, punctilious, and practical in considering the variety of scholarly emendations and textual difficulties. In this he answers Coleman's criticism of Courtney that "the λεπτότης of his apparatus criticus does not reflect the variety of possibilities that might be explored in pursuit of the truth... Unsatisfactory conjecture may prove valuable in pointing a way; yet here C. has denied us access. If another purpose of an apparatus is to record instances where doubt has been felt (even if it is not shared by the editor), C. is less than magnanimous" (Coleman 1991: 335). For example, although G. dismisses Karsten's *nae te deus* (*Silv.* 5.2.110) as "a very weak conjecture," he adds that it "may nevertheless be illuminating" since it "point[s] to the need for a climax" in a passage that serves to "describe extreme responses to Crispinus' brilliant oratory" (231). G. is also unafraid to offer his own conjectures: for example his *paratis* for the vexed *iubatis* in 5.1.83; or in 5.1.66, when G. follows recent editors in accepting *vocasset* and *ad maiora* from ζ, but also emends *metus* to *fors* (perhaps unnecessarily). G. is also knowledgeable enough to admit when a textual problem evades solution--as in 5.2.54-6, "a passage where complete certainty seems unattainable" (210). His arguments for the placement of *lacunae* and appropriate punctuation are also immensely helpful for the modern reader.

G. begins his commentary on each poem of *Silv.* 5 with a brief outline and preface. These prefaces do not aspire to be thorough discussions of the poems; instead they generally focus on a major issue that has already occasioned scholarly debate (e.g. Abascantus' tenuous position as *ab epistulis* in 5.1, the career of Crispinus in 5.2, the chronology of the death of Statius' father in 5.3, etc.). G.'s entries in the commentary generally include a combination of the following: discussions of textual matters and (more sparingly) the effects of stylistic and metrical devices employed by Statius, explanations of subtle or obscure cultural and mythological references, abundant references to comparative texts that augment our understanding of particular words or passages, and interpretive comments that seek to stimulate further research.

G. comments sparingly on diction. He discusses, for example, the epic overtones of *fulmen* in *Silv.* 5.1.133, and of *tuae* in *Silv.* 5.1.77, on which he notes that "the possessive adjective imparts an intimate note." (77) For the most part, however, discussion of Statius' language is mostly confined to the context of weighing the merits of proposed emendations. Discussion of metrics and stylistic features is reserved for those moments that have a significant bearing on the interpretation of the text: e.g. the discussion of litotes (318) and the lone spondaic verse of *Silv.* 5.3.165.

As an aid to the reader, G. will occasionally comment when a word or phrase might be unusual or potentially troubling to even an experienced reader of Latin; for example when in *Silv.* 5.1.120 *hortor* appears with a direct object to denote the action a person is encouraged to perform rather than the person who is being encouraged, G. offers similar examples from the *Silvae*, *Thebaid*, Tacitus, and others. For readers who are less familiar with various mythological, cultural, and historical allusions that Statius relies so heavily upon throughout the *Silvae*, G.'s commentary offers extensive assistance.

### *Individual Poems*

G. concentrates most of his introductory comments to *Silv.* 5.1 on Abascantus' position as *ab*

*epistulis*. In discussing Hardie's argument that "the poem represents an attempt to state the case for Domitian's retention of Abascantus" (74), G. suggests that Hardie's reasoning be qualified, arguing that "the seriousness of the personal and poetic purpose of this *epicedion* should not be discounted," despite the fact that a political purpose may also be present.

G.'s discussion of consolation in *Silv.* 5.1, treated in the General Introduction, emphasizes the absence of direct consolation and of philosophical approaches to consolation. In his commentary on this poem, G. often mentions literary parallels, but the implications of such allusions frequently remain unexplored. For example, G. compares Statius' simile, in which Priscilla is an elm tree supporting her husband as a vine, to the simile in *Cat.* 62, and remarks upon the gender reversal in Statius' passage without elaborating further. Likewise G. intriguingly encourages the reader to compare Statius' simile of *Mors* enclosed in the Underworld to Vergil's *Furor* (*Aen.* 1.294-6), but offers no thoughts on its significance. When Statius praises Priscilla for difficulties she would willingly have endured on her husband's behalf, G. lists a variety of examples of 'the topos of a friend's or a lover's readiness to endure extraordinary privations on behalf of another' (104). Of a page of text, however, only one sentence attempts to compare Statius' employment of this topos to its use by other writers. As disappointing as such silences are, such interpretative restraint is to be expected in an analytical commentary of this type.

G.'s introduction to *Silvae* 5.2 immediately outlines the generic considerations at play in the poem: "Regardless of the reliability of M's title (*Laudes Crispini Vetti Bolani Filii*), *Laudes* usually underlines the fact that this poem does not offer allegiance to a single genre, but instead exploits aspects of the propempticon ... as well as more conventional techniques of praise" (173). After drawing a connection with epideictic oratory, G. explores how this poem of praise must diverge from such generic expectations because of Crispinus' youth. G. underscores the sincerity of the poem's praise, despite the exaggerations by the poet. G. then reconstructs the career of Crispinus, with appropriate circumspection given that nothing is known about Crispinus outside of this poem (177).

*Silv.* 5.2 is perhaps best known for the tantalizing mystery of the attempted poisoning of Crispinus by his mother (vv. 75-96). G.'s treatment of this episode takes a literary approach, exploring how his mother's characterization reads within the broader literary and historical context. On the reference to Crispinus' mother as *miseræ* (v. 76), G. comments that it indicates "a sympathetic focalization from Crispinus' perspective, but she cannot be depicted as wholly nefarious, since she is after all the mother of Crispinus." (220). G. astutely identifies Crispinus' pardon to his mother in lines 84-96 as "an index of character" that allows Statius to "justif[y] mention of a rather unsavoury episode" transforming a "seemingly unsuitable anecdote" into a "vehicle for a very lofty compliment" in the context of the poem (223). G. offers literary examples of the "*frisson* engendered by a mother worse than a stepmother," as well as summarizing other scholars' comments and opinions on this matter (221-22).

G. does occasionally discuss significant moments of allusion in greater detail, as with the presence of Dido in *Silv.* 5.2.120, where Statius "draws attention to a difficulty in the Vergilian original, the age of Ascanius" (234). G., however, cautions against over-reading the allusion, as "the ability to elicit an amorous response is not inauspicious in this simile," which "must be

viewed a praise of Crispinus, and not in terms of their epic antecedents" (235). Throughout this commentary, G. shows a laudable ability to muster evidence from a range of scholars and ancient texts in support of his arguments; at the same time, G. often contributes compelling new interpretations--e.g., his analysis of the implications of *advena* (v. 20), which encourages further thought and discussion concerning ancient concepts of self and other.

In consideration of the length of *Silv.* 5.3 relative to other poems in the *Silvae*, G.'s compact summary is especially helpful for the reader who wants to refer to a brief synopsis of the poem and its overall plan. In the introduction to the poem, G. refers the reader to the General Introduction for a discussion of *Silv.* 5.3 as an *epicedion*. He then initiates an exhaustive scrutiny of the poem's chronological difficulties. The dates of the death of Statius' father and the ensuing composition of the poem has occasioned much scholarly debate, especially in the last quarter century.<sup>4</sup> G. delineates the parameters of the debate and systematically leads the reader through the competing arguments. He notably contests Coleman's solution to the chronological problems that *Silv.* 5.3 is an amalgam of two or more separate poems restructured by a posthumous editor.<sup>5</sup> Rather, G. proposes that the irreconcilable conflict is an effect of a "partial revision by the poet" (266). Although a definitive solution remains elusive, G. has contributed a concise synthesis and analysis of this issue. Because of the focus on the chronological problem, discussion of the poem's thematic program and its significance in the broader context of the *Silvae* are absent, which is unfortunate for a poem that lends such insight into Statius' personal life and his relationship with his father. G. does explain that the "twin themes of the poem [are] Statius' relation with his father, and his father's *doctrina*," (268) but this is buried in the general commentary and deserves more immediate discussion in the introduction.

For the scholar interested in pursuing specific elements of the poem, G.'s commentary provides an abundance of references to significant literature and insightful exegetical work. Again, G. is careful not to limit his comments too strictly. He assiduously considers the most recent scholarship on the subject and presents his support or criticism with clarity and sagacity. Ultimately, however, his arguments are left open to debate and further examination by the reader. For instance, the temple that Statius proposes to build to his father in *Silv.* 5.3.47-52 has received different interpretations. R. Nauta argues that this passage should be taken literally as Statius' wish for greater financial solvency.<sup>6</sup> G. however cites the ambiguous phrase *par templis opus* (v. 48), and refers to similar passages not only in the *Silvae*, but in the works of Theocritus, Vergil, Pindar, Horace, and Martial in which such *opera* are not physical structures, but works of poetry (284-5). G. thus implicitly encourages the reader to consider both interpretations and come to his or her own conclusion. G. concludes his commentary on *Silv.* 5.3 with a re-examination of the poem's perplexing conclusion in which Statius provokes a comparison with *Aeneid* 6 and cites unusual precedents for such visitations from the Underworld: Numa's association with Egeria, Scipio's consultations with Jupiter, and Sulla's evocation of Apollo. G. suggests that "Statius may be transcending the controversy over what Vergil's gate of ivory signified by requesting that his father leave the underworld through the gate of horn, and then adding the references to the feigned piety of Numa, Scipio, and Sulla, to create a new puzzle of his own" (375), and that "it might be argued that these examples imply a kind of skepticism about his father on Statius' part, but this would seem to accord ill with the positive way in which his father is presented throughout the poem. It may be better to see Statius as complimenting his father, imagining that he will surpass such spurious examples of

divine guidance" (376).

G.'s commentary on Statius *Silv.* 5.4 is a thorough exploration of this short poem, which is unique in a variety of ways among the other poems of the *Silvae*. After a brief summary of the poem's structure, he discusses its genre(s), one of the more interesting aspects of this poem, as Statius' departures from rhetorical practice are always noteworthy. G. acknowledges that the poem manifests certain aspects of a kletic hymn, but after noting in his introduction the ways it differs from a normal kletic hymn, he does not return to the topic at relevant points in the commentary. He rightly hesitates to attempt to force the poem into a rigid structure, instead focusing on "the changes of direction in the rhetoric and thought of the poem," a more fruitful approach than those adopted by some previous commentators (380). He closes his introduction with a discussion of the various *topoi* and models of appeals to Sleep that Statius engages and modifies.

The commentary on *Silv.* 5.4 primarily treats the poem's intertextuality. G. cites at great length allusions, verbal resonances, and thematic parallels to previous poetry, especially Homer, Vergil, and Ovid. He also shows how Hor. *Carm.* 1.10 can explain the curious *turba laetior* in vv. 17-18, which he concludes (citing an earlier article of his on this point) is a reference to the dead of Elysium, rather than other, more successful sleepers.<sup>7</sup> For the most part, his exegetical remarks are sound, particularly his useful explanation of another odd point in the poem, when Statius describes the rivers as growing quieter in the night (v. 5). G. largely avoids textual questions here, although his explanation of one important emendation, that of *sacer* to *piger* in v. 12, is somewhat dismissive and unsatisfactory. Given that *Silv.* 5.4 is easily the most popular and anthologized of the *Silvae*, the extremely brief discussion of the poem's reception could have been fuller.

G. continues his study of the idea of "the failure of consolation" (xlii) and in particular the failure of self-consolation in his discussion of the last poem of the book, which he ties to the two previous *epicedia* in *Silv.* 5. Although G.'s examination of *Silv.* 5.5. is colored by the idea that this poem may be unfinished, he later suggests that "it is at least worth asking whether the poem confronting us here is not an unfinished fragment" (393). Perhaps because the poem is thought to be incomplete, the best insights come from comparison to other parts of the *Silvae*, especially the other consolations for the deaths of *pueri* (*Silv.* 2.1 and 2.6) and the other self-consolation poetry of Book 5. G.'s commentary is marked by the need to discuss the damaged condition of the manuscript and the variety of readings that could be made as a result. For example, G.'s discussion of the *lacunae* in vv. 24-7 illustrates the author's meticulousness in explaining his own interpretations (404-6). This thoroughness is shown throughout his other exegetical comments on Statius' poetic techniques.

Given the paucity of commentary available on the *Silvae* and the lack of a recent commentary on Book 5 before G.'s, even a lesser work would be most welcome to the growing cohort of scholars studying these poems. G. deserves our thanks for having produced a rich and fastidious commentary that advances our understanding of Statius and the *Silvae* and will, without doubt, contribute to the ongoing renaissance of Statian studies.

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**Notes:**

- [1.](#) Primary contributors: Preface (Bret Mulligan); *Silv.* 1 (Jennifer L. Brown); *Silv.* 2 (Elizabeth H. Spear); *Silv.* 3 (Theodore J. Freeman); *Silv.* 4 (Matthew C. Farmer); and *Silv.* 5 (Mage Macchione).
- [2.](#) "This translation aims to be a readable version which will capture Statius' wit and convey the allusiveness so typical of Roman authors ... I have endeavored to gloss most of the poet's references and allusions within the translations itself. This technique derives from my conception of the translation as bringing the author to the reader, rather than the reverse" (Nagle, B.R. (2004). *The Silvae of Statius*: 28).
- [3.](#) Reynolds, L.D. (1983). *Texts and Transmission*: 388-39.
- [4.](#) See Nauta, R. (2001). *Poetry for Patrons: Literary Communication in the Age of Domitian* (Leiden): 197, n.12; Caldelli, M.L. (1993). *L'Agon Capitolinus: storia e protagonisti dall'istituzione domiziana al IV secolo* (Studi pubblicati dall'Istituto Italiano per la Storia Antica, Rome: 56-58; White, P. (1998). 'Latin Poets and the *carmen Capitolium*', in Knox and Foss: 86, n.6; Coleman (1988), *Ibid.*; Hardie, A. (2003). 'Poetry and Politics at the Games of Domitian', in Boyle and Dominik: 125-147.
- [5.](#) Coleman, K.M. (1988). *Statius: Silvae IV. Edited with an English Translation and Commentary*, Oxford: xvii and on 4.2.66-67.
- [6.](#) Nauta, R. (2002). *Poetry for Patrons: Literary Communication in the Age of Domitian* (Leiden): 202-203.
- [7.](#) Gibson, B.J. (1996). "Statius and Insomnia: Allusion and Meaning in *Silvae* 5.4." *CQ* n.s. 46: 457-68.

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