CHAPTER FIVE

IMITATION AND THE HERO

Elizabeth Kennedy Klaassen

He is too little of a genius... The extreme conscientiousness of his work cannot compensate for his lack of creative power and imagination and of originality, vividness and vivacity.¹

These words from a handbook on the history of Roman literature describe not Silius but Virgil, whose lack of inspiration is proven by his slavish imitation of Homer. Similar judgments have been voiced about Silius, often citing the ancient evaluation of Pliny, in his letter announcing the death of the Flavian poet: *scribepat carmina maiore cura quam ingenio* ("he wrote poems with greater care than talent," *Ep. 3.7.5*).² But imitation is often itself creative, and an important aspect of Silius' *cura* is the creativity with which he has used and transformed his models.

Among Silius’ many sources, his historical epic has two parents, and it is often hard to tell which of the two the *Punica* resembles more, Livy’s third decade or Virgil’s *Aeneid*.³ The storyline of the Second Punic War is based on Livy, but Silius draws his narrative technique from Virgil. Within Silius’ epic, various characters assume the role of an Aeneas in different ways at different times. Hannibal is repeatedly shown as an antitype of Aeneas, while Scipio emerges as the main Roman Aeneas. I will first give an overview of this scheme of imitation,

¹ Teuffel (1868–69) 391, quoted by Heinze (1993) xii n. 1.
² See Dominik in this volume on Pliny’s judgment and critical response to Silius after Scaliger (431–40). Translations are my own unless otherwise noted; Duff (1934) and West (1990) on Silius and Virgil respectively have been consulted extensively.
³ Both these authors were condemned by Caligula, according to Suetonius: *sed et Virgili ac Titi Lii scripta et imagines paulum auit quin ex omnibus bibliothecis amovaret, quorum alterum ut nullius ingenii minimaque doctrinae, alterum ut usuros in historia neglegentemque carpebat* (“As for Virgil and Livy, Caligula came very near to having their works and busts removed from the libraries, claiming that Virgil had little knowledge and less skill; and that Livy was a wordy and inaccurate historian” [tr. Graves (1957)], *Cal. 34.2*). See Pomeroy (1989) 137 n. 38.
showing how Scipio reappropriates from Hannibal the heroic types of Virgilian and Homeric epic, and then look in detail at Scipio’s visit to the world of the dead in *Punica* 13, as an example of an epic episode that confers heroic stature on Scipio.

1. **Double models**

Hannibal is the main character of the *Punica*: the antagonist has the over-arching role in the epic. Structurally, his role is like Aeneas’, but his purpose is opposite to that of the founder of the Roman race (*pater Aeneas, Romanae stirpis origo*, “father Aeneas, the founder of the Roman race,” *Aen.* 12.166). Hannibal wishes to destroy Rome, and so he becomes what von Albrecht calls a “Gegenbild zu Aeneas,” an opposing mirror-image to Aeneas, or rather a “Punic Aeneas,” in Vessey’s words.4 In the structure of Virgil’s epic, the first half presents Dido as the major obstacle to Aeneas’ mission, and the second half, Turnus. Hannibal, too, must contend first with Fabius and then with Scipio as the major figures hindering his goals: Fabius holds him off, and Scipio ultimately defeats him. But Silius does not portray Fabius or Scipio as Dido or Turnus in specific episodes. The Flavian poet has reversed Virgil’s schema in that the two blocking figures are the protagonists who have very different but complementary strengths. The comparison of Hannibal with Aeneas repeatedly draws attention to the differences between the two epic heroes and suggests the alternative Virgilian models of Dido and Turnus for Hannibal.

The main epic episodes that figure Hannibal as a type of Aeneas are Hannibal’s duel with the Saguntine Murrus in *Punica* 1, which recalls Aeneas’ fight with Turnus in *Aeneid* 12 (*Pun.* 1.456–517; *Aen.* 12.887–952); the description of Hannibal’s new armor in *Punica* 2, which recalls Aeneas’ in *Aeneid* 8 (*Pun.* 2.395–452; *Aen.* 8.608–728);5 the banquet scenes of *Punica* 11 and *Aeneid* 1 (*Pun.* 11.267–302, 385–482;

---

4 Von Albrecht (1964) 177; Vessey (1974b) 28. Vessey (1975) 401 also observes: “Aeneas founded Rome; but he also engendered Hannibal, who attempts, like a ghastly parody or hellish Doppelgänger of Aeneas, to conquer Italy and to subject it to Carthage.” Ahl, Davis and Pomeroy (1986) 2511 comment: “Caesar and Hannibal…are curiously reversed images of Aeneas, inasmuch as what they are undertaking would, if successful, result in the destruction of the New Troy which it was Aeneas’ duty to establish.”

5 See Ganiban (84–91) and Harrison (282–85) in this volume.