Silius Italicus’ *Punica* is a very Roman epic. From the outset, the poet presents his work as the “sequel” of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the national epic, when he declares his intention to sing the *gloria Aeneadum* (1.1–2). This essentially Roman quality of the *Punica*, as opposed to the contemporary epics with Greek subjects, Valerius’ *Argonautica* and Statius’ *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*, raises the question how the Flavian poet positions himself in the wider epic tradition with its rich Greek past. A promising starting point for any discussion of the way in which Silius engages with his literary predecessors is a passage in *Punica* 13, which features the father of epic poetry, Homer himself, as a character. In his inspection of the shades of the Underworld, guided by the *umbra* of the ancient Sibyl of Cumae, the protagonist Scipio views the ghost of Homer, which elicits a eulogy of the latter’s poetic merits. The scene is set in a broader encounter with Greek ghosts, among whom the shades of Alexander the Great and the heroes of the *Iliad*. The entire passage arguably invites comparison between Greeks and Romans, be they heroes or poets.

The encomium of Homer is prompted by Scipio’s remark that the Greek poet looks like a god to him:

> ‘non falleris;’ inquit
docta comes Triuiae ‘meruit deus esse uideri,et fuit in tanto non paruum pectore numen.
carmine complexus terram, mare, sidera, maneset cantu Musas et Phoebum aequauit honore.
atque haec cuncta, prius quam cerneret, ordine terrisprodidit ac uestram tulit usque ad sidera Troiam.’
Scipio perlustrans oculis laetantibus umbram’si nunc fata darent, ut Romula facta per orbemhic caneret uates, quanto maiora futurosfacta eadem intrarent hoc’ inquit ‘teste nepotes!felix Aeacide, cui tali contigit ore
gentibus ostendi! creuit tua carmine uirtus.’

(Sil. 13.785–797)

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“You are right,” Trivia’s learned companion replies, “he has deserved to seem a god, and no small deity housed in his great breast. With his poetry he encompassed earth, sea, stars and shades, and he equaled the Muses in song and Phoebus in glory. And all this, before he saw it, he revealed to the earth and he raised your Troy to heaven.” Scipio looks with joyful eyes at the ghost and says: “If Fate would give that this poet now would sing Roman deeds throughout the world, how much greater those same deeds would come to our future descendants, if Homer testified to them! Blessed Achilles, whom it was granted to be shown to the world by such a voice! Your virtue has grown through his song.”

In her enumeration of Homer’s achievements, the Sibyl tells Scipio that the poet had revealed “all this” (haec cuncta, 790) to the world before he saw it. It is plausible that with “all this,” she refers to the Underworld and its inhabitants, which Scipio has been viewing for the last three hundred lines. But since she comments upon Homer’s poetic power, it is just as likely that this statement also relates, metapoetically, to Silius’ debt to him for the Nekyia of which this is a part—Silius would not have written “all this,” his account of the Underworld, but for Odyssey 11.¹

That Silius here refers to Homer as the originator of his subject matter is corroborated by a few allusions to Lucretius, and more in particular to the passages where the didactic poet refers to his own “source,” Epicurus, and defines the relation of his work to the epic tradition. The first of these allusions is found at 786 meruit deus esse uideri, which goes back to merito nobis deus esse uidetur (“he deservedly seems a god to us,” Lucr. 5.19).² This praise is directed at Epicurus, the inspirator of the De rerum natura. A few lines later, Lucretius described his subject matter as the origins of terram caelum mare sidera solem / lunaique globum (“earth, sky, sea, and stars, the sun and the ball of the moon,” 5.68–69). Silius draws upon this asyndetic list for Homer’s reported subject matter terram mare sidera manes (13.788). The last item, manes, is a significant addition; not only is the Underworld the setting for Silius’ praise, but it was precisely Lucretius who denied the Underworld its traditional place in the arrangement of the world. He did so in his first book, when he praised his predecessor Ennius for his poetic achievement, but simultaneously criticized him for his erroneous exposé of the Acherusia templae, the Underworld:

¹ See also Reitz (1982) 117.
² Hardie (1993) 115 thinks that Silius’ use of past tenses suggests that Homer’s poetic achievement was past and partial; but while the moment of his merits may lay in the past, it does not follow that they are exhausted by now. For meruit, the interpretation “has deserved” (against Duff’s “deserved,” adopted by Hardie) seems better.