CHAPTER 7

Negative Stereotypes of Wealth in the Works of Statius

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I take as my starting point for this paper the meeting between Dante, Vergil, and Statius in the Purgatorio. Dante and Vergil encounter Statius in the twenty-first canto, and their conversation continues into the twenty-second, where Vergil asks Statius why he has been assigned to the area of Purgatory which is inhabited by those guilty of avarice, before expressing his surprise as follows:¹

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come poté trovar dentro al tuo seno
loco avarizia, tra cotanto senno
di quanto per tua cura fosti pieno?
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*Purg.* 22.22–4

How could avarice find a place within your breast, among all the wisdom with which your studies had filled you?²

Statius’ reply however is that his crime was not avarice, but its opposite, liberality, and it was through reading Vergil that he realized the error of his ways, and was thus saved from the torments of the Inferno:

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Or sappi ch’avarizia fu partita
troppa da me, e questa dismisura
migliaia di lunari hanno punita.
   E se non fosse ch’io drizzai mia cura
quand’io intesi là dove tu chiame,
crucciato quasi a l’umana natura:
   “Perché non reggi tu, o sacra fame
de l’oro, l’appetito de’ mortali?”
voltando sentirei le giostre grame.
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*Purg.* 22.34–42

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¹ On Statius and Dante, see now Heslin, pp. 512–26 in this volume.
² The text and the translation of Dante’s *Purgatorio* are taken from Durling and Martinez (2003).
Know then that avarice was too distant from me, and thousands of months have punished this lack of measure.

And had it not been that I straightened out my desires, when I understood the place where you cry out, almost angry at human nature:

“Why do you, O holy hunger for gold, not govern the appetite of mortals?” I would be turning about, feeling the grim jousts.

The idea of Statius as a spendthrift is a curious one, even if in the end he was saved from such extravagance by his reading of Vergil’s poetry. As Alex Hardie has demonstrated, Statius was a product of the world of professional poetry, and thus dependent on success in competitions, and ultimately on private patronage as well. While Statius might not be thought of as conveying a poet’s poverty in the way that Martial’s writings sometimes do, many of the poems of the *Silvae* (which the historical Dante did not have access to) describe possessions that are owned not by Statius but by his friends: Statius thus experiences the trappings of wealth, but as an invited viewer. This is clearly apparent in poems where Statius engages with the emperor, as at *Silvae* 4.2.13–17, where he expresses his astonishment that he even sees Domitian (*tene ego... cerno iacens, “do I see you, as I recline,” 14–16), before going on to describe the architectural splendor of Domitian’s palace (18–37). But the same sense of wonder also holds true of Statius’ interactions with the possessions of private individuals among his friends: thus in the poem on Novius Vindex’s statue of Hercules the statue holds but is not able to sate Statius’ gaze (4.6.33–4). Statius had previously remarked that he had wished that the night could have been extended (17–19), a pointer not only to the delights of Vindex’s hospitality, but also to the transience of his encounter with Vindex’s wealth, which can be enjoyed by the owner whenever the inclination takes him (30–1). In this sense, occasional poetry’s effect is a commodification of what was previously private wealth: occasional poetry, once written down, might almost be said to steal the

6 For similar emphasis for Statius as the viewer, cf. *Silv.* 1.3.13–15 (Statius recalls his gaze being exhausted by the miraculous qualities of Manilius Vopiscus’ villa), 2.2.42–5 (on Statius’ astonishment at the villa of Pollius Felix).