CHAPTER 32

Statian Recusatio: Angelo Poliziano and John Dryden

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In 1677, nine years into his tenure as poet laureate, John Dryden (1631–1700) laments that the Roman poet, Publius Papinius Statius, wants for “poize of judgment.”1 And so begins what may be termed a twenty-year long recusatio of Statius’ poetry, culminating at the beginning of the Dedication to his famous translation of Vergil’s Aeneid, in 1697. During these years, Dryden derides Statius and his poetry numerous times not only to show his readers but also himself what characteristics the best poets and poetry have versus that of the lowliest poets and poetry. Yet Dryden is not the first poet-critic to find in Statius’ work an opportunity to reconsider the understanding of poetry in a specific time and place. Some two hundred years earlier, the Florentine humanist Angelo Poliziano (1454–1494) formulated and wrote his own recusatio in terms of Statius’ poetry.2 Similar to Dryden in that he pairs Vergil with Statius, he nevertheless arrives at precisely the opposite conclusion. For Poliziano, Statius is just as valuable a poet as Vergil; in fact, he rivals him. Differences aside, both Dryden and Poliziano use Statius to rethink their own and their own eras’ conceptions of poetry. For Poliziano, Statius’ poetry provides evidence that his own privileging of remote learning and variety were not only key ingredients for a humanistic understanding of classical literature and culture but also for creating successful poets following Vergil, including himself.3 For Dryden the contrary is true: Statius’ poetry is a source of stress and anxiety about how to evaluate poetry in general and his own poetic legacy specifically.

Neither Poliziano nor Dryden define recusatio or call what they write about Statius and his poetry recusatio. In fact, the term itself receives little use from antiquity through the beginning of the twentieth century, when it begins to

1 Scott and Saintsbury (1882–1893) 5.118; the comment comes in Dryden’s “Apology for Heroic Poetry and Poetic License.”
2 There is little to no evidence at present that Dryden knew Poliziano’s work firsthand.
3 Mengelkoch (2010a) 96.
attract some attention.\textsuperscript{4} Since then scholars have used it as a convenient term to mean, generally, the rejection of writing epic poetry. The broad nature of this definition derives in large part from the beginning of the \textit{Aetia} by the poet Callimachus, who advocates for shorter, refined poems rather than longer, heroic ones. Essentially, he lends value and authority to less significant genres of poetry by arguing for erudition, variety, and elaboration over length and heroism. Roman poets including Vergil, Ovid, Horace, and Propertius heed his advice, but do so by evading the composition of epic poetry, not rejecting it entirely. In large part, each poet excuses himself by emphasizing his unworthiness to compose such a poem.\textsuperscript{5}

The assumption about subsequent poets, like Statius, was that they had no problems writing epic poems or obsequious panegyric. Recent scholarship, however, has shown \textit{recusatio} to be as significant a part of Flavian poetry, and Statius’ poetry particularly, as that of the poetry of Vergil, Ovid, Propertius, and Horace.\textsuperscript{6} The difference that scholars now notice is that both the use and the type of \textit{recusatio} changed significantly during the Flavian era. From the Callimachean rejection of epic poetry in favor of shorter, elaborate poems, Flavian poets reject elaborate, shorter poems in favor of epic themes contained in smaller forms, such as epigrams.\textsuperscript{7} This shift bears significant fruit not only in terms of Statius’ poetry but also in the reception of his poetry, with which I am concerned here.

Poliziano and Dryden may not define \textit{recusatio} literally; however, the ways that each receives and uses Statius’ body of poetry, not necessarily how each notices that Statius himself participates in composing \textit{recusationes}, is best thought of in \textit{recusatio}-like terms. Since the nature of Statius’ poems both mediates and exacerbates the tension between epic and non-epic forms of poetry, each poet-critic reacts according to his specific critical context. In other words, for Poliziano, Statius’ use of variety and erudition (especially in the \textit{Silvae}) champions a mutable sense of poetics that may be used to instruct. For Dryden, the very same characteristics highlight a lack of judgment about how to use recondite learning for instructing subsequent generations in how to compose heroic poetry. Here, then, is the crux: pedagogy. For both poet-critics, \textit{recusatio} is most instructive in Statian terms or with respect to Statius.

\textsuperscript{4} Nauta (2006) 21–2 provides a brief but critically accurate account of the use of \textit{recusatio} by early twentieth-century scholars, such as Lucas, Heinze, and Pasquali, as well as Fraenkel in the mid-twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{5} Lyne (1995) 32.

\textsuperscript{6} Nauta (2006) 23–6.

\textsuperscript{7} Nauta (2006) 37–9.