CHAPTER 34

Statius in an Ideological Climate

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The rediscovery of Statius’ Silvae in the fifteenth century created initial excitement among philologists, who welcomed a new work by this eminent Latin poet. Yet paradoxically that discovery led to a decline in Statius’ reputation. First the text was found to be difficult and obscure, in part because of the poor copy that Poggio Bracciolini had made and brought to Italy; it is only the past twenty years that have given us sound texts of the Silvae, thanks to Courtney and Shackleton Bailey and the work of commentators.1 Secondly, the Silvae were found to include poems praising Domitian, widely regarded as a tyrant even worse than Nero. In fact only seven of the twenty-seven of the Silvae published in Statius’ lifetime have to do with Domitian or his court; but their presence has overshadowed the rest of the poems. Statius’ Silvae, and by association the Thebaid, thus have been implicated in a negative way with politics from the start; Vessey, for instance, comments, “[Statius’] poetry reflects and reproduces the oppressive spirit of Domitian’s court.”2

Decadence of style and decadence of political regime have thus commonly been seen to go hand in hand in criticism of Statius. Although literary criticism over the past three decades, along with revisionary historical assessments of Domitian, have done much to challenge this negative perception of Statius and his poetry,3 stereotypes die hard and continue to be enshrined on library shelves in literary histories and standard works of criticism.4 In this chapter I will argue that despite the renewed appreciation of Statius’ poetry today, nonetheless his reputation still carries some of the burden of the political factionalism of the period of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries in Europe and the United States. His relegation till recently to a minor place in the Latin

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2 Vessey (1973) 13.

3 See, for instance, the revisionary history of Domitian’s reign by Jones (1992).

4 See the introduction to this volume, p. 2.
literary canon reflects in part the triumph of puritan and Republican ideology, in part the tendency of literary historians not to read the works they legislate about; traces of such peremptory dismissals still linger in the often minor place Statius can hold in our classroom curricula today. My focus will be mostly the *Silvae*, but I will discuss the *Thebaid* too, since Statius’ reputation is particularly closely intertwined with both works.

**Seventeenth-century England**

The first translator of Statius into English was Thomas Stephens (d. 1677); he also wrote a commentary on the Latin text of the *Silvae* and *Achilleid*. But Stephens chose to publish his translation of the first five books of the *Thebaid* at the wrong time, in 1648, at the end of the English civil war between the supporters of Charles I—the royalists—and the Puritans, who were supporters of parliamentary democracy. As Norbrook has shown, Thomas May’s translation of Lucan in 1627 demonstrates the politically partisan nature of translation at this time.5 But Stephens was on the wrong side of the civil war—he was a royalist.6 He was principal of the prestigious grammar school at Bury St. Edmunds near Cambridge, and in his preface he claims that the translation was intended for his pupils: “the translation was meditated, midst all the clamour and imployments of a publike Schoole . . . it was intended as a help to my Scholars, for understanding the Poet.”7 Thus, as Braund points out in her chapter for this volume, Stephens attempts to naturalize Statius’ Latin with his English translation and accompanying, basic notes.8

At the same time, there is an element of disingenuousness about Stephens’ claim that the translation is primarily a school text, since his is the first translation into English of the *Thebaid*. And this in itself is a major event. Moreover, the paratextual material and the shaping of the translation both practice a

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6 A retrospective, anonymous review of Stephens’ work published in *Gentleman’s Magazine* 33 (1850) 35–40 points out that Stephens, who was also a doctor of divinity, preached sermons hostile to Cromwell and the Puritans (though he was silent from 1642–1660, from the start of the civil war to the Restoration). On Stephens’ royalist beliefs and connections, see Mengelkoch (2010b).
7 Stephens (1648) *praef.* A4r. On the pedagogical career of Thomas Stephens, see Elliott (1963); for a brief account of his life and career see Dominik (2004).