A Literary Joke in Martial 9.65

nunc tibi Iuno favet, nunc te tua diligit Hebe;
nunc te si videat Nympha, remittet Hylan.

Martial 9.65.13-14

In epigram 9.65, one of a series of poems in which Martial discusses a newly built temple of Hercules on the Via Appia in which the cult statue of Hercules was given the features of the emperor Domitian, he compares Hercules to Domitian. The comparison serves to illustrate how, if Hercules had in reality resembled Domitian, his labours and other feats would have been far easier. The poem closes with the suggestion that the nymph Dryope would have returned Hylas to Hercules had she seen him with a Domitianic mien.1)

Martial alludes to a popular myth in Hellenistic and Latin poetry.2) Hylas was a beautiful young man and Hercules’ lover, and both sailed among Jason’s crew of Argonauts. Whilst in Mysia, Hylas went alone to a spring (either to fetch water or whilst hunting—versions differ) and there was seen by a nymph (or nymphs in the Hellenistic versions; the singular nymph is often named as Dryope in Latin versions of the story) who fell in love with the young man’s beauty and dragged him under the water. Hercules heard his lover’s cries and shouted Hylas’ name three times, but only heard a faint reply and, unable to find him, abandoned the Argonautic expedition.

There is good reason to suggest that the story of Hercules and Hylas has its origins in local cult which was adapted by Hellenistic poets for the purposes of aetiological poetry, and in particular that the triple cry of Hercules was a prominent feature of Hylas-cult.3) In Theocritus, the triple cry is emphasised by the repetition of τρίς:

1) On this poem generally, and connections between Domitian and Hercules, see Henriksén (1998, vol. 1, 32-3 and ad 9.64, 65, 101).
3) The suggestion is made by Gow (1950, ad Theoc. 13.58). The repetition in Theocritus is also an intertextual allusion to Iliad 11.462-3; see Van Erp Taalman Kip (1994, 165).
Virgil reflects elegantly on the Hellenistic version in *Eclogue* 6:

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his adiungit Hylan nautae quo fonte relictum 
clamassent, ut litus ‘Hyla, Hyla’ omne sonaret 

Verg. Ecl. 6.43-4
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Virgil includes Hylas’ name three times, but artfully only has Hercules cry the name twice, combining syntactical and metrical variation in these two lines.\(^4\)

His reworking of Hellenistic poetry established Hercules as giving a double cry as he searches for Hylas. Double repetition is marked by Propertius (*a dolor! ibat Hylas, ibat Hamadryasin, 1.20.32; cui procul Alcides iterat responsa, 1.20.49*) and twice replayed by Valerius Flaccus (*rursus Hylan et rursus Hylan per longa reclammat / avia, 3.596-7; Hylas, spes maxima bellis / pulcher Hylas, 3.183-4*).\(^5\)

Moreover, further evidence suggests that the Hylas myth rapidly became a commonplace in Latin literature (*Verg. G. 3.6, cui non dictus Hylas puer?, itself imitated with double repetition by Seneca Medea 648-9, Herculi magno puer inrepertus, / raptus, heu, tutas puer inter undas?*). What is more, the myth is closely associated and at times allusively intertwined with two similar narratives best known from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the stories of Echo and Narcissus (*Met. 3.339-510*) and Salmacis and Hermaphroditus (*Met. 4.274-388*).\(^6\)

The affinity between Ovid’s Narcissus and his own Hylas is exploited by Valerius Flaccus, who has Hylas distracted by his reflection in the pool and unaware of the nymph stalking him (*3.558-64*) and has Hercules confronted by echoing woods as he repeatedly shouts Hylas’ name:

\(^4\) See Clausen (1994, on 6.43-4); Wills (1996, 53-4). This particular detail is marked throughout classical poetry by variety and mutability: in Apollonius it is not Heracles but Polyphemus who hears Hylas’ cry, 1.1240.

\(^5\) For further instances of the repetition in Roman poetry, see the examples collected by Wills (1996, 54). One might read the repetition, *Hylas... Hylan*, Prop. 1.20.48, 52, as a further play on this theme.

\(^6\) All three myths involve beautiful boys, nymphs falling in love and shady pools. The myth of Echo is an obvious parallel for Hercules’ repeated cry and Salmacis pulls Hermaphroditus into her pool. For the interplay between Propertius, Ovid and Valerius Flaccus, see Heerink (2007, 607-13, 614-15).