

## Queer Consolation: Melior's Dead Boy in Statius' *Silvae* 2.1

This paper examines the consolatory poem in Statius' *Silvae* 2.1 as a “frame tale,” a way of seeing the social expectations for how grief and love between a man and a boy should be expressed. Written around 90 C.E., the poem consoles Atedius Melior for the loss of his beloved foster-son Glaucias, who died at the age of twelve. The rapport between Melior and Glaucias is doubly problematic from the standpoint of contemporary Roman morality, first because it extends from the paternal to the erotic, and second because, as the natural son of two freedmen, Glaucias is technically a freeborn male whether or not Melior adopted him. Initially depicted as a foster father/son relation, this man/boy rapport also encompasses an erotic dimension. To this amorous liaison, Statius alludes by mentioning Heracles and Apollo along with their respective paramours, Hyacinth and Hylas. While the myths are not told in any detail, they were widely known in antiquity. As examples, they perspicuously apply because, like Melior, both Heracles and Apollo lost the objects of their affections. Hyacinth was accidentally killed by Apollo's disk, while the nymphs snatched Hylas as he was fetching water. Exploiting the wide renown enjoyed by both myths, Statius relies on his allusion to convey the appropriate sense of empathy for Melior's loss.

At the same time, Statius hints that Melior's desire for the dead boy cannot be accommodated by the existing paradigm of the consolatory poem. A more blunt acknowledgment of Melior's erotic feelings would have been morally inappropriate in a consolatory poem, for it might have implicitly conveyed reproach instead of empathic participation in the addressee's grief. To be sure, Statius exhorts himself to weep along with Melior (35 *confer gemitus pariterque fleamus*). In fact, the reference to Apollo and Heracles as lovers of boys occurs together with other allusions to myth as elements of Statius' rhetorical strategy for consoling Melior.

Stattus expresses the tension between socially appropriate and personally intense feelings by framing the man-boy relationship within the existing literary/social paradigm of public consolation. In the first line, Glaucias is denoted as Melior's foster-son (*alumnus*) and, later on, Melior is referred to as the boy's foster-father (70 *altor*). Glaucias was the son of two of Melior's freedmen, whom Melior freed to benefit Glaucias and give him full freeborn status (77 *uterque parens atque in tua gaudia liber*). Stattus' emphasis on Glaucias' free status, and his insistence on the parent-son relationship, suggest that Melior must have adopted Glaucias to further benefit his pupil and spare him some of the legal handicaps from which freedmen normally suffered (Treggiari, *Roman Freedmen*, 229). Stattus' eulogy of Glaucias is also meant to praise his patron Melior. As praise is woven into consolation, Stattus mentions three foster father/son relationships from myth (Chiron/Achilles, Acoetes/Pallas, and Dictys/Perseus). These mythic references are to enforce Stattus' point that foster parenthood surpasses the natural bond because foster children are chosen and therefore dearer than one's kindred (*natos genuisse necesse est, / elegisse iuuat* 87-8). Yet the nature of the relation between Melior and Glaucias deviates from the merely parental.

The tension between the appropriate and the desired public display of consolation switches the frame from the loss suffered by a parent to that suffered by a lover. The implicitly erotic undertones between Melior and Glaucias' playful pleasantries (60-6) beg for greater vent; for a moment the poem climaxes into the erotic. Stattus mentions two homosexual couples from Greek myth (Apollo and Hyacinth; Hercules and Hylas) to allude somewhat subtly to the actual nature of the bond between Melior and his boy. At this point, Melior has been only half-consolated, as it were, because the mention of Hyacinth, Apollo, Hercules, and Hylas occurs around the center (112-13) of our 234-line-long poem. After the description of the deceased's death, Stattus begins his conclusion and final consolation of Melior's grief with Glaucias' arrival to the world beyond. Needless to say,

Glaucias' otherworldly life will unfold in Elysium, the paradise of the ancients. Finding there an old/new friend for Glaucias, Statius achieves closure: Melior should console himself with the knowledge that Glaucias will not spend his afterlife alone, for in Elysium he embraces Blaesus, a former beloved of Melior's, whom Glaucias recognized from the portrait over which Melior would weep. Any doubts of Melior's queerness are washed away in Statius' final acknowledgment of the bond between Melior and Blaesus.

Having reframed the situation, Statius breaks the paradigm of the consolatory poem in both content and form. In the tension between the socially appropriate and the intensely felt form of public consolation, we can see the elite's general understandings of sexuality, personal comportment, and public morality.