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An Insomniac's Lament: The End of Poetic Power in Statius' *Silvae* 5.4

In *Silvae* 5.4, the shortest and penultimate poem in the corpus, Statius complains about the lack of sleep which has been torturing him for a long period of time. This unusual poem has been examined by critics for the poet's mining of epic and elegiac motifs to produce an innovative hymn to *Somnus*. The purpose of the present study is to examine Statius' emphasis on poetic powerlessness by means of two methods: 1.) inter-(intra-)textual references to Virgil's Dido, Ovid's exile poetry, and Amphiaraus, the *vates* in the poet's own *Thebaid*; 2.) the position of the poem, inserted between two *epicedia*, compositions that epitomize the loss of the poet's father and son (*Silvae* 5.3 and 5.5). Not only does the author single out this composition as the penultimate poem of the collection, but he also indicates the termination of poetic inspiration to coincide with the end of the *Silvae* by means of a lament which Statius usually ascribes to female figures. The image of *Somnus* and his soporific power are loaded with infernal connotations, while the poet identifies the god with his own deceased father who, in a manner of *anabasis*, is unsuccessfully summoned by Statius.

Crimine quae merui quove errore: the opening two lines of *Silvae* 5.4 allude to Ovid's exile poetry, when the Augustan poet ponders on his immobilized status which ensues in his inability to produce (*Tristia* 2.1.109; 3.5.52; 3.6.26; 3.11.33-34). At the same time, however, Statius directly recalls the impasse faced by another *vates*, Amphiaraus, because of his unexpected demise. When Amphiaraus is swallowed by the earth and faces Dis, he proclaims to the king of the dead that he has not deserved to die (*crimine non ullosic merui de luce rapti*, *Thebaid* 8.101-2). Thus in the *Silvae*, Statius' introduction at once points to his own poetic powerlessness and lack of inspiration for subsequent compositions.

In *Silvae* 5.4, however, there is a twist, because Statius complains about his insomnia not only as Ovid or Amphiaraus do about their respective incapability but also by adopting Dido's persona from *Aeneid* 4. The contrast between the poet's lack of sleep and nature's tranquility (*tacet omne pecus*, *Silvae* 5.4.3-6) is borrowed from the parallel scene in the *Aeneid* (4.522-32). Statius as another Dido has succumbed to the power of grief for losing a beloved person. Only by appropriating a female stance can the poet bear the immense burden of lament, properly assigned to women (*Silvae* 5.3.64-72). This sharply contrasts with the poet's reaction at the end of the *Thebaid* (12.797-809), when Statius, unable to express the grief of the Argive women, rather chooses to end his epic. In *Silvae* 5.4, Statius adopts Dido's voice of unrest in order to express his discomfort concerning his powerless poetic status. In the second half of the poem, however, the poet accepts his fate: *unde ego sufficiam? non si mihi lumina mille* (*Silvae* 5.4.11). The phraseology recalls Statius' own claim in *Thebaid* 12.797, *non ego, centena si quis mea pectora laxet*. In the *Silvae*, his lack of inspiration corresponds to his inability to bewail his father's and son's demise and therefore his immediate abandonment of any further poetic activity.

Finally, the author identifies the god with his own father, when in the end of the previous poem he summons his parent from the Underworld *somni in imagine* (*Silvae* 5.3.289).

The loss of Statius' father results in the poet's bereavement of skills (*dedidici*, *Silvae* 5.3.7). Statius does not attempt a *katabasis*, like Aeneas, which would grant him a visit with his father but rather calls upon his parent to come up to him through the gate of true dreams (*Silvae* 5.3.288-89). Nevertheless, the father's identification with Somnus in 5.4 does not bode well for the continuation of the poet's pursuits.