

Thomas JENKINS

Pope Springs Eternal: Statius' "Celestial" Dedications

In her influential book on epistolarity, Janet Altman explores the role of self- and other-definition in epistolary discourse, how the "particularity of the *I-You*" relationship inherent in the epistolary form makes possible—even mandatory—a unique and revealing relationship between the writer and the addressee. Every writer constructs himself, one letter at a time, according to this particular relationship; in epistolary fiction, the presence of multiple addressees (one *I*, multiple *You*s), permits the revelation of a multifaceted *I*.

I suggest that the *You* in Statius's dedicatory epistles is no other than Statius, or, rather, the distinction between *You* and *I* dissolves when Statius praises exactly those characteristics of *You* that most resemble those of *I*. In attributing various literary qualities to his dedicatees, Statius dwells on those admirable facets which in fact redound to his own literary glory. For example, in the fourth epistle, Statius claims he has finally found a book that he can dedicate to Marcellus' sense of piety, quem pietati tuae dedicarem. Statius next launches into a reminiscence of his other books and claims that not one has opened without an invocation to the godhead, numen, of the emperor. It is now apparent that it is not Marcellus' sense of piety but Statius' which is at stake; the opening dedication raises the issue of the addressee's piety (*You*) only to dwell on the writer's own (*I*).

Other passages in the dedications likewise collapse the epistolary distinction between Statius and his dedicatee: the beginning of the third dedication, with its images of dissolving corporeality; the ending of the second dedication, with its convoluted triangle of debt and honor; and the first dedication's fulsome praise of Vospicus as the rescuer of Roman literature—a possible reference to Statius' own aspirations in that regard.

It is just this type of bloated hyperbole that Alexander Pope torpedoed in his delightfully wicked and insightful "On Dedications," in which the long-suffering author takes sure and deadly aim at the proliferation of 'Celestial' English dedicatory epistles. For Pope, all sycophantic dedications are, in essence, the author's "Dedication to Himself," a dedication that (as in the case of Statius) effectively twists the dedicatory epistle into a unique mode of self-presentation.