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VIOLENTILLA VICTA

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In *Silvae* 1.2, Statius presents a dazzling array of divine personages either in attendance at the wedding or otherwise involved in the planning of the marriage of Stella and Violentilla, including Apollo, Erato, Venus, and a host of Cupids. The interference of divine participants at the wedding of mortals sets Statius's epithalamium apart from those that preceded it and has encouraged Statian scholars to search beyond previous epithalamia for the primary models on which Statius based his poem. The highly allusive quality of Statius's writing has made it possible for scholars to argue plausibly for a host of models, both Latin and Greek, epic and lyric (Pederzani 1995). In fact, *Silvae* 1.2 seems to have more in common with Catullus's epyllion on the wedding of Peleus and Thetis (64) than with Catullus's more conventional wedding songs 61 and 62 (Vessey 1972.178). None of these arguments, however, has gone far enough to explain the function of the involvement of the gods in the poem, especially Venus and her Cupids in the center of *Silvae* 1.2. While the debt Statius's epic works owe to Apollonius's *Argonautica* has been acknowledged, the influence of the *Argonautica* on *Silvae* 1.2 has not been sufficiently recognized, especially to explain Venus's aid of Statius's patron Stella. Using the *Argonautica* as the primary model for his epithalamium, Statius himself surpasses his Hellenistic and neoteric predecessors with his novel wedding poem of epic scope.

A comparison of the structure of each poem reveals that in *Silvae* 1.2, Statius carefully places allusions to Apollonius's epic in order to position Stella and Violentilla in their own miniature *Argonautica*, replete with insurmountable labors and divine intervention. Statius casts Stella in the role of Jason, elevating the status of his patron's exploits by transforming Stella's pursuit of love and marriage into an epic quest. What is more, by depicting Stella as the darling of Apollo and Venus, Statius celebrates Stella's

own elegiac triumphs. Violentilla, in turn, is re-imagined as Medea, a virgin who has yet to submit to the yoke of love. As the power of Aphrodite brings Medea to live among civilized Greeks in the *Argonautica*, so Venus brings Violentilla under the civilizing yoke of Rome in *Silvae* 1.2. As Apollonius presents a sympathetic portrait of Medea's turbulent transformation from daughter of Aietes to wife of Jason, so Statius examines Violentilla's change from recalcitrant widow to subdued and virginal bride. However, Statius replaces the fiery arrow of Eros that led Medea to abandon homeland and family for the greater good of the Argonauts (*Arg.* 3.275–98) with a sensible talk from a pragmatic Venus who, as *pronuba* (a female attendant who conducts the bride to the groom), leads the Neapolitan Violentilla to marry and join the ranks of Roman women who have suffered in the name of Rome's greatness (*Silvae* 1.2.162–93).

Commentators have noted some of Statius's allusions in *Silvae* 1.2 to Apollonius's *Argonautica*, but without recognizing the epic framework Statius imposes on the poem (Pederzani 1995).¹ Statius announces his intention to follow an Apollonian blueprint in the second line of his epithalamium, invoking not the god of love, or of the wedding, or even the evening star, as previous writers of epithalamia had done, but Apollo. Apollonius begins his epic by invoking the god with his epithet Phoebus, whose oracle led Pelias to send Jason on his impossible mission. Statius, too, addresses Apollo with an epithet, Paean, asking to hear the cause of the god's presence in Rome. After the invocation to the god, Apollonius catalogs the semi-divine heroes sailing on the *Argo* (*Arg.* 1.23–233) and describes the preparations for sailing (*Arg.* 1.234–518). The seer Idmon reveals that the gods have decreed a favorable outcome for the *Argo*'s journey (*Arg.* 1.440–47). Statius, in turn, catalogs the divinities in attendance at the wedding (*Silvae* 1.2.1–23), describes the preparations for the ceremony (*Silvae* 1.2.3–49 *passim*), and then reveals that the wedding was decreed by the Parcae (*Silvae* 1.2.24–26). As Apollo is present throughout Jason's trials on the *Argo*, so he oversees Stella's romantic and poetic endeavors throughout *Silvae* 1.2.

Between invocations to Apollo and Erato, each poet recounts the labors undertaken by his hero. Apollonius, after calling upon Apollo and enumerating heroes and preparations, devotes Books 1 and 2 of the *Argonautica* to recounting the trials of the Argonauts as they strive to reach

1 Politian, in the fifteenth century, seems to have been the first to identify the allusion to Book 3 of the *Argonautica* when Statius invokes the Muse Erato at lines 1.2.46–49.

Colchis. Statius collapses Apollonius's first two books into the space of the first fifty lines of *Silvae* 1.2, enumerating the physical labors Stella would have faced to win Violentilla. Statius suggests that Stella's quest to win Violentilla's hand in marriage is the equal of the labors of Jason and his comrades, for Violentilla is worth the toils of Hercules, Jason, Pelops, Paris, and Tithonus (*Silvae* 1.2.38–45).

Taken by themselves, the allusions to Apollonius's invocation to Apollo and the recounting of heroic trials would not suffice to establish the Apollonian framework of the epithalamium. But Statius also alludes to the third book of the *Argonautica* when he invokes the Muse Erato at *Silvae* 1.2.46–50. Both authors ask Erato to instruct them how the pair came together (*Arg.* 3.1–5, *Silvae* 1.2.46–49):

εἰ δ' ἄγε νῦν, Ἑρατώ, παρά θ' ἵστασο καί μοι ἔνισπε
 ἔνθεν ὅπως ἐς Ἴωλκὸν ἀνήγαγε κῶας Ἰήσων
 Μηδείης ὑπ' ἔρωτι. σὺ γὰρ καὶ Κύπριδος αἶσαν
 ἔμπορες, ἀδμῆτας δὲ τεοῖς μελεδήμασι θέλγεις
 παρθενικάς· τῷ καί τοι ἐπήρατον οὔνομ' ἀνήπται.

Come now, Erato, stand by my side and tell me how Jason brought the fleece to Iolchos by the love of Medea. For you share in the power of Cypris and bewitch unwed maidens with your cares; for this reason the lovely name attaches to you. (author's trans.)

sed quae causa toros inopinaque gaudia uatis
 attulit? hic mecum, dum feruent agmine postes
 atriaque et multa pulsantur limina uirga,
 hic, Erato iucunda, doce.

But what was it that brought marriage and unlooked-for joys to our poet? Here with me, while entrances and halls seethe with the throng and doors are beaten with many a staff—here, delightful Erato, tell me true. (Shackleton Bailey trans.)

Virgil (*Aen.* 7.37–40) and Ovid (*Ars Am.* 2.15, *Fasti* 4.195–96) also invoke Erato, but these earlier Roman authors, even if alluding to Apollonius's invocation of Erato, are not asking the Muse to give the origins of a

love affair as does Statius. What separates Statius's invocation to Erato from those of previous Roman poets, and what connects it to Apollonius's, is that soon after both Apollonius and Statius request Erato's aid, they embark on a description of how the goddess of love came to aid the heroes Jason and Stella. In the *Argonautica*, Hera and Athena, coming to request Aphrodite's aid, find her alone in her bedchamber at her morning toilette (*Arg.* 3.43ff.); in the *Silvae*, it is also early morning in Venus's bedchamber (*Silvae* 1.2.51–53). In the *Argonautica*, Hera persuades Aphrodite to send Eros to aid Jason by recounting his services to her. In Statius's poem, one of a group of Amores persuades Venus to aid Statius's patron by enumerating Stella's services to her. Richard Hunter, in his commentary on Book 3 of the *Argonautica*, shows how Apollonius transformed Homer's story of the visit of Thetis to Hephaistos in Book 18 of the *Iliad*, mentioning both the morning ablutions of the gods and the recounting of services (1989.101). While it is true that most "epic visiting" among the gods may be traced ultimately to Homer, the very purpose of the epic visiting in *Silvae* 1.2—to enlist Venus's help in a love affair—recalls Apollonius rather than Homer.

Both Apollonius and Statius blame singular and plural Loves for vexing gods and men. When approached by the goddesses, Aphrodite briefly complains about the trouble her boy Eros causes, for he has even threatened the goddess herself (*Arg.* 3.90–99). Later in the poem, Apollonius blames plural Loves for Medea's torment (*Arg.* 3.452, 3.687, 3.765). Statius, too, describes a squadron of Cupids waiting for the least signal to cause trouble (*Silvae* 1.2.54–57). Like Apollonius, Statius also describes one lone Cupid to whom the case of Stella and Violentilla has been assigned (*Silvae* 1.2.61–102).

After the goddesses agree to ensnare the girls, both poems move to a description of the palaces in which the girls live. In each poem, in precisely the same order, the narrator describes the stonework of each house, the foliage within it, and the magical properties of the house. In Medea's house, we find grand columns and gates, vines covering the house, and four springs flowing: one flows with milk, one with wine, one with perfume, and one with hot water when the Pleiades set in November and with cold water when they rise in May (*Arg.* 3.215–27). Violentilla's house is covered with rare marbles, and countless columns support the ceilings; we hear, too, of the trees and fountains in the courtyard. Like Medea's fourth magical spring, Violentilla's house maintains temperatures contrary to nature, staying cool during the time of the Dog Star, Sirius, and warm during mid winter (*Silvae* 1.2.147–57). In addition, while a god (Hephaestus) built

Aietes' palace (*Arg.* 3.228–29), Violentilla's home is said to be worthy of one (Venus) (*Silvae* 1.2.147).

There should be no question now about the significance of the detail Statius includes in his description of Violentilla's house. Coupled with Statius's previously unrecognized allusions to Apollonius's invocation to Apollo and the recounting of labors at the beginning of the poem, the allusion to the intervention of Aphrodite in the *Argonautica*—positioned between the invocation to Erato and the description of the fantastic home of Violentilla—leaves no doubt that Statius based his tale of the romance of Stella and Violentilla on the love affair of Jason and Medea. Therefore, Statius's use of myth is elevated from the scattered allusions discovered by previous Statian scholars to an actual mythic framework.

Lest there be doubt that Stella is meant to represent a new and improved Jason, it is worth noting that when Violentilla assents to the marriage, Statius likens Stella's success to the safe return from a perilous journey at sea: Statius joyously announces that Stella has reached the end of difficult labors and has gained a safe haven (*Silvae* 1.2.201–03). Perhaps more important is Stella's name itself, "the star." Apollonius famously likens Jason to stars and surrounds him with light imagery. Jason is first likened to the evening star, Hesperus, whom Apollonius connects to unwed maidens and marriage (*Arg.* 1.774–81) and to whom Catullus will give prominence in his wedding poem 62; later, Jason is likened to the star Sirius (*Arg.* 3.957). Because Apollonius also connects Medea and her emotions to light—for example, when he describes Medea's heart enflamed with love at *Argonautica* 3.291–95—we may better understand the significance of the anaphora at *Silvae* 1.2.197–98, when Statius gives prominence to Stella's Greek pseudonym for Violentilla, Asteris. While Violentilla's nickname signifies Stella's own clever play on words as he translates his name into the Greek, it also seems sensible to connect this reference to the Apollonian model.

It is notable that Violentilla is more reluctant than the average blushing bride. Many have claimed—rightly—that Statius's portrayal of the reluctant Violentilla owes its inspiration to the portrayal of the *dura puella* in elegiac poetry (Newmyer 1979.31, Verstraete 1983.198, Zeiner-Carmichael in this volume). But elegiac *puellae* are not normally paid visits by Venus who convinces them to marry. The fusion of divine intervention and elegiac *duritia* makes sense, however, if we view Violentilla's fantastic reluctance in light of Book 3 of the *Argonautica*. For truly, how else can we explain that the goddess of romantic love must be summoned to convince a *dura puella* to get married? In portraying Violentilla as the *dura puella*,

Statius acknowledges his patron Stella's accomplishments as an elegist, while at the same time, writing in hexameters and using Apollonius as a model, Statius shows that he can create a new type of epithalamium that is at once personal and epicizing.

We are left with the question of why Statius would describe his patron's successful romance in terms of the love affair between Jason and Medea, a love that not only did not endure, but also ended in tragedy. If, as I am suggesting, Statius's audience was meant to recognize allusions to the myth, we might then ask whether that audience would have been at all disturbed by the implicit comparison between Medea and Violentilla.

Part of the answer lies in the way in which Statius fulfills the specifications set forth by rhetoricians for epithalamia, yet also pays homage to the celebration of ill-starred lovers featured in earlier wedding songs. Far from being shunned by Greek and Roman poets, weddings of couples whose love would eventually turn sour were often commemorated in song. Earlier Greek poets sang of doomed couples—Sappho and Theocritus celebrated the mythological weddings of Hector and Andromache, and Menelaus and Helen, respectively. But it was certainly Apollonius's charming portrait of the blossoming romance between Jason and Medea that Statius's audience was meant to recall, not the bloody resolution of their marital woes made famous by Euripides and Seneca. Moreover, Graham Zanker argues that one primary characteristic of Hellenistic literature and visual art is a flouting of the traditions of art; when presenting new works, Hellenistic artists expected their audiences to both recognize the traditions and appreciate their reworking (2004.145). Clearly Statius, with his circle of friends that included the most learned men of his day, expected his audience to appreciate his novel reworking of the tale of the Argo.

It is true that Statius's audience may not have been disturbed by his choice of model, but by comparing Medea and Violentilla, Statius was, in effect, likening his patron's fiancée to a witch. Likening a bride to a famous virgin seems a sensible choice, but why Medea? Here we may consider Statius's unique situation. If Statius is to create a successful epithalamium, he must at least show that the wedding marks a change in status of one of the partners. Statius cannot focus on Violentilla's sexual status, so he focuses on her social status. Carole Newlands has recently shown that Statius achieves his characterization of Violentilla partly through his description of her house (2002.100). Stately, rich, and adorned, Violentilla's house is the material expression of the wealth, status, and even independence and power of its owner. In its gleaming perfection, the house also

reflects Violentilla's chastity. Showing Violentilla alone in her mansion and likening her to Medea, Statius cleverly presents us with a Violentilla who is altogether too independent—and in need of Stella's control.

I have argued that Statius's portrait of the love of Stella and Violentilla was informed by the *Argonautica*. But Statius is also careful to flesh out this Apollonian skeleton with additional references to Greek and Roman myth, showing Violentilla living in her own magical Greek world that is in need of Romanization. Statius carefully casts Violentilla's transition from independence to marriage in terms of a metamorphosis: from a creature of Greek myth, Violentilla becomes a paragon of Roman virtue. Statius is careful to assert that by the time the goddess Venus has persuaded Violentilla to marry, and dawn breaks on the wedding day, Violentilla is no longer wild; she is more chaste and perfect than famous virgins of Roman history.

The number of references to mythological characters to whom Stella and Violentilla are compared may seem vast and haphazard, but there is method and meaning in Statius's arrangement. As we have seen, after naming the gods in attendance at the wedding, Statius's first mention of Greek myth comes just as he is about to enlist the help of Erato to sing the tale of Stella's success with the intervention of Venus. Statius, addressing Stella, assures him that the nearly unattainable hand of Violentilla was worth all he suffered—even worth the toils of Hercules, and Jason, and Pelops; likewise, Violentilla is a more worthy prize than Helen or Aurora (*Silvae* 1.2.38–45). Statius then turns to Erato, and we are whisked away to the charming bedroom of Venus, where a bold Cupid recounts the sufferings of Stella to enlist Venus's help on Stella's behalf. Cupid asserts that Stella has worked harder than Hippomenes and Leander, all in the name of worship of Venus (*Silvae* 1.2.85–90). Venus's reply to the Cupid hardly mentions Stella. Instead, she lists the charms of Violentilla, whose beauty is so rapturous that she would have been snatched up by amorous deities or heroes had they spied her. Venus exclaims that Violentilla surpasses in excellence Daphne, Ariadne, and all the amours of Jupiter (*Silvae* 1.2.130–36).

Venus leaves to visit Violentilla, whom she finds in a magical house lavishly decorated with exotic, foreign marbles. Venus convinces Violentilla to marry with threats of Violentilla's youth and beauty about to fade, and many words of praise for Stella, including future government offices. The role of *pronuba*, anyone could remark, is a strange role for Venus; we might find scores of examples of Venus inspiring mortals to love, but not to marry. Venus ends her harangue with the not very romantic vision of gods and humans who suffered in the name of founding Rome—Venus included

(*Silvae* 1.2.188–93). Venus herself had to mate with Anchises, Rhea Silvia with Mars. Conspicuously absent in the goddess's speech is any mention of love or happy marriage. Venus's admonitions to Violentilla suggest that sex and marriage are duties for women, not pleasures.

When Violentilla assents to the wedding, Stella is happier than Paris or Peleus welcoming their brides, Helen and Thetis (*Silvae* 1.2.213–17). The wedding day goes forward with the gods as guests. Of the wedding night, we hear only that Violentilla was as lovely as Rhea Silvia, Lavinia, and Claudia (*Silvae* 1.2.242–46). Stella is exultant, Violentilla is subdued; if Violentilla experiences any emotion, we do not learn of it. The final image we are left with is that of Stella as a successful Greek lover and Violentilla more perfect than famous Roman virgins.

Statius cannot present Violentilla as the ideal virginal Roman bride—she isn't. Statius attempts instead to endow Violentilla with other outward signs of maidenhood known to prior poets. Violentilla's independence, not her physical virginity, must be overmastered by Stella. Statius, playing with his audience's expectations of the conventions of epithalamia, inserts subtle tension into his characterization of Violentilla in order to give Stella his own wild filly to master. Before the wedding, Violentilla seems to be *sui iuris*—at least, her parents are never mentioned. Friedrich Vollmer notes in his commentary that the absence of Violentilla's parents is "curious," since praise of a marrying couple's parents was common in epithalamium. He suggests that her parents were absent because they were perhaps dead or not needed at a second wedding (1898.250). Readers know only that Violentilla lives in a magical house all alone and is likened to the woodland Daphne in Thessaly, the crafty, Medea-like Ariadne, and, finally, the women for whom Jupiter makes his own magical transformations. Yet after Venus lists those brave souls (including herself) who suffered to make sure the Roman race replenished itself, and by the time Stella has won and the couple is finally together, Violentilla is no longer the wild girl of Greek myth. She is a lovely Roman virgin who is ready to bear children for Rome. Having been overmastered by Venus and Stella, Violentilla is tamed.

Michael Roberts (1989.324–27) argues that Statius uses passages of myth lightheartedly to cast doubts on Violentilla's chastity and Stella's fidelity. For example, he shows that the women to whom Violentilla is likened are not always paragons of conjugal virtue (Venus, Helen) or are those whose chastity is called into question (Rhea Silvia, Lavinia, Claudia). Roberts suggests that Statius's treatment of myth "reflects the sophisticated flouting of conventional morality . . . that must have characterized the image

Stella presented to the world in his poetry,” concluding that *Silvae* 1.2 has an “insistently non-serious tone.”

While Roberts argues that Stella and Violentilla were “scarcely a conventional married couple” (1989.325), I suggest that Statius’s epithalamium is especially interesting because it is the first Roman epithalamium that seems to reflect aspects of actual Roman social practice. While Catullus’s epithalamium (61) celebrates an ideal bride who comes to her husband a virgin, historical and epigraphic sources show that, among the Romans, remarriage was not uncommon. While Catullus’s epithalamium focuses on the changes that both bride and groom will undergo, Roman legal texts suggest that a wedding and marriage did not mark any particular change in status for a man, social or legal. For a woman, however—remarrying or not—the change brought by a wedding would be vast. Statius examines this change for Violentilla in his poem. Stella seems never to leave the world of Greek mythology; in fact, he is last mentioned alongside adulterous Paris and Thessalian Peleus. Clearly Stella does not need to be transformed by Venus, and perhaps the sly implication is that he will abandon neither his poetic nor amorous pursuits.

As for Statius himself, he vies poetically with his Hellenistic and Roman neoteric predecessors as well as his Flavian counterparts, creating a wholly new approach to epithalamia that will become a model for later poets. Working within the generic constraints of the epithalamium, Statius celebrates the epic love of Stella and Violentilla.

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