One of the aspects of classical literature that makes the field fascinating to study is the practice of all ancient poets intentionally alluding to or imitating their predecessors or contemporaries. This phenomenon was a staple of the craft of writing Latin poetry and a characteristic that in some ways separates classical works from more modern creative literature. In recent times, the literary artist has looked to break with the molds constructed by previous writers and often does not explicitly allude to others work with any of the frequency that a classical author would. The referencing of a previous or contemporary author’s work in Latin poetry reveals the literature to be part of a continuum, in which imitation and a reworking with alterations of previous poetry is looked on favorably when cleverly executed. Because this practice was so widespread, it means that the reader is often times not only reading one text, but is also reading certain episodes “through” similar or imitated episodes composed before in previous works, which adds to that episode’s meaning and sometimes allows a deeper interpretation of what the poet was attempting to convey in the passage.
An example will help to illustrate this point. This instance is taken from the epic poem *Punica*, of Silius Italicus (ca. 28 – ca. 103) who was a Roman orator and poet, and an avid devotee of the poet Virgil (October 15, 70 BC – September 21, 19 BC). The *Punica*, which tells the story of Rome’s eventual victory in the Hannibalic War, contains within it many allusions to the poetry of Virgil, especially, and appropriately, his *Aeneid*, which tells of Rome’s foundation. In book 7 of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, he embarks on a catalogue of Latin warriors, who will soon begin fighting against Aeneas and his band of Trojans. In lines 7.750-7.760, Virgil describes the warrior-priest Umbro, a creation of the poet, from the Marruvian race. Virgil relates that, even given his skills, Umbro will not be able to heal his own wound delivered from a Trojan spear, nor will either his charms or the herbs he has obtained from the Marsian Hills be able to save him from death. Umbro is helpless, despite his abilities, and is destined to die. Virgil, in this passage, describes the mourning pastoral countryside. The landscape mourns for Umbro, as the war between the Latins and the Trojans will lead to the subsuming of the Latins into the Roman race, and the end of their freedom over the land.\(^1\)

\(^1\) This passage is analyzed extensively in Parry (1963) and Putnam
For you Angitia’s grove wept, for you Fucinus’ glassy wave, for you the limpid lakes!

*te nemus Angitiae, uitrea te Fucinus unda,*

*te liquidi fleuere lacus* (7.759-7.760).  

In book 14 of the *Punica*, Silius mirrors this episode when he describes a large naval battle off the coast of Sicily between the Romans and the Sicilian allies of Carthage. One of the combatants in this engagement is a certain Podaetus, a creation of Silius, fighting for the Carthaginian side, and a native of the Aeolian Islands off the coast of Sicily. Silius makes it clear that Podaetus is still immature in experience and not yet prepared to achieve great success in battle (14.493-14.494). The youth has already distinguished himself in this conflict and now wishes to kill the renowned Roman general, Marcellus, and take his armor as spoils of war (14.503-14.504). Silius lists the youth’s various skills, as Virgil states Umbro’s magical powers (7.750-7.755). Silius relates Podaetus’ feats in rapid succession, emphasizing his ability to succeed in varied challenges, such as throwing the discus and javelin along with running and leaping. In each attribute, Podaetus possesses superior skill (14.505-509). Silius laments that

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(1995) 121-134.

2 Text and translation are from Fairclough (2002).
Podaeus could have attained a great amount of distinction in affairs not involving warfare or bloodshed. Podaeus is then killed by a thrown spear and falls into the sea. “When he fell and the fatal weapon sank him beneath the wave and cheated his sea-tossed bones of a grave in Syracuse, he was mourned by the straights and the rocks of the Cyclopes; Cyane and the river Anapus and Ortygian Arethusa wept for him.”

ubi labentem pepulerunt tela sub undas,
ossa Syracosio fraudatum naufraga busto,
fleuerunt freta, fleuerunt Cyclopa saxa

Podaeus, in these lines, is a passive agent, as the spears (tela) cast by an unidentified individual strike (pepulerunt) him dead, despite his prayers to the gods to grant him a victory in single combat (14. 502-14.503). The skills and powers of Umbro and Podaeus cannot save them from death. Even though both characters cannot prevent their demise, the lands are able to actively mourn them. These lines also mirror the lines of Virgil describing the landscape. Silius, just as Vigil does, employs the verb fleo (to cry), using it twice to Virgil’s once. Virgil, as was seen

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3 Text and translation are from Duff (1934).
above, delayed the verb for effect, whereas Silius places the verb (*fleuerunt*) in a prominent position as the first word in line 14.514, and when added to the repetition of the verb and the assonance of the final vowels in this line, serves to intensify the emotions of mourning taking place.

The syntactic structure of these passages is also alike, as each passage is one sentence long and three clauses are added on to one another, emphasizing the degree of the sorrow of the landscapes being identified. Virgil includes three instances of the pronoun *te* (*you*) in these lines, giving prominence to the character of Umbro, whereas Silius achieves a similar emphasis by employing the conjunction *et* (*and*) thrice in one line, piling on the locations grieving. Both Virgil and Silius begin with a geographical location on land, with Virgil using a grove and Silius, the island rocks. Then, each author uses aquatic proper names, with Virgil employing two lakes and Silius outdoing him in terms of numbers by including a river and two springs. Silius also employs geographical and mythological details about Sicily, such as mentioning the spring Cyane (named after an eponymous Sicilian nymph) and the local goddess Arethusa, just as Virgil mentions that Angitia, a Marsian goddess, mourns Umbro. Podaetus, here, is mourned by his native land, Sicily, just as Umbro is
lamented by Italy in the passage from the *Aeneid*. Silius highlights this fact in line 14.513, stating that the shipwrecked bones of Podaetus are cheated from a grave in Syracuse. Silius expresses this fact poetically by separating the bones (*ossa*) from the tomb (*busto*), putting *ossa* as the first word in the line and *busto* as the last. Podaetus’ body is separated from its home, which is one reason the Sicilian land laments his death. However, another cause is that the death of this one youth may indicate the multitude of deaths still to come on Sicilian soil during the Hannibalic War and this destructive loss of young lives. Silius laments in the preceding lines: “There was enough, quite enough, of glory and praise to be won in bloodless strife” (*sat prorsus, sat erat decoris discrimine tuto, / sat laudis*, (14.510-14.511). In addition, in the aftermath of the Second Punic War, just as after the Latin War between the Trojans and Italians, the Sicilian allies of the Carthaginians, who had revolted in support of Hannibal, are harshly disciplined and are permanently put under the Roman yoke. After the war, Sicily is held firmly in the Roman sphere and any independence, which the Sicilians may have had before under their own king, Hiero II of Syracuse, who died in 215 BC, is at an end.
Silius uses this passage in a similar way to Virgil. The landscape of Sicily mourning Podaetus’ death indicates the continuous expansion of the Roman nation as it takes over peoples, expanding across the Italian peninsula. When a reader of Silius reads this passage, the Virgilian passage is already present in his understanding and the actions of the mourning Sicilian landscape work in conjunction with the mourning Italian landscape to form a pattern of Roman conquest over time, originally taking place in Aeneas’ time and continuing into the period of Scipio and Hannibal. However, this process also represents the decline of certain ancestral cultures, such as the local deities mentioned by both poets whom Rome naturally subsumes over time. The allusion to Virgil in Silius makes his passage more profound as it operates on multiple levels, heightening the loss of Podaetus, which Silius tacitly reveals is part of a continuing development of Roman expansion with positive and negative repercussions. Silius observes that Aeneas’ victory over the Latins only started the subjugation of peoples to be put under Roman rule. This is one example from innumerable others, even just in Silius, which serves to demonstrate why reading any classical work is by nature comparative with other authors in a way that a modern text might not be understood.
Bibliography


