PREJUDICE AND THE PUNICA: SILIUS ITALICUS—
A REASSESSMENT

by K.O. Matier
(Rhodes University, Grahamstown)

'Scriebat carmina maiore cura quam ingenio'. 1 Critics, ancient and modern, have seized on this remark by Pliny, and it has practically become Silius' epitaph.

One of the most hostile critics of Silius in the 16th century was Julius Caesar Scaliger, who was probably responsible for much of the odium which the poet often incurs. Scaliger says of Silius: 'quam equidem postremum bonorum poetarum existimo. quin ne poetam quidem. non nervos, non numeros, non spiritum habet. adeo vero ab omni venere alienus est, ut nullus invenustior sit.' 2

The 18th century commentary by Ernesti 3 was very damaging to the reputation of Silius. Ruperti sprang to the poet's defence shortly afterwards, 4 but the damage had been done.

The hostility and malice of most modern English critics towards Silius is beyond belief. The opinion of Mackail is typical: 'His Punic War may fairly contend for the distinction of being the worst epic ever written; and its author is the most striking example in Latin literature of the incorrigible amateur ... Without any invention or constructive power of his own, Silius copies with tasteless pedantry all the outworn traditions of the heroic epic.' 5 This view is supported by Butler, 6 Summers, 7 Wight Duff, 8 Rose, 9 Laidlaw 10 and Sherwin-White. 11 The strictures of Macaulay have also had their effect, especially in the English-speaking world. 12 Silius does not even rate a chapter in one of the most recent works on Silver Latin. But he is mentioned, contumeliae causa, in the chapter on Martial: 'The desire to flatter would seem to have warped Martial's keen judgment as a literary critic when he praises Silius Italicus, the writer of "the worst epic ever written", as a great author.' 13

It should hardly be necessary to state that such sweeping, subjective statements are unworthy of the name of scholarship. I am not alone in suspecting that many of them are based on preconceived prejudices rather than a detailed study of the Punica with an open mind. In his review of von Albrecht's book, 14 Bassett makes the telling point: 'There is a philosophical or ethical depth to the Punica which even professional Latinists have missed because they have never read much of the poem but rather accepted the tralatician adverse comments in the histories of Latin literature.' 15

It is impossible to reply in detail here to all the criticisms levelled against the Punica. Much of the poem may fairly be labelled tedious, especially the gruesome details of battle scenes. To sustain the reader's interest for all of 12,202 lines would have required the poetic genius of a Virgil. I refer here specifically to the following two points.

1. "Silius' lack of originality." The poet is often accused of slavish imitation
of Livy and Virgil in particular. But Silius shows great originality in the adaptation of historical, geographical and poetic material which he proceeded to remould in his own way. His selection of the Second Punic War as the setting for his epic was in itself a departure from Virgil. In any case, Silius’ dependence on Virgil must be seen in the right perspective. Criticism of the *Punica* has suffered most up to now from the fact that if anybody looked on the poem primarily as a work of art, he tried to understand it ‘aus sich selbst heraus’. Von Albrecht has shown that although the *Punica* has to be seen in relation to its predecessors, even when Silius is closely adhering to his model Virgil, he nevertheless uncompromisingly pursues his own basic motives. His speeches give clear evidence of his own training as an orator. Martial tells us that Silius practised as an advocate. Silius’ use of his source material would have been readily understood by an ancient reader, whose definition of originality was very different from that of the critics I have cited. Housman had such critics in mind when he scathingly referred to Englishmen who flattered themselves that the literary tastes of the Romans were identical with their own: ‘Communion with the ancients is purchaseable at no cheaper rate than the kingdom of heaven; we must be born again. But to be born again is a process exceedingly repugnant to all right-minded Englishmen. I believe they think it improper, and they have a strong and well-grounded suspicion that it is arduous. They would much rather retain the prevalent opinion that the secret of the classical spirit is open to anyone who has a fervent admiration for the second-best parts of Tennyson.’

2. ‘Silius’ introduction of the gods into the *Punica* is ludicrous’. Again, one may well ask ‘ludicrous to whom’? Certainly not to a Roman of Silius’ own time, to whom the events of the Second Punic War were sufficiently remote to make such a device the most natural thing in the world in an epic poem. Silius was dealing with history to be sure but it was the history of the earlier and more shadowy days. Paulus and Varro and Scipio and Hannibal lived and died almost three centuries before the day of their chronicler and many a myth had gathered round them in the interim. The gods are quite all right, the critics tell us; they are not impossible at the battle of Lake Regillus. Where then shall we draw the line? An epic poet of today writing the history of Jeanne d’Arc would hardly venture to leave out the heavenly voices.

Some modern scholars at least are prepared to give credit where credit is due. Von Albrecht, as we have seen, is one. Bruère is another: ‘His poetic talent is mediocre, but he knows how to make the most of it; and his resourceful adaptations of Ovid . . . go far toward making the *Punica* the most readable of the post-Augustan Latin epic poems.’

I now propose to examine the historical sources of Silius, with particular reference to *Punica* book 11. The subject has been investigated in general by Klotz who shows that it was commonly held by older scholars such as Ernesti, Ruperti and others that Silius depended mainly on Livy. The
only opposition to this general view came from Heynacher who tried to prove that Silius did not use Livy but an older annalistic source which celebrated the glory of Fabius Cunctator in particular. Bauer believed that Livy was used by Silius, whose only other source was Ennius. Nicol also holds that Livy was Silius' main historical source. The main weakness of Nicol is that he refuses to allow Silius any originality whatsoever. Nor does he consider the possibility of Silius having used a common annalistic source where similarities of phrase do occur. In Book 11 the evidence suggests that Silius did use Livy directly at times while making a poetic adaptation of what he found in Livy; at other times he may have used a source in common with Livy. On other occasions I think that Silius has not used Livy at all.

HISTORICAL SOURCES OF PUNICA BOOK 11

1–27: The peoples who revolted from Rome and went over to Hannibal. The list in Silius is very similar to that given by Livy (22.61.11–12). Silius has Samnis, Bruttii, Apulus, Hirpini, Atella, Calatia, Tarentum, Croton, Locri, Maior Graecia and Celtic. In Livy we find Samnites, Bruttii, Apulum pars, Hirpini, Atellani, Calatini, Tarentini, Crotonienses, Locri, Graecorum omnis ferme ora and Cisalpini omnes Galli. In addition, Livy mentions three tribes which do not occur in Silius: Lucani, Uzentini and Metapontini. There are two possible explanations: 1. These names did not occur in the source used by Silius. 2. Uzentini and Metapontini were less convenient metrically (they could not be put into the same hexameter line). Apart from this passage in Livy, the only other instance of Uzentini cited by Pauly-Wissowa is Livy 27.40.10 where the text is corrupt. Only three other instances of Metapontini are cited. Nor do these names occur in Swanson.

No definite conclusions can be reached from a comparison of the list in Silius with that in Livy. Silius could have used Livy himself, a source used by Livy, a source which used Livy, or a source unrelated to Livy.

28–54: The luxury and depravity of Capua. There are some very slight similarities with Livy (23.2.1 and 23.4.5), e.g. line 33 'luxus et insanis nutrita ignavia austris.' Livy has 'Inde Capuam flectit iter, luxuriantem longa felicitate et indulgentia' and 'ut nec libi̇dîni modus esset.' But these very slight similarities afford no evidence that Silius is following Livy here. In any case, the luxury of Capua was proverbial as was the story that Hannibal and his men were ruined by the winter of 216 BC spent in Capua. Hayward calls the episode in Livy 'a ridiculous annalistic fable.' The evidence of Polybius makes it quite plain that all through the winter and spring, the two armies remained in camps opposite each other and it was not until the season was advanced enough for them to get supplies from the year's crops that Hannibal moved his forces out of camp near Geronium.

55–64: Pacuvius works on the minds of the Capuans to demand one of the consulships at Rome. Livy's account (23.2–4) is very different and there is no
proof that Silius has used Livy at all. The only similarity is that the name Pacuvius is common to both accounts.

65–72: Virrius leads the delegation to Rome. Again the account in Livy (23.5–6) is very different and there is no evidence that Silius is using Livy.

73–87: The speech of Torquatus. Silius says that Torquatus rivalled his noble ancestor in the stern morality of his countenance. Torquatus finds it hard to believe that the Capuans could have dared to demand one of the consulships and reminds the delegation of the fate of the Latins when they made a similar request. Silius also records speeches by Fabius (90–97), Marcellus (100–109) and Fulvius (116–120). Only Fabius is mentioned by Livy.

At this point it is necessary to re-examine the whole episode of the Capuan demand for a share in the consulship in the light of the possible sources which Silius could have used. These are (i) the variant in Livy (23.6.6–8), (ii) the story in Livy about the proposal to grant Roman citizenship to selected senators from each of the Latin communities (23.22.4–9), (iii) the story of the Latin demand for one of the two consulships in 340 BC (Livy 8.5.1–8.6.7), and (iv) Valerius Maximus (6.4.1) who mentions a Capuan demand for a share in the consulship.

(i) The variant in Livy 23.6.6–8: Similarities with Silius:
1. The delegation was sent to Rome with the demand that one of the two consuls should be a Campanian.
2. The demand was met with indignation.

Differences between Livy and Silius:
1. Silius says that the senate met in the temple (lines 72, 103, 118–119). According to Livy, the envoys were expelled from the Curia.
2. There is no mention in Silius of a lictor being sent to escort the delegation out of the city and ordering them to remain outside Roman territory for that day.
3. The variant in Livy has no speeches by Torquatus, Fabius, Marcellus and Fulvius.

(ii) Livy 23.22.4–9: Similarities with Silius:
1. There was indignation in the senate at Rome.
2. Torquatus refers to his descent from the consul of old.
3. Fabius opposes the proposal and refers to its shamelessness.
4. The date of both events is 216 BC.

Differences between Livy and Silius:
1. In Livy, the proposal is introduced by Spurius Carvilius and refers to the granting of Roman citizenship to two selected senators from each of the Latin communities. Silius refers to a Capuan demand for one of the two consulships at Rome.
2. In Livy, Torquatus the consul of 340 BC is said to have threatened to kill with his own hand any Latin he saw in the senate-house. This is not in Silius.
(iii) Livy 8.5.1-8.6.7: Similarities with Silius:
1. The senate met in a temple.
2. The anger of Torquatus is common to both accounts.

Differences between Livy and Silius:
1. Silius does not make Torquatus threaten to kill with his own hand any Latin he might see in the Curia.
2. Livy says that the people were so enraged by the consul's words that the envoys owed their protection more to the care of the magistrates than to the law of nations. This is not in Silius.

(iv) Valerius Maximus 6.4.1
Valerius records that after the disaster at Cannae a majority of the Roman senate resolved that leading men of Latium should be elected to the Roman senate to take the place of Romans. Annius, a Campanian, insisted moreover that one consul should be elected from Capua. Torquatus then threatened to kill any of the allies who dared to express an opinion in the Roman senate.

Similarities with Silius:
1. The Campanian demand that one of the consuls should come from Capua.
2. The indignation of Torquatus.

Differences between Valerius and Silius:
1. Silius says nothing about the proposal to elect the leading men of Latium to the Roman senate.
2. Silius does not mention an explicit threat by Torquatus to kill any of the allies who dared to express an opinion in the senate. But Torquatus does remind the Capuan delegation of the fate of the Latins when they made a similar request.

Conclusions:
1. The most striking verbal similarities occur in the passages of Livy and Valerius. This would point to a common source for their account of the proposal to enfranchise the Latins in 216 BC.
2. The main difference between Livy and Valerius is that the latter adds one sentence about the Capuan demand for one of the consulships. Was Valerius using a source different from Livy at this point? Or did Livy reject the Capuan demand as being irrelevant to the context in which a proposal to enfranchise the Latins was being discussed?
3. The verbal similarities between Silius and Livy are not very striking and they do not postulate a direct use of Livy by Silius. On the contrary, the evidence points to a source other than Livy in which Silius found an account of the Capuan demand for the consulship.
4. It is significant that Valerius devotes only one sentence to this demand, while Silius writes about it at some length. This could mean that Silius and Valerius used a different source. But it could also mean that Silius is showing some poetic originality by transferring the speeches of Torquatus and Fabius
from the context of the Latins to the Capuans. It is quite likely that he has invented the speeches of Fulvius and Marcellus about whom Livy and Valerius are silent. Capua plays an important part in Book II and it is perfectly natural for Silius the poet and rhetorician to have invented speeches which he considered suitable for the occasion. Marcellus was one of the consuls of 214 BC, and Fulvius later besieged Capua in 211 BC along with his colleague Appius Claudius. There is also the significant statement by Silius in line 124:

‘cum pia Campano gaudebit consule Roma.’

It is clear that Silius is referring to a consul from Capua at the time of Nero. Klotz gives his name as T. Clodius Eprius Marcellus. This would explain the prominence given to this episode by Silius.

5. Livy’s rejection of the authenticity of the Capuan demand in 216 BC on the grounds that a suspiciously similar demand was once made by the Latins is interesting but open to question. It would not have been difficult to project the proposal of 216 BC to enfranchise the Latins into the past and to make it a Latin demand for the consulship in 340 BC, especially as the main opponent in each case was a Torquatus.

129–154: The reaction at Capua to Virrius’ account of his embassy to Rome. This is not in Livy. Silius may have taken these details from some annalist, possibly using the same source as Valerius. But he could well have invented them as they are a natural continuation of the earlier account of the Capuan delegation to Rome.

155–189 and 194–200: The speeches of Decius. There is no exact counterpart in Livy to these speeches. Livy reports briefly in the third person (23.7.4–6) but he does record a speech by Decius later (23.10.7) which could have influenced Silius. It is quite likely that these speeches were invented by Silius. They are certainly evidence of his rhetorical training. There is a deliberate play on Decius and decus (158, 169, 197). The tag in lines 186–188 about grudging Nature and the boon of death was a Stoic commonplace and along with other evidence in the Punica points to the conclusion that Silius himself was a Stoic.

201–258: Decius and Hannibal. Livy describes relations between Decius and Hannibal at 23.7.7 ff. and 23.10. Livy’s account is similar to Silius’ in several respects:

1. After Decius made a speech, he was summoned to appear before Hannibal.
2. Decius did not shut himself up at home in Capua but strolled around as if he had nothing to worry about.
3. Chains were put on Decius and he was taken to Hannibal who was sitting in state.
4. After his speech, Decius had his head covered and was taken away.

Differences between Livy and Silius:

1. Silius records a speech of Hannibal in which Hannibal insults Decius. This is not in Livy.
2. In Silius, Hannibal orders his officers to advance to find out whether Capua
will open her gates in defiance of Decius. Livy says that Hannibal feared an unpleasant incident or a riot and sent a message to the praetor that he would be in Capua the next day.

3. Silius says Hannibal only saw the sights of Capua after Decius had been dragged away. In Livy, Hannibal saw the sights on the day of his arrival.

4. In Livy, Hannibal demands Decius in a speech before the senate. Silius makes no mention of the senate.

5. Silius records a second speech of Hannibal together with the reply of Decius. Livy says nothing of this and records a speech in which Decius addresses the crowd at Capua. The evidence suggests that Silius could well have used Livy here and the differences be explained as his own poetic rehandling.

259–266: Hannibal views Capua. There is no proof that Silius has used Livy at this point. All that we find in Livy is the very brief statement ‘visenda urbe magnam partem diei consumpsit’ (23.7.12).

270–287: The banquet at Capua. Livy mentions the banquet briefly (23.8.6) but the evidence suggests that Silius is much closer to Virgil (Aen. 1. 695 ff.) and Statius (Theb. I. 515 ff.).

303–368: Pacuvius and his son. The account in Livy (23.8–9) is similar in several respects:
1. The son of Pacuvius was the one man who would not drink at the banquet.
2. He followed his father out of the banquet to an open space at the back of the house.
3. There he drew back his toga, exposed his sword and revealed his plans to kill Hannibal.
4. The son gave Pacuvius the opportunity to absent himself when the deed was done.
5. Pacuvius was horrified and pleaded with his son to abandon the attempt.
6. Pacuvius refers to the hospitable board which will be polluted by the blood of Hannibal.
7. Pacuvius refers to the bodyguard of Hannibal and says the deed will be impossible.
8. Pacuvius threatens to protect Hannibal with his own body.

Differences between Livy and Silius:
1. Silius does not mention that Hannibal was staying with Pacuvius or his brother.
2. Livy makes the son weep after hearing his father’s entreaties, while in Silius it is the father who does so.
3. Livy records a speech of the son to the father. This is not in Silius.
4. Silius does not mention the son addressing his country.
5. In Livy, the son flings his sword over the garden wall into the street and then returns to the banquet alone. In Silius there is no mention of this dramatic little detail and father and son return to the banquet together.

These differences are of a minor nature and exactly what one would expect
from a poet using his imagination in the adaptation of minor details. The list of similarities is most impressive and is reinforced by a comparison of the verbal similarities between Silius and Livy. The most impressive similarity occurs in lines 332–336, as it is in speeches that Livy will have felt free to depart the most from his sources.

'per si quid superest vitae, per iura parentis
perque tuam nostra potiorem, nate, salutem,
abiste inceptis, oro, ne sanguine cernam
polluta hospitia ac tabo repleta cruento
pocula et eversas pugnae certamine mensas.'

Livy has 'per ego te' inquit 'fili, quaecumque iura liberos iungunt parentibus, precor quaesque ne ante oculos patris facere et pati omnia infanda veis... Ab hospitiali mensa surgis... ut eam mensam cruentares hospitis sanguine?' 23.9.2–4.

372–376: Mago is sent to Carthage to announce Hannibal's victory. There is a very brief account in Livy (23.11.7) but there is no evidence that Silius has used Livy at this point.

377–384: The fate of Decius. Livy's account is very similar (23.10.11–13). Both Silius and Livy mention that Decius was sent to Africa, diverted to Cyrene and rescued by Ptolemy. Silius adds that the same land which saved his life received his bones in a peaceful grave. In Livy, Decius was given the choice of going to Rome or returning to Capua. The evidence suggests that Silius has adapted Livy's narrative at this point.

385–482: Venus destroys the morale of the Carthaginians. Livy (23.18.10–16) gives an account of how Hannibal's men spent the winter of 216 BC in debauchery at Capua. The only thing common to both accounts is that the morale of the army was destroyed by wine, women and song. Livy says nothing about immorality on the part of Hannibal himself. He makes no mention of Venus and her army of Cupids and does not mention stage-plays or the song of the bard Teuthras. There is nothing in Silius about deserters returning to Capua during the summer. It cannot be proved that Silius is following Livy here. It was part of epic tradition for Venus to destroy morale in this way and it is more likely that Silius had Apollonius Rhodius and Virgil in mind here rather than Livy.

483–541: Mago's arrival in Carthage and his report on Hannibal's victory. The account in Livy (23.11.7–12 and 23.12.1–5) is similar to Silius in the following respects:
1. Mago's arrival in Carthage and his report to the senate on the successes of Hannibal.
2. Mago expresses gratitude to the gods.
3. He pours out the gold rings (proof of nobility) taken from the Roman dead.
4. He makes an appeal for reinforcements, supplies and money to pay the troops.
Differences between Livy and Silius:

1. Livy gives no details of the welcome given to Mago.
2. Silius gives a detailed account of the battle of Cannae. This is not in Livy, who records Hannibal's successes in Italy in general including Roman casualties and war prisoners.
3. Livy's account of Mago's appeal for reinforcements sounds convincing as a Carthaginian statement. Silius' account sounds like wild anti-Punic propaganda, e.g. "pateant non parca aeraria dextris quas emimus bello." 539-540

The evidence suggests that the differences are those to be expected in a poet using a historian and it seems likely that Silius has adapted Livy at this point.

452-553: Mago's attack on Hanno. It is significant that in Livy (23.12.6-7) it is Himilco and not Mago who makes this attack. Nicol sees this as evidence that Silius used a source which gave scanty or inaccurate information about the Carthaginian leaders. It is possible that Silius is following a source other than Livy here. It is not inconceivable that the name has been deliberately changed by Silius. The poet mentions Mago elsewhere where Polybius and Livy give different names. Klotz gives examples of Roman proper names which have been changed in this way.

No metrical considerations can be advanced to explain the change as Silius uses Himilco four times in Book 14. Livy says nothing about the jealousy and bitterness of the man making the attack. Silius mentions the open support of Mago's audience while Livy refers to the possibility of a Roman senator in the senate-house at Carthage. The differences may be explained either by the fact that Silius was using a different source or that he has made a poetic adaptation of Livy.

554-600: Hannibal's reply. The similarities with Livy (23.12.8-17 and 23.13.1-5) are striking:

1. Hanno has not changed his attitude to the war and he stresses the need for peace.
2. If Hannibal had lost, he could not have asked for more.
3. Both accounts refer to the defeat at the Aegates Islands.
4. Hanno says that peace is easier for the victor than for the vanquished.
5. No more supplies should be sent to Hannibal.

The similarities are reinforced by a study of the verbal similarities, e.g.

'tela, viros, aurum, classes, alimenta precatur belligeramque feram. victus non plura petisset.' 563-564.


'citiusque haec foedera victor quam victus dabit.' 577-578

"tum pacem speratis cum vincemur, quam nunc cum vincimus dat nemo?" Liv. 23.13.4.
Differences between Livy and Silius:
1. Silius does not mention any questions about the Latin Confederacy or the 35 tribes in Rome.
2. Nor does he refer to the lack of progress in the conduct of the war.
These differences are of a minor nature and may be explained as poetic adaptation on the part of Silius.

601-611: The reaction to Hanno’s speech. The account in Livy (23.13.6–8) is similar in two respects:
1. Supplies were to be sent to Hannibal.
2. Spain is mentioned in both accounts.

Differences between Livy and Silius:
1. Silius says that Hanno was confused by a shout of disapproval, while Livy mentions that few were affected by the speech.
2. Livy does not refer to the jealousy of one man.
3. Silius only mentions supplies in general terms, while Livy gives specific numbers in each case.
4. Silius says that the same supplies were sent to Spain, while Livy mentions specific numbers of mercenaries.

Silius seems to be using a source which is particularly hostile to Hanno. But again these differences are to be expected from a poet using a historian, and the similarities with Livy are in speeches which indicate that the direct use of Livy is a real possibility.

All this does not add up to slavish imitation of Livy (or anyone else for that matter). It suggests rather that Silius has shown both ingenuity and originality in the remoulding of his historical material in his own way. As Wallace says, ‘He imitated, he made innovations, he simplified, he unified, he made his own contributions, all in varying degrees in different portions of the poem’. 43

NOTES
1. Plin. epist. 3.7.5.
2. Poetics libri septem 6.841 (1561), 324.
15. CPh 63 (1968) 76.
16. Von Albrecht, op. cit. 185.
17. Von Albrecht 15.
18. Von Albrecht 185.
19. See the eulogy of Cicero in Sil. 8. 404–411.
20. Mart. 7.53.3–8.
23. Bruère, R.T., ‘Color Ovidianus in Silius’ Punica 8–17’, CPh 54 (1959) 244.
31. See Cic. leg. agr. 2.92, 2.93, 2.95, p.red. in sen. 17, Liv. 9.40.17.
32. Cic. leg. agr. 2.95, Liv. 23.18.10–16, 23.45.2–4.
33. Hayward, B.L., CAH VII, 75.
34. 3.107.1.
35. op. cit. 27.
36. Silius’ own deliberate suicide in the face of an incurable disease (Plin. epist. 3.7.1), traces of Stoic thought throughout the Punica, e.g. the great emphasis on virtus (it is mentioned no fewer than eighty-four times), the idea of the human mind as a divine element (Sil. 15.70–78), the many instances of fortitudo, the frequent allusions to Hercules who is often called the patron saint of the Stoics, Scipio’s lecture on burial customs which was a Stoic commonplace (Sil. 13. 466–487), and the prominence given to the contest between Virtus and Voluptas for the soul of young Scipio (Sil. 15.18–123), where the reader is left in no doubt where the poet’s sympathies lie.
37. This will be discussed in an article on the literary sources of the Punica, with particular reference to Book 11.
38. See Apoll. Rhod. 3.83 ff., Verg. Aen. 1.657 ff.
40. Sil. 7.329 ff. where Mago is said to have tied faggots to the horns of oxen; Polybios (3.93.4) and Livy (22.16.8) both mention Hasdrubal. At Sil. !0.382, Mago advises Hannibal to take action; Livy (22.21.2) gives the name Maharbal.
42. 14.394, 431, 451, 56i
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