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ACTOR IN THE THEATRE OF THE GODS – HANNIBAL'S DREAM IN SILIUS ITALICUS' *PUNICA* (3.163–221)

by

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ABSTRACT: The present study examines Hannibal's dream – an episode in Silius Italicus' *Punica* (3.163–221) – with special attention to theatrical structure, staging, and symbolic motifs (the admonition, the prohibition on looking back, the serpent). Reading Silius alongside earlier accounts (Silenus via Coelius, Cicero's *De Divinatione*, Livy, Valerius Maximus) shows how Flavian poetics reshape inherited material: Silius tones down the spectacular *concilium deorum*, recasting Hannibal as an actor moved by divine direction rather than as a counsellor among the gods. Mercury's harangue (*o rector Libyae*) urges action and frames the invasion of Italy; the ban on looking back, familiar from epic *exempla*, is transgressed in a way that serves dramaturgy rather than impiety. The *ater serpens* functions as a theatrical sign, not simply an allegory of "Carthaginian evil." Overall, Silius' version contributes to a Roman interpretative horizon, redirecting attention from the Carthaginian general to the theatre of the gods. In this perspective, Hannibal's dream assists a Flavian remodelling of the Second Punic War and supports an imperial Roman self-image.

KEYWORDS: Hannibal, Silius Italicus, Second Punic War, Roman epic, ancient historiography

INTRODUCTION

As Suetonius reports, before his own death, Augustus was supposed to correct his hairstyle and ask his friends if he had played his part well in the drama of life (*mimum vitae*), wanting them to clap for his departure.[1] As Angelos Chaniotis rightly points out, this comparison of a dying man to the role of an actor who leaves the stage is one of the many comparisons that ancient theatre left to the post-classical world. This observation, transferring its projection to the world of the Roman Empire, was rooted in Hellenistic thought, where the directors of the 'game of life' were seen in superhuman forces, gods or Tyche.[2] This projection naturally also concerned historical events. The role of Hannibal in the context

[1] Suet. *Aug.* 99.1–2; Chaniotis 1997: 219.

[2] The transition from Hellenistic to Roman theatricality is depicted by the funeral of Demetrius, which closes with the indication that when the Macedonian drama came to an end, Roman drama would be presented, cf. Plut. *Dem*. 53.4: διηγωνισμένου δὲ τοῦ Μακεδονικοῦ δράματος ὥρα τὸ Ῥωμαϊκὸν ἐπεισαγαγεῖν; Chaniotis 1997: 220–221, 245. See also note 8.