

Venatrix Animumque Innupta Remansi: Atalanta's Ovidian Intertextuality and Asexual Motherhood in Statius' Thebaid

This paper considers Atalanta in Statius' *Thebaid* as a gender-bending huntress as well as a mother. I argue that Atalanta's characterization is largely shaped by an intertextual relationship with the asexual nymphs devoted to Diana in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, particularly Callisto, and that she can be read as an asexual woman who is also a mother.

Statius's use of Ovid is receiving increasing attention (Keith, 2004, 2007, 2014; Newlands, 2004; McAuley, 2016; Tommaso, 2019) and the stories of Atalanta and Parthenopaeus are particularly rich in Ovidian intertexts. Throughout the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid depicts female followers of Diana who are huntresses and who consistently refuse not only marriage and sex in favor of the enjoyment of virginity (*Met.* 1.486—87), but also feminine dress and pursuits such as wool work. I argue that the nymphs can be read through the lens of asexuality, that is of lacking sexual attraction and/or desire (Przybylo, 2019). While an ancient reader would not have read them as asexual *per se*, there is an affinity between their depiction and the modern conception which provides a useful lens for studying these figures and their connection with each other. I argue that Statius recognized the asexual resonances of these characters and used them to shape his characterization of Atalanta such that she, too, can appropriately be read through an asexual lens.

Statius depicts Atalanta much like Ovid depicts the nymphs: she hunts in the woods, has a special relationship with Diana, and does not conform to conventional femininity. She is unlike other mothers in the *Thebaid* (on whom see: McAuley, 2016; Augoustakis, 2010; Keith, 2000; Newlands, 2006) and fulfills both traditionally paternal and maternal roles for her son Parthenopaeus. Besides Ovid's Atalanta (Keith, 2002), the most important Ovidian intertext for

Atalanta is Callisto (cf. Micozzi, 2015), whose story Statius reorders and adapts for Atalanta's. Atalanta's story is initially more positive since Diana forgives her and protects her and her son. Thus, her narrative before her son's departure for war functions as an optimistic intertextual epilogue for the Ovidian nymphs in which a life devoted to Diana and an asexual existence are possible in the aftermath of sexual violence.

Landscape, too, is important to Atalanta's asexual depiction. Statius consistently adapts Ovidian landscape to introduce horror (Newlands, 2004), but the Statian Arcadia features inhabitants born asexually from trees. The asexual landscape then both confirms Atalanta's asexuality and foreshadows her son's tragic death, which doubly signifies her inevitable separation from Diana's utopian Arcadia. The combination of Atalanta's intertextually-constructed asexuality and her maternal care and lament for Parthenopaeus result in the creation of a character who despite her motherhood, is asexual in her desires and lifestyle.

Statius' use of Ovid's virginal nymphs who follow Diana as a primary intertext for Atalanta serves to emphasize the non-normative aspects of her gender and her relationship with Diana, such that asexual desires are possible without virginity, resulting in a character who reads nearly as an asexual character in terms of the modern orientation.

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