

Fraternal Strife Among Statius' Gods

This paper will examine the conflict between Dis and Jupiter in Statius' *Thebaid* in comparison with that of Poseidon and Zeus in the *Iliad*, especially as it pertains to the brotherly dynamic amongst the gods. Book VIII of Statius' *Thebaid* marks a turning point within the epic where Dis supplants Jupiter as the overseer of the conflict; Dis' anger stems from the earth opening to bring daylight and the living body of Amphiaraus into the Underworld, which the god considers an invasion of his realm. Dis gives a speech where he bemoans that his brother would break this boundary after their drawing of lots long ago when dividing the cosmos amongst themselves (Stat. *Theb.* VIII.39-42). To avenge this offense, Dis sends Tisiphone to cause strife on the battlefield and foretells the most awful events remaining in the war: Tydeus' act of cannibalism, Capaneus' mock gigantomachy against Jupiter, and the mutual death of the brothers Polynices and Eteocles in combat (Stat. *Theb.* VIII.65-77).

The scene is overall reminiscent of Book XV of the *Iliad* where Zeus sends Iris to instruct Poseidon to stop interfering in the war. Poseidon is angered by Zeus' orders and reiterates that the two of them and Hades split division of the universe amongst themselves and are thus equal (Hom. *Il.* XV.185-200). However, when Iris offers to report this message to Zeus, Poseidon changes his mind and submits to his brother. Zeus himself acknowledges that this was for the best since a battle between the two would be so great that even the Titans in Tartarus would feel it, essentially meaning that it would throw the world into disorder (Hom. *Il.* XV.224-228). Statius seems to reverse this scene by having Dis instead take up Jupiter's challenge and create chaos in the upper world. In fact, Dis is the only major god in the work to successfully declare specific events that will occur in the epic, establishing him as a more worthy director of the war

than Jupiter himself (Ganiban 2009, 118). This becomes nowhere more apparent than when Jupiter flees from the combat once Polynices and Eteocles begin their fraternal duel incited by Tisiphone, allowing the chthonic forces of the Underworld to become the chief forces in the conflict (Stat. *Theb.* XI.134-135).

This paper will then examine the effect of Statius depicting Jupiter as an inefficient ruler who can be thwarted by his brother. Although Jupiter himself is the cause of war in Thebes, Dis is able to take command of the battle and twist it so horribly that Jupiter must flee from the chaos he initially started. This is in sharp contrast to the Homeric Zeus who guides the events of the entire war and is present most especially at the final duel between Achilles and Hector, attentively weighing the warriors' souls to ensure fate can play out appropriately regardless of the carnage on the battlefield (Hom. *Il.* XXII.209-214). Overall, Statius appears to engage with the Homeric model by having a disgruntled divine brother boast that he received a share of the universe by lot and claim that this makes him equal to the supreme deity. However, while Homer treats a battle between the gods as a cosmic disaster to be avoided, Statius embraces the divine fraternal conflict as a parallel to the mortal struggle between Polynices and Eteocles. In his speech, Dis acknowledges that he has been deprived of Jupiter's heavenly portion just as Eteocles steals the rightful rule of Thebes from Polynices. By extending the idea of brotherly war beyond the human sphere to the gods themselves, Statius crafts a cosmos chaotic enough to suit the needs of his gruesome epic.

Works Cited

Ganiban, R. (2007). "Dis and the domination of hell." *Statius and Virgil: The Thebaid and the Reinterpretation of the Aeneid* (pp. 117-151). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.