

Invoking the Muses: Statius' Use of Invocations in the *Thebaid*

A Muse's influence on her artist has long been recognized and today's conception of an artist and their muse comes rather straightforwardly from the Greeks' conception. They were a source of inspiration for their artist, and may have helped provide him with facts, but the relationship was a partnership. Though it originally started as an actual prayer for divine aid, by the time of the Roman poets (if not earlier), an invocation to a Muse was simply a literary conceit. As daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (Titaness of memory), they are to serve as divine inspiration and fonts of information for the poet, to help him along if he forgets certain details. In his *Thebaid*, Statius calls directly on Muses (with their names in the vocative) more than any other poet in an epic (Hardie 9). He does this for two reasons. One, to mark a return to Vergil's influence from the lack of divinities in Lucan (Statius's immediate epic predecessor). This 'return to the divine' is mostly proven in his immediate proem. The second is as a cue for his readers. As an ancient audience would expect (with such precedents as Homer's Catalogue of Ships in the *Iliad*), an invocation to a Muse signals that an important list is coming. Statius, as always, takes this one step further and chooses to invoke specific Muses and not always the Muse of Epic poetry. Instead, he alternates between Calliope and Clio.

First, I explain the origins in poetry of the Muses and examine their history in earlier literature. Traditionally, each individual Muse has her own 'sphere of influence' (e.g. Calliope for epic, Polyhymnia for sacred hymns, etc.). Though there is no extant work describing *exactly* how each of these Muses came to have her own specific sphere of influence, but it is clear that, at the very latest, they did by the Hellenistic Age. In his "Etymologising the Muses", Alex Hardie concedes that Hesiod could very well have invented the names and their roles himself but

clearly, they caught on (Hardie 12-14). Hardie makes a case for the so-called “speaking names” of the Muses, and that their names, unlike older Olympian gods, should be clear to the audience which aspect of artistic inspiration each governs.

I then explore in depth Statius’s introduction to his *Thebaid* to see how he establishes himself as combining Lucan and Vergil and what role the Muses play in this. Finally, I look at the specific instances in which Statius invokes a Muse. The sheer number of times Statius calls upon a Muse for assistance works to show just how much help he needs in composing this poem and what a massive undertaking it will prove to be. I argue that Statius uses these invocations to prime the audience’s attention to a particularly significant passage and, depending on the Muse he decides to invoke, to establish what aspect of the story (i.e. epic or historical) the audience should focus on.

Works Cited

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