

Dulce nefas: Venus Armed in Statius' Thebaid

In Book 3 of the *Thebaid*, when an irate Jupiter has sent Mars to stir up war, Venus stops the chariot of the war god and is recognized as *domina* (3.267) by his horses. Scholars have noted the failure of her plea that Thebes be spared, but the scene is also important in its portrayal of Venus as a goddess who can have a share in her consort's martial power. This is then borne out in Book 5, when Venus exchanges her seductive *cestos* for the sword as she drives the women of Lemnos to destroy their families. This characterization fits both the inversion of normal roles and boundaries in the *Thebaid* and its mythic plot, a perverted love leading to destruction on both personal and national levels.

The scene of Venus and Mars in Book 3 has clear models in Jupiter's consolation of Venus in the *Aeneid* (1.223-96) and her pacification of Mars in Lucretius (1.31-40). In her broader discussion of how Statius plays with literary models, Hershkowitz (1997) points out that both reassurance and pacification are absent; while I agree with her overall argument, in this particular instance pacification is present in the response of the horses, who lower their heads in supplication (*suppliciter*, 3.265) to their mistress. Mars, moreover, addresses Venus not only as his delight, peace, and respite from war, but as the only one who has sufficient *potestas* to meet his weapons, stop his horses as they roar amidst slaughter, and take his sword from his hand (3.295-99). His speech and the context, in which there is manifestly no respite, suggest that Venus might take his sword to use herself. Feeney (1991, 369) points out that this scene demonstrates "one of the poem's key concerns, the powerlessness of love in the face of madness." Without contesting the general point, I suggest that Statius does not represent a simple love that can be opposed to madness -- in the *Thebaid*, love seems to find power in madness, as demonstrated when Venus transformed brings slaughter to Lemnos in Book 5.

First, as Hypsipyle begins her tale, Venus sets aside her normal appearance and accoutrements (5.61-64) before visiting Lemnos with the Furies. Then, in Polyxo's report of her vision, Venus bears a drawn sword as she demands violence and then leaves it on Polyxo's bed (5.134-140). Finally, adding the truly horrific inversion of child sacrifice to her arsenal, Venus appears as the culminating force in the opening sacrifice, the one who bears arms and stirs up wrath (5.157-8). When the episode concludes with the union of Lemnians and Argonauts, one might expect to see Venus portrayed as a source of delight and fertility. Instead, the terse *ergo iterum Venus* (5.445) follows Hypsipyle's description of the assault and martial prowess of the Argonauts (5.335-444), and it is then Love who fires the hearts of the women and Juno who stirs awareness of the Argonauts' manly charms (5.445-8). Even then, Hypsipyle follows the brief description of restored normalcy with her vow that she married unwillingly (5.454-6). Vessey, who takes the Venus of Polyxo's dream to be simply "a personification of her own frustrated lusts" (1973, 181), sees the conclusion as a complete return to normal love, but the structure emphasizes force, while minimizing the generative love that is the natural concern of Venus.

As Ganiban points out, the entire inset narrative of the Lemnian episode began with Hypsipyle enticing her audience while making *nefas* "the conceptual center" of her tale (2007, 73). Attention to the representations of Venus suggests that she might herself be considered *nefas* as she demonstrates that she can take up the arms that properly belong to Mars. Taken with the concluding focus on compulsion rather than expected pleasure, this suggests that Statius' Venus is always potentially violent and bloodthirsty, as befits a world in which a family's destruction and the subsequent war are rooted in inappropriate love.

Bibliography

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