

The Complex Oedipus: Who Is(n't) Oedipus in the *Thebaid*?

This paper analyzes the portrayal of Oedipus in Statius' *Thebaid*, a character who has undergone a significant metamorphosis since his earlier appearances in Sophocles and Seneca. I demonstrate that while Statius' Oedipus might seem an oddly minimized character, his presence is still often felt because his likeness has been grafted onto various other individuals in the epic. This use of Oedipus as 'artistic effect' lets Statius illustrate the darkness and *nefas* that plague his literary world while also commenting on the dispositions of his other characters.

Minor Oedipus-inspired moments, in which less central characters momentarily exhibit comparable traits, appear throughout the *Thebaid*. Blindness, such as when Capaneus scales the walls of Thebes (10.923), is the most frequent comparison. These connections add a unifying artistic theme to the work and prime the audience to notice more significant Oedipus connections elsewhere.

In a more substantial juxtaposition, Polynices' exile from Thebes has been carefully reworked to mimic both Oedipus' current wanderings as well as his initial trip to Thebes. Like his father, Polynices too must face down a 'Sphinx' (as Statius portrays his Tydeus) and then must desert his new family when he returns to Thebes, where he ultimately shares in Oedipus' fate. Laius' elderly armor-bearer Phorbas becomes another stand-in for Oedipus: watching from the walls of Thebes, he acts paternally to Oedipus' daughter Antigone while discussing their family issues and his own Oedipus-like health problems.

Most importantly, however, Statius has assimilated his characters of Oedipus and Jupiter. The portrayal of Statian gods, and especially of Jupiter, is a contentious issue in modern discussions of the epic. Some take a positive or neutral view of the supreme god, considering him an illustration of a contemporary ideal ruler or merely an agent of Fate (Gossage 1969: 80,

Gossage 1972: 195-98, Vessey 1973: 82-91, Delarue 2000: 304-306). More often, though, he is deemed to be a negative figure, either a cruel or misanthropic deity or a “bumbling buffoon” (Schönberger 1965: 132-27, Burck 1979: 334-35, Feeney 1991: 351, Dominik 1994: 211, Hill 2008: 129). By examining connections between Oedipus and Jupiter, the characterization of each of Statius’ figures will become clearer. In particular, their opening speeches reveal their shared motivations and failings in the epic. Despite some superficial disparities, these two figures of strikingly similar backgrounds proceed along the same course and work toward comparable goals.

This paper will conclude with analyses of why these particular characters were chosen to mimic Oedipus and how these various comparisons may be interpreted. Despite his presence mostly indirectly and behind the scenes, Statius’ Oedipus is still a valued character, as his connections to such a variety of characters shows. Oedipus has become the plague that now descends on Statius’ literary world and has infected it sufficiently that his withdrawn character still molds both other characters and the whole landscape of this drama-turned-epic.

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