

Taking Matters and Eyeballs into Your Own Hands: Greek Tragic Intertext in the Opening of  
Stattius' *Thebaid*

Stattius' epic poem, the *Thebaid*, has often been compared to Virgil's *Aeneid* and Stattius himself openly invites the comparison in the final lines of his poem. Stattius' intertextual relationship with Greek tragedy, however, has been a lesser examined study. Even authors who have partially examined Stattius' use of Greek tragedy in his epic (Heslin 2008; Hulls 2014), have not identified and explored the full range of intertextual moments between Stattius' epic and Greek tragedy and the themes and issues that are highlighted through these parallel passages. In my paper, I intend to show: firstly, that despite a pervasive presence of studies on the influence of Virgil on the *Thebaid* (such as Ganiban 2007), Stattius' relationship with Greek tragedy in his epic is no less prevalent and relevant for an understanding of the text; secondly, that such a study uncovers thematic concerns that are largely concentrated on issues of the collapse of boundaries between family dynamics and politics and the breakdown of ritual; finally, that by drawing out these issues of dysfunction in family and ritual, which are made more prominent by their comparison to and departures from their Greek tragic counterparts, we can see how Stattius is able to express a general Roman anxiety about civil war and the current political situation.

I have identified many passages throughout the epic that parallel Greek tragedy not only through their more overt similarities to characters or plot, but also because the corresponding passages are integrated into Stattius' *Thebaid* by verbal, syntactic or even thematic echoes. This list of intertextual moments includes, among others: Oedipus' reference to his self-blinding and his curse against his sons in book 1 compared to similar episodes in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*; Jocasta's entrance to the Argive camp in book 7 and sections from Euripides' *Phoenissae*; Amphiaraus' descent to the underworld in book 7 and Oedipus'

own departure in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*; the discovery of Polynices' body in book 12 and the attempt at burial in Sophocles' *Antigone*; and the burning of Polynices and Eteocles' bodies on the pyre in book 12 and Evadne's leap to the pyre in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the opening passages of the epic, with a glance at the end to the burial and pyre scenes in book 12.

In this opening, which I argue is programmatic for the rest of the epic, Statius makes a clear statement that not only will Greek tragedy play a prominent role, woven in throughout the poem, but that Statius' world depicts a perversion of family and ritual that is distinct from the tragic models, a theme that is revealed prominently by the end of the epic in the perversion of burial practices. This opening is critical for identifying and understanding further intertextual patterns and we can see Statius purposely activating this relationship with Greek tragedy to signpost to the reader that such intertextual moments will be embedded throughout and integral to the reading of the epic. These themes of the perversion of ritual and a dismantling of the sanctity of the family, which are introduced in the opening of the *Thebaid* and reinforced in the final book, are easier to see as they become highlighted against the backdrop of Greek tragedy. The mistreatment of the dead and dysfunctional family dynamics are characteristic for a story from the Theban cycle. When these moments are examined alongside tragedy, however, we find that Statius traces a clear pattern of the eventual rejection of the gods and proper ritual in Thebes, which is in contrast to the tragic counterparts that offer a sense of ritual resolution. These expectations, which such comparisons with Greek tragedy invite, allow Statius systematically to subvert these patterns to reflect a general anxiety about the dissolution of Rome and ritual through family dynasties and civil war. By uniting his Greek background with his Roman epic, Statius is able to define himself as a poet who self-consciously engages in complex intertextual

interactions, making use of his predecessors' footsteps, but remaining independent in his own right.

#### Bibliography

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