

## The Anxious Mother: Atalanta's Dream in *Thebaid* 9

In Book 9 of Statius' *Thebaid*, Atalanta is disturbed by a dream that predicted the impending death of her son Parthenopaeus. The very characterization of Parthenopaeus in battle emphasizes his youth and inexperience in war in order to highlight the unnecessary loss of his life (Vessey 1973; Dewar 1991). To this end, the narrative position of Atalanta's dream before his *aristeia* and eventual death leads the reader to view his demise from her perspective: this was a personal loss of a mother who had been his protectress. That her prayer to Diana was made "in vain" (9.609: *nequiquam*) generates dramatic irony in showing Atalanta's hopes to be false.

This dream and Atalanta's subsequent reaction are paired with those of Ismene in *Thebaid* 8. Ismene had not understood that her dream referred to her betrothed Atys and was surprised by his death. Her loss shows the naïve perspective of women who have limited interaction with the war (Scioli 2010). Ismene was separated from the scene of battle and sought no agency to counteract the events foreshadowed in her dream. In contrast, Atalanta immediately understood the true import of her dream and sought to protect her son through the aid of Diana.

The symbolic dreams of Atalanta and Ismene find several intertextual precedents in Greek tragedy, including Atossa's dream of Xerxes' disastrous homecoming (Aeschylus, *Persians*). Connections may also be drawn, with Dewar, to Medea's dream foretelling her exile (Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica*) and Ilia's dream foretelling the fates of Romulus and Remus (Ovid, *Fasti*). However, setting itself apart from these models, Atalanta's reaction is remarkable for her proactive ability to influence the outcome presaged by her dream. In taking action, Atalanta contributes to a narrative delay of Parthenopaeus' death; and due to the actions of Diana, as requested by Atalanta, Parthenopaeus' death has a more heroic tenor than what is granted to him in other sources (namely in Euripides, *Phoenician Women*).

Atalanta's dream and reaction furthermore reveal the nature of human and divine actions in the *Thebaid*. As the divine apparatus reveals its bent towards destruction and vengeance (Feeney 1991; McNelis 2007), Diana faces a distinct inability to circumvent fate (largely due to the intervention of Mars and Venus) and thereby prevent the death of Parthenopaeus. Not unlike how Adrastus placed his trust in a destructive Apollo (*Thebaid* 1), Atalanta entrusts her son to a divine system that has shown itself fundamentally unable to preserve human life. Moreover, her proactive measures to save her son allude to the poem's necessity for human action and intervention.

By comparing Atalanta's dream with that of Ismene and symbolic dreams from tragedy, we gain insight not only into the agency exercised by Atalanta, but also the tragic consequences of divine action upon the mortals of the epic.

#### Bibliography

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