

Reversal of Fortune: Statius' *Thebaid* and Valerius' *Argonautica*

This paper examines the *Thebaid*'s dynamic—and subversive—engagement with the *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus. I argue that Statius often 'rewrites' Valerian passages in order to reverse what can be read as positive sequences in his predecessor's text. My analysis thus seeks to complement a number of recent studies on the Argonautic and/or Valerian aspects of Statius' *Thebaid*.

My point of departure is a well-known instance of Statius' engagement with Valerius' epic. It has long been recognized that Polynices' nocturnal journey to Argos in *Thebaid* 1 exhibits striking resemblances to Valerius' description of the Argonauts' first night aboard Argo in *Argonautica* 2. What has been less well appreciated, however, is the manner in which Statius here reverses the trajectory of the Valerian sequence, which I suggest is programmatic of his engagement with Valerius generally.

Statius emphasizes Polynices' ignorance (*incertusque viae*, 1.368; *rationis inops*, 373) and the lack of help he receives from the heavens (*cui neque Temo piger neque amico sidere monstrat / Luna vias*, 371-2). This contrasts strongly with the Valerian passage. There, after we read of the Argonauts' intense fear of the unknown (2.38-47), the ship's captain immediately offers them consolation: he tells the crew not to fret because he has not only been taught by Minerva how to read the stars, but he also explains that the goddess herself is often present to help pilot the ship (*sed pectora firmans / Hagniadēs "non hanc" inquit "sine numine pinum / derigimus, nec me tantum Tritonia cursus / erudit: saepe ipsa manu dignata carinam est"*, 47-50). The moon, whose friendly light is singled out by Statius as conspicuously absent during Polynices' journey (1.371-2), is in the Valerian text a helpful beacon shining brightly in the night sky (*micat immutabile caelum / puraque nec gravido surrexit Cynthia cornu*, 2.55-6). The

staunch support offered by Valerius' Minerva, who in fact helped construct Argo (1.125-6), and the guiding light supplied by Cynthia are nowhere to be found in Statius' rewriting of the Valerian episode. Rather, Statius' Polynices journeys blindly, alone in a godless and guideless wilderness of darkness, thereby evincing in miniature the *Thebaid's* broader tendency to depict a world devoid of divine compassion for humanity. And whereas the Valerian sequence takes us from an initial moment of fear and uncertainty to one of consolation and security, there is nothing in the Statian passage to mitigate the darkness visible. Valerius' Argonauts are so reassured by the thought of Minerva's help and Tiphys' divinely inspired knowledge that they succumb to peaceful slumber beneath the stars that guide the ship (2.71). In contrast, even after reaching his destination in Argos, Polynices finds Adrastus' forecourt to be a "hard couch" and thus his sleep is anything but deep (*invitat tenues ad dura cubilia somnos*, 1.389).

Polynices' inability to find peace is fitting. His arrival in Argos will be devastating for that city, since it brings with it all the destructiveness, madness, and dysfunction characteristic of his native Thebes. The divine assistance made available to guide the Valerian Argo safely through the channels of epic poetry and the tempests of political turmoil is lacking in Statius' *Thebaid*. I suggest that Statius signals this radical difference between his epic world and that of his Flavian predecessor by reversing the thrust of certain Valerian sequences that offer a movement from darkness to light, ignorance to knowledge, and pessimism to optimism.