

The War with Nemea: *Furor* and Delay in the Nemea Episode of Statius' *Thebaid*

This paper examines violence against nature in Statius' *Thebaid* and argues that the violence of the Argives against Nemea in books 4-6 forces us to reinterpret the traditional understanding of the delay of the war. I argue that both the Argives and the Nemean landscape undergo a transformation. As the Argives storm the Langia river (4.823) and cut down the Nemean forest (6.115-117) they are compared to soldiers sacking a city, a violent and ironic comparison, since the Argives will not sack Thebes. Thus, the Argives briefly become victorious soldiers and the rivers, trees, and nonhuman animals of Nemea become the conquered enemy, the first victims of the war. By comparing the destruction of Nemea to the sack of a city, Statius blurs the line between humans and nature, between city and wilderness. Statius complicates what it means to go to war and forces us to examine whether the delay of the war is truly a delay or instead a war with Nemea.

In *Thebaid* 4, Bacchus causes a drought in Nemea in order to delay the Argives. Angered by the delay the Argives attack Nemea, polluting the Langia, cutting down forests, and killing a serpent sacred to Jupiter. This paper synthesizes previous studies of this episode (Newlands 2004) with studies of tree violence in Vergil's *Aeneid* (Thomas 1988) and Lucan's *Bellum Civile* (Augoustakis 2006) in order to examine the Argive attack on the Nemean landscape in Statius' *Thebaid* which has largely been ignored in favor of other Nemean episodes such as Hypsipyle's story (Nugent 2016), the death of Opheltes (Ganiban 2013), and the funeral games. However, scholars have recognized the delay of the war between Argos and Thebes as an important theme throughout Statius' *Thebaid* (Ash 2015, McNelis 2007). The delay symbolizes resistance to the nefarious war between the sons of Oedipus and operates both metapoetically to delay the

progress of the poem and within the narrative to delay the Argives. This paper expands on our understanding of that delay by examining the Argives' interaction with the Nemean landscape.

Statius illustrates that the Argives are driven by *furor*, the same madness with which Tisiphone infects Eteocles in order to begin the war (1.123). When the Argives reach Nemea Bacchus commands the rivers to dry up in retaliation for the Argive campaign against Thebes. The thirsty Argives are guided by Hypsipyle to the Langia and proceed to storm the river and fight each other to get a drink of water. Statius compares their attack to a battle raging in the river (*Martem perfurere*, 4.823) or the sack of a city (*captam tolli victoribus urbem*, 4.823). The verb *perfurere* and the comparison to the sack of a city portray the Argives as inflicting wanton destruction on a captured enemy.

Just as the Argives rage when they storm the river seeking water so does the sacred serpent, the *genius loci*, rage in its search for water (*furit*, 5.521), marking Nemea as similarly tainted by *furor*. The theomach Capaneus kills the serpent whom the fields, Nymphs, and Fauns of Nemea lament like a fallen hero (5.579-82) confirming that we should judge the killing negatively. In an attempt to expiate this crime the Argives hold a funeral for the serpent and Opheltes but they cut down trees like victorious soldiers sacking a city (*cum possessas avidis victoribus arces / dux raptare dedit*, 6.114-15) and Statius even gives a catalogue of the types of trees cut down (6.98-106). The catalogue reads like a Homeric battlefield with each hero and soldier named and killed. The beech falls like a soldier (*cadit*, 6.98), the spruce trees fall to ruin (*procumbunt*, 6.100), the pine is split (*scinditur*, 6.105). Thus the Argives inflict a final, sacrilegious indignity on Nemea by despoiling its forests and bring to Nemea a war between humans and nonhuman nature.

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