

Atomic Centaurs: Reading Statius Reading Lucretius

Lucretius' denial of the existence of Centaurs in the *DRN* impacted subsequent renderings of the hybrid in mythological poetry. Ovid taunts Lucretius' rational denial by presenting a beautiful, and anatomically plausible, Cyllarus in the *Metamorphoses* (DeBrohun 1995). Statius takes this one step further in his *Achilleid*, presenting a scientifically plausible means for the rearing of a Centaur (Chin 2014). We find a similar, albeit neglected, response in the *Thebaid*. I argue that Statius engages with Lucretius' denial of Centaurs in crafting two connected similes in the *Thebaid* surrounding the hero Hippomedon (4.128-44; 9.216-24). Statius experiments with Lucretius' rationalization of *simulacra* of hybrid creatures (4.129-42, 729-44) as well as his use of metathesis (1.192-8, 820-9, 907-14; 2.688-99, 1013-22) to explain his brand of atomism. However, unlike allusions from the *Metamorphoses*, *Achilleid* or even Hardie's (2009) discussion of Lucretian multiple possibilities in the *Thebaid*, this use of Lucretian elements is not an antagonistic manipulation towards an anti-Lucretian end. We shall see that Statius' intertextual toying with the *DRN* stops short of direct refutation and, rather, appears intent on imbuing his mythological centaur similes with the rational coloring of Lucretius' atomic theory.

Parkes (2012) discusses the influence of Ovid and Vergil in the *Thebaid*'s allusions to the Centaurography and specifically assesses Hippomedon's centaur simile at 4.128-44 as a means to downgrade his heroism while Gervais (2017) has elucidated the complexities of intertextual references for Tydeus' heroism during his monomachy (2.527-681). However, the full weight of Lucretius' denial of the hybrid form has not been fully brought to bear on centaur similes in the *Thebaid*.

Lucretius offers two explanations for the persistence of *simulacra* of impossible forms: some float in the air and haphazardly take shape similar to clouds; some come from the chance combination of *simulacra* of actual things like those of horse and man (4.731). Statius employs both possibilities in his likening of Hippomedon to a Centaur. Lucretius' clouds and the false, gigantic forms their shadows can cast (*Gigantum/ ora volare videntur et umbram ducere*, 4.139) correspond directly to lofty Hippomedon (*arduus*, 4.128) on horseback and the massive centaur-like shadow this pair makes (*umbraque inmane volanti*, 4.137). Ultimately, this simile, created by shadows of two real forms, engages with but does not challenge Lucretius' refutation.

Lucretius' use of metathesis as a metaphor for atomic structure similarly opens up avenues of engagement for Statius' centaur similes. At 8.196 Hippomedon is labeled as *ferus* while the centaur he is likened to at 8.220 is *semifer*. Such slight adjustments call to mind Lucretian atomic refashioning of atomic combinations (*demptis paucis paucisque tributis/ ordine mutato et motu*, 1.800-1). Two letters are taken off the end (*-us*) while four are added to the beginning (*semi*) in order to change man to centaur. However, the ordering (*positura*, 1.909) of the individual letters, and hence atoms—crucial to Lucretius' metaphor (Snyder 1980, Armstrong 1995)—remains consistent in the *Thebaid*. Statius' repetition of the adjectival root hints at some common elements between Hippomedon and a Centaur and also hints at an exploitation of Lucretian metathesis to craft an anti-Lucretian Centaur; however, Statius does not truly mimic Lucretian metathesis in his allusion, maintaining the plausibility of the Lucretian refutation within the *Thebaid*.

Although appropriated for seemingly opposed ends, Statius' fashioning of Lucretian elements only toys with *simulacra* and metathesis and does not fully repurpose them to create centaurs in the *Thebaid*. Rather, this engagement puts on display Lucretius' atomism as an

operative element—and perhaps an aesthetic lens—to view even the most mythologically evocative elements of Statius' poem.

Bibliography

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