

Parthenopaeus and Statius' Testing of the *Aeneid*

In the closing lines of his epic the *Thebaid* (12.810-819) Statius hopes that his poem will achieve success similar to that of the *Aeneid* but not rival the earlier classic too aggressively.

*uiue, precor; nec tu diuinam Aeneida tempta,
sed longe sequere et uestigia semper adora.*

(12.816-817)

Live, I pray; and test not the divine *Aeneid*,

But follow from afar and always venerate her footsteps.

The *Thebaid*'s *sphragis* is considered one of the most intertextual passages in all of Roman literature and the epic as a whole has a highly allusive quality (Dominik 2003). Despite Statius' intention of not "testing" the *Aeneid*, he in fact engages in a literary *certamen* with Vergil and his work. A central figure in this contest is the Arcadian youth Parthenopaeus, whom Statius consistently uses as a device for measuring his poem against that of Vergil.

In the *sphragis* Statius refers to the *Thebaid* as new: "already, for sure, powerful *Fama* has laid out a pleasant path for you and begun to show you, a new poem, to future generations" *...iam certe praesens tibi Fama benignum / strauit iter coepitque nouam monstrare futuris*, 12.812-813. The *Thebaid* may be a new publication, yet because of its imitative features and treatment of the well-trodden saga of the family of Oedipus is anything but new (Vessey 1973). Furthermore, Parthenopaeus is one of epic's most recycled characters and one who embodies many of Vergil's youthful warriors (Pallas, for example) who populate the second half of the *Aeneid* (Hardie 1989). Statius, however, outdoes Vergil in his presentation of a young, beautiful and doomed warrior by making Parthenopaeus the target of multiple audiences' erotic attention throughout the poem.

Parthenopaeus's appearances in the *Thebaid* frequently signal direct references to the *Aeneid* or are part of epic tropes also found in Vergil's poem. The best example in the *Thebaid* is when Parthenopaeus competes in a running race that is part of a series of funeral games. He is selected to run because of the renowned speed of his mother, Atalanta.

nota parens cursu; quis Maenaliae Atalantes

nesciat egregium decus et uestigia cunctis

indepressa procis? onerat celeberrima natum

mater...

(6.563-566)

His mother is famous for her running; who does not know

The remarkable beauty of Maenalian Atalanta

And the footsteps unable to be overtaken by all the suitors?

The most celebrated mother burdens her son.

Atalanta's "footsteps" (*vestigia*), like those of the *Aeneid*, mark her fame but also present a nearly insurmountable challenge. The funeral games and the race itself follow several formulae established by the epic games described by Homer at the funeral of Patroclus and by Vergil at that of Anchises. Statius, however, rewrites the familiar scene by having Parthenopaeus lose the race only to have it be rerun due to another competitor's cheating. In the second race Parthenopaeus is victorious and lives up to his mother's reputation, and Statius leaves his own literary *vestigia*.

Just before the *sphragis* of the *Thebaid*, Statius includes a lament for Parthenopaeus that brings the youth's Arcadian lineage to the fore.

*Arcada quo planctu genetrix Erymanthia clamet,
Arcada, consumpto seruantem sanguine uultus,
Arcada, quem geminae pariter fleuere cohortes.*

(12.805-807)

[I would not be able to tell...]

With what lament the Erymanthian mother grieves the Arcadian,
The Arcadian who preserves his beauty even with his blood drained,
The Arcadian, whom twin armies mourned equally.

The lament is similar to that of Aeneas for Pallas at the close of the *Aeneid* (Hardie 1997). The focus on Arcadia, however, suggests a different Vergilian text, the *Eclogues*, in which Arcadia is both site and judge of poetic *certamina*.

*Pan etiam, Arcadia mecum si iudice certet,
Pan etiam Arcadia dicat se iudice victum.*

(Verg. *Ecl.* 58-59)

Even Pan, should he vie against me with Arcadia as judge,
Even Pan would say that he was conquered with Arcadia as judge.

The echo of Vergil's *Arcadia* in Statius' *Arcada* points to Parthenopaeus playing a similar role in the *Thebaid* as Arcadia did in the *Eclogues*, that is, as a *locus* of poetic evaluation and competition through which Statius imitates, tests, and challenges his predecessor.

Bibliography

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