

Manus Cruentae: The Bloody Hands of Oedipus and Theseus in Statius' *Thebaid*

The actions of the characters Oedipus, disgraced king of Thebes, and Theseus, triumphant king of Athens, form bookends to Statius' epic poem the *Thebaid*. Oedipus, living in isolation in his homeland, sets in motion the plot of the poem by cursing his sons and raising the Fury Tisiphone to foment hatred between them (1.46-87). By contrast, Theseus, a foreigner, arrives in Thebes at the poem's end, sought by the women of Argos to allow the burial of the Argive warriors who have died in the civil war that resulted from Oedipus' curse (12.656-781). Traditionally, as in the work of William Dominik (1994: 88-98), Creon, the Theban tyrant who takes the throne in book 11, is read as a counterpart to Oedipus; while Adrastus, the benevolent king of Argos, is seen as a counterpart to Theseus. In this paper, I suggest that we instead read Oedipus and Theseus as counterparts. Although Oedipus and Theseus play opposing roles in the narrative (one initiates war; the other establishes a truce), there are similarities between the two that suggest an under-appreciated duality. Specifically, I suggest that Statius' description of Theseus' arrival in Thebes (12.656-76) activates the reader's memory of the opening of the poem through the use of a particular phrase, and thus encourages the reader to reconsider Oedipus' early intervention in the poem through the lens of Theseus' later one.

This paper presents a close reading and comparison of two passages containing detailed descriptions of the kings, beginning with a striking mention of the Theban and Athenian kings' "bloody hands" (*manus cruentae*, the only two uses of this collocation in the entire poem). In both contexts, description of the "bloody hands" is juxtaposed with descriptions of distorted vision, in particular, Oedipus' blindness (*tunc vacuos orbes, crudum ac miserabile vitae / supplicium, ostentat caelo manibusque cruentis / pulsat inane solum...*, lines 53-4) and the "double" vision of Theseus in person and on his shield (*terror habet populos, cum saeptus*

imagine torva/ingreditur pugnās, bis Thesea bisque cruentas / caede videre manus, lines 672-4), thus suggesting a link between vision and violent action. Furthermore, the blood defiling the hands is a stain from previous violence: Oedipus' hands are bloody from his act of self-blinding, and Theseus' hands are defiled by the gore of the slaughtered Minotaur. Hands are thus sites for recalling previous violence that infects the violence of the present.

As Randall Ganiban (2007, 39-40) has argued, Oedipus is the embodiment of the *nefas* ("unspeakable crime") that infests and motivates Statius' poem. Although Oedipus has a limited role in the narrative, the effects of his actions are pervasive. Neil Coffee (2009) has shown that Statius' Theseus, also a character with limited involvement in but significant impact upon the narrative, takes "excessive delight in slaughter" (224), as exemplified by his associations with Mars. There is a complex dimension to Theseus as a ruler who, like Oedipus, is characterized by and unable to escape from the repercussions of a previous violent crime. By exploring several parallels between Oedipus and Theseus, this paper will illuminate how both kings are brought into confrontation with earlier "versions" of themselves, as Statius himself confronts and scrutinizes his literary predecessors who have told the tales of Oedipus and Theseus.

Bibliography

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