

A Bovine Minotaur in Flavian Rome: Statius' *Thebaid* (12.665-676)

This paper assesses the *Thebaid's* monsters against the backdrop of monster theory as creatures who “both produce and reproduce social discourse and practice” (Bellin 2005). The *Thebaid's* monsters embody and communicate cultural anxieties concerning ‘same’ and ‘other’ prevalent in first century literature. Such anxieties have long been established in scholarship (Dench 2005; Augoustakis 2010). I examine the *ekphrasis* on Theseus’ shield (12.665-676), featuring the Minotaur, as a case study for this argument. The Minotaur, as hybrid monster, offers a focal point for discussions of ‘same’ and ‘other’ mapped onto its human (same) and non human (other) halves. The Minotaur provides a flash point where the boundary between human and non human would blur if the Minotaur appeared too human. However, Statius’ Minotaur lacks human characteristics and thus avoids such collapse. What is more, Statius’ metaliterary coloring of this passage suggests artistic innovation as an ideal method to experiment with such themes.

Monsters in Statius’ poetry have received notable treatment. Scholars have situated Centaurs in discussions of heroism (Parkes 2012) and hybridity (Heslin 2005) while giants have been viewed as potent metaphors for intertextual agonism (Lovatt 2005). However, the cultural significance of the Minotaur’s body has not yet been treated.

Statius highlights the Minotaur’s neck, (*colla*, 670)—the traditional meeting point between bull (head) and human (body) components in depictions of the Minotaur in literature and art (Hughes 2010)—drawing attention to the monster’s hybridity. However, Statius toys with the monster’s hybridity as the descriptors (*hispidā ... nodosa*, 669-70) signal a more bestial depiction of the monster’s body (traditionally human). Ultimately, Statius’ Minotaur is hardly a hybrid.

Statius flags metaliterary qualities in this passage, often noted for its intertextuality (Besone 2011). The Minotaur, contained within the *ekphrasis*, has a unique quality among monsters in antiquity: it is created by an intelligent hand, Daedalus. Therefore, the Minotaur is an obvious subject for poetic creativity (Lowe 2015). Moreover, the term, *exordium*, which opens the *ekphrasis*, (*propriaeque exordia* laudis, 12.666), refers to literary undertakings elsewhere in the Statian corpus (*Silv.* 5.3.234; *Theb.* 4.649-51). Most significantly, the character Hypsipyle employs *exordium* in her narrative digression (*Theb.* 5.36). Finally, Statius' intertextual resonance with a portion of Vergil's *ekphrasis* (*Aen.* 6.22-30) also comments on the artistic process. Specifically, the intertextual nod (*bis ... bis*, *Aen.* 6.32-3 and *bis ... bis*, *Theb.* 12.673) evokes the unfinished aspect of Daedalus' work, often seen as a comment on the artistic process (Hardie 1993). By referencing the master craftsmen and his work of art (the *ekphrasis* from *Aeneid* 6), Statius further underlines the artistic process in his own *ekphrasis*.

Statius concocts a novel, fully bovine, Minotaur which lacks any traditional 'humanness' and, thus, eschews the categories of 'same' and 'other.' This Minotaur simultaneously embodies and proclaims contemporary concern concerning the categories of 'same' and 'other.' Additionally, Statius places this Minotaur in a markedly metaliterary passage. Ultimately, the *ekphrasis* on Theseus' shield offers insight into both the *Thebaid's* metaliterary character and its exploration of otherness.

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