

## Monsters in Mourning

In Statius' *Thebaid*, mourning women are portrayed in nearly every space of action throughout the twelve books. In addition, mourning occupies a much more significant place in the narrative of the *Thebaid* than is traditional in Roman epic, and for Statius, as Bernstein argues, it provides a frame for masculine action (Bernstein 2015: 144-45). Thus, motherhood, and in particular the role of the mother as principal mourner, is placed on the narrative level of the poem as a major reference point and thematic scheme. Mother figures in the *Thebaid* are wide ranging and they suffuse the epic landscape, both literally as in book three after Turnus' killing spree, and figuratively throughout the narrative of the poem. But Statius's mothers are not uniformly presented as helpless victims of the violence of civil war. Rather, motherhood in the *Thebaid* is reflective of a problematic type of motherhood that is characteristic of Thebes itself (Zeitlin 1990: 141ff). For example, as Bernstein notes, the mother earth metaphor in the *Thebaid* is one of a failure to nurture: rivers are dried up, a chasm swallows Amphiarus, and both Linus, Coroebus' grandson, and Opheltes die in the bosom of the earth (Bernstein 2015: 153). But not only is there a lack of motherly nurture, there is also, at least an intimation, of the mother's active intent to destroy her offspring. This paper will argue, that the descriptions of female mourning in the *Thebaid* correspond to descriptions of Theban and Argive monsters. In particular this paper will focus on a comparison between Jocasta and the monster raised by Apollo in book one, known from Callimachus and Pausanias as Poine. While the comparison is not perhaps so concrete as to turn Jocasta into a monster, it does suggest that, on an external level, female mourning in the *Thebaid* is always interrogated by the gaze of the reader.

In *Mothers in Mourning*, Nicole Loraux explains the connection between the lamenting mother and the murderous mother in the Ancient Greek context. In the moment when the mother of a dead child receives the body of her child as recompense for her loss, she recognizes the actual incommensurability of it, and her grief becomes anger (Loraux 1998: 41). Thus there arises an anxiety in the male Greek mindset, that *whenever* a mother mourns, her black wrath lurks in waiting, ready for vengeful action (Loraux 1998: 65). Extrapolating from this, it seems that the double role of the female as mother and murderer, in some ways, is concentrated in the actual *visage* of the female in mourning. The sight, not only of tears, but of the torn cheeks, the bruised body, and the loose sordid hair, instantaneously presents to the anxieties of the viewer both the image of the vengeful, destructive female, and the female who is a mourning mother.

Although it is somewhat outside of the Athenian context which Loraux discusses in her book, Statius' *Thebaid* seems to employ these same associations between danger and feminine roles when it comes to mothers in mourning. It is not that Theban mothers are murderous, or that Theban monsters are maternal, but that Thebes is a place in which destruction and creation have a parallel existence. The Theban mother in Statius' *Thebaid* is proleptically made both a murderer and mourner. In bearing children at all, she has consigned them to their deadly fate.

### Bibliography

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