

*natura versa: (Un)natural Law in Statius' Thebaid*

This paper examines Statius' reception of *natura* from Senecan tragedy and argues that invocations and apostrophes of *natura* in the *Thebaid* prove ineffectual in a world which *natura* has perverted with the fraternal strife of the sons of Oedipus. The war is brought to a close by Theseus who has been interpreted as an ambiguous figure (Dominik 1989) or even a *deus ex machina* (Braund 1996). Theseus claims that *natura dux* is on his side in order to justify the coming battle with Thebes (*Theb.* 12.645). I argue that *natura dux* is an as yet unnoticed allusion to Seneca's *Phaedra* in which the Nurse urges Hippolytus to follow *natura* as his guide (*naturam ducem, Ph.* 481) and no longer be celibate. But the Nurse is in fact urging Hippolytus to commit incest with Phaedra. Theseus uses the same phrase that the Nurse utilizes in an attempt to pervert *natura*. This allusion serves to undermine Theseus' claim to moral authority, impugns his motives for attacking Thebes, and illustrates the breakdown of norms in the poem.

Senecan tragedy exerts a considerable influence over Statius (Augoustakis 2015) and Seneca's *Phaedra* in particular has a tremendous impact on *Thebaid* 12 (Sacerdoti 2008, Boyle 1985). From Seneca, Statius receives and redeploys Stoic ideas about *natura* and natural law, in particular the Stoic injunction to follow *natura*. Yet in Senecan tragedy *natura* is often 'reversed', an ominous intertext for Theseus (*versa natura est retro, Ag.* 34; *natura versa est, Oed.* 371; Busch 2007). In the *Phaedra*, the Nurse sarcastically tells Phaedra to pursue Hippolytus and "reverse *natura* with criminal fires [of love]" (*nefandis verte naturam ignibus, Ph.* 173) and alleges that in doing so Phaedra will create a confused race, (*prolem...confusam, Ph.* 172). It is no coincidence that at the end of a poem about the *confusa domus Oedipodae*

(*Theb.* 1.17) Statius alludes to Seneca's *Phaedra* in which Theseus' house could produce a *proles confusa*.

Immediately after his speech invoking *natura dux* Theseus is compared to Jupiter (*Theb.* 12.650ff) who, despite his eagerness to destroy Thebes (*Theb.* 1.214-47), claimed that he is not causing the war for his own personal reasons. Instead Jupiter claims that it is fated and that *natura* (and other abstractions like *pietas* and *fides*) demands the war between Polynices and Eteocles (*rogat hoc tellusque polusque / et pietas et laesa fides naturaque*, *Theb.* 7.216-17). Jupiter contradicts himself and must be either lying about his motivations or impotent. He invokes dysfunctional *natura* and also *pietas*, who in fact appears later in the poem as a personified entity. *Pietas* apostrophizes *natura* and demands to know why she was created (*quid me...princeps natura creabas?*, *Theb.* 11.465-6). She gets her answer when the Fury Tisiphone subsequently drives her from the battlefield.

Jupiter's lies, or impotence, and invocation of ineffectual forces like *natura* and *pietas* reflect back on Theseus and his declaration that he has the favor of the gods, humans, and *natura* (*Theb.* 12.644). No one but he and the Athenians seem eager for more war and no gods show their support for Theseus' attack on Thebes. Theseus ends the war and allows for the proper burial of the Argives but he does so in a violent and problematic manner.

An intratext further problematizes Theseus' invocation of *natura dux*. When his sons lie dead on the battlefield, Oedipus regrets his decision to curse them and declares that he now feels *pietas* and that *natura* has conquered him as a father (*vincis io miserum, vincis, natura, parentem!*, *Theb.* 11.607). But *Pietas* has already been driven off by Tisiphone and it was Oedipus' own perverted nature that caused him to murder his father and curse his sons. Just as Oedipus cursed his sons so too will Theseus curse Hippolytus in Seneca's *Phaedra* in a

perversion of his nature as a father. The dysfunction of *natura*, Theseus' flawed moral authority, and the promise of familial conflict ensured by Hippolyte's pregnancy (*tumentis / spes uteri*, *Theb.* 12.636-7) mar Theseus' role in providing closure for the poem.

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