

Inspired Denial: Mourning and the Muses in Statius' *Thebaid*

The repeated invocations of Muses in Statius' *Thebaid*, which tells the story of the Seven Against Thebes, offer more to the poem than simply a myriad of new beginnings. Rather they serve as nexus points between the moments of lament that suffuse the poem and the martial character of its plot. The invocations, especially in books 4, 8, and 12 create liminal bridges between military narrative of the war at Thebes and grief experienced by the family members left at home during the war.

Scholars have long noted that Statius' *Thebaid* is replete with allusions to the long literary and mythological tradition of Latin and Greek Epic. Parkes (2012), Meyer (2016) and Keith (2016) have convincingly argued that the influence of Statius' literary forebears is especially heavy in the invocations of Muses throughout the epic. They have, however, failed to connect the numerous occurrence of this standard epic trope to either the abnormal focus that the poem places on lamentation throughout the work (Pagan 2000). I contend that the repeated Musical appeals do not simply situate Statius' epic in relationship to his forebears, but rather mediate between the scenes they interrupt.

The poem's internal conflict between the poetic focus on lamentation and the necessity of advancing the plot is especially clear at the beginning of book 4 when the Argive host is preparing to venture forth toward Thebes. In this scene, as the army attempts to leave from Argos, their families begin to mourn their deaths even before they have fully departed (4.16-32). The lamentation is all engulfing and quickly involves the soldiers themselves in a simile that describes them as sailors setting off on a voyage (4.24-30) before returning once again to the families left behind by the war (4.31-32). This description of pain and grief here transitions

immediately into the catalogue of heroes. Standing between the intense emotion of the army leaving for war and the numbering of its members is an plea to Fama, Vetustas and Calliope that they return the plot to traditional epic matters(4.32-37). By virtue of its position the invocation puts the lamentation of the home front in conversation with the military subject of the remaining poem.

Throughout the battle narrative of book 8, divine inspiration cuts off hiatuses from the action. At 8.373-74, an invocation of Apollo and Calliope interrupts the army's reaction to losing Amphiaraus. Likewise, at 8.655-56 the fury Enyo rekindles the war just as Ismene begins to weep over Atys' body. Although these invocations advance the epic's plot by removing female lament from center stage, they do not silence that lament. In book 4, the families at Argos are left metaphorically standing on the side of a cliff watching their loved ones sail away. In book 8, the soldiers are left dazed and confused as the battle begins in earnest. Ismene's lament is left unfulfilled. By the end of the poem the mournful static has become too powerful for the Muses to overpower. In the invocation that brings book 12 to its conclusion (12.797-808) Apollo can no longer inspire the poem. When the war is over, the only sound left is lament. Thus grief and mourning become the background noise against which the narrative asserts itself.

In moving the narrative forward, the invocations of Muses throughout the *Thebaid* mediate the experiences of participants in the war and those excluded from participation in it. By placing a barrier between moments of intense grief and the necessity that the plot does not come to a stand-still, the invocations of the Muses in the *Thebaid* serve as crucial cogs in the epic's narrative of delay. Far from drawing an impenetrable line between the scenes they interrupt, the invocations lend a thematic unity to the epic whereby the grief of the home-front is given equal footing to the suffering of those at war.

Bibliography

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