

Crudelis Gloria: Casting the Nemean Serpent as a Genius Loci in Thebaid 5

Several scholars have attempted to make sense of the Hypsipyle epyllion that occupies book 5 of Statius' *Thebaid*, arguing that it is not just a loose digression, but an important break from the narrative that helps explain the overall themes of the work (Heslin 2016, Soerink 2014). While these scholars focus on Hypsipyle's narrative and the book's intertextuality with other ancient authors, insufficient attention has been paid to Statius' infusion of religious imagery throughout the book. This is especially evident in the poet's vivid description of the Nemean serpent in lines 510-13. Statius imbues the snake with the religious imagery characteristic of *lararia* serpents, or rather *genii loci*, depicted in Campanian wall paintings. This paper addresses the gap in the study of the Hypsipyle epyllion and aims to elucidate Statius' use of programmatic religious imagery surrounding the Nemean serpent.

In her recent monograph on domestic religion in Italy, Harriet Flower cogently argues that the serpents portrayed on *lararia* shrines represent *genii loci*, guardian spirits of place (Flower 2017). The *genii loci* do not preside over any mortal activity, but rather the natural landscape on which the physical *lararium* rests (Flower 2017, 63-70). Statius describes the serpent with all the typical attributes of the *genius loci*, writing that "a cruel glory juts out from his golden brow" (*auratae crudelis gloria fronti / prominet, Theb. 5.510-11*) and describing both the farmer's offerings upon the woodland altar (Stat. *Theb. 5.511-13*) and the serpent's circular movement (Stat. *Theb. 5.513*). All of these attributes are consistent with the extant depictions of Flower's *genii loci* and have parallels in other works. For instance, Cicero and Valerius Maximus both describe the portentous serpent that arose to confirm Sulla's eminent victory at Nola (Cic. *Div. 1.72*; Val. Max. 1.6.4).

The physical appearance of the Nemean serpent and its evocation of the serpents depicted on *lararia* shrines from Pompeii and Herculaneum have gone unnoticed by scholars. The dates of these extant paintings (since the eruption of Vesuvius preserved their context in 78 CE) in fact approach the publication date of 90-92 CE for the *Thebaid*. Additionally, Carole Newlands specifically notes the central importance of Statius' engagement with visual art and understanding his poetics (Newlands 2012). These paintings are thus prime for study in comparison to the imagery of *Thebaid* since the poet himself was raised in Naples before 78 CE and doubtless saw many of these programmatic religious depictions. Moreover, these paintings are remarkably consistent in terms of style: they maintain the physical movement, colors, and general form of the serpents across the extant corpus.

Statius does not limit the religious references of book 5 to these wall paintings, however. News of Opheltes' death reaches Lycurgus, the infant's father, as he is performing haruspicy which then prompts him to remember the omen he received long ago that he would provide an early sacrifice to the Theban War (Stat. *Theb.* 5.650). These descriptions of Lycurgus as a *haruspex* and reader of omens in combination with Statius' clear portrayal of the Nemean serpent as a *genius loci* constitute an invasion of Roman religion into the Greek context of the epic. In this paper, I explore what effect such an invasion has on our reading of the epyllion and what thoughts these patently Roman religious traditions would inspire. I argue that Statius engages these depictions of *genii loci* on Campanian *lararia* alongside other traditional Roman religious features in order to characterize book 5 as a portent of the Theban War and the *nefas* that is to come in the second half of the epic.

Bibliography

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