

Programmatic Expectations in *Thebaid* 7

Statius's *Thebaid* is a tapestry of intertextuality, and much work has been done in recent years to appreciate rather than denigrate his use of earlier texts and genres. A glance at the table of contents in *Brill's Companion to Statius* (2015) reveals the literary history Statius learned and adapted for his purposes: Sophocles, Ovid, Vergil, Seneca, Homer, Euripides, Lucan, Valerius Flaccus, Silius Italicus, and Martial all receive attention. Further, Charles McNelis has demonstrated the heavy influence of Callimachean poetics at work in the *Thebaid* (2007). This paper builds on the work of these scholars by examining the challenge to intertextual expectation that Statius embeds in his description of the shrine of Mars at the opening of *Thebaid* 7. The description of this shrine operates programmatically for the remainder of the epic, but it does not do so straightforwardly. Rather, through the description, Statius plays with the readers' expectations, undermining and then reasserting the power of Mars in his poetry. Ultimately, as the epic unfolds, we come to realize that the actual war far exceeds the violence and fury suggested by the shrine. War overcomes humanity, nature, and even the gods themselves.

Book 7 of the *Thebaid* marks the middle of the epic, and Statius follows Vergil in marking the halfway point with a temple description (*Georgics* 3.26-39) and promises of war (*Aeneid* 7.41-45). However, this temple and the subsequent appearance of Mars are more like an elaboration on *Georgics* 1.511 (*saevit toto Mars impius orbe*) than an echo of Roman triumphs displayed on the temple doors in *Georgics* 3 (Smolenaars, 1994). This shrine is a celebration of the brutality of war, a generalization and personification of its bloodshed, furor, and death. Statius has taken Roman valor and surrounded her with the ugly realities of violence (*tristissima Virtus stat medio*, line 7.51-2). Even Mercury, a god, shudders at the horrid sight (*horrescitque*

tuens 7.41). We see in this description Statius's hint that his war is a Lucanian one, "privileg[ing] disruption and chaos" (McNelis). His temple, like Vergil's, presents the poetic future, but it is not a vision of triumph.

As dismal as this temple and the poetry it promises are, the reader is left uncertain to the reality of this vision. The end of the ekphrasis reveals that the horrors described are merely the arts of Vulcan, and though war is everywhere, Mars is not to be found. The competing narratives of action and delay identified by McNelis are in conflict again. Though the martial action has been signaled by Jupiter dispatching Mercury to Mars, the personification and artifice of the forces build a mimetic space detached from reality. Lines 60-61 (*ubique ipsum, sed non usquam ore remisso cernere erat*) demonstrate this through their conceptual resonance with 1.369 (*pulsat metus undique et undique frater*). As Polynices fled through the storm, he feared that his brother was everywhere, though this was a figment of his imagination. Similarly, Mars's presence is felt, though he is absent, and his absence gives the narrative of delay a moment to reassert itself.

This moment is short-lived, however; Mars arrives in bloody glory, and at his arrival the overwhelming boundary-breaking forces of war are briefly apparent. His appearance is signaled by an earthquake, and the poet claims that even Jove would fear and demur to the god of war in this moment (7.65, 76). In the *Thebaid*, war disrupts nature and proper hierarchies as demonstrated by the arrival of Mars. But as the action unfolds, war itself is far more destructive and chaotic than even the god of war. Book 7 ends with an earthquake so intense that a chasm opens all the way to Hades (7.794-823); Tydeus commits gruesome cannibalism (8.751-758); Capaneus ascends into heaven to challenge the gods (10.917-930). This civil war exceeds expectations based on the description of the temple of Mars that opens Book 7. Statius uses a programmatic moment to distort his readers' expectations of what is to come in his epic. Though

horrible, both the shrine to Mars and Mars's appearance understate the disruption and destruction of civil war.

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