

Statius' Debt to Virgil

A paper given to the Virgil Society on 21 May 2005

Before finally committing myself to addressing this august body, I took the elementary precaution of asking a friend of mine to read a draft of this paper and make appropriate suggestions for its improvement. Imagine my reaction when he reported to me a few days later that he had fallen asleep over the second page. Happily, he pulled himself together, read the piece in its entirety without any more sleep, and made many helpful suggestions and encouraging remarks. Many years ago, I read a paper on Statius to the Leeds Latin seminar. When it was over, Harry Jocelyn approached me, smiled, and said: 'There is of course no Latin poet after Lucretius that is worth reading.' I thought that the Virgil Society would enjoy that. Many years earlier, when I had just arrived at Newcastle, I was due to give a paper to the local branch of the Classical Association immediately after their AGM. Unfortunately, at the AGM, some savage controversy arose that kept them busy for about an hour, thus obliging me, at the shortest imaginable notice, to abbreviate my talk very significantly. Although, like all abbreviations, it was, of course, an improvement, it did not seem so at the time.

The context of this talk is the fact that CUP have commissioned Hans Smolenaars and me to produce an edition of Statius *Thebaid* 1 in the Green and Yellow series. This has been an ambition of mine for some years during which I have spoken and written on *Thebaid* 1 on several occasions, largely, but not exclusively, on establishing the text. So when I received Jonathan Foster's generous invitation to speak to the Virgil Society, it seemed to provide a wonderful opportunity to develop further my ideas on the relationship between Statius and Virgil, a topic I have touched on before, but not in the detail it deserves. This is the Virgil Society, a group of enthusiasts who will be steeped in the *Aeneid* but who will be far less likely to be familiar with the *Thebaid*. You are accordingly very like Statius' readership when his great epic first became available from the booksellers'.

You may well resemble that first readership in another way. Roman authors normally gave public recitals of their work before full publication, and there is no reason to suppose that Statius did not. You will not have attended such occasions, but you probably have read brief extracts from the *Thebaid*, if only in Latin unseen translation exercises, and you will have come away with some kind of impression.

*

*uiue, precor; nec tu diuinam Aeneida tempta,
sed longe sequere et uestigia semper adora.* (Theb. 12.816-17)

Live, I pray; and do not challenge the divine *Aeneid*,
but follow from a distance and always revere its footsteps.

In the past, these two lines from almost the end of the *Thebaid* were used to dismiss the epic as trite and derivative. As reported by Kathleen Coleman in her most thorough account of modern Statian scholarship,¹ this view has been almost entirely discredited in the last forty years, not so much by reinterpreting the lines as by ignoring them and relying on the text itself. However, there is profit in placing the lines in context to see exactly what they do mean:

*durabisne procul dominoque legere superstes,
o mihi bisseos multum uigilata per annos
Thebai? iam certe praesens tibi Fama benignum
strauit iter coepitque nouam monstrare futuris.
iam te magnanimus dignatur noscere Caesar,
Itala iam studio discit memoratque iuuentus.*

Then the two lines quoted above, followed by:

*mox, tibi si quis adhuc praetendit nubila liuor,
occidet, et meriti post me referentur honores.* (Theb.12.810-15, 18-19)

Will you long endure, and be read surviving your master,
O *Thebaid* much toiled on wakefully by me for twice six
years? Already for you present Fame has surely strewn
a kindly way and begun to show you, still new, to future times.
Already great-hearted Caesar deigns to know you,
and Italian youth eagerly learns and recites you.

Soon, if any envy still stretches clouds before you,
it will die, and after me your deserved honours will be paid.

These are not the words of an unsure poet. Out of context, 12.816-17 might just be understood as timid (though to claim to walk in the footsteps of the *Aeneid*, even *longe*, is no mean claim); in context, such an interpretation is impossible. Similarly, at *Silvae* 4.7.25-8, Statius claims:

*...nostra
Thebais multa cruciata lima
temptat audaci fide Mantuanae
gaudia famae.*

...our
Thebaid, tortured by much polishing,
is, with audacious lyre, challenging the joys
of Mantuan fame.

Note in particular that, although at 12.816 the *Thebaid* is told not to *temptare* the *Aeneid*, at *Silvae* 4.7.27-8 Statius claims that his epic *temptat audaci fide Mantuanae gaudia famae*, hardly a self-effacing claim.

Why listen to prose, when you can hear poetry? Why listen to an essay on a poem when you can hear the poem itself? I accordingly make no apology for reciting some significantly long sections of the *Thebaid* to you, following them with a very literal translation in case you are unfamiliar with the poet's style.

Classical epic poets are either historical and political – Ennius, Virgil, Lucan and, later, Silius Italicus; or mythological – Homer, Apollonius Rhodius, Valerius Flaccus. If it is objected that the *Aeneid* is mythological, the reply is that the epic, though set in mythological times, is transparently a poem of contemporary Augustan political importance. And where does Statius' *Thebaid* stand? The very beginning of the *Thebaid* is instructive: *fraternas acies* (1.1); there is clearly a resonance with Virgil's *arma* (the first word of the *Aeneid*) and Lucan's *bella...plus quam ciuilia* (1.1), two unequivocally political works, unlike Valerius Flaccus' unquestionably mythological *Argonautica*, which begins:

*Prima deum magnis canimus freta peruia natis
fatidicamque ratem, Scythici quae Phasidos oras
causa sequi mediosque inter iuga concita cursus
rumpere, flammifero tandem consedit Olympo.*

Though even Valerius cannot resist patriotic outbursts as at 1.7-21, 558-60. At the beginning of his epic, he has no words such as *arma*, *bella* or *acies*, neither does he offer a *recusatio* refusing to make any of the three Flavians the subject of his epic; though he does call upon each of them, duly praised for their exploits, to favour his poem. Statius, on the other hand, explicitly claims that it is his intention to write an epic on the exploits of Domitian when he is ready to do it justice; meanwhile, he writes:

*limes mihi carminis esto
Oedipodae confusa domus, quando Itala nondum
signa nec Arctos ausim spirare triumphos
bisque iugo Rhenum, bis adactum legibus Histrum
et coniurato deiectos uertice Dacos
aut defensa prius uix pubescentibus annis
bella Iouis. tuque, o Latiae decus addite famae,
quem noua maturi subeuntem exorsa parentis
aeternum sibi Roma cupit. licet artior omnes
limes agat stellas et te plaga lucida caeli
Pleiadum Boreaeque et hiulci fulminis expers
sollicitet, licet ignipedum frenator equorum
ipse tuis alte radiantem crinibus arcum
imprimat aut magni cedat tibi Iuppiter aequa
parte poli, maneat hominum contentus habenis,
undarum terraeque potens, et sidera dones.
tempus erit, cum Pierio tua fortior oestro
facta canam.*

(1.16-33)

*let the limit of my song be
the confused house of Oedipus, since not yet would I dare
to breathe out the Italian standards nor the northern triumphs
and the Rhine twice under the yoke and the Danube twice submitting to the
and the Dacians thrown down from their conspiring mountain, [laws*

*or earlier the defensive wars of Jupiter scarcely
in your adolescent years.² And you, O glory added to Latian fame,
whom, taking on the new beginnings of your father,
Rome wants for herself for ever. Though a tighter track
drives all the stars along and a clear region of the sky,
free of the Pleiades and of Boreas and of cracking lightning,
summons you, though the curber of the fire-footed horses
himself presses the high shining diadem
upon your hair, or Jupiter yields to you an equal
part of the sky, may you remain content with the reins of men,
powerful on land and sea, and may you give up the stars.
There will be a time when I shall sing your deeds
made stronger by the Pierian gad-fly.*

You will, of course, recognize the allusions to the *Georgics* (1.32-5) and to Lucan (1.33-6), but that is not our interest today. We may readily disbelieve Statius' claim that he harboured ambitions to compose an epic poem about Domitian, but we are, at the very least, obliged to confront the theoretical possibility that, as in the case of Virgil, his relationship with his emperor was important to him. It could be argued that Valerius' pleas for support from the Flavians argue for a similar relationship, but there is an important difference between seeking the Flavians' support for a mythical epic and laying claim to a future epic on Domitian's achievements.

As I have pointed out elsewhere,³ there is a remarkable symmetry between *Aeneid* 1.1-304 and *Thebaid* 1.1-311:

<i>Aeneid</i> 1		<i>Thebaid</i> 1	
1-33	Prologue	Prologue	1-45
34-49	Juno's anger	Oedipus' anger	46-5
50-64	Aeolus' cave	Prayer to Tisiphone	56-87
65-80	Prayer to Aeolus, and his response	Description of Tisiphone	88-113
81-222	Effect of Aeolus' intervention	Effect of Tisiphone's intervention	197-302
223-296	Divine Council	Divine Council	197-302
297-304	Mercury sent to earth	Mercury sent to earth	303-311

This pattern requires further analysis. Some critics are content to record echoes from one poem to another without establishing whether a reader who notices the echo will enjoy a better appreciation of what he is reading. Others will argue that any resemblance between two works must be, in some sense, significant. My own position is that the onus of proof resides with those who wish to argue for the significance of any particular resemblance; at the same time, however, this may be an opportune moment to suggest that the ancients were accustomed to frequent readings of the same work and that many important features of their literature could not possibly have been appreciated on a first reading. Much of the analysis here is based on these assumptions.

Both poems start with a prologue; the *Aeneid*'s ends with the ringing words *tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem* (1.33: How great an effort it was to found the Roman race); the *Thebaid*'s with: *atque alio Capaneus horrore canendus* (1.45: and Capaneus to be sung with quite another shudder). The noble Virgilian words, implicitly imposing a duty on the Romans of Virgil's day to live their lives mindful of the sacrifices of their ancestors, give way to an allusion to Capaneus, perhaps the most impious of the Seven (e.g. *superum contemptor* 3.602). Immediately after these words,

both poets launch into their story proper, Virgil giving us, very briefly, Aeneas at sea with his men sailing happily (*laeti*) in Sicilian waters (1.34-5), though, admittedly, the happiness will be short-lived, followed by a longer section on Juno's anger that she alone of the goddesses cannot protect her favourites, the Trojans (1.36-49). Statius gives us no one who is *laetus* even for the shortest time, only Oedipus, recently self-blinded and soon to start a vendetta against his sons. The contrast is striking and is reinforced by the very first word of Statius' narrative – *impia* – which must remind us of the *Aeneid*'s obsession with *pietas*:

*impia iam merita scrutatus lumina dextra
merserat aeterna damnatum nocte pudorem
Oedipodes longaque animam sub morte trahebat.
illum indulgentem tenebris imaeque recessu
sedis inaspectos caelo radiisque penates
seruantem tamen adsiduis circumuolat alis
saeua dies animi, scelerumque in pectore Dirae.
tunc uacuos orbes, crudum ac miserabile uitae
supplicium, ostentat caelo manibusque cruentis
pulsat inane solum saeuoque ita uoce precatur:* (1.46-55)

He had already probed at his impious eyes with his guilty right hand
and plunged his condemned shame in eternal night,
had Oedipus, and he was dragging his life out in a long death.
He embraced the shadows and in a recess deep
in his dwelling kept his *penates* unseen by sky
or sunlight, yet, with persistent wings, the cruel
day of the soul flew round him, and in his breast were the Furies of his crime.
Then he showed his empty orbs, the raw and pitiable
punishment of his life, to the sky and with bloody hands
beat the empty earth and in a savage voice prayed thus:

Virgil's Juno had explained why she was angry, Oedipus reveals only the intensity of his anger, not, beyond general unhappiness with his family, its cause.

In Virgil's next two sections (*Aen.* 1.50-64 and 65-80), we meet first an account of Aeolus controlling the winds, in accordance with a constitutional arrangement set up by Jupiter himself, followed by Juno's apparently reasonable request to Aeolus to assist her by sinking Aeneas' ships, a request which Aeolus sees as his duty to obey, not least because Juno promises him a wife if he complies. Statius' corresponding sections are, again, very different. Oedipus appeals, not to Aeolus but to Tisiphone and the powers of the underworld (1.56-87), and the following description is not of Aeolus but of Tisiphone herself (1. 88-113). Oedipus' prayer is unashamedly wicked, and in that respect too, rather different from Juno's appeal to Aeolus:

*'di, sontes animas angustaque Tartara poenis
qui regitis, tuque umbrifero Styx liuida fundo,
quam uideo, multumque mihi consueta uocari
adnue, Tisiphone, peruersaque uota secunda:
si bene quid merui, si me de matre cadentem
fouisti gremio et traiectum uulnere plantas
firmasti, si stagna peti Cirrhaea bicorni*

*interfusa iugo, possem cum degere falso
 contentus Polybo, trifidaeque in Phocidos arto
 longaeuum implicui regem secuique tremantis
 ora senis, dum quaero patrem, si Sphingos iniquae
 callidus ambages te praemonstrante resolui,
 si dulces furias et lamentabile matris
 comubium gauisus ini noctemque nefandam
 saepe tuli natosque tibi, scis ipsa, paravi,
 mox auibus poenae digitis caedentibus ultro
 incubui miseraque oculos in matre reliqui:
 exaudi, si digna precor, quaeque ipsa furenti
 subiceres. orbum uisu regnisque carentem
 non regere aut dictis maerentem flectere adorti,
 quos genui quocumque toro; quin ecce superbi
 --pro dolor!--et nostro iamdudum funere reges
 insultant tenebris gemitusque odere paternos.
 hisne etiam funestus ego? et uidet ista deorum
 ignauus genitor? tu saltem debita uindex
 huc ades et totos in poenam ordire nepotes.
 indue quod madidum tabo diadema cruentis
 unguibus abripui, uotisque instincta paternis
 i media in fratres, generis consortia ferro
 dissiliant. da, Tartarei regina barathri,
 quod cupiam uidisse nefas, nec tarda sequetur
 mens iuuenum: modo digna ueni, mea pignora nosces. ' (1.56-87)*

Gods, you who rule guilty spirits and mean
 Tartarus with punishments, and you, Styx, whom I see
 livid in your shady depths, and you, very used to being called upon by me,
 nod, Tisiphone, and favour my perverse prayers:
 if I have deserved anything, if you cherished me in your bosom
 as I dropped from my mother, and if you strengthened me when I was transfixed
 through my feet, if I sought the Carrhaean ponds flowing between
 the two-peaked ridge, when I could have lived content with
 false Polybus, and if in a narrow place of three-road Phocis
 grasped the long-lived king and cut the head
 of the trembling old man, while I was seeking my father, if I cleverly solved
 the riddles of the unjust Sphinx, with you to show the way,
 if I gladly entered upon the sweet passions
 and lamentable marriage with my mother, and often spent
 a guilty night, and made sons for you, as you know yourself,
 and if soon, eager for punishment, I fell deliberately upon my cutting
 fingers, and left my eyes on my wretched mother:
 hear me, if I am praying worthily and for the sort of thing you yourself would supply
 to a madman. I was deprived of sight, lacking a kingdom,
 but they did not try to direct or distract me in my grief with words,
 those whom I had begotten in whatever bed; no, instead, look, proud ones

– O grief – and by my disaster kings for some time now,
they mock my blindness and hate their father’s groans.
Even to them am I unclean? And does the idle father of the gods
see this? You at least, my deserved avenger,
come here and line up all my descendants for punishment.
Put on the diadem wet with gore that I snatched off
with bloody hands, and, driven by a father’s prayers,
go in amongst the brothers, and with a sword let the family’s partnership
fly apart. Grant, queen of Tartarus’ pit,
the evil that I have wanted to have seen, and not slowly will the mind
of the young men follow; only come worthily, and you will know my offspring.’

It is not easy to imagine a more dramatic opening to an epic poem than a speech from the blind Oedipus begging the infernal gods to bring down punishment upon his sons. Notice how, unlike Juno’s address to Aeolus, this request is candidly presented as nothing other than blatant evil. The arrangement of the speech is very striking; as is not uncommon in prayers, it starts with an amazingly complex sentence with a host of *si* clauses (56-74) but it is the content, not the form of these clauses, that startles the reader; after a complex but much shorter sentence (74-8), there follow three quite brief sentences (79-81) and a much more conventional conclusion (82-7). A few details will sharpen the argument:

58 multumque mihi consueta uocari: it is indeed a disturbing thought that it is not some sudden whim that has made Oedipus turn to Tisiphone, she has become the constant focus of his devotions.

59 Tisiphone: one of the *Dirae*; according to Fordyce (on Virg. *Aen.* 7.324ff.), their original function was to punish sin, but at least as early as the *Aeneid*, ‘their concern is provoking strife, not punishing guilt’, for which he cites Juno’s words when she is trying to persuade not Aeolus but Allecto (another of the *Dirae*) to do her wicked bidding: *tu potes unanimos armare in proelia fratres* (*Aen.* 7.335). In the *Aeneid*, the brothers are merely theoretical if striking examples of Allecto’s ability to create strife; in the *Thebaid*, the strife to be created is between specific brothers, Eteocles and Polynices.

60 si bene quid merui: this is an example of the fact that it is not just *Aeneid* 1 that has contributed to this speech. The echoing here of Dido’s *si bene quid de te merui* (*Aen.* 4.317) in her passionate plea to Aeneas must bring into the sharpest contrast the monstrous difference between her state and that of Oedipus. As we shall see, Dido is frequently invoked here.

60-72 Oedipus attributes to Tisiphone every significant event in his life from his birth to his self blinding. This is, of course, a perversion of the normal prayer where the supplicant lists all previous benefits received from the god to whom the prayer is addressed. A ‘perversion’ because here the ‘benefits’ are all evil.

61 fouisti gremio: it is striking that such an action, normally attributed to a mother or someone who would like to be a mother (compare *Aen.* 1.718, where Dido fondles Cupid disguised as Ascanius: *interdum gremio fouet inscia Dido*), should here have been performed by Tisiphone, especially after *de matre cadentem*. The circumstances of Oedipus’ early childhood were, of course, unusual.

1.63 degere: *sc. uitam* of a happy life he could have spent with Polybus, which is to be compared with *Aen.* 4.550-1 *uitam / degere* of a happy life forbidden to Dido.

67 callidus...te praemonstrante: even when he is acknowledging the assistance of Tisiphone, Oedipus’ notorious pride drives him to call himself *callidus*.

71-72 *digitis caedentibus...incubui*: *incumbo* is the *uox propria* for falling on one's sword (*OLD* s.v. 4b); how falling on one's *digitis caedentibus* could be effective becomes clear only in the next clause with the mention of his eyes left on his unhappy mother.

80 *ignauus*: note the position in the line occupied by this key word. This is a first hint of the contempt in which Jupiter is held throughout the *Thebaid*. Normally, an expression of this sort leads to action by the addressee (e.g. Iarbas' words at Virg. *Aen.* 4.206-210: *Iuppiter omnipotens...aspicis haec?*); here, however, the contempt for Jupiter, so different from the tone of Virgil's Juno, explains why Oedipus turns to Tisiphone and not to him.

As indicated above, the description of Tisiphone which follows (1.88-113) is suitably disturbing and in great contrast to the corresponding passage in the *Aeneid*, the description of Aeolus' cave (1.50-64), a model of constitutional government. Of course, Virgil's Juno is abusing her power and his Aeolus is a fawning toady, but these are the kind of faults that the best regulated societies will, from time to time, encounter and have mechanisms to correct; Statius' Tisiphone, on the other hand, is the very embodiment of evil persuaded into unimaginable evil by a depraved Oedipus. The effect of Aeolus' intervention is a dreadful storm that terrifies Aeneas and scatters his ships (1.81-124), followed by an intervention by Neptune, who rebukes Aeolus for exceeding his authority and restores calm, thus reinforcing the impression we have received that there is fundamentally order in the world, even though it can sometimes be challenged (1.125-56). Virgil then turns our attention to Aeneas, who finds a safe harbour in Libya and resumes control of those of his men who are not still scattered elsewhere (1.157-222). The effect of Tisiphone's intervention is to fill the minds of Polynices and Eteocles with poison. The policy of alternating power breaks down at the end of the first year and the people, represented by a single unnamed individual (*aliquis* 1.171), have no time for either of their rulers (1.114-96). The contrast with the corresponding Virgilian section could hardly be greater. From Virgil we learn that a robust constitution has ways of dealing with breakdown; from Statius we learn that a weak constitution is powerless against the forces of evil.

Both poems now present us with a Divine Council. In the Virgilian version, Jupiter looks down from heaven and notices Aeneas' troubles (1.223-6); before he can react, he is approached by his daughter, Venus, complaining about Aeneas' suffering, doubting Jupiter's earlier promises, and contrasting the happy state of Antenor with the plight of Aeneas and his men (1.227-53). Jupiter's response is to reaffirm his promises and to give a ringing prediction of Rome's future, a future that Virgil's readers will recognize as, indeed, the history of the Rome they know (1.254-96). Once again we are in an orderly universe. It was, of course, precisely that sort of contrast between Virgil and Statius that persuaded earlier critics to dismiss Statius' work, whereas, if I am right, it is an essential part of his strategy. Statius' Jupiter, on the other hand, calls a council for no apparent reason, lectures to it on the incorrigibility of humans, with copious examples, and then petulantly announces that he will punish Argos and Thebes, Argos because of their frightful history starting with Tantalus, and Thebes because of Oedipus' defiling sins (1.197-247). Juno tries very hard to make him change his mind, but without success (1.248-82). The section ends with Jupiter's prediction of a future very different from that predicted by Virgil's Jupiter; Virgil's Jupiter (*Aen.* 1.257-96) predicts the inexorable rise of Rome culminating in the triumph of *pietas* over *furor*; Statius' Jupiter (*Theb.* 1.214-47) predicts the shameful destruction of the Theban royal family. Jupiter then sends Mercury down to find Laius' ghost and to send him up from the underworld to poison the hearts of Polynices and Eteocles by persuading Eteocles not to relinquish the kingdom at the end of his first year (1.283-302). Virgil's Jupiter was an effective ruler of a reasonably well organized world; Statius' Jupiter is petulant and

ineffective; he appears to know nothing of what the reader knows; in particular, he does not know that his interference on earth has already been anticipated by Tisiphone. Virgil's Mercury is sent to ensure that Dido and her people receive Aeneas generously (1.297-304); Statius merely relates Mercury's traditional function to accompany the dead (1.303-11); the reader must wait for the beginning of Book 2 to learn any more of what he does.

At this point, the close structural symmetry between the *Aeneid* and the *Thebaid* ends, but Statius' readers have surely been alerted to the fact that there is a significant contrast between the two epics, so that, to achieve a full understanding, the reader must remember the former when reading the latter. Polynices, expelled from Thebes, makes his way towards Argos (1.312-35). Since he is the injured party, it might be expected that he would be treated sympathetically by Statius, in spite of his usual depiction in the literature. However, as I show elsewhere in detail,⁴ this passage uses a wide range of allusions to associate Polynices with the very worst figures of Greek mythology. There is, however, no particular allusion to Virgil. Next, we encounter a great storm scene following immediately after a passage of intense calm (1.336-41):

*sed nec puniceo rediturum nubila caelo
promisere iubar, nec rarescentibus umbris
longa repercusso nituere crepuscula Phoebos:
densior a terris et nulli peruia flammae
subtextit nox atra polos. iam claustra rigentis
Aeoliae percussa sonant, uenturaque rauco
ore minatur hiems, uenti transuersa frementes
configunt axemque emoto cardine uellunt,
dum caelum sibi quisque rapit; sed plurimus Auster
inglomerat noctem, tenebrosa uolumina torquens,
defunditque imbres sicco quos asper hiatu
praesolidat Boreas; nec non abrupta tremescunt
fulgura, et attritus subita face rumpitur aether.
iam Nemea, iam Taenariis contermina lucis
Arcadiae capita alta madent; ruit agmine magno
Inachus et gelidas surgens Erasinus in undas.
puluerulenta prius calcandaque flumina nullae
aggeribus temere morae, stagnoque refusa est
funditus et ueteri spumauit Lerna ueneno.
frangitur omne nemus, rapiunt antiqua procellae
brachia siluarum, nullisque aspecta per aeuum
solibus umbrosi patuere aestiua Lycaei.
ille tamen, modo saxa iugis fugientia ruptis
miratus, modo nubigenas e montibus amnes
caure pauens passimque insano turbine raptas
pastorum pecorumque domos, non segnius amens
incertusque uiae per nigra silentia uastum
haurit iter; pulsat metus undique et undique frater,
ac uelut hiberno deprensus nauita ponto,
cui neque Temo piger neque amico sidere monstrat
Luna uias, medio caeli pelagique tumultu*

*stat rationis inops, iam iamque aut saxa malignis
 expectat summersa uadis aut uertice acuto
 spumantes scopulos erectae incurrere prorae:
 talis opaca legens nemorum Cadmeius heros
 accelerat, uasto metuenda umbone ferarum
 excutiens stabula, et prono uirgulta refringit
 pectore (dat stimulos animo uis maesta timoris)
 donec ab Inachiis uicta caligine tectis
 emicuit lucem deuexa in moenia fundens
 Larisaeus apex. illo spe concitus omni
 euolat, hinc celsae Iunonia templa Prosymnae
 laeuis habens, hinc Herculeo signata uapore
 Lernaesi stagna atra uadi, tandemque reclusis
 infertur portis. actutum regia cernit
 uestibula; hic artus imbri uentoque rigentes
 proicit ignotaeque adclinis postibus aulae
 inuitat temes ad dura cubilia somnos.*

(1.342-89)

But neither did clouds in a red sky promise
 returning sunshine, nor did a long twilight
 with reducing shadows shine from reflected Phoebus:
 black night, penetrable by no flame
 and thicker nearer the earth, covered the sky. Now the prisons
 of frozen Aeolia are struck and sound out, and the storm to come
 threatens with hoarse mouth, the roaring cross winds
 collide and pluck at the pole, its hinge removed,
 while each seizes the sky for himself; but mostly it is the Auster
 that doubles the night, twisting the shaded whirlpools,
 and pours down rainstorms which harsh Boreas solidifies
 with his dry mouth; also sudden lightnings
 quiver, and the ether chafed by a sudden flash is broken.
 Now Nemea, now the high peaks of Arcadia
 next to the Taenarian groves are drenched; the Inachus rushes in a great
 column as does the Erasinus rising into cold waves.
 Rivers, dusty before and to be trampled on, could now
 not be restrained by delaying dykes, and the Lerna, flooded
 deeply from its pools, and foamed with ancient poison.
 Every glade was broken, gales snatched the ancient
 branches of the woods and, seen through the ages by no
 suns, the summers of shadowed Lycaeus lay open.
 But he [Polynices], now wondering at rocks fleeing from the broken
 ridges, now made by his ear fearful of cloud-born
 rivers from the mountains, and the houses of shepherds and flocks snatched
 by the mad storm on every side, distraught, slowly no more
 and uncertain of the way, devours his vast journey
 through black silences; fear from every side drove him and from every side his brother.
 And just as a sailor caught in a stormy sea,

to whom neither the sluggish Plough nor the Moon with her friendly shine
shows the way, stays in the middle of the tumult of sky
and sea, bereft of strategy and now, now expects either reefs
submerged in treacherous shallows or foaming rocks
with sharp tops to run into his upturned prow:
even so, the Cadmean hero picking out the dark parts of the glades,
hurries on, shaking out the fearful lairs of wild beasts
with his huge shield boss, and breaks through the thickets with breast
turned down (the sad force of fear gives goads to his spirit)
until, with darkness overcome by the Inachian houses,
the Larisaean peak shone out pouring light
onto the sloping walls. To there, excited by every hope,
he flies, on this side keeping the temple of Juno of high
Prosymna to the left, on the other side the dark pools of the Lernaean
waters marked by Hercules' heat, and, at last, he is brought in
to the opened gates. Immediately, he sees the king's
forecourt; here he throws down his body stiff from rain
and wind, and leaning on the doors of the unfamiliar palace
he summons light sleep to his hard bed.

The reader will see that though the strict structural parallelism between the *Aeneid* and the *Thebaid* has come to an end, the connection between the two epics foreshadowed at *Silvae* 4 and trumpeted at the end of the *Thebaid*, is still fully engaged. There is indeed, in these storm scenes, a complex interplay of similarities. In the *Aeneid* (1.81-123), the storm is a direct result of Juno's anger and her instructions to Aeolus. In the *Thebaid*, no cause is postulated, the storm simply happens. We are subtly reminded of this point by *claustra... Aeoliae* (1.346-7: the prisons of Aeolia) which reminds us of the Virgilian Aeolus, but forces us to acknowledge that he has no role to play in this storm. In both epics, however, the storm advances the plot. In the *Aeneid*, it led on to Aeneas' encounter with Dido, in the *Thebaid*, it started a chain of events which led to the friendship between Polynices and Tydeus. But, because the storm had no expressed causation, we are entitled to presume that that friendship is part of no plan. At 1.370-5, Statius gives us a storm at sea, also with no apparent cause, as a simile. This must underline the fact that Virgil's Book 1 storm was at sea, Statius' on land. However, Virgil himself provides a precedent for blurring the distinction. At *Aeneid* 1.124, during Virgil's sea storm, we read *interea magno misceri murmure pontum* and at 4.160, *interea magno misceri murmure caelum*. This to introduce the land storm engineered by Venus at *Aen.* 4.120, a storm which drives Aeneas and Dido into the cave and cements their relationship. Once again, we see the contrast between Statius' storm with no cause or instigator and Virgil's, a result of Venus' scheming, and important for the development of the plot. In both cases, however, the distinction between storm at sea and storm on land is blurred. In Virgil's case, both types advance the plot and share one near identical line; Statius' land storm includes a simile based on a storm at sea. Thus similarity and difference are, in both authors, inextricably bound together.

So far, we have concentrated on the relationship between *Thebaid* 1 and *Aeneid* 1. Next, however, we need to turn our attention to the beginning of the second half of the *Aeneid*, in Book 7. There we meet Latinus, a noble but old king, who is seeking a husband for his only daughter, Lavinia. Two striking portents, a swarm of bees predicting, according to a prophet, an approaching army, and Lavinia's hair catching fire, persuaded Latinus to consult Faunus, who, after elaborate ceremonies, forbade Latinus to marry his daughter to a local man and predicted a glorious future for her descendants if she married the correct stranger. The elaborate nature of these portents made them seem authentic and, in any case,

Virgil's readership, with the benefit of hindsight, knew that they were authentic. Similarly, with Polynices apparently safely asleep in the forecourt of Adrastus' palace, Statius gives us a brief description of the king, revealing him to be very like Latinus and in a similar predicament:

*rex ibi, tranquillae medio de limite uitae
in senium uergens, populos Adrastus habebat,
diues cuius et utroque Iouem de sanguine ducens.
hic sexus melioris inops sed prole uirebat
feminea, gemino natarum pignore fultus.
cui Phoebus generos (monstrum exitiabile dictu!
mox adaperita fides) fato ducente canebat
saetigerumque suem et fuluum aduentare leonem.
id uoluens non ipse pater, non docte futuri
Amphiaræ uides, etenim uetat auctor Apollo.
tantum in corde sedens aegrescit cura parenti.* (1.390-400)

The king, Adrastus, passing from the middle limit of his peaceful life into old age, was ruling the people there, rich in ancestors and tracing his ancestry to Jove on both sides. He lacked children of the better sex but flourished³ with female offspring, propped up by a double pledge of daughters. Phoebus prophesied to him (a deadly portent to say! But soon its truth was revealed) that sons-in-law, with fate to lead, were approaching, a bristling pig and a tawny lion. Turning this over, not the father himself, not you, Amphiarus, learned about the future, understands; for its source, Apollo, forbids. Only his care, sitting in his heart, grows sick in the father.

Once again, similarity and contrast are intertwined. Both kings are noble, both have a daughter, or daughters, whom they wish to marry off, both receive portents. Latinus, however, is given clear and auspicious portents and the reader knows that what has been predicted will take place. The divine intervention is purposeful. Adrastus, on the other hand, is left in uncomfortable ignorance. Apollo refuses to allow either the king or Amphiarus, his priest/prophet, to know what the portents mean, nor is there any sense that we are witnessing the working out of some great divine plan. Readers who know the mythology or who have read the epic before will know that the rest of this old king's life will be neither 'peaceful' (*tranquilla*), nor long.

There then follows an account of Tydeus' flight from his native Calydon through the same storm suffered by Polynices and his arrival at the same shelter as his (1.401-7), followed by a savage fight between the two young men (1.408-30), until it is stopped by Adrastus, woken from his nocturnal sleep by the brawl outside (1.431-46). At first they continue their quarrel, but only with words (1.447-51), then Tydeus tries to justify himself at some length and ends with an account of his ancestry (1.451-65). Polynices' reply starts with an attempt to give his ancestry in return, but the need to mention Oedipus silences him almost before he can start (1.465-7). Adrastus then calms them down and takes them into his palace predicting that they may even become friends, a prediction which, as Statius himself says, was to be fulfilled (1.468-81). Next Adrastus notices a lion's skin on Polynices' shoulders and a boar's skin on Tydeus', which, naturally, he interprets with joy as the fulfilment of Apollo's portent (1.482-97). Our sense of unease on his behalf, however, is not alleviated when he turns to a god to give extravagant praise to and chooses Night because it was at night that he found his sons-in-law (1.482-509). The general associations of Night are bad enough, but we have not forgotten the close association between Oedipus and Night:

merserat aeterna damnatum nocte pudorem (1.47)
noctemque nefandam / saepe tuli (1.69-70)

Adrastus becomes ever more enthusiastic in his praise of Night. Note in particular, during his address to Night, the opening word, (*Nox* 1.498) and, a little further on:

semper honoratam dimensis orbibus anni
te [Noctem] domus ista colet; nigri tibi, diua, litabunt
electa ceruice greges...

Always in the measured circles of the year will that house
 worship you [Night]; black herds with choice necks,
 goddess, will be sacrificed to you...

Our sense of foreboding is strengthened when we remember that black animals are sacrificed only to the denizens of the Underworld. Dido, in her preparations for entertaining Aeneas, had organized a magnificent sacrifice of twenty bulls, a hundred hogs and a hundred lambs, none of them, we should guess, black (*Aen.* 1.634-5). Just as Dido holds a cheerful banquet for Aeneas and his men at the end of *Aeneid* 1, so Adrastus holds a banquet full of foreboding to welcome the two strangers; during the festivities, the king's two daughters are brought down to see, and to be seen by, the two strangers who, it seems, are the fulfilment of Apollo's riddling prediction. So both banquets sow the seeds of possible marriages to come; in the case of Aeneas and Dido, the marriage never properly happens and ends in safety for the Roman dream, and tragedy for her but not for him; in the case of Adrastus and his daughters, the marriages did take place but with disastrous consequences for all concerned. At the end of the banquet, libations are poured to all the gods, especially Apollo, from an ancient cup elaborately decorated with lifelike images of Perseus and the Gorgon's head, and of Ganymede snatched away by an eagle (1.542-56), not, perhaps, the most auspicious images possible. Dido's silverware too was heavily decorated, not with sinister images but with *fortia facta patrum* (*Aen.* 1.641).

Adrastus then explains why his people worship Apollo (1.557-668). The dreadful story reinforces our sense that this epic does not celebrate good government either in heaven or on earth. I have discussed it in detail elsewhere;⁶ suffice it to say here that it develops the idea that Apollo, and probably the other Olympians, are utterly amoral. Critics have recognized many respects in which the incidents described seem to relate to aspects of Oedipus' own unhappy story; some of these alleged parallels are probably no more than the inevitable overlaps when similar stories are rehearsed; others seem more plausible, but since I have nothing to add to my 1990 analysis of this section, I shall say no more here, except that a city which has as its central cult the most flawed Apollo imaginable will inevitably seem to be destined for disaster.

Before the libations to Apollo are completed, Adrastus asks the two strangers to identify themselves (1.668-9); before Tydeus can comply, Adrastus reveals that he has already overheard the answer (1.669-72). This leaves Polynices exposed and so, nervously and apologetically, he identifies himself (1.673-81). This enables Adrastus to reveal that he, and indeed the whole world, knows the story of Oedipus, echoing Dido's words to Aeneas. Compare those:

'soluite corde metum, Teucri, secludite curas.
 ...
quis genus Aeneadum, quis Troiae nesciat urbem,
uirtutesque uirosque aut tanti incendia belli?
non obtusa adeo gestamus pectora Poeni,
nec tam auersus equos Tyria Sol iungit ab urbe ...' (*Aen.* 1.562, 565-68)

with Adrastus' words:

*tum motus Adrastus
hospitiis (agnouit enim): 'quid nota recondis?
scimus' ait 'nec sic auersum fama Mycenis
uoluit iter. regnum et furias oculosque pudentes
nouit et Arctois si quis de solibus horret
quique bibit Gangem aut nigrum occasibus intrat
Oceanium et si quos incerto litore Syrtes
destituunt...'* (1.681-8)

Then Adrastus, moved
to hospitality (for he recognized him), said: 'Why hide what is known?
We know and fame does not roll its way
so far from Mycenae. The kingdom and the madness and the shameful eyes
are known to anyone who shivers in the Arctic sun
and to anyone who drinks the Ganges or enters black Ocean
in the West and to those who have been left by the Syrtes on an uncertain
shore...'

But whereas Dido's hospitality was excited by her knowledge of Aeneas' great reputation, Adrastus' hospitality was offered in spite of the shameful background suffered by Polynices, son of Oedipus. The book ends with an elaborate hymn to Apollo which, given all that we have seen of Apollo, fills the reader with foreboding.

I hope that I have shown that Statius, in his *Thebaid*, is setting up an epic to respond in detail to Virgil's and that his account is deeply pessimistic when compared to Virgil's. To those of you who, to any degree, take what is popularly known as the Harvard position, that is, that the *Aeneid* is itself pessimistic, I have two responses. First, I personally see in the *Aeneid* admiration for the privations suffered by those who have contributed to creating a modern Rome and to confidence in its future, but no pessimism. Secondly, that since Statius' epic is so manifestly more pessimistic than Virgil's, it is evident that if we find the *Aeneid* bleak, we shall be even more horrified by the pessimism of the *Thebaid*. That of course inevitably moves on to what might be called the Ahl theory, i.e. that Statius and others produce material at two levels, one which to the tyrant will seem to be flattery, but to the *cognoscenti* will be obvious ridicule.

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NOTES

- 1 In Shackleton Bailey's new Loeb Statius, volume 2, pp. 10-24.
- 2 During the struggle between Vespasian and Vitellius in 69, the eighteen-year-old Domitian took refuge in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, according to Suetonius *Dom.* 1.2. Elsewhere (*Silv.* 5.3.195-204), Statius records a much more flattering account of the battle, reporting that his father had intended to write a poem on the subject. See also Tac. *Hist.* 3.69-75.
- 3 Hill, D.E. (1990) 'Statius' *Thebaid*: a glimmer of light in a sea of darkness', in A.J. Boyle, ed. *The Imperial Muse: Flavian Epicist to Claudian* (Bendigo) 98-118
- 4 Hill (1990) 106-7
- 5 'flourished'; the Latin word *uirebat* may be chosen for its punning effect with the word *uir* 'a man' as opposed to 'a woman'.
- 6 Hill (1990) 113-15.