

Sabine Successors? The Failure of Female Mediation

The ends and closures of Roman war epic are themes that have generated a great deal of academic study.¹ The end of war is an event that usually anticipates the end of the whole poem and strongly determines its closing ethos. For the ideological content of the epic, the end of the conflict can be considered an equally important structural point as its beginning. Against this background, it might seem somewhat odd or surprising that Roman war epics rarely present a harmonious closure: more often than not, the narrative seems to be left unfinished, or the ending is confusing, since it directly contradicts or ignores something that has happened earlier.² The best example is the much-disputed ending of the *Aeneid*. The episode where *pius* Aeneas thrusts his sword into Turnus' breast, ignoring his pleas for mercy, has given rise to so many differing readings concerning Virgil's moral code and the ethics of the *Aeneid* that they form a branch of their own among scholarship.³

The other surviving Roman war epics do not appear to offer any much greater feeling of cohesion and closure. The *Pharsalia* breaks off in book ten, leaving the reader in doubt about how the poem would have ended—or whether the confusingly abrupt end is, in fact, deliberate and the poet's final note on the topic of civil war. The *Argonautica* is unquestionably incomplete, and ends without even hinting at the approaching end. Of Statius' *Achilleid*, only one and a half books survive. The situation is not much easier in the case of the *Thebaid* and the *Punica*, epics that were completed and that have survived in their entirety. Although an articulate and indisputable end is achieved in these poems, it is in both cases ambiguous and morally confusing in a manner

1 For studies of closure in Roman epic, see Dietrich 1999; Putnam 1990; Putnam 1995; Fantham 1997; Hardie 1993; Hardie 1997, 139–162.

2 This feature can be seen in Homeric epic, too. De Jong, who has examined closure in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*, points out that the lack of formalised endings has been linked to the oral background of these poems. De Jong 2007, 19. In Roman war epic of the early Principate, this naturally cannot be the reason—it seems more likely that the authoritative Homeric example influenced the Roman poets and had an impact on their ways of dealing with ending and closure.

3 See e.g. Quinn 1968, 270–278; Putnam 1990; Putnam 1995, 172–243, Gill 1997, 228–241; Galinsky 1988.

similar to the *Aeneid*. The *Thebaid* ends with *nefas* conquering every positive value cherished in the Roman worldview. After the protagonists have been wiped off the stage, social harmony is ostensibly restored by Theseus, who takes over the corrupt Thebes and ends Creon's tyranny. However, the moral ambiguity of Theseus' character makes the reader doubt about the peace and prosperity of his reign. Because of the gloomy overtones of the scene, many scholars have argued that the Theban cycle, marked by violence and self-destruction, represents a pattern of *nefas* that even the destruction of Oedipus' family cannot set right.⁴

The *Punica* has a different but nonetheless ambiguous ending. While the narrator rejoices in the end of the second Punic War, he simultaneously reminds the reader that this is anything but the end of trouble for the Romans.⁵ The victory at the war, while it marks the beginning of Rome's mastery over the Mediterranean, is represented as the moral peak of the Roman people, from whence the inevitable direction is decline—a moral decay that will culminate in a civil war.⁶ This means that the ambiguity that characterises the endings of Roman war-centred epics, from the *Aeneid* onwards, is strongly present in Silius Italicus' patriotic poem too.⁷ All in all, the end of war in Roman war epics generally appears to pose more questions than it answers: this is a feature that, at first sight, would seem to conflict with the genre's fondness for master narratives and teleological progressions. As Hardie puts it, epic is a genre that “strives for totality and completion”; at the same time, however it is characterised by constant instability.⁸ The continuous tension

4 The ending of the *Thebaid* is a disputed subject; a prevalent view is that Statius closes the epic with the same desperation that marks it throughout, or at least with very ambiguous overtones concerning the moral issues. See e.g. Hershkowitz 1998, 296–301; Pagán 2000, 434–448; Ganiban 2007, 212–232; McNelis 2007, 152–177. For an alternative reading, see Fantham, who argues that the epic can be interpreted as having an optimistic ending. Fantham 1997. Bessone discusses the ending from the broader perspective of Flavian imperial ideology. Bessone 2013, 101–105.

5 Sil. *Pun.* 17.618–654.

6 In *Pun.* 10.657–658, Silius states that *haec tum Roma fuit. post te cui vertere mores/si stabat fatis, potius, Carthago, maneres*; as Dominik puts it, “Carthage is ruined militarily by defeat but Rome is ruined morally by victory”. Dominik 2003, 495. A future decline is implied already in Sil. *Pun.* 3.575–585, and is made explicit in book fifteen by the threat of the goddess *Voluptas*, who claims that *venient, venient mea tempora quondam, cum docilis nostris magno certamine Roma/serviet imperiis, et honos mihi habebitur uni* (Sil. *Pun.* 15.125–127). Here, Silius appears to recall the Roman historiographic tradition that often viewed the Punic Wars as the origin of the Roman decline. Val. Max. 7.2.3; Sall. *Cat.* 10.1, 11.4–8, *Iug.* 41.1–5; Vell. Pat. 1.12.2–7, 2.1–3. Jacobs 2010, 124–125.

7 See Dietrich 1999, 42.

8 Hardie 1993, 1–3.

between closing the text and keeping it open is a feature most characteristic of the war epics of the Roman Principate.⁹

It is noteworthy that in the final moments of war and in the final pages of the epics, women often appear as central characters. In a sense, this reflects the traditions of Graeco-Roman literature in general: we can see the deep-rooted idea of women as the victims of war who question its meaning and purpose—examined in detail in the previous chapters—crystallised in the literary archetype of a female mediator. The woman who places herself between the warring parties and uses her familial authority to end the hostilities is a character that Roman legendary history was particularly fond of.¹⁰ The story about the Sabine women is the best-known story where women, on their own initiative, intervene to stop the war.¹¹ Another famous example is Coriolanus' mother Veturia, a legendary matron who prevents the Volscian attack against Rome.¹² These women use their emotional and social power to prevent, delay or end an armed conflict—they place themselves in between the battle fronts, transfer the enmity between the men to themselves, and stand against the patriarchal power in order to protect the patrilineal continuity.

These exemplary stories created a positive model for Roman women to emulate, and conveyed an idea that, in difficult times, traditional female virtues could come to the rescue and save the day. The idea of female self-sacrifice as the final obstacle standing in the way of an unjust war therefore characterises the Roman legendary past and defines the appropriate political activity of women as peace-making and mediating.¹³ It is also crucial to note that, because these stories were so essential to the Romans' perception of their common past, the kind of female virtue that was depicted in them was gradually established as an important defining factor in Roman identity.

It is obvious that models such as the Sabine women and Veturia shaped the Roman epic poets' understanding of the female role at the end of war, and affected their ways of interpreting elements from Roman history and from classical mythology. Nevertheless, while the legacy of Roman historiography is clearly strong in war epic, it is intriguing that in this respect, the differences between the two genres are often more evident than their similarities. There is a dark and threatening overtone—an aura of violence and destruction—that marks the peaceful efforts of the epic women, and usually dooms them to fail-

9 Dietrich 1999, 43.

10 Ganiban 2007, 152–159.

11 Liv. 1.9–13; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.30–33, 2.45–46; Plut. *Vit. Rom.* 19.

12 Liv. 2.40; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 8.44–54; Val. Max. 5.2.1a; Plut. *Vit. Cor.* 33–36.

13 Pomeroy 1975, 186.

ure from the very outset. In order to understand why this is so, one must go back, and examine epic women's role in the development of the conflict, starting from the beginning of the war.

1 The Futility of *mora*, the Failure of Mediation: Mixing and Juxtaposing Epic with Historiography

A typical way of opposing war and violence in Roman literature is via the tactic of delay—or *mora*, as it is sometimes called.¹⁴ Generally, the *mora* theme means that one or more of the characters endeavour to postpone the crisis, regardless of whether they know that these efforts are in vain.¹⁵ Similarly, the internal and the external audiences are usually well aware of the futility of the attempt. It is notable that, when the *mora* theme appears in war-centred epic, the delayer practically never offers a valid alternative to war; this is what makes her or his attempt all the more feeble and ineffective.

In certain situations, *mora* can develop into more active mediation between the warring parties. Mediators are generally more confident about their cause than delayers, and often have some genuine chance of getting their way. Moreover, the mediator usually offers some sort of an alternative to the war, and is able to imagine the peaceful coexistence of the warring parties after the conflict is over.

In Roman historiography, in particular, women tend to play crucial roles in the *mora/mediatrix* tradition—and this does not concern the legendary past alone, but is a phenomenon that can be observed in Roman authors' depictions of the more recent, recorded history. Outstanding examples of women acting as both delayers and mediators can be found especially in the accounts of the civil war period. Appian, Plutarch and Velleius Paterculus represent both Julia and Octavia as maintainers of peace between the men in their family: both women are praised for having been the only thing that held the triumvirates together—until the inevitable collapse.¹⁶ In this literary tradition, the woman is in the first place an instrument who, through her position in the patriarchal family structure, links the enemies to each other. Because of her unique rela-

14 For the definition and function of *mora* in epic, see Ganiban 2007, 152–175; Schetter 1960, 115–116.

15 Ganiban has studied the Homeric, the Virgilian and the Lucanian influence on the *mora* topos in Statius' *Thebaid*; see Ganiban 2007, 152–153, 156, 158–159.

16 On Julia, e.g., App. *B Civ.* 2.19; Vell. Pat. 2.47.2.; Plut. *Vit. Caes.* 23; Plut. *Vit. Pomp.* 23.4–5; on Octavia, e.g., Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 31.2–3, 35.1–3, 54.3.

tionship with both sides of the conflict, she can operate ‘behind the scenes’ to mediate the conflicting goals of her husband and her birth family.¹⁷

Moreover, the grounding principle of this literary tradition, and the matter that enables the women’s mediating activity, is that the woman is understood to be an outsider in the conflicts of men on the grounds of her sex. She is a non-political creature by nature, driven primarily by her pursuit for familial harmony and by her need to secure the generational continuity. This outsider status enables her to distance her own person from the conflict and remain, in a sense, impartial. The characteristically Roman issue of the woman’s conflicting loyalties towards her husband and her birth family is crucial to this theme: the high praise that Julia and Octavia receive is largely due to their ability to remain loyal to both directions and to distance themselves from the political content of the conflict. Correspondingly, women of the late Republic who failed to do precisely this are judged harshly in the literary sources. Skinner argues that Clodia Metelli’s bad reputation was largely due to the fact that she openly took her brother’s side in his particular rivalries, regardless of the tension between him and her husband.¹⁸ Apparently, the ability not to choose sides was considered the ultimate feminine virtue that, when practiced to perfection, could maintain peace in the entire Republic. On the other hand, having an ulterior agenda and meddling in political affairs for one’s own benefit could easily lead to the public defamation of a Roman elite woman. It shattered the illusion of the temporal scene—that is, the political affairs—as the male domain, and of the female domestic *pietas* as a *force majeure* that could stand in the way of war when things went awry.

In Roman war epic, the adaptations of the *mora/mediatrix* theme often differ drastically from the historiographic tradition. For instance, whereas the mediating women are many and memorable in the works of Augustan historiographers, their coeval Virgil makes relatively little use of this storyline.¹⁹ When he does so, he leans considerably more towards the *mora* than the *mediatrix* theme. In the *Aeneid*, women do not run *inter tela volantia*,²⁰ and in the few episodes where they try to delay the violence, they do not appear to have much

17 For further discussion of the significance of family relations for political alliances, see e.g. Harders 2008, 51–59, 281–288; Bauman 1994, 91–93.

18 Skinner 1983, 280. For Clodius’ conflicts with his political adversaries, see Gruen 1997, 95–98, 255–258. On Clodia’s role as an intermediary, Cic. *Att.* 2.9.1, 2.14.1. For Cicero’s accusations of Clodia, see Cic. *Att.* 2.12.2; Cic. *Cael.* 20.50, 32.78, 50. Skinner 1983, *passim*; Skinner 2011, 1–19; Butrica 2002, 507–516; Harders 2008: 215–248.

19 In addition to the stories about the Sabine women and Veturia, see also the less happy tale of the Horatii and the Curiatii: Liv. 1.24–26; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 3.13–22.

20 Liv. 1.13.1.

confidence in themselves. Instead, their efforts to delay the inevitable seem weak and doomed from the outset. In book twelve, when Turnus is departing for a duel against Aeneas, both Amata and Latinus strive to change his mind.²¹ First, the king, who blames himself for Turnus' inevitable demise, entreats him to surrender and save his life. When Turnus remains unmoved by his arguments, Amata, in turn, steps in:

At regina nova pugnae conterrita sorte/flebat et ardentem generum moritura tenebat: 'Turne, per has ego te lacrimas, per si quis Amatae/tangit honos animum: spes tu nunc una, senectae/tu requies miserae, decus imperiumque Latini/te penes, in te omnis domus inclinata recumbit./unum oro: desiste manum committere Teucris./qui te cumque manent isto certamine casus/et me, Turne, manent; simul haec invisa relinquam/lumina nec generum Aenean captiva videbo.'

VERG. *Aen.* 12.54–63

But the queen, terrified by this new turn of the conflict, wept and, ready to die, clutched her zealous son-in-law: "Turnus, by these tears, by whatever esteem for Amata that may yet touch your heart—you are now my only hope, the repose of my miserable old age; the honour and power of Latinus are in your hands, on you our entire falling house leans—I beg you this one thing: desist from joining combat with the Trojans. Whatever disasters await you in that battle await me too, Turnus; at the same time with you I will leave this hateful light of life, and will not, taken captive, see Aeneas as my son."

As I noted in chapter two, Amata is the prime example of a passionate epic woman driven by her bodily drives. Frustrated by her constant marginalisation and her lack of influence, she is inclined to forsake reason and repeatedly behaves like a raving lunatic. Here, once again, Amata's passionate and self-destructive speech—modeled on the speeches of Hecuba and Andromache in the *Iliad*—appears as a direct antithesis to her husband's composed and reasonably argued pleas.²² Whereas Latinus' requests are rational, Amata is all emotion—furthermore, her pleas ignore the interests of the community, since they are all about her and her personal suffering. Both approaches, nevertheless, turn out to be equally ineffective. One look at the blushing Lavinia

21 The episode is strongly modelled on Hom. *Il.* 22.37–92, where Priam and Hecuba together try to stop Hector from meeting Achilles in a duel.

22 Hom. *Il.* 22.82–89, 6.405–439.

is enough to excite Turnus to rush more eagerly to arms.²³ The intervention is so strikingly weak and ineffective that it appears to completely undermine the Roman historiographic tradition concerning women's mediating roles.

This inefficient delay is repeated about a hundred lines later, when Juno sends Turnus' sister, the water-nymph Iuturna, to protect him in battle and to prevent his duel with Aeneas.²⁴ Iuturna's help is rejected by Turnus who, upon hearing about Amata's death, is stricken with grief and accepts his own forthcoming doom in a fatalistic manner.²⁵ Overlooking Turnus' rejection of her help, Iuturna continues to guard his steps until Jupiter himself eventually sends down *dirae* to drive the nymph from the battlefield.²⁶ The Iuturna episode is a textbook example of useless, yet hopeful, *mora*—a frustrating fight against the inevitable destiny. Its sole function appears to be to depict Juno's final intrusion into the war, and to anticipate the reconciliation between her and Jupiter.²⁷

Virgil therefore deliberately distances himself from the historiographic tradition that his coevals represent. His female characters are a far cry from the courageous Sabine women. In the epic universe of the *Aeneid*, the teleological drive of war and violence cannot be stopped with women's tears—apparently, all they can do is to start it.

The pessimistic approach towards women's ability to delay conflicts is evident also in the epics of Lucan and Statius. Not only are the failures of *mora* and mediation more repetitive in the works of Virgil's epic successors, but their ideological significance seems to be accentuated further. In the *Aeneid*, the failures of Amata and Iuturna to protect Turnus are firmly in line with the teleological drive of the epic, and with the optimistic idea concerning the future union of the Trojans and the Italians—in a sense, the women's efforts *must* fail in order that a new, peaceful regime can be established. This Virgilian hopefulness is, however, completely absent from the *Pharsalia* and the *Thebaid*. In Lucan's civil war epic, *mora* is embodied in the person of Julia, whose marriage to Pompey was supposed to maintain peace between the triumvirs. Here, the remarkable difference between epic and historiography can be particularly well observed: whereas Livy and Plutarch repeatedly praise Julia for her mediating work, in the *Pharsalia* her role as an arbiter is never actualised.²⁸ Lucan only states that she *could* have been that person—he never admits that, for a good

23 Verg. *Aen.* 12.64–84.

24 Verg. *Aen.* 12.134–160.

25 Verg. *Aen.* 12.468–485, 12.623–683.

26 Verg. *Aen.* 12.780–790, 12.843–886.

27 Verg. *Aen.* 12.791–842.

28 Liv. *Per.* 106; Plut. *Vit. Caes.* 23; Plut. *Vit. Pomp.* 53.

while, she actually *was*. Even Julia's ghost does not raise a finger to reconcile Caesar and Pompey; when she appears to Pompey before the battle of Pharsalia, she is more of a threatening Fury than a peaceful arbiter:²⁹

—*diri tum plena horroris imago/visa caput maestum per hiantes Iulia terras/tollere et accenso furialis stare sepulcro.*

LUC. *Phar.* 3.9–11

—Then Julia, a ghost full of dread and horror, was seen raising her sad head above the gaping earth and standing frenzied on her kindled funeral pyre.

Julia's frightening appearance is made scarier by her speech, where she threatens to haunt Pompey until his death—a death that the civil war will soon bring about. “My shadows, my ghost, will never let you forget, Magnus, that you are Caesar's son-in-law” (*numquam tibi, Magne, per umbras/perque meos manes genero non esse licebit*), she states, but this reference to her role as a link between the adversaries is not peaceful, but rather increases the hostility.³⁰ In effect, Julia's appearance only excites Pompey's fear and battle lust, and makes him rush more eagerly to arms.

The poet also stresses Julia's wasted potential as an arbiter, stating that

Nam pignora iuncti/sanguinis et diro ferales omine taedas/abstulit ad manes Parcarum Iulia saeva/intercepta manu. Quod si tibi fata dedissent/maiores in luce moras, tu sola furem/inde virum poteras atque hinc retinere parentem/armatasque manus excusso iungere ferro,/ut generos soceris mediae iunxere Sabinae./Morte tua discussa fides, bellumque movere/permisum ducibus.

LUC. *Phar.* 1.111–120

For when Julia was cut off by the cruel hand of fate, she bore with her to the underworld the promise of offspring united by blood and the wedding torches which the terrible omen had turned into funeral torches. If only Fate had granted you a longer life, Julia, only you could then have restrained the fury of your husband on one side and your father on the other. You might have struck down their swords and made them clasp

29 Luc. *Phar.* 3.8–35.

30 Luc. *Phar.* 3.31–32.

their armed hands, as the Sabine women, stepping between the sons- and the fathers-in-law, joined them together. But loyalty was quashed by your death, and it allowed the generals to pursue war.

The fact that the narrator explicitly mentions the Sabine simile looks like a deliberate attempt to underline Julia's failure to rise to the level set by her legendary paragons. It is a marked comparison between the good old legendary times and the hopeless decay of the late Republic.

The bitterness and the disappointment at Julia's wasted potential run through the *Pharsalia*, as the poet repeatedly refers to Pompey as Caesar's *gener*, reminding the reader of the broken family bond between them.³¹ It would also seem that with the poet's hindsight, Lucan constructs this female failure to mediate and maintain peace as a feature that marks the Roman civil wars throughout. Before relating Julia's death, he explains the origins of the civil war:

*Dividitur ferro regnum, populique potentis,/quae mare, quae terras, quae
totum possidet orbem,/non cepit fortuna duos.*

LUC. *Phar.* 1.109–111

The kingly power was divided by the sword; and the prosperity of the mighty people, that possessed sea and land and the whole wide world, was not enough for two.

The reader instantly recalls the failure of not only the first, but also the second triumvirate to divide the *orbis* between the commanders. By emphasising Julia's unrealised potential to maintain peace in the empire, Lucan therefore hints at Octavia's future failure to do so. Women's failed attempts to fulfill their mediating roles become the milestones of the history of the civil wars.

The whole situation seems paradoxical and marked with a cruel irony; civil war is a situation where the familial and the political spheres intermingle and the warring parties are closely related to each other, and this provides optimal circumstances for female mediation. The stage is set for the successors of the Sabines to save the day—but, against all odds, these efforts fail, and the women's family-driven mediation proves inadequate to solve the political crisis that underlies the situation. In the *Pharsalia*, the ideal of a virtuous *mediatrix*

31 Luc. *Phar.* 1.289–290, 2.652, 3.31–32, 4.188, 4.802, 6.5, 6.12, 6.304–305, 7.611, 7.723, 7.806, 8.555, 9.952, 9.1015, 9.1026, 9.1049, 9.1055, 9.1058, 9.1086, 10.170, 10.184, 10.417. Caesar as Pompey's *socer*, see Luc. *Phar.* 7.71, 9.1038, 9.1094. Compare Verg. *Aen.* 6.828–831.

who operates behind the scenes is definitively shattered, and the poet offers no Virgilian hope that this disappointment might lead to a happy ending—instead, the failure paves the way for the shattering of the collective Roman-ness and eventually, for despotism and tyranny.

While Lucan plays with the grim and gloomy *mora* theme that suits the topic and style of his epic, Statius, in turn, depicts several failures of more active interference. In book three of the *Thebaid*, when the chthonic forces are unleashed and the war is on its way, Venus takes a stand for peace. The poet describes how the goddess steps in front of Mars' chariots, begging for restraint:

tunc pectora summo/acclinata iugo vultumque obliqua madentem/incipit—/‘bella etiam in Thebas, socer o pulcherrime, bella/ipse paras ferroque tuos abolere nepotes?/nec genus Harmoniae nec te conubia caelo/festa nec hae quicquam lacrimae, furibunde, morantur?/criminis haec merces? hoc fama pudorque relictus,/hoc mihi Lemniacae de te meruere catenae?/perge libens; at non eadem Vulcania nobis/obsequia, et laesi servit tamen ira mariti./illum ego perpetuis mihi desudare caminis/si iubeam vigilesque operi transmittere noctes, gaudeat ornatusque novos ipsique laboret/arma tibi; tu—sed scopulos et aëna precando/flectere corda paro—.’

STAT. *Theb.* 3.265–267, 3.269–281

Then, leaning her breast against the top of the yoke, with her teary face inclined to one side, she begins:—‘War against *Thebes* even? O you, the best of fathers, do you yourself prepare to destroy your own descendants by the sword and war? Is it that neither Harmonia's race, nor the wedding party in heaven, nor these tears can hold you back whatsoever, you madman? Is this the reward of my adultery? Is this what I deserve from you after forsaking my reputation and my shame, after suffering the chains of Lemnos? On your merry way then! But not so does Vulcan obey me; at least my betrayed husband's anger serves me still. If I ordered him to ceaselessly sweat for me at his forge, and spend sleepless nights at work, he would be happy to, and would drudge at new equipment—he would even make weapons for you. But you—oh, but it is rocks and a heart of bronze that I aim to soften with my pleading’.

Venus' speech is a very typically feminine plea, since all her arguments are grounded on the personal relationship between herself and the addressee; she demands that the other delays his action as a personal favour to *her*. As female mediators are wont to do, she does not meddle with the political background of the conflict, nor does she seek direct personal gain from preventing

it—these elements notwithstanding, her plea is completely void of power to persuade, as she herself seems to be well aware. Much like the manly matrons discussed in chapter four, Venus gives up before even finishing her plea, as if her efforts to stop or delay the war were a mere formality. We should note that this is an entirely different Venus than the bloodthirsty *dira* one meets in *Thebaid* 5, when she reappears in the story of the Lemnian conflict. There, her power to generate violence and destruction is limitless and unparalleled; here, she seems to be aware of her inability to stand in the way of the inevitable. It would seem that Statius' Venus—like Virgil's Amata—is at her most powerful when stirring up violence, not when trying to prevent it.

Unsurprisingly, Mars' answer is just as hollow as Venus' plea. Although he is stunned by her bold gesture, it has no real influence on him:

O mihi bellorum requies et sacra voluptas/unaque pax animo; soli cui tanta potestas/divorumque hominumque, meis occurrere telis/impune et media quamvis in caede frementes/hos assistere equos, hunc ensem avellere dextrae.—.

STAT. *Theb.* 3.295–299

O, my respite from the wars, my sacred pleasure, the one and only peace of my mind: You alone of gods and men have such power, that you can march to meet my weapons and escape punishment, and step, as you like, in the midst of these growling horses that are headed for slaughter, and wrest this sword from my hand.

The flattery notwithstanding, the reader is left with an impression that these are empty words, mere verbiage intended to conceal the fact that Venus' influence is miniscule and her opinion insignificant. After invoking the unalterable will of Fate, Mars hastens away without giving Venus another opportunity to have her say. The whole episode is a feast of idle words, and a grotesque antithesis to the heroic interventions of women in Roman historiography. Its sole function appears to be to stress the decline of that tradition—thus, Statius' epic follows in the footsteps of Virgil and Lucan as it continues juxtaposing epic with historiography, and develops the theme in an ever gloomier direction. The encounter between Venus and Mars informs the reader in a straightforward way that in this poem, the tears of women will not work wonders in the machinations of war. The author depicts civil/familial war as a situation where female *pietas* is inadequate to stand in the way of destruction.

Venus' plea paves the way for the ultimate failure of mediation that comes in books seven and eleven in the figure of Jocasta. The mother's failure to prevent her two sons from engaging in a duel is one the most doleful episodes in the whole of the Roman epic tradition. It is a perverse reworking of the story of the Sabine women and especially of that of Veturia—Statius takes these episodes from the legendary past and reverses them completely.³² He accomplishes this by drawing on influence from Athenian tragedy: as Lovatt points out, the poet sets the models of tragedy against the models of historiography in order to create and increase intertextual suspense.³³

Statius' most important literary models in this attempt are, on the one hand, Euripides, and on the other, Seneca—in their tragedies, both these authors relate their own versions of Jocasta's mediating role. In Euripides' *Phoenissae*, Jocasta manages to arrange a truce between her sons, and tries to convince them to give up arms for good. However, her efforts are wasted, since Polynices and Eteocles end up antagonising each other even further.³⁴ At the end of the play, Jocasta is informed that her sons are about to engage in a duel; upon hearing this, she makes one last attempt to rush in between them.³⁵ However, when the mother finds her sons dead, she takes her own life, laying her body on top of them.³⁶ Seneca's version of the story in his *Phoenissae* is a rather direct parallel to the tale of the Sabine women: the queen rushes in between the battle lines, forcing the fighting to halt.³⁷ She then addresses both of her sons with extensive speeches, to turn their minds around.³⁸ Unfortunately, this is where the play breaks off, so the emotional impact of Jocasta's speech and what eventually causes her to fail remain unknown.

Although Statius strongly leans on both Euripides and Seneca, he slightly alters the story by giving Jocasta two comparative episodes where she addresses each of her sons separately. This is a clever narrative technique, since the parallel episodes pile up the excitement and the pathos by repetition.³⁹ Jocasta's

32 For further discussion, see Soubiran 1969, 698–699.

33 Lovatt 2010, 82.

34 Eur. *Phoen.* 301–637. In Aeschylus' *Septem*, Jocasta does not appear at all, but the chorus takes on the mediating role. See Aesch. *Sept.* 677–719, 686 in particular.

35 Eur. *Phoen.* 1217–1283.

36 Eur. *Phoen.* 1454–1459.

37 For further analysis of Seneca's influence on Statius, see Aricò 2002. For Seneca's way of utilising the Euripidean and Aeschylean elements in his *Phoenissae*, see Mazzoli 2002. The tragic elements of Jocasta's story in Roman literature have been discussed by Smolenaars too (Smolenaars 2008).

38 Sen. *Phoen.* 420–664.

39 Vessey 1973, 270–271; Micozzi 1998, 114, 119.

first speech—to Polynices—takes place in the Argive camp outside Thebes, just before the outbreak of the war. The mother's grim appearance creates an immediate impression that she is beside herself and prepared for desperate deeds:

ecce truces oculos sordentibus obsita canis/exsanguis Iocasta genas et brachia planctu/nigra ferens ramumque oleae cum velleris atri/nexibus, Eumenidum velut antiquissima, portis/egreditur magna cum maiestate malorum./hinc atque hinc natae, melior iam sexus, aniles/praecepitantem artus et plus quam possit euntem/sustentant. venit ante hostes, et pectore nudo/claustra adversa ferit tremulisque ululatus orat/admitti: 'reserate viam! rogat impia belli/mater; in his aliquod ius exsecrabile castris/huic utero est.' trepidi visam expavere manipuli/auditamque magis;—illa—clamorem horrendum luctu furiata resolvit—.

STAT. *Theb.* 7.474–486, 7.489–490

See, Jocasta goes forth from the gates in all the majesty of her sorrows. Her fierce eyes are covered with filthy grey hair, her cheeks are bloodless, and her arms are black from beating. She carries an olive branch bound with black wool like the oldest of the Furies. She marches forth towards the gates, majestic in all the evils. On both sides, her daughters, now the better sex, support her old woman's frame as she rushes on headlong and moves faster than she can. She arrives in the face of the enemy, and smites the opposing gates with her naked bosom, begging, with trembling wails, to be let in: 'Unbar my way! The impious mother of war asks it. In this camp, this womb has some accursed right.' Seeing her makes the soldiers tremble with fear, hearing her even more so.—Frantic with grief, she lets out a terrifying scream.

Jocasta's wailing, her loosened hair and beaten arms—as well as the daughters she is dragging along—are traditional *signa* of female lament, and as such, they neatly fall into the sphere of the symbolic order.⁴⁰ However, these elements are darkened by her apparently chthonic and maenadic appearance and behaviour: these bring to mind Virgil's Amata when possessed by the Fury. Jocasta's apparent lack of self-control and her difficulties to put her agony into words are the clearest signs that she is spiralling out of reach of symbolic logic. She is described as *furiata*, and seems to be entirely driven by her bod-

40 Vessey 1973, 271–272; Ganiban 2007, 111–114.

ily drives. And in fact, the queen explicitly refers to her womb as the cause of her entitlement—but also, it would seem, as the source of her motivation. Like Virgil's Amata, Jocasta is frustrated by her narrative insignificance: her motherly authority has been disregarded, and her frustration at this marginalisation finally makes her lose control and resort to the semiotic modality of communication.

Jocasta's maternal body, in fact, not only appears as a cause and motivation that underlies her own actions, but is indirectly depicted as the driving force of the war narrative at large. When she describes herself as *impia mater belli*, her life-giving power is mixed with the death drive that has taken hold of the family. Jocasta's womb, it would seem, is a symbol and the origin of the misdirected sex and death drives within the Theban family—it is simultaneously a reminder of Oedipus' patricide and an implication of Polynices' and Eteocles' future fratricide.

This aura of violence and destruction about the queen is blatantly obvious to the internal audience of the episode, whose reactions make it clear that this is not traditional motherly mourning regulated by social conventions. The queen's a verbal cry, *clamorem horrendum*—a resort to the semiotic modality of communication—evokes horror and fear in the listeners: we read that *trepidi visam expavere manipuli/auditamque magis*. The fear that the Argive soldiers feel at the sight of the queen seems a natural reaction in the face of the abject: it is a mixture of disgust and recognition (of something that is simultaneously both strange and familiar), and it is a discomfort caused by an encounter with the threatening, animalistic side of humanity.⁴¹ Jocasta is a woman entirely defined by her motherhood, yet this is a motherhood marked with death and incest. She does not signify, but *is* the failure of the symbolic order to maintain clear boundaries between civilisation and nature, human being and beast, life and death—the failure to mark out a precise area of culture for the drives of sex and death. This seems to be the underlying cause of the horror that she evokes in the internal audience—and presumably in the external reader as well. She is the Other, deprived of subjectivity and impossible to relate to—but at the same time, a strangely familiar character who reveals the fragility of the social order and civilisation.

It is intriguing that Jocasta herself strongly stresses the primal abjection and the consequent difference between herself and her son. On the one hand, her claims are entirely based on the fact that once, she and her son used to be of one flesh—on the other, she continuously underlines the fact that this bond has

41 Kristeva 1980 (in Oliver 2002, 232).

been broken and that they now are others to each other. This can be observed in how Jocasta refuses Polynices' embraces:⁴²

venit attonitae Cadmeius heros/obvius, et raptam lacrimis gaudentibus implet/solaturque tenens, atque inter singula, 'matrem,/matrem' iterat, nunc ipsam urgens, nunc cara sororum/pectora, cum mixta fletus anus asperat ira:/quid molles lacrimas venerandaque nomina fingis,/rex Argive, mihi? quid colla amplexibus ambis/invisamque teris ferrato pectore matrem?—longae tua iussa cohortes/expectant, multoque latus praefulgurat ense./a miserae matres! hunc te noctesque diesque/deflebam? si verba tamen monitusque tuorum/dignaris, dum castra silent suspensaque bellum/horrescit pietas, genetrix iubeoque rogoque:/i mecum patriosque deos arsuraque saltem/tecta vide, fratremque (quid aufers lumina?), fratrem/alloquere et regnum iam me sub iudice posce—'.

STAT. *Theb.* 7.492–499, 7.501–509

The Cadmean hero comes to meet the stunned woman. He grabs her and, shedding tears of joy, holds and comforts her. And over and over he repeats “mother!” “mother!”, entreating now Jocasta herself, now the dear hearts of his sisters—when the old woman’s weeping is sharpened by anger that is mixed with it: “Why do you feign tender tears and pretend to call me by respectful names, Argive king? Why do you wrap both arms around my neck in an embrace and hug your hateful mother with iron-clad breast?—Far-reaching cohorts await your order and so many swords glitter at your side. O miserable mother! Is this you, for whom I wept day and night? Still, if you have any respect for the words and warnings of your people, while the arms are silent and anxious Piety trembles at the thought of war, I your mother command and beg: go with me and at least look upon your country’s gods and the homes about to burn, and your brother—why do you turn your eyes away?—speak to your brother and claim the throne now with me as your judge.”

While Polynices is trying to repair and restore the broken bond by repetitively addressing Jocasta as *mater*, Jocasta addresses him as *rex Argive*, thus stressing

42 As Augoustakis notes, Polynices' vain attempt to embrace his mother is Statius' inversion of the epic tradition where a son tries to embrace his deceased parents. Augoustakis 2010, 64–65. In particular, the episode is parallel to the passage in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus tries to embrace the shade of his mother and to the one in *Aeneid* 6, where Aeneas tries to embrace the shade of Anchises. Hom *Od.* 11.204; Verg. *Aen.* 6.697–702.

both his disloyalty towards his *patria* and his role as a servant of the temporal scene. The message is clear enough: the mother-son bond has been irreparably broken, both physically and emotionally. Polynices has torn himself away from his mother and dedicated his life to the symbolic order. This is why, instead of referring to her maternal anxiety, Jocasta pleads to Polynices' loyalty towards the political organism: to his city, to his people and to his native gods.⁴³ Nevertheless, in the climax of her speech, when she turns from addressing Polynices to address his soldiers, she cannot resist exploiting familial pity. Pledging her undying love for her son, she pleads to the Argive warriors and reminds them of *their* suffering mothers at home.

At first, Jocasta's speech—which has by now strained every rhetorical device from guilt and reason to pity and compassion—appears to have some real influence. It would seem that, when she ceases her non-verbal wailing and finds the words to express herself, the queen regains some of her subjectivity: the internal audience is momentarily able to relate to her suffering, and to imagine, perhaps not their own selves, but at least their own mothers in her place. The Argive troops are moved to tears, and their battle lust is weakened:

*tumidas frangebant dicta cohortes, / nutantesque virum galeas et sparsa
videres / fletibus arma piis. quales ubi tela virosque / pectoris impulsu rabidi
stravere leones, / protinus ira minor, gaudentque in corpore capto / securam
differre famem: sic flexa Pelasgum / corda labant, ferrique avidus mansue-
erat ardor.*

STAT. *Theb.* 7.527–533

The restless cohorts were defeated by her words, and one could see the men's helmets swoon and their armour sprinkled with pious tears. As when lions, driven by the rage in their breasts, have spread weapons and men all over, straightaway their anger calms down, and they are happy to sate their hunger untroubled on the corpse that they have captured: so the Pelasgians' turning hearts waver, and their eager passion for war grows tame.

Polynices himself, after hearing his mother out, appears to be affected by her words. The lust for power that has driven him on, is momentarily quelled

43 In Roman war epic, this sort of rhetoric is typical of episodes that discuss civil war as a breaking of *fas*. Compare, for instance, Lucan's depiction of Caesar's soldiers, who are portrayed as being anxious about their native gods and afraid to raise their swords against Rome. Luc. *Phar.* 1.352–356.

and replaced by affection: the narrator relates that “his mind is in turmoil, and his kingdom is forgotten” (*variaque animum turbante procella/exciderat regnum*).⁴⁴ This yielding, however, only lasts for a fleeting moment before Tydeus, “remembering his righteous anger” (*iustae—memor irae*),⁴⁵ begins to stir up anew the Argives’ bloodlust. He reminds Polynices of the harsh realities of political affairs, and makes it clear that his mother’s intentions, even if innocent and sincere, are inadequate to resolve the conflict between the brothers. Tydeus’ words immediately turn the soldiers’ minds around. We read that

*rursus mutata trahuntur/agmina consiliis: subito ceu turbine caeli/obvius
adversum Boreae Notus abstulit aequor./arma iterum furiaeque placent;
fera tempus Erinys/arripit et primae molitur semina pugnae.*

STAT. *Theb.* 7.559–563

The troops, swayed by his words, change their stance again: just as when in a sudden hurricane the south wind storming down snatches from the north wind the mastery of the sea. War and the Furies seem pleasing to them again; fierce Erinys seizes the moment and sows the seeds of the first battle.

With regard to the moral judgement of the protagonists’ actions, the episode is most confusing and unsettling. The author clearly juxtaposes family and war, and associates the female with the former and the male with the latter. Nevertheless, in the corrupt moral universe of the *Thebaid*, it is unclear which one is ruled by reason and which one by emotion. On the one hand, Jocasta’s motherly plea is threatening and chthonic, the very embodiment of the abject: it abhors the soldiers and reminds them of the sins of her family. On the other, her speech calls forth pious tears in the warriors: she now appears as a representative of the motherly role that *does* fit in with the logic of the symbolic order. In a similar way, it remains unclear how the reader is expected to judge the male protagonists of the episode, or to relate to them. On the one hand, Tydeus’ anger is described as aroused by *iustae—memor irae*: it is rightful anger in line with the heroic code of epic. But on the other hand, when the warriors are overtaken by battle frenzy at his urging, their bloodlust seems more like the venting of an animalistic death drive than an institutionalised service of the

44 Stat. *Theb.* 7.536–537. As Soubiran notes, here Statius clearly alters the tradition; in Athenian tragedy and in Roman historiography, Polynices does not easily yield to his filial affection. Soubiran 1969, 694.

45 Stat. *Theb.* 7.358.

temporal scene. It is compared to an uncontrollable hurricane, and the fact that it is fertile ground for the Fury to intervene enhances the impression of semi-otic rage. The episode, therefore, seems one of the prime examples within the epic tradition that question the gendered nature of the symbolic and the semi-otic modalities. By underlining the conflicted and broken mother–son bond between Jocasta and Polynices, and the immoral nature of the war at large, it exposes the animalistic aspects of the human psyche, and shows how easily they can get out of control.

In the end, bold and impressive as Jocasta's intervention in *Thebaid* 7 is, it is of course doomed to fail. The tumult of war in the camp strips the queen of the remnants of her bold fury, and she flees.⁴⁶ The *Thebaid*, therefore, discernibly underlines the downfall of female negotiation, depicting it as even more pathetic than in Statius' literary models. Whereas in Euripides' *Phoenissae*, Jocasta manages to persuade her sons to a temporary truce, in the *Thebaid*, the mere pursuit only ends up triggering the conflict.⁴⁷ Jocasta's failure is made worse by her humiliating exit—she, who a few lines earlier boasted of being prepared to die, flees the minute that things start to heat up.

Jocasta's second attempt to reconcile her sons takes place in the end of the epic, when she pleads to Eteocles in Thebes. Like the queen's previous appearance in book seven, it is clearly modelled on Euripides; however, Statius adds to the pathos of the episode by delaying it until book eleven, where the mother makes her move just before the beginning of the decisive duel.⁴⁸ This is a strategic choice that, besides increasing the narrative suspense, associates the episode with the Roman legendary tradition concerning women *in medias acies*, and invites the reader to compare it to Veturia's story, in particular.

Jocasta's second intervention repeats many elements from the first, and appears to be modeled on it. Nevertheless, as Ganiban notices, in her second attempt, the queen appears even more frenzied than earlier, in book seven:⁴⁹

At genetrix, primam funestae sortis ut amens/expavit famam (nec tarde creditit), ibat/scissa comam vultusque et pectore nuda cruento,/non sexus decorisve memor: Pentheia qualis/ mater ad insani scandebat culmina montis,/promissum saevo caput allatura Lyaeo./non comites, non ferre piae vestigia natae/aequa valent: tantum miserae dolor ultimus addit/robur,

46 Stat. *Theb.* 7.609–610.

47 Eur. *Phoen.* 301–637.

48 For further discussion of the dramatic impact of this narrative choice, see Smolenaars 2008, 224.

49 Ganiban 2007, 164.

et exsanguis crudescunt luctibus anni./iamque decus galeae, iam specula saeva ligabat/ductor et ad lituos hilarem intrepidumque tubarum/prospiciebat equum, subito cum apparuit ingens/mater; et ipse metu famulumque expalluit omnis/coetus, et oblatam retro dedit armiger hastam.

STAT. *Theb.* 11.315–328

But his mother, upon hearing the first rumour of this fatal fortune (nor was she slow to believe it), was frightened and frenzied. She went with torn hair and face, with her naked bosom stained with blood, unmindful of her sex or of a decent appearance: like Pentheus' mother climbing to the top of the mad mountain about to take the promised head to cruel Lyaeus. Neither her companions nor her loyal daughters can manage to follow in her footsteps: such strength does this final agony give the miserable woman, and her griefs add violent vigour to her feeble years. And already the leader was binding on the glory of his helmet and his cruel shields and viewing his horse (who was happy to hear the war-trumpets and did not fear the horns), when suddenly his mother was there, looking mighty and enormous. And he and his attendants all turned pale with fear and his shield-bearer took back the exposed spear.

Whereas in *Thebaid* 7, Jocasta still makes an attempt to play the traditional part of a distraught mother—flavoured with some admittedly threatening chthonic elements—this time, her appearance clearly denotes that she has stepped outside the limitations not only of womanhood but of humanity altogether. When she storms out to meet Eteocles, her grim appearance creates an impression of an apparition of a deity: she is *ingens*, and her looks are enough to turn Eteocles from a courageous warrior into a mere mortal shrinking from fear.⁵⁰ Moreover, Jocasta has taken the beating of her breast—a symbolic sign of female lament—too far, turning it into a non-verbal expression of her despair: we read that she has been tearing at her breasts until they bled. This encounter with the physical reality of the mother's body and its mortality is particularly shocking and abhorrent to the internal audience: they turn pale with fear, immobile and petrified.

The traumatic encounter with the object that “disturbs identity, system and order” is therefore even stronger in Jocasta's second intervention than it was

⁵⁰ Compare the episode in the *Aeneid*, where Allecto reveals her true self to Turnus, Verg *Aen.* 7.445–450. Spectres also assume a large bodily mass when they appear to mortals; thus, e.g., the ghost of Creusa, who is depicted as *nota maior imago* (Verg. *Aen.* 2.773).

in her first.⁵¹ The conflation of the maternal life-giving power and the animalistic death drive is made explicit by a direct reference to a murderous mother: when Jocasta rushes to meet her son, she is compared to Agave, who famously tore her son to pieces in a Bacchic frenzy.⁵² Hershkowitz and Ganiban have suggested that this comparison implies a violent intent on Jocasta's part: it makes the reader wonder whether her desires are so beneficial towards her sons, after all.⁵³ I believe, however, that instead of directly implying Jocasta's violent intent against her sons, the simile further emphasises her forsaking of the logic of the symbolic order. Like Agave, she is in a state of fury where all reason has ceased to exist, and where there is no longer any difference between birth and death.

After this powerful first impression, Jocasta begins her speech. It is clear that her state of mind is far more tormented than in book seven: she has let go of the means of persuasion and all rhetorical devices, and resorts to a passionate rage:

quis furor? unde iterum regni integrata resurgit/Eumenis? ipsi etiam post omnia, comminus ipsi/stabitis? usque adeo geminas duxisse cohortes/et facinus mandasse parum est? quo deinde redibit/victor? in hosne sinus? o diri coniugis olim/felices tenebrae! datis, improba lumina, poenas:/haec spectanda dies. quo, saeve, minantia flectis/ora? quid alternus vultus palloorque ruborque/mutat, et obnixa frangunt mala murmura dentes?/me miseram! vinces. prius haec tamen arma necesse est/experiare domi: stabo ipso in limine portae/auspicium infelix scelerumque immanis imago./haec tibi canities, haec sunt calcanda, nefande,/ubera, perque uterum sonipes hic matris agendus.

STAT. *Theb.* 11.329–338

51 Kristeva 1980 (in Oliver 2002, 232).

52 The simile is borrowed from Seneca, but has dramatically different overtones in Statius' epic. While in the *Phoenissae* 363–367, Jocasta is depicted as envying Agave for her ignorance about her crime, in the *Thebaid*, instead, Jocasta is compared to Agave at the moment of killing her son. The purpose of this is to stress the queen's tormented state of mind: *Pentheia qualis/ mater ad insane scandebat culmina montis,/promissum saevo caput allatura Lyaeo*. As Ganiban perceptively notes, Statius' Jocasta truly becomes Agave; moreover, she becomes Agave, paradoxically, at the precise moment when she herself is trying to save her son's life. Therefore, Statius recalls a figure of crime at the very moment when he is seemingly fashioning a character that embodies feminine *pietas*. Ganiban 2007, 164–165.

53 Hershkowitz 1998, 291; Ganiban 2007, 164–165.

What is this madness? From where does the Fury of our kingdom rise again all refreshed? Will you yourselves, after everything that has happened, will you *yourselves* meet in close combat? Is it not enough that you have gone all the way leading two armies, passing your crime on to them? Where shall the victor then return? To this bosom of mine? O, my dreadful husband's blindness, what a stroke of luck it was! Wicked eyes, you are punished, having to see this day. You savage, where do you turn your threatening face? Why does your face turn now pale, now red? Why do your clenched teeth struggle to staunch evil mumblings? Alas for me! You will be victorious. First, however, you must try out those arms at home: I will stand in the very threshold of the gate, as an abominable omen, as a monstrous ghost of crimes. This grey hair, and these breasts you must trample on, you wretch, this horse you must drive through your mother's womb.

We should note that Jocasta appears to borrow many elements from her earlier speech to Polynices. As before, she underlines the irrevocable separation and the difference between the two beings who used to be of one flesh. Likewise, she once again refrains from addressing her son by his name, but refers to him as *saevus*, thus stressing the breaking of the emotional bond between them. Also, in a similar manner as when addressing Polynices, Jocasta offers herself as a surrogate victim through whom her sons must prove the depth of their hatred. Recalling Suetonius' story of Agrippina's murder by her son Nero, Jocasta invites Eteocles to direct his rage against the womb that bore him and the breasts that nursed him: she is inviting him to complete the primal abjection by actually destroying and obliterating the mother's body.⁵⁴ Thus, Jocasta's speech to Eteocles appears as a more desperate, violent, and irrational variant of her encounter with Polynices.

We should also note that the reactions of Jocasta's son are both strikingly similar and drastically different from each other. In book seven, when Jocasta refers to the native gods of Thebes and to homes destroyed by war, she suddenly halts mid-sentence to note Polynices' reaction. *quid aufers lumina?*⁵⁵ denotes that he is turning his eyes away from his mother, out of shame or of fear, or to avoid being persuaded by her.⁵⁶ Similarly, Eteocles, too, is depicted as avoiding

54 Tac. *Ann.* 14.8; Sen. *Oct.* 368–374; Cass. Dio 61.13.5. For an alternative version of the story, see Suet. *Ner.* 34.

55 Stat. *Theb.* 7.508.

56 The episode can be compared to Atalanta's efforts to prevent Parthenopaeus from going

eye contact with his mother. *quo, saeve, minantia flectis/ora?* Jocasta asks, trying in vain to connect with him. Nevertheless, while Polynices' refusal to meet his mother's eyes appears to be an attempt to resist her authority, Eteocles, on the contrary, is depicted as no less crazed than Jocasta herself. Eyes downcast, he mutters to himself, almost as if she was not present at all. Jocasta's mad, Fury-like aspect is reflected in her son, who completely shuts her out. Whereas with Polynices, Jocasta was able to temporarily return to the conventional role of a grieving mother and reach her son through symbolic communication, with Eteocles, there is no such hope, because both participants of the interaction appear to be completely lacking reason and overtaken by their bodily drives. Thus, Jocasta's second intervention appears as a grim and gloomy repetition of the first one, a passage that even more clearly denotes the fragility of reason, logic and familial loyalty in an unrighteous war.

Jocasta's fear that turns into rage, and the threatening elements about her character, are something that clearly sets her apart from the Euripidean model. Whereas in Euripides' *Phoenissae*, the queen appears as a suffering victim of the familial strife, in the *Thebaid*, she is a demanding mother who wields a threatening aura of violence herself. Rather than begging, she commands; rather than putting her hope in her sons' goodwill, she demands their obedience. Moreover, while in Euripides' play, Polynices and Eteocles bravely argue with Jocasta, in the *Thebaid*, they make no such attempt. As Soubiran has suggested, this powerful image of motherhood is the very thing that characterises Statius' Jocasta as Roman in essence.⁵⁷ The frightening, demanding, authoritative mother is a literary archetype typical of the Roman culture of the early Principate.⁵⁸ The way in which Statius draws on the historiographic tradition becomes particularly clear when one compares his Jocasta with Livy's Veturia.⁵⁹ Like Jocasta, Veturia harshly scorns her son and refuses his affectionate embrace, stressing her role as an authoritative mother:

to war in book four; in that episode, as the mother addresses the son, he is depicted as *ad humum pallens*, pale and with eyes downcast. Stat. *Theb.* 4.318.

57 Soubiran 1969, 694–694, 699.

58 On the phenomenon, its Republican background and its appearance in Augustan literature, see Brazouski 1991; Soubiran 1969, 695, 699; Hallett 1984, 130–131, 94–95, 243, 246–248; Dixon 1988, 175–176, 179–187.

59 Soubiran 1969, 694–695. As Soubiran points out, Jocasta's self-awareness and her demanding attitude strongly align her with Livy's Veturia, and alienate her not only from Athenian tragedy, but also from Roman historiography written in Greek. Soubiran perceives a notable difference in the degree of motherly authority in Livy's and Dionysius' versions of Veturia, and argues that it is the Livian model that Statius follows in his fashioning of Jocasta.

Coriolanus prope ut amens consternatus ab sede sua cum ferret matri obviam complexum, mulier in iram ex precibus versa 'Sine, priusquam complexum accipio, sciam,' inquit, 'ad hostem an ad filium venerim, captiva materne in castris tuis sim.—Potuisti populari hanc terram, quae te genuit atque aluit?'

LIV. 2.40.5–7

Coriolanus started up like a madman from his seat, and running to meet his mother would have embraced her, but her entreaties turned to anger, and she said: "Suffer me to learn, before I accept your embrace, whether I have come to an enemy or son; whether I am a captive or a mother in your camp.—Could you bring yourself to ravage this country which gave you birth and reared you?"⁶⁰

The similarities of this passage with those describing Jocasta's interventions in the *Thebaid* are obvious, particularly the stress on maternal authority. Statius' Jocasta, like Livy's Veturia, is not a wronged victim, but a strong parent who expects and demands obedience from her sons. By reworking the Livian model, Statius thereby brings a characteristically Roman overtone to his depiction of the tragic queen.

The unmistakable similarities between Livy's Veturia and Statius' Jocasta also immediately underline the most crucial difference between these two literary characters: whereas one of them manages to successfully persuade her son and saves the people from war, the other one fails to do so. In effect, the allusion to the Livian model in the *Thebaid* is so apparent that it is as if the poet was deliberately inviting the reader to compare Jocasta to Veturia, in order to draw attention to her inability to fulfill that role. By doing so, the author questions the exemplary discourse that defines female virtue and mediation as essential parts of *Romanitas*.

Newlands considers Jocasta's failure to be ideologically significant to Statius' epic, and uses the queen as an example when she argues for the 'decline of motherhood' in Flavian poetry.⁶¹ It is indeed true that, in the *Thebaid*, the downfall of motherly authority has a crucial and discernible role and wields considerable narrative significance, but I am not convinced that Statius' depiction of Jocasta should be read as a reflection of the social reality of his time—nor would I consider the downfall of motherly authority that it depicts to be a

60 English translation of the *Ab Urbe Condita* by B.O. Foster, LCL 1967.

61 Newlands 2006, esp. 212–222.

phenomenon particularly typical of the Flavian period. Rather, I view it as an expression of a more ancient cultural phenomenon: a mother–son tension that forms an integral part of Roman family dynamics at least from the late Republic onwards.⁶² The difference between the tones taken by Livy and Statius, I would suggest, has more to do with the genre than with the social reality of the time of writing. While Livy's depiction of Roman legendary history is, in general, an extreme idealisation of the virtues of the good old days, Statius' cynical epic tends to underline the downfall of all kinds of familial loyalty as a product of civil/familial war. In Jocasta's ineffectual pleas to her sons, Statius combines elements from Athenian tragedy and Roman historiography, and establishes the ambivalent and threatening mother figure as part of the epic tradition. He is, of course, building on Virgilian ground, exploiting the character of Amata in the *Aeneid*, but he enhances the aura of violence and despair. Paradoxically, Statius' epic mother is stronger, scarier and more aware of her authority than any of her literary models—and yet, she fails more magnificently than any of them.⁶³

The cynical message about the inefficiency of women's attempts to mediate is consolidated by repetition, when the poet depicts Antigone's failed efforts to reconcile her brothers. In book eleven, while Jocasta is pleading to Eteocles in Thebes, Antigone climbs to the top of the city wall and addresses Polynices, who waits outside:

At parte ex alia tacitos obstante tumultu/Antigone furata gradus (nec casta retardat/virginitas) volat Ogygii fastigia muri/exsuperare furens—magno

62 See Dixon 1988, 175–176, 179–187. In particular, the 'decline of motherhood' appears to be related to the strong women of the Julio-Claudian imperial house; for the conflicted relationship between Nero and Agrippina, see Tac. *Ann.* 13.12–15, 13.18–19, 14.3–9; Suet. *Ner.* 34; between Livia and Tiberius, Suet. *Vit. Tib.* 50–51. In these accounts, the determined and authoritative mother becomes a controlling and manipulative one, and the line between the two appears to be very fine.

63 It should be noted that during the fourth century BCE, there was a parallel tradition to the Theban legend, according to which Jocasta was not the mother of Oedipus' children, but the rivalling brothers were born to his second wife Eurygeneia. This version of the story is mentioned, e.g., by Pausanias (9.5.11). It eventually died out because of the popularity of the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides, but it was certainly still known in the early Principate. For further discussion, see Smolenaars 2008, 221. For Statius' epic, it seems essential that Jocasta is mother (and grandmother) to Polynices and Eteocles—through this incestuous relationship, the breaking of motherly authority can be fully depicted on multiple levels. Tense and perverted family relationships and the constant pursuit to break free from the preceding generation are the lifeblood of the Oedipal legend; Statius takes the myth and reworks it masterfully into a reflection of the Roman mindset and family dynamics.

*prius omnia planctu/implet et ex muris ceu descensura profatur:/comprime tela manu paulumque hanc respice turrem,/frater, et horrentes refer in mea lumina cristas!/agnoscisne hostes? sic annua pacta fidemque/poscimus? hi questus, haec est bona causa modesti exsulis? Argolicos per te, germane, penates/(nam Tyriis iam nullus honos), per si quid in illa/dulce domo, summitte animos: en utraque gentis/turba rogant ambaeque acies; rogat illa suorum/Antigone devota malis suspectaque regi,/et tantum tua, dure, soror.—illum gemitu iam supplice mater/frangit et exsertum dimittere dicitur ense:/tu mihi fortis adhuc, mihi, quae tua nocte dieque/exsilia error-
esque fleo iam iamque tumentem/placavi tibi saepe patrem?’*

STAT. *Theb.* 11.354–357, 11.361–371, 11.375–379

From another part, Antigone, with silent steps, rushes through the opposing tumult (nor does her chaste virginity hold her back), frenzied and ready to surmount the summit of the Ogygian walls.—First, she fills everything around with great wailing, and speaks as though she was about to throw herself from the wall: ‘Hold your weapons, brother, and look at this tower for a little moment. Turn your trembling crests to face my eyes! Do you see enemies? Is this how we claim the yearly pact and brotherly loyalty? Are these the complaints, is this the good cause of a humble exile? I beg you by your Argive home, brother (since for the Tyrians you have no honour left), by anything that is dear to you in that home, restrain your mind. Look! A crowd of both peoples and both armies is begging you. Antigone begs, devoted to the crimes of her family, mistrustful of the king and sister only to you, O cruel one!—Mother is already defeating him with her suppliant wails, and they say he is putting his drawn sword down. Are *you* still unyielding to *me*—to me, who cry over your exile and wanderings night and day, and who have often calmed down our father, when he was about to lose his temper with you?’⁶⁴

It is notable that Antigone’s approach is considerably more humble and suppliant than that of Jocasta. Since she does not wield maternal authority, she cannot command Polynices; instead, she chooses different tactics, emphasising their affectionate bond as siblings. At first, her approach appears to work: Polynices’ anger calms down and his heart is softened, as it was earlier, in book seven:

64 *nec casta retardat/virginitas* (11.355–356) recalls a passage in Euripides’ *Phoenissae*, where Jocasta encourages Antigone to expel her virginal modesty in order to follow her mother on her mission to reconcile the brothers. Eur. *Phoen.* 1264–1269.

his paulum furor elanguescere dictis/coeperat, obstreperet quamquam atque obstaret Erinys;/iam summissa manus, lente iam flectit habenas,/iam tacet; erumpunt gemitus, lacrimasque fatetur/cassis; hebent irae, pariterque et abire nocentem/et venisse pudet—.

STAT. *Theb.* 11.382–387

Hearing these words, little by little his anger begins to grow weaker, although the brawling Fury still objects. Already his hand is falling, already he is turning the reins more slowly, already he has fallen silent. Moans burst out of him, and through his helmet one could see his tears. Anger grows dull, and he is equally ashamed of leaving, and of having come in guilt.

In a manner characteristic of his epic, Statius increases the narrative suspense by depicting a moment of wavering between *pietas* and *nefas*. However, before Polynices has time to make up his mind, the Fury once again intervenes, hurling Eteocles from the city to challenge his brother.⁶⁵ With this decisive moment, the last attempt for reconciliation fails and Antigone is quietly removed from the scene.

Antigone's role as a mediator is somewhat confusing, since it is not necessary in any narrative sense; in effect, all she does is repeat Jocasta's failure. What makes things even more perplexing is that Statius' decision to give Antigone so much room in his epic does not seem to derive directly from any literary model: in Euripides' *Phoenissae*, Antigone is Jocasta's docile companion and does not speak once in the whole play. As Ganiban notes, she appears only with Jocasta and always in the same function as her.⁶⁶ The same kind of auxiliary function marks Antigone in Seneca's *Phoenissae*, where the maiden only ever appears as consoling her father or as spurring her mother on.⁶⁷ In the *Thebaid*, instead, Antigone performs as a protagonist in her own right.⁶⁸ On these grounds, some

65 Micozzi perceives strong Lucanian overtones in the way Statius develops the drama in this episode (see e.g. *Phar.* 4.157–252). Micozzi 1998, 120. Nevertheless, it is significant that while Lucan once again avoids introducing a divine agent in the situation, Statius leaves it to a Fury to stir up the conflict.

66 Ganiban 2007, 166.

67 For Antigone and Oedipus, Sen. *Phoen.* 51–319; for Antigone and Jocasta, Sen. *Phoen.* 403–418.

68 Venini believes that Antigone's active participation is Statius' innovation, since it does not feature in the plays of Euripides and Seneca. Venini 1970, X s. e 90. See also Lesueur 1992, 235. Aricò, however, points out that the theme is visually depicted on a few Etruscan urns that show Jocasta and Antigone both positioned in a mediating position between the rivalling brothers. Aricò 2002, 184.

readers have observed her as an exceptionally empowered character.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Antigone, no matter how courageous she may be, does not achieve her ends, any more than her mother does.

We should note that while the end results of Jocasta's and Antigone's pleas are the same, the reasons for their failure are different. If Jocasta's mimicking of Livy's Veturia is darkened by her chthonic appearance and by her resort to the semiotic, the same cannot be said about Antigone's fairly well constructed speech, nor about her calm and submissive approach. Instead, it would appear that Antigone's influence as a political arbiter is undermined by her obvious partiality. Unlike her mother, Antigone has a favourite. In her appeal to Polynices, she repeatedly stresses the close and affectionate bond between herself and him. Besides reminding him of her constant support,⁷⁰ Antigone's choice of words shows where her sympathies lie: *frater* and *germane* stress her familial relationship with Polynices; in contrast, Eteocles is simply referred to as *rex* and *ille*. What is more, she explicitly blames Eteocles for the conflict, stating that *nempe ille fidem et stata foedera rupit, / ille nocens saevusque suis* ("was it not he who broke faith and your treaty, is it not he who is cruel and hurtful towards his own people?").⁷¹ Antigone therefore deliberately distances herself from her other brother—but, while doing so, she distances herself from the Roman exemplary tradition that epitomises the ideal of female mediating behaviour. By taking Polynices' side, and by expressing her own opinion about who is to blame for the familial conflict, Antigone fails in the archetypal role of a female arbiter. She is no longer an unbiased woman, nor an outsider to the political affairs.

It appears, therefore, that Statius utilises Antigone's character to repeat and reinforce the message delivered by Jocasta's failure: that this is not the kind of story where virtuous women turn up to save the day in the *patria's* darkest hour, reconciling the interests of family and state. Instead, it is a story about women (and men) who either forget their place in the patriarchal hierarchy, or who are overwhelmed and driven out of their minds by their all-consuming bodily drives. By underlining this message, the poet steers the epic towards its final note of destruction that brings the *Thebaid* to its end: Eteocles and Polynices' mutual fratricide.

Perhaps this is what the discernible significance of failed female mediation in the *Thebaid* is all about: while it reveals the shattering of unity within the

69 Lesueur 1992, 223–235; Vessey 1973, 131–133.

70 Stat. *Theb.* 11.377–379.

71 Stat. *Theb.* 11.380–381.

family, it anticipates the shattering of unity within the state and the community. Ganiban has argued that throughout her appearance in the epic, Jocasta strongly endeavours to reveal the Theban war for what it really is—that is, a fratricide and a *nefas*.⁷² I support this notion, and I would add that in this task, Jocasta's womanhood and motherhood work as her most crucial instruments. When Jocasta places her motherhood as a barrier between Polynices and Eteocles, she actually breaks down all distinction between them. Her womb, which she offers as a surrogate victim, is what defines the existence of both of her sons: in this womb, not only have they been of one flesh with their mother, but they have been of one flesh with *each other*. Jocasta seems to believe that her mere existence is enough to reveal the quintessential sameness of her sons and the self-destructive nature of their quarrel. The parallel episodes where Jocasta addresses her sons, and the sons' similar reactions, reinforce this idea of underlying sameness.

Read against this background, Antigone's function in the *Thebaid* appears to be the same as Jocasta's—as a connecting familial link between Eteocles and Polynices, she is a powerful reminder of the quintessential sameness of the warring parties. By her existence, rather than by her actions, she exposes the *nefas* that marks the Theban war—although failing to offer a valid alternative to it. It would seem that in Statius' epic, much as in Lucan's *Pharsalia*, familial relationships are a powerful tool for demonstrating the unjustness of war, but highly inefficient at solving the conflict. In the end, the civil war as a violent disintegration of the political organism—the collective self—is symbolically represented in Polynices' and Eteocles' mutual fratricide. Denying their quintessential sameness, they destroy each other and themselves, just as the war does on the level of society.

In this aspect, Statius' Jocasta and Antigone strongly remind me of Lucan's Julia, who likewise seems to exist in the epic only in order to draw attention to how different from her exemplary literary models she is. Just as Statius associates Jocasta with Livy's Veturia, only to emphasise her failure in this role, so too Lucan recalls the Roman historians' depictions of Julia's death, only to turn the story from a positive *exemplum* into a tale of failure. This deliberate breaking of the literary tradition concerning women's mediating attempts is a way of underlining the message about the destructive power of the civil war: it anticipates the complete dissolving of the collective identity. Statius follows the Lucanian example when he represents the family and the state as comparative levels where this breaking of unity happens—and where women are no longer

72 Ganiban 2007, 111.

capable of performing as unbiased outsiders and selfless arbiters in the conflicts of men, because the lines that separate the private and the public, the 'female sphere' and the temporal scene, have been irrevocably blurred.

2 Functional Failures: Epic Women Tangled Up with War

The episodes discussed in this chapter demonstrate that the epic women's failures at peace-making and mediating, which constitute a recurrent theme in Roman war epic, are more than merely doleful manifestations of the decline of the traditional Roman female virtues: they have a functional role in the epic discourse concerning the civil war. Of course, to a certain extent, the poets' hands are tied when it comes to the structure of a myth or a historical narrative—in every account of the Roman civil war, Julia has to die, just as every version of the Theban war has to end with a fratricide. However, it appears to be significant that the Roman epic poets do not merely follow the narrative tradition when they depict the female failures of mediating—they celebrate the theme, exploiting it to the fullest in their construction and deconstruction of ideas concerning Roman-ness.⁷³

As I noted above, Statius' representation of Jocasta in the *Thebaid* is among the best examples of this. In Statius' epic, the queen has a very prominent and memorable role—precisely because of her failed attempts to stop the drive of war—which in fact would not in the least be necessary for the main plotline of the story. It is crucial to note that there was an alternative tradition available, where Jocasta is not present in the story about the Theban war at all. Statius could have followed a popular version of the myth where the queen kills herself upon finding out about her incestuous marriage, immediately before Oedipus blinds himself.⁷⁴ It is particularly intriguing that Statius not only rejects this version of the myth but also appears to deliberately remind the reader of the

73 As De Jong points out, this is where the unending opportunities of tradition lie—because the mythical stories are well known to the audience, the poet can emphasise those parts that he considers important, and skip over others. De Jong 2004, 20; De Jong 2007, 37. As Lamari states, ancient literature is often extremely reception-oriented, since the authors took full advantage of the intertextual awareness of their audience. Lamari 2009, 416–418.

74 This version of the myth is generally considered to be more ancient; it was part of the oral tradition and features, for instance, in Aeschylus' *Septem contra Thebas*. Smolenaars suggests that a shift in tradition took place from the Euripides' *Phoenissae* onwards, after which, in most versions of the story, Jocasta lives on after Oedipus' blinding of himself and acts as a mediator between her sons. Smolenaars 2008, 222.

rejected option. As Smolenaars has observantly noted, the passage in *Thebaid* 1 where Oedipus' fury is described is a direct allusion to the alternative tradition concerning Jocasta: when Oedipus tells the tale of how he blinded himself, the king claims that "afterwards, I punished myself and eagerly pushed fingers through my yielding eyes, relinquishing sight, beside my miserable mother" (*mox avidus poenae digitis cedentibus ultro/incubui miseraque oculos in matre reliqui*).⁷⁵ This phrasing seems to refer to the alternative version of the myth, since it implies that Jocasta is already dead and lying in front of Oedipus.⁷⁶ Obviously, the passage conflicts with the rest of the epic, where the queen is very much alive.

The passage has understandably evoked a great deal of confusion among readers of the *Thebaid*, and various possible explanations of the contradiction have been proposed: it has been discussed both as a lapse that has not been removed during the final redaction of the work, and as a deliberate touch of controversy typical of Roman epic.⁷⁷ It should be noted that, in the research tradition of Roman epic, the argument in favour of the work being 'unfinished', 'unpolished', or 'contaminated' (that is, deliberately or unintentionally altered at some later stage of manuscript circulation) is usually particularly popular whenever there is something that does not make sense or something that contradicts the narrative logic of the work as a whole. Arguably, this is the easy way out because, technically, it could be true, and after two millennia of manuscript tradition, there is no one to disprove it. In this study, I have deliberately chosen to avoid this approach with regard to the many contradictions in Roman war epic, on the grounds that I find it both uninteresting and unproductive—and, in the end, no less speculative than any other way of reading. Instead, I aim to appreciate the contradictions, the ruptures and the loose ends of epic, and to examine what narrative purpose they might serve *as such*, not only despite themselves. As O'Hara points out, inconsistency is an indispensable part of the Roman epic canon and a feature that is intrinsically linked to its rich intertextual tradition.⁷⁸ Enduring contradictions might therefore open up a whole new world for the contemporary reader of epic—since it is in any case impossible to get into the poet's head and resolve the question of how 'deliber-

75 Stat. *Theb.* 1.71–72.

76 Stat. *Theb.* 1.71–72. Smolenaars 2008, 219.

77 Lesueur 1990, 119; Smolenaars, 2008, 219.

78 O'Hara 2007, esp. 1–2, 4. Classen, too, has stressed that in Roman poetry, examining the alternative that the author does not use, and whether he rejects or ignores it, is often just as important as examining the version he uses, when considering the ideological overtones of the work. Classen 2002, 18.

ate' his 'mistakes' are, one might just as well embrace the death of the author and create the meaning for these inconsistencies for oneself.

From the Kristevan viewpoint, contradictions, ruptures and inconsistencies in the narrative logic of epic are, of course, of prime importance since they can be considered as expressions of the semiotic pressure on the logic of the symbolic order. They are the breaking points where the semiotic makes itself heard, and where the signifying practice of narrative temporarily breaks down in favour of the signifying practice of poetry. In other words, epic's phenotext gives way and is temporarily replaced by genotext, and the two are merged in what constitutes the real intertextuality in the Kristevan sense: the dynamic interaction between different signifying practices. Read through this interpretative lens, the fact that Statius' Jocasta is dead at one moment and alive at another underlines her central role in the *Thebaid* as a channel through which the semiotic pressure is charged into the narrative. It completes the picture of her as the queen of the *chôra*, already manifested in her averbal communication and in her chthonic appearance that marked her failed pleas for peace.

Furthermore, the fact that Statius reminds the reader that Jocasta did not *need* to exist in his poem draws attention to the fact that she *does*. The only purpose of her existence is her role as an arbiter between her sons; and the only function of that role is its ultimate downfall and failure. In short, Statius' Jocasta exists only to try and fail, and it seems as if the poet wanted the reader to notice this. It is a prime example of the ways in which Roman war epics revel in the failure of female mediation, making the most of the earlier mythical and literary tradition and emphasising the narrative significance of the theme in their works.

It is arguable that up to now, the functional role of the theme in the genre has not been fully acknowledged. When discussing the inefficiency of epic women's pleas for peace, most studies have stressed the rhetorical weakness of the entreaties, labeling them as both poorly composed and feebly expressed.⁷⁹ As I already argued in chapter three, this way of reading is an excellent expression of the deep-rooted thinking according to which, in Roman epic, the logic and language (the symbolic modality) constitute the male domain, whereas women are from the outset judged as illogical, non-political creatures driven by their emotions and prisoners of their bodies. However, it is crucial to notice that while women's pleas for peace almost invariably fail to convince, female speech in general is anything but ineffective in epic. Besides the various rhet-

79 Heslin 2005, 131–134; Kozák 2013, 250–255; Hardie 2012, 7; von Albrecht 1999, 283–284; Fuhrer 2010, 67–72, 75–77.

orical breakthroughs of Furies and goddesses, there are numerous episodes where mortal women successfully speak and make a difference—one of the most significant is Argia's speech in *Thebaid* 3, which brings about the Theban war.⁸⁰ It seems, therefore, that it is not female speech in general that is badly composed and ineffective but rather female speech *for certain ends*. In Roman war epic, women prove very effective when promoting war, but when negotiating peace, they have no real influence whatsoever. This pattern appears so often that it is worth examining the phenomenon in a little more depth: why is it that the female rhetoric is at its clumsiest specifically when it aims at stopping, preventing or delaying war and destruction?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to examine more closely the overall role of the speaker in the poem. In *Aeneid* 12, when Amata fails to persuade Turnus to give up the fight, the fact that the attempt is doomed is apparent even to the speaker herself. The queen ends her speech by claiming that should Turnus perish, she would leave the world together with him—this does not seem like a mere rhetorical threat, but rather like a compliant remark by a woman who is already yielding to her failure.⁸¹ Amata, like Statius' Venus, does not seem to really believe in her chances of standing in the way of the war, and this considerably weakens her rhetorical performance.

And is it any wonder if she does not believe this, when we bear in mind her role in the epic as a whole, and in the beginning of the war in particular? It is crucial to notice that all the peace-making women examined in this chapter are in one way or another closely associated with the beginning of the conflict: if they are not directly guilty of agitating for war, they are at least profoundly entangled in the underlying causes of the conflict. This, I propose, is one of the main reasons why their rhetoric sounds hollow and their attempts lack credibility. Amata's plea to Turnus in *Aeneid* 12 is close to being tragicomic, since the reader is all too aware that it was the queen herself who stirred up the war in the first place. How could she now wield any credibility in her peace-promoting role?

The same applies to Julia in *Pharsalia* 3, where Lucan's way of consistently downplaying Julia's role as a mediator goes as far as to transform her from an arbiter for peace into a warlike Fury. In book three, she is "a ghost full of dread and horror" (*diri tum plena horroris imago*)⁸² that makes Pompey rush more

80 Stat. *Theb.* 3.695–707. See also Cleopatra in the *Pharsalia* (although Lucan states that Cleopatra's speech was successful because of her beauty, rather than because of her rhetorical skills). Luc. *Phar.* 10.82–106.

81 Verg. *Aen.* 12.61–62.

82 Luc. *Phar.* 3.9.

eagerly to arms—Lucan recalls the episode in *Aeneid* 7, where Allecto's nightly visit arouses Turnus' *amor ferri*, and thus deliberately associates Julia with a chthonic warmongering Fury.⁸³ In the light of this episode, the narrator's reference to Julia's potential to become a literary descendant of the Sabine women seems even more absurd and cynical than it otherwise would. In the universe of Roman epic, Julia, too, is more Fury-like than mediating, too tightly entwined with the circle of destruction to break free from it.

In the *Thebaid*, Statius recurrently brings up this controversial and twofold role of women in respect of epic warfare. Venus' plea to Mars in *Thebaid* 3, discussed above in this chapter, can be characterised as a textbook example of ineffective rhetoric:⁸⁴ it is based on blame and on accusations that do not help her agenda at all.⁸⁵ Venus' last sentence—*sed scopulos et aëna precando/flectere corda paro*—implies that she herself is fully aware of this.⁸⁶ Like Virgil's Amata, Statius' Venus anticipates her failure and does not even bother to try her best. Again, I argue that this is mainly because the role of an advocate for peace is grotesquely inconsistent with Venus' overall function in the *Thebaid*. As I noted in chapter five, Statius' Venus is a strikingly violent and quasi-chthonic goddess: in the Lemnian episode, her bloodthirst, cruelty and savagery are unmatched by any of the gods or mortals. This representation of the goddess casts a shadow of doubt on her peaceful efforts in book three and undermines her credibility. How could she succeed in pleading for peace, when there is an aspect of her that surpasses even the hellish rage of the Furies?

The same phenomenon can be observed in the character of Jocasta in books seven and eleven. As I have shown, although the queen is demanding truce, peace and reconciliation, she wields a threatening aura of violence.⁸⁷ She is explicitly compared to a Fury,⁸⁸ and to Agave who slaughters her son in a Bacchic frenzy.⁸⁹ These inter- and intratextual associations, as Ganiban notes, doom her from the start.⁹⁰ Moreover, she is doomed from the start because, like Virgil's Amata, Jocasta cannot escape the fact that she is intrinsically entwined with the narrative of war from its very beginning. Statius paints a fascinating

83 Verg. *Aen.* 7.460–462.

84 Heslin 2005, 131–134.

85 Statius states that *lacrimas non pertulit ultra/Bellipotens* (*Stat. Theb.* 3.291–292). These words could be read as an expression of Mars' pity for Venus; however, they could likewise be interpreted as a sign of his frustration with her complaints.

86 *Stat. Theb.* 3.280–281.

87 Ganiban 2007, 160.

88 *Stat. Theb.* 7.477–478.

89 *Stat. Theb.* 11.315–320.

90 Ganiban 2007, 111.

picture of the queen as wavering between guilt and defiance, between self-defense and self-accusation. In book eleven, she denies all responsibility, blaming her husband:

parce: quid oppositam capulo parmaque repellis?/non ego te contra Stygiis feralia sanxi/vota deis, caeco nec Erinyas ore rogavi./exaudi miseram: genetrix te, saeve, precatur, non pater—.

STAT. *Theb.* 11.339–342

Spare me: why do you thrust me away with sword-hilt and shield, when I stand up to you? I took no fatal vows to Stygian gods against you, nor did I blindly pray to the Furies. Listen to me in my misery: it is your mother who begs you, O savage, not your father.

In book seven, instead, Jocasta identifies herself as the cause and origin of all the destruction, exaggerating her own role in the conflict. “I married and gave birth to horror” (*nupsi equidem peperique nefas*), she claims, and defines her role as “mother to the impious war” (*impia belli mater*).⁹¹ These two episodes aptly manifest Jocasta’s complex position at the root of the Theban conflict. While it is Oedipus who is guilty of summoning the Fury, and Polynices and Eteocles who pull the trigger, it is Jocasta, who is in a sense the cause that underlies all these actions. Her involvement with the crisis goes further back, and her guilt is, in a sense, an intrinsic part of the fates of her family. Hershkowitz has defined the queen as “ultimately responsible for the destruction of both her sons simply by having conceived them incestuously”.⁹² According to her reading, while Oedipus is responsible for initiating the destructive circle in the Theban family, he could manage this only through Jocasta’s fertile womb: “Oedipus actively compounds the madness that J. can only passively accept and endure”.⁹³ The gender dynamics of guilt in this tableau depict the man as the agitator of *nefas* and *furor*, and the woman as a *locus* where the seeds of madness can be sown over and over again. While, in this sense, Jocasta differs from her most obvious literary model—Virgil’s actively destructive Amata—her functional role at the root of the conflict explains why it is impossible for her to become an advocate for peace. As Ganiban puts it, she is unable to fight *nefas*, because *nefas* is what defines her and contaminates her surroundings.⁹⁴

91 Stat. *Theb.* 7.514, 7.483–484.

92 Hershkowitz 1998, 291. See also Keith 2000, 96.

93 Hershkowitz 1998, 280.

94 Ganiban 2007, 160–161.

This means that the readings of Roman epic that strive to view women as the voice of peace in the corrupt world of war do not seem to be supported by characters such as Amata in the *Aeneid*, Julia in the *Pharsalia*, and Jocasta and Venus in the *Thebaid*.⁹⁵ The intertextual allusions that burden these epic women with madness, war, and violence make it impossible for them to be taken seriously as arbiters for peace. This reinforces the impression that in Roman war epic, the female role is more closely associated with death than with life: instead of appearing as the voice of peace in the grim world of war, the women appear as strikingly similar to the warmongering men of their families, similar in their inclination towards the violence and destruction that tear the community to pieces.⁹⁶ The works of the Roman imperial poets express very little faith in Sabine successors who could stand in the way of destruction and constitute a basis for collective *Romanitas* in an environment marked by tyranny and civil war.

Once again, the level of optimism is what clearly distinguishes the *Aeneid* from Lucan's and Statius' more cynical civil war epics. Notably, both the *Pharsalia* and the *Thebaid* lack the Virgilian hopefulness that the end of the war could bring about a new kind of unity and peace; instead, they merely depict tyranny, bloodlust and imperial greed as matters that inevitably both shatter and define *Romanitas*. Besides undermining female *pietas* as a possible basis for collective Roman identity, Lucan and Statius undermine the idea that the traditionally gendered roles in terms of war and peace could uphold order in a corrupted society.

95 For some of these readings, see, e.g., Vessey 1973, 271; Leuseur 1992, 239.

96 It is crucial to notice that not only epic women but authoritative men, too, repeatedly seem to fail to convince when they are trying to delay or stop the drive of violence. Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned Latinus' futile attempt to stop Turnus from meeting Aeneas in a duel. Another example can be found in Statius' *Thebaid*, where the Argive king Adrastus plays the part of Virgil's Latinus. Time after time in books two to eleven, he steps in, trying to prevent further hostilities, with no real effect whatsoever (Stat. *Theb.* 2.364–374, 3.442–459, 3.386–393, 7.537–538, 11.110–111, 11.196–197, 11.426–443). For a more general discussion of the failures of male rhetoric in the genre, see Dominik 1994a 213–235; see also Fuhrer 2010, 1–75.