TRAGIC / EPIC: STATIUS’ THEBAID AND EURIPIDES’ HYPsipyle

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Though admirable in all, [Statius] principally excels in the mournful and pathetic. He is the same among the Romans, as Euripides among the Greeks.

– (Lewis [1773] xv)

1. Introduction

Statius’ Thebaid reworks several tragedies, such as Aeschylus’ Septem, Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex, and Euripides’ Phoenissae, not to mention Seneca’s plays. The Flavian epic is profoundly tragic on a different level too: its disturbing poetic universe is more like Seneca’s inescapable world of nefas than the teleological world of Virgilian epic.¹ This paper examines Statius’ engagement with one particular tragedy, namely Euripides’ Hypsipyle, in the Nemean episode (4.646–7.104). Previous research on this intertextual relationship has been dominated by the question if Statius has used the Hypsipyle; I aim to explore how he has used it.² Before we turn our attention to Statius, however, let us look briefly at the Greek play.

2. Euripides’ Hypsipyle

Of all fragmentary Greek plays, Euripides’ Hypsipyle (412–406 BCE) is the least fragmentary,³ thanks to a spectacular discovery of Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt in Oxyrhynchus in 1906, romantically described in

¹ On Statius and Greek tragedy, see Heslin (2008), Smolenaars (2008), and Hulls in this volume, pp. 193–213. On Statius’ Thebaid and Seneca, see Augoustakis (2014).
² A more comprehensive discussion will be part of my dissertation on Theb. 5.499–753 (in progress).
one of their reports. The papyrus (P. Oxy. VI 852), produced in the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE), contains three complete columns of 60 lines each and numerous smaller fragments. It covers substantial parts of the first half of the play; the second half is less well-preserved. On the basis of stichometric line numbering it has been calculated that the play counted ca. 1750 lines (30 columns). The papyrus also has paragraphoi indicating a change of speaker, sometimes even naming the dramatis personae. In combination with other evidence, especially from the mythographers, the papyrus has enabled scholars to reconstruct the play with some precision. After two Dutch editions, in 1963 Godfrey Bond produced the first English edition with commentary. Bond’s reconstruction was improved by W.E.H. Cockle: on the basis of a technical re-examination of the papyri, involving microscopic analysis of fiber structures and worm cut patterns, Cockle made 46 new joints. His reconstruction underlies the most recent editions of the Hypsipyle.

Although the reconstruction of the play is not without problems, the main events are clear. As the title indicates, its heroine is Hypsipyle, daughter of Thoas and granddaughter of Dionysus. In the Euripidean version, her background is as follows (fr. 759a): when the Argonauts visited Lemnos, Hypsipyle bore twin sons to Jason, Euneus and Thoas, whom Jason took with him to Colchis. After the Argonauts had left, the Lemnian women massacred the male inhabitants of the island. Since Hypsipyle had refused to kill her father, she had to flee. Seized by pirates, she was sold into slavery to Lycurgus, priest of Zeus in Nemea, where she became wet-nurse to Opheltes, infant son of Lycurgus and Eurydice. In the meantime, Jason died, and Euneus and Thoas were raised by Orpheus in Thrace. There they were reunited with their grandfather Thoas and returned with him to Lemnos. When they found their mother missing, they set out to find her.

In the prologue, Euneus and Thoas arrive in Nemea, at the exact moment when the Seven march through Nemea on their way to Thebes. Lingering before the palace with her nursling Opheltes in her arms, Hypsipyle admits the two young men to the house, without recognizing them as her sons. Then Amphiarraus makes his appearance. He needs fresh water for a sacrifice, and Hypsipyle guides him to a spring. There Opheltes is killed by a

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5 Van Herwerden (1909) and Italie (1923).
6 Collard, Cropp, and Gibert (2004) and (2008); Kannicht (2004). The following discussion is based on the most recent Loeb edition (2008), although I have often consulted Cockle’s and Bond’s valuable editions.