CHAPTER 13

Parent-Child Conflict in the Thebaid

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I begin by reading the episodes through to show that a controlling theme is the destruction of parent-child bonds: dangerous offspring, cruel or negligent parents, and, everywhere, children dying.\footnote{Bernstein, pp. 139–54 in this volume offers a more general examination of troubled kinship bonds in the Thebaid.} I end by suggesting that these two extended meditations on parent-child relationships are important because, in the final lines of his epic (12.810–19)—effectively a tiny third inset
narrative—Statius figures the *Thebaid* as a child, and himself as its father.\(^4\) This metapoetic parent-child relationship is no different from those in the two longer inset narratives: as Statius sends his poem out into the world, he does not know whether to pray for its survival, or wish for its death.

**Adrastus’ Tale**

First, Apollo slays the Python. The language points to Ovid’s version in *Metamorphoses* 1.\(^5\) Of particular interest is Ovid’s description of the serpent’s birth:

\[
\text{illa quidem nollet, sed te quoque, maxime Python, tum genuit.}
\]

*Ov. Met. 1.438–9*

And although the Earth would not have wished it, at that time she bore you too, giant Python.

To summarize this, Statius offers *terrigenam Pythona* (“earthborn Python,” *Theb. 1.563, a phrase unique in Latin literature*), reminding us that the monstrous serpent is nevertheless a child of Earth, albeit a horrible one that she would have rather not born (a detail unique to Ovid). Python, then, is the first in a series of harmful offspring that will bring grief and die (or die and bring grief) in Adrastus’ narrative.\(^6\)


\(6\) Statius also alludes to Luc. 5.79–81 (*ultor ibi expulsae, premeret cum uiscera partus, / matris adhuc rudibus Paean Pythona sagittis / explicuit*, “there, avenging his mother who had been chased away when her babies were burdening her womb, Paean stretched Python out with still unpracticed arrows”); cf. *Theb*. 1.568–9: *dedit [Apollo Pythona] centum per iugera campi / uix tandem explicitum*. A subtle reminder that Apollo was avenging his mother’s mistreatment by Python: one child kills another.