CHAPTER 14

Transgressing Boundaries of the Unthinkable: Sophocles, Ovid, Vergil, Seneca, and Homer Refracted in Statius’ Thebaid

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Academics sometimes privilege scholarly doctrine over a particular poet’s words. Comparatists are expected to conform to the secular orthodoxies of “theory,” which, like theology, subordinates the poetic to prescribed orthodoxies of interpretation. “Theory” resorts sparingly to poets’ or dramatists’ actual words for texts to illustrate its abstract and non-literary agenda.1 “Theory” is the ultimate, but not the only, way of so generalizing works of literature that they can be subsumed into a database for largely self-referential social or philosophical enterprises.

Classicists, long before “theory” menaced, saw the dangers of construing dramatic poetry as, say, historical comment, but were often overly enthusiastic in precluding contemporary allusion. Wilamowitz, defending Sophocles’ pristine universality, proclaimed: “it must be said in the strictest possible terms that no Sophoclean tragedy has a direct connection to a contemporary political event.”2 At a much further extreme, Ogilvie, writing about Statius, declared: “the Thebaid cannot be said to be about anything.”3 Both ruled connections between Theban myth and the authors’ contemporary worlds “unthinkable,” a ruling this chapter sets out to refute in the Roman tradition of Oedipus.

The “Unthinkably Political” Flawed Masterpiece

The “unthinkable,” a widely prevalent, yet rarely discussed, scholarly category, is a repository not for ideas impossible to think (if such there be) but for ways of thinking scholars want to forbid. It functions like the ecclesiastical desig-

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1 See Norton (1994).
3 Ogilvie (1980) 292.
nation “heresy” because ancient literary texts, nobody’s private estate, are, in practice, the domain of the academy, their interpretation dominated by its privileged spokesmen. Contemporary allusion is only one of the broader “unthinkables” we face in assessing texts based on Greek myth. Dodds, for example, ruled it unthinkable to consider whether Sophocles’ Oedipus could have “escaped his doom if he had been more careful,” since “we are not entitled to ask questions that the dramatist did not intend us to ask.”4 Such prohibitions yield bizarre results, most notably explanations of plays (or epics) that achieve the “meaning” required by their beliefs through suggestions of authorial error or incompetence. Dawe writes of “numerous offences against dramatic or real life” in Sophocles’ Oedipus, yet contends they “are not a condemnation of Sophoclean technique.”5 They are surely not praise. This sense of Sophocles’ Oedipus as a flawed masterpiece drives scholars to change and re-direct the force of Sophocles’ text and encourages translators to remove or adjust alleged inconsistencies.6

The “Unthinkably Political” Flawed Non-Masterpiece?

Many gains have been registered in favor of Statius’ importance in recent years. But counterbalancing, say, the replacement in 2004 of Mozley’s 1928 Loeb translation7 of the Thebaid is the 2006 reprint of Butler’s Post-Augustan Poetry, replete with echoes of a critical past we thought was behind us:

The Theban legend is unsuitable for epic treatment for more reasons than one. In the first place the story is unpleasant from beginning to end.8

[Homer] knew what fighting was from personal experience, or at least from being in touch with warriors who had killed their man. Vergil had come no closer to these things than “in the pages of a book.” Statius is yet one remove further from the truth than Vergil.9

4 Dodds (1966). Silk and Stern (1981) 309 point out that Dodds assumes there is a specific doom for Oedipus to escape. Dodds never explains how he knew Sophocles’ intentions.
6 See Ahl (2012).
7 Mozley (1928).
8 Butler (1909) 208.
9 Butler (1909) 221.