CHAPTER 19

Statius’ Thebaid and Greek Tragedy: The Legacy of Thebes

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Statius can be presumed to have acquired a deep knowledge of Greek tragedy under the tutelage of his father, whom he praises in the Silvae as a distinguished teacher of Greek poetry.1 Given both the popularity of Euripides’ Phoenissae in Rome, as well as the esteem in which Aeschylus’ Septem Contra Thebas was held in antiquity,2 the question of the Thebaid’s indebtedness to those works is inevitably raised. While our discussion will embrace both Euripides and Aeschylus, we shall lay particular emphasis on Septem, whose influence has only recently been foregrounded in relevant discussions.3 If in this, necessarily concise, overview we can hardly afford an exhaustive treatment of the echoes of Greek tragedy in the Thebaid, we may still aspire to assess the extent of its influence, while concentrating on some of its most significant facets—

1 See Silvae 5.3, esp. 154–8, with Holford-Strevens (2000) esp. 46–8 on the omission of Attic drama from this list of poets; McNelis (2002).


significant, that is, for the overall scheme of Statius’ epic. Our prime point of focus will be the depiction of the leaders of the attacking army, particularly in the catalogue of book 4, where we may detect essential distinctions in their construal. Yet an inquiry on the Six shall inevitably encompass the Seventh: Polynices, whose role may only be properly appraised in tandem with Eteocles. We are inevitably led to the central notion of *furor* and its final culmination in the duel between Eteocles and Polynices: Statius’ utilization of tragic models demands to be approached in connection with the issue of the relative standing of the brothers, a topic central to the epic, pertaining to the wider Roman problematic of sameness and otherness.

**Warriors and Emblems**

Comparing the shield descriptions in *Septem Contra Thebas* and *Phoenissae*—a joint source of inspiration for Statius—one gathers the powerful impression that Euripides’ aim in the shield-narrative (*Phoen. 1104–40*) can be none other than to “dismantle” the Aeschylean sequence of shield-descriptions at the central scene of the *Redepaare* (*Sept. 375–676*), to effectively annul the relation between signifier and signified, between image and reality: a connection all too evident within the Aeschylean schema. The Euripidean account appears “teasingly inconclusive and unreadable,” yet in a way—we may assert—that creates its own sense in the unbalanced world of the *Phoenissae*. Statius now,

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4 For detailed commentaries of the Statian catalogue (4.1–344), see Steiniger (2005); Micozzi (2007b); Parkes (2012) 1–197.
5 On the resonance of Greek tragedy in book 12, see Criado, pp. 291–306 in this volume.
6 On the Theban problematic of the “Two” and the “One” as projected on Rome, see Braund (2006) esp. 268–71—taking the thread from Zeitlin (1986) on Greek tragedy; briefly also Criado, pp. 293–4 in this volume.
8 So Foley (1985) 128; cf. Saïd (1985) 504–8; Vidal-Naquet (1990) 299–300. The narrative has even been considered as interpolated: see Mastronarde (1994) 456–9 for a persuasive defense. Also Mastronarde (1994) 460–1 on the differences from Aeschylus—a key one being the substitution of Adrastus for Eteocles, which is followed by Statius. On variations as regards the names of the Seven in Greek literature, see Cingano (2002); concerning the Theban gates, see Berman (2002) and (2007) 87–115. Note that the gates are all but omitted in the *Thebaid*, save for a cursory mention in 8.351–7: see Venini (1969b) 468–70.
9 See Goff (1988). Note that in Euripides’ *Supplices* (857–917) the Argive heroes are presented in startlingly positive terms; see Storey (2008) 62–77. This departure is either to be read in