CHAPTER 21

Statius and Senecan Drama

Antony Augoustakis

The relationship between Statian epic and Senecan tragedy has been the object of occasional critical scrutiny in the past decades, since the resurgence of interest in Senecan tragedy, in combination with the most recent renewed interest in Flavian epic poetry.1 Given the prominence of the misfortunes of the Theban royal family in Seneca's tragic corpus, in plays such as Oedipus and Phoenissae in particular, it comes as no surprise that the Flavian poet borrows extensively from his Neronian predecessor and builds an intertextual nexus of correspondences that ultimately go beyond the surface of verbal allusions. This study will elaborate on the adaptation and exploitation by Statius of Senecan ritual representations: the Flavian poet extensively draws on such descriptions from Seneca's tragedies and adjusts them in a much more grotesque and exaggerated manner in the Thebaid. In what follows, we shall look at scenes such as the necromancy in Thebaid 4 and its relationship with similar scenes in Oedipus, as well as Tydeus' cannibalism in Thebaid 8 and its allusions to Thyestes. Just as Seneca grafts the tragic genre with epic overtones, and, as Schiesaro has pointed out,2 makes the two genres project a troubling shadow onto each other, so Statius exploits the interaction between the two genres to underscore the inescapability from the nefas that overshadows the Thebaid's perverted epic landscape; his chief mechanisms are religious, ritual

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1 Studies have heretofore limited themselves to detecting the verbal allusions to Senecan tragedy in Statius' Thebaid. The groundwork was laid by Braun (1867). Already Helm (1892) 35 recognized the neglected status quaestionis: "in materia quam finxit saepius Statius uideatur secutus esse [sc. Senecam], etiamsi urba alterius non itam cum altero consipirent, quia ille senarios iambicos, hic uersus epicos scripsit. Qua de similitudine qui adhuc dixere, uocabula quaedam et satis neglegenter aut obiter conesserunt." Helm spends more than twenty pages identifying further verbal similarities (35–58). Following in Helm's footsteps, Legras (1905a) 56–7, 96–8, 174–6 adds further insights on the verbal allusions to Seneca's tragedies. Venini (1965b) and (1967), and most recently, Fantham (1997); Bessone (2006); Ganiban (2007) 159–65; and Sacerdoti (2012) 141–3 have discussed the background of this literary affiliation. Personae dramatis frequently discussed are Oedipus and Jocasta or the Furies; see, e.g., Iglesias Montiel and Álvarez Morán (1997) on Jocasta, and Criado (1999) on Tisiphone.

representations. Statius plays with the idea of tragic *katharsis* at the end of his poem, but at the same time reverses expectations by excluding the possibility of a clear-cut, cleansing resolution: the burial of the dead is accompanied by lamentation, setting the expectations for more violence to ensue with the Epigonoi, the next generation; the conclusion of this war is soon to be overturned by the next battle, in an endless series of civil strife. The poet then opts for a closure that underscores his poetic powerlessness in front of this impasse, when he decides to end his *Thebaid* in the footsteps of the epic tradition of lament, as exemplified in *Iliad* 24, and not in the tragic manner of *katharsis*. Thus what emerges at the end of the *Thebaid* is a mingling of genres, from epic to tragedy, but ultimately epic poetry is privileged.

**Necromancy at Thebes**

In the middle of *Thebaid* 4, at the end of the catalogue of the Argive heroes setting out to attack Thebes, Statius embarks upon a lengthy narrative recording the reaction of the Thebans to the news of an imminent Argive expedition (4.345–645). Here the narrator reveals the extent of the Theban predicament: they lack the preparations to face the enemy, since their “walls have crumbled with ancient neglect” (*ipsa uetusto / moenia lapsa situ*, 356–7). In addition to portents of upcoming disaster (374–7), the queen of the Bacchants, a prominent figure of the religious life of the Theban society, runs down from Mt. Cithaeron and utters a clear prophecy: two kindred bulls will fight and kill one another (383–404). Upon consultation with Tiresias, Eteocles subjects himself to the prophet’s suggestion of a necromancy after purification:3

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3 On the necromancy, see Vessey (1973) 235–58.