CHAPTER 29

Statius in Dante’s *Commedia*

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As shown by Edwards in this volume,¹ Dante regards Statius as one of the great poets of Latin epic; his works are full of references which make it clear that he had an extensive and intimate knowledge of the *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*.² What makes Dante’s *Commedia* such a unique and important moment in the reception of Statius is not this, however; it is that the Latin poet appears as a significant speaking character in his own right. What is more, Dante conceives of his Statius as a Christian,³ an intervention which has greatly perplexed readers from his day to ours. The puzzlement of Dante’s near-contemporaries suggests that Statius’ Christianity was news to them, too.⁴ To understand how Dante could have conceived of such a bold fiction, we must remember that the *Silvae* had not yet been discovered, so all of the biographical details we learn from that text were unknown. Dante drew his idiosyncratic portrait upon a nearly blank canvas.

There have been three main approaches to explaining the mystery of Statius’ Christianity. The first has been to identify a particular moment in the *Thebaid* where the rhetoric might have belied for Dante a Christian theology. An early candidate was Capaneus’ pronouncement that the pagan gods are mere projections from human fear: “it was fear that first brought gods into the world” (*primus in orbe deos fecit timor, Theb. 3.661*).⁵ This strategy was also adopted by Politian, who looked to Tiresias’ mantic reference to an unknowable and unnameable god, the pinnacle of the three-fold universe (*triplicis mundi summum, 4.516*).⁶ Apart from the fleeting nature of these statements, the main problem with this approach is obvious: Capaneus is hardly the most

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¹ Edwards, pp. 497–511.
³ There is a vast bibliography on this aspect of the *Commedia*, and it would be beside the point of this Statius-focused study to attempt to survey it systematically. For starting points, see Paratore (1976) 425 and Heil (2002) 73–9.
⁴ See the mid-fourteenth century commentary of Benvenuto da Imola, in Lacaita (1887).
⁵ Cf. Benvenuto da Imola, in Lacaita (1887).
⁶ Mariotti (1975). Politian evidently was looking for a passage just before the Argives arrive at the Langia; see below.
noble mouthpiece to convey the author’s theological sentiments, and Dante puts Tiresias in Hell with the false prophets (Inf. 20.40–5). Hence a second strategy: to look for an external source, either a biographical tradition or an allegorical reading of passages or characters in the *Thebaid* that Dante might have drawn upon. The search for a convincing biographical source has been a failure. There were medieval allegorical readings of the *Thebaid*, but their relevance has been greatly overstated. Much has been made of the allegorizing commentary falsely attributed to Fulgentius, but it is certainly late in date and there is no evidence that it circulated at all; claims that Dante must have known it are unfounded. There were also obscure late-medieval allegorical traditions linking Theseus’ killing of the Minotaur to Christ, but these are of scant relevance to the plot of the *Thebaid* and are attested later than Dante. These allegories can serve as parallels for our own re-reading of the epic, but they are not very useful tools for explaining how Dante arrived at his ideas.

The third main approach to the problem has been to assert that the invention of a figure like the Christian Statius was simply a matter of poetic necessity for Dante. It is true that Dante makes good use of the Christian Statius, but he could have achieved his ends in other ways. This mode of analysis tends to reduce Statius to a stick-figure rather than treat him as a real poet in whose works Dante was immersed, and does little to explain why Statius was selected as the writer to be granted the honor of Paradise. What tends to get short shrift in all three of these approaches is Dante’s sense of the epic output of Statius as a whole, and its place in the Latin epic tradition beyond the gesture of respect to the *Aeneid* at the end of the *Thebaid*. We will begin from the assumption that Statius’ Christianity was not invented as a superficial gimmick, but was intended as an important statement about the way to read Statius. Our discussion, therefore, will return to a mode of analysis which tries to situate an answer within Dante’s own Statian hermeneutics. Instead of arguing for the importance of a single feature of the *Thebaid* in isolation, we will attempt to combine the best elements of earlier explanations into a single organic

9 Caviglia (1974); Baumble (1975); Padoan (1977); Petrocchi (1983) 105; Kleinhenz (1988b) 32.
10 Hays (2002); Anderson (2009) 1.xxvi. As we will see below, Dante had a very positive view of Hypsipyle, whereas this document allegorizes Hypsipyle negatively as bearing the insufficient waters of secular knowledge; for the text, see Sweeney (1997) 702.
11 Ronconi (1965) 566; Padoan (1977) 140–50.
14 Scherillo (1902) 499, immediately contested by Albini (1902).