1) Politics and literature, two powers confronting each other

As is well known, the epilogue of the Thebaid is marked by two dominant figures, with respect to which Statius defines his own position. In consigning his work to posterity, the poet pays a twofold homage to Virgil and Domitian, that is the highest authorities in literature and politics respectively:

Durabisne procul dominoque legere superstes,  
o mihi bissenos multum uigilata per annos  
Thebai? Iam certe praesens tibi Fama benignum  
strauit iter coepitque nouam monstrare futuris.  
Iam te magnanimus dignatur noscere Caesar,  
Itala iam studio discit memoratque iuuentus.  
Vive, precor; nec tu divinam Aeneida tempta,  
sec longe sequere et uestigia semper adora.  
Mox, tibi si quis adhuc praetendit nubila luor,  
occidet, et meriti post me referentur honores.  

(Stat. Theb. 12.810–9)

My Thebaid, on whom I have spent twelve wakeful years, will you long endure and be read when your master is gone? Already, 'tis true, Fame has strewn a kindly path before you and begun to show the new arrival to posterity. Already great-hearted Caesar deigns to know you, and the studious youth of Italy learns you and recites. Live, I pray; and essay not the divine Aeneid, but ever follow in her footsteps from afar in adoration. Soon, if any envy still spreads clouds before you, it shall perish, and after me you shall be paid the honours you deserve.

* Versions of this paper were delivered at the Amsterdam Symposium and in Bari, Florence, Palermo and Udine. I thank my audiences at those occasions for their comments, and Glenn Most for his critical remarks on an earlier draft of these pages.


2 Translations from Statius are by Shackleton Bailey 2003.
What immediately strikes the reader (and has long been interpreted as a sample of the ‘Virgilianism’ of the Flavian epicists) is the hyperbolic homage to the great epic poet – especially in comparison with the fairly restrained tribute paid to the emperor. Virgil is exalted to the ranks of the gods (an honour usually reserved for the emperor), and is said to be such a superior model that his followers should remain at a respectful distance, showing the veneration that is due to a god.¹

The deification of ancestors, as we know, is the typical custom of imperial power (starting with Augustus himself, who promotes the deification of Caesar); but we also know that there is nothing innocent or disinterested about this custom. In other words, deification is part of a logic of self-promotion⁴ and above all of succession: the figure who is deified is the one to whom one hopes to succeed, the one whose power one hopes to inherit (as, precisely with reference to Augustus, already Cassius Dio lucidly observed: “so they [sc. the triumvirs] eagerly did everything which tended to Caesar’s honour, in expectation of some day being themselves thought worthy of like honours ”, 47.18.2).⁵ The deification of one’s predecessor is an operation which, in time, will benefit the promoter of the initiative: it is part of a strategy of consolidation and perpetuation of one’s own power, a way to prepare one’s own immortality. Consequently, also the gesture of Statius, who deifies Virgil, proves to be less ingenuous and innocent than it has been described by a long critical tradition.⁶ In deifying Virgil, and thus certifying his ‘classic’ status, the poet Statius is simply preparing the way for his own inclusion among the classics (as is confirmed by the image of Fame, who has started to show the new poem to future ages). Turning Virgil into a god, a classic to be con-

---

¹ The phrase *uestigia adorare* seems to have just one parallel, Sid. Carm. 22.ep.3 *nos uestigia doctrinae ipsius adorantes* (with reference to the poet Antedius). This image combines that of ‘following in the steps’ (*uestigia legere, or premere, and sim.*) and that of religious veneration. It is evident (cf. Hardie 1993, 110; Pollmann 2004, *ad loc.*) that there is influence of Lucretius’ image of following in the steps of his ‘god’ Epicurus: 3.3ff. *te sequor, o Graiae gentis decus, inque tuis nunc / ficta pedum pono pressis uestigia signis, / non ita certandi cupidus quam propter amorem / quod te imitari aueo…* In Statius *adoro* also occurs, with reference to his other epic model Lucan, at Silv. 2.7.135 (last line of the poem).


⁵ Translation by Cary 1914.

⁶ Good Henderson 1991, 40: “Statius’ most counter-Virgilian moment is, precisely, his overt act of deference to Virgil”.