STATIUS THEBAID 1.72: IS JOCASTA DEAD OR ALIVE?
THE TRADITION OF JOCASTA’S SUICIDE IN GREEK AND
ROMAN DRAMA AND IN STATIUS’ THEBAID

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The story of Statius’ Thebaid starts some time after the close of Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus (further: OT) and shortly before his Oedipus Coloneus (OC). At the end of OT Jocasta has hanged herself, Oedipus has blinded himself and asks Creon to send him away from Thebes. At the beginning of OC there has been an interval of many years. It appears that Oedipus remained at Thebes for some time and was expelled just when he had learned to resign himself to his fate; he regrets that his sons did nothing to prevent his expulsion. Blind Oedipus has grown old and guided by Antigone has entered a grove sacred to the Eumenides at Colonos, where he utters a solemn prayer to the goddesses (OC 84–110). Then Ismene arrives from Thebes and tells her father about the strife between her brothers: Polynices has gone to Argos and is preparing for war. Hereafter the drama unfolds.

At the beginning of Thebaid I, immediately after the eulogy on Domitian in the proem, we listen to Oedipus cursing his sons and praying to the gods of Tartarus, especially Tisiphone, to punish them (Theb. 1.56–87). This prayer, the structural counterpart to that in OC but different in tone and content, is preceded by a brief description of the present situation: Oedipus has blinded himself (46–7) and is hiding in a secret abode (49f.). Answering Oedipus’ prayer, Tisiphone leaves Tartarus for Thebes and causes madness to enter the brothers’ hearts (123–30). Until this moment, it appears, the brothers have been sharing the rule over Thebes (130 sociis … regnis), but at this point Tisiphone makes discordia enter their minds. As a result of this discordia, the brothers decide to rule over Thebes each for one year in turn, and alternately go into exile (138–41). In line 164, Eteocles is appointed by lot to be king for the first time, and Polynices leaves

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Thebes. Subsequently, Jupiter in a council of the gods (197ff.) announces his decision to destroy both Argos and Thebes, in order to answer Oedipus’ prayers, thus continuing the chain of events Tisiphone had already set in motion.¹ He will punish Oedipus’ sons for their outrageous behaviour: *at nati (facinus sine more!) cadentes/calcauere oculos* (1.238ff.), “but his sons (outrageous deed!) trampled his eyes as they fell”.² In lines 292ff., Jupiter sends Mercurius to Laius in the underworld, whose soul we are told is still waiting at this side of the Lethe and who therefore—I assume—still lies unburied somewhere at the place of his death, at the crossroads in Phocis. Laius has to ascend to the upper world, go to Thebes and persuade Eteocles to break the contract for the alternate reign. In the meantime (312ff.), Polynices—and the poem—is on his way to Argos.

After this summary of the dramatic situation and the sequence of events in *Theb.* 1.46–312, I return to Oedipus’ prayer in lines 59–87.

**Oedipus’ prayer and his curse**

Oedipus asks Tisiphone to take revenge on his sons, a request he himself labelled as *peruersa uota* (59).³ In order to justify this appeal and persuade the dreadful goddess to grant his prayer, in which he asks for the destruction and death of both his sons, Oedipus sums up the tragic events of his life, which he presents as if guided by Tisiphone and achieved by him in her honour:

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adnue, Tisiphone, peruersaque uota secunda:
si bene quid merui, si me de matre cadentem
fouisti' gremio et traiectum ulnere plantas³
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¹ See on this speech the contribution of Hill to this volume.
² Tr. Shackleton Bailey (further: SB). For the interpretation of *calcauere oculos* as either physical (SB) or metaphorical, see below.
³ For a survey of the various explanations of this curse in the Greek tradition, see Ganiban 2007, 26–7, note 10, who also points out that the version of the curse in Sophocles *OC* is “the only Greek version in which the curse does not give birth to the expedition.” In Statius, as elsewhere, the curse sets in motion the events of the *Thebaid*.
⁴ The rather rude phrase *me de matre cadentem/ fouisti gremio* is taken from or imitated by (see Smolenaars 1994, xxxv–xlii) V.Fl. 1.355 *quam matre cadentem/ Piresius gmeno fouit pater amne*. In both cases, *gremio* and more unusual *gmeno amne* refer to the ritualistic recognition of a child by a father, who in Statius here is substituted with Tisiphone. See also van Dam 1984, 129 on *Silv.* 2.1.120–4 and 471 on 2.7. 36–41.