CHAPTER 18

The Epics of Statius and Valerius Flaccus’

Argonautica

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In his Thebaid and the extant portion of the Achilleid, Statius treats the legends of Polynices’ attempt upon Thebes and Achilles’ youth. Yet the fame of the Argonautic voyage seeps out into these other myths. So in the Thebaid we find Amphiaraois recalling his past as one of the crew (3.517–21) and Hypsipyle narrating her encounter with the voyagers at Lemnos (5.335–498). Meanwhile, in the Achilleid the Amycus–Pollux fight is included in Achilles’ song (1.190–1), and Chiron begins to talk of the time he saw the voyagers Hercules and Theseus (1.156–7). Indeed, these Achilleid references contribute to the important theme of how far Achilles emulates (and might continue to emulate) the Argonautic crew.¹ Now it comes as no surprise that alongside traces of the Argonauts, we find traces of a contemporary poem, Valerius Flaccus’ Argonautica.² While the

1 Thus, for example, he emulates Theseus and Jason in his abandonment of a female (Davis (2006) 139–41) while following in the footsteps of his father in the rape (see below, p. 338, n. 69). Cf. also Heslin (2005) 184–7 on the parallelism between Achilles and Castor at Ach. 1.171–8. The prospect of love for an Amazon (Penthesilea) in Achilles’ mythological future might align him with Theseus. Chiron appears to be setting out parallels between Achilles and Hercules and Theseus at Ach. 1.156–8 but suddenly falls silent, thereby drawing our attention to the nature and extent of the emulation: see Parkes (2009b) 476–7.

2 The compositional time span of the Argonautica, begun in the seventies CE, is uncertain. It may well have extended at least into the early eighties but no later than the early 90s (Zissos (2008) xv). For work on the poem could not have continued after Valerius’ death, which is described as ‘recent’ (nuper) by Quintilian at Inst. 10.1.90, in a book written no later than 94, probably around 92 (Zissos (2008) xvii; Stover (2008) would place Valerius’ death c. 80 CE and hence composition in the 70s). Statius is thought to have died c. 96 CE and to have written the Achilleid in the last years of his life (Coleman (1988) xx–xxi). Hence the dependence of this text on the Argonautica is uncontroversial. Work on the Thebaid, assumed to be of twelve years duration on the grounds of a statement at Theb. 12.811–12, is usually dated to around 80–92 CE (Coleman (1988) xvi–viii). The majority of critics view the Argonautica as the Thebaid’s source text, though see e.g. the unease of Smolenaars ((1996) 151) about the assumption of the priority of Argonautica 7 and 8. See further Parkes (forthcoming). Note that Valerian intertextuality in the early stages of the Thebaid’s composition may have been possible without access to the full extant version of the Argonautica: Statius could have encountered
detection of verbal parallels is nothing new, increasingly critics are coming to recognise the dynamic and sustained nature of Statius’ engagement with Valerius.\(^3\) With particular focus on overlapping content, such as Achilles’ upbringing and events at Lemnos, this chapter takes up two current trends in the exploration of the relationship between the two Flavian epicists:\(^4\) the way in which Statius deals with his belated position and the nature of the intertextual process. Through examination of the manner in which the *Achilleid* plays out the consequences of Valerius’ poem and the *Thebaid* indirectly treats familiar material, it highlights the self-consciousness with which Statius approached his epigonal status. It then explores Statius’ technique of multiple imitation, which, as the *Thebaid* ambush and the *Achilleid’s* description of Chiron’s home show, includes evocation of his Valerian intertext’s model. Using the example of the *Achilleid’s* interest in abduction, the chapter goes on to suggest an area for further research in Statius’ take-up of the *Argonautica’s* themes and motifs.

**Following After**

Both of Statius’ epics are set after the Argonaut mission in time. In the *Achilleid*, for instance, Peleus is still alive but too old to fight (*Ach. 1.440*), while in the *Thebaid* a generation has passed since the voyage, as shown by the fact that Hypsipyle’s sons by Jason have reached adulthood (*Theb. 5.713–30*). Some of the crew, such as Theseus, who is named as one of the band at *Theb. 5.431–2*, feature in the poem, but others, such as Hercules, Meleager and Castor and Pollux, are no longer on earth.\(^5\) Statius’ positioning of the Argonautic expedition as something that has recently happened in the poems’ memory is tied up with his own belated literary situation as Valerius Flaccus’ successor.\(^6\) So, for example, the fact that the Flavian *Argonautica* had referred to Achilles’ upbringing is exploited by the *Achilleid*. At Val. Fl. 1.268–70, Peleus advises

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3 See e.g. (on the *Thebaid*) Stover (2009); Newlands (2012) 38–44; Lovatt (forthcoming); Parkes (forthcoming); (on the *Achilleid*) Ripoll and Soubiran (2008) 32; Parkes (2009a); Kozák (2013); Augoustakis (forthcoming).

4 Treatment of the *Silvae’s* use of Valerius Flaccus lies outside the scope of this paper.

5 See e.g. *Theb. 4.158* (the god Hercules); 4.103 (the death of Meleager); 7.792–3; 8.49–50; 10.500–2 (the afterlife of Castor and Pollux).

6 For the *Achilleid’s* play with its post-Valerian position, see Kozák (2013) (taking up work on belatedness by Hinds (1998) and Feeney (2004)).