STATIUS’ THEBAID AND THE LEGACY OF VERGIL’S AENEID

BY

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In 1713, Alexander Pope published in the Guardian, a literary magazine of the time, a Receipt to Make an Epic Poem (I quote only some extracts):

Take out of any old poem (. . .) those parts of story which afford most scope for long descriptions, put these pieces together, and throw all the adventures you fancy into one tale. Then take a hero you may choose for the sound of his name, and put him into the midst of these adventures. There let him work, for twelve books; at the end of which you may take him out ready prepared to conquer, or to marry; it being necessary that the conclusion of an epic poem be fortunate. (. . .) For a battle: Pick a large quantity of images and descriptions from Homer’s Iliad, with a spice or two of Vergil, and if there remain any overplus you may lay them by for a skirmish. Season it well with similes, and it will make an excellent battle. (. . .)

Already these few excerpts show what have to be considered the necessary ‘ingredients’ of an epic which remained impressively stable during the centuries. It is also clear that still in the 18th century Homer and Vergil were considered to be the models for the epic genre. Turning back to the development of the epic genre in Antiquity it can be said that, from their earliest epics onwards,

1) Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Universities of Glasgow, Trier, Vancouver (Green College, UBC), St Andrews, Bielefeld, Mainz, Ithaca (Cornell), Seattle, Princeton (Institute for Advanced Study), Basle, and London (Institute of Classical Studies). I am grateful for stimulating discussions on these occasions. My thanks are also due to the anonymous reader of Mnemosyne for helpful criticism and to T.G. Duncan for assistance with the English version of this paper.
2) No. 78, Wednesday, June 10, 1713, 308-12, quotations from 309 and 311.
3) Here ‘receipt’ is a now rare synonym for ‘recipe’, i.e., a “formula or prescription, a statement of ingredients (and mode of procedure) necessary for the making of some preparation, esp. in medicine and cookery”; see the Oxford English Dictionary s.v. ‘Receipt I. 1’.
4) From Livius Andronicus onwards, cf. E. Burck (ed.), Das römische Epos (Darmstadt 1979), 1-3; P. Toohey, Reading Epic (London 1992), 90-9, and M. von Albrecht, A
the Romans tried hard to rival the paramount achievement and position of Homer. As it is well known, Vergil was finally awarded the crown for having created a Roman epic equal to Homer’s poems. Roman epicists after Vergil had not only the Greek and Roman epic tradition behind them, or, indeed, confronting them, but they had in particular to measure themselves against Vergil: epicizing after Vergil means Vergilizing. This is also true for all of the Flavian epicists. In his epic, the *Thebaid* (written roughly between 80 and 92 AD), Statius evokes twice, explicitly, his model, Vergil’s *Aeneid* (by then roughly a hundred years old), with which he wants his own epic to be compared: this expresses humility and pride at the same time, and moreover shows that he feels that he cannot produce an epic without referring to Vergil in one way or another. He does so in *Thebaid* book X (see below) and at the end of book XII. In the *Silvae* Statius seems, in a kind of palinode due to increased confidence, to revoke the modesty (or rather: ambiguity) of the end of the *Thebaid*; whereas he had said in *Theb*. 12.816-7

\begin{verbatim}
 nec tu divinam Aeneida tempta, | sed longe sequere et vestigia semper adora, this is expressed slightly differently in *Silv*. 4.7.25-8 quippe te fido monitore nostra | Thebais multa cruciata lima | temptat audaci fide Mantuanae | gaudia famae.
\end{verbatim}

Though, at first glance, the content of the two epics could not be more different, there exist some striking similarities and contrasts between the two epics which Statius clearly wanted his readers to realize:

1) The overall structure of the epics is the same: both contain twelve books; the first six tell about the action leading to the mil-

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History of Roman Literature from Livius Andronicus to Boethius (Leiden 1996; German original Munich 1994), 76-80.

5) In the Neronian and then also the Flavian period the Augustan authors became classics, cf. R. Mayer, ‘Neronian Classicism’, AJPh 103 (1982), 305-18.


8) S. Hinds, Allusion and Intertext. Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry (Cambridge 1998), 93-5, is right when he points out the occasionality of these statements which complicates any attempt to read them “as a literary historical position statement” (94).