Iocasta’s Intercession inStatius' *Thebaid* and its Literary Antecedents

A mock aporia from Martial that suggests recycled narratives could be tiresome when not done well belittles the Theban story as a trifle (14.1.11-12). The predictability of revised narratives likely hampered the success of many poetic efforts, and Statius certainly worries a few times over the success of his own work (See *Theb.* 12.810-19 and *Ach*. 1.12-13). His *Thebaid* was preceded by several works not least of which was the *Phoenissae* of Euripides, distinguished as one of the most attested literary papyri of antiquity and a school text frequently visited throughout a young man’s education.[[1]](#endnote-1) The mutual fratricide of Oedipus’ sons is the absolute crisis toward which Theban narratives aim. This is the scene toward which Statius’ *Thebaid* must also work to be an identifiable reconstitution of the conflict between Eteocles and Polynices. How then could Statius’ Theban epic be engaging when significant plot points, particularly the scene of fratricide, were already known? Suspense, to be sure, is integral to a compelling narrative, but it also requires “a state of cognitive uncertainty”[[2]](#endnote-2) and it is unlikely that Statius’ audience was unfamiliar with previous narratives recounting similar episodes.

There is a strong relationship between canonicity and the readers’ development of scripts.[[3]](#endnote-3) One of many canonical action sequences in the Theban story is Iocasta’s efforts to prevent the conflict between her sons. Judged against his predecessors, Statius’ treatment is unique because Iocasta never stands between her sons as in Euripides and Seneca. In this paper I consider Iocasta’s efforts to intervene as a breach in canonicity that creates the uncertainty necessary for suspense.[[4]](#endnote-4) Statius fails to present the brothers with Iocasta; however, this is not a sheepish surrender to the productions of his predecessors[[5]](#endnote-5) but a deft occlusion of a canonical scene. This elision invalidates the anticipation of events the reader would enjoy from familiarity with the story’s plot (i.e. their operative script). At the end of Iocasta’s speech to dissuade Eteocles, Statius shifts the focus to Antigone’s attempt to sway Polynices. This abrupt transition suspends the outcome of Iocasta’s efforts and leaves unanswered her question—*in fratrem…exis?* (11.353). Antigone tells Polynices that their mother’s speech has persuaded their brother and points out that Eteocles does not come to the challenge. This moves Polynices to lower his sword and weep. Eteocles, however, arrives suddenly and the duel begins. As Vessey notes, Statius’ revision increases tension and suspense but does not elaborate on how this is achieved.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The division of Iocasta’s efforts to intercede between Polynices and Eteocles with a sudden leap to the duel elides the point at which the brothers are actually brought together with Iocasta to refuse terms. The trajectory of Statius’ *Thebaid* is so seamless that we hardly notice that the time for her tragic intercession has passed. This produces an unsettling conflict to the reader’s script and raises the possibility, though briefly, of alternate outcomes. Suppose Antigone is truthful in her claims to Polyinces, at this point the reader can only anticipate further delay so the brothers can come together with Iocasta, or speculate that an unsatisfactory truce is about to be reached. Of course, as quickly as the uncertainty arises, it is resolved. Nevertheless, in this breach of a traditional narrative sequence Statius achieves the uncertainty needed to make his revision of the events leading to the duel suspenseful and compelling.

1. Cribiore, Raffaella (2001) ‘The Grammarian’s Choice: The Popularity of Euripides’

   *Phoenissae* in Hellenistic and Roman Education’, in: Too, Yun Lee (Ed.), *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity*. Brill, pp. 241–259 and Bremer, J.M. (1985) ‘The Popularity of Eurpides’ *Phoinissae* in Late Antiquity’, in: *Actes du congres VII de la FIEC*, pp. 287–8. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In agreeing on a definition of suspense, the majority of theorists accept that of Ortony et al. (1998) The Cognitive Structure of Emotions, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.131. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Herman, David (2002) *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp.85-113. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Bruner, Jerome (1991) ‘The Narrative Construction of Reality’, *Critical Inquiry* 18, pp. 11-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Bremer (1987) ‘The Lille Papyrus’, in: Bremer, et al. (Eds.) *Some Recently Found Greek Poems. Text and Commentary*. Brill, p. 172. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Vessey. David (1973) *Statius and the Thebaid*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 271. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)