

The Intimacy between Sleep and Death in Book 10 of Statius' *Thebaid*

Deep within the house of Sleep (Somnus), as Statius describes it in a vivid ekphrasis at *Thebaid* 10.84-136, there lies a sculpted image of Sleep reclining beside his brother Death (Mors) (*cum Morte iacet*, line 105). The physical intimacy between the brothers conveyed by the sculpture goes beyond merely suggesting their close familial relationship; rather, the fact that Statius describes the sculpture as a gloomy image that no one sees (*nullique ea tristis imago / cernitur*, lines 105-6), hints at the implicit, sinister aspect of their brotherhood, namely their ability to impersonate one another and thus deceive those trying to discriminate between the sleeping and the dead. The dark symbolism of the bond between Sleep and Death had a long literary pedigree (cf. Hesiod, *Theog.* 755-66), but Statius' textual image of the brothers lying together is especially apt for the mood of the *Thebaid*, an epic in which restful sleep is scarce and, when it does occur, is "unnatural and portentous," in the words of David Vessey (1973: 305).

Commentators tend to treat Statius' description of the house of Somnus in connection with Ovid's description of Somnus' abode at *Met.* 11.592-649 (e.g., Delarue (1988-89)). By contrast, this paper looks forward from the ekphrasis to the subsequent narrative of *Thebaid* 10. Specifically, this paper uses the description of the sculpture as the starting point for an examination of how Statius recalls and foregrounds the intimacy between sleep and death in the scene of the massacre of Thebans that ensues (*Theb.* 10.262-375). At *Theb.* 10.300-01, for example, Statius describes the slaughter as follows: *fumat humus, somnique et mortis anhelitus una / volvitur*... The noun *anhelitus* has two different senses when taken with each preceding genitive, the "breathing (of sleep)" and the "gasp (of death)," as R. D. Williams (1972: ad loc.) notes. But the adverb *una* elides the difference between the two actions, as the elision between

-*que* and *et* brings the nouns *somni* and *mortis* closer together; in this case, the breathing of sleep *is* the gasp of death. The intimacy hinted at in the sculpted image of the brothers lying together, an image normally unseen by visitors to the house (recall *nulli...cernitur* in lines 105-06), but etched vividly in the mind of the reader by way of Statius' graphic ekphrasis, is realized by their intermingling in the throats of the sleeping/dying Thebans. Statius gives the reader exceptional visual access to the hidden sculpture and thus privileges him or her with an interpretive key to the imagery of Somnus' actions on the battlefield.

The theme of duality is prominent in Statius' epic poem, as Philip Hardie (1993: 8) has observed. Tatiana Korneeva (2011: ch. 2 *et passim*) has written in particular about doubling (and its opposite, splitting) as an organizing principle of the epic. Foremost among doubles in the narrative are Oedipus' sons, Eteocles and Polynices, whose opposed fraternal armies (*fraternas acies*, *Theb.* 1.1) create the epic's central conflict. I conclude this paper by suggesting that Somnus and Mors, brothers whose partnership ensures the doom of countless Theban soldiers in Book 10, provide a foil for the doomed sons of Oedipus. The productive collusion between the divine brothers in Book 10 paves the way for the epic's climax, the mutual destruction of the mortal brothers Eteocles and Polynices in book 11.

Works Cited

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