

Staius on Staius: The Virgilian *Thebaid* in the *Achilleid*

In his fragmentary epic poem, the *Achilleid*, Staius has much to say about his completed epic, the *Thebaid*. Not surprisingly, most of his self-commentary is implicit, allusive, or both. This paper aims to demonstrate that, however opaque Staius' treatment of himself may at first seem, the *Achilleid* does paint a particular and instructive picture of the *Thebaid*; to be specific, Staius' latter epic places the *Thebaid* in conversation with the *Aeneid*, and even goes so far as to make the *Thebaid* the primary martial intertext *instead of* the *Aeneid*.

In her 2003 discussion of Staiian scholarship, Coleman notes the relative dearth of studies analyzing the relationship between Staius' two epics. Much has been published on Staius in the past decade, but the study that most directly and productively compares the two Staiian epics is, as its title promises, Parkes' 2008 analysis, "The Return of the Seven: Allusion to the *Thebaid* in Staius' *Achilleid*." In this article, Parkes responds to previous Staiian scholars who see the Theban elements and echoes in the *Achilleid* as evidence of laziness (e.g., Dilke 2005, 10). In short, she argues that the *Achilleid* makes productive and dynamic allusive use of the *Thebaid*, especially in martial scenes. Parkes does not emphasize (although her article makes it clear in many cases) that the *Achilleid* is, on the one hand, engaging both the *Thebaid* and the *Aeneid* and, on the other, making the *Thebaid* the *primary* intertext, the intertext that enhances the meaning of the alluding passages.

In addition to repurposing and expanding the Theban elements identified by Parkes, this paper aims to add three more provocative Staiian intertexts to the mix. First, Staius' unique inclusion of Theseus among the Argonauts allows the poet to interweave more closely his two epics when he invokes Catullus 64 in the *Achilleid*. Second, Staius begins the *Achilleid* with *magnanimum*, a word which shows up at the very end of the *Thebaid* as an epithet of Domitian

(*Theb.* 12.814). The careful but unsuspecting reader of Statius might thus expect a poem beginning with *magnanimum* to be about Domitian, which it is not. This echo, then, lends additional humor to the emphatic recusatio at *Achilleid* 1.14-19. Third, much has been made of the *vestigia* (footsteps) in the epilogue of the *Thebaid*, which are both explicitly and allusively about Virgil (Nugent 1996): Statius exhorts the *Thebaid* to reverence the *Aeneid*'s footsteps from afar, just as Aeneas tells his wife, Creusa, to follow his own footsteps from afar. Rarely noted in discussions of these passages, however, is the fact that Creusa dies, and in fact must die for the *Aeneid* to go on; with this imminent death in mind, the footprints pose a potential problem for Statius' own literary-historical self-fashioning: must the *Thebaid*, like Creusa, be sacrificed to the project of *Aeneid*? The *Achilleid* as well evinces a deep concern with literary history, and the motif of *covered* tracks arises repeatedly. Perhaps, then, the *Achilleid* expresses concern about those very tracks which would lead Creusa (read: the *Thebaid*) to her demise.

In the absence of an Ovid or a Propertius to "receive" his martial epic, Statius becomes his own epic's most engaged reader. By emphasizing the importance of the *Thebaid* as an intertext, as opposed to the *Aeneid*, Statius, it seems, engages in a sort of self-Virgilization: the patterns of self-allusion in the *Achilleid* suggest an author aware of and concerned with the importance of reception and criticism for one's place in literary history.

Works Cited

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