

Rewriting the *Thebaid*: Pietas and the Furies in *Silvae* 3.3 and 5.2

Much recent Statian scholarship is devoted to the study of the relationship between the *Thebaid* and the *Silvae*. These contributions primarily aim to explain how similar motives, ideas, and poetic techniques are used differently in the two works (Dietrich 2002; Newlands 2002: 199-226; Augoustakis 2007; Bernstein 2007; Malamud 2007). Newlands (2002: 201) has persuasively theorized that in the *Silvae*, a collection of “safe and joyful poetry,” Statius often reverses themes and images used in the *Thebaid*, “a poem of pain and suffering.” In particular, she focuses on *Silvae* 1.5, addressed to Claudius Etruscus, and suggests that Statius alludes to his epos there to contrast the everlasting friendship between himself and his patron with the undying enmity between Eteocles and Polynices. Following this line of argumentation, in this paper I show that Statius uses the same technique in *Silvae* 3.3, also addressed to Claudius Etruscus, where he describes his patron’s affectionate bond with his father as antithetical to Oedipus’ resentful relationship with his children.

At the beginning of *Thebaid* 1, Oedipus curses his sons for having mistreated him, and summons Tisiphone from the Underworld, so that she may punish them by spurning on a fratricidal war. The Fury promptly carries out the order. In Book 11 Pietas makes one last attempt to delay the conflict: she comes down from heavens to instill a sudden sense of peace into the soldiers’ hearts. Tisiphone, however, immediately intervenes to drive her away by threatening her with snakes and torches. Terrified by her rival, Pietas flees, returning to her celestial abode.

Silvae 3.3, written to console Claudius Etruscus on the death of his beloved father, overturns this narrative pattern. Having left the earth at the end of the *Thebaid*, Pietas is now

called back by Statius (who significantly uses the same language employed by Oedipus to summon Tisiphone), whereas the Furies are urged to stay away. In addition, the description of Pietas in *Silvae* 3.3 reverses her characterization in *Thebaid* 11: while in the epos the goddess is portrayed as grieving, powerless, and terrified by her rival, in the consolation she appears triumphant, outstanding in her splendor, and harmed by no evil man. This glowing depiction of Pietas enables Statius not only to highlight and praise Claudius Etruscus' devotion toward his father, but also, more broadly, to celebrate the restoration of traditional Roman morals in his own poetry.

An analogous reworking of the epic contrast between Pietas and Tisiphone is found in *Silvae* 5.2 (Bernstein 2007: 192-94). The addressee, Crispinus, is said to have forgiven his mother despite her attempt to poison him. Statius comments on this episode by pointing out that in the age of Domitian Pietas has returned, and the Furies, goddesses of vengeance, have been driven away. Once again, the narrative universe of the *Thebaid*, in which all fundamental values are turned upside down, is contrasted with the more conventional and (at least on the surface) reassuring world of the *Silvae*.

Works Cited

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