

The Argos Narrative in Statius' *Thebaid*: a new Ovidian Perseid?

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ABSTRACT

Moving beyond traditionally Virgil-centric readings of the *Thebaid*, this article argues that Statius programmatically acknowledges the role that the *Metamorphoses* plays in his poem, by opening the *Thebaid* with an Argive narrative (*Theb.* 1.312-2.743) entirely modelled on the Ovidian Perseid (*Met.* 4.610-5.249). By exploring how a “conflictive” Virgilian-Ovidian intertextuality informs the *Thebaid*’s Argos narrative, I show how Statius develops Ovid’s intertextual technique both to competitively renegotiate his relationship with his Augustan models and to respond to the new socio-political issues of Flavian Rome, chiefly the dangers of the Flavians’ family-based reorganisation of the imperial institution under the guise of a return to an idealised Augustan past.

1. *Structural and thematic similarities between Ovid’s Perseid and Statius’ Argos narrative*

Placed between the first and the second books of the poem, Statius’ Argos narrative triggers the *Thebaid*’s plot: after the Ovidian Fury Tisiphone reiterates her malediction against Thebes (*Theb.* 1.89-130) Polynices revives the exile of his ancestor Cadmus by leaving Thebes (*Theb.* 1.164-70).¹ Having survived a storm (*Theb.* 1.346-382), he meets Tydeus at Argos and the two are welcomed by the local king Adrastus with a banquet (*Theb.* 1.380-539). This is the occasion for the old king to tell a complex aetiological tale (*Theb.* 1.540-672) that explains to the newcomers the origin of the festival for Apollo that Argos is celebrating: the city is thankful to the god (who slew the monster Python) for having spared Coroebus, the hero who killed the monster sent by Apollo himself against Argos as revenge for the death of his lover Psammathe, killed by her father for adultery. The narrative continues with Polynices’ marriage to Adrastus’ daughter, Argia (*Theb.* 2.213-268), and Tydeus’ embassy to Eteocles in Thebes (*Theb.* 2.375-480). Here, Tydeus’ monomachy against the fifty soldiers who try to kill him in an ambush (*Theb.* 2.527-681) not only marks the beginning of war-hostilities between Argos and Thebes, but also -as the *Thebaid*’s first scene of martial violence- it articulates important themes that will be developed through the poem, such as the tension between heroic and monstrous behaviours and the crisis of traditional Herculean heroism.²

¹ Statius maintains the Ovidian name Tisiphone for his Fury (*Met.* 4.481-511) and emphasises her previous visits to Thebes (*notum iter ad Thebas*, *Theb.* 1.101; *adsuetaque infecit nube penates*, *Theb.* 1.124). See Feeney 1991, 343; Keith 2002a, 394.

² In the following analysis we will explore the political significance of Tydeus’ fight as a perversion of Aeneas’ last duel. For a more general discussion of the figure of Tydeus in the poem see Augoustakis (2016, xxi-xli; ad v. 8.749-66). More specifically on Tydeus’ animal regression as the beginning of an anti-heroic and dehumanising pattern in the poem see Gervais 2015, 56-76.

At first sight, the Ovidian saga of Perseus seems scarcely visible in this story, whereas the points of contact with the *Aeneid* are abundant: Adrastus' reception of the two exiles (*Quae causa furoris / externi iuvenes*, 1.438-39) and his aetiological tale (*non inscia suasit / religio*, 1.559-60) verbally recall Aeneas' arrival at Pallanteum and Evander's mythological tale (*iuvenes quae causa*, *Aen.* 8.112; *non...vana superstitio*, 8.185-88), while the Argive banquet evokes Virgilian scenes of hospitality (*Theb.* 1.516-21; *Aen.* 1.725-27; 7.524-26) and Adrastus' hymn to Apollo echoes Evander's prayer to Hercules (*Theb.* 1.696-720; *Aen.* 8.293-302).³

Nevertheless, precise verbal and thematic similarities confirm that these allusions occur within a narrative that closely follows that of the Ovidian Perseid in its evocative rewriting of the *Aeneid* and its narrative journey from Thebes to Argos. The beginning of the Statian narrative describes Polynices trembling in the winds of a storm just like Perseus (*venti transversa frementes*, *Theb.* 1.348; cf. 1.364-369; *ventis discordibus actus*, *Met.* 4.621) so that both heroes can be indirectly compared with frightened sailors who are respectively afraid to navigate the sea and the sky at night (*pulsat metus undique et undique frater / ac velut hiberno deprensus navita ponto / cui neque Temo piger neque amico sidere monstrat / Luna vias medio caeli pelagique tumult*, *Theb.* 1.369-372; *saepe sub occasus, saepe est ablatas in ortus / iam cadente die veritus se credere nocti / constitit*, *Met.* 4.626-28). Thus, both Polynices and Perseus are immediately cast in the position of the soon-to-be-shipwrecked Aeneas at the beginning of his peregrination (*Aen.* 1.81-123). However, their routes take an emblematically different direction from that of the Virgilian hero: Perseus is pushed to the extreme borders of the world in a Hesperia (*constitit Hesperio, regnis atlantis, in orbe*, *Met.* 4.628) far away from the Hesperia reached by Aeneas (*est locus Hesperiam*, *Aen.* 1.530), while Polynices moves east toward an Argos described as the falling Troy from which Aeneas escapes.⁴ Just as in the *Aeneid*, the storm causes the heroes to seek refuge: Polynices goes to Adrastus' place and Perseus to Atlans' (*Theb.* 1.386-87; *Met.* 4.627). However, the battles that the heroes wage to defend their place of refuge transports them directly into the Iliadic part of the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas becomes both *hospes* and warrior, as allegorically displayed by his consecration as a new Herculean hero (*Aen.* 8.184-309) via Evander's aetiological tale (Galinsky 1966, 65). Here, the Ovidian saga of Perseus continues to supply an important mythological model for Statius' Argive narrative. Indeed, while Adrastus' immediate recognition of Polynices and Tydeus as his son-in-law prophesised by Apollo (*Theb.* 1.494-96)

³ See McNelis (2007, 27-28) and Caviglia 1973, ad v. 390-720.

⁴ *vis maesta timoris*, *Theb.* 1.379; *lucem in moenia fundens Larisaeus apex*, *Theb.* 1.381-82; *maestumque timore*, *Aen.* 1.302; *fundere lumen apex*, *Aen.* 2.682.

seems to correct the failure of Ovid's Acrisius to recognise Perseus as his grandson (*Met.* 4.612-14), Polynices's hesitation to reveal the name of his father (*sed prodite tandem / unde orti, Theb.* 1.443-44; *cunctatur proferre patrem, Theb.* 1.467) parallels Andromeda's behaviour in the Perseid ('*pande requirenti nomen terraeque tuumque / et cur vincla geras.*' *Primo silet illa nec audet / appellare virum virgo, Met.* 4.680-682).⁵

As we shall see, in addition, both the fights of Polynices against Tydeus (*in verba minasque / cunctantur...exertare umeros nudamque lacessere pugnam, Theb.* 1.410-13) and of Perseus against Atlans (*vimque minis addit manibusque expellere temptat / cuntanctem, Met.* 4.651-52) retrace the primeval struggle between Hercules and Cacus before being followed by an evocation of the event that formally triggers the Italian war, namely Aeneas' marriage with the local princess Lavinia. Perseus asks Cepheus for hospitality and for a wife (*Met.* 4.691-705), while Adrastus offers his daughter Argia to his *hospes* Polynices (*Theb.* 2.152-72). In this context, both the heroes look with amazement at the girls' beauty (*marmoreum ratus esset opus, Met.* 4.675; *mirabile visu, Theb.* 1.534; *ora Dianae aequa ferunt, Theb.* 1.535-6), but the virgins are too shy to look at them (*nec audet / appellare virum virgo manibusque modestos / celasset vultus, si non religata fuisset, Met.* 4.681-83; *nova deinde pudori / visa virum facies, Theb.* 1.536-7).⁶ After an allusion to the Gorgon (*Theb.* 1.545; *Met.* 4.771), both stories critically rework Evander's tale about Hercules and Cacus by presenting monster-killing tales in a Virgilian banquet-frame, as we shall see in detail in the following section.⁷

In the Perseid, a banquet follows the slaying of the sea monster and becomes the occasion to tell the story of the Gorgon's killing (4.772-790). In the *Thebaid*, the banquet frames Adrastus' stories of Apollo and Python and of Apollo and Coroebus (1.561-672). Direct verbal allusions (*regalia turba atria completur, Met.* 5.3-4; *regalia coetu / atria complentur, Theb.* 2.214-15) and the ominous presence of the Gorgon (*Gorgonis extulit ora, Met.* 5.180; *Gorgoneosque orbes, Theb.* 2.278) link the marriages of Polynices and Perseus, both of which are transformed from celebration of peace and unity into a preamble of war (*fera nuntiet arma, Met.* 5.4; *turbata dies, Theb.* 2.251). Perseus is attacked by Phineus' gang and transforms all his enemies into statues by using the Gorgon. Polynices's marriage is marred by ominous signals of war (fall of the Palladium, the extinguishing of torches, and the sound of the *tuba*) and by the Theban malediction

⁵ The intertextual comparison between Ovid's Andromeda and Statius' Polynices is not without problem. Indeed, this intertextual link can be read in the light of the broader tendency to "feminize" male heroes that Augoustakis (2013, 157-176) has recently shown pervades Flavian epic.

⁶ Hardie (2002, 184-85) notes a parallel with Aeneas and Dido: *Aeneae miranda videntur / dum stupet obtutuque haeret defixus in uno / regina, Aen.* 1.494-97.

⁷ See Ganiban (2007, 9-23) and Fratantuono 2011, 110.

brought into Argos by the Gorgonic necklace of Argia, which formerly belonged to Harmonia. Here, the statues adorning Adrastus' palace recall precisely those created by Ovid's Perseus for they seem to be living humans blocked in their actions (*vivis certantia vultibus aera*, 2.216): Coroebus, like Perseus, holds the spoils of a serpentine monster (*ferens caput ense Coroebus*, *Theb.* 2.221; *referens spoliū memorabile monstri*, *Met.* 4.615), while Danaus' expression frozen in the marble (*torvaque iam Danai facinus meditantis imago*, 2.222) recalls that of the Ovidian Astyages (*marmoreoque manet vultus mirantis in ore*, 5.206).⁸

Finally, both narratives end with a meta-poetically loaded reproduction of the Virgilian war-narratives that amplifies the original. In both the Perseid and the Argos narrative, indeed, we witness fights that, beginning with an anachronistically Roman *iaculatio* (throwing of a spear cf. *Theb.* 2.539-40; *Met.* 5.32), retrace the most horrid moments of the *Aeneid*'s battles, covering the ground with a scum of blood and human remains (*simul ora virum, simul arma manusque / fractaque commixto sederunt pectora ferro*, 2.567-68; *sanguine quo late tellum madefacta tepebat / conciderant lapsi*, *Met.* 5.76-77; cf. *Aen.* 9.333). Here, the influence of Ovid's Perseid is visible in the way Tydeus parallels the strategy already deployed by Perseus in the *Metamorphoses*. Indeed, as H. M. Mulder has noted, Tydeus' use of cliffs to protect his back from the mass of Theban attackers (*scopuloque potitus / unde procul tergo metus*, *Theb.* 2.557-58) recalls Perseus' use of a column to protect himself (*applicat hic umeros ad magnae saxa columnae / tutaque terga gerens*, *Met.* 5.160-161).⁹ Similarly, Perseus' throwing of a mixing-bowl against his enemies (*multaeque in pondere massae / ingentem manibus tollit cratera duabus / infligitque viro*, *Met.* 5.81-83) seems to become the model of Tydeus' hurling of a crater-like rock at the Theban warriors (*dein toto sanguine nixus / sustinet, inmanem quaerens librare ruinam, quails in adversos Lapithas erexit inanem / magnanimus cratera Pholus*, *Theb.* 2.561-64). Furthermore, in both cases these fights end by evoking the *Aeneid*'s climactic duel between Aeneas and Turnus via the killing of the *supplices* Phineus and Menoetes, respectively by Perseus (*Met.* 5.210-235) and Tydeus (*Theb.* 2.644-681).

The *Thebaid*'s accumulation of Virgilian episodes, then, must not be read against the *Aeneid* alone for it actually reproduces the structures and the theme of the Ovidian Perseid, whose importance as a model is signalled via many verbal allusions. If the *Aeneid* constitutes the most visible model of the *Thebaid*'s structural framework, the Argos narrative acknowledges the

⁸ The style of Statius' comment on the realism of the statues is also Ovidian (*tantum ausae perferre manus*, *Theb.* 2.217; *virginis est verae facies*, *Met.* 10.250; *ars adeo latet arte sua*, *Met.* 10.252).

⁹ See Mulder 1954, ad v. 2.527-613.

Metamorphoses as the indispensable lens through which Virgil's epic will be re-read and rewritten in Statius' poem.

2. Reading the politics of Statius' and Ovid's Herculean narratives in their imperial context

This dense network of structural, thematic and verbal similarities prompts fresh discussion of the political dimensions of Statius' Argos narrative and of the poem as a whole.¹⁰ At the root of the similarity between the two narratives, indeed, is the fact that, in different ways and in a changing imperial context, they both scrutinise the fissures of Virgil's foundational myths via a similar intertextual condensation of the *Aeneid*'s plot. The political nature of this operation is made visible in different ways. First, both the Argos narrative and the Perseid are built around the deeds (*labor*, *Met.* 4.739; *laborum*, *Theb.* 2.196) of two heroes who are overtly and repeatedly described as a new Hercules and compared with Virgil's Herculean Aeneas (*Aen.* 1.10).¹¹ Perseus is associated with Hercules by his visit to the garden of the Hesperides (4.628-62) and even more overtly by Atlans who mistakes the hero for Hercules himself (4.464-65). Polynices arrives in Argos wearing a lion skin (1.482-6) reminiscent of that on which Aeneas symbolically sits while listening to Evander's tale (8.177) and which Statius overtly connects with Hercules (*Amphitryoniades*, 1.486).¹²

This allegoric identification is politically significant if we consider that, in admittedly different ways, in both Augustan and Domitianic Rome, Hercules and his alter-ego Perseus were deployed as imperial emblems.¹³ At the time of Ovid, the heroes were prominently and allegorically present in imperial iconography and literature (Verg. *Aen.* 8.184-305; Liv. *Ab Urb. Con.* 1.7; Hor. *Carm.* 3.3.9-12; Prop. 4.9) as symbols of the *princeps*' civilising mission.¹⁴ When Statius composed his *Thebaid* nearly a century later, by contrast, Hercules and Perseus had assumed a different and more problematic political significance: tainted by over-use during the autocratic reign of Nero,

¹⁰ In what follows, I adopt a New Historicistic and Cultural Materialistic approach to explore the different ways in which Statius' epic engages with its socio-historico-political context, by considering not only the author's manipulations of the political and cultural discourses of his time but also what they can tell us about the realities of the world in which it was composed and read. Cf. Dominik, Garthwaite and Roche 2009, 1-21.

¹¹ On Perseus and Hercules see Keith 2002, 240; 2014, 76. On Polynices, Tydeus and Hercules see Parkes 2009, 476-494.

¹² Statius even invents a Herculean deed that is not attested elsewhere: Caviglia 1973, 485-87.

¹³ On the political significance of these heroes in Flavian Rome see Rebegiani 2018.

¹⁴ According to Galinsky (1972, 141; 1990, 286-7), the Augustan propaganda cleansed Hercules and Perseus from their links with Antony and Pompey by turning them into allegories of the *princeps*' civilising mission, as displayed by the terracotta plaques of the temple of Palatine Apollo (Zanker 1988, 199-200); Strazzulla 1990, 34-49), by coins (cf. *RPC* II 1022) and by several buildings connected with the imperial family, such as the *porticus Octaviae* (Hekster 2004, 235-41) and the villa of Agrippa Postumus.

Herculean iconography was generally avoided by the first Flavian emperors before being powerfully reintroduced by Domitian within a process of sacralisation of his imperial power.¹⁵

On a deeper level, Statius' and Ovid's Herculean narratives offer a distorting lens through which to re-read the teleological Herculean plot which Virgil uses in the *Aeneid* to provide a politically providential mythohistory for Augustan Rome (Hardie 1986, 97-117). Via the sagas of new Herculean heroes, indeed, both the Argos narrative and the Perseid re-evoked the *fil rouge* that in the *Aeneid* subtly links the victory of Hercules over the monster Cacus (book 8) to the final victory of Aeneas (book 12) and Augustus (book 8), but in a condensed form that over-exposes its fragilities. In Ovid's and Statius' poems, the wind-storm that threatens Perseus and Polynices is immediately followed by the heroes' gigantomachic fights, by the rewritings of the story of Hercules and Cacus into new stories of monster-killings, and by a final fight that evokes the duel between Aeneas and Turnus in a miniaturised and domestic form.

Composed around 85 years apart from one another, then, both the Perseid and the Argos narrative can be considered the two first and fullest cases of reception of Ovid's Theban histories (*Met.* 3.1-4.603) as a critical rewriting of the *Aeneid* (Hardie 1990, 224-35). While in *Met.* 3 Cadmus traces the providential mission of Aeneas backwards by going from Thebes' foundation to his permanent exile and from the dragon's killing to his own transformation into a snake, the Herculean sagas of Perseus and Polynices scrutinise the reasons behind the failure of Cadmus by questioning the effectiveness of Virgil's Hercules as a political and heroic model.¹⁶ In the case of the *Thebaid*, this operation assumes an extraordinary political significance if we read it in the light of the new social and political context of Flavian Rome, and especially of the Flavians' so called *imitatio Augusti*, as suggested by Rosso (2009). Many pieces of evidence, from coins and festivals to architectural projects, reveal that Flavian emperors legitimised their new power, gained from the civil wars, by presenting themselves as the dynasty able to bring Rome back to its golden

¹⁵ On Nero's association with Hercules see Suet. *Nero* 5 and coins with the inscription *Herculi Augusto*. Vespasian (Suet. *Vesp.* 12) overtly avoided any assimilation with the hero. Domitian, instead, used Hercules as his personal emblem as confirmed by the colossal statue of the hero adorning his new *aula regia* (Tuck 2016, 111), by the statues representing the hero as the emperor (Mart. *Ep.* 9.64-65), by coins (Scott 1936, 145) and by Flavian poetry (Mart. *Ep.* 9.64.6; 9.101.3; Stat. *Silv.* 4.2.50; 4.3.155). Perseus, as an *alter-Hercules*, shares with Domitian the protection of Minerva, the *Pallas Caesariana* (Mart. 8.1.4; *familiare numen*, Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.91-92) with the Gorgon-adorned shield that the emperor holds in his hands in the equestrian monument in the forum (Stat. *Silv.* 1.1 with Newlands 2002, 55). A statue of Domitian with the Gorgoneion is in the Sacello degli Augustali at Misenum, see Laird 2015, 155.

¹⁶ Cadmus' regression from human to bestial status subverts the traditional three-term pattern (beast-man-god) in which heroic action is inscribed and which is used by the *Aeneid* to build the connection between Hercules, Aeneas and Augustus. See Vernant 1981; Hardie 1993, 65-66.

Augustan age, taken as an idealised political model.¹⁷ In this context, by re-reading Virgil's *Aeneid* via the critical lens of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Statius seems to further destabilize Virgil's foundational myths in order to question their applicability in Flavian Rome. Overall, for us, the consideration of the chronological and political gap that divides the Perseid from the Argos narrative provides a fertile opportunity to better understand not only Statius' poetic technique but also the way Ovid's literary and political discourse was interpreted and adapted in the *Thebaid* in response to the evolution of the imperial institution.¹⁸

2.1 *Renovataque proelia: Statius' re-reading of the Aeneid's civilising struggles via Ovid's Perseid*

So far, we have seen that Ovid's Perseid and Statius' Argos narrative display similar condensations of the *Aeneid*'s plot that are linked by conspicuous verbal and thematic similarities loaded with political significance. Consideration of the most important passages of these narratives, I argue, shows how Statius exploits and develops in an original way Ovid's intertextual technique in order to scrutinise the politics of both his models -the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*- in response to the new socio-political issues of Flavian Rome.

On a general level, a quick overview of the major episodes of the Perseid and the Argos narrative is sufficient to reveal that they share similar deflating narrative strategies, because they both organise their condensations of Virgilian episodes around the most problematic juncture of the *Aeneid*'s political plot: Aeneas' killing of Turnus, inspired by a *furor* similar to that used by Hercules against the monster Cacus.¹⁹ In the *Aeneid*, as Hardie (1986, 117-120) suggests, these duels are two unique moments of problematic violence that nevertheless constitute fundamental steps in a narrative leading towards order and civilisation. In Ovid's and Statius' narratives, by contrast, the deeds of Perseus and Polynices randomly multiply the violence of the Virgilian duels via a series of fights that replace their universal and teleological significance with self-serving and capricious interests. A more focused reading of these episodes, however, reveals that, despite their apparent similarities, Statius interprets and acutely adapts Ovid's intertextual strategies for new poetic and political ends.

¹⁷ See, for instance, the Flavian coinage with the slogans *Pax Augusta* and *Fortuna redux*, the closing of the doors of the temple of Janus, the re-establishment of the *ludi Saeculares* and the restoration of the temple of Palatine: McNelis (2007, 5-8) and Tuck 2016, 104.

¹⁸ By articulating its politics and poetics via a dense intertextuality that continuously intertwines Virgil's *Aeneid* with its Ovidian rewriting, the *Thebaid* might be said to alter our response to both its Augustan models, whose opposition is emphasised much more than it was by Ovid himself. See Tarrant 2006, 26-27.

¹⁹ Hercules' immoderate anger (8.230 *fervidus ira*) -mirrored by that of Aeneas (*Aen.* 12.946)- represents a case of concern for the political interpretation of the entire poem: see Rimell 2015, 39-55.

A first example is offered by the initial fights of Perseus and Polynices against Atlans and Tydeus (*Met.* 4.627-662; *Theb.* 1.401-446). Here, the introduction of the heroes as *hospes* and Herculean characters immediately triggers a deflating comparison with the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas -*hospes* of Evander and invested with a Herculean mission through the king's aetiological tale - seeks allies for the war that will lead to the foundation of Rome (*duces socia arma rogantis*, *Aen.* 8.120). Perseus and Polynices, in fact, arrive respectively at Atlans' and Adrastus' palaces only looking for an overnight refuge for themselves, but despite the more modest nature of their mission they both start violent fights reminiscent of gigantomachy. Perseus fights the Titan Atlas by assuming the traits of "a Jovian hero, in the tradition of those who bring order and restore peace" (Fratantuono 2011, 109); Polynices fights against Tydeus by paralleling the same techniques and the same *furor* that characterises Hercules' gigantomachic fight against Cacus in the *Aeneid*.²⁰

Although Statius follows Ovid by using these tussles waged for a shelter to pervert the gigantomachic theme that informs Evander's aetiological tale (often deployed in imperial literature to allude to the providential establishment of the principate), the two scenes are developed in ways that open up different political interpretations.²¹ In the *Metamorphoses*, Virgilian intertextuality is exploited to suggest that Perseus' Herculean fight is actually moved by the personal need to silence Atlans who accuses the hero of being a burglar and of making false claims about his descent from Jupiter (*quam mentiris, ait, longe tibi Jupiter absit*, 4.650). Perseus responds to this insinuation, which echoes the doubts about the nature of Augustus' war *pro ultione paterna* (Svet. *Aug.* 29.20), by transforming Atlans into a mountain - an act of monumentalisation that, while revealing the immoderate violence behind the hero's apparent pacifism (*hospitium requiemque peto*, 8.642), also recalls the violence eventually concealed behind the monuments celebrating Augustus' civilising victories.²² In the Argos narrative, instead, Ovid's perversion of Virgil's gigantomachic fight is developed in a way that programmatically introduces the most important theme of the *Thebaid*: the relation between Polynices' familial issues and the fratricidal war for succession to the Theban throne. While Perseus fights to defend his lineage, in fact, Polynices fights because of the problematic lineage that he is afraid even to confess (*cunctatur proferre patrem*, 1.447) and that Adrastus highlights as the main issue of the

²⁰ Cf. *furens animi*, *Aen.* 8.228; *fervidus ira*, 230; *telis permit* 249; *alacres odio*, *Theb.* 1.425; *ira intumuere*, 1.412; *ingeminant telorum*, 1.419.

²¹ On the gigantomachic elements of Evander's tale see Hardie 1986, 85-119. On the theme in Imperial poetry see e.g. Hor. *Carm.* 3.4.42-79; Ov. *Trist.* 2.333-34; 4.8.45-52; *Met.* 5.319-61; Prop. 2.1.19-39. See also Chaudhuri 2014, 56-194; 299-300.

²² See Feldherr 2010, 313-341; Lowe 2015, 101-112; on the theme of disbelief see Wheeler 1999, 183-84.

scene.²³ The personal problems that in the *Metamorphoses* move the imperially loaded duel of Perseus, in the Argos narrative cause Polynices to launch a dehumanising battle that reverses the traditionally positive connotation of the gigantomachic theme in Augustan literature: here, by bursting out with no rational justification, Herculean anger (*non tulit, Aen.* 8.256; *haud passi, Theb.* 1.409) makes both Polynices and Tydeus regress to the status of monsters that Statius describes as the Virgilian Cacus (*facies quam dira, Aen.* 8.194; *terribilem dictum faciem, Theb.* 1.437), resituating them within the regressive Cadmean pattern (hero-man-beast).²⁴

The comparison of these two scenes, however, offers new insights not only into Statius' sophisticated deployment of Ovidian intertextuality but also into the changing political context in which the *Thebaid* and the *Metamorphoses* were composed. In Ovid, the issue of paternity - already introduced by the story of Phaethon (*Met.* 2.1-400)- still reflects the problems of legitimacy (*vindex ultorque parentis, Met.* 5.237) that are typical of a new principate, in which Augustus' claims to be the "Caesaris ultor" (Hor. *Carm.* 1.2.44; Dio. Cass. 53.4.4) were looked upon with scepticism.²⁵ By contrast, in the *Thebaid* the focus is no longer on the imperial institution and its legitimacy, but actually on the problems that its institutionalisation has created, chiefly the succession.²⁶ The Flavians were the first dynasty to publicly consolidate the idea of the imperial family as an institution and to inaugurate the principle of dynastic succession; indeed, Titus was the first Roman emperor to succeed his biological father (Tuck 2015, 118-120). And yet, this new order was already challenged by issues such as the lack of heirs of both Titus and Domitian and by their brotherly enmity (Suet. *Dom.* 13). In this new context, the episode that in the *Metamorphoses* raised doubts about the self-serving nature of Augustus' legitimising war is in the *Thebaid* developed into a much more dramatic reflection on the dangerous consequences of the familial issues affecting the imperial institution: the violence that in the Perseid is used (in Augustan terms) to silence the dissenting Atlas, in the Argos narrative predicts the dehumanising effects of the war that will lead to Tydeus' cannibalism (8.757) and Polynices' fratricide (11.540-573).

²³ *unde orti?*, *Theb.* 1.444; *tanta ira docet generisque superbi*, 1.445; cf. *generis magni, Met.* 4.640.

²⁴ See note 26.

²⁵ Both the new temple of *Mars Ultor* and the *Res Gestae* (2; 21.1) celebrated Augustus' war as an act of justice rather than as a personal revenge and as the beginning of a season of civil wars (Suet. *Aug.* 29.2; Ov. *Fast.* 5.569-578). But this version was not universally accepted (Suet. *Aug.* 10).

²⁶ The importance of the theme of paternity in the *Thebaid* has been well noted by Rosati (2008, 175-194), who explores how the myth of Phaeton is deployed in the *Thebaid* to address both the issue of Statius' poetic succession in relation to his epic predecessors, and the more politically-loaded problem of the succession of Domitian. On the politics of the myth of Phaeton in Latin poetry see more generally Schiesaro (2014, 73-104) who highlights the inherently double-edged nature of the figure of Phaethon while exploring its political use in imperial literature.

2.2 Deflating monster-killing tales

The anxiety surrounding the dangers of a self-serving use of imperial power finds its fullest development in the stories of monster-killing through which both Statius and Ovid rewrite -in different ways- the Virgilian myth of Hercules and Cacus. As we have noted, in the *Aeneid* Hercules' liberation of the future site of Rome from the monster offers the theological parameters for interpreting the problematically violent action of Aeneas and Augustus in the light of a providential and universal mission.²⁷ In both the Argos narrative and the Perseid, this myth is complicated by similar narrative strategies that deflate its universal and providential significance. Statius, in fact, follows Ovid by depriving the grandiosely single monster-killing of the *Aeneid* of both its grandiosity and its uniqueness: in the *Metamorphoses*, Perseus tells -in just seven verses- his own killing of the Gorgon (4.779-785) after having slain the sea-monster that was threatening Andromeda. In the *Thebaid*, Adrastus devotes only a few verses (1.563-69) to Apollo's slaying of Python before focusing on Coroebus' killing of the new monster sent by Apollo (1.557-672). Even more than Ovid, however, Statius complicates Virgil's myth, by fragmenting and distributing the monster-killing action of his heroes between the mythical past (the slaying of Poine) and the present of different epic narratives (the Herculean fights of Polynices and Tydeus).

Just like the Ovidian story of Apollo, Python and Daphne, which is overtly alluded to by both narratives, these stories pervert the *Aeneid*'s aetiological myth by abruptly shifting their narrative focus from the civilising significance of the Herculean action to its unexpected amatory drift.²⁸ Far from being an event of universal significance, in fact, Perseus' killing of the sea-monster is an entirely personal fight waged for a girl (*virgo, premiumque et causa laboris*, *Met.* 4.739).²⁹ Similarly, in the *Thebaid*, Apollo's killing of Python is immediately compromised by the god's erotic passion for Psamathe (*occultum Phoebosociasset amorem*, 1.574) that results in the execution of the raped girl for immorality, and consequently in the god's revenge against Argos.

Despite the exquisitely Ovidian nature of the myths recounted by Adrastus, however, Statius gives a new value to the Ovidian amatory drift of the heroic action, as acknowledged by

²⁷ Hardie 1986, 110-125.

²⁸ Both Statius and Ovid allude to the story of Apollo, Python and Daphne (*Phoebos...draconem*, *Met.* 4.715; *terrigenam Pythona*, *Theb.* 1.563): the archetype of erotic drift of a heroic narrative. See Rosati (2007, ad v. 663-739). Keith (2014, 368-69), in addition, has noted conspicuous thematic similarities: Statius' Python is born of the Earth (*Theb.* 1.173; *Met.* 1.437-38) and of immoderate size (*Theb.* 1.168; *Met.* 1.157) just like Ovid's Python, which is also killed by the same technique (*Theb.* 1.167; *Met.* 1.158).

²⁹ In both the narratives the girls are rewards for the heroes' deeds: '*ut mea sit servata mea virtute, paciscor*' / *accipiunt legem – quis enim dubitaret?*, *Met.* 4.703-4; *post verbera merces*, *Theb.* 2.172.

the ekphrasis of Adrastus' cup (*Theb.* 1.544-556).³⁰ Here, the images on the goblet overtly follow Ovid's account of Perseus' rescue of Andromeda (*Met.* 4.698-700) but the image of Jupiter's eagle, used by Ovid as a metaphor to describe Perseus' attack against the monster (*Met.* 4.712-716), is transformed in the *Thebaid* into a representation of Jupiter's abduction of Ganymedes. Placed just before the tale of Apollo, Psammathe and Coroebus, this modification foregrounds the increased importance that the theme of the divine sexual abuse, present only as a minor hint in the *Perseid* (*hanc pelagi rector templo vitiasse Minervae*, 4.799), will assume in the *Thebaid* as a symbol of the gods' malevolence against humans. In Adrastus' story, in fact, the amatory drift affects the god alone and transforms his selflessly civilising mission into a destructive personal revenge that blatantly contrasts with the entirely positive mission of the human Coroebus, who even overtakes Aeneas' *pietas* by slaying the monster without any *furor* (*ferrum ingens sub pectum duro condidit*, *Theb.* 1.613-14; *ferrum adverso sub pectore condit / fervidus*, *Aen.* 12.950) and by offering his own life to appease the angered god.³¹

The *Thebaid's* development of Ovid's perversion of the *Aeneid's* monster-killing tales, then, offers another example of Statius' exploitation of Ovidian intertextual strategies to engage with a changed political context. In the *Metamorphoses*, indeed, the erotic drift affecting the imperial god Apollo (*Phoebus domesticus*, *Met.* 15.865; *Phoebus Actiacus*, 13.15) provocatively addresses both Augustus' moralising policies and the capricious nature of the new imperial power (Cf. *Met.* 1.562).³² In the *Thebaid*, this theme is developed to portray an allegorically Roman universe in which Augustus' moralising policies have been not only re-applied by the Flavians in their *imitatio Augusti*, but also strengthened according to the new religious fervour that followed the civil wars.³³ In this context, the Ovidian myth of Daphne is transformed in the *Thebaid* into the tragic story of Psammathe, whose execution for adultery is described by the anachronistically Roman legislative expression *occumbere leto* (1.595), eventually reminiscent of Domitian's moralising policies and, in particular, of the reintroduction of capital punishment for the unfaithful Vestals (Suet. *Dom.* 8.3.5).³⁴ At the same time, Statius' juxtaposition of Apollo's divine action and Coroebus' human heroism refashions the *Aeneid's* providential design into a new situation of

³⁰ The myth of Apollo and Python in Latin literature receives its fullest treatment in *Met.* 1.436-41, while that of Coroebus is attested before Statius in Ovid alone (*Ibis* 575-6). See Keith 2013, 308-9.

³¹ On Coroebus as an *alter-Aeneas* see Ganiban 2007, 15.

³² On Ovid's Apollo: Meyers 1994, 61-62; Holzberg 1999, 324-25; Miller 2005, 165-180; 2009, 344-47. On its relationship with Adrastus' tale see McNelis 2007, 29-30.

³³ On the religious anxiety in Flavian Rome see Rebeggiani 2018, 3-10. The implementation of restrictive moralising policies is attested by Plutarch (*Quaest. Rom.* 50) but also by the re-application of the *lex Scantinia* on sex crimes (Suet. *Dom.* 8.3-4; Stat. *Silv.* 5.3.178). See Jones 1992, 101-102.

³⁴ See Caviglia (1973 ad v. 595) and Griffin 2000, 19-21.

divine malevolence toward humans that echoes the pessimistic sense of guilt that emerges from other texts composed after the civil wars.³⁵ The fear expressed by Horace (*Carm.* 3.6.1-9) and Lucan (4.807-9) that the original sin of Romulus inevitably affects all the generations of Romans, appears stronger in the Flavian texts, where, after a second season of civil wars, the gods are depicted as rightly angry at the Romans (*non esse cura dei securitatem nostram esse ultionem*, Tac. *Hist.* 1.3).³⁶ In the *Thebaid*, this atmosphere is well visible in the atoning purpose of Adrastus' festival (*Phoebeaque placat / templa novatus honos*, *Theb.* 1.668) that is absent in both the Virgilian and Ovidian models and that Roman readers could have easily compared with the ceremonies of *supplicatio* organised by the Flavian emperors.³⁷ Similarly, Coroebus' self-sacrifice represents a Statian innovation of the standard monster-killing tales that re-enacts in the poem the Roman practice of *devotio* used during the most tragic moments of the civil wars to appease the gods.³⁸ While the *Aeneid* portrays Hercules' violent action as an unique and decisive event aligned with Jupiter's providential plan, then, the *Thebaid* follows Ovid in displaying a series of problematic monster-killings in a world dominated by malevolent gods. Ovid's rewriting of Virgil's Herculean narratives, however, is further and innovatively developed by Statius into an aetiological tale that, instead of providing a theological justification for the problematic but necessary use of violence to found Rome, transforms this violence into a curse upon posterity that sees the city of Argos pervaded and lacerated by the same anxieties, conflicts and religious hysteria that dominated Rome in the aftermath of the civil wars of the 68-69 CE.

2.3 Rewriting the last duel of the *Aeneid*

In both the Argos narrative and the Perseid, this loaded condensation of Virgilian episodes is concluded by a final duel in which Perseus (*Met.* 5.210-35) and Tydeus (*Theb.* 2.644-654) respectively kill their defeated enemies Phineus and Menoetes in mimicry of Aeneas' killing of Turnus (*Aen.* 12.885-952). As we have noted, in the *Aeneid* this event represents the climax of the poem's political plot and its most problematic moment, for it indissolubly links the foundation of Rome to an act of irrational violence (*dum conderet urbem*, *Aen.* 1.5; *ferrum adversum sub pectore condidit*, *Aen.* 12.950).³⁹ In both the Ovidian and the Statian narratives, this scene is re-enacted in

³⁵ On divine malevolence in the *Thebaid* see Criado 2013, 195-212.

³⁶ See, for instance, Tac. *Hist.* 2.38.2; Stat. *Silv.* 5.3.195.

³⁷ See the *Ludi Capitolini* (Monaca 2002, 153-171) and the *supplicatio* recorded by the coins *RIC* (1) 114.

³⁸ The *devotio* is an archaic rite in which a person sacrifices his life to appease a god. See Scott (1968, 56-62) and Rebeggiani 2018.

³⁹ Turnus is immolated as a sacrificial victim (*immolat*, 12.949). And yet Aeneas' revengeful refusal to spear his defeated enemy seems to denounce the *furor* behind the Augustan *pietas*. See Boyle (1986, 108-132) and Rimell 2015, 39-55.

a pacific context that artfully magnifies the doubts -hinted at by Virgil- about the unjustified and impious nature of Aeneas' Herculean violence: a marriage (*testatus iusque fidemque / hospitia, Met. 5.44-45*) and an embassy (*sanctum populis per saecula nomen / legatum, Theb. 2.486-7*). Here, the battles that Tydeus and Aeneas fight against a gang of savage people (*exit in unum / plebs ferro iurata caput, Theb. 2.490-91; omnibus unum opprimere est animus, coniurata undique pugnant agmine, Met. 5.149-50*) as new Aeneas (*ferus; animum pallantique ira, Theb. 2.545; ferox; inimica pectora, Met. 5.35-36; furiis accensus et ira / terribilis, Aen. 12.946*) becomes a rewriting of the Virgilian war narrative (*renovataque proelia, Met. 5.156*) condensed in a virtuosic summary of horror.⁴⁰

The purposes of these similar fights, however, are different. The fight that in the *Aeneid* concludes a crescendo of order and civilisation and that in the *Perseid* represents the final climax of the horrific summary of Virgil's war-scenes, is provocatively transformed in the *Thebaid* into the first act of a fratricide war that will destroy not only a city but also the most basic laws of the human society, such as those of kinship. Here, the deepest meaning of the *Aeneid's* Herculean fight is reversed by blurring the border between hero and monster up to the point of making it impossible to distinguish between the roles of Tydeus-Aeneas from those of Menoetes-Turnus. This innovation is highlighted by Statius in the description of an Aeneas-like Tydeus (*Theb. 2.279*) as an angered lion, a metaphor Virgil applies to Turnus (*Aen. 12.3-9*), in a scene where all the human characters, led by an impious *furor*, have regressed to the status of monsters following the anti-heroic Cadmean paradigm.

The increased violence that, as we have seen, characterises Statius' competitive refashioning of Ovid's rewriting of the *Aeneid*, is meta-poetically acknowledged as a loaded feature via the intertextual punishment of Chromis. This warrior that in *Metamorphoses* performed the most violent act by beheading the *pius* Emanthion, whose semi-conscious head continued to pray (5.99-106), in fact, is silenced three times in the *Thebaid* (*obmutuit, 2.628*) with a killing that ostentatiously surpasses the Ovidian violence: while he speaks, a spear enters his mouth and exits from his throat, his tongue is cut away and his body is pierced falling on the same spear. Thus, while in the *Perseid* the petrification of Phineus into a beautiful statue of a *supplex* (with the same posture as Virgil's Turnus) allegorically displays the conflictive transition from Virgil's war-narratives into Ovid's new metamorphic poetry, in the Argos narrative a similar accumulation of

⁴⁰ On Ovid's condensation of Virgil's war narratives see Keith 2002b, 105-122; On Statius' Virgilian war-scene see Gervais 2017 ad *Theb. 2.482-537*.

violence is deployed to renegotiate Statius's relationship with both the *Aeneid* and the Ovidian poetry itself.⁴¹

In sum, in the *Thebaid* Ovid's criticisms about the establishment of the principate are developed into a much more dramatic reflection on the danger that new and more violent civil wars could be triggered by an unsuccessful political action still based on a revival of those Augustan foundational myths whose fragilities have already been explored by Ovid's epic. In this operation, Statius emerges as an acute interpreter of Ovid's intertextual strategies and as an author deft at rereading both the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* in order to reflect on the new political issues of Flavian Rome through the lens of an Augustan past that the Flavian emperors exploited for legitimising purposes in their *imitatio Augusti*.

3. *The meta-poetics of Statius' Ovidian Perseid*

In the preceding analysis, I have suggested that politics and poetics become inseparable in Statius' rewriting of Ovid's *Perseid*, where intertextuality triggers and performs political reflections by developing, undermining or building upon the politics of epic models. In the *Perseid*, as we have seen, the politically loaded summary of Virgilian war narratives is dense with meta-poetic significance: the Gorgon's transformation of Phineus and his gang into stone artworks visualises "the transmutation of Virgilian battle poetry into the Ovidian poetry of metamorphosis" (Keith 2002b, 122). By opening the *Thebaid* with a rewriting of the *Perseid*, Statius too gives a highly meta-poetic significance to his Argive narrative where he tries out on both Ovid and Virgil the same technique exploited by Ovid on the *Aeneid*. This operation, which programmatically defines the relationship of the *Thebaid* with its Augustan models, is brought to our attention by Statius himself in the ekphrasis of Adrastus' cup (1.544-551) and Argia's necklace (2.269-288) that display the Ovidian Gorgon embedded in two artistic objects.⁴²

As is common in epic poetry, these ekphrases have an important programmatic and meta-poetic function.⁴³ Both the goblet and the necklace, indeed, respectively recall Dido's cup in the *Aeneid* (1.728-30) and the story of Harmonia in the *Metamorphoses* (*Theb.* 2.289-292); but they also display elements that are absent in the original models, thus visualising the novelty of Statius'

⁴¹ On Phineus Cf. *supplex / confessasque manus obliquaque brachia tendens*, *Met.* 5.214-15; *dextramque precantem / protendens*, *Aen.* 12.930-31. On the metapoetics of Perseus victory see Keith 2002b, 105-122; Hardie 2002, 179-80; Feldherr 2010, 334.

⁴² Focusing on the metapoetics of Statius' description of the Gorgon-adorned cup of Adrastus, Keith (2013, 307) has brilliantly argued that the representation of this Ovidian monster in the *Thebaid* becomes "a figure for the status of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a literary artefact in Statius' day."

⁴³ On epic ekphrasis see Harrison 2013, 215-17.

poem.⁴⁴ Placed at the beginning of the section, Adrastus' cup offers a visual summary of the entire Argos narrative and of its poetics: the goblet is an apparently Virgilian object but is actually decorated with images taken from the *Metamorphoses*, just as the Argos narrative displays a Virgilian narrative-frame that actually contains a reproduction of the Ovidian Perseid. Similarly, at the end of the section, Harmonia's necklace visually acknowledges the Statian debt to the *Metamorphoses* by becoming an embodiment of the malediction of Ovid's Thebes that also affects Statius' Argos. A former possession of Cadmus' wife Harmonia (*dirumque monile / Harmoniae, Theb. 2.266-67*) and made by the condensation of the most horrific elements of the Ovidian stories (Tisiphone's snaky hair, poison, Jupiter's fatal fire and the eyes of the Gorgon), this jewel represents a programmatic reversal of Aeneas' shield where all the elements, instead of being re-ordered in a providential plan, are actually mixed together in a story of evil (*longa est series sed nota malorum, Theb. 2.276-8*) that meta-poetically acknowledges the descent of the *Thebaid* (*longa retro series, 1.7*) from Ovid's Theban saga (*serieque malorum, Met. 4.564*).⁴⁵

Prominently placed at the heart of these ekphrases is the Gorgon, whose semi-alive eyes appear engraved on Adrastus' cup and embossed in Argia's necklace. Many verbal similarities and the use of the distinctively Ovidian adjective *anguicoma* suggest that we interpret the meta-poetic significance of this creature in the light of the *Metamorphoses* where she becomes a figure closely related to the Ovidian artistic process.⁴⁶ As a woman transformed into a snaky-haired monster with the supernatural power of solidification, Medusa embodies the poetic and artistic principle of metamorphosis: just like Ovid's poetry, her eyes can transform banal objects into pieces of art via a process of monumentalisation that simultaneously causes and sidesteps death (Lovatt 2013, 348-49). Used in the Perseid to solidify the Virgilian war narratives into Ovidian ones, indeed, this monster is associated by Ovid with the Hippocrene spring (5.257), the source of poetic inspiration, and her myth is often deployed also by Ovid's epic successors to acknowledge their debt to the *Metamorphoses*.⁴⁷ In the *Thebaid*, the appearance of the Gorgon's semi-alive and still active eyes (*paene movet, Theb. 1.547*) seems to visually acknowledge the

⁴⁴ Dido's cup is golden but not decorated. Harmonia's necklace never appears in the *Metamorphoses* even if Statius directly connects the jewel with the Ovidian story of Cadmus and Harmonia.

⁴⁵ McNelis 2007, 63-72.

⁴⁶ The adjective *anguicoma*, used by Statius for the Gorgon (*Theb. 1.544*), in Latin poetry -before Statius- occurs only in *Met. 4.699*. As Rimell (2006, 1-40) has shown, the multi-layered myth of Medusa (viewer and artist, statue-maker and artefact to be-looked-at, source of excitement and castration) provides "an aition of poetry to rival that of Narcissus" (p.16). According to Lovatt (2013, 349) in the *Metamorphoses* "the hybrid Perseus/Medusa combination is a paradoxical poet-figure" and, as Feldherr (2010, 324-26) argues, her power can be directly compared with that of Ovid's poetry.

⁴⁷ "Ovid makes Medusa the grandmother of poetry": Feldherr 2010, 325. Keith (2014, 76) has defined the Perseid as a "touchstone of the Ovidian reception," in post-Ovidian poetry. See also Lovatt 2013, 353-57.

influence that the Ovidian poetry exerts on the Statian poem. As in the *Metamorphoses*, in fact, in the *Thebaid* her gaze can transform Virgilian scenes into Ovidian narratives, as shown by the Ovidian drift of Adrastus' aetiological tale immediately after the monster's appearance on the goblet, by the transformation of Polynices' marriage into a preamble of war (like that of Ovid's Perseus) due to the Gorgonic necklace of Argia (*tam saeva potentia donis*, 2.268), and by the transformation of Tydeus' fight from a Virgilian war narrative into a reproduction of Perseus' final battle (*asperso crudescit sanguine Gorgon*, *Theb.* 2.717).

At the same time, however, the monster that in the *Metamorphoses* is a totemic figure of Ovid's artistic and poetic process, is now itself solidified into two small pieces of art described - and so created- by Statius' poetry. By portraying the Gorgon solidified in the gold of Adrastus' cup in the same posture of Phineus during his petrification in the Perseid (*illa graves oculos languentiaque ora / paene movet vivoque etiam pallescit in auro*, *Theb.* 1.546-47; *conanti sua vertere lumina cervix / deriguit saxoque oculorum indurit umor*, *Met* 5.232), Statius proudly presents the creature, which in the *Metamorphoses* effected the Ovidianisation of the Virgilian martial epos, now herself solidified in a narrative that is a solidification of the Ovidian Perseid into a new piece of Statian poetry. Here, the miniaturised occurrence of the monster in two old heirlooms, which draws ironic attention to the contradictory nature of the Ovidian Gorgon as statue-maker and artefact to-be-looked-at, acknowledges the *Metamorphoses* as a precious but past model that Statius' own art is able to outdo (*signis perfectam*, 1.541; *tantum ausae perferre manus!*, 2.217) and to mould into the programmatic heart of the *Thebaid* by re-applying Ovid's narrative strategies to the Ovidian poetry itself.

Conclusion

Moving beyond a scholarly consensus that has long interpreted the dense allusivity of the Argos narrative mostly in light of the *Aeneid*, I have suggested that this highly programmatic section of the *Thebaid* actually revisits the structure and themes of the Ovidian Perseid, as Statius signals with frequent verbal allusions.⁴⁸ Here, an ongoing allusive confrontation continuously compares and contrasts Virgil's epic with its Ovidian rewriting in the *Metamorphoses*, foregrounding the intense and conflictive intertextuality through which the *Thebaid* articulates its poetics and politics. In his rewriting of Ovid's Perseid, indeed, Statius not only acknowledges the Ovidian inspiration that pervades his epic but also exploits Ovid's narrative strategies to interpret and

⁴⁸ On the Argos narrative see n. 5. A broader intertextual network for this section has been acknowledged by McNelis (2007, 25-49), who focuses on Statius' Callimacheanism, and by Keith (2013, 304-310), who studies the Ovidian models behind Statius' Python, Poine and Medusa.

rewrite the *Perseid*'s politics in response to the new social and political issues of Flavian Rome. In particular, the *Thebaid* seems to develop Ovid's concerns about the nature and the legitimacy of the newly established principate into a reflection on the new dangers created by the Flavians' family-based reorganisation of the imperial institution under the guise of a return to an idealised Augustan past. The lack of biological heirs to the throne, the familial enmities and an autocratic drift of power, all emerge in the *Thebaid* as potential catalysts of new civil wars that are represented as an absolute evil without any positive or civilising value.

This political reflection corresponds, on a literary level, with a programmatic renegotiation of Statius' relationship with both his Augustan models, on which the *Thebaid* tries out the same technique of critical condensation deployed by Ovid on the Virgilian epos. While the *Perseid* performs the transformation of Virgil's battle narratives into Ovid's metamorphic epic via the solidification effected by the Gorgon, in fact the *Thebaid* reduces this symbol of the Ovidian poetry to a powerful but miniaturised object that Statius masterfully describes and uses as he pleases. The Ovidian epic, which seemed excluded by the *Thebaid*, then, is simultaneously acknowledged as a model and reduced to a beautiful but small heirloom: a piece of art that Statius can perfect and rework in an act of devotion but also of proud self-promotion that ultimately marks his competitive engagement with both Virgil's and Ovid's epos. In conclusion, in the case of the Argos narrative, neglecting the *Metamorphoses* does not mean just losing the Ovidian nuances of some Statian myths, but rather misunderstanding the deepest political and metaliterary agenda of the entire poem and of its allusions to the *Aeneid*, whose real significance emerges only if we read them with the knowing eyes of those who have already read the *Metamorphoses*.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Alice König, Dr. Emma Buckley, and to Prof. Victoria E. Rimell for their support, their comments and their insights that greatly improved this article.

Abbreviations:

RPC I: Burnett, A., Amandry, M. and Ripollés, P.P. 1992. *Roman Provincial Coinage (Vol. 1)*. London and Paris: British Museum Press and Bibliothèque Nationale.

RIC II: Harold, M., Edward A. S., 1926. *The Roman Imperial Coinage, vol. II. Vespasian to Hadrian*. London: Spink & Son.

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