

## NOXIA TELA: SOME INNOVATIONS IN STATIUS *THEBAID* 7 AND 11

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... ob regna . . . diris cecidere sub armis  
Thebani media non sine matre duces.

SO PROPERTIUS refers to a famous scene from the *Phoenissae* of Euripides.<sup>1</sup> Statius, in his account of the war between Eteocles and Polynices, made use of the same tragedy,<sup>2</sup> but in this dramatic incident, he introduced many innovations. The role of Jocasta in the conflict of her sons diverges radically from that assigned to her by Euripides, and an examination of the differences is instructive.

At lines 261 ff. in the *Phoenissae*, Polynices appears upon the stage, explaining that his mother has arranged a truce. Soon afterward, Jocasta herself enters: on seeing Polynices she breaks into a lyrical ode (301–54); mother and son then engage in a dialogue about Polynices' period of exile and his reasons for leading an army against Thebes; at 446, Eteocles enters to parley with his brother. Jocasta and her sons debate the issues involved in the conflict but no agreement is reached: thereafter war becomes inevitable. Jocasta's attempt to secure peace has failed, her attempt at mediation is useless.

In Statius' account, the brothers do not meet face to face until just before their fatal duel (11. 57 ff.), but in Book 7 an attempt by Jocasta to stop the war is described. Accompanied by her two daughters, she leaves the city and successfully gains admission to Polynices' presence. There, in an impassioned plea, she attempts to

persuade him to come to the city to confer with his brother. Polynices is inclined to obey her, but Tydeus opposes the scheme, pointing back to his own unhappy experience as ambassador to Thebes.<sup>3</sup> There are generic similarities to Euripides, but the differences are greater. In both, Jocasta attempts to act as mediatrix, in both she delivers a long and emotional plea (*Phoen.* 527 ff.; *Theb.* 497 ff.). It is not, however, primarily to Euripides that Statius looked back at this point. There are more parallels with a scene from Seneca's *Phoenissae* (or *Thebais*).<sup>4</sup> Seneca provides a central point between the Euripidean and Statian accounts of Jocasta's actions. In his version, Polynices and Eteocles meet before the battle commences, as in the Greek play. But they do not meet in Thebes; they parley between the Argive and Theban battle lines. Jocasta pleads with them (480 ff.); she is accompanied by Antigone. This version is obviously closer to Statius in some respects, but the epic poet has transformed the details completely. In a drama, the meeting between mother and sons upon the stage is effective, but in an epic the writer has greater latitude in organizing his material. Statius was wise in keeping the confrontation of the brothers until the climax of the poem. This delay adds considerably to the tension and suspense, as events march inexorably on toward the fatal duel.

Statius' depiction of Jocasta's mission is in itself a fine piece of work. He avoids

1. Prop. 2. 9. 49–50. The relevance of 49–52 to the rest of the poem is problematical: cf. the remarks of M. Rothstein, *Propertius Sextus: Elegien*, I (rev. J. Stark, Dublin and Zurich, 1966), 275; P. W. Damon and W. C. Helmbold, "The Structure of Propertius' Book II," *CPCP*, XIV, 6 (1952), 229, remark: "This passage can scarcely be part of the present elegy; nor do we possess it in anything approaching the form in which Propertius, if indeed it was he, wrote the lines."

But the relationship with Euripides is clear enough: cf. also Sen. *Phoen.* 407–8.

2. On this, see F. Spiro, *De Euripidis "Phoenissis"* (Berlin, 1884), pp. 44 ff.; A. Reussner's *De Statio et Euripide* (diss., Halle, 1921) remains the most comprehensive treatment.

3. See *Theb.* 2. 306 ff.

4. L. Legras, *Étude sur la "Thébaïde" de Stace* (Paris, 1905), pp. 96–97, gives a useful summary of the parallels.

the harsh necessity of showing the sons' rejection of their mother's prayers. The description of Jocasta leaving Thebes, her speech, and the reactions of Polynices and Tydeus give ample scope for pathos and rhetoric. To a Roman, a historical parallel would spring readily to mind: Coriolanus had drawn his Volscian army away from Rome through the intercession of his mother Veturia and his wife Volumnia.<sup>5</sup> But Jocasta's attempt is, by contrast, doomed from the start, for no one can stand in the way of the grim fulfillment of Oedipus' curse. It is not for nothing that Statius compared Jocasta as she leaves Thebes to *Eumenidum . . . antiquissima*, following it with a portentous and stately line: "egreditur magna cum maiestate malorum" (7. 477–78). This is the sole instance of the word *maiestas* in the *Thebaid*. It is fitting for one of the most pathetic emotional scenes in the epic. Her attempt, however, is quite in vain and actually occurs just before an event that makes war inevitable.

The parallel to this scene is to be found in Book 11. For Statius does not eschew the possibilities of a meeting between Jocasta and Eteocles, in which she pleads with him as she had previously with his brother. As Eteocles leaves the Ogygian gate of Thebes on his way to fight with Polynices, Jocasta endeavors to stop him (315 ff.). By this stage her grief is even more desperate: "at genetrix primam funestae sortis ut amens / expavit famam—nec tarde credidit—ibat / scissa comam volutusque et pectore nuda cruento / non sexus decorisve memor . . ." In this extremity of anguish, Jocasta has lost the *magna maiestas malorum* of Book 7. Her speech to Eteocles is frenzied, staccato, extreme (329 ff.). She is compared now not to the most

ancient of the Eumenides but to Agave (318 ff.). But the word *Eumenis* does occur at the beginning of her impassioned plea, recalling the earlier simile: "quis furor? unde iterum regni integrata resurgit / Eumenis?" In Book 7, Jocasta went to Polynices accompanied by both her daughters; in Book 11, Antigone climbs onto the walls of Thebes for a final *cri du coeur* to Polynices.<sup>6</sup> In Book 7, Antigone added her tearful support to her mother's words (535); in 11 she makes another attempt. Mother and daughter do have some effect in Book 11, as in Book 7. In both, the fury of Polynices is abated (7. 536 ff., 11. 382 ff.). For a final moment in Book 11 before the duel commences, the power of the Erinys, summoned up by Oedipus' curse (l. 45 ff.), abates and gives place to more human feelings (382 ff.). But in both cases the attempt fails, for fate intervenes. In 7, the harsh words of Tydeus (539 ff.) have their effect, and the Fury stirs up a lust for war again: "fera tempus Erinys / arripit et primae molitur semina pugnae" (562–63). The killing of Bacchus' tigers (maddened by the Furies) then begins the conflict (564 ff.); Jocasta is forced to flee, abandoning her mission (607 ff.); Tydeus' counsels of war and *furor* prevail (611 ff.). In 11, the situation is not dissimilar. Polynices is wavering, but again the Fury takes action: "subito cum matre repulsa / Eumenis eiecit fractis Eteoclea portis" (387–88).

These twin episodes show how Statius was aware of the potentialities of his genre. Taking an idea from the tragedians Euripides and Seneca, he has transformed it. The theme is divided into two parts: rather than a joint meeting before hostilities commence, Statius shows us Jocasta pleading with her sons separately, both times at critical junctures in the war. Whereas in the tragedies

5. See Livy 2. 40: it seems clear that Statius had Livy's account in mind at this point.

6. The language used of Antigone in Book 11 is reminiscent

of that used in the teichoscopy in 7. 88 ff. In particular the aged Actor of 11. 358 is a duplicate of Phorbas in 7.

the brothers reject their mother's advice after discussion, in Statius there is both times a possibility that her supplication may be successful but for the action of the Fury. The impulsions that drive the brothers to their death are created by the irresistible supernatural entity brought into being by Oedipus. From that force there can be no escape. In Statius, Jocasta attains a greater stature than in the tragedians: she becomes the helpless victim of fate; her love, her grief, her dignity are all useless. In Euripides, the debate between the brothers and the speech of Jocasta is of a logical, politico-philosophical kind<sup>7</sup> and it is largely the brutal and pragmatic intractability of Eteocles that leads to war. In Seneca, predictably, the episode is framed in more emotive rhetorical terms but in essence it is similar to the Euripidean version. In the *Thebaid*, the facts are different. Statius found the germinal idea in the tragedies but changed its whole basis.

Statius' familiarity with Seneca cannot be disputed, as it is confirmed by close parallels of word and sense in both Books 7 and 11.<sup>8</sup> It is less easy to see specific echoes of Euripides,<sup>9</sup> which need cause no surprise; Seneca's version represents more closely the predilections of Statius' own audience, accustomed to the more vivid and sensational rhetoric of contemporary declamation.

The introduction of Jocasta's mission to Polynices in 7 left one problem which

Statius succeeded in solving with skill. Jocasta's plea *had* to fail. But Statius did not wish to show Polynices directly rejecting his mother's appeal. Tydeus' opposing viewpoint, however forcefully expressed, was an insufficient reason for Polynices to spurn the offer of mediation. To obviate the difficulty, Statius introduced an episode closely modelled on the *Aeneid*. Virgil in his Book 7 recounts how Allecto stirred up war between the Trojans and Latins by making Ascanius kill a stag that was cherished by the local population (475 ff.). In the *Thebaid*, the Erinys, to counteract Jocasta's influence, arranges that the Thebans kill two tigers belonging to the priests of Bacchus. These animals had come with Bacchus from India but were now tame and no longer killed for their food (564 ff.). The Fury, however, stirs them to madness: "has ubi vipereo tactas ter utramque flagello / Eumenis in furias animumque redire priorem / impulit, erumpunt non agnoscentibus agris" (579 ff.). Under her influence they rage through the plain and kill Amphiaras' charioteer<sup>10</sup> and others of the Argive host; not unnaturally the Argives kill the tigers, who return to the gates of Thebes (590 ff.). Seeing them dying, and not knowing of the Fury's actions, the Thebans are goaded into reprisals. The war has begun.

The echoes of the *Aeneid* are clear enough.<sup>11</sup> The details are, however, widely different and Statius lends his narrative its

7. See esp. Eteocles' speech, 499 ff., and the reply of Jocasta, 528 ff. The *Phoenissae* is a play with many structural problems, most of which Statius has overcome in the *Thebaid*; cf. H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (London, 1939), pp. 354-66; T. B. L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London, 1967), pp. 215-19.

8. For the parallels between Seneca and Statius in this portion of Book 11, see R. Helm, *De P. Papinii Statii "Thebaide"* (Berlin, 1892), pp. 53 ff., and Legras, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-28. R. W. Battenhouse, *Marlowe's "Tamburlaine": A Study in Renaissance Moral Philosophy* (Nashville, 1964), pp. 103 ff., has useful comments on Senecan tragedy and the role of Jocasta as peacemaker in the *Phoenissae*.

9. It is not surprising that Statius chose to use Seneca in preference to Euripides when possible. But there is no need with Helm (*op. cit.*) to argue that Statius' divergences from

Euripides at other points are due to the influence of now-lost portions of the Senecan tragedy.

10. Statius remarks of this, *nec defuit omen*; for later in Book 7 Amphiaras is swallowed up into the Underworld with his chariot, a second charioteer having been killed just previously (723 ff.).

11. Cf. Helm, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-5; Legras, *op. cit.*, p. 97. Valerius Flaccus also has an episode based on the same Virgilian exemplum: at *Argon.* 3. 19 ff., the Fury stirs up war by making King Cyzicus kill a tame lion, sacred to Cybele. Legras, *op. cit.*, p. 97 n., has pointed out that Macrobius (*Sat.* 5. 17) reports a criticism that the Virgilian episode is too trivial an incident to inspire war. He rightly suggests that Valerius and Statius set out "sans doute perfectionner Virgile."

own proper significance. It seems clear that the two tigers, once wild and now tame, are symbolically related to Polynices and Eteocles, for there is at this time a possibility that Jocasta may succeed in reconciling the brothers before war breaks out. The action of the Erinyes in inflaming the tigers is equivalent to her implanting into the sons of Oedipus that madness which transforms them into beasts rather than men. When the Argives slaughter the tigers, they foreshadow the massacres that are to come and in particular the death of Eteocles and Polynices in Book 11. There are a number of significant references to tigers in later books.<sup>12</sup> Statius in fact describes the flight of the wounded tigers in terms which make them appear almost as human beings: "illae autem longo cum limite fusi / sanguinis ad portas utrimque exstantia ducunt / spicula semianimes, gemituque imitante querellas / saucia dilectis adclinant pectora muris" (595 ff.). The last line is closely and purposefully echoed in Book 10, of the dying Capaneus: "pectoraque invisibilibus obicit fumantia muris" (936). It is an example of the many unifying links that run through the *Thebaid*, as through the *Aeneid*.<sup>13</sup>

After the tigers' deaths both Thebans and Argives are whipped to madness. The Argives are no longer *mites* (611). Spurred on by Tydeus, they are filled with a fresh frenzy. The result is confusion and rage: "saevus iam clamor, et irae / hinc atque inde calent; nullo venit ordine bellum." By taking a motif from the *Aeneid*, Statius has successfully circumvented a difficulty caused by his reorganization of material inspired by Euripides and Seneca. Jocasta is not directly spurned, nor Polynices

shown flouting his mother's will. The responsibility for the war is placed solely on the Fury, the demon of destruction.

Despite Jocasta's two attempts to prevent disaster, the final single-handed duel between her sons is inevitable. It finally occurs, climactically, in Book 11. The details in the *Thebaid* at this point also differ from those in the *Phoenissae*. In particular Statius utilized Virgil's account of the combat between Aeneas and Turnus.<sup>14</sup> Some aspects of the duel are worth special consideration in view of Statius' innovations.

Statius has inverted the roles of Eteocles and Polynices at the end of the duel. In Euripides, Polynices is mortally wounded and, realizing this, kills his brother while he is confidently despoiling him (1412 ff.). Statius, on the other hand, allows Polynices to wound his brother apparently mortally and to exult in his victory (11. 547 ff.); but Eteocles is still alive: "sed sponte ruit fraudemque supremam / in media iam morte parat" (554-55). While Polynices stoops over him to take his royal insignia and armor, Eteocles stabs him in the heart (557 ff.). Even *in articulo mortis*, the same terrible fury that has characterized the tyrant throughout the epic is in control of his actions: "nondum ille peractis / manibus ultrices animam servabat in iras" (563-64). This change in roles is matched by an earlier variation: in the *Phoenissae*, it is Eteocles who first proposes a duel; in Statius it is Polynices (*Phoen.* 1223 ff.; *Theb.* 11. 150 ff.). To explain these changes as due to Statius' greater sympathy for Polynices is only partly true.<sup>15</sup> He makes it abundantly clear that, at this stage, both brothers are equally

12. *Theb.* 7. 474; 9. 16 and 686; 10. 289, 411 and 820; 12. 170.

13. Many such internal resonances have been traced in recent works on the *Aeneid*; cf. esp. V. Pöschl, *Die Dichtkunst Virgils* (Innsbruck, 1950), and M. C. J. Putnam, *The Poetry of the "Aeneid"* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1967).

14. Legras, *op. cit.*, p. 124. In a recent paper P. Venini has also indicated a number of echoes between Statius' account and Lucan *BC* 7: "Echi lucanei nel l. XI della *Tebalde*," *RIL*, XCIX (1965), 149-67.

15. Statius obviously paints Polynices in more favorable colors than he does Eteocles, and his speech to Adrastus is a

guilty, equally terrible in their mutual hatred. It is better that Polynices should think that he is victorious, should believe that he has attained the regal power and be destroyed in the midst of his triumph. At the end, Polynices in his cruel and taunting words reveals that he is just as evil as his brother: "huc aliquis propere sceptrum atque insigne comarum / dum videt" (559–60). Statius stresses the fact that both brothers are equally crazed, inspired *tantum animis iraque* (525), burning with *odia* (526). Even the Furies now have no part to play: "nec iam opus est Furiis; tantum mirantur et adstant / laudantes, hominumque dolent plus posse furores" (537–38). P. Venini has rightly contrasted the dying words of Polynices in Euripides and Statius (*Phoen.* 1444 ff.; *Theb.* 11. 568 ff.).<sup>16</sup> In the former, Polynices addresses his mother in terms of affection and regret, asking only that he be buried in his fatherland. In the *Thebaid*, he dies still full of hatred: "vivisne an adhuc manet ira superstes, / perfide nec sedes umquam meriture quietas? / huc mecum ad manes. illic quoque pacta reposcam / si modo Agenorei stat Gnosia iudicis urna, / qua reges punire datur." It is in fact Euripides who is consistently sympathetic to Polynices: Eteocles suggests the duel and Polynices, when he kills his brother, is not so much engaging in bloodthirsty fraud as carrying out an act of justice. In Statius, although Eteocles maintains his tyrannical and savage nature to the end, comparable blame is transferred to his brother. That both are to be equally condemned is made clear by the poet's remarks after both are dead: "ite truces animae

funestaque Tartara leto / polluite et cunctas Erebi consumite poenas" (574–75). The mutual hatred of the brothers is carried even beyond death and the flames of their pyre bear witness to the fact (12. 420 ff.).

In keeping with his concentration on the madness with which the brothers fight, Statius affirms that "coeunt sine more, sine arte" (524); in Euripides, they fight with cunning and skill (1353–54).<sup>17</sup> In the role of Jocasta at this stage there is also a radical difference between epic and tragedy. In the *Phoenissae*, Jocasta is present at the combat, having arrived too late to intervene (1427 ff.); seeing both her sons killed, she commits suicide on the spot (1455 ff.). In the *Thebaid*, the queen, *inceptae clamore exterrita pugnae* (634), kills herself in the palace. In both versions, she uses a sword (*Phoen.* 1457; *Theb.* 639) but the blade, in the tragedy, enters the throat, in the epic, the breast (*Phoen.* 1457; *Theb.* 641). Euripides portrays her dying in the arms of her dead sons (1459), whereas in the *Thebaid* she ends her life alone but for Ismene (642–43). This modification naturally follows from the other changes that Statius has made in Jocasta's activities, but he has also introduced a new episode, which, though it owes something to Euripides, is largely original.<sup>18</sup>

Oedipus, when he hears that his sons are dead, comes out from his retreat to the field of battle (580 ff.). The description that he is accorded is, admittedly, grotesque but it has a certain horror and pathos of its own: "at genitor sceleris comperto fine profundis / erupit tenebris, saevoque in limine profert / mortem imperfectam: veteri

noble one: he realizes "nec . . . omnis culpa malorum / me penes, et superi mecum Parcaeque nocentes" (11. 188–89). But when he begins to fight he is just as violent as Eteocles. In Polynices there is a *potential* tyrant, lacking only the kingly power to appear in his true colors.

16. P. Venini, "Studi sulla *Tebaida* di Stazio: L'imitazione," *RIL*, XCV (1961), 397; cf. Reussner, *op. cit.*, pp. 26–27.

17. It may also be noted that in Statius the combat begins with the brothers fighting from chariots (440, 450–51, 513 ff.)—

not so in Euripides. The simile which Statius introduces at 530 ff. is based on *Phoen.* 1380–81. Polynices' prayer that he may kill Eteocles is similar in both tragedy and epic (*Phoen.* 1365 ff.; *Theb.* 504 ff.).

18. On the duel scene, see, in general, Helm, *op. cit.*, pp. 48–49; Legras, *op. cit.*, pp. 123 ff., 128, 212; Reussner, *op. cit.*, pp. 26 ff.; Venini, *op. cit.*, pp. 397–98; W. Schetter, *Untersuchungen zur epischen Kunst des Statius* (Wiesbaden, 1960), pp. 114 ff.

stat sordida tabo / utraque canities, et durus sanguine crinis / obnubit furiale caput: procul ora genaeque / intus et effossae squalent vestigia lucis." Oedipus' existence is a living death. His appearance now is the same as in Book 1, when he cursed his sons, and in marked contrast to that in Book 8, when he had reveled in the prospect of war.<sup>19</sup> Like Jocasta in the *Phoenissae*, he throws himself on the corpses of his sons (600), ultimately breaking into a grim lament, which, although marred a little by bizarre rhetoric,<sup>20</sup> nonetheless succeeds in depicting vividly the final regret that he feels for his actions. It is too late for such a *volte-face*, and Oedipus tries to shift the blame from himself: "quisnam fuit ille deorum / qui stetit orantem iuxta praereptaque verba / dictavit fatis? furor illa et movit Erinys / et pater et genetrix et regna oculique cadentes / nil ego. . ." (617 ff.). These lines recall *Phoenissae* 1612 ff., but Oedipus' words in the *Thebaid* are only partly true. It is correct that the Fury completely controlled the course of events after Book 1, but it had been summoned into existence by Oedipus. It was an event on the human level that permitted supernatural powers to bring destruction upon so many. But Oedipus also sees that the curse which rested on his family predicated all that was to come. At last he sees himself in the dual role of victim and instrument of fate. Oedipus then calls to the dead for the only forgiveness he can have: "solvite quaeso manus infestaque vincula tandem / dividite et medium nunc saltem admittite patrem" (625–26). There is an added irony here, arising from the stress which Statius has laid on the imperishability of the brothers' *profana odia*. Their father then secretly looks for a weapon to kill himself, but *cauta Antigone* has removed

them; again Oedipus' madness springs up (*furit inde senex*, 630): "ubi noxia tela? / heu Furiae. num totum abiit in corpora ferrum?" This too owes something to Euripides; for in the *Phoenissae*, Jocasta kills herself with one of her sons' weapons (1456). In the tragedy too, Oedipus feels final remorse (1551 ff.), but in terms far different from those in the epic. Statius adds a further, and credible, touch in Antigone's grim joy at her father's misery: "dicentem comes aegra levat mutumque dolorem / ipsa premit, saevum gaudens planxisse parentem" (632–33). In Statius' account, while Oedipus and Antigone are on the battlefield, Jocasta and Ismene are in the palace: Antigone leads her father away, denied death; Ismene weeps on the corpse of her mother (643–44). These variations are attributable to Statius and not to a source other than Euripides.<sup>21</sup>

When Statius chose the Theban war as his theme, he was aware that he had in hand for profitable study Euripides' *Phoenissae* and *Supplices*. They were models which he and his audience may be presumed to have known from youth.<sup>22</sup> But there is a manifest difference between composing a tragedy and writing an epic: there are limits to the way in which the epic poet can utilize drama for his purposes. Discrepancies between the genres, particularly in relation to the stage conventions of drama, provide obvious restrictions. Statius has succeeded in rearranging, expanding, and modifying the details of the Theban war for his own epic purposes. The result is that the differences between the *Thebaid* and the *Phoenissae* have far more significance for the interpretation of the epic than what is common to both.

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19. *Theb.* 1. 46 ff.; 8. 240 ff.

20. Absurdity is reached at 616–17, where Oedipus wishes that his eyes were restored so that he could tear them out again, and at 624, where he speculates on which son's wounds

he is feeling.

21. Cf. the remarks of Venini, *op. cit.*, pp. 393–94.

22. On the popularity of Euripides, see Quint. *Inst.* 10. 1. 67.