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STATIUS' THESEUS: MARTIAL OR MERCIFUL?

The final book of Statius' *Thebaid* brings a type of closure previously unknown in the classical epic tradition. Of the figures who dominate the poem in the previous books, the warring brothers Eteocles and Polynices have ended their quarrel in death, and the great heroes who accompanied Polynices have likewise perished or fled the field. Book 12 then sees the emergence of Creon as new ruler of Thebes, his edict forbidding burial of the Argive dead, and the vindication of the Argive women's burial rights by the Athenian Theseus.

Although Theseus appears only in the last book, he nevertheless plays a significant role in the poem as the last political leader standing, who brings order to Thebes and Argos. Some critics have discerned within his defeat of Creon and vindication of Argive burial rites the portrait of an ideal king, possibly with Stoic virtues, in contrast to the tyrannical figures who dominate the previous books.¹ Others, however, have called attention to aspects of Theseus' character that complicate this picture,² pointing out that Theseus shows a strange eagerness for war, that he is compared to other destructive and malevolent figures,³ that his search for vengeance brings fresh killing,⁴ and that he may share in a madness prevalent in the poem.⁵

In this note, I examine two central elements of Statius' representation of Theseus: his resemblance to the god Mars and his differences from the Altar of Clementia located in his kingdom in Athens. Neither those who argue for Theseus as a just king nor those who have raised doubts about this picture have fully explored these correspondences. This examination will demonstrate that Theseus is identified with Mars and contrasted with the Altar to a greater extent than has yet been recognized. It will

1. Vessey (1973, 312, 314–15) writes of Theseus as "the model of a clement and just king," an "earthly reflection of the supreme god" in his "impartial devotion to justice and to law." Braund (1996, 13) argues that Theseus is a "good king" or "good emperor" on a Roman model, who imposes justice at the end of the poem in place of Jupiter, and to this extent she presents Theseus as a model of benign kingship that could be seen as both a reflection of and encouragement for Domitian. Ripoll (1998, 450–51, 496) views Theseus as "le bon roi en acte" who represents both traditional Roman values and the Stoic virtue of *iustitia*. D'Espèrey (1999, 369) argues that Theseus "remplace Jupiter dans sa fonction de garant de l'ordre du monde," as part of a human order that takes over once the divinities have withdrawn. Delarue (2000, 372–74) sees Theseus identified in a positive way, through the comparison to Jupiter, with Domitian and argues that critics who interpret Theseus differently do so because they cannot enter into the imperial mindset that makes this sort of flattery legitimate. Cf. Rieks 1967, 224; Helzlsouer 1996, 148–49, 156–59; Hill 1996, 52–53; and Albrecht 1997, 950, 954.

2. Ahl (1982, 935) writes that Theseus' "credentials as a moral hero in the epic are hardly solid." Cf. Ahl 1986, 2894–98.

3. Dominik (1994, 96) observes that Theseus shows a strange eagerness for war, e.g., at 12.595, when, after returning from the Amazonian battlefields, he agrees without hesitation to fight on behalf of the Argive women. The Theseus of Euripides' *Suppliants*, by contrast, decides to go to war only after Creon has refused through an arrogant messenger to bury the Argive dead (388–94). In the *Thebaid*, Theseus' alacrity also contrasts with the deliberation earlier shown by Adrastus in deciding on war (3.388–93, 3.440–49, 4.38–41). Dominik (1994, 92–98) ultimately describes Statius' presentation of Theseus as "ambiguous" (98), but compares Theseus to a bloodthirsty tyrant, adducing his mistreatment of women and comparisons between Theseus and "female barbarians . . . , cruel monarchs . . . , fierce warriors . . . , malevolent divinities . . . , and ferocious beasts . . ." (93). Theseus is "attracted as much by the prospect of fighting with Creon as he is interested in upholding natural law." Ganiban (2007, 229) concludes that Theseus "is one of the most disturbingly transgressive characters in the *Thebaid*" but that he nevertheless represents the best possible king that could emerge in this epic world (230). Cf. McNelis 2007, 172–73, 176.

4. Henderson 1998, 250.

5. Hershkowitz (1994, 144–47) argues that Theseus is infected with a madness that afflicts the Theban royal line throughout the poem. Pollmann (2004, 43) offers a balanced appraisal of both positions.

thus help to show how, through the figure of Theseus, Statius expresses significant reservations about the use of kingly power even in the service of a virtuous cause.

THESEUS AND MARS

Critics who interpret Theseus as a model king have tended to stress his similarities with Jupiter, particularly his shared role as executor of justice,⁶ while others have argued that Jupiter's indifference and hostility toward humanity make this a derogatory parallel.⁷ Scholars have paid comparatively less attention to the resemblance of Theseus to Mars. The focus of this discussion has been the simile describing Theseus' battle charge against the Thebans, where Statius likens him to Mars (12.733–36):

ceu pater Edonios Haemi de vertice Mavors
impulerit currus, rapido mortemque fugamque
axe vehens, sic exanimis in terga reducit
pallor Agenoridas.

As though father Mavors were driving his Edonian chariot from Haemus' summit bearing death and rout on his rapid wheels, so pale terror leads back the panicking sons of Agenor.⁸

Mars is a creature of infinite bloodlust, as indicated by Jupiter's speculation that he could be reveling in the blood of his own people (*caraeque in sanguine gentis / luxuriat*, 7.12–13), and by the description of his home, whose altars constantly stream with the blood of wars (*bellorum solum in aris / sanguis*, 7.53–54). William Dominik thus comes to the apparently inevitable conclusion that the comparison to Mars highlights Theseus' "destructive propensity."⁹

François Ripoll disagrees, however, and as part of his argument for Theseus as a model king, contends that four aspects of the context of the simile prevent it from reflecting negatively upon him.¹⁰ First, Ripoll argues that Theseus has a predominantly psychological effect on the Thebans rather than a deadly one, since the list of those he proceeds to kill (12.741–46) is short and recounted without pathos. Second, the comparison between Theseus and Mars is "indirect" because Statius compares their actions rather than their essential natures and introduces the comparison hypothetically (*ceu*, 12.733). Third, Theseus' actions are less horrific than the representation of Mars at 7.47–74. Finally, Theseus' stated goal of defending universal laws (*terrarum leges*, 12.642) shows that he is waging a "just war" (*bellum iustum*), so this simile could not signify that he was doing otherwise.¹¹

Yet, in epic terms, an *aristeia* killing seven opponents is not notably brief. The hypothetical form of the comparison does nothing to diminish its significance, nor

6. Braund 1996, 14–17; Ripoll 1998; Delarue 2000, 372–74.

7. Schubert 1984, 257–58; Ahl 1986, 2845; Dominik 1994, 95, 157; Davis 1994, 481; Criado 2000, 196–204.

8. Translations of extracts are by Shackleton Bailey (2003), unless otherwise noted; in-text translations are my own. Pollmann (2004, ad 12.733–35) observes that the comparison of Theseus to Mars implies that his actions will not be wholly positive and good, as remarked by Dominik (1994, 92–98). She adds, though, that Theseus "does not indulge in the worst excesses of warfare," citing 12.736–37, where he passes up easy killing. But see further on this passage below.

9. Dominik 1994, 97.

10. Ripoll 1998, 177: "Le contexte enlève donc toute nuance de caractérisation négative à cette comparaison."

11. Ripoll 1998, 177.

does the fact that Theseus acts less viciously than Mars. The discrepancy between Theseus' declared motivations and the comparison with Mars suggests, if anything, the possible falsity of his declarations. Even if we accept all these arguments, they do not change the fundamental fact that Theseus alone is compared to this most wantonly destructive divinity in the poem's last reference to Mars.¹²

Dominik's assessment of this passage thus stands, but is also bolstered by other parallels between Theseus and Mars that have gone unexamined. Well before Theseus enters battle against the Thebans and is compared to Mars explicitly, he first appears in the poem triumphant with spoils from his victory over the Amazons (12.523–28):

ante ducem spolia et, duri Mavortis imago,
virginei currus cumulatque fercula cristis
et tristes ducuntur equi truncaequae bipennes,
quis nemora et solidam Maeotida caedere suetae,
gorytique leves portantur et ignea gemmis
cingula et informes dominarum sanguine peltae.

Before the chief spoils are led and, image of cruel Mavors, virgin chariots, wagons piled with crests, sad horses, broken axes with which the women were wont to cleave forests and frozen Maeotis; light quivers are carried and belts blazing with gems and bucklers marred by the blood of their mistresses. (Trans. Shackleton Bailey, adapted)

Susanna Morton Braund writes of this passage that "our first visual impression of Theseus casts him as a Roman general in a triumphal procession,"¹³ and she sees this as evidence that Theseus embodies "the supreme Roman *paterfamilias*, the emperor" who is "the tamer of barbarism and the representative of civilization."¹⁴ Yet the closest precedent is not any Roman general, but rather the only other triumph in the poem, that of Mars himself, returning from his own foreign wars to his homeland (7.64–74). Statius calls attention to this parallel when he dubs Theseus' procession the very "image of cruel Mars" (*duri Mavortis imago*).

Indeed, there are several specific correspondences between the two triumphal processions, beginning with the notion of the "image" of Mars. The only other place we find such images is in the war god's palace. As Mercury awaits Mars' arrival there, he sees personifications of various destructive forces,¹⁵ bloody altars,¹⁶ and "every sort of violence and wound."¹⁷ He also sees images of Mars throughout the palace, always with a cruel countenance.¹⁸ Mercury then witnesses Mars bringing these images to life by arriving in person in grim procession. Theseus, triumphant as another *duri Mavortis imago*, recalls not only Mars in triumph, but also all the other images of cruel Mars in the gloomy palace. Furthermore, in his procession, Mars leads both booty and weeping captives behind him (*spolia a tergo flentesque catervae*,

12. The comparison of Archemorus/Opheltes to the infant Mars, Mercury, or Apollo at 4.801 has altogether different connotations. At 6.665–67, Statius writes that Hippomedon's discus engenders as much fear among his competitors at the games as the shield of Mars does on the battlefield. The comparison of objects and the discrepancy in contexts make for a limited assimilation of Hippomedon to Mars.

13. Braund 1996, 12.

14. *Ibid.*, 13. Cf. McNelis 2007, 176.

15. *Impetus, Nefas, Ira, Metus, Insidiae, Discordia, Minae, tristissima Virtus, Furor, and Mors* (7.47–53).

16. 7.54.

17. *adeo vis omnis et omne / vulnus*, 7.59–60.

18. *ubique ipsum [Martem], sed non usquam ore remisso / cernere erat*, 7.60–61.

7.71). Theseus' Amazons do not yet weep because they have not come to terms with their fate (*ipsae autem nondum trepidae sexumue fatentur, / nec vulgare gemunt*, 12.529–30), but the suggestion is that they certainly will.

In his triumph, Theseus is returning from the lands of Mars himself, where he conducted his wars against the Amazons. Mars was traditionally said to have his home in Thrace, and this is where Jupiter imagines him killing his subjects for sport (*Bistonias . . . domos*, 7.7; *caraque in sanguine gentis / luxuriat*, 7.12–13). Statius shows that he considers Thrace and Scythia to be the same land when he writes of Thracians taming their rage with fresh milk,¹⁹ since he thereby refers to a tradition found in Strabo and other authors that identifies the Scythians with Thracians and makes the drinking of milk a distinctively Scythian practice.²⁰ Thus, when Statius makes the unusual decision to locate the Amazon homeland in Scythia (*Scythicae . . . gentis*, 12.519),²¹ he places Theseus' conquest within the domains of Mars. Finally, Theseus breaks off his triumph, eagerly returning to war (*nec sanguine fessum*, 12.594), just as Mars does when ordered to begin the Theban conflict (*nec longa moratus*, 7.81).²²

The parallels between the triumphs of Theseus and Mars, together with the simile comparing the two, create a consistent assimilation that suggests in Theseus not simply war prowess, but the sort of excessive delight in slaughter that has been part of the character of the war god from Homer onward²³ and that Statius amplifies with extensive references to the bloodlust of Mars.

THESEUS AND THE ALTAR OF CLEMENTIA

When Theseus conducts his victory procession into Athens, he passes the Altar of Clementia, a gentle (*mitis*, 12.482) goddess who offers consolation to any who are suffering, as she does to the Argive women (*sedatis requierunt pectora curis*, 12.514). Some critics have interpreted the proximity of Theseus' triumph to the Altar as proof of his *clementia*.²⁴ Ripoll, although he views Theseus as a model king, nevertheless acknowledges the contrast between Theseus' parading of bloodied war captives and the Altar that offers refuge for the losers and victims of war. He therefore argues that Theseus and the Altar embody complementary Athenian virtues. Theseus champions Stoic *iustitia*, while the Altar represents *clementia*.²⁵ At the same time, the appearance of the Altar completes the tragic action of the main part of the poem with a scene of

19. *lacte novo domuisse furorem*, 2.84.

20. Strabo (7.3.7–9), who refers to *Il.* 13.5–6 (the Hippemolgi, identified with the Scythians by a fragment of Hesiod, for which see Strabo 7.3.7); a lost play of Aeschylus (frag. 198 Nauck); and Hippoc. *Aer.* 18. Hdt. (4.64) also mentions the milk drinking of the Scythians.

21. Shackleton Bailey (2003, 262 n. 10, ad 12.182) writes: "As generally represented, their territory lay on the south coast of the Black Sea, by the river Thermidon to the west of the river Phasis. Statius, however, usually makes them denizens of Scythia and the far north." In Proclus' summary of the *Aethiopis* legend, Penthesilea, as daughter of Ares, comes from Thrace, but Aeschylus (*PV* 723–25) and Pherecydes (*FGH F* 15) locate their homeland in Pontic Asia Minor. Plutarch too, in his life of Theseus, recounts Theseus' abduction of Antiope as taking place on the Euxine, apparently on a distant shore given the long voyages involved (*Thes.* 26).

22. Noted by Ganiban (2007, 230).

23. Even Homer's Ares sets aside opportunities to indulge his war lust in order to support one side; Statius' Mars holds to no fixed affiliation (Feeney 1991, 367–69).

24. Braund 1996, 12.

25. Ripoll 1998, 450.

reconciliation like that found at the end of the *Oresteia*, whereupon Theseus reasserts a Homeric heroic ethic imbued with Aristotelian values that allows for the virtuous use of anger.²⁶ Theseus is never called *clemens* or said to have *clementia* because *clementia* is a separate moral force in the poem, independent of kingship.²⁷

What this division overlooks, however, is that for values to be complementary, they must be compatible.²⁸ Whether or not the execution of justice (*iustitia*) and the granting of pardon (*clementia*) must necessarily come into conflict in theory, Statius goes at least as far as questioning their compatibility, if not Theseus' role as executor of justice, when he has Theseus drive his triumphal procession past the Altar. He does this most obviously when he identifies Theseus with Mars, the god most diametrically opposed to *Clementia*. But he also creates several specific contrasts between Theseus and the Altar.

To begin with, Statius distances Theseus physically from Athens, the site of the Altar. Theseus turns immediately from his triumphal procession back to battle, so that he scarcely has time to set foot in his home city between campaigns. By contrast, in Euripides' *Supplices*, Adrastus and the Argive women meet Theseus already in Athens, not returning from a campaign, and Theseus spends a great deal of time in his city deliberating with the Athenian citizens over his course of action. The physical distance between Statius' Theseus and Athens as home of the Altar is one indication of the difference in character between the "war-waging son of Aegeus" (*belliger Aegide*, 12.546, as the Argive women address him) and the Altar that promotes reconciliation of conflicts without violence.

The description of the Altar also contrasts point by point with Theseus' triumph. The Altar belongs to no powerful god (*nulli concessa potentum / ara deum*, 12.481–22), but to *Clementia* alone (12.482). It is "sparing" (*parca*) in the rites that it requires, accepting no incense or blood, but only tears, locks of hair, and clothing left by those who survived disaster:

parca superstitio: non turea flamma nec altus
accipitur sanguis: lacrimis altaria sudant,
maestarumque super libamina secta comarum
pendent et vestes mutata sorte relictæ.
(12.487–90)

Frugal is her cult, no flame of incense or deep measure of blood is accepted: the Altar is moist with tears and above it hang severed offerings of sad hair and clothing left when luck changed.

As cast-off items, such offerings cost little or nothing. The Altar refuses more costly items such as incense and blood, the latter all the more so when it is copious (*altus*). Around the Altar is a gentle grove (*mite nemus*, 12.491), and there is no image of the spirit that dwells there (*nulla autem effigies*, 12.493). The poor frequent the Altar most often, while it remains unknown only to the wealthy (*semper locus horret egenis / coetibus, ignotæ tantum felicitibus arae*, 12.495–96). The Altar is a refuge for those

26. Ripoll 1998, 444.

27. Ripoll 1998, 445.

28. Ripoll is also not entirely consistent on Theseus' representing the reassertion of Homeric/Aristotelian values, since he also says that these values exist all along in the poem (450): in his evaluation Theseus wavers between being a representative of Stoic ethics and a representative of traditional epic heroism.

defeated in war (*huc victi bellis*, 12.507), and the Argive women feel a sense of rest and comfort the moment they arrive (*vix ibi, sedatis requierunt pectora curis*, 12.514).

Whereas the Altar belongs to no powerful individual figure, Theseus makes a display of his individual power. In contrast to the Altar's succor of the poor and refusal of rich offerings, Theseus parades rich spoils, among them baldrics gleaming with fiery gems (*igneae gemmis / cingula*, 12.527–28). Among these costly items is the blood that the Altar refuses, dried onto the Amazons' lost shields (*informes dominarum sanguine peltae*, 12.528). Where Clementia admits no image (*effigies*) of herself, and maintains a gentle grove, the spoils of Theseus amount to the very image of the harsh war god. The Amazons could potentially find refuge at the Altar with others defeated in war, but Theseus drives them right past it instead.

The Argive women who have sought refuge at the Altar themselves register this disparity between Theseus and Clementia. They arrived in Athens seeking aid, and were directed by the Athenian population not to seek the court of Theseus and await his arrival, but rather to proceed directly to the Altar (12.512–13),²⁹ where they found immediate relief from their cares. Now, as the women watch Theseus drive his triumphal entourage into the city, they are brought back to the world he inhabits (12.540–42):

paulum et ab inessis maestae Pelopeides aris
promovere gradum seriemque et dona triumph
mirantur, vinctique animo rediere mariti.

The sorrowful daughters of Pelops walk a little way from the Altar where they sit and admire the procession of triumph gifts. They think again of their vanquished husbands.

As the women physically step away from the Altar (*ab . . . aris / promovere gradum*), their thoughts change.³⁰ The cares that had melted away return when they see Theseus in triumph; they remember their dead husbands and once again become downcast (*maestae*). To seek some form of justice through Theseus, the Argive women must literally leave Clementia behind.³¹ Theseus will vindicate them, but on his

29. Noted by Ahl (1986, 2896).

30. See further Pollmann 2004, ad loc., on the different perspectives in this passage.

31. Ganiban (2007, 220) introduces a distinction, drawn from Burgess (1972) and Braund (1996) between *misericordia*, as compassion for those who have suffered undeservedly, and *clementia*, as the prerogative of the powerful to forgive, and interprets the Argive women as leaving the *misericordia* of the Altar to seek the *clementia* of Theseus. There are two problems with this interpretation, however. First, even if we accept that both definitions are in play, it is difficult to see how the Argive women could be described as seeking from Theseus *clementia* under its traditional definition. Ganiban (222–23) acknowledges that Theseus' expression of emotion in response to the plea of the Argive women (*rubuit*, 12.588; *permotus*, 12.589) shows that he is not operating with dispassionate Stoic *clementia*. But in fact the encounter between Theseus and the Argive women does not even allow for the exercise of traditional *clementia*. Burgess makes a broad survey of the word *clementia* and related terms in Republican and Imperial authors, leaving aside Statius but including the prose and poetry of Seneca. From this, he concludes that conventionally *clementia* was used when "a fixed standard of behaviour which relates two individuals or groups has been breached by one of the partners; the other is then in a position to show *clementia* in respect of the punishment he exacts for that breach. That this remission of punishment for an offence is the situation in which *clementia* is normally used is clearly shown by what survives of Seneca's treatise *De Clementia*." The first point, then, is that Theseus cannot show traditional *clementia* to the Argive women because they have not committed any offence against him for which he can offer forgiveness. More fundamentally, Burgess demonstrates that "Statius has succeeded in redefining *clementia* to make it approximate to *misericordia*" (347), a definition that Statius forcefully asserts with his description of the goddess Clementia and her Altar. It therefore seems to defy Statius' very project to reimport an older definition of *clementia* in an attempt somehow to fit the term to Theseus.

own terms, which involve thirsting with his spear (*hasta . . . sitiebat vulnera*, 12.750) after the blood that the Altar refuses to consume.

We find a similar contrast with the Altar in Theseus' last action in the poem, his killing of Creon. Theseus himself figures this act as a sacrifice (12.771–73):³²

Argolici, quibus haec datur hostia, manes,
pandite Tartareum chaos ultricesque parate
Eumenidas, venit ecce Creon!

Argive ghosts, to whom this victim is offered, open wide the void of Tartarus, make ready avenging Furies, for see, Creon comes!

Braund has given various reasons why Theseus' killing of the solitary and isolated Creon (*abscedunt comites*, 12.756) does not show a lack of *clementia*. She argues that Creon's isolation makes him a legitimate sacrifice, that Theseus must slay Creon to end the cycle of retribution, and that Theseus shows *clementia* by granting to Creon the burial he denied the Argives.³³

Yet if we are to ask whether Theseus acts with *clementia* or not, it seems most reasonable to measure his deeds against the standard of *Clementia* that Statius himself clearly sets out with the Altar. The Altar accepts no blood sacrifices whatsoever; Theseus sacrifices Creon with a spear cast. Theseus may act with justified anger (*iusta . . . ira*, 12.589; *iustas . . . iras*, 12.714; *ira*, 12.740), but *Clementia* allows neither anger nor threats near her Altar (*unde procul starent iraeque minaeque*, 12.504). Indeed, *Clementia* shelters suppliants precisely in Creon's situation, namely those who, "deprived of the rule of kingdoms and guilty of erring by committing crimes, have come to seek reconciliation" (*regnumque inopes scelerumque errore nocentes / conveniunt pacemque rogant*, 12.508–9).³⁴

CONCLUSIONS

Ripoll has observed that Statius never refers to Theseus as *pious* or as having *pietas*.³⁵ He explains that *pietas* requires sacrifice, and Theseus, powerful as he is, has no need to sacrifice to vindicate the Argive women. But more fundamentally, *pietas* means a sense of moral obligation and duty to others, which will often reveal itself when sacrifice is called for, but need not, as when the "faithful crowd" (*pio . . . tumultu*, 12.782) of warriors from both sides reunites after Creon's death with a new commitment to one another. By strongly contrasting Theseus with *Clementia* and assimilating him to Mars, Statius indicates that Theseus does not take up the task of defeating Creon because of a universal sense of *pietas*, as suggested by his declaration of the need to defend human laws (*terrarum leges*, 12.642).³⁶ Rather than "just,"

32. Hardie 1993, 46.

33. Braund 1996, 4, 14. Although Ripoll (1998, 441) states that Theseus assumes some aspects of *Clementia*, he says of the killing of Creon only that it is done in a just war (431–32), and that a duel between rival chiefs is an imperative of the epic genre (447). Neither of these claims addresses the contradiction between Theseus' dispatching of Creon and his supposed *clementia*.

34. McNelis (2007, 172–73) argues in addition that the scene on Theseus' shield at 12.665–76 recalls Catull. 64.137–38, where Ariadne accuses Theseus of lacking *clementia* and failing to pity (*miserescere*) her.

35. Ripoll 1998, 295–96. Cf. Ganiban 2007, 228.

36. As argued by Ripoll 1998, 177.

his anger is “justified”;³⁷ he champions a just cause not, or not purely, from a sense of obligation to humanity. Instead, he sees war against Thebes as the sort of opportunity Mars would appreciate for more pleasure in bloodshed. Theseus’ behavior emphasizes that rulers often act from selfish motives that may appear virtuous when they coincide with the public good, but that stand revealed when they lead to actions harmful to the community. Critics who interpret Theseus as modeled upon, or as a model for, the Flavian emperors³⁸ must come to terms with Statius’ use of Theseus to express a deep suspicion of absolute power.³⁹

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37. *OLD*, s.v. *iustus*, 1, 5.

38. On the relation between Theseus and the Flavian emperors, see Ripoll 1998, 495–502.

39. I would like to thank *CP*’s anonymous referee for suggestions that improved this note.

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