

## THE ARMS OF CAPANEUS: STATIUS, *THEBAID* 4.165–77\*

at pedes et toto despectans vertice bellum  
quattuor indomitis Capaneus erepta iuvenis  
terga superque rigens iniectu molis aenae  
versat onus; squalet triplici ramosa corona  
Hydra recens obitu; pars anguibus aspera vivis  
argento caelata micat, pars arte reperta  
conditur et fulvo moriens nigrescit in auro;  
circum amnis torpens et ferro caerula Lerna.  
at laterum tractus spatiosaque pectora servat  
nexilis innumero chalybum subtegmine thorax  
(horrendum, non matris opus), galeaeque corusca  
prominet arce gigas, atque uni missilis illi  
cuspidē praefixa stat frondibus orba cupressus.

The lack of a separate commentary on the fourth book of Statius' *Thebaid* has meant that many significant details in this description of Capaneus in the catalogue of the Seven have gone unremarked.<sup>1</sup> This article aims to fill the deficiency, pointing out the rich literary allusions, artful symbolism and the careful use of language in this well-written passage.

Two literary models for the arms of Capaneus remain from Greek tragedy in the fifth century B.C., models which themselves may owe something to the lost Cyclic *Thebais*.<sup>2</sup> The earlier is Aeschylus, *Septem* 432–4:

ἔχει δὲ σῆμα γυμνὸν ἄνδρα πυρφόρον,  
φλέγει δὲ λαμπὰς διὰ χερσὶν ὠπλισμένη,  
χρυσοῖς δὲ φωνεῖ γράμμασιν “πρήσω πόλιν”.

‘And he has as his shield-device a fire-bearing man, naked, but his torch burns set as a weapon in his hands, and he says in golden letters “I will burn the city”.’

As has been remarked, this shield is non-realistic and recognisably artificial, conforming to the conventions of classical Greek art.<sup>3</sup> The symbolism of the device is clear, and reiterates in visual form the threat Capaneus has already made to sack the city (425–8); the torch perhaps anticipates Capaneus' fiery end, struck down by the thunderbolt of Zeus,<sup>4</sup> something certainly foreshadowed in the immediately preceding lines (430–1). Similarly suggestive is Capaneus' shield-device in the version of Euripides' *Phoenissae*, which occurs in a passage of dubious authenticity<sup>5</sup> (1130–3):

σιδηρονώτοις δ' ἀσπίδος τύποις ἐπὶν  
γίγας ἐπ' ὤμοις γηγενῆς ὅλην πόλιν  
φέρων μοχλοῖσιν ἐξανασπάσας βάθρων,  
ὑπόνοιαν ἡμῖν οἷα πείσεται πόλις.

‘And there was on the iron-framed figuration of his shield an earth-born giant, carrying on his shoulders an entire city which he had ripped from its foundations with crowbars, a hint to us of what the city will suffer.’

\* My thanks to the referee for *CQ* for many helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> Some good hints are to be found in D. Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 200, 204, and especially in Th. Klinnert, *Capaneus–Hippomedon: Interpretationen zur Heldendarstellung in der Thebais des P. Papinius Statius* (Diss. Berlin, 1970), pp. 22–8.

<sup>2</sup> That Capaneus appeared in the Cyclic *Thebais* is assumed by most modern scholars – cf. M. Davies, *The Epic Cycle* (Bristol, 1989), p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. G. O. Hutchinson's commentary *ad loc.*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hutchinson on 422–56.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. E. Fraenkel, *SBW* (1963), 53–63, who athetises the lines, and D. Mastronade, *Phoenix* 32 (1978), 105–20, who is less sure of their non-authenticity.

Here the symbolic meaning of the shield-device is actually interpreted by the messenger who speaks the lines: indeed, the word *ὑπόνοια*, used of the shield's symbolic function, is used by Plato in connection with the allegorical interpretation of Homer.<sup>6</sup> The threat to Thebes of destruction by fire in Aeschylus is here replaced with the threat of uprooting, appropriate to Capaneus' characterisation as the sapper of the Seven in this play;<sup>7</sup> the display of a gigantic figure on his shield recalls Aeschylus' messenger's allusion to him as a *γίγας*, and similarly suggests Gigantic and theomachic violence as well as massive size.

There is thus a tradition of symbolic shield-devices for Capaneus in poetry before Statius. As we might expect, Statius expands the symbolic shield into a whole symbolic collection of arms and armour (helmet, breastplate and spear as well as shield). One source for this is not hard to find – the account of Turnus at *Aeneid* 7.783–92, a passage which like *Thebaid* 4.165–77 describes a formidable hero in the context of a military catalogue:<sup>8</sup>

ipse inter primos praestanti corpore Turnus  
vertitur arma tenens et toto vertice supra est.  
cui triplici crinita iuba galea alta Chimaeram  
sustinet Aetnaeos efflantem faucibus ignis;  
tam magis illa fremens et tristibus effera flammis  
quam magis effuso crudescent sanguine pugnae.  
at levem clipeum sublati cornibus Io  
auro insignibat, iam saetis obsita, iam bos,  
argumentum ingens, et custos virginis Argus.

Statius' 'toto despectans vertice' (165) would seem to pick up Vergil's 'toto vertice supra est', and the vast Chimaera-helmet with the Gigantic links implied by 'Aetnaeos'<sup>9</sup> has clear affinities with Statius' giant-helmet in expressing the dark violence of the bearer, as well as anticipating the similarly monstrous Hydra-shield. Turnus' Io-shield, alluding to Turnus' Argive ancestry and to the fact that he like Io has been maddened by Juno,<sup>10</sup> seems at first sight to be more relevant to its bearer than Capaneus' Hydra-shield, but this is misleading, as a closer examination will show.

Above all, the Hydra links Capaneus with Hercules. Its clear allusion to a Labour of Hercules occurs immediately after a passage describing the contingent from Tiryns, dressed in the Herculean costume of the lion-skin, carrying the Herculean club and bow, and inspired to war by Hercules himself, now a god (145–56).<sup>11</sup> Joined with them is the contingent from Nemea, which introduces another Herculean allusion with a description of the hut of Molorchus where the hero famously rested on his way to killing the Nemean lion (159–64). Thus the Hydra forms part of a complex of Hercules-allusions here. The attribution to Capaneus of a symbol of this great god/hero, presented here and elsewhere in the *Thebaid* as a martial and moral paragon, seems dramatically ironic, for in his failure and impious end at Thebes Capaneus is as far from achieving the greatness and beneficial labours of Hercules, just mentioned in the poem, as he is from burning the city. This aspect of Capaneus seems to be brought out at *Thebaid* 5.565ff., where he slays the serpent which has

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Rep.* 378d; cf. also Plut. *Mor.* 19e.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Phoen.* 180–1, where the Paidagogos reports Capaneus' sizing-up of the walls of Thebes.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the links with this Vergilian passage are pointed out by Klinnert, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 27 n. 56.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. P. R. Hardie, *Virgil's Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 118–19.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. S. G. P. Small, *TAPA* 90 (1959), 249–51.

<sup>11</sup> This point is noted by Vessey, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 204.

accidentally killed the boy Opheltes/Archemorus, a serpent linked by the poet with the Lernaean Hydra; he thus accomplishes a deed like that of Hercules the Hydra-slayer, but the deed is hybristic, since the serpent is no undesirable pest but the sacred guardian of the shrine of Zeus (5.505–17).<sup>12</sup> In effect, the Hydra-device marks out Capaneus as a hybristic Hercules, a Hercules *manqué*.

The particular allusion to the Hydra may even have a more detailed narrative function within the *Thebaid*, anticipating the very manner of Capaneus' death. Klinnert has ingeniously argued that Capaneus bears the token of the Hydra since he too is a monster who is to die at the hand of a fire-wielding god.<sup>13</sup> The myth depicted on the shield thus foreshadows the events of the poem: Hercules' cauterisation kills the Hydra on the shield just as the fiery thunderbolt of Zeus destroys Capaneus (*Thebaid* 10.927–39). Such a narrative function of Capaneus' shield-device would recall and parallel that in Aeschylus' *Septem* (432–3), where the figure bearing a torch was seen to anticipate Capaneus' fiery end (see above).

Statius' language in describing Capaneus' shield (167–72) is worth closer consideration, for it presents both problems and artful details. The Hydra-device is embossed rather than painted as the strongly tactile 'squalet' makes clear. 'Squalet' is carefully chosen here in its sense of 'feel rough'; as well as having impeccable Vergilian precedent in this meaning (cf. *Aeneid* 10.314 'tunicam squalentem auro'), it is highly appropriate for describing a serpent, since 'squalere' was commonly connected by ancient writers with 'squama', 'scale'.<sup>14</sup> It covers the shield in a triple coil ('corona' suggests an enclosing ring), and is described as 'branching' ('ramosa') with its multiple necks. That detail is clearly taken from Ovid's description of the Hydra in the mouth of Hercules at *Metamorphoses* 9.73–4:

hanc ego ramosam natis e caede colubris  
crescentemque malo domui, domitamque perussi.<sup>15</sup>

The Hydra in Statius is also 'recens obitu'; this does not refer to the fact that it had only recently been killed at the time of the *Thebaid*'s narrative, but rather to the fact that it looked convincingly freshly-slaughtered – the standard ancient praise for realism in representative artefacts.<sup>16</sup>

Lines 169–71 describe the Hydra in more detail. It is clear that some of its heads are still living, others dead, but details of text and interpretation are both in doubt. The clause 'pars... micat' seems clear enough; 'aspera' like the preceding 'squalet' appeals to the sense of touch and again has snaky connections, being used of the feel of rough scales,<sup>17</sup> while 'micat' appeals to the sense of sight and yet again is appropriately serpentine, 'micare' being used since Vergil for the flashing movement of a snake's tongue.<sup>18</sup> The difficulty comes in the clause 'pars... in auro'. In the phrase 'arte reperta', 'arte' is clearly to be referred with Housman<sup>19</sup> not to the skill of the depiction but to the cunning of Hercules in thinking up the famous tactic of cauterisation to defeat the Hydra,<sup>20</sup> a tactic to which 'nigrescit' in the next line clearly

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Vessey, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pp. 188–9. <sup>13</sup> Cf. Klinnert, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Gellius 2.6.23, Nonius, p. 725.18ff. Lindsay, Macrobius 6.7.17–18.

<sup>15</sup> The serpent which kills Opheltes/Archemorus in *Thebaid* 5 also has an Ovidian model: cf. L. Legras, *Étude sur la Thébaïde de Stace* (Paris, 1905), pp. 72–3.

<sup>16</sup> So the ancient commentary on the *Thebaid*, ascribed to Lactantius: 'ita veritatem expressit pictura, ut paene recenti obitu Hydra cum suis serpentibus interiret.'

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Nisbet and Hubbard on Horace, *Odes* 1.37.25.

<sup>18</sup> *Aen.* 2.475, *Georg.* 3.439, Silius 6.223.

<sup>19</sup> A. E. Housman, *CQ* 27 (1933), 7 (= *Classical Papers*, ii.1203–4).

<sup>20</sup> Diodorus 4.11.5, Apollodorus, *Bibl.* 2.5.2.

alludes, indicating the dark smoke from the cauterised necks.<sup>21</sup> However, the participle 'reperta' has often been doubted: the reader might expect an adjective or participle agreeing with 'pars' to which 'arte' is attached as modal or instrumental ablative, balancing the earlier 'pars anguibus aspera'. Various conjectures have been made to agree with 'pars' ('reposta' Deiter, 'retorta' or 'repressa' Müller, 'recurva' Lachmann, 'perempta' Gil, 'resecta' Baehrens),<sup>22</sup> but none seems decisive, and further emendation is possible.

Of the conjectures mentioned, 'resecta' at least does the needful in giving a participle agreeing with 'pars' which adequately describes what Hercules did to the Hydra, and is supported by Seneca's accounts of this very deed (*HF* 529 'serpentis resecet colla feracia', *Med.* 701–2 'et Hydra et omnis redeat Herculea manu / succisa serpens'). However, the most appropriate replacement for 'reperta' would surely emphasise that the cleverness of 'arte' consisted in cauterisation: it might be worth trying 'perusta', which would neatly echo 'perussi' of this same act of Hercules at Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 9.74, the passage from which Statius quarried 'ramosa' (above), and would be supported by Statius' own 'ambustaque.../...hydra' at *Thebaid* 2.376–7.

'Arte reperta' is not the only difficulty here. 'Conditur' in 171 is no easier in sense,<sup>23</sup> though it must oppose 'micat' in 170, balance 'nigrescit' in 171 and refer primarily like both those verbs to the aesthetic appearance of the artefact rather than to any action in the myth it describes. The account given by Håkanson must therefore be right:<sup>24</sup> he suggests that 'conditur' here is almost a technical term for putting something in the background in a depiction, 'hiding' it in that sense, comparing Pliny, *N.H.* 35.127 'cum omnes [pictores] quae volunt eminentia videri, candicanti faciunt colore, quae condunt, nigro'. So the living serpent-heads are picked out in silver, the necks with their heads severed and smoking are more darkly depicted against the gold and do not stand out as much as the silver. The technical language of 'conditur' thus draws attention to the fact that this is an artefact, a self-consciousness matched by the stress on the shield's differing metals.

All around the Hydra is depicted the swamp at Lerna which formed its lair. As one might expect in this symbolic context, this is no ordinary swamp. Picked out in the darker metal of iron ('caerula ferro'), it suggests not only the normal colour of an 'amnis' but also the darkness of the Underworld: so 'caerulea serta' are used in Tiresias' necromantic ritual later in this same book of the *Thebaid* (4.449).<sup>25</sup> This chthonic aspect is strongly supported by 'amnis torpens', somewhat odd for a marsh which is far from an 'amnis'; the phrase surely recalls Seneca's 'torpentes lacus', used twice in his tragedies for the rivers of the Underworld (*Phaedra* 1202, *Oedipus* 583), whose fluvial presence behind this line in turn explains the unusual 'amnis'.<sup>26</sup> These chthonic allusions are appropriate, for like other details of the shield they suggest the death to which Capaneus is doomed.

<sup>21</sup> *Ignescit*, the reading of  $\omega$ , is clearly inappropriate here; *P*'s *nigrescit* is much to be preferred – cf. Klinnert, op. cit. (n. 1), pp. 24–5.

<sup>22</sup> The references for these conjectures may conveniently be found in Th. Klinnert's revision of A. Klotz's Teubner edition of the *Thebaid* (Leipzig, 1973), pp. lxxii–v and 605.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Klinnert, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 23: 'Unklarheit herrscht beim Verständnis von *conditur*.'

<sup>24</sup> L. Håkanson, *Statius' Thebaid: Critical and Exegetical Remarks* (Lund, 1973), p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> For 'caeruleus' of the Underworld and objects associated with it cf. further *TLL* 3.106.74ff.; for 'caeruleus' of rivers cf. *Thebaid* 1.38 'caerula Dirce', *TLL* 3.104.40ff.

<sup>26</sup> This echo is perhaps rendered more likely by Statius' clear use of Seneca's *Oedipus* elsewhere – cf. Vessey, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 252.

Capaneus' corslet is as monstrous as his shield: it protects his 'laterum tractus', where 'tractus', commonly used of great spaces of land or building,<sup>27</sup> is clearly hyperbolic and gives an idea of vast tracts of body rather like Vergil's Tityos, 'per tota novem cui iugera corpus / porrigitur' (*Aeneid* 6.596–7), a fitting reminiscence of a famous impious giant. Also protected by the corslet are Capaneus' 'spati-osa...pectora', another hyperbole perhaps recalling Valerius Flaccus' 'spati-osa pectoris ossa' (*Arg.* 4.244), of yet another hybriatic and vast figure, the royal pugilist Amycus of Bebrycia. The corslet itself, clearly chain-mail, is first described as if it were a piece of weaving or embroidery ('nexilis', 'subtegmene'),<sup>28</sup> but 'chalybum' suggests that this is no ordinary piece of cloth, a point made more emphatically by 'horrendum, non matris opus'. The punctuation and interpretation of 175–7 needs to be firmly established. It seems to form a single sentence, interrupted only by commas (as printed above): 'horrendum, non matris opus' is parenthetical and in apposition with 'thorax', 'galeaeque...arce' is co-ordinated with the preceding 'thorax', one piece of armour linked with another, while 'atque' links the similar verbs 'prominet' and 'stat'. In these two lines, as was noted in antiquity,<sup>29</sup> Statius is inverting the tunic in which Lausus is slain in the *Aeneid* (10.818): 'tunicam molli mater quam neverat auro'. Capaneus' metal corslet is naturally not woven by a *matrona*, and the details can only be put in to recall the famous passage of Vergil. The link between the chain-mail protection of the formidable and gigantic Capaneus and the cloth-of-gold tunic of the young and vulnerable Lausus can only be one of ironic contrast, appealing to the learning of the reader.

The giant-emblem on Capaneus' helmet scarcely needs further remark given the mythological tradition that he is a gigantic and Gigantomachic figure; as indicated above it has clear affinities with Turnus' Chimaera-helmet in the *Aeneid*. More interesting is the spear which he carries. This is described as 'uni missilis illi / ...cupressus'. The detail that a particularly vast spear may be wielded only by a particularly massive hero goes back to Homer's Achilles,<sup>30</sup> but this is not just a vast spear – it is a whole tree, and a significant tree at that. This hyperbolic wielding of whole trees once again links Capaneus with impious gigantic figures such as Vergil's Polyphemos and Orion.<sup>31</sup> But the language with which the spear is described also recalls another much less gigantic weapon: 'cuspidē praefixa...cupressus' surely picks up 'pastoralem praefixa cuspidē myrtum', Vergil's characterisation of the spear of Camilla, whose arms are similarly described in a catalogue in the *Aeneid* (7.817). The impious Capaneus' relation to the warrior-maiden Camilla, as to the youth Lausus, both highly sympathetic characters in Vergil, is clearly one of inversion, as the choice of tree shows. Camilla's myrtle spear, as the epithet indicates, appears to symbolise 'the idyllic pastoral world' to which she at least partly belongs;<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Cf. e.g. *Silvae* 3.5.76–7 'magnae tractus imitantia Romae / ...moenia', Lucan 2.630 'immensis tractibus Alpes'.

<sup>28</sup> For 'nexilis' cf. Lucretius 5.1350 'nexilis ante fuit vestis quam textile tegmen'; 'subtegmene' is a technical term in weaving – cf. *OLD* s.v.

<sup>29</sup> 'Lactantius' *ad loc.*: 'quasi imbellibus illa convenient, quae a femina fabricantur, ut Vergilius "et tunicam molli mater quam neverat auro".' Statius imitates this Vergilian passage again at *Theb.* 9.691–2 'hoc neverat unum / matris opus'.

<sup>30</sup> *Iliad* 16.141–2 τὸ μὲν οὐ δύναται ἄλλος Ἀχαιῶν πᾶλλειν, ἀλλὰ μιν οἷος ἐτίστατο πῆλαι Ἀγυλλεύς.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Aeneid* 3.659 (Polyphemos) 'trunca manum pinus regit', 10.766 (Orion) 'referens annosam montibus ornum'. In Capaneus' case, the fact that the cypress is a sacred tree makes its wielding particularly hybriatic – cf. Klinnert, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 26.

<sup>32</sup> So R. D. Williams in his commentary *ad loc.* For this pastoral aspect of Camilla cf. further A. Brill, *Die Gestalt der Camilla bei Vergil* (Diss. Heidelberg, 1972), pp. 27–8.

Capaneus' cypress, used for the funerals and tombs of Romans, certainly symbolises death,<sup>33</sup> the death which he is to meet in the *Thebaid* at the end of Book 10, and rounds off his description with an appropriately pregnant ending, just as the description of Camilla's spear is the last line of *Aeneid* 7.

To sum up: this relatively brief passage of Statius has been shown to be highly allusive, relevantly symbolic and cleverly written, with Capaneus presented on his first major appearance in the poem as an impious and Gigantomachic character doomed to the failure and death which forms a major climax within the *Thebaid*.

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Klinnert, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 28, *Thebaid* 4.460–1 'cupressus / ... plorata', H. W. Fortgens on *Thebaid* 6.54, Nisbet and Hubbard on Horace, *Odes* 2.14.22.