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RECENT SCHOLARSHIP ON THE *THEBAID* AND *ACHILLEID*: AN OVERVIEW*

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Given the renaissance of interest in post-Virgilian epic in the latter decades of the twentieth century, this essay is perforce drastically selective. It does not include items on Statius' background and formation, since these topics are covered in the essay on the *Silvae* that is the companion to this one (Coleman 2003). Nor does it venture to assess scholarship on the vast influence of the *Thebaid* in the Middle Ages, powerfully epitomized for readers of Dante by his meeting with Statius and Virgil in Purgatory. The enormous range of modern studies on the *Thebaid* has been summarized as far as the middle of the nineteen-nineties (Dominik 1996a); the focus in what follows is on English-language scholarship, although it would be unfair to omit reference to a pioneering work of the "Statius renaissance" in German (Schetter 1960). For the *Achilleid*, however, adequate coverage demands that scholarship in other languages be given prominence. Although treated

* In preparing this survey I have sought advice from Bruce Gibson, Peter Heslin, and Charles McNelis, to all of whom I am properly grateful.

selectively here, a multilingual volume of essays celebrating Statius' nineteen-hundredth anniversary provides a representative cross-section of trends in contemporary criticism on his entire *oeuvre* (Delarue *et al.* 1996).

Thebaid

The first half of the twentieth century failed to find much to appreciate in the *Thebaid*. Because Statius explicitly envisages his epic following in the footsteps of the *Aeneid*, his self-acknowledged debt to Virgil at times earned him labels along the lines of "derivative," "slavish imitator," and "lacking in originality."¹ These views have been variously and resoundingly refuted in the late twentieth-century rehabilitation of Statius' reputation as a consummate epic artist, although the concept of "defensive imitation" still betrays the tenacity of the old view (Williams 1986). But the problem is not only aesthetic; it is also ideological. Even while earning admiration for his literary qualities, Statius has been tarred with the brush of Domitianic despotism, a repressive regime that the *Thebaid* has been assumed to vindicate (Vessey 1973). Towards the end of the century, however, a revisionist interpretation promoted the poem as a commentary upon the evils of civil war, and hence an explicit challenge to the legitimacy of the Flavian

¹ A random example expresses the insult with Gallic elegance: "Les épopées de Stace sont des oeuvres artificielles, sans originalité dans l'invention et surtout sans sincérité," J. Humbert, *Histoire illustrée de la Littérature Latine. Précis méthodique* (Paris and Toulouse, 1932), 298.

regime (Ahl 1986) and to the brutal means that Vespasian employed to restore order after the "year of the four emperors" in AD 69 (Dominik 1989). Indeed, the latter view has been developed into a somewhat inflexible thesis equating power in the *Thebaid* with relentless cruelty, and concluding that Statius' audience (like the inhabitants of the free world in the twentieth century) would necessarily recoil from the horror of this picture (Dominik 1994b).

The view that sees Statius as a heroic voice for the opposition has been adduced to explain certain characteristics of the narrative. The contemporary political and intellectual climate has been held to account for such features as the prominence of suicide in both Statius' *Thebaid* and Silius' *Punica*, suicide and assassination being held to be the only options for escaping from a tyranny (McGuire 1989). Despite the risks of anachronism, a more extensive study by the same author interprets all three instances of Flavian epic (*Punica*, *Thebaid*, and Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*) as protest literature (McGuire 1997). An influential general study of the post-Virgilian epic tradition, however, shows that epic is a genre that shares one of the primary concerns of any imperial system, namely a preoccupation with finding a balance amid "the instabilities of power" (Hardie 1993). All the successors to Virgil, Hardie argues, confront this problem in some way, as they also confront the struggle between good and evil, and the issue of succession, both political and literary. Not that Statius necessarily finds an equilibrium: on the contrary, the *Thebaid* can be said to display a marked imbalance, war and violence far outweighing forgiveness and peace. It has recently been suggested that this imbalance need not,

however, be read as a critique of the Domitianic regime, but rather as a reflection of Statius' view of mankind as a whole (Franchet d'Espèrey 1999).

In the *Thebaid* Greek myth can be seen as a vehicle for a particularly Roman preoccupation with the relationship between politics and the family (Hardie 1993). On this analysis, the relationship that is at the heart of the Roman power structure lies at the heart of the *Thebaid* also; in this respect Statius demonstrates a self-conscious debt to his predecessors, especially Lucan. Succession is thwarted as one hero after another is snatched away by death. Still, Hardie's study concedes that a model for smooth succession seems to be offered in the choice of Theodamas to take over the role of seer from Amphiarus after his tragic and premature death; the smooth transfer of office is posited as a model for cooperation and for continuity of authority. If, however, Flavian epic seems to reflect the male-dominated structure of contemporary Roman society, a recent feminist study of the role of women in the entire genre of Roman epic has highlighted a contrasting dimension (Keith 2000). Keith argues that Statius and his contemporaries employ the theme of civil war to reflect conflict between the sexes, and to explore the function of female impulses (personified, most obviously, in the Furies) in precipitating conflict.

Contemporary relevance, however, is not restricted to the sphere of politics and moral codes. The funeral games for Archemorus (previously called Opheltes) in *Thebaid* 6 have long been recognized as heir to the games for Patroclus in *Iliad* 23 and to their Roman counterpart, the games in honor of Anchises in *Aeneid* 5. But a recent study points to unique aspects of Statius' treatment of this mo-

tif (Thuillier 1996). Thuillier argues that some details in Statius' presentation reflect conventions in the contemporary Roman circus, stadium, and boxing ring, and suggests that they may derive from Statius' familiarity with the gymnastic competitions that formed part of the *certamina* in which he is known to have competed as a literary contestant. This practical approach is at one end of the critical spectrum; at the other lies the contention that all poems are ultimately about the craft of writing poetry. This latter theory has been variously applied to the *Thebaid*. In one study, the ambiguous relationship between Hypsipyle and her father Thoas has been interpreted as a reflection of ambiguity in Statius' relationship with Virgil (Nugent 1996). In another, madness—in both its creative and its destructive aspects—is seen as a metaphor for epic composition, a metaphor already employed by Virgil and subsequently developed by Statius (Hershkowitz 1998).

The bursts of irrationality that periodically threaten to engulf the characters have their structural counterpart in the abruptly episodic nature of the narrative. Scholars have begun to appreciate this structural feature as a deliberate device whereby the progress of the plot is repeatedly delayed. This strategy has a venerable epic pedigree stretching back to the *Odyssey* (though paradoxically the *Odyssey* is the only major epic whose influence is overtly absent from the *Thebaid*, which has no "Odyssean" half) (Hardie 1993 and 1997). Hence the perpetual postponement of the critical duel between the rival brothers is no longer to be seen as a structural flaw caused by Statius' desire to exploit every epic device at the expense of narrative cohesion. Rather, his self-conscious references to delays in the story are interpreted as drawing attention to the chaos

and confusion of the whole Theban tragedy (Feeney 1991). The care with which Statius positions and structures scenes within the epic has also begun to be appreciated. A case study of Polynices' first and last fight (the first with Tydeus, over the palace doorstep, and the last with Eteocles, over the kingdom) reveals a complex system of structural parallels and inversions that turns the instance of a trivial quarrel into a commentary on a drama of mortal combat; arching from Book 1 to Book 11, these conflicts frame the entire narrative (excluding the "coda" of Book 12) (Bonds 1985).

Indeed, far from comprising a meandering and formless discourse,² the episodic structure of the *Thebaid* is now recognized as a very tightly controlled design, even if consensus has not yet been reached on its precise configuration. Parallels and correspondences have been usefully set out in diagrammatic form in a study that emphasizes Statius' Ovidian legacy of a *carmen perpetuum*, "continuous song" (Vessey 1973). On one recent interpretation, the overall structure of the poem comprises three major phases, in which dialogue, narrative, and description are juxtaposed in parallel and contrasting sequences to emphasize key themes and create contrasts in atmosphere and tone (Dominik 1996b). Another view posits simultaneous progression on two separate planes: the divine, in six major sequences, and the human, in four sequences of three books each (Delarue 2000). These approaches, and

² Cf. W. C. Summers, *The Silver Age of Latin Literature from Tibertius to Hadrian* (London, 1920), 51 (on the *Thebaid*): "Nothing could be much worse than the composition: the first six books drag terribly. . ."

others like them, are helpful in drawing attention to major axes in the structure of the poem, though ultimately its dynamic movement resists mathematical symmetry.

In the analysis of the epic's structure, special attention has been paid to Statius' debt to Virgil. A study of Book 1 has demonstrated that the first three hundred lines establish the *Thebaid's* Virgilian pedigree in a series of remarkable structural similarities and transpositions; the rest of the book then fans out to embrace a wide range of episodic models, not only from the entire *Aeneid* but also from a wide generic spectrum of antecedents in Latin poetry (Hill 1989). The middle of the epic also attests Statius' debt to Virgil, and the creative use that he makes of it. A new analysis shows that Book 7 articulates a fresh martial beginning after the hesitations of the first hexad, which is not "Odyssean," as in the *Aeneid*, but rather "Callimachean" in its overriding preoccupation with stories of origins and beginnings; characteristically, Statius combines his debt to Virgil with a sophisticated new departure in epic design (McNelis, forthcoming).

Alongside focus on the structure of the poem, intertextuality as a mode of criticism has demonstrated that Statius' adaptation of motifs in his predecessors creates a commentary of great vigor and subtlety upon the themes and situations of epic. A case study of Parthenopaeus as a "simultaneous reading" of several warrior youths in the *Aeneid* shows that Statius combines a multiplicity of correspondences and contrasts to create a portrayal that is profoundly enriched by recognition of the myriad Virgilian strands in its woof and warp (Hardie 1989). Virgil, however, is not the only poet whose influence informs the narrative fabric of the *Thebaid*; the characters in this poem

have been shown to respond in detail to Ovid's Theban narrative in Books 3 and 4 of the *Metamorphoses* (Keith 2002). And Statius' reading included even his immediate contemporaries, as has been demonstrated with reference to his reception of Homeric motifs via the intermediary of his coeval Valerius Flaccus (Smolenaars 1991). Immediate contemporaries (and the critical approaches of inter-textual analysis) have unfortunately been excluded from a compendious study that traces Statius' models for specific thematic elements such as Tisiphone's hiss or the reflection of the sun on the shield of Mars (Taisne 1994).

Since all the ingredients of the epic "recipe" are present in the *Thebaid*, we are in danger of taking them for granted. Starting from Edward Gibbon's famous complaint two hundred years earlier to the effect that an epic catalogue is merely an irritating interruption, a contribution to Statius' nineteen-hundredth anniversary volume offers a stimulating deconstruction of the catalogues of the *Thebaid* (Georgacopoulou 1996). This study shows that each of the numerous catalogues in the poem is a repository of memory that is either integral to the narrative or else summarizes a theme that will not be addressed *in extenso* elsewhere. The detached authorial voice usually narrates the catalogues pertaining to the Argives; a more subjective perspective is contributed to the Theban material in those instances where the narrator is one of the characters from Thebes itself. This variety is further compounded by instances where a catalogue is delivered in not one voice but two. Georgacopoulou concludes that the catalogues do indeed suspend the action, while simultaneously functioning as a repeated motif that unifies the narrative.

The traditional role assigned to the gods in epic had been destabilized by Lucan's radical renunciation of divine agency in human affairs. But Statius found fertile new ways of reintegrating them and revitalizing their role. It has been observed that his human characters interact more effectively with the powers of the Underworld than with the celestial gods above, and only they (and not the gods) are capable of moving between all three realms (Feeney 1991). The role of Jupiter in particular has provoked conflicting interpretations. Feeney's influential reading builds upon an earlier study of Jupiter's role across Flavian epic (Schubert 1984). Feeney argues that in the *Thebaid* Jupiter is consistently reduced in status and his efficacy usurped, either by personifications representing elemental forces in human nature or by the heroes themselves, most notably Theseus; Jupiter becomes almost a caricature of his own traditional qualities. This tendency towards allegory Feeney interprets as a definitive step towards the intellectual context of the Middle Ages, although we have been reminded that the allegorizing interpretation should not be exaggerated at the expense of the individuality of the gods (Hutchinson 1993).

Statius' response to the problem of divine responsibility for human tragedy has been clarified in a recent study showing that the balance between the authority of Jupiter and the power of fate is not a neat subdivision (Davis 1994). Jupiter treats fate as an instrument to justify his own actions; yet events both at Thebes and at Argos are presented just as much in terms of generic heredity, a heredity that the characters are aware of and upon which they base their assessment of one another. Hence, Davis concludes, the *Thebaid* is inevitably topical, and cannot be abstracted

from contemporary society and politics, in that "the forces which govern the world of the *Thebaid* govern the world at large." This interpretation is different from the views glossed at the beginning of this article that posit the *Thebaid* as a text of protest or subversion; a Domitian prone to suspect dissidents of treason was also a well-educated emperor who paid close attention to the administration of the Empire. An epic poem investigating the role of power and authority in shaping the human condition is not necessarily incompatible with the outlook and preoccupations of such a person. A caution against overdetermined readings that equate a tyrannical Jupiter with the Domitian of popular perception has been expressed in the context of the hazards inherent in speaking out against tyranny (Hill 1996).

The *Thebaid* has been said to "challenge" the entire epic tradition. The martial theme, offset by the comradesly relationship between Polynices and Tydeus (subsequent to their fracas over the doorstep), infuses epic with something of the tenor of Euripidean tragedy. Indeed, in handling the gods Statius has been said to dress up tragedy in an epic costume, alternating between the two poles of *furor* and *pathos* (Criado 2000). In exploring the savage irrationality of war through the different viewpoints of the individual characters, Statius deepens his readers' understanding of the grim subtext to the *Aeneid* (Henderson 1993). A character such as the Lemnian queen Hypsipyle recalls not only Dido but also, in certain aspects, Aeneas; while her manner and appearance encourage a parallel with Dido, her reactions to events are often quite different, so that the immediate comparison sets up expecta-

tions that are then undermined by Hypsipyle's behavior (Gruzeliier 1994).

The speeches of the *Thebaid* have been classified typologically, and analyzed as a means of advancing the plot, delineating character, and developing the major themes of the epic (Dominik 1994a). A nuanced study has been devoted to the number and interaction of the speech partners, the immediate circumstances in which the speeches are delivered, the gestures that accompany them (sometimes objectively described by the narrator, sometimes remarked on by the interlocutors themselves), and the interruptions that fracture the discourse in telling ways (e.g. parentheses, or aposiopesis, i.e. an abrupt halt in mid-sentence) (Frings 1991). These features are shown to contribute great variety to the characterization and plot development of the *Thebaid*. Frings observes that neither the characters nor the stages of the plot are necessarily described by the narrator; rather, character is revealed through the speech and actions of individuals, and the plot is developed through action that is reported by one or other of the participants.

In the vanguard of the movement to rehabilitate the *Thebaid*, the poem was read as an "elaborate and sustained allegory of the emotions" (Vessey 1973). Since then, the violence—emotional as well as physical—that saturates the poem has prompted detailed studies of the ancient view of negative passions and irrational behavior. A study of the motif of hatred between brothers, *odia fraterna*, compares Statius' treatment with Seneca's in *Thyestes* (Frings 1992). Frings argues that Statius surpasses the deployment of this motif by Seneca in extending it beyond the human plane

to the divine, so that the enmity between Eteocles and Polynices reflects the hatred between Jupiter and Pluto. In Frings' view, however, the terrible inevitability that this divine paradigm imposes upon human behavior is redeemed, if slightly, by man's simultaneous capacity for positive relationships, as represented by the friendship between Polynices and Tydeus. Madness, too, has been explored as an epic motif (Hershkowitz 1998). In the *Thebaid* madness is shown by Hershkowitz to be associated with sexual deviance, and to be fundamental to Statius' characterization of all the children of the royal house of Thebes, including the virgins Antigone and Ismene. Meanwhile, man's precarious position, poised between god and beast (or: Heaven and Hell), is a theme of post-Virgilian epic that is strikingly exemplified in the lapse of the heroic Tydeus into cannibalistic impotence (Feeney 1991, Hardie 1993).

The *Thebaid* has been called a "Stoic" epic, because the doom-laden narrative unfolds in a fated series of events, *fatorum series* (Vessey 1973). But it has been demonstrated that, insofar as distinctively Stoic elements can be distinguished from the general tenor of Roman thought, Stoicism in Flavian epic is largely the literary inheritance of the *Aeneid*, though displaying also the influence of Seneca and Lucan (Billerbeck 1986). On this analysis, Statius shows fewer Stoic elements than Valerius Flaccus, and Silius Italicus far more than either of these two. More recently, the fundamental Stoicism of the *Thebaid* has been challenged in a study that examines whether the concept of hatred, central to the epic, conforms to the psychological aspects of Stoic doctrine (Fantham 1997). Fantham argues that in the *Thebaid*, where the gods display hatred

even before the humans do, hatred of human by human is presented as a fundamental evil that dominates the narrative and can only be overcome by piety and clemency. Like the other negative passions that give rise to it, hatred is shown to have no place in the proper pursuit of retribution, and it is only to persons free from the tyranny of the passions that Statius entrusts punishment and the dispensing of justice.

The close of the epic demonstrates that this is a story that cannot really end: male violence and, especially, female mourning are without limit. Just as the death of Turnus at the end of the *Aeneid* brings anything but closure to the moral issues at the heart of the poem, so the hatred between the warring brothers in the *Thebaid* bequeathes a continuing legacy after their deaths (Hardie 1993). The debate about the end of the poem essentially revolves around the status of Book 12 in its entirety: is it integral to the poem's structure, or an anticlimactic coda? What is the significance of the absence of the gods from the last thousand lines of the poem? One recent verdict supporting the cohesion of the whole suggests that it privileges individual acts of heroism, such as Theseus' in Book 12, over the entire machinery of divine revenge for the crimes committed against *pietas* by the royal house of Thebes (Kytzler 1996).

The narrative proper, however, ends at the point where Theseus strips Creon of his armor and denounces his wickedness (*Theb.* 12.781). A close examination of the remaining thirty-eight lines of the poem shows that they comprise three "supplements," which are interpreted as offering alternative forms of closure in response to the unfinished state of the *Aeneid* (Braund 1996). But the very end of

the poem is unprecedented in the formal epic tradition, though memorably anticipated in Ovid's "anti-epic," the *Metamorphoses*: in the last ten lines of the *Thebaid*, in emphatically modest phrasing, the poet expresses a hope for literary immortality. Why does Statius choose this ending? A cogent answer suggests that it sets upon the epic a neat and orderly seal in contrast to the limitless chaos of the narrative, and that, paying tribute to Virgil, it affords the irony of an entirely non-Virgilian (and indeed non-Homeric) authorial epilogue (Hardie 1997). Yet the end of the *Thebaid* continues to stimulate a variety of observations: the heroic deeds of battle giving way to female lament, Statius' personified epic behaves in a distinctly feminine way (Dietrich 1999); the authorial "afterword" matches the scenes of aftermath that are well established in Roman battle narratives and exemplified four times in the *Thebaid*, most notably in Book 12 itself (Pagán 2000); the question that Statius poses about the immortality of the *Thebaid* is so phrased as to gloss the entire spectrum of his predecessors in the epic genre, from Ennius to Lucan (Dominik 2003). In terms of supplying a provocative ending, the *Thebaid* has indeed proved to be a worthy successor to the *Aeneid*.

One more issue demands attention: no matter how sophisticated a poet's thought or how artful his handling of the tradition that he has inherited, the impact and individuality of a poem ultimately depend upon the micro-details of the poet's use of language. This aspect of a poem is hard to demonstrate economically; and fluctuations in taste can obscure it altogether. The luxurious style of the *Thebaid* clashed with the stark preferences of the late twentieth century; blame was laid at the door of "mannerism," a

mode of expression that transgresses classical norms of restraint and exploits volleys of rhetorical effects (Vessey 1973 and 1992). A recent appreciation of Latin literature between the reigns of Nero and Hadrian, however, has illuminated the brilliance and audacity of Statius' style (Hutchinson 1993). Comprising a series of chronological case studies under different stylistic headings, Hutchinson's analysis repeatedly illustrates Statius' mastery of an immense range of tone, from dramatic grandeur to profound simplicity. It shows how, far from fragmenting the cohesion of the narrative, the contemporary taste for epigrammatic conceit and dazzling paradox is deployed with consummate discrimination and subtlety to sustain Statius' vast sweep of narrative. Discursiveness balances cohesion in a tightly controlled design that orchestrates a finely calibrated network of Virgilian allusions and resonances.

Already in late antiquity Statius' epics, like the epics of Homer and Virgil, attracted commentators. A commentary ascribed to a certain Lactantius Placidus is to be dated no later than the sixth or the late fifth century, and perhaps earlier. Its comments ("scholia") testify to the issues of diction, structure, narrative, and characterization that late antiquity considered interesting, and its citations have enabled scholars to correct some of the erroneous readings in the text of the *Thebaid* transmitted in the medieval manuscript tradition (Sweeney 1969 and 1997). The nineteenth-century saw the publication of the most reliable text of the *Thebaid* in the modern era, with generous space devoted to variants (Hill 1983). Modern commentaries on a lesser or greater scale, all but two (alas) predating Hill's text, are available for seven complete books: 1 (Caviglia 1973),

2 (Mulder 1954), 3 (Snijder 1968), 7 (Smolenaars 1994), 9 (Dewar 1991), 10 (Williams 1972), and 11 (Venini 1970). A single commentary has also been devoted to the climactic episode in Book 12 in which, in defiance of Creon's ban, Argia and Antigone find Polynices' corpse and cremate it on what turns out to be Eteocles' pyre (Hoffmann 1999). Given that sound commentaries are of enduring value, it is also worth mentioning two editions from the nineteen-thirties, accompanied by a translation into Dutch and a commentary in Latin; these deal respectively with Book 1 (Heuvel 1932) and the episode of Opheltes' funeral at the beginning of Book 6 (Fortgens 1934). The extant fragment of the *Achilleid*, on the other hand, has had no commentary devoted to it since the nineteen-fifties (Jannaccone 1950, Dilke 1954), other than the useful annotations to the text and facing French translation in the Budé series (Méheust 1971).

Achilleid

Any epic poem invites comparison with its predecessors in the "epic tradition," most especially a fragment such as the *Achilleid* which, being incomplete, offers only limited scope for self-contained analysis of structure, characterization, diction, and all the other features exhibited by a literary work in its entirety. What remains of the *Achilleid* offers a vivid contrast with the *Thebaid*, yet little critical attention has been devoted to a sustained comparison between the two. The *Achilleid*, manifestly playful and irreverent in its surviving portion, has been called "Ovidian" in contrast to the "Virgilian" *Thebaid* (Fantham 1979, Hinds 1997), and its focus on a single protagonist (albeit in com-

petition with some powerful supporting roles) has earned it the label "Odyssean," in comparison to an "Iliadic" *Thebaid* (Delarue 2000). Whereas Statius' style in the *Thebaid* has seemed dense and ornate to the point of satiety, the *Achilleid* has been credited with a *faux-naïf* appearance of simplicity that belies the subtlety of Statius' juxtapositions and the innovative nature of his diction (Vessey 1986).

Yet the relative lack of interest in setting the *Achilleid* beside the *Thebaid* is understandable, since the subject of Achilles demands comparison, first and foremost, with Homer. Here an immediate hierarchy suggests itself to account for the characteristics of Statius' treatment: the evolution from "oral" to "literary" epic (or "primary" to "secondary"). Such a rigid distinction, however, may impose a straitjacket on the text; reading as performance is an aspect of Roman culture that is often overlooked. Just as the plot and structure of the *Iliad* create an eminently readable poem ("readable," that is, in the accepted modern sense), so the virtuoso rhetorical features and sophisticated structural symmetry of the *Achilleid* (two bulky Scyros episodes bracketing a slender interlude at Aulis) are arguably best appreciated when the work is heard being read aloud (Johnson 1994).

The question has been raised: would the finished poem have qualified as an epic at all? Both implicitly and explicitly, the *Achilleid* declares its literary allegiance to the refined canons of the Hellenistic poets and to the sophisticated wit of Ovid. Literary influence is not inhibited by generic boundaries. The prominence of the theme of love combines the influence of Ovid's "anti-epic," the *Metamorphoses*, with elegiac elements from his irreverent love

poetry. Drama, too, has left its imprint: Seneca's treatment of Andromache's attempt to hide her son Astyanax from harm in the *Troades* finds echoes in Statius' handling of the parallel situation in the *Achilleid* (Fantham 1979). On one reading, the private and domestic values of the poem make "epic" an ambiguous designation for a work so firmly affiliated to the epic tradition in its choice of eponymous hero, and yet so distant from it in its elegiac treatment of the characters and the plot (Rosati 1994). Still, Statius' programmatic statements at the beginning belie the tenor of the surviving portion, encouraging the belief that the completed work would have commandeered an arsenal of varied generic elements in a serious bid for inclusion in the epic canon (Aricò 1986 and 1996).

But the very novelty of Statius' approach poses a challenge to the "epic tradition" as an intellectual construct. Hence the multiplicity of generic influences at work here has been interpreted as evidence of Statius' attempt to revitalize and enlarge the epic tradition. The complexity of his responses to earlier poets outside the epic canon is part of a process of dynamic engagement that alters the balance within that very canon. His intertextual allusions are therefore seen to confer epic status on Catullus 64, the "epyllion" on the marriage of Peleus and Thetis (clearly of signal importance for an epic about their son), and to affirm the epic affiliations of the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid (Hinds 1997). Simply put, the *Achilleid* seems to be taking Latin epic in a new direction (Hinds 1998). It is self-evident that only the most sophisticated alternative model has any hope of challenging the supremacy of the Homeric-Virgilian epic "code." Thus the prologue to the *Achilleid* has been read as a programmatic statement of Statius' in-

tention to write an epic that is an allegory of the difficulty of completing the task that he has set himself (Barchiesi 1996).

Did Statius in fact start as he meant to go on? Or would the exuberant beginning of the *Achilleid* have simmered down into a narrative more like the *Thebaid*? A teaser of one and a quarter books provokes speculation about the rest, although we are not even sure how many more Statius was planning. To fill the remaining books with the standard epic fare of heroic exploits and bloody battles would have involved a dramatic shift of tone and focus. Perhaps Statius intended, rather, to build the rest of his epic around the subsequent erotic adventures of his hero, whose string of conquests encompassed heroines as diverse as Agamemnon's doomed daughter at Aulis and the Amazon queen, Penthesilea; the *Heroides*, Ovid's collection of fictitious letters from heroines to their fickle lovers, could have provided suitable impetus (Koster 1979).

The striking delineation of feminine emotions in the surviving fragment has already been foreshadowed in the female characters of the *Thebaid*, most memorably Hypsipyle. The prominence of Thetis in the surviving portion of the poem displays Statius' sophisticated manipulation of maternal psychology to drive the plot (Mendelsohn 1990). By the end of Book 1 her worst fears have been realized, and her son's bid for independence has precipitated him towards the doom that she knows is waiting for him at Troy. But by entrusting her child to the avuncular centaur Chiron Thetis effectively upstages herself, since Chiron is to supplant her in her son's affections. Once again, Statius demonstrates acute psychological insight: the relationship between foster-father and son, of which Chiron and Achil-

les are the archetype, is one that is replicated in several examples in the *Silvae*, including the relationship between Statius and his own foster-child in *Silvae* 5.5 (Fantham 1999).

The "subversive" reading that was in vogue in criticism of the *Silvae* in the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties, and that we have seen applied to the *Thebaid*, has been tried on the *Achilleid* as well. It has been argued that in the portrayal of Achilles Statius chose to emphasize aspects that would evoke flaws in the character, appearance, and achievements of the emperor; it has even been suggested that such effrontery may have cost Statius his life, which would account for the fragmentary nature of the poem (Benker 1987). At the other extreme, a "propagandist" reading interprets Achilles' capitulation to the lure of battle as an endorsement of Domitian's military campaigns on the Danube (Aricò 1986). On a third and more reasonable interpretation, however, contemporary relevance in the *Achilleid* may rather be found in the portrayal of domestic scenes and civilized values, reflecting the world of the *Silvae*, in which Statius endorses his patrons' leisured and graceful lifestyle (Konstan 1997).

Despite its fragmentary nature, the *Achilleid* held great appeal for subsequent generations. Similarities have been noted between the education of Achilles as portrayed in the *Achilleid* and in the poetry and rhetoric of late antiquity. While the Greek rhetoricians of the Roman Empire from the late first century onwards may have shared with the *Achilleid* a common source, the Latin poets from Ausonius to Corippus seem to have been influenced directly by Statius (Pavlovskis 1965). If the *Iliad* generated a paradigm of Achilles as a great warrior dominated by tow-

ering anger, the *Achilleid* and its roughly contemporary poem, the *Ilias Latina*, are responsible for the more sentimental picture of Achilles as a warrior whose immense physical prowess is matched by a comparable capacity to conquer women's hearts. It is this romanticized portrait that captured the imagination of the Middle Ages (King 1987). The poem's medieval popularity is attested by a vast plethora of manuscripts, manifold witness to the regularizing impulse that divided the extant 1,128 lines into self-contained episodes of 200–300 lines each, in an attempt to approximate the scope of a proper epic by transforming the fragment into five numbered books (Clogan 1968). Indeed, our modern attempt to confront and embrace the fragmentary nature of the *Achilleid* may be the one facet of our reaction that differentiates us from our medieval ancestors; for the first time since the Middle Ages, this beguiling virtuoso piece is at last captivating a new audience.

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