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outweigh the earthly suffering is designed to have a solace which cannot be achieved by Vergil's more diffuse images of the Elysian fields (themselves, to some extent, counterbalanced by the numerous scenes of futility which introduce them). It is a tepid and un-moving moment, perhaps, but one which coheres with the poet's general attempts to recover some solace from the dismaying bleakness which the main elements of his tradition had to offer him in its picture of the human place in the scheme of things.

This is a poet whose self-awareness impresses one at every turn. He controls a massively overpowering tradition with insight and poise, and wittily demonstrates his understanding of the false polarities which that tradition threatens to press upon his own responses. If, in the end, this is not enough to make his work one that imperiously claims our attention, we may temper any disappointment by recalling the words of Helen Vendler:⁸¹

But when one remembers how many separate talents go to make a formidable poet—talents musical, imaginative, psychological, visual, intellectual, metaphysical, temperamental—one wonders that the thing is done at all. Poets who lack one or more of these talents remind us why we so much admire the few who possessed them all.

II

Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man . . .

Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 3, Scene 4

Statius today is perhaps not 'buried in the graveyard of literary history', as was said of him in 1932, nor is he 'in almost total eclipse', as was claimed in 1972, but devotees of his *Thebaid* are still entitled to be baffled at the condescension which smothers appreciation of this gorgeous poem.⁸² To some degree, no doubt, this demeaning judgement is the result of the general prejudice against what we are pleased to call 'Silver Latin Literature': the poem is seldom read at all, let alone with the intent care and interest

⁸¹ Vendler (1989), 30.

⁸² Friedländer (1932), 215; Dudley (1972), xii. Burck (1979), 300–51, and Gossage (1972) may be recommended as sympathetic introductions. For an account of the poem's neglect, and a protest against it, see Ahl (1986), 2804–8.

it deserves. The critical attitudes which scholars have honed for the study of the great classical monuments prove to be worse than useless in reading Silver epic, and it is no surprise that many readers come away disappointed. Even Statius' advocates sometimes help put the halter around their client's neck. If open-minded novices go to Vessey, for example, in order to discover why the *Thebaid* is worth reading, they are likely to receive the impression of an earnest, dogmatic, and sclerotic work—an impression that stifles the sensational flamboyance of a poem which seduced not only its first audience, but audiences up to the Renaissance.⁸³ Readers who come to the *Thebaid* from Ariosto or Tasso seem to be in a better position to appreciate its power and beauty than readers who come to it from Vergil, so that one finds more sympathetic insight in Lewis's nine pages on the poem, written over fifty years ago, than in anything produced since.⁸⁴ Lewis's pages remain even now the most stimulating discussion of the aspect of the poem which engages us here, its treatment of the divine.⁸⁵

Statius' use of the gods in the *Thebaid* is an astonishing exercise of resilient originality in the face of a tradition which must have threatened any sense of adequacy he possessed. Some will find this claim preposterous, and I shall do what I can to convince them of its worth. Conventional criticisms of Statius' divine machinery are extremely fragile, for they labour under the misapprehension that the poet is some sort of victim of his inherited matter. It has been my invariable experience in reading the *Thebaid* that, if you take

⁸³ 'Seduce' is my ameliorative gloss on Juvenal's picture of the *Thebaid* as a delectable prostitute, captivating the city, with Statius as her pimp (7. 82–6); for the impact of Statius on the Middle Ages and Renaissance, see Venini (1970), vii (though even this sympathetic critic must speak of the poem's 'larga, per non dire eccessiva, fortuna durante il Medioevo e il Rinascimento'). Vessey (1973) and (1982) are very important studies, to which all students of Statius are indebted, but I share the misgivings of Burck (1979), 306 n. 19, 338 n. 86, and Ahl (1986), 2810–11, concerning Vessey's overly rigid Stoic interpretations. There must be something wrong with a reading technique which can obliterate even something as clear as the difference between Polynices and Eteocles: Vessey (1973), 65–7, 78–81.

⁸⁴ Lewis (1936), 48–56; note especially 56 on the poem's 'charm', its 'graceful and romantic variation', its inspiration of 'so many willful beauties' in later literature.

⁸⁵ Other treatments of the gods: Legras (1905), 157–205; Schetter (1960), 5–29; Schönberger (1965), 132–7; Vessey (1973), 82–91, 230–69; Burck (1979), 334–43; Schubert (1984); Neri (1986), 2006–26. There are bibliographies in Venini (1970), xxxi–xl; Frassinetti (1973); Vessey (1973), 329–41; CHCL 2. 876–7; Ahl (1986), 2905–12.

the criticisms normally made against it and put them to the poem for answer, the poet is already there ahead of you. By way of example, before coming to grips with the gods, let us pause here for a moment, and deal with the charge that the poem is episodic.⁸⁶

As soon as discord has been sown between the brothers, and we have been told of the plan of alternate kingship, Statius introduces his principal motif of divagation: *haec mora pugnae / sola* ('this was the only thing that delayed their fight', 1. 142–3). This delay, compounded with any number of others, puts off the necessary climax for another ten and a half books; it represents a bloated and highly self-conscious adaptation of Vergil's delaying tactics in the last three books of the *Aeneid*, and of Lucan's in the first seven books of the *Bellum Civile*.⁸⁷ Tydeus' embassy to Thebes in Book 2 is another retardation of the inevitable, as Tydeus declares with his last words to Eteocles: *sed moror* ('but I am causing a delay', 2. 467). At the end of the first three books, when the expedition has yet to start, and after Jupiter has ordered Mars to stop the dallying (3. 233), Adrastus gives us to understand that everything so far has been delay (3. 718–19). When they at last set off, the heroes are unable to progress even so far as a book before they are enmeshed in the narrative of Hypsipyle and the funeral games of Archemorus. The deceased infant's significant name spells out 'Beginner of Doom' (*Mópos*, *moros*),⁸⁸ but it clearly also denotes 'Originator of Delay' (*mora*), as Statius shows with his references to *morae* at the beginning of the episode (4. 650, 677), and at the end, when the prophet Amphiaraus prays for yet more delays, so that they may never arrive at Thebes (5. 743–5).⁸⁹ One half of the poem has gone by, and Jupiter is still angry at the delay to the start of the war (*Atque ea cunctantes Tyrii primordia belli . . .*, 7. 1). In Book 11, the final duel itself is approached through one obstacle after another, as if the poet can hardly bring himself to narrate it.⁹⁰

If a poet expends this much effort on calling attention to the

⁸⁶ Legras (1905), 152, 277; Williams (1978), 250–2.

⁸⁷ Very good discussion in Vessey (1973), 165–7. On Vergil's delays, see Sempke (1959–60) (the subject would repay fuller treatment); on Lucan's, above, p. 277.

⁸⁸ Mozley (1928), on 4. 718; 5. 647, 738.

⁸⁹ Note the frame around the episode formed by *nectam . . . moras* (4. 677), and *innectere . . . moras* (5. 743–4).

⁹⁰ 11. 80, 169, 201, 268, 347, 447–8.

eddies and drifts of his narrative, it seems churlish to reproach him for not proceeding briskly to the point. There seems no good reason why we should not allow ourselves to enjoy the sheer poise of this procedure, while appreciating its enactment of the expedition's continually threatened collapse into dissolution. Fragmentation of authority is, as we shall see, one of the poem's main preoccupations. The organizational powers of the princes are barely sufficient to keep the expedition, and its poem, on the road; and the war itself is without order or customary norms: *nullo uenit ordine bellum, / confusique duces uulgo, et neglecta regentum / imperia* ('the war comes in no order; the leaders are mixed up with the people, and the commands of the generals are paid no heed', 7. 616–18).⁹¹ Such is the preparation for the tremendous climax of the brothers' duel, as they meet like two colliding ships at night, rushing together haphazardly, without skill (*sine more, sine arte*, 11. 524). Criticism of the poem's episodic progress evaporates before the evidence that the poet calls our attention again and again to his dilatory manner of narrating—a manner which is not only diverting but purposeful, as it helps create an environment for the poem's capturing of confusion.

As one of antiquity's most self-consciously professional poets, heir to an oppressively rich inheritance, Statius confronts his belatedness head-on.⁹² His explicit addresses to the *Aeneid* and its characters are only the most overt demonstrations of his awareness that his tradition may suffocate him if he allows it to.⁹³ It is as if he disarms his readers' expectation of jadedness by showing that he has anticipated their worst fears. The tradition crowds around the poet and his characters at every point, and Statius adopts the risky strategy of declaring his debts in order for his departures to stand forth—one thinks of the example of Ovid, who is at his most original when most sedulously acknowledging allegiance.⁹⁴

⁹¹ The passage carries on with more disorder (618–21); related passages include 5. 7–9; 8. 323; 10. 12, 274; 11. 758–9. Dante's sense of justice sets the dead Statius in a place where nothing happens that is 'sanza ordine' or 'fuor d'usanza' (*Purg.* 21. 40–2).

⁹² Hardie (1983) is a splendid introduction to the world of learning and performance which Statius inhabited from childhood.

⁹³ 10. 445–8; 12. 816–17. Dante is even more overt in displaying his dependence on the resources of his poetic inheritance, for he makes Vergil and Statius his actual guides on the journey.

⁹⁴ Hinds (1988), 13–19. Vergil, too, is at his most original when he comes

We may see this atmosphere in many incidental moments. Burial, for example, will be a key concern at the poem's close, as was laid down by earlier treatments of the Theban story.⁹⁵ To Tydeus, fighting in Book 8, the question of Theban attitude to burial is already an issue (472–3); the character is proleptically aware of the problems which the tradition will force to emerge more than two books after he himself passes out of the poem. Similarly, the horses of Amphiaraus are already afraid of the ground beneath their feet a hundred lines before it will open up to swallow them and their master into Hell (7. 690–1). One book earlier, during the horse-race at the funeral games, as Amphiaraus' horses head for the finish, 'the earth gives a groan, and even then savagely threatens' (*dat gemitum tellus et iam tunc saeua minatur*, 6. 527). Again, Statius follows the basic tradition in having Oedipus' curse on his sons begin the poem's action (1. 56–87).⁹⁶ Now, this curse was delivered in a secret recess (1. 49–50), yet Iocasta and Polynices know all about it in Book 11 (344–5, 504–5).⁹⁷ In all these cases, the self-sufficiency of the tradition is such that characters and poet appear to have equal access to it. A very remarkable example of the acknowledged weight of the poem's inheritance is seen when Oedipus is made to speak of himself as a canonical character, performing canonical actions:

o si fodienda redirent
lumina et in uultus saeuire ex more potestas.

Oh if only my eyes could come back so that I could dig them out again, and I had the power to savage my face according to my normal custom. (11. 614–15)

The most overt recognition of these dilemmas comes as a stroke of genuine self-referential humour, in the episode where Tiresias and Manto organize a necromancy at Thebes (4. 406–645). No subject was more vulnerable to the charge of being hackneyed; not

closest to his models, as has been most conclusively shown by Thomas (1986); the impression of self-sufficiency which he none the less generates is, in contrast with Ovid and Statius, even more astonishing.

⁹⁵ Aeschylus' *Septem*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Euripides' *Phoenissae*. Propertius (1. 7) implies that his friend's poem on the story will have burial as a theme, as appears from the antithesis between lines 18 and 23.

⁹⁶ *Thebais* F 2–3 EGF.

⁹⁷ Cf. Venini (1970), on 11. 504, pointing out how Statius departs from the Greek tragedians in having the curse of Oedipus unknown to the other characters—except here.

only did such scenes go back to the origins of the epic tradition, in the *Odyssey*, but they enjoyed a particular vogue in Statius' immediate predecessors and contemporaries.⁹⁸ Tiresias' daughter and helper, Manto, is describing the vision of the Underworld to the blind seer: she gives us thirteen lines of scenery before she breaks off:

quid tibi monstra Erebi, Scyllas et inane furentis
Centaurus solidoque intorta adamante Gigantum
uincula et angustam centeni Aegaeonis umbram?

Why should I to you of Erebus' monsters, the Scyllas, and the futile ravings of the Centaurs, of the chains of the Giants, twisted from solid adamant, and of the thin shade of the Hundred-hander Aegaeon? (4. 533–5)

This *praeteritio*-topos is well-known.⁹⁹ Here, in a move arresting even for Statius, whose liberties with language are notorious, Manto leaves out her verb, and there is none to be understood from the context (the effect in Latin is scarcely less odd than in the English of my translation).¹⁰⁰ Mozley is quite right to translate 'Why should I tell thee . . .?'; but Statius' ellipse jolts us into thinking that these things are so much spoken of that a verb of speech is redundant. Tiresias' reply consists of a well-timed double-take—and he, too, leaves out his verb of speech, in a usage which is even more bizarre than Manto's.¹⁰¹

'Immo' ait, 'o nostrae regimen uiresque senectae,
ne uulgata mihi. quis enim remeabile saxum
fallentesque lacus Tityonque alimenta uolucrum
et caligantem longis Ixiona gyris
nesciat? . . .'

'Indeed,' he said, 'O guide and strength of my old age, do not [tell] me things that even all the common people know about. For who does not

⁹⁸ Vessey (1973), 237–53; cf. his fine comments on Statius' 'search for variation and brilliance within a valued and coercive tradition' (258).

⁹⁹ Martin (1974), 289–90. Here the particular models appear to be Verg. *G.* 2. 118–21 (*quid tibi . . . referam?*); 3. 339–40 (*quid tibi . . . prosequar?*).

¹⁰⁰ On Statius' liberties with Latin, see Legras (1905), 312, 320–3; Williams (1978), 225–31. Ellipses of verbs of speech are fairly common in Latin (*H.*–*Sz.* 2. 424), but I find nothing that quite parallels this.

¹⁰¹ The great difficulty of the expression is shown by the fact that the manuscripts show three different attempts (one of them unmetrical) to come up with an imperative. The omission of an imperative after *ne* is most odd in Latin, but Greek commonly omits the imperative after μή, especially with verbs of speech: *Ar. Vesp.* 1179, 1400; *Nub.* 84; *Ach.* 345; *Soph.* OC 1441 (with Jebb's examples ad loc.).

know the returning rock, the deceitful lakes, Tityos, the food of birds, and Ixion, dizzy from his long spinning circuits? . . .' (4. 536–40).¹⁰²

If all these characters intermittently share their creator's heightened awareness of the history which they inhabit, the gods too show themselves to be conscious of the traditional parameters for their behaviour. Jupiter is tired of behaving like Jupiter, so he announces to the assembled gods, speaking of his thunderbolt with ornamental epithet, with the result that we seem to hear him referring to himself as a character: *taedet saeuire corusco / fulmine* ('I am tired of raging with flashing thunderbolt', 1. 216–17).¹⁰³ We will observe the gods in this poem departing from many of their canonical ways of behaving; hence, as a necessary preliminary, the common insistence on the gods as canonical objects, frozen in their familiar poses: Venus is seen in the embrace of Mars (9. 822), Bacchus is droopy in his vine-covered chariot (4. 652–7); Mars is blood-drenched in his chariot, with Bellona as his chariot-eer (7. 69–74).

Juno, for example, will prove in this poem to be very different from her normal self. At the end of the poem, therefore, Statius has her dwell for a moment on the traditional malevolence which she has not embodied here, as she refuses to follow up her resentment against the moon-goddess for her actions on the night of Hercules' conception: *ueteres sed mitto querellas* ('but I leave out my old grudges', 12. 301).¹⁰⁴ Again, the action of the Furies will be an arena for some of Statius' most stunning inventiveness:¹⁰⁵ hence the initial description of Tisiphone travelling 'the familiar

¹⁰² Tiresias refers in the first instance to Ovid's picture of the Underworld (*Met.* 4. 457–63). The prophet denounces the use of well-known themes by copying Vergil's well-known denunciation of the use of well-known themes (*G.* 3. 4–5: *omnia iam uulgata: quis . . . nescit?*); this joke is almost as good as Sterne's plagiarism of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* in his denunciation of plagiarism at the beginning of Volume Five of *Tristram Shandy*.

¹⁰³ Schubert (1984), 80, comments on the oddness of this epithet in Jupiter's mouth.

¹⁰⁴ Compare the misleading Vergilian allusion in the proem (1. 12) to *saenae Iunonis opus* (*Aen.* 1. 4, *saenae . . . Iunonis*), and the way in which Mars, rather than Juno, imitates Homer's Hera in a vindictive scene modelled on the *Iliad* (*Theb.* 9. 834–40, *Il.* 21. 479–96). Valerius similarly signals his departures at 1. 112, *solitosque nouat Saturnia questus* ('Juno gives a new version of her customary complaints').

¹⁰⁵ On the importance of the Furies in all treatments of the Theban story, see Venini (1970) on 11. 58.

road to Thebes' (*notum iter ad Thebas*, 1. 101);¹⁰⁶ or her infection of the royal house 'with her usual cloud' (*adsueta . . . nube*, 1. 124); or Jupiter's question to the assembled gods, *quis funera Cadmi / nesciat et totiens excitam a sedibus imis / Eumenidum bellasse aciem?* ('who wouldn't know about the death dealt by Cadmus, and the wars fought by ranks of Furies, summoned up so often from the depths?', 1. 227–9). As a final anticipatory example, we may point to the intervention of Virtus in Book 10. As we shall see, Statius is at his most original here, yet he introduces the episode with words which imply that we will be given the normal and expected epic treatment of the divine machinery, as he calls on the Muse to tell him who inspired Menoeceus: *neque enim haec absentibus umquam / mens homini transmissa deis* ('for this state of mind is never communicated to man without the presence of the gods', 10. 629–30).

This confiding in his audience, as he charts the straitened arena in which he must perform, is a most remarkable gesture of tact on Statius' part. We abuse his politeness if we come to the abrupt conclusion that these preparatory statements are a sign of resignation, rather than being an invitation to join him in testing the confines of his 'coercive tradition'.¹⁰⁷ Those who expect Statius to be nothing but derivative, paralysed by his mighty predecessors, should pause before his wry affirmations that no one is more aware of the risks than he is himself.

The way in which the *Thebaid* organizes its cosmos is the best guide for our enquiry into the divine action in the poem. The various spheres of action and motivation are clearly demarcated in the early stages, and the rest of the poem may, for our purposes,

¹⁰⁶ 'Familiar' to readers in the first instance from Ovid (*Met.* 4. 481–8). Statius' entire subject may be seen as supplementing Ovid's treatment of the house of Cadmus in *Met.* 2–4; in his proem (1. 4–14) he rejects those areas dealt with by Ovid, and devotes twelve books to the mighty topic skipped over by Ovid in five lines of prophecy (*Met.* 9. 403–7). The poem is an epic exaggeration of Ovid's technique of expanding on a model's brevity and abbreviating a model's expansion.

¹⁰⁷ Again, the phrase of Vessey (1973), 258. At this point a reference to Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' seems inevitable: Bloom (1973). Statius has two mighty progenitors, Vergil and Ovid, together with two godfathers, Seneca and Lucan, and a grandfather, Homer. Amongst classicists (and I am no exception), Bloom has suffered the fate of the archetypal 'strong' critic, and has become softened into what he would describe as 'weak' readings.

profitably be viewed as an exploration of what follows from this demarcation.

The obvious basis of the structure of the *Thebaid*'s universe is its arrangement in a vertical scheme, on three levels, with the world of the Olympians at the top, the Underworld at the bottom, and the human world in between. The scheme, clearly, is sanctioned by long custom, although different emphases were possible in epic (in the *Odyssey* Hades is 'down', but, more importantly, off to the far West, on the bounds of Ocean).¹⁰⁸ This is not simply a description of the geography of the epic. The action of the poem is split up amongst these levels in a very systematic manner.¹⁰⁹ The motivation of the action flows from these three spheres, and, as the narrative unfolds, there is continual movement from each sphere to the others, so that there comes to be an anxious tension as to where the centre of gravity of the poem resides.¹¹⁰

The first 300 lines deploy each of the three realms in turn. Oedipus is the first character we meet, a human being, whose relation to the realms above and below him is caught with expert economy. Self-blinded, hiding from the light in the inmost recesses of the house, closeted with the ancestral household gods whom he has only just discovered to be his own, he is living a species of death (46–52).¹¹¹ He is intimately linked with the Underworld, as is first marked by the fact that his self-blinding has cut him off from the light of the sky (50): Jupiter soon after says of him that he 'no longer enjoys my heaven' (*nec iam amplius aethere nostro / uescitur*, 1. 237–8).¹¹² Oedipus begins the action of the poem by turning his empty sockets to heaven and beating upon the ground, the partition between his level and the infernal level (53–5); his abjuration of both of the non-infernal realms will be made explicit in Book 11, where he declares that he abandoned sky and earth when he dug out his eyes (*caelum terramque reliqui*, 11. 692). His prayer, though it starts with a ringing 'Gods', is addressed not to

¹⁰⁸ *Od.* 11. 12–13; Vermeule (1979), 34–5.

¹⁰⁹ See, especially, Burck (1979), 338.

¹¹⁰ Though scholars normally talk of the poem's 'double', rather than 'triple', motivation: discussion in Gossage (1972), 192–6.

¹¹¹ Vessey (1973), 72–4; cf. 11. 581–2, *proferit / mortem imperfectam*.

¹¹² Blindness need not lead to divorce from the gods: light moved from Tiresias' eyes to his chest (4. 542); Oedipus' chest has Dirae (1. 52), and what he sees is Styx (57–8).

the celestial gods, but to those below—in particular, to the Furies. His appeal is a perversion of normal prayer, as he himself asserts, referring to his words as *peruersa uota* (59). His wish for his sons' destruction is addressed to the Fury Tisiphone because Jupiter is doing nothing:

et uidet ista deorum
ignauus genitor? tu saltem debita uindex
huc ades et totos in poenam ordire nepotes.

And does the father of the gods see this and not stir himself? Do you at least be present here, the due avenger, and line all the descendants up for punishment. (1. 79–81)

The problem of Jupiter's involvement or inaction will prove to be one of the poem's greatest areas of anxiety. Apollonius and Lucan are the two predecessors who make most of this uncertainty over how, or whether, the supreme god will act, and Statius sounds a typically Lucanesque note in order to introduce the theme.¹¹³ Tisiphone has 'avenger' emblazoned in her name,¹¹⁴ and is therefore the ideal instrument for Oedipus' purposes; yet Oedipus' scepticism about Jupiter's involvement will soon be revealed as misplaced, when we hear Jupiter declaring that he wishes to be involved in this task of vengeance as well (*ultorem . . . louem*, 1. 241). If Oedipus regards Jupiter as unresponsive, he need have no concern about Tisiphone. Throughout the poem, the channels of communication between humans and the Underworld are a good deal more effective than those between humans and the upper world: Tisiphone responds instantly:

talia dicenti crudelis diua seueros
aduertit uultus. inamoenum forte sedebat
Cocyton iuxta, resolutaque uertice crines
lambere sulpureas permiserat anguibus undas.
ilicet igne Iouis lapsisque citatior astris
tristibus exiluit ripis.

The cruel divinity turned her grim face to his address. She happened to be sitting next to unlovely Cocytus; with her hair let down, she had given her

¹¹³ Cf. BC 7. 447–8 (above, pp. 281–2; cf. pp. 65–9, on Apollonius); for a collection of expressions like that used by Oedipus here, see Pease (1935), on *Aen.* 4. 208. On Statius and Lucan, see Venini (1970), xv–xvii, with works cited there; Ahl (1982).

¹¹⁴ In Greek, her name is 'avenger of murder': cf. Verg. *Aen.* 6. 570–1, *ultrix Tisiphone*, a phrase repeated by Statius (8. 757–8).

snakes the opportunity to sip the sulphurous water. Straight away, quicker than the fire of Jupiter and falling stars, she leapt up from the gloomy banks. (1. 88–93)

At face value, the last sentence is doing no more than telling us what we know already: she is indeed quicker to act than Jupiter, who has yet to appear.¹¹⁵ Worse, however, than the fact itself is the disquieting arrogation of celestial language which conveys Tisiphone's destabilizing rush to action—a destabilization promoted by the perverted way in which her ascent is described in terms of a celestial descent. The end of this chain of action is eleven and a half books away, when she will swoop on Pietas at the climax of the brothers' duel, *caelesti . . . ocior igni* ('faster than heaven's fire', 11. 483)—and when Polynices, at last coming to grips with Eteocles, will call on the same infernal gods as had his father at the outset (11. 504–8). The comprehensiveness of Tisiphone's appropriation of this Jovian language is revealed in Book 3, when Statius says of Mars' speed that 'the anger of high Jupiter does not fall more quickly on the earth' (*non ocius alti / in terras cadit ira Iouis*, 3. 317–18). Since the Fury first claimed this pattern, Mars' impact is now, oddly, 'like' Tisiphone's, as well as Jupiter's.

When Tisiphone crosses the boundary from her sphere to the upper sphere, the organization of the cosmos is breached, and the world reacts with disarray:

Taenariae limen petit irremeabile portae.
sensit adesse Dies, piceo Nox obuia nimbo
lucentes turbauit equos; procul arduus Atlas
horruit et dubia caelum ceruice remisit.

She makes for the threshold of the Taenarian gate, which may only be crossed once. Day felt her presence, as Night blocked his path with pitchy cloud and threw his shining horses into confusion; far off, steep Atlas shuddered and let go of the sky on his teetering neck. (1. 96–9; cf. 118–22)

As the Fury appears and the cohesion of the universe buckles, we are in the world so unforgettably created by Senecan tragedy, a world where evil comprehensively deranges natural order.¹¹⁶ The

¹¹⁵ The germ of Statius' idea may be Lucan's description of Caesar's *celeritas*, *ocior et caeli flammis* ('faster than the flames of heaven', 5. 405).

¹¹⁶ On this feature of Senecan tragedy, see Herington (1966), 433–5;

universal scope of her threat is highlighted by Statius' choice of an Ovidian scene as model. In *Metamorphoses* 4, Tisiphone likewise goes up to earth to punish members of the house of Cadmus:

limine constiterat: postes tremuisse feruntur
Aeolii pallorque fores infecit acernas
solque locum fugit.

There she was on the threshold. The door-posts of Aeolus are said to have trembled; the maple doors lost their colour, and the sun fled from his proper position. (4. 486–8)

Ovid has a perfunctory disturbance of the sun, but by contrast with Statius his derangements of order are localized: the threshold is only that of the house, not the boundary between one world and another, as is the threshold crossed by Statius' creature.

In four words within a subordinate clause Tisiphone infects the house, to begin the falling-out of Polynices and Eteocles (1. 124). At this point Statius veers into a naturalistic account of the brothers' discord, with much sententious matter from Lucan's first book.¹¹⁷ The brothers' differences are here explained in terms of the accepted clichés of political behaviour, with a soliloquy from an unnamed ordinary citizen to help marshal the observations (1. 173–96). Within this speech, we hear another baffled question to Jupiter: *tibi, summe deorum/terrarumque sator, sociis hanc addere mentem / sedit?* ('highest progenitor of gods and earth, was it you who resolved to make these men, who should be natural allies, decide on this course of action?', 1. 178–80).¹¹⁸ This time there is an answer, for as soon as the citizen has finished speaking, the scene is transported to the last remaining sphere, the Olympian, as Jupiter calls a council of the gods (197–9), and we are allowed to see the celestial motivation for the action. The characterful action of this council will demand our attention further on; for now, we need only note that Jupiter announces his

Rosenmeyer (1989). Seneca's *Thyestes* is the clearest prototype for Statius here, having as it does in its first scene a magnificent Fury, who gloats over the world's disruption as she shepherds the shade of Thyestes around the stage (48–51, 106–21); the *Thyestes* is activated again at the beginning of Statius' second book, when Mercury leads the shade of Laius up from Hell. For Seneca's influence on Statius, see Venini (1970), xix–xxi, and literature there cited; Vessey (1973), 59, 72–3, 76–8, 251–3.

¹¹⁷ Note esp. 1. 144–64 and Luc. 1. 87–97; Venini (1961), 68–83.

¹¹⁸ Following (though not with much confidence) the interpretation of *sociis* given by Heuvel (1932), ad loc.

intention of punishing the royal houses of both Thebes and Argos, and overrides Juno when she attempts to turn aside the anger which he feels against Argos (214–302).¹¹⁹

The triple motivation provides the environment for a tussle over authority which carries through to the end of the poem, so that the arena for the warring brothers' struggle over dominion becomes itself a power-struggle.¹²⁰ The characters, and their creator, are caught up in an uncertainty over which of the poem's three spheres will predominate. Statius' most explicit deployment of this uncertainty comes, naturally enough, immediately after the introductory exposition of the triple motivation, when Polynices goes into exile, and decides to make for Argos.¹²¹

tunc sedet, Inachias urbes Danaeiaque arua
et caligantes abrupto sole Mycenae
ferre iter impavidum, seu praeuia ducit Erinys,
seu fors illa uiae, siue hac immota uocabat
Atropos.

Then he decides to beat his undaunted path to the cities of Inachus, the lands of Danae, and to Mycenae, murky with the interruption of the sun—whether the escorting Fury led him there, or the chance of the road, or whether immovable Atropos called him by this route. (1. 324–7)

Here one of the Parcae stands for the will of Jupiter, and 'chance' for the human realm. In yet another interesting ellipse, Statius conveys the indirection felt in the human action by leaving out a verb for this one of the three alternatives; 'leading' or 'calling' is readily supplied from the context, but it remains significant that the human alternative, sandwiched in the middle, should lack the verb which the other two command. Again, at the beginning of the second book, as Mercury leads the shade of Laius up out of the Underworld to infect Eteocles, one of the watching shades addresses Laius, and speculates whether it is Jupiter, a Fury, or human witchcraft which is the explanation for his departure (2. 19–22). A similar concatenation of alternatives is given as Capaneus rises to attack heaven: he was impelled by the Furies, or by his own warrior's lust for glory and fame, or by the gods above

¹¹⁹ Fine discussion of the first council in Schubert (1984), 71–105.

¹²⁰ Schubert (1984), 128: 'In diesem Epos wird das Problem der Abgrenzung einzelner Machtbereiche oft zum Thema.'

¹²¹ Cf. Ahl (1986), 2851–2.

(10. 831–6).¹²² Finally, when Polynices' wife and sister need a funeral pyre for his corpse, the glowing pyre of Eteocles is nearby—whether by chance or the will of the gods, as a result of the action of Fortune, or of the Eumenides (12. 420–3).

These realms interact in complex ways. The most starkly delineated tussle in the poem is the antithesis between heaven and hell, an adversity so marked that J. Kroll, in his *Gott und Hölle*, was able to speak of the 'dualism' of the *Thebaid*.¹²³ Polynices and Eteocles are not the poem's only pair of contending brothers, for their conflict is framed by the adversity between Jupiter and his brother Dis, king of the Underworld. Although Manichaeist dualism as such is not to be sought in the *Thebaid*, there is no doubt that, of all our poets, Statius comes closest to depicting a world where Good and Evil divine principles struggle for mastery (the markedly allegorical character of the poem contributes to this tendency¹²⁴). Even the *Aeneid*, for all its obsession with evil, is not as dualistic in atmosphere as the *Thebaid*. Vergil's Juno exploits the powers of hell, but she is not one herself. She is part of a rhythm which involves Jupiter as well, and she is susceptible to change: Statius' Dis and Tisiphone will never change. In Statius, the polarization between Jupiter and Dis is thrown into relief by the absence of the third brother, Neptune, and also by the fact that Olympus is not common to all three brothers, as it is in the *Iliad* (15. 187–93): Dis' descent to Hades is a comprehensive defeat in the *Thebaid*, an irrevocable deprivation of the sky (8. 38–40, 11. 446).¹²⁵

The rivalry between the two brothers is played down by some commentators, who describe Dis as furthering the design of Jupiter.

¹²² For this purpose it does not matter whether we read *fata* or *fama* in 10. 835. If *magna data fata neci* (or *necis*) could be made to yield sense, we would have two different expressions in each of the three alternatives; but I am not sure that *fama* can be resisted: cf. Williams (1972), ad loc.

¹²³ Kroll (1932), 450, 453. On this antithesis, see Schetter (1960), 29; Schubert (1984), 128–30. Reservations from Burck (1979), 338; Ahl (1986), 2861.

¹²⁴ On the naturally dualistic cast of allegory, see Fletcher (1964), 222–4; Clifford (1974), 34. As Ahl (1986), 2861, points out, the biggest objection to seeing the poem as dualistic in a strict sense is the fact that only blind faith will see Jupiter as embodying absolute Good. There are, however, other celestials who come closer to doing so.

¹²⁵ Neptune acts only once in the poem, without any characterization whatever, in a few vague words which describe his refusal to see his horse-offspring, Arion, defeated in the chariot-race (6. 529, *sed uetat aequoreus uinci pater*).

ter. This is not how the outraged King of the Underworld sees the matter at the beginning of Book 8, and even Vessey characterizes the results of Dis' intervention as being 'truly the work of hell and of the powers of hell'; and going 'beyond what Jupiter had planned and even Oedipus willed'.¹²⁶ One may as readily speak of Heaven doing Hell's work in the poem as of Hell doing Heaven's. As in the case of Tisiphone's arrogation of celestial language, we are dealing with a zealous rivalry in inflicting punishment which can have the effect, and appearance, of a co-operation.¹²⁷ Dis in fact emerges as a kind of anti-Jupiter, with his kingdom as an anti-Heaven. When Mercury wings his way through the Underworld, the atmosphere is a sickly inverse of the atmosphere of the upper world:

undique pigrae
ire uetant nubes et turbidus implicat aer,
nec zephyri rapuere gradum, sed foeda silentis
aura poli . . .
hac et tunc fusca uolucer deus obsitus umbra
exilit ad superos, infernaque nubila uultu
discutit et uiuis afflatibus ora serenat.

On all sides the inert clouds blocked him, the roiling air clogged his progress; nor was it zephyrs which snatched him along, but the foul breeze of the silent realm.... By this route then the winged god, smothered by sombre shadow, leapt out to the world of the upper gods; he scattered the infernal clouds from his face and cleared his countenance with currents of air that were alive. (2. 2–5, 55–7)¹²⁸

The climax of this conceit will come at the moment when Megaera arrives on earth to help Tisiphone arrange the brothers' final combat; her advent is accompanied by a ghastly blending of the upper and lower atmospheres: *exultant manes, quantumque profundae/rarescunt tenebrae, tantum de luce recessit* ('the shades of the dead rejoice; the darkness of the deep is diluted by as much as is lost from the light of day', 11. 73–4).

Dis himself, from Book 8 on, comes into his own as an anti-Jupiter,

¹²⁶ Vessey (1973), 264: on the same page, Vessey would have it that Dis' 'will, in essence, is identical with that of his Olympian counterpart, for both are executors of Fate'.

¹²⁷ Burck (1979), 338; Schubert (1984), 73: 'Jupiter und Tisiphone—eine interessante Kombination!'

¹²⁸ These last lines are imitated by Dante (*Inf.* 9. 82): Mozley (1928), vol. 2. 250.

instigating the horrors of the latter part of the war in revenge for having to tolerate the irruption of the still-living Amphiarus into the Underworld at the end of Book 7. This breaching of boundaries is a moment of potential chaos, as Statius notes with an echo of Lucan's first programmatic simile of cosmic dissolution.¹²⁹ 'I will fight,' says Dis, 'let the boundaries of the universe pass away!' (*concredior, pereant aedum discrimina rerum*, 8. 37). He organises a reciprocal breach, by causing Capaneus to invade heaven, as Amphiarus has invaded hell (8. 75-7). He orders Tisiphone to her ultimate horrors, and the Jovian nod at the end of his speech is marked by language that makes his power equal to Jupiter's: *non fortius aethera uultu / torquet et astriferos inclinat Iuppiter axes* ('Jupiter is not more powerful when he turns the aether with his nod, and tilts the star-bearing axes of heaven', 8. 82-3). If Dis nods like Jupiter, he even usurps his brother's most characteristic prerogative, and thunders from beneath the earth (11. 410-11); he is Jupiter of the lower realm, black Jupiter, the infernal Thunderer.¹³⁰

The power of the Underworld increases as the duel between Eteocles and Polynices comes closer, and this increase is accompanied by a corresponding recession in the influence of the celestial sphere. Dis' supreme moment of rivalry with his brother comes as Creon prays to Jupiter. Tisiphone twists his words, so that the highest god becomes the lowest, and the lowest the highest:

nec pater aetherius diumque has ullus ad aras,
sed mala Tisiphone trepidis inserta ministris
adstat et inferno praeuertit uota Tonanti.
'summe deum, ...'

The ethereal father was not present at these altars, nor any of the gods; evil Tisiphone stood there, mingling with the quaking attendants, and twisted the prayers to the Thunderer down below: 'Highest of the Gods, ...' (11. 207-10)

The climax of the Underworld's success, and the nadir of celestial power, is the duel between the sons of Oedipus, a combat engineered by twin Furies, against the futile opposition of the goddess Pietas. And at this climactic moment, in a typically self-

¹²⁹ *supera conpage soluta*, 8. 31 (and 144, *ruptaque soli conpage*); cf. BC 1. 72 ff., sic, *cum conpage soluta*...

¹³⁰ 1. 615-16; 2. 49; 11. 209.

referential gesture, Statius announces the end of the Underworld action, as the humans take over:

nec iam opus est Furiis; tantum mirantur et adstant
laudantes, hominumque dolent plus posse furores.

Now there is no need for the Furies; all they do is look on in astonishment, and stand by with words of praise; they grieve that men's fury can outdo them. (11. 537-8)

This is, in simple fact, just as Statius announces, the last appearance of the Furies, or any other infernal creature, in the poem's action.¹³¹ The humans are left to themselves—as they are, likewise, by the celestial gods, to whom we now turn, before examining the human isolation at the poem's end.

The first celestial action in the poem, the council of the gods, is a magnificently Ovidian moment, especially in its capturing of a political atmosphere, for Statius' council develops the Ovidian picture of the contemporary world's political realities.¹³² Just as Ovid had discarded Vergil's picture of a Jupiter who acts like an Octavian amongst the other gods, a tactful operator who veils his violence unless absolutely forced to act, so Statius follows the development of power into his own generation, and gives us a Jupiter whose autocracy is even more naked than Ovid's. His Jupiter enters with a placid expression, but he makes everything quake none the less (*placido quatiens tamen omnia uultu*, 1. 202), and it is quite clear that the gods are terrified of him;¹³³ at his last appearance, and introducing his last utterance, when we have got to know him better, he will have a savage face (*toruo . . . ore*, 11. 121). The gods do not dare to sit until he gives his gracious permission; as Williams points out, this touch recalls Statius' own reference to etiquette in the emperor's presence.¹³⁴ While Ovid spells out his analogies between human and divine power-politics with his very first comparisons (*Met.* 1. 175-6, 200-5), Statius keeps us waiting until the end of Jupiter's fulminations in the second divine

¹³¹ At 12. 696 the Eumenides are part of a vision seen by Creon.

¹³² Excellent discussion in Schubert (1984), 76-7, 99, 102-3, 296-7; cf. Williams (1978), 251.

¹³³ See Schubert (1984), 77-8, on the oxymoronic power of the quoted expression, and its implications.

¹³⁴ Williams (1978), 251, citing *Silv.* 4. 2. 17. Williams also refers to the similarities between the epic's description of Jupiter and the description of Domitian in *Silv.* 1. 1 (one might add 4. 2).

council, in which the god asserts his mastery, and mocks Juno's helplessness:

dixit, et attoniti iussis. mortalia credas
pectora, sic cuncti uocemque animosque tenebant.

He spoke, and they were stunned by his commands. You would think they had the minds of mortals, such was the restraint which they exercised over what they felt and what they wanted to say. (3. 253-4)¹³⁵

In the Homeric model, the gods are at first silent after Zeus' self-assertion, until Athene eventually speaks up (*Il.* 8. 28-30); here there is total and lasting silence. So also in the first council, where, apart from Juno, no god reacts: 'Die versammelten Götter schweigen von Anfang an'.¹³⁶

In the first council, Jupiter's apparent geniality soon evaporates, as he reveals his wrathful, Ovidian, urge to punish the sins of human beings (1. 214-47). The bluster and rage of his speech is eminently Ovidian, and radically un-Vergilian. The more than Ovidian harshness of Jupiter is highlighted by the fact that Statius characterizes him with traits taken from Vergil's savage Juno, while simultaneously ameliorating his own Juno in order to accentuate the departure. Like Vergil's Juno, Statius' Jupiter dwells on his abiding memory of the human offences which caused his rage;¹³⁷ like Vergil's Juno, he turns to the Underworld to achieve his ends, sending Mercury to fetch the shade of Laius up from Hell.¹³⁸ Statius' Juno, on the other hand, is astonishingly mild in speech and action, considering her epic heritage. She pleads on behalf of Argos, although Jupiter takes no notice whatever of her intervention (1. 250-82), and she participates, as we shall see, in the human reconciliation at the end of the poem.

The passionately human characterization of Jupiter has been

¹³⁵ In Eteocles' *concilium*, only 250 lines earlier, there is at least some muttering (3. 92-3).

¹³⁶ Schubert (1984), 99; his whole treatment of the *Thebaid's* divine power-structure is most valuable (cf. 102-5, 133-4). Williams's comments on this scene are, unfortunately, characteristic of the prejudices which dog criticism of this poetry: 'When Ovid painted the same scene (*Met.* 1. 163-252), he used the gods to punctuate Juppiter's speech with roars of applause and questions. But Statius completely forgets the other gods...' (1978), 251. See, rather, Schubert (1984), 99: 'Das Schweigen ist die Haupteigenschaft der Götter und nicht nur ein vorübergehendes Phänomen bei der Ankunft Jupiters.'

¹³⁷ 1. 246-7; cf. *Aen.* 1. 25-7.

¹³⁸ 1. 292-311; cf. *Aen.* 7. 324-5.

often documented.¹³⁹ Although he professes to be outraged at the crimes committed against the gods by Thebans, his very language reveals that the traffic in crime is a two-way affair. His term is *reticenda deorum crimina*, 'crimes committed against the gods, which must not be spoken of' (1. 230-1); yet the genitive is two-sided, and Juno is quite entitled to interpret the words as 'crimes committed by the gods'—and she *will* speak of them, as she resists Jupiter's attempt at hypocritical decorum by cataloguing his rapes of Semele and Danae (253-69).¹⁴⁰ The distinction between divine and human sin is collapsed by Jupiter's unwittingly self-incriminating phrase.

The cumulative effect of this human characterization of Jupiter is so relentless that it becomes exceedingly difficult to have any confidence either in Jupiter's worth as a moral adjudicator for the poem, or in interpretations which cast him in this role.¹⁴¹ Even more pernicious to such a reading is Jupiter's dismaying abdication at the climactic moment of the brothers' duel—an act which caps the anxieties sounded at the very beginning of the poem, when Oedipus and the anonymous citizen each questioned whether Jupiter was directing, or even observing, the action. This washing of hands is itself part of a broader movement (corresponding to the disappearance of the infernal powers), by which the celestial realm evanesces from the close of the poem, leaving the humans isolated.¹⁴² The preparation of the Furies for the brothers' duel sets the wider scene for the disappearance of Jupiter and the eclipse of the Olympians. When Tisiphone speaks to her sister Megaera, she anticipates no interference from the conventional gods: the only obstacles she fears are Fides and Pietas, and the human mother, sister, and father (11. 98-108). She aims to

¹³⁹ Gossage (1969), 81; Burck (1979), 334-5; Schubert (1984), 133.

¹⁴⁰ So, rightly, Schubert (1984), 84. We are sent back to the area of difficulty charted by Euripides' exchange between Dionysus and Cadmus at the end of the *Bacchae* (1346-9). This is not the only time that Jupiter's sexual derelictions will be commemorated in the poem; Eteocles and the river-god Ismenos give lists of his rapes (11. 212-16, 9. 421-6).

¹⁴¹ Vessey (1973) is the most systematic exponent of the view that Jupiter, as the Stoic Providence, guarantees the moral meaning of the poem. See, rather, Burck (1979), 335-6, and Schubert (1984), 102-3, on how Jupiter's characterization is a stumbling-block to this interpretation.

¹⁴² Schetter (1960), 26-9, has some excellent points on this feature of the poem; cf. Newman (1986), 239-40, on Jupiter's withdrawal, and Schönberger (1965), 136-7. Section III of this chapter will examine the gods' eclipse in more detail.

supplant the gods above: according to her, the ordinary horrors so far are the province of ordinary celestials, Mars and Enyo (11. 84, 97). Sure enough, when the brothers approach each other, the celestial gods of war are put to rout, and the Furies take their place (11. 409–15).¹⁴³ Shortly afterwards, there is Adrastus, pleading with the brothers, asking the pertinent question, *ubi iura deique?* ('where are ordinary codes of conduct, where are the gods?'), 11. 430).

Between the address of Tisiphone to Megaera and the question of Adrastus, Jupiter has retired from the action. At the moment when the Furies Tisiphone and Megaera end their conversation, and move to commit the brothers to combat, Statius gives us an image of chaotic storm (11. 114–18). Jupiter is immediately introduced, but he refrains from quelling the chaos, and instead makes his last speech in the poem before absenting himself from the action for good. He forbids his fellow-celestials to play their traditional part of divine audience (*auferte oculos!*), and then declares that he will in fact act out the obliviousness which human characters have from the start feared, or suspected, of him: *absentibus ausint / ista deis lateantque Iovem* ('let the absent gods not be present at these events, may they escape the notice of Jupiter', 11. 126–7; from 9. 520–1, it appears that it is the norm for this Jupiter not to be watching the action). A few lines later (133–4), in a definitive gesture of dissociation, he turns his own eyes away from the human action—and unlike his Homeric model, Zeus, who averts his eyes from the plain of Troy at the beginning of *Iliad* 13, he will never look back to help guide the poem to its conclusion. Jupiter's abdication from his epic task of responsibility is castigated by Pietas, who laments the indifference or hostility of the gods, and of 'savage Jupiter' in particular, as she sits apart from their company, watching the brothers advance to combat (11. 457–64). The words of Pietas mark the evanescence of the celestials' influence, just as the catastrophe of the duel, when it finally comes, marks the disappearance of the infernal agents.

Not only the climactic horror, but the reconciliation which can recuperate it, are the work of humans operating with their own resources, in the absence of the gods. The climax to all the anxious

¹⁴³ Bentley's *subiere* at 415 is clearly right. See Schetter (1960), 26, on the Furies' taking over at this point.

questions about Jupiter's involvement comes in the final book, with the question asked by Capaneus' widow, Evadne, as she tells Theseus of the unburied Argive corpses polluting the Theban plain: *ubi numina, ubi illest / fulminis iniusti iaculator?* ('where are the gods, where is that hurler of the unjust thunderbolt?', 12. 561–2). Jupiter is associated only with punishment, not with return to order. The final book, with its concern over reconciliation and proper treatment of the dead, is very much an *Iliad* 24;¹⁴⁴ with its quickened tempo, and carefully systematic resolution, it is also an *Odyssey* 24.¹⁴⁵ Statius' radical departure from both Homeric poems (and from the *Aeneid*) lies in his removal of the gods, and especially of the supreme god, from the resolution of the poem's action—Jupiter's place is taken by the human Theseus, who is compared to Jupiter in a simile, as he marches against Thebes (12. 650–5).¹⁴⁶ The one exception to this comprehensive absence is the help given by Juno to the Argive women's supplication at Athens (12. 464–70). The goddess who was so vindictive in the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*, so resistant to any reconciliation, here takes on a kindly role, and does so secretly, to deceive Jupiter.¹⁴⁷ Her participation, so much at odds with her traditional persona, is made part of the resolution in order to highlight the fact that Jupiter and the other gods persist in their absence.¹⁴⁸

With as much force as his tradition allows him to command, Statius makes it impossible for us to refer to the gods for help when we try to find a vantage-point, at the poem's end, from which to make some sense of the resolution. After the three realms' long tussle, it emerges at the end that the Olympians must surrender their claims to moral authority. Already at the end of the first book, with the story of Apollo and Coroebus (1. 557–668), Statius had prepared this theme. The god's traditional self-indulgence and savagery are put to shame by the noble self-sacrifice of the human. In a quite extraordinary moment, after

¹⁴⁴ Turolla (1956), 136; Schetter (1960), 77–8; Juhnke (1972), 158–9.

¹⁴⁵ Juhnke (1972), 162.

¹⁴⁶ The absence of Jupiter is well stressed by Burck (1979), 335–6; Schubert (1984), 299.

¹⁴⁷ At 12. 292 she slips away from Jupiter's bed; the *discordia thalami* of 1. 260 remains unhealed.

¹⁴⁸ The only other reference to the action of a god after Jupiter's withdrawal follows Theseus' declaration of war, when Pallas strikes her shield and shakes the aegis (12. 606–9).

the human offers to die for his community, the god feels awe, yields, and is astonished (1. 662–5). The same god, when he disappears from the action in Book 9, confesses to his sister that his failure to save Amphiaraus makes him unfit to be honoured: *saeuus ego immeritusque coli* ('I am savage and unworthy to be worshipped', 9. 657). In epic, the necessary humanity of divine characterization is always the fault-line on which the gods' claims to moral value are perched, ready for collapse. Statius follows Ovid in bringing so much pressure to bear at this point that the gods' claims do indeed become wreckage, but he goes beyond Ovid, and ends up in Lucan's camp, by eventually removing the gods from the scene altogether.

The human sphere, where the action will come to rest, is defined from the beginning by boundaries above and below, as we saw earlier with the first human character, Oedipus. The prophet Thiodamas tells us in his great prayer to Earth that the human domain is the centre of affairs, the cockpit, open to the influence of all realms: *o rerum media indiuisaque magnis / fratribus!* ('O centre of everything, not divided up amongst the great brothers', 8. 312–13).¹⁴⁹ The *Thebaid*'s elaborate cosmology, the setting of the poem and the world, is there for the human dimension. So we are obliquely informed by the former human, Hercules, who has become a god, when he reminds Pallas that she could not accompany him to the Underworld (8. 512–13). Only human characters may move in all of the poem's three realms.

When the living Amphiaraus pierces the lower boundary, and the living Capaneus attempts to pierce the upper, these are gross violations of the human norm, and each act provokes catastrophic retaliation from the lower and upper Jupiters. In sharp distinction to Valerius, Statius maintains a consistently pessimistic attitude to the ambivalent paradigm of humans bursting into heaven. The topic of the apotheosis of Domitian in the poem is cast in markedly guarded terms, for it is seen as a competition with Jupiter for divine prerogatives: the emperor should remain content with his regulation of the human realm, since elevation to heaven would require yielding on the part of Jupiter (1. 29–31).¹⁵⁰ In a sense,

¹⁴⁹ Note here how Statius does not say 'three brothers', in accordance with his shifting of the Homeric division towards a bi-partite split between Jupiter and Dis.

¹⁵⁰ Schubert (1984), 129–31; Ahl (1986), 2820.

such language expresses the wish that the emperor's mortal life should continue for a long time, but the anxiety about attempts to leave the human realm is entirely in harmony with the poem's consistent position. In an epic context, as a disciple of Ovid and Lucan, Statius finds it quite impossible to restrain his anxiety when he faces his master's systematic cultivation of analogies with Jupiter.¹⁵¹

The spectacular fates of Amphiaraus and Capaneus are aberrations which help to demarcate the human norm. The problem of this human norm, poised between the upper and lower limits, becomes increasingly important as the poem proceeds, as the upper and lower spheres, which form its bounds, retreat and disappear. The last one and a half books come to be focused exclusively on the problem of human nature, viewed in the context of burial, an issue which comes to the fore when Creon will not allow the Argive corpses to receive their proper honours. Burial is a human duty, owed by humans to humans, but a duty which also involves responsibility to the powers above and the powers below, so that a resolution of this crisis is capable of being treated as a resolution of the discord among the poem's three realms of action.

The poem's movement towards some kind of reintegration begins as soon as the two brothers have killed each other. The human realm is now isolated, as Jupiter and the Furies end their participation. Just as Oedipus began the main action, so now he begins the dénouement by coming into daylight and the presence of his dead sons (11. 580–604). On his knees beside their corpses, he prays:

'tarda meam, Pietas, longo post tempore mentem
percutis? estne sub hoc hominis clementia corde?
uincis io miserum, uincis, Natura, parentem! . . .'

'Now, when you are too late, Pietas, after long space of time do you smite my heart? Is there clemency in this human breast? You conquer, ah you conquer, Nature, this unhappy parent. . . .' (11. 605–7)

¹⁵¹ In the *Silvae*, he tries as hard as possible to annul the anxiety. In describing Domitian's new palace, for example, Statius reveals that it is in competition with the gods' residences, but asserts that the gods are pleased at Domitian's equation of his status with theirs (4. 2. 18–22). On Domitian and Jupiter, see Sauter (1934), 54–78; Fears (1981b), 77–80; Coleman (1988), on *Silv.* 4. 1. 17; 2. 11, 14, 52; 7. 49–50 (note Coleman's marvellously revealing, solitary, index entry under *Jupiter*: 'see Domitian').

These are lines to which we must return in the next Section, when discussing the poem's allegories. For now, we may note that *Pietas* appears to be still effective, despite her rout by *Tisiphone* shortly before (11. 482–95), and that *Clementia* and *Natura* will be key concepts in the human healing of the final book. *Oedipus* is made a human being again by the power of *Pietas*, *Clementia*, and *Natura*, rescued from his half-life, half-death on the brink of the Underworld.

Book 12 displays the development of these concerns, as the widows of the Argive host go to Athens and supplicate at the altar of *Clementia*, in order to prevail upon *Theseus* to march on Thebes and force *Creon* to allow the burial of their menfolk. Trapped by *Creon*'s inhumane edict, the dead men are hovering in a no-man's land, and *Creon* has removed himself from human status by his cruelty, as an Argive remarks early in Book 12: *bello cogendus et armis / in mores hominemque Creon* ('*Creon* must be forced by war and battle into behaving as he should, into being a human', 165–6).¹⁵² Here we may note that, in a manner familiar from *Ovid*, *Statius* also uses the animal realm to serve as a lower demarcation for defining the human. The *Creon* who is described here as having lost his human status was revealed only seventy lines earlier as one who wished to follow the wild beasts, and the hooked beaks of vultures, and show them the limbs of the dead kings: the word for 'show' is held back until the sentence is almost over, so that one is expecting *lacerare*, 'rend' (*utinam . . . fas ipsum . . . feras, ipsum unca uolucrum / ora sequi atque artus regum monstrare nefandos!*, 12. 95–8). The bestial act of *Tydeus*, who forfeits immortality by gnawing at the head of the man who has mortally wounded him, is the poem's clearest example of the *Ovidian* bounds of definition. *Tydeus* goes full circle from almost-god to almost-beast, demonstrating the linked outer limits of human excess.¹⁵³ In the context of mighty human achievement, as we have seen repeatedly, bestiality is next to godliness.¹⁵⁴ Bestial *Tydeus*, *Creon*, and bestial *Jupiter* are linked by *Dis* when

¹⁵² *Rieks* (1967), 221–2; *Rieks*'s whole discussion of *Statius*' *humanitas* is very valuable.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 214–15.

¹⁵⁴ The twin poles are automatic reference points for the elder *Pliny*, for example: *nec ideo proximum illi [deo] genitum hominem ut uilitate iuxta beluas esset* ('man was not born one step down from god in order to rank next to the beasts in vileness', *HN* 2. 5. 26).

he prophesies the escalation of horror at the beginning of Book 8:

sit, qui rabidarum more ferarum
mandat atrox hostile caput, quique igne supremo
arceat exanimis et manibus aethera nudis
commaculet: iuuat ista ferum spectare Tonantem.

Let there be one who savagely chews the head of his enemy, acting like the rabid beasts; let there be one who keeps the dead from their funeral pyre, polluting the aether with naked spirits: may it give pleasure to bestial *Jupiter* to look at that! (8. 71–4)

The scene for the Argive widows' supplication is the altar of *Clementia*, the human emotion to which *Oedipus* appealed when his humanity returned to him beside his sons' corpses.¹⁵⁵ Again, this is a passage to which we will return when discussing the poem's allegories in the next Section. Here we may observe only that *Clementia* is distinguished as being different in every way from the main gods who dominated the first ten and a half books, as *Statius* takes even further the *Ovidian* insight that the power of conventional divinity is incompatible with genuine kindness:

urbe fuit media nulli concessa potentum
ara deum; mitis posuit *Clementia* sedem,
et miseri fecere sacram.

In the middle of the city was an altar, assigned to none of the gods with power. Gentle *Clementia* made her seat here, and the unhappy made her sacred. (12. 481–3)

At this juncture *Statius* presents us with a major speech on human duties, and he puts it, with characteristic point, in the mouth of the widow of *Capaneus*, the most inhuman of the heroes (12. 546–86).¹⁵⁶ *Evadne* asserts that *Theseus* will satisfy the demands of all three spheres by ensuring burial of the Argives (*da terris unum caeloque Ereboque laborem*, 12. 580); and she bases her plea on the humanity which *Theseus* has in common with the dead men:

hominum, inclyte *Theseu*,
sanguis erant, homines, eademque in sidera, eosdem

¹⁵⁵ On the altar of *Clementia*, see *Burgess* (1972); *Vessey* (1973), 308–12; *Ahl* (1986), 2890–2.

¹⁵⁶ *Vessey* (1973), 312. Note especially the lines which introduce the extract quoted in the text, where *Evadne* is on thin ice in her claim that the Argives were not gigantesque monsters (12. 553–4); her husband was doing his best to break into this category (10. 849–52).

sortitus animarum alimentaue uestra creati,
 quos uetat igne Creon . . .
 . . . heu princeps Natura! ubi numina, ubi illest
 fulminis iniusti iaculator? ubi estis, Athenae?

They were the offspring of humans, famous Theseus, and themselves humans, born to the same stars, the same mortal fate, the same sustenance as you, and now Creon bars them from fire . . . Alas, Nature, mother of all! Where are the gods, where is that hurler of the unjust thunderbolt? Where are you, Athens? (12. 555–62)

The gods, and Jupiter in particular, are not responsive. But Evadne and her companions do succeed in this appeal to Nature and to Athens, the home of Clementia—and we remember that Oedipus acknowledged Nature and Clementia, together with Pietas, when he accepted human status again (11. 605–7), while Pietas herself is the offspring of the same *princeps Natura* addressed by Evadne here (11. 465–6). When Theseus sets off for battle, the self-sufficiency of the human action is dramatically highlighted by the simile which compares him to Jupiter (12. 650–5). A man must, and can, take the place of the deity in asserting the rights and duties of man to man.

The movement of the last part of the poem appears to define itself readily. After the miasma of the first ten and a half books there is a purification, a victory for the weak forces of humanity, which had appeared to be no more than the cat's-paw of the mightier powers above and below.¹⁵⁷ Yet the reaction of many readers seems to show that the felt force of the poem is not necessarily congruent with this statement of its direction.¹⁵⁸ Theseus' intervention has a rushed, even perfunctory air.¹⁵⁹ In an epic which has been densely populated by participants from so many realms of poetry and experience, the absence of any divine dimension from the resolution generates a barren sense of anticlimax: the human agents appear to be operating in a vacuum rather than standing proudly alone.¹⁶⁰ Statius will not follow the natural impetus of the

¹⁵⁷ Kytzler (1955), 176–7; Rioks (1967), 221–5; most strongly, Vessey (1982), 575, and (1973), 307–16: 'The *Thebaid* is an epic not of sin but of redemption, a chronicle not of evil but of triumphant good' (316).

¹⁵⁸ Burck (1979), 339–43, esp. 343; Schubert (1984), 278; Ahl (1986), 2894–8.

¹⁵⁹ Those who wish to avoid such a reading will find the rapidity of the closing narrative best defended in Lewis (1936), 55.

¹⁶⁰ Schubert (1984), 278. Right to within 110 lines of the end of the *Iliad*, a sense of divine guidance persists.

poem, or the prompting of his own creation, Evadne, and present the act of burial as a resolution of the discord between the three spheres of the poem's action. It is not a comprehensive triumph. The brothers' hate persists unassuaged even in death, as we learn in the marvellous moment when the flame on their joint pyre divides in two (12. 429–41).¹⁶¹ Evadne persuades Theseus to bring about the dénouement, and her speech is the clearest expression of the justice of humanity's claims to vindication, yet she commits suttee on the pyre of Capaneus, and has no part in the resolution which she helped to instigate (12. 800–2). The end of the *Seven Against Thebes* is the beginning of the story of the *Epigoni*.¹⁶²

The narrative finishes with a declaration of incapacity from the poet. At the end of a poem which has been saturated with formal lament, he announces that he does not have the resources to present the laments for Tydeus, Polynices, and Parthenopaeus (12. 797–809). With the aid of all the Muses he could tell of the superhuman insanity of Capaneus (10. 831), but not even if Apollo comes out of retirement can he tell how the widows attempted to express, or heal, their misery. If he refuses in this way to follow Homer's solutions at the end of the *Iliad*, he also refuses to follow the divine oversight which governs the resolution of the *Odyssey*. The gods' participation in the poem gives Statius weighty resources for his narration of human madness, but their withdrawal from the finale enables him to go one step further, as he suggests the weakness of human attempts to make sense of their catastrophes.

The isolation of the (finally untellable) human action at the end corresponds to the poem's general refusal to construct a cosmic frame of reference into which human action may be plotted. Epic's distinctive metaphors for such frames of reference are often to be found emblematically caught in a cosmic icon, a material object (the shield of Achilles, or of Aeneas): 'such images contain the cosmos of those works where they appear'.¹⁶³ Early on, the *Thebaid* has such an object, or a candidate for such an object, on display—the necklace of Argia (2. 265–305). This ornament was once the property of Harmonia, the daughter of Mars and Venus, and it

¹⁶¹ Stressed by Burck (1979), 343.

¹⁶² Well noted by Ahl (1986), 2897.

¹⁶³ Fletcher (1964), 219.

too is the work of Vulcan and the Cyclopes (2. 269–74).¹⁶⁴ In Statius' icon, however, we see no comprehensive vision of empire or of the rhythms of human life, but an internally bound miniature of pettiness and vice, a catalogue of lust and madness, deliberately set against its mighty predecessors by Statius' remark that the Cyclopes who made it were trained for bigger projects (*docti quamquam maiora*, 2. 273).

III

The germ of all the allegorical poetry.

C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*¹⁶⁵

We have already discussed the gods' withdrawal from the end of the poem, and it is time to put that withdrawal in a larger, and different, context. The gods of the *Thebaid* yield to many pressures. Their claims to authority exploded, they surrender the moral stage, as we have seen, to the human actors. Further, the poet deprives them of the right to fulfil their proper epic modes of action, as they succumb to a double threat from allegory. The first threat is the long-standing one to their own epic natures and personalities, for in this poem we see the gods shedding their multiple ways of generating meaning, in the process of becoming the allegorical agents which many readers had seen in them for centuries.¹⁶⁶ The second threat is yet more radical, for the gods must yield not only to the Furies, who usurp their epic patterns of behaviour, but also to an array of personifications and allegorical constructs, who come into their own as alternative vehicles for the depiction of human action. Lewis puts it thus: 'On the one hand, the gods are becoming more and more like mere personifications; on the other, the personifications are beginning to trespass farther and farther beyond the boundaries which Johnson assigns them.'¹⁶⁷ The manifold power-struggles which make up the

¹⁶⁴ And, amazingly enough, of the Telchines (274–5).

¹⁶⁵ Lewis (1936), 54.

¹⁶⁶ As Lamberton (1986), 147, succinctly puts it: 'allegorical literature . . . is the outgrowth of a tradition of interpretation impinging on a tradition of creative literature'.

¹⁶⁷ Lewis (1936), 50 (his Johnson reference comes two pages earlier). Even from my introductory paragraph, it will be plain how much my whole approach owes to Lewis's splendidly provocative discussion.

Thebaid acquire another dimension, as the poem becomes a power-struggle among alternative narrative modes.

In Lewis's analysis, the gods' allegorical way of acting appears to be something which Statius deploys almost insensibly, as if it were the inevitable thing to do.¹⁶⁸ Yet, here as elsewhere, Statius exhibits a remarkable self-awareness at every stage of his operation, as he shifts certain of his gods from being personalities, with cult interests and a mythological history, into being allegorical emblems of human phenomena. The first key passage comes at the end of Book 2, with the first impact by an Olympian on a human personality, when Statius shows us Minerva hovering precisely on this boundary.

Tydeus has slaughtered all but one of the Thebans sent to ambush him on his way back to Argos, and, says the poet, he would have marched on Thebes itself, were it not for Minerva:

. . . ni tu, Tritonia uirgo,
flagrantem multaque operis caligine plenum
consilio dignata uirum: 'sate gente superbi
Oeneos, absentis cui dudum uincere Thebas
adnuimus, iam pone modum nimiumque secundis
parce deis: huic una fides optanda labori.
fortuna satis usus abi.'

. . . if you, Tritonian virgin, had not thought the man worthy of your counsel, in his heated passion, all in a fog as a result of his performance: 'Descendant of the race of proud Oeneus, whom I have just now allowed to conquer Thebes at a distance, now set a limit, and do not presume upon the over-favourable gods: you must hope for only this exploit to be believed. You have taken your luck far enough: depart.' (2. 684–90)

Minerva here is human wisdom, given a voice, and a compelling philosophical rhetoric—'undisguisedly a state of Tydeus' mind', as Lewis puts it.¹⁶⁹ The care which Statius lavishes on this effect begins with his refusal even to figure Minerva in the action. Lewis refers to her 'astonishing appearance', but Statius is in fact so far from having her appear that he contrives to introduce her words without using an actual verb of speech. He activates the tradition of reading Homer by which Athene represents Wisdom

¹⁶⁸ Most explicitly on p. 52: '... when the poet gives us a full-length description of Bacchus *he seems to forget* both his own romance and the materials with which Greek mythology would so readily have supplied him' (my italics).

¹⁶⁹ Lewis (1936), 52; cf. Vessey (1973), 147.

(φρόνησις, σύνεσις), while the fog surrounding the hero represents the fog of ignorance, which clouds the vision of the soul, and which wisdom alone may penetrate.¹⁷⁰ It is, further, possible that he labels the goddess 'Tritonian' in order to refer to one of the oldest allegorical etymologies, by which Athene's Homeric epithet of 'Tritogeneia' is taken to refer to the 'threefold' nature of wisdom's manifestation, in deliberation, speech, and action.¹⁷¹ The appearance of Athene to Achilles in *Iliad* 1 (188–222) is the obvious model for Statius' scene, yet the departure from Homer's procedure is radical. However much sympathy one may feel for the common interpretation which sees Athene as embodying Achilles' rational power in the Iliadic scene, Homer's technique resists us if we try to read the confrontation between goddess and mortal as nothing more than an articulation of an inner human process—if we try to read it, in other words, as some sort of anticipation of what Statius is doing here.¹⁷² The attenuation of the goddess's personality in Statius, the absence of any narrative dynamic or interchange, are astonishing if one reads his scene immediately after reading Homer's, in which Athene is a character with no less mimetic intensity than Achilles himself.

To stop here, however, when the episode still has more than fifty lines to run, is to do less than justice to the self-consciousness of Statius' art. If we read on, we observe Tydeus following the goddess's advice by sparing the sole survivor, Maeon; he proceeds to mark his victory by constructing a trophy to Minerva (2. 690–712). In this cult act, and especially in the elaborate prayer which the hero then addresses to his protecting deity, we see full recognition of the goddess's cultic and mythic personality. Statius

¹⁷⁰ Athene as wisdom is the commonest allegorical identification of the Homeric commentators: above, p. 37. Athene's action in *Il.* 5. 127, when she dispels the fog around Diomedes, gave rise to readings of the sort given in the text: bT. 5. 127; *Excerpta Vaticana* 20 (Festa (1902), 98); Buffière (1956), 284; cf. Heraclit. *All.* 34, for a rather similar treatment of *δῖψ* in Homer. Vergil appears to be relying on such a tradition in *Aeneid* 2, when he refers to the mist which clogs Aeneas' mortal understanding (604–6). This mist makes it impossible for Aeneas to see the divine dimension to Troy's fall, but it also makes him unable to think; he is restored to rationality by his mother, Venus.

¹⁷¹ Democritus fr. 68 B 2 DK; bT *Il.* 8. 39.

¹⁷² Roemer (1914), 177–9; especially, Whitman (1987), 14–19: 'The fact . . . is that Athena is too literal a goddess too often to be consistently "something else," the something else of allegory. Any sustained correspondence we try to establish between her and Wisdom must fail' (16). Of course, as Whitman stresses, 'the allegorical potential of Homer's work remains striking' (19).

presents us with a fully developed cult hymn, replete with allusions to a variety of Minerva's exploits and manifestations (2. 715–42). Further, to Tydeus, the deity appears as no personification of wisdom, but in her other dominant guise, as the martial goddess who guarantees victory to her devotee: she is 'fierce goddess, powerful in war' (*diua ferox, . . . bellipotens*, 715–16).¹⁷³ Tydeus' reaction, in other words, preserves the goddess from being relegated to her purely allegorical function as a figure for wisdom. His initial address to her may be seen as catching the two alternatives which the episode sets up. 'Adornment and wisdom of her great parent', he calls her (*magni decus ingeniumque parentis*, 715): if 'wisdom' is her allegorical persona, she still claims the 'adornment' to which she is entitled in prayer and cult.

Lewis's clearest case of how the gods shift into allegory—the onrush of Mars in Book 3—provides us with the poem's most spectacular example of Statius' revelling in his innovation. With his customary lucidity, Lewis shows the force of Statius' departure from epic norms. This Mars is a genuinely allegorical creation, 'an accident occurring in a substance', the martial or pugnacious spirit as it exists in the mind now of one nation, and now of another, at the bidding of Fate'.¹⁷⁴ Unlike Juno in the *Aeneid*, Mars has no mythological motivation for his onslaught; sent by Jupiter to incite war-lust in the Argives so that they will attack Thebes (3. 218–61), he rages because 'it is his *esse* to rage'.¹⁷⁵ This Mars is not a divine character who participates for characterful reasons, but an embodiment of the madness which is activating the human characters, and he does not possess any self-awareness beyond that function.

Of all the great gods, Ares had been, from the beginning, the deity most prone to such an allegorical identification with his clearly demarcated province.¹⁷⁶ None the less, in Homer he is still a partisan character, identified with the Trojan side, so that even the scholiasts, who wish to see Ares as nothing but 'War' wherever

¹⁷³ It is possible to see a unity of a kind in Pallas' twin realms of wisdom and warfare: Burkert (1985), 140–1. The point is that Statius, for his own purposes, is denying such a unity by creating the split in attitude which we see in this scene.

¹⁷⁴ Lewis (1936), 50–1.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, referring also to the other great allegorical scene involving Mars, 7. 40–84; cf. Vessey (1973), 86–7.

¹⁷⁶ Burkert (1985), 169.

possible, can hesitate over his status: ἡ προθυμία τοῦ πολέμου. ἢ ὁ σωματοειδής θεός ('he is the urge for war. Or else the god in bodily form', D II. 4. 439). In Vergil, while appearing as an emblem of mutual war-lust, and as a metonymy for war, Mars also has his tales of myth, and, in particular, carries a heavy load of significance as a national Roman god, father of Romulus and Remus.¹⁷⁷ Even in Valerius, who comes closest to Statius' usage, Mars has identifiable mythological grounds for his participation. At the beginning of Book 6, Valerius shows Mars uncertain over which of the two sides to back in the imminent battle. This looks very much like Statius' picture of Mars as the urge for war, yet Valerius' Mars is undecided for sound, characterful motives: he wishes to protect the fleece in his holy grove, and knows that there are persons in both camps who wish to plunder it.¹⁷⁸ Valerius' Mars is hovering over the choice of becoming no more than an allegorical agent, but he remains a god.

Statius' Mars is something new, then, in his allegorically obsessive patterns of behaviour, in his lack of affiliation or epic personality; and the allegorical tenor of the episode continues in the sequel, as Whitman shows, with the help later given Mars by the personified Fama (3. 420–30): god and personified agent now occupy the same space.¹⁷⁹ Any notion, however, that Statius is proceeding unawares is shattered when Venus steps into the path of Mars' rampaging chariot, and activates her sexual charge by leaning her breasts against the top of the chariot (3. 263–6). Her words of reproach and appeal show up Mars' novelty in the most astonishing manner. When she alludes to the fact that their own offspring, Harmonia, was married to the father of the Theban race, Cadmus, she is asking him, in effect, 'Have you quite forgotten your mythological personality and allegiances? Are you now nothing more than an allegory?':

¹⁷⁷ As war-lust or war: *Aen.* 6. 165; 7. 582; 8. 700; 10. 755–6. In myth: 7. 304–5. As national god: 6. 872 (with the note of Austin (1977), ad loc.); 8. 630; 12. 179.

¹⁷⁸ So Lüthje (1971), 270. Statius' difference from Valerius could be conclusively shown if one could be confident that *Theb.* 6. 227–32 were genuine lines. In a simile, 6. 232–3 show Mars uncertain which side to back in a conflict, and the only reason for his uncertainty is precisely that the decision is immaterial to him, so long as blood is shed. The lines, however, are almost certainly spurious.

¹⁷⁹ Whitman (1987), 56: 'the allegorization of a god is converging with the amplification of a passion by the dynamic motion of an abstract agent'.

bella etiam in Thebas, socer o pulcherrime, bella
ipse paras ferroque tuos abolere nepotes?
nec genus Harmoniae nec te conubia caelo
festa nec hae quicquam lacrimae, furibunde, morantur?

War even against Thebes, o choice father-in-law, are *you* preparing war, preparing to destroy your descendants with the sword? You aren't slowed down at all, mad one, by the thought of the people of Harmonia, or the wedding [of Harmonia and Cadmus] celebrated in heaven, or these tears? (3. 269–72)

Venus' attempt to recall Mars to his epic inheritance is a bold one. It even has a limited success, for Mars promises that, when the war actually begins, he will help the side to which he is allied (3. 312–15)—and so he does (once).¹⁸⁰ More noteworthy than Venus' small gain, however, is the fact that the goddess is herself swept up into the narrative mode which she is attempting to resist. Her very attempt to remind Mars of his proper allegiances becomes itself an allegorical enactment.¹⁸¹ Her sexual overtures to Mars, and her pleas that he should not harm the cause of Harmonia, are transformed into a figural acting out of one of the poem's key concerns, the powerlessness of love in the face of madness: as Whitman well puts it, the 'fable of love seeking to prevent discord from disturbing the effects of harmony is a shift from mythology toward argumentation that almost reminds us of Heraclitus' exegesis'.¹⁸² The failure of Venus' appeal is shown immediately she has finished speaking, with Mars' failure to fit into the canonical, especially Lucretian, pose of disarmament:

lacrimas non pertulit ultra
Bellipotens, hastam laeua transumit et alto,
haud mora, desiluit curru, clipeoque receptam

¹⁸⁰ 9. 821–40; cf. Snijder (1968), 144–5. Note, however, that Mars continues to embody war none the less: at 8. 383–5 he is in the middle of the battlefield, inspiring war in both sides.

¹⁸¹ Though not, of course, without precedent. Allegorical interpretation of Demodocus' song of Ares and Aphrodite in *Odyssey* 8 was early and pervasive (Buffière (1956), 168–72); in Latin epic, Lucretius and Vergil exploited such interpretations extensively: Hardie (1985), 90–5, and (1986), 360.

¹⁸² Whitman (1987), 56, referring to his earlier discussion (38–41) of the treatment of Demodocus' song in *Homeric Problems* 69. 1–11, where 'Heraclitus' brings in Empedocles to explain the relationship between Ares and Aphrodite, and the birth of their daughter, Harmonia. Cf. Vessey (1973), 86, with his fine point on the metamorphosis of Harmonia into a snake (3. 289–90): 'Harmony . . . is humiliated and debased in the world of man, just as Harmonia became a snake.'

laedit in amplexu dictisque ita mulcet amicis:
 'o mihi bellorum requies et sacra uoluptas
 unaque pax animo! . . .'

The God of War did not endure her tears any longer; he switched his spear to his left hand, and, without delay, jumped down from the high chariot; clutching her to himself within his shield, he hurt her in his embrace, and soothed her thus with friendly words: 'O, my rest from war, my sacred pleasure, the only peace my mind knows! . . .' (3. 291-6)¹⁸³

The comedy here is rough, as Mars' gesture is rough. With his indecorous bluster, and his inflicting of pain even in solicitude, Mars is unable to cut away from his persona even for a moment. We may observe of Mars, as Reinhardt observed of Themis, in his classic discussion of personification, that he cannot disavow his essence.¹⁸⁴ Mars' identification with his *esse* represents allegory at its tightest, with the closest possible fit between the affect and its characterized embodiment. Allegory can, of course, exploit disjunctions between affect and embodiment, as may be clearly seen in one of classical literature's first fully achieved allegorical figures, Euripides' Lyssa ('Madness').¹⁸⁵ Lyssa's task is to drive Heracles mad, but her initial stance is one of reasonableness, and reluctance to fulfil her allotted task: 'I do not enjoy visitations against the mortals that I like,' she says, as she attempts to plead for the character she is supposed to victimize (*HF* 846). After being reminded by Iris that she was not sent by Hera in order to exercise rational self-control, she declares emphatically that she is acting against her will (857-8). Only then does she stir herself up to picture the frenzied catastrophe which she will inflict on the house of Heracles (859-72). In the scene as a whole, the reluctance of personified Madness to act, to fulfil what her nature dictates, catches the reluctance of those who are going mad to surrender to their madness, just as Madness's rational conversation with Iris acts out the last seconds of self-control's resistance. Statius never goes quite as far as Euripides in this separation of the allegorical character from its *esse*, though we will observe him

¹⁸³ One thinks immediately of Lucretius' proem, where the poet addresses Venus as *hominum diuumque uoluptas* ('pleasure of men and gods', 1. 1), and prays that Venus will disarm Mars (31-40). Also important is the scene in *Iliad* 15, where Athene disarms Ares (125-7).

¹⁸⁴ Reinhardt (1960b), 32: 'Themis kann ihr Wesen nicht verleugnen.'

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Petersen (1939), 42, on how different Lyssa is from the allegorical figures of Hesiod; 43-5, on the remarkable nature of Euripides' procedure in this scene.

opening up some rather similar lines of fracture, in our discussion of his allegorical personifications. Before examining those personifications, however, we must complete our investigation of what happens to the gods.

If some cardinal deities find themselves being subsumed into allegorical patterns, what becomes of the gods' traditional ways of acting? Of all the poem's gods, the chief one, Jupiter, remains most true to his traditional nature, becoming a kind of exaggeration of his epic self. In his violence, self-indulgence, and final indifference, he pushes to the limit the menacing side of his epic personality.¹⁸⁶ The poem's pessimism positively demands such a glowering and inflexible backdrop to the human action. The other gods also will inevitably strike any reader as canonical in their attributes and characteristics, yet their behaviour is in fact extremely circumscribed.¹⁸⁷ The new constraints upon them are concentrated especially in the one area of their traditional operation where they are most exposed to the new threats from the allegories—that is, in their influence on human characters. Such scenes are not only comparatively rare in the *Thebaid*, they are also very different from anything which had gone before. We have already seen the novelty of the first scene in which an Olympian impinges on a human character, with Pallas and Tydeus at the end of Book 2.¹⁸⁸ If we turn to Apollo and Amphiaraus at the end of Book 7, we see a novelty of a very different kind.

The prophet Amphiaraus is riding over the plain in his chariot, his horses already afraid of the ground beneath their feet (7. 690-2). At this point, his own special god, Apollo, enters the action:

famulo decus addit inane
 maestus et extremos obitus illustrat Apollo.
 ille etiam clipeum galeamque incendit honoro
 sidere; nec tarde fratri, Gradiue, dedisti,
 ne qua manus uatem, ne quid mortalia bello

¹⁸⁶ The discussion of Schubert (1984) is fundamental here; cf. Burck (1979), 334-7.

¹⁸⁷ Canonical: above, p. 343. Circumscribed: Schetter (1960), 26-7, a most valuable discussion: 'Ein bedeutsames Charakteristikum der Thebais besteht darin, dass die traditionellen Göttergestalten in den Hintergrund treten. . . . Jedoch spielen diese Götter in dem grossen Weltdrama keine entscheidenden, vielmehr untergeordnete Rollen' (26); cf. Schönberger (1965), 136-7.

¹⁸⁸ Above, pp. 365-7.

laedere tela queant: sanctum et uenerabile Diti
funus eat. talis medios aufertur in hostes
certus et ipse necis, uires fiducia leti
suggerit; inde uiro maioraque membra diesque
laetior et numquam tanta experientia caeli,
si uacet: auertit morti contermina Virtus.
ardet inexploto saeui Mauortis amore.

Sad Apollo adds empty adornment to his servant, and lights up his dying moments. He makes his shield and helmet glow with a star-like fire, to honour him. Mars, you were not slow to grant to your brother that no hand or mortal weapon could harm the prophet in the fray, but that he could go to Dis as a sacred and venerable death. This is how he is borne into the thick of the enemy, himself certain of his death; his confidence that he is about to die supplies him with strength; so the hero seems to feel his limbs grow, the day become more favourable, never has his skill at reading the sky seemed so great—if he were free to read it: but Virtue, death's neighbour, distracts him. He burns with unassuaged passion for savage Mars. (7. 692–703)

The Homeric model is very clear. At the beginning of *Iliad* 5 Athene aids Diomedes, giving him strength and courage, so that he might win excellent glory, and causing a star-like fire to blaze over his helmet and shield (5. 1–8).¹⁸⁹ Likewise very clear are Statius' departures. Apollo does not give Amphiaraus strength and courage, and he bestows, not excellent glory, but an adornment that is empty, futile—*decus inane* (7. 692). At this point, it appears, Apollo even has to rely on Mars to protect Amphiaraus for him.¹⁹⁰ In Statius, as in Homer, the god's favourite receives strength and inspiration, but in Statius he does not receive them from the god. Instead, the hero is affected, in various ways, by Mars (703), by Virtus (702), and by his confidence that he is about to die (699–700)—that is, by an allegorized deity, by a personification, and by one of his own emotions.

The key phrase at the beginning of the scene is *decus inane*,

¹⁸⁹ Juhnke (1972), 121–2. Note how closely Statius annotates the Homeric text further on, when Apollo, like Athene in Homer, takes over as charioteer. In Homer, the chariot groans under the weight of the mighty goddess and outstanding hero (*Il.* 5. 838–9). Statius imitates the Homeric phraseology of 'great hero, great god together on the chariot' (7. 750), but postpones the mention of the groan till the god gets off, and the sound becomes a lament: 'it was *then* that the chariot groaned' (*tunc uero ingemuit currus*, 790).

¹⁹⁰ Later, however, Apollo does deflect weapons from Amphiaraus, and instruct him in his shooting (7. 753–4).

'empty adornment'. One's suspicion that this phrase cannot be idle, and that the radical departures from Homer cannot be accidental, is confirmed by an extensive sequence which this scene of futile glorification anticipates. After the weeping Apollo jumps off the chariot of the doomed prophet (7. 789), he vanishes from the action for almost two books, to reappear two-thirds of the way into Book 9. Here his sister, Diana, encounters him, as she is moving to the battle-field out of concern for *her* favourite, Parthenopaeus:

iamque fere medium Parnassi frondea praeter
colla tenebat iter, cum fratrem in nube corusca
aspicit haud solito uisu: remeabat ab armis
maestus Echioniiis, demersi funera lugens
auguris. inrubit caeli plaga sidere mixto,
occursuque sacro pariter iubar arsit utrimque,
et coiere arcus et respondere pharetrae.

And now she was at the half-way point of her journey, passing the leafy ridges of Parnassus, when she caught sight of her brother in a shimmery cloud—not at all looking the way he normally looked. He was returning in sadness from the Theban war, mourning the burial of the engulfed prophet. The section of the sky glowed at the mingling of the heavenly body; at the holy conjunction, a radiance shone out from each of them, their bows met, and the quivers reacted in response to each other.¹⁹¹ (9. 643–9)

As the dejected brother goes on to castigate himself, saying that he is unworthy of worship, and that his oracle is now silent (657–8), it becomes irresistible (to me at least) to see in these lines an image of the sun-god going into eclipse.¹⁹² And it is indeed the case that Apollo never figures in the action of the poem after this, apart from a glimpse at the end of Book 10, where we see him in the company of the other gods, as Capaneus mounts his assault on

¹⁹¹ See Cornutus, *Theol. Graec.* 32, for a comparison of Apollo to the sun and Artemis to the moon, with the comment that the gods are represented as archers as an allegorical hint at their rays.

¹⁹² Greek, like English, can use 'eclipse' metaphorically in this way (Polyb. 29. 16. 1; Plut. *Aem.* 17. 8; both passages mention an actual eclipse as a portent of the 'eclipse' of King Perseus in defeat at Pydna). The native Latin word for eclipse (*deficio*) may also be used of 'fading away', 'failing' (*OLD* s.v. §5, §6), though I do not find examples of punning on the astronomical usage. Statius' description of Apollo here is very reminiscent of Ovid's picture of the self-chastizing Phoebus in *Met.* 2 (381–3), after the death of his son, Phaethon: Phoebus is stripped of his *decus*, just as he is when in eclipse.

heaven (889–90).¹⁹³ His direct contact with humans is severed, as that glimpse in Book 10 itself helps to show. The ghost of his prophet, Amphiaraus, when it appears to Thiodamas early in Book 10, cries out 'Give me back my gods!' (*meos . . . redde deos*, 207–8); and Statius himself, when he announces his final incapacity at the end of the poem, declares that not even Apollo would be powerful enough to inspire him to transcribe the laments for the Argive dead (12. 808).

Apollo tells Diana not to waste her time trying to help Parthenopaeus (9. 659–62). She replies with the key word which had introduced Apollo's futile glorification of Amphiaraus: 'But a final adornment I may certainly seek . . .' (*sed decus extremum certe . . . licet . . . quaerere*, 663–5). Some fifty lines later her participation in the last moments of Parthenopaeus' life begins, and we see a series of striking departures from epic norms. In order to make sure that her presence is not pointless, she replaces Parthenopaeus' arrows with her own, sprinkles the hero and his horse with ambrosian liquid, so that they may not be harmed before it is fated, and adds magical chants and spells (9. 726–35). The deliberately exaggerated magical atmosphere is very far removed from epic procedure. It is accepted epic practice for a god to honour and preserve a corpse with ambrosia;¹⁹⁴ it is accepted epic practice for a god to heal an afflicted warrior;¹⁹⁵ but this deity is acting like a witch in order to preserve a mortal from harm. Even if we allow for the *Thebaid's* characteristically precious and unrigorous modes, this action of Diana remains unique. Statius has made it unique in order to deny Diana her epic function.

Less than a hundred lines later he denies the goddess her epic function even more comprehensively, when she is shunted out of the action by the new allegorical vigour of Mars. First we see her snubbed by her own protégé, when she advises him to withdraw from the combat (9. 812–20). Thereupon Venus, who has been viewing the action from the embrace of Mars, urges him to re-

¹⁹³ We are told that he also inspires the oracular pronouncement which leads to Menoeceus' self-sacrifice (10. 624, 667, 762–3); yet he does not appear as a character.

¹⁹⁴ *Il.* 16. 680 (Apollo and Sarpedon); 19. 38–9 (Thetis and Patroclus); 23. 186–7 (Aphrodite and Hector); see Griffin (1980), 165–7, for the *Iliad's* avoidance of such motifs as magical invulnerability. Statius' Parthenopaeus, by being associated with this tradition, is marked as already virtually dead.

¹⁹⁵ *Il.* 15. 239–62 (Apollo and Hector); 16. 527–9 (Apollo and Glaucus); *Aen.* 12. 411–24 (Venus and Aeneas).

move Diana from the field (821–30). At this point, to prepare for the victory of Mars over Diana, Statius fabricates what is perhaps the bluntest allegorical moment of the poem. Instead of saying that Mars was angry, Statius gives us this:

desiluit iustis commotus in arma querellis
Bellipotens, cui sola uagum per inane ruenti
Ira comes, reliqui sudant ad bella Furores.

The God of War leapt down, stirred by her just complaints; his only companion as he rushed through the shifting void was Anger—the rest of the Madnesses were toiling away at the war. (9. 831–3)

Before the new narrative threat of Mars, and the inexorable face of Jupiter, Diana is powerless (9. 838–40). Even her promised revenge for the death of Parthenopaeus is, in a sense, robbed from her, for when Parthenopaeus' killer falls, Diana is not given explicit credit for the deed, and the origin of the fatal blow is deliberately kept mysterious (876). As Diana herself had admitted to Apollo when they met at Parnassus (9. 663), her sphere of action has become exactly what the gods' sphere of action in epic had always threatened to become—*decus extremum*, an adornment at the end; or *decus inane*, empty, futile adornment, as the poet had said of Apollo's presence at the death of Amphiaraus (7. 692).¹⁹⁶

Schetter, who first commented on the striking circumscription of the gods' action in the *Thebaid*, points to one exception. In only one place, says Schetter, does Statius give one of the traditional deities a decisively guiding role in the action: that is, to Venus, in Hypsipyle's narrative of the Lemnian massacre.¹⁹⁷ According to Schetter, Statius here is following the canonical version, yet it may be more attractive to see Statius deliberately isolating his one example of more traditional narrative within a parenthesis, marking Hypsipyle as the old-fashioned narrator, so as to allow his overall originality to stand out in more vivid relief. Indeed, when one

¹⁹⁶ At 8. 759 Pallas attempts to do better than this, and obtain *decus immortale* for her favourite, Tydeus. She fails.

¹⁹⁷ Schetter (1960), 27. One could add another apparent exception, the chain of events at 8. 456–518, where Hercules aids Haemon while Pallas aids Tydeus. Yet it is novel for the *arriuite* Hercules to be acting like a fully-fledged god at all (he is rigorously forbidden even so much as speech in his only appearance as a god in the *Aeneid*, 10. 463–4); and when he does come face to face with Pallas he bows out of the action, refusing to sustain the epic momentum (502–18).

thinks of the other surviving mythological epic of the time, with its vigorous, but none the less quite un-iconoclastic employment of the tradition's gods, and with its prominent use of Venus in its own Lemnian episode, one may be tempted to go further, and see Valerius being marked as the old-fashioned narrator, left behind in parenthesis by Statius' innovations.¹⁹⁸

Tydeus' address to Minerva in Book 2, in the episode with which we began this Section, appears in hindsight to offer a blunt but serviceable formula for the polarization of the gods' action. 'Adornment and wisdom of her great parent', he called her there (*magni decus ingeniumque parentis*, 2. 715). Although it does violence to the poem's richness of action to press these alternatives too rigorously upon the divine narrative, it is not misleading to see in these words an early hint at the choices facing the gods of the *Thebaid*: ineffectual adornment, or allegorical affect.¹⁹⁹

The space vacated by the gods is occupied by the allegorical personifications, and by the forces of the underworld, who are themselves markedly allegorical in nature. If the conventional deities have great difficulty in acting (especially when they try to influence humans in their customary manner), their competitors impinge at will upon the human characters, producing new and compelling ways of capturing human experience. The Furies' usurpation is more direct, in that, together with their master Dis, as we saw above,²⁰⁰ they revel in supplanting the celestials, and in taking over their manner of acting. At the climactic moment of the brothers' duel, Tisiphone and Megaera oust Virtus, Mars, Bellona, and Minerva (11. 412–15). Vergil's Fury, Allecto, had been responsible for the war in Latium, but Statius employs Mars for the

¹⁹⁸ On the epic character of Venus' organization of events in Valerius' Lemnian episode, see Bahrenfuss (1951), 101–2.

¹⁹⁹ If I may be permitted to confine my sole discussion of the unfinished *Achilleid* to a footnote, then it is worth pointing out that divine action is remarkably scarce in that charming, almost novelistic, fragment. To be sure, Achilles' mother, Thetis, is a goddess, and the early part of the poem shows her in extensive patterns of action, planning, travelling, conferring with Neptune, removing Achilles from Pelion to Scyros (1. 25–396). Yet divine intervention is conspicuously missing, for example, from the scene where Thetis watches while Achilles falls in love with Deidamia (1. 283–37); and it is an absence highlighted by Statius' initial question, which is never answered: 'Which god bestowed deceit and cunning on the stunned mother?' (1. 283–4).

²⁰⁰ pp. 350–2.

average misery of warfare, and reserves the Furies for the particular evil of the brothers' mutual madness.²⁰¹ Again, although the gods themselves find it difficult to move in their traditional patterns to inspire or aid human beings, the Furies astutely ape these patterns of behaviour, to infect and affect the human characters with unnerving efficiency. Tisiphone stirs up initial discord between Eteocles and Polynices (1. 124–30); she saves each brother from death at different times (6. 513–14, 8. 686–8); she ensures that Tydeus will eat his enemy's brains and lose immortality (8. 757–8); she tricks Hippomedon into abandoning the corpse of Tydeus (9. 148–74); she acts like Vergil's Juno, in summoning up a creature from the underworld in order to achieve her aims (11. 59–61); she impersonates an Argive in order to force Polynices to resist the mild counsel of Adrastus (11. 197–204). Tisiphone becomes one of the poem's most palpably realized creations, acquiring a repulsive tactile dynamism in passages such as this:

centum illi stantes umbrabant ora cerastae,
turba minor diri capitis; sedet intus abactis
ferrea lux oculis, qualis per nubila Phoebe
Atracia rubet arte labor; suffusa ueneno
tenditur ac sanie gliscit cutis; igneus atro
ore uapor . . .

A hundred horned asps, standing on end, shaded her face, the lesser of her dread head's twin troupes. An iron light sits in her deep-set eyes, like an eclipse of the moon, brought on by Thessalian witches' art, glowing red through the clouds. Her skin is stretched tight by the pressure of the venom welling up from within, it is distended with discharge of pus. From her black mouth, a fiery exhalation . . . (1. 103–8)

Tisiphone and her sister Megaera are far more than avengers of blood-guilt, as they were originally in Greek thought, and in the early versions of the Theban myth.²⁰² Under the pressure of Vergil's, Ovid's, and Seneca's creations, Statius' Furies represent every evil of which human beings are capable. As narrative embodiments of attributes of human nature which are regarded as timeless, they demand to be read allegorically.²⁰³ Statius had

²⁰¹ Schetter (1960), 24, 26. Even Tisiphone's instigation of the actual fighting in Book 7 belongs here, since she is acting to thwart the appeals addressed to Polynices by his mother and sisters (534–81). The Fury is concerned to counteract the impact of humanity.

²⁰² Venini (1970), 20.

²⁰³ So (rather differently), Vessey (1973), 75.

considerable background for such a treatment, since Tisiphone and her ilk had been candidates for allegorical treatment of various kinds for centuries. Already in Euripides' *Orestes*, by one kind of allegory, the Furies are, quite explicitly, Orestes' way of objectifying the guilt he feels over his act of matricide;²⁰⁴ it became a commonplace to speak of the Furies of tragedy as the conscience of a guilty man, or his evil desires.²⁰⁵ In a larger sense, a powerful impetus for Statius' creation of an epic world of moral allegory will have been the pervasive moral allegorical readings of Homer.²⁰⁶ Homer was read as a teacher of universal ethical truths, as is seen very clearly from Horace's second *Epistle*, where (if we may adapt Lewis's adaptation of Dante's expression), Horace reads the *Iliad* as *literaliter bellum Troianum, allegorice homo*.²⁰⁷ A brief glance at the problem of allegorical reading is in order at this point, as we move from the Furies to the personifications themselves.

The problem of reading such allegorical figures in Statius is, in some regards, the problem of reading epic divine action writ large. In reading allegory we seem to be given a positive sanction to gloss over the narrative itself as briskly as possible, for is not allegory mere 'other-saying', and is it not therefore our task merely to enucleate that 'other'? The name, and commonly accepted nature of the mode, lead naturally to the conclusion that we are dealing with a 'reality' and its 'disguise'; even more than when reading the actions of the gods themselves, we can find ourselves invited to believe that we have nothing more to do than penetrate the cover, and discard it.²⁰⁸ It is not surprising, then, that the scholar who uses such language of 'reality' and 'disguise' ends by claiming that, in epic, 'the effect of the device is . . . purely intellectual and neutral emotionally'.²⁰⁹ If the reader will look

²⁰⁴ Or. 257–61, 395–400; cf. Jocelyn (1967), 192–3.

²⁰⁵ Jocelyn (1967), 193, citing, e.g. Aeschines *In Tim.* 190–1; Cic. *Q. Rosc.* 67; Pis. 46—where see also the note of Nisbet (1961).

²⁰⁶ On which see Buffière (1956), 249–391; above, pp. 36–7.

²⁰⁷ Lewis (1936), 56, takes over a phrase from Dante's letter to Can Grande and applies it to the *Thebaid*. On Horace's poem, see now Cairns (1989), 85–8.

²⁰⁸ 'Reality' and 'disguise' are the terms used by Gordon Williams in his discussion of the allegory of the Silver period, and particularly of Statius: Williams (1978), 266. From here it is a straight line to his readings of the divine action of the *Aeneid*, five years later (above, pp. 134–5).

²⁰⁹ Williams (1978), 265. Williams is setting Statius' use of personifications in epic against his personification of Sleep in *Silv.* 4. 5, which he regards as a success.

back a page and re-read the description of Tisiphone quoted there, trying to react with emotional neutrality, it will appear that something has gone badly wrong.

The first cogent objections to the reductionist readings of allegory were put forward (it comes as no surprise) by C. S. Lewis: 'When we have seen what an allegory signifies, we are always tempted to attend to the signification in the abstract and to throw aside the allegorical imagery as something which has now done its work. But this is not the way to read an allegory.'²¹⁰ Such insights have received extensive amplification in more recent work on allegory.²¹¹ Even an appreciation of the New Criticism's vaunted 'heresy of paraphrase' should commit one to abandoning the notion that the vehicle is dispensable.²¹² There is a deep flaw in any theory of reading which holds that meaning is independent of its expression, which is what conventional theories of allegory inevitably end up implying, in their assumption that allegorical texts are saying something which may be extracted and reformulated in other terms without loss or damage—the 'premise,' as Van Dyke calls it, 'that texts are not important in allegory—that they are merely vehicles for pre-existing ideas'.²¹³ Whatever ideas are present in Statius' allegories, we may be confident that our apprehension of them is going to be inextricably involved with the experience of reading the allegories themselves, and that the fictional energy lavished on these creations is not going to be otiose.²¹⁴ Stated thus, the notion sounds so self-evident as to be

²¹⁰ Lewis (1936), 125; cf. 166, 269, 289.

²¹¹ Especially Fletcher (1964); Clifford (1974); Quilligan (1979); Van Dyke (1985). All these works, naturally, have their own emphases, and their own reasons for refusing to gloss over the text of allegory: Quilligan, in particular, builds her own theory of allegory out of the 'literalness' (64–79) which she sees as constituting the mode. As a practical demonstration of how to read allegory most fruitfully, I have found Van Dyke's stimulating book particularly illuminating and helpful—witness my frequent references.

²¹² Van Dyke (1985), 36–7; cf. the trenchant declaration of Clifford (1974), 53: 'The allegorical action is not a paraphrase of something capable of alternative expression.'

²¹³ Van Dyke (1985), 45. She continues: 'Against such a premise the objections are well known. Modern criticism takes it as axiomatic that whatever truths literature conveys are essentially literary truths, inseparable from their vehicles.' These words should not be misread as a claim that literature is a self-sufficient system.

²¹⁴ Van Dyke (1985), 45: 'To read an allegory properly is neither to extract a moral nor to construct a geometry of its referents but to follow what Roland Barthes calls "the very movement of meaning"' (the reference is to Barthes (1974), 92); cf. the concise conclusion to the fine study of Prudentius' allegory in Nugent

hardly worth asserting, yet the actual experience of reading is given no prominence at all in discussions of Statius' allegorical composition, as if the ideas expressed were so obvious that lingering over their presentation is redundant.²¹⁵

For the poem's purposes, the Furies, together with the personifications proper, such as Virtus and Pietas, are conceived of as being existing realities, abstracts which occupy their own conceptual sphere, and which must become embodied in the time, space, and conventions of the narrative's mundane reality in order to become accessible to our senses.²¹⁶ So Virtus, for example, is said to live next to Jupiter, and from there to have a contingent effect upon the earth (*unde per orbem / rara dari terrisque solet contingere*, 10. 632–3). This is not to say that Statius is committing himself or his readers to belief in the real existence of these Ideals—indeed, as we shall see, the poem eventually abandons this mode of narration altogether, so that it is difficult to see the poem sanctioning such a philosophical view in itself. Still, even a de-based Platonism is background enough for the audience to be prepared to see Virtus and Pietas as Ideals, and to appreciate the challenge posed by the urge to represent their implication in the human world, the narrative world.²¹⁷ It is important to see Statius' allegorical creations as exterior entities in this way, for otherwise one is bound to regard them as being no more than vivid realizations, or distracting obfuscations, of what the individual characters are feeling 'anyway'. Statius' allegorical technique, in other words, is not a way of making the characters of the poem more interesting or accessible, a way of helping us think more clearly or more richly about Eteocles, or Polynices, or any other character; rather, it is an experiment in universalizing the moral experiences

(1985): 'in the process of reflection or representation, the medium itself (the mirror, the allegory) does not in fact self-destruct or disappear, however much it may lay claim to self-effacement' (100).

²¹⁵ The analysis of Ovid's *Invidia*-narrative revealed similar conclusions: above, pp. 243–7.

²¹⁶ Lewis (1936), 289: 'the concrete experience of a universal' (though Lewis sees the personifications of the *Thebaid* itself as 'belonging to the inner world', 56); Van Dyke (1985), 66 (on the technique of precursors to Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, including the *Thebaid*): 'such allegorical events proceed as does the *Psychomachia*—through the interconversion of static ideas and their temporal embodiments'; cf. 37–46, 65–7.

²¹⁷ It is interesting, in this regard, to read the *Thebaid* against the background of the Neoplatonists' obsession with the failure of language to catch the true forms of reality: Wallis (1986); Lamberton (1986), 85–90, 164–73.

described in the action. What makes Statius' allegorical action so rewarding (and so difficult) to read is the continual reshuffling of positions demanded of the reader, who is tracing the tussle between the action of the human characters and the action of the allegorical figures who impinge upon them.

The climax of this type of narrative in the poem is the duel of Eteocles and Polynices, where the Furies and Pietas clash. Before that episode arrives, Statius deploys a variety of personification allegories. Even the most apparently perfunctory becomes a challenge to our temptation to gloss. The appearance of Mors ('Death') on the battlefield, for example, 'means' that 'men died', if one wishes to put it like that:

Stygiisque emissa tenebris
Mors fruitur caelo bellatoremque uolando
campum operit nigroque uiros inuitat hiatu,
nil uulgare legens, sed quae dignissima uita
funera, praecipuos annis animisque cruento
ungue notat.

Let out from the Stygian darkness, Mors enjoys possession of the sky, and flies above the battlefield, covering it over. She invites men with her black gaping mouth, picking nothing common, but those deaths most worthy of life she marks with her bloody nail, those men outstanding in youth and courage. (8. 376–81)

The developed tactile sense will be familiar to amateurs of Statius. More noteworthy is the care with which these lines relate to the moral architecture of the poem, as we see Jupiter's sky appropriated by the polluting invasion of Death's disruptive force. Thirty lines later the allegorical event is actualized by description of the men's missiles, which do the killing 'in reality', yet the 'literal' description has become contaminated by the moral force of the allegory: *excludere diem telis, stant ferrea caelo / nubila, nec iaculis artatus sufficit aer* ('they shut out the day with their javelins, clouds of iron stand in the sky, the crammed air has not space enough for the missiles', 8. 412–13). The humans co-operate with Mors in turning the battlefield cliché to the needs of Statius' universe, as they shut out air and sky, replacing the natural world with their own tools of madness, creating a suffocating claustrophobia in which it appears that nothing can move or live.²¹⁸

²¹⁸ One wonders what Statius' rhetoric might have made of the transformations

The impact of personifications upon human characters is, however, the most original of Statius' usages. An extended example presents itself towards the end of Book 10, when a divine power descends to earth, puts on the disguise of Tiresias' daughter, Manto, and inspires Menoeceus to save the city of Thebes by offering himself in suicide as a sacrificial victim (10. 628–782). Lewis is absolutely right to stress the remarkable surprise which Statius creates here by his original choice of agent: 'who that knows only his Virgil and his Homer would have expected this part to be played, not by Pallas or Mercury or Apollo, but by the personification Virtus?'²¹⁹ Yet again, however, as we saw with Minerva, Mars, and Venus, Statius is not proceeding unawares. He flaunts his innovation in a richly ironic four-line address to the Muse, after which he keeps us waiting for two more lines before naming the entity at the exposed end of a verse:

nunc age, quis stimulos et pulchrae gaudia mortis
addiderit iuueni—*neque enim haec absentibus umquam
mens homini transmissa deis*—, memor incipe Clio,
saecula te quoniam penes et digesta uetustas.
diua Iouis solio iuxta comes, unde per orbem
rara dari terrisque solet contingere, Virtus . . .

Come now, who spurred the youth on to a beautiful death and made him rejoice in it—for *this state of mind is never communicated to man without the presence of the gods*—, begin to tell, commemorative Clio, since the centuries are in your power, and the distant past, all organized. A deity, a near companion of Jupiter's throne, from where she is wont to be rarely granted through the world, or to impinge upon the earth, *Virtus*, . . . (10. 628–33)

of modern weaponry, most movingly presented by Keegan (1976), 306: 'The longbows of the Agincourt archers, the muskets of the Waterloo infantrymen were very effective agents for the temporary transformation of an airspace of modest dimensions into an atmosphere of high lethality. . . . By the beginning of the First World War, soldiers possessed the means to maintain a lethal environment over wide areas for sustained periods. Hence the titles of some of the war's most deeply felt novels, *Le Feu* (*Under Fire*) by Henri Barbusse, *A Man Could Stand Up* by Ford Madox Ford and *In Stahlgewittern* (*Storm of Steel*) by Ernst Jünger, through which each of these soldier-authors sought to convey in a phrase to their readers what it was about the new warfare which made it different from all other warfare men had hitherto experienced: that it marooned them, as it were, on an undiscovered continent, where one layer of the air on which they depended for life was charged with lethal metallic particles . . .'

²¹⁹ Lewis (1936), 53.

The reader has already encountered Virtus earlier in the poem, and in company which should be unsettling for those who wish to see her inspiration of Menoeceus as a moment of unalloyed sublimity. She follows Bacchus in 4. 661–2, along with Ira, Furor, Metus, Ardor (Anger, Madness, Fear, Passion). In Book 7 she is glumly in the House of Mars (51), once again with Ira, Metus, and Furor, and now also with Impetus, Nefas, Discordia, Minae, and Mors (Attack, Wrong, Discord, Threats, Death, 47–53). Her kinship with Death has been stressed in action, in her first narrative moment, when she turns Amphiaras away from sky-gazing as he rides to his death (*auertit morti contermina Virtus* 'Virtue, death's neighbour, distracts him', 7. 702). The description of her abode near Jupiter's throne will make many readers associate Virtus with the Dira sent by Jupiter to destroy Turnus at the end of the *Aeneid* (12. 845–55). Statius adheres to the Roman preconceptions of the nature of Virtus: 'As a state deity, Virtus was not a goddess of virtue in general, but of courage in battle.'²²⁰ Although Virtus is about to inspire Menoeceus to an act of self-sacrifice which will call forth Statius' high enthusiasm, the company she keeps should alert us to expect that neither the manner of her action, nor our reaction to it, will be straightforward.

As she arrives at Thebes, her feet are touching the earth, and her face is near the sky (10. 638). Not just a description of her size, this image aligns Virtus simultaneously with Vergil's Fama and Homer's Eris ('Strife').²²¹ As an economical snapshot of what produces manly virtue in the world of the poem, this literary parentage could scarcely be bettered: fame is certainly what Menoeceus desires, and wins (10. 790–1); rivalry with his brother has a role also, for Virtus tells him to hasten to suicide, lest Haemon do it first (10. 671). Virtus disguises herself as Manto, the daughter of Tiresias, a process which Statius describes as deceit (*fraus*, 640); deceit is precisely what the inspired Menoeceus will practise upon his father, not eighty lines later (720–34).²²² As

²²⁰ Axtell (1907), 25.

²²¹ *Il.* 4. 442–3; *Aen.* 4. 176–7. As Statius' Virtus is the companion of Jupiter, so Homer's Eris is very closely linked with Zeus (*Il.* 11. 3, 73–81).

²²² Note how Statius stresses there the *fraus* inspired in the hero by the gods (720–1); and note how Menoeceus' first word to his father is *falleris* (720): 'you are mistaken (to assume what you assume)', and also, clearly, 'you are being deceived (by me as I speak to you)'. Menoeceus practices similar deceit in Euripides' *Phoenissae* (977–92). On Statius' relationship with Euripides here, see Legras (1905), 120–1.

she assumes the appearance and dress of the prophetess, Virtus softens, losing her awe-inspiring qualities to some extent (641–2). In a phrase with many resonances to come, we are told that ‘little of her distinction remained’ (*paulum decoris permansit*, 642). *decus*, translated here as ‘distinction’, may also mean ‘seemly behaviour, decorum’,²²³ and it is this quality which is put into jeopardy by the goddess’ assumption of pacific female guise:

tamen aspera proclunt
ora deam nimique gradus, sic Lydia coniunx
Amphitryoniaden exutum horrentia terga
perdere Sidonios umeris ridebat amictus
et turbare colus et tympana rumpere dextra.

None the less, her fierce face and excessively grand strides betray the goddess. Thus his Lydian spouse [Omphale] laughed to see the son of Amphitryon [Hercules] take off his shaggy lion-hide and ruin the Sidonian garments with his shoulders, messing up the distaffs, smashing the timbrels with his right hand. (10. 645–9)

In his commentary, R. D. Williams records the reaction which will be felt by many at a first reading: ‘This simile, which is brilliantly pictorial in itself . . . , is wholly inappropriate in the context of the transformation of the majestic goddess Virtus: Hercules’ plight is comical and ridiculous.’²²⁴ Yet readers who have come this far will be reluctant to assume blundering, and will rather seek some explanation for Statius’ remarkable procedure here—especially since it is Statius himself who has made ‘appropriateness’ an issue, with his highlighting, before the simile, of Virtus’ loss of ‘seemliness’ as she takes on her disguise (*paulum decoris permansit* . . .), and with his description, immediately after the simile, of Menoeceus as ‘not an unseemly object for the sacrifice’ (*neque . . . indecorem sacris*, 650).

The first level of inappropriateness asserts itself readily enough, in the fact that Virtus is disguised as a pacific creature, just as Hercules is disguised as a woman (indeed, the womanly disguise of Virtus and Hercules may prompt one to reflect upon the distinct oddity of Virtus being figured as feminine in the first place, inasmuch as *uir-tus* denotes ‘the qualities typical of a true man’²²⁵). This fundamental inappropriateness leaks out into the

entire context. Statius’ death-besotted and reckless Valour is radically incongruous in any other than a martial setting (though she may slip into Bacchus’ train as a symptom of drunkenness, the Dutch courage which adds strength and horns even to the poor man²²⁶). The job of this Virtus is not to incite Menoeceus to mighty deeds of war, but to remove the great hero from his orthodox martial arena, where he is already performing splendidly, hacking away without respite—all in the *absence* of Virtus (*necdum aderat Virtus*, 657); only before Virtus arrives is Menoeceus ‘not unseemly’ (650). The potentially indecorous bathos of the suicide itself is caught with the confrontation of the obsessed hero and the outsize, underdressed female figure of Virtus, with her wild eyes and bulging shoulders. As Menoeceus flings himself from the walls, trying to land on top of his enemies, it is difficult to feel altogether solemn: *seque super medias acies, nondum ense remisso, / iecit et in saeuos cadere est conatus Achiuos* (‘he threw himself over the middle of the battle-lines, without letting go of his sword, and tried to fall on top of the savage Achaeans’, 10. 778–9). His mad urge to turn his violence against himself as well as his enemies is going to save the city, and it is, in the abstract, a pious and valorous act, as is shown when the abstract figures of Pietas and Virtus honour his falling body by bringing it gently to the ground (780–1). Yet the actualization of his decision by means of the indecorous and inappropriate figure of Virtus colours the entire action, if we allow the characterful intervention of the personification to register on our reading.

It is astonishing how Statius contrives to channel so many of the poem’s currents of energy together into the climactic moment of the brothers’ duel. His lavish experimentation with personification and allegory is no exception. The duel displays the crescendo and termination of the Furies’ action, the abnegation of Jupiter and the celestial powers, the rout of Pietas—and it prepares for the disappearance of the allegorical narrative mode itself. The sense of escalating competition over the brothers’ fate becomes quite overwhelming, making this one of the greatest moments in the poem.²²⁷

²²³ OLD s.v. §4.

²²⁴ Williams (1972), on 10. 646 f.

²²⁵ OLD s.v. §1; *appellata est enim a uiro uirtus*, Cic. Tusc. 2. 43; *uirtus . . . a uirilite*, Varro Ling. 5. 73.

²²⁶ *tu . . . uiris . . . et addis cornua pauperi / post te neque iratos trementi / regum apices neque militum arma*, Hor. Carm. 3. 21. 17–20.

²²⁷ To Williams (1978), 174, this is an example of Statius’ over-use of the divine

The ever-inventive malignity of Tisiphone begins the 500 lines of action which will culminate in the death of both brothers. One Fury has sufficed so far, but she now needs her 'great' sister, Megaera, for the 'great [literary] work' (*grande opus*, 11. 100) of the climax.²²⁸ Tisiphone delivers herself of a 35-line speech to her sister, gloating over the carnage so far, and making the arrangements for the final duel (11. 76–112). Her loquacity meets with a rather odd silence. The second Fury speaks precisely eight words during her time on earth (11. 201–2), and that solitary speech is designed to stop delay and speed up the action (*abrumpe moras, celeremus!*). Megaera's evil appears to be of a less histrionic, more business-like variety than Tisiphone's. It is all the same to the professional Megaera which brother she infects: she seems sluggish to her excited sister Tisiphone (*quid lenta uenis?*, 11. 101), and does not respond when offered the choice, so that Tisiphone herself allots the victims (101–9). This contrast should make us concentrate on how Tisiphone lingers on her achievements and her plans. It is open to us to put the Fury's words to one side as we read on to the 'real' matter of the brothers themselves, yet we are going to miss much of what Statius is saying about the experience of evil if we do not absorb Tisiphone's infinite capacity for taking pains in the infliction of pain, and contrast her glee with the equally repellent torturer's matter-of-factness embodied by Megaera.

Tisiphone is confident of success, but she anticipates some resistance. 'Let kindly faith,' she says, 'and piety fight back, they will be beaten' (*licet alma fides pietasque repugnent / uincentur*, 11. 98–9). She goes on to explain that, whereas the brothers themselves are easy meat, she is anxious about the influence of the Theban populace, of the brothers' mother, sister, and father, and

machinery: 'the single combat of the two brothers in book 11 is very elaborately arranged by Tisiphone and Megaera. A more disappointing instance of this form of overkill occurs in book 1 . . .'. A remark more beside the point can scarcely be imagined. Schetter (1960), 26, has some very fine observations on the escalation and outdoing of the whole episode.

²²⁸ The same translingual pun appears to be operating in Sen. *Thy.* 252–4, where Thyestes wishes for Megaera to come, and then says that his heart is burning with a madness which is *not great enough*, and that he wants to be filled with a *greater* monstrousness. The obvious Greek etymology from *μεγαλῶ* ('to grudge one a thing as too great for him', *LSJ* s.v.) is attested in Cornutus (*Theol. Graec.* 10, 11). Statius appears not to play on this etymology explicitly, but he may hint at it when Polynices (who is under the influence of Megaera) sees his brother's splendid entourage and accoutrements, and feels precisely this emotion (11. 396–9).

of Adrastus and the Argive people (102–11). Sure enough, the next 350 lines show the failure of faith and piety to sway the brothers, as these groups and individuals successively attempt to reason with them, or simply manifest misery at their intentions.²²⁹ Polynices' essential superiority to Eteocles is shown by the fact that he is brought to the verge of acknowledging faith and piety three times, before capitulating for good (139–50, 193–7, 382–7). After all these delays, when the brothers finally charge at each other in combat, Statius pauses on the brink for yet more postponement, as their horses swerve, and the actual clash is put off yet again (447–56). At this point, when we must expect all resources of delay to have been exhausted, Statius begins afresh with an astonishing switch of direction, in which he actualizes Tisiphone's talk of the resistance of faith and piety by showing us the very personification of Pietas, as she observes the combat, decides to intervene, and is put to total rout by Tisiphone (457–96).²³⁰

Let us look again at Tisiphone's mention of Pietas in her initial speech to Megaera. 'Let kindly faith and piety fight back,' she had said there, 'they will be beaten' (*licet alma fides pietasque repugnent / uincentur*, 11. 98–9). Modern editors must decide whether to print the two substantives with or without initial capitals, and they decide to print capitals because they know that personified Pietas will appear in the action some 350 lines later. In the ancient context, such a decision is not at issue. Statius' original audience could not, of course, hear any difference, any more than we can, but nor could they see one, for the printing conventions which force editors to choose between *pietas* and *Pietas* are post-classical (indeed, post-medieval). Statius perhaps marginally inclines his audience to think of personalities here, rather than mere qualities, by using a significant epithet (*alma*, 'kindly, nourishing'), which is a characteristic epithet of female deities, and of Fides in particular.²³¹ None the less, by the time the horses of Eteocles and Polynices are swerving away from each other 450 lines later, we think we have seen the defeat of Faith and Piety

²²⁹ Venini (1970), on 11. 102, 110. Oedipus will appear only after the brothers are dead (11. 580–5). Otherwise, Thebans: 257–62, 416–19, 475–6; mother: 315–53; sister: 354–82; Adrastus: 196–7, 424–46; Argives: 246–7, 475–6.

²³⁰ The surprise of the introduction of Pietas is well brought out by Lewis (1936), 54.

²³¹ Enn. *Trag.* 350 Jocelyn (1967), o *Fides alma*; OLD s.v. \$b.

definitively enacted in the defeat of the human characters who have attempted to represent these qualities to the antagonists: Megaera puts a helmet on Polynices' head to block out Adrastus' 'words of faith' (*fidus exclusit casside uoces*, 11. 200), while Antigone is explicitly 'pious' (11. 321).²³² The reader's experience of the earlier parts of the poem reinforces the sense of surprise when Pietas appears, for in Book 7 a very similar scene of confrontation had enacted itself without any appearance of a personification, when Iocasta and her two daughters had attempted to stop the invading army of Polynices with appeals to piety (506, 529). With a very striking simile, Statius reveals that Pietas is indeed reduplicating the action of the human characters: *fraternaue bella, / ceu soror infelix pignantum aut anxia mater, / deflebat* ('Pietas was bewailing the brothers' war, like an unhappy sister of the fighters, or an anxious mother', 11. 460–2).

The defeat of Pietas happens many times, in other words. We see Adrastus, Iocasta, and Antigone fail to make the brothers listen to the claims of faith and piety, and then, when we expect finally to see the combat which must follow as a consequence, Statius encapsulates that failure once and for all with the abortive intervention of Pietas herself.²³³ The poet enables us to experience the defeat of piety and the defeat of Piety, by narrating first the interaction of pious advisors with the doomed princes, and then the interaction of Pietas and Tisiphone themselves. He gives us a (comparatively) naturalistic narrative, and then follows it by uncovering the urge to universalise the experience which has been latent in our reading of the human interchanges. The intervention of Pietas is fixed in a time subsequent to the human interventions, since narrative can do no other; yet it is not a subsequent event, but rather a retelling, in an entirely different mode, of the previous

300 lines. The experimental nature of Statius' work must be allowed to register, as well as its marked originality. He is testing alternative modes for catching experience, and, at moments like this, appears almost to be leaving it up to the reader to decide which is more adequate or compelling.

For modern readers, with our knowledge of the subsequent development of allegory, the confrontation of Pietas and Tisiphone is a numinous moment. One has the sensation of being present at the birth of an entire tradition of composition, and the tingle in one's spine is increased by the realization that Statius is utterly—arrogantly—in command of this manner of composition. Yet, for all its posthumous influence, the *Thebaid* does not act out the triumph of personification allegory. The abstracts do not take over from the gods of epic, as is implied by Lewis, with his aphorism on the twilight of the gods being the mid-morning of the personifications.²³⁴ For this narrative mode, which asserts itself against the background of the supersession of the epic gods, is itself superseded. Just as the brothers' duel shows the withdrawal of Jupiter and the end of the action of the underworld, it is likewise the cap for the action of the personifications: Pietas is the last such creation on view in the poem. Statius' acknowledging of his procedure will be plainly seen if we turn, in conclusion, to Clementia.

When Oedipus finally speaks over his sons' corpses, he addresses Pietas and Natura, and refers to the *clementia* of his human heart:

tarda meam, Pietas, longo post tempore mentem
percutis? estne sub hoc hominis clementia corde?
uincis io miserum, uincis, Natura, parentem!

'Now, when you are too late, Pietas, after long space of time do you smite my heart? Is there clemency in this human breast? You conquer, ah you conquer, Nature, this unhappy parent.' (11. 605–7)

This mention of clemency anticipates the lengthy treatment of the Altar of Clemency to come in the next book (12. 481–511). Since Oedipus has appealed to Pietas, we may be led to expect that this anticipation of clemency will work in the same way as had the anticipation of Pietas, so that reference to the quality will be followed by the appearance of the personification in the narrative. This sense of expectation is reinforced early on in Book 12,

²³⁴ Lewis (1936), 52.

²³² Statius responds a number of times to epic's use of the helmet as an emblem of the barrier placed between the hero and his humanity. Hector removes his helmet in order to be human enough to pick up his son (*Il.* 6. 472–3); on the only occasion in the *Aeneid* when Aeneas talks to his son, he kisses him through his helmet, in an almost exaggeratedly metaphorical gesture (12. 433–4). Polynices, whose humanity is closer to the surface than his brother's, responds to Antigone's plea: 'his helmet allows tears to appear' (*lacrimasque fatetur / cassis*, 11. 385–6). When Iocasta confronts the faceless mass of the invading army as she looks for Polynices, she asks: 'Tell me, under which helmet am I to find my son?' (*quam inueniam, mihi dicite, natum / sub galea?*, 7. 491–2).

²³³ Cf. Vessey (1973), 276–7 on how Pietas' 'descent to the battlefield is an allegorical repetition of the earlier attempts at peace-making'.

when we are told that some of the Argive widows will go to Athens, to see if the clemency of the Attic people will be favourable to them (12. 175–6). Yet when we arrive with the Argive widows at the Altar of Clementia, we receive an ostentatious declaration from the poet that he is going to stay in the human mode, and refrain from picturing Clementia in the action: she is going to be an altar, a name, a quality of human nature, but not a character:

nulla autem effigies, nulli commissa metallo
forma dei, mentes habitare et pectora gaudet.

There is no image, the form of the deity is entrusted to no metal, she rejoices to inhabit minds and hearts. (12. 493–4)

Statius refers to the hoary Varronian notion that the earliest and purest form of worship was aniconic,²³⁵ yet more than one form of representation is being forsworn here. Clementia is not going to be entrusted to paper any more than to metal. She will remain a human emotion in a human heart, as she had been described by Oedipus (*sub hoc hominis clementia corde*, 11. 606), and she will not follow Virtus and Pietas into characterful action in the narrative.²³⁶

Such an emphasis is in harmony with the poem's final concentration on the human dimension, which we discussed at the end of the previous Section. Indeed, this very concentration on humanity provides us with another way of looking at the role played by the personifications in the closing stages of the poem. As the gods themselves begin to fade out of the action, the personifications do, fleetingly, come into their own. Even they, however, cease to act as characters, and they come to be used, so to speak, without initial capital letters, as ways of speaking generally of human conditions. It is possible to see in this movement an image of the historical process of personification itself, as first reconstructed by Reinhardt, who saw the personifications of Greek religion emerging from the need to associate the Olympians with human emo-

²³⁵ Fr. 18 Cardauns (1976). Statius' stress on the mildness of Clementia is also in harmony with Varro's contention, in the same context, that the iconic representation of the gods was the factor which spread fear amongst the worshippers.

²³⁶ The fact that Clementia is a human emotion is stressed by Lewis (1936), 53; Vessey (1973), 309–11. Statius' unique conception of Clementia is brought out in the valuable article of Burgess (1972), which stresses the way in which Clementia is set apart from the gods' traditional power to pardon (344).

tions and conditions.²³⁷ The personifications may be seen as a way of mediating between the gods and humans, of associating qualities and emotions both with gods and with humans: 'they emerge from an emphasis on *human* conditions'.²³⁸ In a very short space, Statius acts out this process. The gods become unapproachable and ineffectual; the qualities which are associated with them and with humans are allowed to act for a while, with success, as in the case of Virtus, or without, as in the case of Pietas; finally, the poet's focus confines itself entirely to human emotions and exchanges. Clementia had been left among humans by the gods, so Statius tells us (12. 499–505); with the gods' disappearance, and with the abandonment of narrative through personification, this human realm is the only one in which she can now exist.

None of the poets discussed in this book is as innovative as Statius in the treatment of the gods. He possessed an extraordinarily acute sense of the nature and limits of this type of narrative, and was able to demarcate its possibilities by setting it beside other, more novel, narrative modes. Repeatedly chastised for being derivative, this exuberant, accomplished, and original artist deserves better of modern readers.

²³⁷ Reinhardt (1960b), 18–32; cf. already Petersen (1939), 29, on the fifth century: 'Immer bilden die vergöttlichten Mächte des Lebens und Normen des Staates einen Weg der Menschen zu den Göttern, sie stehen zwischen ihrer ewigen Welt und dem menschlichen Dasein, für beide gültig.'

²³⁸ Whitman (1987), 272 (his emphasis). Whitman's appendix 'On the History of the Term "Personification"' is most valuable (269–72); cf. Burkert (1985), 185: 'the Archaic Greek personifications come to assume their distinctive character in that they mediate between the individual gods and the spheres of reality; they receive mythical and personal elements from the gods and in turn give the gods part in the conceptual order of things'.

