

Commentary On Statius' *Thebaid*, Book IV, 604-45

These lines are culmination of a necromantic ritual that began at 4.406. With the Argive army on the march to Thebes, King Eteocles is fearful, and desperate to know the outcome of the coming war. He turns to Tiresias, the blind seer who had lived for seven generations of men, according to the *Melampodia* (fr. 276 M–W), and assisted all Theban rulers in times of need. Arguing that all forms of augury and divination will be useless, Tiresias claims only directly communing with the dead will reveal the answers the king seeks (4.409-14).

After an extended scene of ritual preparation, and a catalogue of Theban and Argive dead, Tiresias meets the target of his summoning, Laius (4.604-5). The dead Theban king, slain by his own son Oedipus, and grandfather of King Eteocles, is 'breathing immortal hatred' (4.609 *immortale odium spirans*). He is unwilling to drink the blood that will allow him to speak. The seer must entice him to do so.

6.604-10

We are first introduced to Laius standing alone on the 'sad shore of Cocytus' (4.604-5 *stabat inops comitum Cocyti in litore maesto / Laius*). He enters in enjambment on 605, delaying his arrival and keeping the audience in suspense, for maximum effect. Mercury is mentioned, and Laius' return to the underworld (4.605-6). This references the earlier events of Book 1 and 2, when Oedipus had called to Tisiphone to curse his sons (1.56-87), and Jupiter had ordered that the guilty cities should be punished (1.214-47). Mercury had taken Laius' shade from the underworld to visit Eteocles in a dream, to put fear and hatred into his grandson's mind, and set in motion the events that will lead to the coming civil war (2.89-127). Having last been seen pouring blood from a gapping wound

in his neck over his grandson (2.122-4), and given the long delay in his arrival after the catalogue of the Theban dead (5.553-78), an audience must have been kept in awe, unsure what would happen next.

Laius 'looks sideways at his dreadful grandson' (4.606 *dirum... tuens obliqua nepotem*), an adjective that both Eteocles and Polynices are labelled with several times throughout the epic (see 1.298, 2.122, 3.245, 6.425, 7.215, and 12.85). This nod to cyclical nature of doom facing Theban family members is a common theme, hinted at multiple times in this section. His sideways look implies he is suspicious and angry with Eteocles. He stands aloof from the other ghosts and does not step forward to drink the offered blood (4.607-8), but is 'breathing immortal hatred' (609 *immortale odium spirans*), confirming his lack of goodwill to his fearful grandson. This hatred for his kin characterises Laius, and will dictate the nature of what he is soon to reveal, although this, tragically, won't be clear to Eteocles. Laius is not the first ghost to refuse to speak with the living due to hatred in the epic tradition. Ajax is 'angry' at his death in the *Odyssey* (11.544 *κεχολωμνη*) and turns away from his friend Odysseus, and when Dido sees her former lover she is 'burning and gazing fiercely' in the *Aeneid* (6.467 *ardentem et torua tuentem*), having cursed him and future Roman generations to war with Carthage.

But Laius' unwillingness to speak is also a departure from these traditions, as the ghost being sought for information, Tiresias in the *Odyssey* and Anchises in the *Aeneid*, has never needed enticing to help the hero. The necromancy in Book 4 follows the traditions set in other epics, starting with Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, but Statius has also greatly expanded parts of the rituals and the overall horror of the scene. Vessey convincingly argues that this necromantic scene is good example of Statius' artistic methods, that he took great inspiration from Ovid, Seneca and Lucan, but "extended and

intensified the baroque tendencies of his predecessors, presenting novel and still more ornate versions of well-established *topoi*” (Vessey, 1973, p. 257). This is typical of Statius in other parts of his epic. He constantly looks to tradition, and then pushes the genre with excess, paying both tribute to those who came before him and establishing his own reputation at the same time.

In the coming dialogue between the Theban seer and former king, Statius will engage even more with the works of later writers, particularly Seneca. As Parkes points out “Constant allusion is made to the Senecan episode, the intertextuality stressing the accursed cyclical nature of Theban history” (Parkes, 2012, p. 214).

As in the *Thebaid*, Laius’ hatred is also a key part of his character in Seneca's *Oedipus*, where he speaks ‘with raving lips’ (*Oed.* 626 *rabido ore*), as well as the need for vengeance. In *Oedipus* he was glad to reveal the truth of his son’s origins to Tiresias and Creon. He had no pity for Oedipus as a victim of the gods' plans, fate, nor his family’s curse, and now he has the same lack of pity for his grandson. This cyclical family hatred is a key theme driving events in the *Thebaid*, starting with Oedipus’ prayer to the underworld in the opening book (1.56–87), and continuing through the brother’s civil war, their deaths (11.572-3), and Creon’s decree that they could not be buried (11.661-4, 12.100-3).

4.610-24

To soothe Laius’ hatred, Tiresias uses pacifying and high language to praise the dead king, the ‘Renowned ruler of Tyrian Thebes’ (4.610 *Tyriae dux inclute Thebes*), claiming that his city and house have seen no good days since his death (4.611-2 *cuius ab interitu non ulla Amphinois arces / uidet amica dies*). This would imply that his own reign was

glorious in comparison, conveniently avoiding issues such as ordering his infant son to be exposed on the mountainside because of an Oracle's prediction about his fate (*Apollod. Lib. 3.5.7*).

Those are big issues to ignore, but passing judgement is not Tiresias' plan. With a vocative of the past participle for emphasis and to raise the level of speech (Parkes, 2012 p. 273), he cries to the angry ghost (4.612-3 *o iam satis ulte cruentum exitum*). He wants Laius in a good and receptive mood, because he plans to argue that Laius need not be angry anymore for his death, as it has been avenged and his family has already suffered enough.

Tiresias goes on to describe Oedipus' current state, as though he remembers well the anger that the Senecan Laius showed towards his son in *Oedipus* (642-6) when it was him asking the seer to raise the dead king's shade, and hopes this will placate him. Other elements from their interaction support the assertion that Statius is engaging directly with Seneca, such as the decision to begin the necromantic rites and to forgo augury and other rituals. In *Oedipus* the seer and his daughter Manto go through an extended and elaborate scene of augury and divination (209-383), before deciding to begin the necromantic rites to get the answers they seek. Statius' Tiresias calls out that those methods won't work (4.409-14) and immediately begins preparations to speak with the dead, almost as though he remembers well the result from his previous efforts. Statius, continues to nod to his predecessors, and then setting out to outdo them.

Further evidence of the interaction between the two works comes in the way Tiresias portrays Oedipus. He is not merely blind, but 'feels connected to the borders of death' (4.615 *iunctae sentit confina mortis*), his face is 'covered by filth and blood' (4.616

paedore et sanguine uultus), and has been 'cast out from the light of day' (4.617 *eiectusque die*). Finally, Tiresias declares Oedipus' 'fate harsher than any death' and cries out *crede mihi!* (4.617-8) as a final authoritative plea to the angry ghost, using enjambment for emphasis. All of this will perhaps be in vain. Laius will soon speak, but, as we will see, he will give no indication he agrees they have suffered enough, and seems bent on aiding the underworld forces to perpetuate his family's cycle of doom.

This speech closely follows and engages with Seneca's Oedipus, and the reasons he gives for blinding himself, deciding that death would be too easy, and it is only right that he continue to suffer to atone for his crimes (*Oed.* 936-57). Blindness is presented as a fate worse than death, that by removing the light from his eyes he would continue to exist in a sort of 'living death', as Dietrich has argued convincingly Jocasta also does in the *Thebaid* (Dietrich, 2015, p. 307-21). This is also how Statius introduces Oedipus to us at the start of Book 1, as 'condemned to everlasting night' and living 'his life in a long-drawn death', by removing his eyes by his own hands (1.46-8). This is not the reason Sophocles' Oedipus gives, who chooses blindness after seeing Jocasta's corpse, so that he would not have to see anymore sights of woe (*Soph. Oed. R.* 1268-74).

Next Tiresias asks why Laius' ignores his 'innocent' grandson and invites him to drink the blood and 'sate' himself (4.618-21). Calling Eteocles innocent is a great irony. Even though he has committed crimes by not giving up his throne and sending the 50 warriors to kill his brother's embassy Tydeus (2.482-703), in a sense he did start the epic as innocent. Vessey persuasively has argued that he had no intent to do those things (Vessey, 1973, 234). It was only by the actions of Oedipus' curse (1.56-87) and the events that followed, including Laius' own involvement in his dream, that stirred the young king's fears, and led him down the path to war and crime.

Tiresias' speech culminates in asking Laius to reveal 'the coming turns and funerals of war, whether in anger or pity for the affairs of your kin' (4.620-1 *venturaque uisces et funera belli / pande, uel infensus res mierate tuorum*). The image of *funera belli* looks ahead to future events, where the funerals of the dead brothers are uncertain (11.661-4, 12.100-3). Tiresias has framed his speech and arguments to present the situation as in Laius' interest to share his knowledge, whatever he feels, whether in anger or pity for his nephew (Parkes, 2012 p. 272). This may have been short-sighted on Tiresias part, as choosing an angry ghost may not have been the most best choice to receive a useful prophecy. But it makes sense from Statius' perspective of interacting with the literary tradition, whilst heightening the tragedy and horror for the audience.

Finally, Tiresias pledges to help Laius cross the river Lethe, where he will no longer be disturbed by the living (4.622-4). It is not stated why he is there, but it is not hard to imagine why this would be a positive offer for an angry ghost who keeps being called up by his hated family members. Offering gifts to the dead for their help and information goes back to Homer, where Odysseus promises to sacrifice heifers to Tiresias when he returns home (*Ody.* 11. 29-33). Lucan's witch Erichtho also offers the same peace from further questioning to the roman soldier that she has brought back to life (*Luc.* 6762-70). Lucan's soldier accepts the offer (*Luc.* 6.824-7), as does Laius. Soothed by Tiresias' words and 'honourable gifts' (624-5 *mulcetur honoris / muneribus*), he 'wets his cheeks' with the offered blood (625 *tingitque genas*), another example of Statian excess. Just drinking the blood like in other epics wouldn't have enough..

4.626-645

But that is not to say his response is what Tiresias or the young king had hoped for. Laius, begins by questioning Tiresias, asking why he of all the shades was chosen to answer their questions (4.627-8 *lectus ego augurio tantisque potissimus umbris, / qui ventura loquar?*). It is a legitimate question, as the purpose of raising the Senecan Laius was to find out who had killed him (393-4). Laius has not been singled out as having special knowledge of the future.

His selection makes more sense in light of his next comments. He says 'It is enough to remember past events' (4.628 *satis est meminisse priorum*), and then goes on to attack Oedipus (4.629-34). He has not been asked to speak about past events, nor Oedipus, but he is 'reprising' his earlier role in the Theban story. Although he does not have a dark secret to reveal this time, his words both remind the audience of his past Senecan appearance and his son's crimes, keeping the cyclical nature of Theban kin violence and familial hatred fresh in their minds.

With slow spondees and powerful repetition for emphasis (Wills, 1996 p. 78) of *illum*, hard to replicate in English translation, he calls 'Bring him, yes *him*, to the sacrilegious rites' (4.630 *illum, illum sacris adhibete nefastis*). Oedipus is not named, but his crimes are listed in a rhetorical triplet (4.631-2) of increasing horror, reworking his words from *Oedipus* (634-40). Calling for 'he who stabs his father with joyous sword' (4.631 *qui laeto fodit ense patrem*), Statius follows a different tradition, rather than a staff as in both Sophocles (*Oed. R.* 811) and Seneca (*Oed.* 769.) A 'joyous' sword is a strange combination, especially knowing that it was an accidental murder. Parkes points out 'perhaps rational thinking is not to be expected from the enraged Laius' (Parkes, 2012, p. 278). This is plausible, in addition Statius could have chosen a sword as a link to the later

deaths of his grandsons (cf 4.643 *geminumque nefas miseros... enses*). Another link in the family's cycle of doom.

Oedipus' crime of incest is next, 'he who turns himself to his origins' (631-2 *qui semet in ortus / vertit*), i.e. the womb that gave birth to him, using the same words again as Seneca (*Oed.* 638 *egitque in ortus semet*). Similar words are used by Jupiter in Book 1 (1.235 *proprios (monstrum!) reuolutus in ortus*) to describe him. And finally, the crime of conception, 'he returns his own children to his underserving mother' (632 *indignae regerit sua pignora matri*). Shackleton Bailey (2003 p. 253) has translated this as 'thrusts back her child', but I would concur with Parkes' argument that the plural *pignora* imply Tiresias is referring Oedipus' children, and not himself (Parkes, 2012 p.277). It also suits the rhetorical triplet of increasing unnatural horror: patricide, incest and conception. In two lines the horror of his Oedipus' story is succinctly summarised and repeated to remind the audience.

It is not clear from this rant how Laius feels towards his wife Jocasta. The adjective *indignae* is often translated as 'underserving', but it can also have the meaning 'unworthy' (*OLD* s.v., 1). Either interpretation could be correct. Jocasta has a good claim to being the most innocent family member. Laius knew the consequences of fathering a child who would kill him with her, but went to her chambers when he was drunk anyway (*Apollod. Lib.* 3.5.7.), and the Senecan Laius words many support this argument too (*Oed.* 636-7: *sed tamen peior parens / quam natus, utero rursus infausto grauis*). On the other hand, the anger, hatred and lack of sympathy Laius shows for his kin support the view that he may well hate her too. The second view seems most likely to me, given the figure of hatred Laius has played in this poem so far. Being sympathetic to his wife and seeing her as a victim may be too much for him.

Next Laius says that 'now [Oedipus] wearies the gods and the dark councils of the Furies and invokes our ghosts in these battles' (4.633-34 *et nunc ille deos Furiarumque atra fatigat concilia et nostros rogat haec in proelia manes*). This would be ambiguous to Tiresias and Eteocles, but clear to an audience that he is speaking of Oedipus' call to Tisiphone and the underworld gods in the opening scenes of the poem (1.56-87), the act which put these events in motion. This tragic irony characterises much of his remaining speech, and would have heightened the drama for an audience.

He finally agrees, saying that if he has been chosen as a 'prophet for tearful times' (4.635 *quodsi adeo placui deflenda in tempora uates*), that he will answer their questions about the coming war, but only 'as far as Lachesis and grim Megara allow me' (4.635-6 *quo me Lachesis, quo torua Megaera / usque sinunt*). Erictho also chose the corpse of a Roman soldier as a prophet (Luc. 6.228 *uatem*). A prophet being limited by what they can say is not unusual. Virgil provides a great example when Helenus, who when sharing his divine instructions for the Trojans, was prevented from sharing more by the Fates (*Vir. Aen.* 3.379-80, *prohibent nam cetera Parcae / scire Helenum farique uetat Saturnia Iuno*).

In fact Laius' coming words may imply that, unlike Helenus, he not only knows what will happen, but he is knowingly working with the dark powers of the underworld to bring them about (Ganiban 2007 pp. 68-9). Ganiban has convincingly argued that, whereas in Virgil's world 'the heavenly gods maintain control over hell; in Statius' world, the Furies dominate' (Ganiban 2007, p. 32). Juno called on the Fury Alecto to do her bidding, (*Vir. Aen.* 7.540-71), and she returns the underworld once her task of fomenting war was complete. The same can be said of the Ovidian Tisiphone (*Met.* 4.481-511). Yet 'Statius' Tisiphone operates unchecked' (Ganiban 2007, p. 32) by divine power in the *Thebaid*. She

even moves faster than Jupiter's thunderbolt (1.92-3, *licet igne louis lapsisque citatior astris/ tristibus exiluit ripis*). The underworld has more power than the gods in Statius' world, and these lines do a powerful job of reminding the audience of this through Laius' seething hatred and actions in support of their dark plans.

Laius' prophesy for the future is bleak and ambiguous. Although for the audience, once again full of dramatic irony. He begins, 'War, war comes from all sides by countless host,' (4.637-8 *bellum, innumero uenit unique bellum / agmine*). The phrase is 3 dactyls, framed by the two spondees of *bellum*, an uncommon arrangement throughout this scene, giving a sense of the frenzy and panic of war. The Sibyl uses the same words in her prophesy (Verg. A. 6.86 *bella, horrida bella*), as had Tiresias previously (4.601-2 *bella horrida nobis*).

Next Mars is named as doing the work of Fate, by 'dragging' and 'goadng' the Argives to war (4.638-9 *Lernaeosque trahit fatalis alumnos / Graduius stimulis*), another reminder of the tragic nature of this war, which is going to bring ruin to all. The deaths of several Argives are then alluded to: Amphiaras will fall down a rupture in the earth (4.639 *terrae monstra*) to the underworld (7.794-823); Capaneus will be struck by Jupiter's thunder bolts (10.921-39; cf. 8.76-7), here called 'weapons of the gods' (4.639-40 *deumque / tela*); the death of young Parthenopaeus is 'beautiful' (4.640 *pulchrique obitus*) because he was beautiful when he was alive (Shackleton Bailey, 1983 p. 54), when dying (9.880) and dead (12.806). These predictions mirror those produced during the Argives augury rites in book 3, for Amphiaras (3.546-7), Capaneus (3.539-40), and Parthenopaeus (3.540-1), and though they mean little to the character's at the time, help to give the poem structure (Parkes, 2012 p. 279) and build the sense of tragedy for an audience, who are likely familiar with the story. This push and pull between the expected, and the unexpected

Stasian embellishments to Theban narrative added by Statius, would have been a key part of the enjoyment, both joy and horror, for an audience.

Laius' prediction of 'obstructions from the supreme fire by guilty laws' (4.640-1 *ab igne supremo / sontes lege morae*), looks to Eteocles and Polynices, when their uncle Creon will decree that their bodies and the other Argives are not be buried (11.661-4, 12.100-3). The importance of burial in the Greek world is hard to understate. When Odysseus speaks to dead, the ghost of Elpenor, whose body was not buried properly, begs him to do so (*Hom. Ody.* 11.59-80). The very idea that a law can be 'guilty' speaks to the sacrilegious nature of the decree. It is 'legal', in the sense that a king will decree it, but it transcends the acceptable morals and customs of society regarding treatment of the dead. In Statius' ancient Thebes, Theseus' words at the end of the poem to overturn the decree (12.798) would have been perhaps as close to a happy ending as the audience could expect for the doomed brothers.

Laius' predictions for Thebes seems to grant a favoured outcome, but only briefly. In an uncharacteristically unambiguous statement he promises that 'Victory is certain for Thebes, fear not, nor shall your fierce brother have the kingdom' (4.640-1 *certa est uictoria Thebis, ne trepida, nec regna ferox germanus habebit*). Finally, after listening to his grandfather's rants and laments, Eteocles may have felt relieved at this, and perhaps encouraged to fight, not understanding the full prophecy. Ganiban (2007 p.69) persuasively argues this was Laius' goal all along, "Here the Statian Laius shows his family's propensity for kin violence by fuelling the conflict."

The ambiguity returns with Laius' final prophetic words, 'but the Furies shall have it; through twin crime and wretched swords (woe is me!) the cruel father conquers' (4.643-4

sed Furiae; geminumque nefas miserosque per enses / (ei mihi!) crudelis uincit pater). The Furies are introduced in enjambment, for maximum shock, quickly ending the optimism of the coming 'victory'. To the audience, the entire bleak outcome is spelt out. The Furies, orchestrating events at the behest of Oedipus' (1.56–87), will triumph through the brother's duel and mutual destruction (11.503–73), and Oedipus will have succeeded, gaining his vengeance on his kin. Moments before the duel, Tisiphone will say to Pietas 'This is our battlefield, our day' (11.485–6 *noster / hic campus nosterque dies*).

All of this would not be clear to Eteocles. Although he learnt of his father's prayers to the Furies from Laius (4.633–4), he doesn't know what he had asked for. Plus he has just heard how the Argives will meet destruction, and that victory is certain. Parkes plausibly argues that these final lines are 'cryptic enough not to discourage him' (Parkes, 2012 p. 279), and that it is usual for Oracles and prophecies to be unclear and uncertain (Parkes, 2012 p. 280). This whole speech emphasises the tragic fate that the brothers are hurtling towards. Even Laius seems to show some understanding that this is seriously wrong, describing the brothers' swords as 'wretched' (4.643 *miserosque enses*, cf 4.631 and Oedipus' *laetus* sword), and uses the emotionally charged *nefas* (4.643) to describe their duel. The word had acquired a powerful connection with unthinkable crimes against the natural order by the late 1st Century (Ganiban 2007, p.33), and would have reminded the audience of the disturbing nature of the fratricidal war to come. Of course, given Laius' behaviour and words throughout this scene, it is also likely he is angry that Oedipus will get his wish. The final word of his speech is *pater* (4.644), just as it was in *Oedipus* (658), an ironic repetition which may speak to the depths of his hatred for his son.

After this, Laius returns to the underworld, and 'leaves them in doubt by his winding evasion' (4.644–5 *haec ubi fatus labitur et flexa dubios ambage relinquit*). Eteocles may be

confused and terrified, but Laius has succeeded in his purpose. He has revealed enough of the truth to satisfy the requirements of a necromantic summoning, but without interrupting the underworld's plans for the coming fratricidal war. For an audience, Statius' entire necromantic diversion (4.404-645), would have been a powerful emotional experience, following the conventions set by previous epic and drama, whilst expanding them to new heights of excessive horror. With the closing of this speech, they would be in no doubt of the tragedy still to come.

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