

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

These lines show the culmination of a necromantic ritual that began 200 lines before at 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 so assisted all the 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 (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. The dead Theban king, slain by his own son Oedipus, and grandfather of King Eteocles, is 'breathing immortal hatred' (609). He is unwilling to drink the blood that will allow him to speak, thus the sage must entice him to do so. The majority of this section consists of direct speech, of Tiresias' enticing and Laius' response.

604-10

We are first introduced to Laius standing alone on the 'sad shore of Cocytus', with him entering in enjambment for maximum effect (604-5). Mercury is mentioned, and Laius' return to the underworld (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, and he put fear and hatred into his grandson's mind, setting in motion the events that had led to the coming civil war (2.89-127).

Laius 'looks sideways at his dreadful grandson' (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). 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 (607-8), but is 'breathing immortal hatred' (609 *immortale odium spirans*), confirming his lack of goodwill to his fearful grandson. He 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*).

But Laius' unwillingness to speak is a departure from these traditions, where the ghost being sought for information, Tiresias in the *Odyssey* and Anchises in the *Aeneid*, has never needed enticing to help the hero. The differences between the meeting of father and son in the *Aeneid*'s underworld, and grandfather and son in the *Thebaid*, are striking. The necromancy in Book 4 follows the traditions set in other epics, including Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Up until this point, the rituals and events have largely been a combination of both epics, with some elements expanded or exaggerated in Statian style. Vessey argues that this necromantic scene is good example of Statius' artistic methods, which followed the tradition of 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*" (D. Vessey, 1973, p. 257). Statius, while aware of the epic tradition and paying tribute to it, is interested in taking it to new heights.

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).

Like here 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 scene, and continuing through the brother’s civil war, their deaths, and Creon’s decree that they, his nephews, could not be buried.

His hatred alone, however, is not enough to prevent him from speaking altogether, which may indicate that his desire for vengeance is greater, or speak to Tiresias’ power of persuasion in the coming speech.

610-24

To soothe Laius’ hatred, Tiresias uses pacifying language and praises the dead king, the ‘Renowned ruler’ (610 *dux inclute*), claiming that his city and house have seen no good days since his death (611-2). This would imply that his own reign was glorious in comparison, conveniently avoiding issues such as accusations of rape, and ordering Oedipus be exposed on the mountainside because of an Oracle’s prediction about his fate (Apollodorus, REF).

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, p. 273), *o iam satis ulte cruentum exitum* (612-3) he cries to the angry ghost. He wants Laius in a good and receptive mood, because his goal is to argue that he 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* (Sen. Oed. 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 (REF), before deciding to begin the necromantic rites to get the answers they seek. Statius' Tiresias calls out that those methods won't work (REF) and immediately begins preparations to speak with the said, almost as though he remembers well the result from his previous efforts (REF).

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' (615), his face is 'covered by filth and blood' (616) and has been 'cast out from the light of day' (617). This line has been placed in enjambment for maximum effect by Statius. Light and dark is a favoured theme of his, and he frequently makes comparisons between the living and the dead in these terms (REF/EXAMPLES). Finally, Tiresias declares Oedipus' 'fate harsher than any death' and cries out *crede mihi!* (617-8) as a final plea to the angry ghost, again using enjambment.

This speech closely follows and engages with Seneca's Oedipus, and the reasons he gives for his choice of punishment. At the end of *Oedipus*, he decides that death would be too easy, and it is only right that he continue to suffer to atone for his crimes (REF). 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 and other characters also do 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 in *Oedipus Rex*, our other main source for this scene, who chooses blindness for (CHECK REASON), further supporting the argument that Statius is following in Seneca's footsteps.

Next Tiresias asks why Laius' ignores his 'innocent' grandson and invites him to drink the blood and 'sate' himself (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 (REF), in a sense he did start the epic as innocent. Vessey has argued that he had no intent to do those things (D. Vessey, 1973, REF). It was only by the actions of Oedipus' curse (REF) 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 (Vessey, REF).

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' (620-1). The image of *funera belli* looks ahead to future events, where the funerals of the dead brothers are uncertain (REF).

Tiresias has framed his speech and arguments cleverly. He presents the situation so that it is in Laius' interest to share his knowledge whatever he feels, whether in anger or pity for his nephew (Parkes, p. 272).

Finally, Tiresias pledges to help Laius cross the river Lethe, where he will no longer be disturbed by the living (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.* REF). In the Flavian era, Lucan's witch Erichtho also offers the same peace from further questioning to the roman soldier that she has brought back to life (LUCAN REFERENCE).

Lucan's soldier accepts the offer, as does Laius. Soothed by Tiresias' words, he drinks. Or rather he 'wets his cheeks' with the offered blood (625). But that is not to say he response, comprising the rest of this section (626-644) is what Tiresias or the young king had hoped for.

- He is full of resentment and reluctant to speak (626-30)
- Begins to rant about Oedipus (630-33), hasn't been asked to speak about him, but that was his role in Seneca and Sophocles, to reveal his killer.

- Follows the (insert) tradition with "joyous sword", a strange combination.

Either he is willingly exaggerating, or hate has turned his mind. Parkes points

out his probably a isn't very stable mind (Commentary, Quote)

- *Semet in ortus* (631), is from Seneca, "The one who returns to his origins", Jocasta and her portrayal, also quoted in Book 1, Jupiter
- *Indignae...matri*, not sure exactly what this word meant, does he have sympathy for her? Or does he see her as unworthy? - CHECK
- Comments that now Oedipus is responsible for invoking the gods and the Furies in this (633-4), a reference to Book 1 (LINES?? + details), but this would be ambiguous to the listeners, like much of the speech that follows
 - Bring in Ganiban's idea that *nefas* is central, and all these events have been set in motion by Oedipus and his call to the Furies, who here have more power than the gods, unlike in Virgil
- 636-7 implies that Lachesis and Megara are limiting what he can say
 - Ganiban - The underworld has more power than the gods in Statius' world
- 637-41 is full of references to future events that would please an audience, but again mean little to the listeners. But then again, oracles aren't known for being reliable (reference, Parkes commentary?)
 - *Bellum... bellum* is a references to - see Parkes, p. 278

- Mars and Fate are literally goading the Argives towards this (could this be a better point to talk about fate and the gods?)
- Cross-reference to the deaths to come: the one who falls into the underworld, the one killed by Jupiter, and the obstruction of the brothers funeral by Creon.
- “And obstructions from the supreme fire by guilty laws” - the significance of this
- Laius states victory is certain, but only for Thebes, not him nor his brother. The Furies shall have it (641-43) through “twin crime and wretched sword”, obvious perhaps to the audience, but ambiguous to the listeners.
- Finally he declares “The cruel father conquers” (644), finishing with *pater*, just like (insert reference).
- The final line leaves it clear that the Thebans are left in doubt (645) as to the future outcome of the war, despite their efforts.
 - Why is this significant? Because the purpose of these actions are to get information about the future

Ideas not covered above:

- The overall effect, how does this work with the idea of delay? Is it a digression? Or a set up for the next scene? Perhaps the main purpose is to imitate previous poets and expand on their ideas? In that sense this scene succeeds in many ways.
- Characterization - Who is Eteocles? What type of man is he? Does this affect why he doesn't get the information he seeks, because he isn't a pious man like Aeneas?

Points I could expand/improve:

- Comment on the theme of light and dark which is prevalent throughout the text