

Stattius' Thebaid and the Poetics of Civil War. By CHARLES McNELIS.*
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A recent survey of scholarship on Statius' epic concludes that "the overall message of the *Thebaid* is not easy to extrapolate," noting that power, *pietas*, anti-*pietas*, fury, the anger of Jupiter, civil war, allegory, dynastic succession and literature as a form of escapism have all been proposed as principal themes of the poem.¹ One key to a more definitive interpretation may lie in a fuller appreciation of Statius' use of his Greek poetic predecessors. Although Statius explicitly situates his epic in relation to Vergil (*Theb.* 12.816; *Silv.* 4.7.25-8),² he studied poetic composition with a father deeply learned in Greek verse and chose for the subject of his epic a theme best known from classical Athenian tragedy. Charles McNelis' (hereafter M.) study of the intertextual relationship between the *Thebaid* and the works of Callimachus thus represents a timely effort to shed light on an important and relatively understudied aspect of Statius' epic poetics.

M. contends that Statius creates a program of allusion to Callimachean poetics and anti-Callimacheanism that mirrors the conflict over Thebes at the heart of the *Thebaid* (p. 1). Callimachean poetics is characterized as endorsing "small-scale creations that enjoy peaceful settings," and is contrasted with the "large-scale productions about violence and strife" (p. 70) created by the Telchines. When M. finds allusions to Callimachus together with significant delay, an undermining of traditional epic heroism or a resistance to closure, he reads these gestures as appeals to Callimachean poetics. This poetic program counters, but often must yield to, a Telchinic drive for war more consonant with Statius' epic predecessors, above all Homer and Vergil (e.g. pp. 44-5, 97-8, 132). Thus, as much as the conflict over Thebes reflects Roman concerns about civil war, the allusions to Callimachus act out a struggle over whether and how to tell a civil war story.

M. lays out this argument in his introduction, and elaborates it through six chapters that take episodes of the poem in order. Chapter 1 examines the *action* of the Argive festival of Apollo told by Adrastus in *Thebaid* 1.557-668. M. argues that, through allusion to related Homeric and Vergilian scenes, Statius creates the expectation

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¹ K. Pollmann, *Stattius, Thebais 12: Introduction, Text and Commentary* (Paderborn, 2004). P. 26.

² See R. Ganaban, *Stattius and Virgil: The Thebaid and the Reinterpretation of the Aeneid* (Cambridge, 2007).

that the *action* will show the gods establishing control of the cosmos, but then presents them as allying with chthonic forces, thereby “re-ject[ing] the notion that control and order are dependent upon the gods” (p. 47). Here various allusions to Callimachus’ version of the story help “disrup[t] the theological vision of earlier epic” (p. 37). Chapter 2 centers on the ekphrasis of Harmonia’s necklace at 2.269–305. M. argues that Statius mentions Vulcan, the Telchines and the Cyclopes when describing the necklace in ways that allude to the conflict between Callimachus and his detractors on view in the *Aetia* prologue. This and subsequent allusions “establis[h] that the narrative of Theban violence has an anti-Callimachean programme” (p. 52).

The interpretation of the necklace becomes a touchstone for the remainder of the book. In Chapter 3, M. reads the delay of the Argive armies at Nemea in Books 4–6 as a Callimachean “counterpoint to the martial agenda devised by Vulcan and his assistants” (p. 77). Chapter 4 argues that delay at the beginning of *Thebaid* 7 represents a final gesture of allegiance to Callimachean poetics (pp. 98–9) before the war begins. In Chapter 5, M. interprets the deaths of five of the seven heroes of the Argive contingent as representative of “an anti-Callimachean poetic agenda that exemplifies the narrative of violence and intestine warfare created in part by the Telchines” (p. 124). Chapter 6 argues that “epic models are challenged by allusions to Callimachus’ poetry” (p. 176) to produce an open ending to the poem signifying the difficulty of concluding civil war. An epilogue restates the thesis that Statius uses Callimachus to voice an alternative to grand, heroic epic narratives.

M.’s study takes as a premise, without explanation, a firm conception of Callimachean poetics as advocating non-heroic, non-linear, open-ended poetic narratives. This is a commonly accepted interpretation, but, given the importance of Callimachean poetics to M.’s book, one would have liked some discussion of how he arrived at this conception, including some consideration of Cameron’s views, however unorthodox. Nor does M. consider what the unleashing of dueling poetic programs within the epic signifies about Statius’ own poetics. If in the end Statius sides with Callimachus entirely, why does he compose a long, ultimately linear poem about warfare? Is he rather staging the defeat of Callimachean ideals? Or is he somehow disinterested? Discussion of this question might have made an apt theme for M.’s epilogue.

M. offers no discussion of his approach to intertextuality, but his interpretations at times set a demanding standard for the poem’s audience, or perhaps rely implicitly upon the notion that it is the critic alone who produces meaning. Such is the case with the use of Harmonia’s necklace as a key to interpretation. Once M. has argued

that allusions to Callimachus in the necklace ekphrasis refer to contrasting poetic programs, he then understands subsequent references to Callimachus in the remaining ten books of the poem, however slight and in whatever context, as referring to this conflict. Readings of individual passages also seem to envision readers tracing wide-ranging and subtle allusions, as when M. argues that an intertextual nexus contributes to Coroebus' effort to shame Apollo into desisting from his slaughter of Argives (p. 45). The argument proceeds as follows: Coroebus speaks of the *inclementia* of the gods (1.651); the most notable example of *clementia* is the altar at 12.481–518; the *clementia* of the altar is a translation of the Greek *eleos*; the mention of *inclementia* at 1.651 thus brings to mind *eleos*; this in turn recalls Apollo's appeal to *eleos* at *Il.* 24.44 to persuade Achilles to end his anger; so Coroebus is challenging Apollo (intertextually) to live up to the values he espoused in *Il.* 24. Some theoretical discussion of how intertexts signify might have given M.'s reader a benchmark against which to measure the efficacy of such chains of allusion.

At the same time, when M. focuses more tightly on inter- and intratextual connections, he offers compelling readings of key passages. Thus he nicely details the resonances of Harmonia's necklace with Homer, Callimachus, Ovid, Statius' *Silvae* and other parts of the *Thebaid*. His concise discussion of the duel of Eteocles and Polynices in light of the final duels in the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* (p. 147) is equally illuminating. And M. illustrates that the triumphal return of Theseus looks rather equivocal by comparison with the finality of Augustus' triumph on the shield of Aeneas (pp. 175–6).

In the end, M. delivers a thoughtful reading of Statius' use of Callimachus, with telling observations on other intertextual links. I myself did not find the argument for a thoroughgoing program of Callimachean allusion fully persuasive. But M. has shed substantial light on Statius' use of Callimachus, and has thus opened up a new perspective that, alongside others, will form the basis for continuing interpretation of Statius' epic.

NEIL COFFEE

University at Buffalo, SUNY