

BOOK REVIEW

Anticipation and Anachrony in Statius' Thebaid. By ROBERT SIMMS. London, UK and New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Pp. i + 208. Hardback, £76.50. ISBN: 978-1-3500-8257-1.

Robert Simms' monograph, which stems from his PhD dissertation, asks a very interesting and timely question: how does Statius manage to keep his audience engaged with a twelve-book epic about a myth as well-known as that of the Seven against Thebes? How does he create suspense and anticipation in a story whose outcomes are already known? In order to achieve his aims, Simms surveys the major scenes and characters and the creation of suspense, with recourse to the main tragic intertexts of the *Thebaid*.

In an Introduction, Simms briefly introduces the texts through which the Theban myth could have been known to Statius' audience, including the ones that are lost or fragmentary. He then discusses how familiar Statius' hypothetical audience would have been with the myth, and sets this against Statius' proclamation of novelty in the epilogue of the *Thebaid* (12.812–15). This is followed by a five-page discussion of suspense, anticipation and surprise: Simms quotes the definition of suspense given by Ortony, Clore and Collins, as well as the work by Richard Gerrig on the so-called suspense paradox. In some of the other chapters, Mieke Bal's work on narratology, as well as Gary Morson's concept of "side-shadowing" are invoked as well.¹ Simms is aware of the scholarship on suspense in ancient texts, but, somewhat surprisingly, he does not engage with some of the many works on suspense in modern narrative.²

¹ A. Ortony/G. Clore/A. Collins, *The Cognitive Structure of Emotions* (Cambridge 1988); R. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven 1993); M. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto 1985); G. S. Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven 1994).

² To name but a few: E. S. Rabkin, *Narrative Suspense* (Ann Arbor 1973); P. Vorderer/H. J. Wulff/M. Friedrichsen (eds.), *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations* (Mahwah 1996); R. Baroni, *La tension narrative. Suspense, curiosité, surprise* (Paris 2007).

In the first chapter, Simms discusses the proem of the *Thebaid*, set against the prologue of Euripides' *Phoenissae*, and the way both texts situate themselves within the story of Thebes. In Chapter 2, Simms explores Statius' use of "portentousness and a sense of foreboding" (31), as a means of creating suspense in the audience and anxiety in the characters of the *Thebaid*, from Tydeus' and Polynices' arrival in Argos to Teiresias' necromancy at Thebes. Chapter 3 is dedicated to Hypsipyle's Lemnian narrative and the Argive army's delay at Nemea, with a focus on the way these anticipate the war against Thebes. In Chapter 4, Simms studies the figure of Jocasta and her ultimately futile attempt to prevent the fatal duel between Eteocles and Polynices, as well as the way Statius elides the famous scene in Euripides' *Phoenissae* of Jocasta meeting with her sons. Chapter 5 deals with Oedipus, his curse and the expectations it creates, as well as the way Statius' Oedipus works both with and against the tradition established by Euripides' and Seneca's *Phoenissae*. Chapter 6, entitled, "Portentous Ends," examines how the end of the seven Argive leaders, as well as the Theban Menoecus, works against the anticipations created earlier in the epic. In Chapter 7, Simms focuses on the characterization of Eteocles and Polynices as leaders. The final chapter explores how Statius creates an unexpected ending with Argia's and Antigone's burial of Polynices and the intervention of Theseus.

Simms offers a careful study of moments of anticipation in the *Thebaid*, in terms of portentous scenes, prophecies, character portrayal, similes and Statius' engagement with and deviation from well-established versions of the Theban myth. In fact, Simms is especially good at studying Statius' interplay with the Theban tragedies. However, the other key word from the book's title, anachrony, only plays a marginal role and is evoked only in Chapter 1.

Simms justifies his choice of the *Thebaid* as his test case by stating that the myth of Thebes "offers more surviving versions with which to make comparison than any other extant work from Classical antiquity" (13). In my opinion, however, the specific nature of the myth of Thebes could have resonated more profoundly with Simms' discussion. While he does mention the inevitability of the dire end of Thebes (quoting Zeitlin's seminal article³), further questions could have been raised: is there anything specifically "Theban" about anticipation and suspense in the *Thebaid*, i.e. does it differ from other works whose outcome is well known, from myth or from history, such as, for instance, the *Punica* by Statius' near-

³F. Zeitlin, "Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama," in J. P. Euben (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley 1986), 101–41.

contemporary Silius Italicus? Does suspense in a narrative about Thebes only keep the audience engaged, or does it actually make us even more painfully aware that, at Thebes, everything is inevitably caught up in an endless loop of the repetition of violence, suffering and death? Is there anything that we can learn from this Theban example for theoretical reflections on suspense and anticipation in narrative? A brief conclusion might have helped Simms to address some of those more wide-ranging questions. As it stands, however, Simms' book offers a welcome and thorough study of an essential aspect of Statius' art.⁴

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⁴The book is carefully produced, with only a few typos. It includes a helpful index. Regrettably, the book has endnotes rather than footnotes.