

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Fragility of Power: Statius, Domitian, and the Politics of the Thebaid.* By STEFANO REBEGGIANI. New York, NY.: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xiv + 322. Hardback, \$74.00. ISBN 978-0-19-025181-9.

Readers of the *Thebaid* owe a great debt to scholars such as Frederick Ahl and William Dominik, who in the 1980s and 1990s argued for a poem that was no mere escapist fantasy, but rather politically engaged, and indeed strongly critical of imperial power. Subsequent scholarship has been hesitant to fully accept the idea of Statius the professional poet criticizing, even covertly, the most powerful man in Rome, and readings have fallen into “optimistic” and “pessimistic” camps. At the same time, more emphasis has been laid on the literary dimensions of the *Thebaid*’s political themes, so that when Statius discusses tyranny or civil war, our eye should be as much on Virgil, Callimachus or Greek tragedy as on contemporary Roman politics.

Stefano Rebeggiani’s important new book argues persuasively for a renewed focus on directly political readings of the *Thebaid* and offers an appealing new critical framework to make sense of the poem’s politics. The crucial point is that the *Thebaid* was written in the 80s and early 90s CE, at a time when various senatorial groups, in particular survivors of Nero’s hostility, are on tentative good terms with a new emperor “who seeks to present himself as an embodiment of *clementia*, a friend of the Senate, and the polar opposite of Nero” (20). Rebeggiani argues that Statius associated with members of these groups (the Annaeans in particular), and that the various portraits of tyrannical leaders in the *Thebaid* would thus have been read in terms of the anti-Neronian propaganda current in these circles, while the focus on *clementia* at the *Thebaid*’s conclusion would have aligned with Domitian’s imperial self-representation in the first part of his reign. This more “optimistic” political reading exists, however, in the generally pessimistic framework of Statius’ tragic epic: power, even when wielded by a clement emperor, is terrifying and unpredictable, and history had provided Statius’ audience with many examples of early promise that slid into tyranny. Like his predecessors Lucan and Seneca (who loom large in Rebeggiani’s analysis), “Statius too sees himself as an advisor of kings” (20), urging Domitian to succeed in establishing a

permanent peace where Augustus and Nero had failed. As Rebeggiani well observes, this was all in vain, and almost immediately after the completion of the *Thebaid* relations between Domitian and the senatorial elite soured and the anti-tyrannical themes in the poem opened irresistibly to anti-Domitianic rather than anti-Neronian readings.

Rebeggiani's overall thesis is persuasive, and will I hope inspire a critical reevaluation of the *Thebaid* in the vein of that sparked by the earlier work of Ahl and Dominik. To support his thesis, Rebeggiani ranges widely over the *Thebaid*, exploring in successive chapters topics relevant to political discourse at the time of the poem's composition: Nero, solar imagery, Hercules, Lucan's *Bellum Civile* (Seneca's tragedies and *De Clementia* are also a prominent presence throughout the book), narratives of outside saviours at times of crisis (here the focus is on Coroebus) and the Gallic sack of Rome. All of the arguments are interesting, and most of the points made are persuasive. As Rebeggiani acknowledges in his concluding chapter, much more work is possible. Indeed, it is now time to more fully integrate the book's innovations into the broader scholarship on the *Thebaid*, something which Rebeggiani himself could perhaps have done a little more consistently. Overall, this volume offers not only a new framework for reading important themes in the *Thebaid*, but also makes a good case for treating its political resonances as capable of the same complexity, contradiction and nuance as Statius' literary intertexts. It is a book well worth reading.

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