

## ***Philomathes***

### ***Oedipodae confusa domus: Double Meanings in Statius' Thebaid***

---

**D**ouble meanings in Statius' *Thebaid* follow a long literary tradition of wordplay in Greek and Latin poetry.<sup>1</sup> Joshua T. Katz has aptly defined this rhetorical technique as "extreme language" that, in every instance, "toy[s] with the boundaries of language, skating along its periphery without, crucially, quite going beyond (into the realm of nonsense or gibberish)."<sup>2</sup> Those linguistic boundaries, of course, are the boundaries of denotation (the literal meaning of a word) and connotation (the meaning implied by a given word). In this way, according to Christine Luz, double meanings in the *Thebaid* take on the complementary qualities of invitation and disguise, entreating its readers to examine Statius' verse for obscured meanings,<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Benefiel finds evidence of a lively culture of wordplay in early-Roman society: "The graffiti of Pompeii thus testify to an active culture of writing and reading, not solely for the purpose of communication but also for simple enjoyment. Inscribed word-games, riddles, even improvised adjustments to popular poetry all highlight the rich variety among the wall-inscriptions of Pompeii and testify to a culture of playful literacy and mental activity among the wider population under the early Roman Empire." Rebecca R. Benefiel, "Magic Squares, Alphabet Jumbles, Riddles and More: The Culture of Word-Games among the Graffiti of Pompeii," in *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry*, eds. Jan Kwapisz, David Petrain, and Mikolaj Szymanski, (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 79.

<sup>2</sup> Joshua T. Katz, "The Muse at Play: An Introduction," in *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry*, eds. Jan Kwapisz, David Petrain and Mikolaj Szymanski (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Christine Luz, "What Has It Got in Its Pocketses? Or, What Makes a Riddle a Riddle?" in *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry*, eds. Jan Kwapisz, David Petrain and Mikolaj Szymanski (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 83-99.

# Philomathes

while enjoying the analytic pleasure of verbal contests. In this paper, I argue that Statius chooses this word-game in order to more subtly engage with his epic predecessors Ovid and Vergil.<sup>4</sup> I also argue that double meanings strengthen the rhetorical and narrative potency of key scenes in the *Thebaid*, constituting the epic's larger pattern of doubling or what Ellen O'Gorman identifies as "acts of recognition or misrecognition performed both by characters and by readers."<sup>5</sup> Lastly, I examine specific textual examples of wordplay and how each instance enhances both imagery and narrative through either the overlapping of multiple meanings of one word or the intimation of one word with its homonymic equivalent.

Statius' *Thebaid* is replete with allusions to Vergil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>6</sup> For example, Statius' ekphrastic depiction of Sleep's lair in Book 10 of his epic contains direct allusions to Ovid's description of Sleep in Book 11 of his *Metamorphoses*. The same occurs in the *Thebaid*'s Hypsipyle episode in Book 5 which, in many ways, resembles Dido's in

---

<sup>4</sup> In the final lines of the *Thebaid*, Statius addresses his epic's connection to Vergil's *Aeneid*: *nec tu diuinam Aeneida tempta, sed longe sequere et uestigia semper adora* ("Don't rival the divine Aeneid, but follow it at a distance and always worship its steps", 12.816-17).

<sup>5</sup> Ellen O'Gorman, "Beyond Recognition: Twin Narratives in Statius' *Thebaid*," in *Roman and Greek Imperial Epic*, ed. Michael Paschalis (Heraklion, Crete: Crete University Press, 2005), 29.

<sup>6</sup> J. H. Mozely, "Statius as an Imitator of Vergil and Ovid," *The Classical Weekly* 27, no. 5. (1933), 33-8; Alison Keith, "Ovid's Theban Narrative in Statius' *Thebaid*," *Hermathena*, no. 177/178 (2004), 181-207; Randal T. Ganiban, *Statius and Virgil: The Thebaid and the Reinterpretation of the Aeneid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Alison Keith, "Imperial Building Projects and Architectural Ecphrases in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Statius' *Thebaid*," *Mouseion* 7, no. 1. (2007): 1-26.

## ***Philomathes***

Book 4 of the *Aeneid*.<sup>7</sup> Given the ubiquity of textual parallels connecting Statian, Ovidian and Vergilian epics, the *Thebaid* perhaps borrows from previous epics' rhetorical techniques as well.<sup>8</sup> Double meanings are well-recorded in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Vergil's *Aeneid*.<sup>9</sup> *Dryopeius*, for example, an epithet ascribed to Erysichthon in Book 8 of *Metamorphoses*, has fascinated Ovid's editors for its semantic layers. Derived from the Greek word for "oak," *dryopeius* contains a subtle nod to Erysichthon's great offense when he fells a tree in Ceres' sacred grove. The epithet also bears connotations to the Dryopians who, like Erysichthon, were notorious for their impiety.<sup>10</sup> Vergil's *Aeneid* likewise contains instances of double meaning, such as with the word *sola* in Book 4.

post ubi digressi, lumenque obscura vicissim/  
luna premit suadentque cadentia sidera  
somnos,/ sola domo maeret vacua stratisque  
relictis incubat. (*Aen.* 4.80-83)

After they have departed, and the moon, in turn, has dimmed its light and the stars, setting, urge their slumbers, she grieves alone in the empty house and lies down on the bed he abandoned.<sup>11</sup>

The juxtaposition of *luna* and *sola* through enjambment suggests to the reader *sola's* homonym *sole*, or "sun." Taken with the literal text *sola domo maeret vacua*, line 82 reads

---

<sup>7</sup> S. Georgia Nugent, "Statius's Hypsipyle: Following in the Footsteps of the *Aeneid*," *Scholias: Studies in Classical Antiquity* 5, no. 1. (1996), 46-71.

<sup>8</sup> Martha A. Malamud, "Happy Birthday, Dead Lucan: (P)Raising the Dead in *Silvae* 2.7," *Ramus* 24, no. 1. (1995): 1-30.

<sup>9</sup> Clifford Weber, "Some Double Entendres in Ovid and Vergil," *Classical Philology* 85, no. 3. (1990), 209-14. Weber compiles a useful list of several instances of wordplay in works by Vergil and Ovid.

<sup>10</sup> Weber, "Some Double Entendres," 209.

<sup>11</sup> All English translations are my own.

# ***Philomathes***

"[Dido] grieves alone in the empty house." Taken however with the homonymic and metrically congruent *sole*, the line reads "in the sunless house she grieves." Both readings illuminate key aspects of Dido's storyline: the literal translation describes Dido's melancholic state as a result of her doomed marriage to Aeneas, while the homonymic translation places her in the house of the dead, foreshadowing her fated demise.<sup>12</sup>

Double meanings in the *Thebaid* occur in the same vein as their use in the *Metamorphoses* and *Aeneid*, enriching the ekphrastic and narrative effect of its language and reinforcing its defining motifs: doubling and confusion. The epic itself hinges on the thematic continuity of the Oedipus myth, which, as explained by Terrence Cave, "advertises the tragedy of knowledge lost and recovered."<sup>13</sup> The Oedipus curse (*Theb.* 1.73-87) preserves the tragic cycle which condemns Oedipus' sons Eteocles and Polynices to struggle to know themselves and others.<sup>14</sup> The frequent appearance of twins also emphasizes the epic's theme of Oedipal confusion. The double or twin, Cave contends, is a feature of literature "in which sameness moves from the reassuringly familiar to the disturbingly monstrous."<sup>15</sup> Polynices and Tydeus, for example, though not biologically

---

<sup>12</sup> Weber, "Double Entendres," 212-4.

<sup>13</sup> Terrence Cave, *Recognitions: a study in poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 336.

<sup>14</sup> O'Gorman ("Beyond Recognition," 32) asserts that the discrepancy in how Polynices and Eteocles view themselves and each other manifests in their conflicting answers to two crucial questions: "These crucial questions are (i) how do you tell one brother from another? and (ii) which brother comes first? Polynices and Eteocles think they know the answer to the first question and at least can produce an answer to the second question. In effect, their solution to question (ii), which is to draw lots determining priority of rule, provides the solution to the first question."

<sup>15</sup> Cave, *Recognitions: a study in poetics*, 228.

## ***Philomathes***

related, are aligned in their hatred for their brothers and political ambitions, and each refers to the other as a brother. Biological twinning is likewise prevalent, the foremost set, of course, being Polynices and Eteocles, followed by the twin sons of Hypsipyle, Lycaste and Cydimus, and Castor and Pollux of the Argonauts. Each pair struggles according to the central tragic theme, for when faced with their double, the twins commit disastrous intuitive errors either by failing to recognize kinship, misrecognizing kinship, or recognizing kinship too late.<sup>16</sup>

Oedipal confusion does not end there. Readers of the *Thebaid* too must face its challenges of recognition and misrecognition when confronted with the task of interpreting words with multiple meanings and discerning words from their homonymic pair. One of the earliest examples of these challenges occurs within the first 200 lines of Book 1, as the commencement of Oedipus' calamitous filial curse approaches. Both lusting for power, Polynices and Eteocles devise a monarchical arrangement of alternating reigns providing that, for a year at a time, one brother may enjoy a solitary rule while the other awaits his turn in exile. Statius makes known the certain doom of this precipitous pact in line 143, writing, *nec in regem perduratura secundum*. The line, despite its concision and syntactic simplicity, is far from lacking sophistication. Rather, its narrative dexterity rests upon a single, decisive word appropriately placed at the line's conclusion: *secundum*. Bearing the paired meanings of "second" and "favorable,"<sup>17</sup> this eight-

---

<sup>16</sup> O'Gorman proffers many detailed examples and more analyses of these kinds of misrecognitions committed by characters in the *Thebaid*, especially towards twins and between twins, in "Beyond Recognition" (pg. 29-45).

<sup>17</sup> *Logeion*, s.v. "secundus," accessed November 22, 2022, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/secundus>

## ***Philomathes***

letter adjective alone portends a twofold ruin for Thebes. The adjective cleverly conveys not only the temporal inevitability of the city's monarchical collapse but also its necessity. In essence, Statius' word choice expresses both fact and critique, a critique which seems to urge the arrival of the brothers' despotic foil from Thebes' mythological antithesis, Theseus of Athens.

The second example of double meaning occurs later in Book 1 with the noun *lustra*.<sup>18</sup> Here, exiled Polynices finds himself caught in a storm while wandering through an unknown kingdom. In its most literal translation, *lustra* refers to the wilds or haunts through which Polynices travels, a geographical description. Alternatively, however, the noun's second meaning presents a symbolic metaphor, coloring Polynices' journey as an act of lustration.<sup>19</sup> Statius reinforces this meaning in the surrounding lines with redundant uses of several words for water and rain: *imber*, *infundo*, *glacies*, and *liqueo*. The libationary imagery suggests that Polynices is undergoing a sort of regeneration, a change best understood in terms of his father's curse. This curse damns Oedipus' sons to calamitous strife and ensures that Polynices will never peaceably exchange rules with his brother according to their pact of alternating reigns. Thus, Polynices' lustration strips him of all notion of filial devotion; he will return from exile not as a brother but as an enemy. This kind of layering through double meanings of a necessary depiction of Polynices' geographical whereabouts onto the epic's larger context of curses and fraternal

---

<sup>18</sup> *Logeion*, s.v. "lustrum," accessed November 12, 2022, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/lustrum>.

<sup>19</sup> *Logeion*, s.v. "lustrum," accessed November 14, 2022, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/lustrum>

# ***Philomathes***

estrangement, exponentially enhances the drama and foreshadowing of Statius' storytelling.

Double meanings continue in Book 1, when Polynices coincidentally meets another young exile, Tydeus of Calydon. Exchanging blows, both seeking to expel the other from the shelter they each had found, they learn that this shelter is the threshold of King Adrastus, who insists that they put aside their conflict: *iam pariter coeant animorum in pignora dextrae* (*Theb.* 1.470). *Pignora*, here, possesses two meanings: "pledge" and "family."<sup>20</sup> Statius uses the post-Augustan meaning of the noun *pignora* a mere seventy-six lines earlier in reference to King Adrastus' children, his twin daughters (*gemino natarum pignore fultus*, *Theb.* 1.394). This use of *pignora* expands its literal definition of "pledge" to denote one's relatives who, like a pledge, are valuable and loyal. Thus, the meeting of the minds that occurs between Polynices and Tydeus as a result of their pledge reflects more than a truce but, rather, signifies a kindred attachment. They have established an interpersonal connection comparable to a fraternal bond, supplanting each other for their estranged biological brothers. Book after book, their bond grows stronger, enduring until Tydeus' death in Book 8.

Statius often intensifies scenes of heroic deaths in the *Thebaid* like Tydeus' with double meanings. In Book 7, the verb *rimor* foreshadows Amphiaraus' death in line 761: *corpora rimantur terras*. *Rimor* in its textual context refers to Amphiaraus' horses as they seek a path free of bodies through which they can navigate the battlefield. The verb's historical origins, however, apply to agriculture, denoting the process of

---

<sup>20</sup> *Logeion*, s.v. "pignus," accessed November 12, 2022, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/pignus>

## ***Philomathes***

turning up the earth's soil, forcefully splitting its surface open with "cracks or chinks."<sup>21</sup> This alternative meaning enhances the scene's visual imagery, brilliantly calling attention to the vigorous gallop of Amphiaraus' chariot as his horses' hooves pulverize the earth while foreshadowing the seer-soldier's tectonic death — swallowed up by an infernal chasm driving his raging chariot into Hades.

Stattius similarly employs double meaning to foreshadow Capaneus' death in Book 10, line 828: *comminus astrigeros Capaneus tollendus in axes*. Here, *tollo* can denote, according to its most common use, "to raise," describing Capaneus' ascension up the walls of Thebes. An alternative translation of the verb, however, is "to destroy,"<sup>22</sup> a foreshadowing of his death from Jove's mighty thunderbolt which sends his sizzling corpse plunging from the wall's lofty pediments. A third meaning "to extol" may also be derived from *tollo* denoting the fame Capaneus gains through his act of defiance, a deed, Stattius says the Thunderer himself admired (*Theb.* 11.11). Foreshadowing pivotal death scenes, the overlapping meanings constituting the verbs *rimor* and *tollo* achieve a paramount descriptiveness wherein Stattius expertly exercises his command over the epic genre and the Latin language itself.

Stattius likewise projects a keen command over Latin etymology by parlaying words of seeming inessentiality into words of eidetic or thematic relevance. That is, Stattius often chooses words that seem rather straightforward, but intimate their equally or more compelling homonyms. At *Thebaid* 1.74,

---

<sup>21</sup> *Logeion*, s.v. "rimor," accessed November 12, 2022, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/rimor>.

<sup>22</sup> *Logeion*, s.v. "tollo," accessed November 22, 2022, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/tollo>.



## ***Philomathes***

for example, Oedipus bemoans his blindness with the phrase *orbum visu* ("bereft with respect to my eyes"). Contextually, however, the discussion of his vision suggests the homonym of *orbis*, *orbis*, meaning "eye."<sup>23</sup> When translated to the end of line 74 using its homonymic equivalent, Oedipus' meaning — the lamentation of his blindness — remains intact: "lacking my kingdom and the sight of my eyes" (*orbum uisu regnisque carentem*). The point of the homonym, as evidenced by its near identical meaning with the original *orbum*, is not to establish an ambiguity but to establish emphasis. This emphasis of Oedipus' blindness occurs for two essential reasons: (1) to suggest by reiteration the immense sadness with which Oedipus regards his blindness and (2) to introduce the thematic importance of recognition and misrecognition in the *Thebaid*.

Homonymic doublings of meaning also appear in Hypsipyle's account in Book 5. As Hypsipyle describes the slaughter of men in their beds by the Lemnian women, she provides a negligible detail about the narrowness of the beds. The adjective *artus* bears a close resemblance to its homonym meaning "limb." In fact, Statius uses *artus* over fifty times throughout his epic in exclusive reference to "limbs." The Hypsipyle account presents one of the only exceptions; however, narratively, both *artus* and its homonym play up the gory imagery and atmosphere of the corpse-ridden scene she describes (*artis arma inserta toris*, 5.30-31). Moreover, they foreshadow the gruesome details Hypsipyle later describes of

---

<sup>23</sup> Statius likewise uses *orbis* in reference to Oedipus' eyes in Book 11, line 172: *extinctos galeae pater ingerat orbis* ("my father places his extinguished eyes upon my helmet").

## ***Philomathes***

sword hilts protruding from men's chests (5.252-257), contributing to the overall ubiquity of violence in the *Thebaid*.

Noticing instances, like these of homonymic parallelism or multilayered meanings, engages readers of the *Thebaid* in a riddling exercise of wordplay, an exercise reflective of characters' individual encounters with doubling and confusion. Leaving readers to exercise close reading — grappling both with what the text says and implies — double meanings comprise a rhetorical functionality. Each instance fosters the epic's uniquely interactive quality, wherein its characters and audience encounter Oedipal confusion concomitantly. Moreover, they enhance the epic's literary value with respect to the emphasis of motifs and the imagery of key scenes. It is through double meanings that the *Thebaid* becomes supra-textual: it takes the potency of epic narrative, its strategies and its objects, to the extreme, as the rules of semantics as well as the separation of character and audience are blurred. This feature is unparalleled in previous epic poetry, a demonstration of the distinctiveness of Statius' poetic prowess.

Taylor Tunstall  
The University of the South: Sewanee  
taylormtunstall@gmail.com

# Philomathes

## Works Cited

- Benefiel, Rebecca R. "Magic Squares, Alphabet Jumbles, Riddles and More: The Culture of Word-Games among the Graffiti of Pompeii." In *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry*, edited by Jan Kwapisz, David Petrain, and Mikolaj Szymanski, 65-79. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013.
- Cave, Terrence. *Recognitions: a study in poetics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Ganiban, Randall T. *Statius and Virgil: The Thebaid and the Reinterpretation of the Aeneid*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Katz, Joshua T. "The Muse at Play: An Introduction." In *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry*, edited by Jan Kwapisz, David Petrain and Mikolaj Szymanski, 1-30. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013.
- Keith, Alison. "Ovid's Theban Narrative in Statius' *Thebaid*." *Hermathena*, no. 177/178 (2004): 181-207.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Imperial Building Projects and Architectural Epiphrases in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Statius' *Thebaid*." *Mouseion* 7, no. 1. (2007): 1-26.
- Luz, Christine. "What Has It Got in Its Pocketses? Or, What Makes a Riddle a Riddle?" In *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry*, edited by Jan Kwapisz, David Petrain and Mikolaj Szymanski, 83-99. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013.
- Malamud, Martha A. "Happy Birthday, Dead Lucan: (P)Raising the Dead in *Silvae* 2.7." *Ramus* 24, no. 1 (1995): 1-30.
- Mozley, J. H. "Statius as an Imitator of Vergil and Ovid." *The Classical Weekly* 27, no. 5. (1933): 33-8.
- Nugent, S. Georgia. "Statius' Hypsipyle: Following in the Footsteps of the *Aeneid*." *Scholia: Studies in Classical Antiquity* 5, no. 1. (1996): 46-71.

# ***Philomathes***

- O’Gorman, Ellen. “Beyond Recognition: Twin Narratives in Statius’ *Thebaid*.” In *Roman and Greek Imperial Epic*, edited by Michael Paschalis, 29-45. Heraklion, Crete: Crete University Press, 2005.
- Smith, William. *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*. London: John Murray, 1875.
- Weber, Clifford. “Some Double Entendres in Ovid and Vergil.” *Classical Philology* 85, no. 3. (1990): 209-14.