



McNelis, Charles. *Stattus' Thebaid and the Poetics of Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. ISBN: 052186741X. Pp 214.

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It has long been recognized that allusion to a vast range of earlier literary works is an essential compositional principle of Statius' *Thebaid*. Earlier generations of scholars, however, primarily understood allusion as a derivative activity befitting epigonal poets who came not only after Homer but also after Vergil and Ovid. It is only in recent decades that the study of Statian poetics has benefitted from the widespread resurgence of interest in the study of intertextuality as a dynamic and sophisticated compositional strategy employed throughout Roman literature. The fortunes of the Hellenistic poets have similarly improved throughout the same period, and recent works such as Nelis' study of the intertextual dialogue between the *Aeneid* and the *Argonautica* continue to demonstrate that their importance to the understanding of the Roman poets cannot be underestimated.¹

¹ D. Nelis, *Vergil's Aeneid and the Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius* (Leeds, 2001).

To date, however, few book-length studies of the *Thebaid* have made allusion to Callimachus a serious object of inquiry. Most have preferred to devote attention to more distinguished predecessors such as Vergil; the other book on Statius also appearing this year from Cambridge University Press offers a sophisticated continuation of this tradition.² Vessey's venerable work pays relatively little attention to Callimachus, and Delarue's examination of Statius' poetic predecessors includes only a brief chapter on this Hellenistic poet.³ It is therefore with full justification that McNelis (hereafter M.) presents this fine study, which originated as a UCLA dissertation (2000), of Statius' deployment of allusion to Callimachus.

The Theban saga had traditionally provided the material for discussion of civil war themes in earlier Roman poets such as Ovid, Seneca, and Lucan. Statius' subject, however, is also of particular relevance and interest to a Flavian audience. His contemporary Valerius Flaccus had demonstrated the urgent nature of the theme by including a mythological civil war at Colchis in his *Argonautica*. In the *Thebaid*, however, civil war dominates the narrative instead of being confined to a single book. M. well shows how the epic's form and aesthetic both reflect the subject of internecine conflict. Reference to Callimachean aesthetics tend to indicate peace and concord at the expense of narrative progression, while the aesthetics associated with the Telchines (the narrator's opponents in the famous prologue to Callimachus' *Aetia*) drive the narrative forward toward violence and social disruption. M.'s study also balances examination of Statius' mobilization of Callimachean poetics with reference to his dialogue with other poetic predecessors.

Consideration of the Apollo and Coroebus narrative recounted by Adrastus at the end of *Thebaid* 1 (which draws details from a Callimachean version) forms the basis for discussion

² R. Ganiban, *Statius and Virgil: the Thebaid and the reinterpretation of the Aeneid* (Cambridge, 2007).

³ D.W.T.C. Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid* (Cambridge, 1973); F. Delarue, *Stace, poète épique: originalité et cohérence* (Louvain, 2000), 117-138.

of the epic's account of the relationship between gods and humans (chapter 1). The actions of Statius' wrathful Apollo, who summons hellish forces to cause human beings undeserved suffering, complement the larger-scale narrative of violence set in motion by Oedipus' prayer to Tisiphone. Adrastus' ignorance of the larger significance of his aetiological story marks its difference from the comparable Vergilian and Ovidian epic aetia, in which the divine banishment of monsters (Cacus, the Python) leads to cultic foundations that subtend social harmony rather than to civil war and dissolution. Statius mobilizes prior literary tradition in order to indicate his narrative's departure from the expectations encoded by prior epic. Statius' gods can neither be praised for their triumph over the forces of chaos, nor do they display a beneficent attitude toward human beings. Coroebus' complaint about divine *inclementia* prefigures the lesson of the epic's final book that *Clementia* is in fact separate from the gods, and the encomiastic focus is on the imperial exercise of this virtue (chapter 6). Theseus' control of this virtue and his restoration of peace after civil war in the epic's final book conceptually aligns him with emperors such as Augustus and Vespasian, though the narrative also prevents celebrating him as an ideal through reference to his negative characteristics. The epic's ending precludes naïve optimism by focusing on the suffering of the bereaved survivors and calling attention to the inevitability of the recurrence of violence.

Callimachean aesthetics further inform the epic's account of its origins and teleology as well as its narrative progression. The Telchines assist in the construction of Harmonia's necklace, which both contributes to the outbreak of the war and recapitulates the epic's theme of generational conflict (chapter 2). Statius associates the labor of the Telchines with the narrative drive that will culminate in the destruction of Thebes, while Callimachean poetics in turn become associated with *mora*, the constant deferral of narrative closure upon which the production of large-scale epic narrative depends (chapter 3). The Argives' prolonged, apparently digressive sojourn in Nemea also participates in Callimachean aesthetics. Just as Callimachus had focused on the lowly Molochus rather than the heroic Hercules, so this section of the

Thebaid defers the subsequent martial narrative in order to focus on a humble figure (the infant Opheltes) and an action (the games).⁴ M. develops this component of the argument by indicating the abandonment of Callimachean *mora* at the beginning of the epic's second half. The contrast between the pure spring and the muddy river famously characterizes the difference between Callimachus' preferred oeuvre and that of his aesthetic opponents. The crossing of the river Asopus leads the Argives away from a Callimachean landscape into the world of martial epic, replete with catalogue (chapter 4). A "'Telchinic' narrative strategy" governs the books that relate the conduct of the war (chapter 5). The narrative focus is now on excessive behavior and the dissolution of boundaries, and frequent comparison is made to the Gigantomachy, the subject of the large-scale epic that serves as foil for the Callimachean recusation. Statius thereby attributes a moral dimension to the activity of Callimachus' opponents by associating their works with violence and social disruption, while allusion to the Hellenistic poet represents the retarding narrative function that will hold off destruction as long as possible.

I have only a very few criticisms. Lucan's Theban similes, Rubicon and Delphi episodes, and occasional characters are briefly noticed, but a more sustained account of Statius' dialogue with the *Bellum Civile* would have helped in delivering more fully on the promise of the book's title. While M. successfully relates the civil war theme to Callimachean poetics, attention to Statius' dialogue with his immediate predecessor in Roman epic would add significant counterpoint. For example, Lucan relates the disruption of the social order to models of narrative deferral and poetic excess quite different from the contrast of Callimachean and "Telchinic" poetics advanced here. Discussion of Senecan tragedy, another important mediation of the Theban tradition for Statius, is a further lacuna. Both of the Neronian poets offer pessimistic views of the possibility of adequate resolution after civil war.

⁴ H. Lovatt's recent study (*Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics, and Poetics in the Thebaid*, Cambridge 2005) pursues a comparable argument by viewing the games at Nemea as, among other things, a figure of recusation and a negotiation of the transition between boyhood and manhood, sport and war.

M.'s decision to narrow focus to the deployment of Callimachean poetics in an epic context, however, has resulted in a significant contribution to the interpretation of the *Thebaid*. The monograph admirably balances discussion of the larger-scale consequences of Stattus' compositional decisions with attention to significant details, such as the "Callimachean" soldiers who originate in the *uineta Molorchi* (*Theb.* 4.160). This study both draws on comprehensive understanding of the epic and full control of the most recent scholarship. A particular strength is attention to the programmatic interaction of the *Thebaid* with Stattus' smaller-scale poetic project, the *Silvae*. The discussion of the "Telchinic" poetics associated with the creation of Harmonia's necklace, for example, gains strength from the fruitful contrast of the Callimachean ideal represented in the small-scale Hercules statue of *Silvae* 4.6. M. successfully demonstrates how pointed allusions to Callimachus, far from being merely ornamental displays of *doctrina*, in fact subtend the *Thebaid's* broadest-ranging compositional goals, including its theodicy, its teleology, and its characteristic narrative strategies of dilation, deferral and disrupted closure.