

REWRITING THE *THEBAID*: PIETAS AND THE FURIES IN *SILVAE* 3.3 (AND 5.2)*

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that in Silvae 3.3, written to console Claudius Etruscus on the death of his beloved father, Statius reverses his own account of the contentious relationship between Tisiphone and Pietas in Thebaid Books 1 and 11 to present his patron's affectionate bond with his father as antithetical to Oedipus' resentful relationship with his sons. In the Thebaid, Oedipus summons Tisiphone from the Underworld to punish his own children by stirring up civil war, and the Fury promptly obeys, banishing Pietas from earth to prevent her from stopping the conflict. In Silvae 3.3, on the other hand, the poet asks Pietas to come back to earth, and urges the Furies to stay away from the deceased. The return of Pietas, also portrayed in Silvae 5.2, shows that in his collection of occasional poetry Statius rewrites his own epic to restore cosmos: while in the chaotic narrative universe of the Thebaid all fundamental values, including filial devotion, are turned upside down, the Silvae describe a more conventional and reassuring world, founded on virtue rather than vengeance.

Keywords: Statius; *Thebaid*; *Silvae*; Pietas; Furies; Claudius Etruscus; Crispinus; Domitian

Scholarship on Statius has contributed valuable studies on the relationship between the *Thebaid* and the *Silvae*,¹ whose first book appeared only one year after the publication of the Theban epic. Arguing against Cancik's formalist analysis, which highlighted the continuity between these two works,² Vessey suggested that Statius was eager to differentiate between the *Thebaid* and the *Silvae* in order to comply with the principles of the classical theory of genres.³ Shifting the focus from the style to the tone of the two works, Newlands has persuasively theorized that in the *Silvae*, a collection of 'safe and joyful poetry', Statius often reverses themes and images used in the *Thebaid*, 'a poem of pain and suffering'.⁴ More specifically, she shows that in *Silvae* 1.5, addressed

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¹ More generally on the influence of epic poetry on the *Silvae*, see H. Baumann, *Das Epos im Blick: Intertextualität und Rollenkonstruktionen in Martials Epigrammen und Statius' 'Silvae'* (Berlin and Boston, 2019).

² H. Cancik, *Untersuchungen zur lyrischen Kunst des P. Papinius Statius* (Hildesheim, 1965), 38–43.

³ D. Vessey, *Statius & the Thebaid* (Cambridge, 1973), 7–14, 41–4. Statius' generic concerns are further discussed by J.S. Dietrich, 'Dead parrot society', *AJPh* 123 (2002), 95–110, at 105, who interprets the death of the parrot in *Silvae* 2.4 as the symbol of the poet's wish to leave epic behind and approach a different type of poetry.

⁴ C. Newlands, *Statius' Silvae and the Poetics of Empire* (Cambridge, 2002), 201. This study has paved the way for a number of contributions aimed at explaining how similar motives, ideas and poetic techniques are used differently in the two works. See especially A. Augoustakis, 'Vnius amissi leonis: taming the lion and Caesar's tears (*Silvae* 2.5)', *Arethusa* 40 (2007), 207–21, at 213–21; N.W. Bernstein, 'Fashioning Crispinus through his ancestors: epic models in Statius *Silvae* 5.2', *Arethusa*

to Claudius Etruscus, Statius alludes to his epos to contrast the everlasting friendship between himself and his patron with the undying enmity between Eteocles and Polynices.⁵ In this paper I argue that Statius uses the same technique in *Silvae* 3.3, also addressed to Claudius Etruscus. There he reverses his own description of the contentious relationship between Tisiphone and Pietas in *Thebaid* Books 1 and 11 to present his patron's affectionate bond with his father as antithetical to Oedipus' resentful relationship with his children.⁶

Silvae 3.3 is a consolation for Claudius Etruscus on the death of his beloved father. The poem meets generic expectations by focussing on the deceased, who had an exceptionally long and distinguished career, culminating in his appointment as secretary *a rationibus*. He held this position for a few years, until he was banished by Domitian for some not well-defined reason. Only the intercession of his son with the emperor, Statius emphasizes, allowed him to return from exile not long before his death.⁷ The poem features the conventional structure of Statius' *consolationes*, typically divided into *exordium*, *laudatio*, *lamentatio* and *solacia*.⁸ In the *exordium*, the section where the poet can more easily break away from the constraints of the genre and explore different avenues,⁹ Statius addresses Pietas and begs her to console Etruscus (3.3.1–7):

summa **deum**, Pietas, cuius gratissima **caelo**,
 rara profanatas inspectant numina terras,
huc vittata comam niveoque insignis amictu,
 qualis adhuc praesens nullaque expulsa **nocentum**
fraude rudes populos atque aurea regna colebas, 5
 mitibus exsequiis **ades** et lugentis Etrusci
 cerne pios fletus laudataque lumina terge.

Devotion, power most dear to heaven and god
 supremely high, who rarely now regards
 this desecrated world—be present here
 with fillets in your hair and snow-white cloak,
 just as you were when still you lived on earth
 among a golden race of simple folk
 before the wicked drove you off; attend

40 (2007), 183–96, at 193–6; M. Malamud, 'A spectacular feast: *Silvae* 4.2', *Arethusa* 40 (2007), 223–44, at 239–42.

⁵ Newlands (n. 4), 199–226. Vessey (n. 3), 41 had already noted, although only in passing, that the opening lines of *Silvae* 1.5 may allude to Statius' transition from epic to occasional poetry.

⁶ On fathers' spiteful attitude towards their sons in the *Thebaid*, see N.W. Bernstein, *In the Image of the Ancestors: Narratives of Kinship in Flavian Epic* (Toronto, 2008), 85–94.

⁷ On the life and career of Etruscus' father, see especially P.R.C. Weaver, 'The father of Claudius Etruscus: Statius, *Silvae* 3.3', *CQ* 15 (1965), 145–54 and P. White, 'The friends of Martial, Statius, and Pliny, and the dispersal of patronage', *HSPH* 79 (1975), 265–300, at 275–9. More specifically on his exile, see I. Carradice, 'The banishment of the father of Claudius Etruscus: numismatic evidence', *LCM* 4 (1979), 101–3.

⁸ See K.L. Baucom, 'Four *consolationes* of Statius' (Diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1963), 23. Although A. Hardie, *Statius and the Silvae: Poets, Patrons and Epideixis in the Graeco-Roman World* (Liverpool, 1983), 104 proposes a slightly different partition for *Silvae* 3.3, he ultimately agrees that all *epicedia* in the *Silvae* show a movement from encouragement and lamentation at the start to consolation at the end. More in general on the structure of *consolationes* and *epicedia* in Latin literature, see F. Lillo Redonet, *Palabras contra el dolor: La consolación filosófica latina de Cicerón a Frontón* (Madrid, 2001), 93–4.

⁹ See Baucom (n. 8), 24; S. Newmyer, *The Silvae of Statius: Structure and Theme* (Leiden, 1979), 65.

these touching rites and see devoted grief,
applaud Etruscus' tears and wipe them dry.¹⁰

The prominent role played by *pietas* here, anticipated and underlined by its mention in the *praefatio* to Book 3 as the main theme of the poem (*merebatur et Claudii Etrusci mei pietas aliquod ex studiis nostris solacium*, 14–15), is discussed by White, who points out that, although the occasion calls for a reference to *pietas*, 'the care which Statius has taken to ornament and enlarge it reveals a more than perfunctory interest'.¹¹ This focus on Etruscus' filial devotion was probably due to his lack of remarkable public distinctions: persuading Domitian to reinstate his father after the banishment was his most outstanding achievement.¹² I suggest that Statius makes this emphasis on *pietas* even more prominent by alluding to the *Thebaid* and, more specifically, by reversing both Oedipus' invocation to Tisiphone in Book 1¹³ and the subsequent clash between the Fury and Pietas in Book 11.¹⁴

At the beginning of *Thebaid* Book 1, Oedipus curses his sons for having mistreated him, and summons Tisiphone from the Underworld so that she may punish them by instigating a fratricidal war. The Fury promptly carries out the order. Although in distress on account of the fraternal strife and quite hopeless about the future, at 11.457–96 Pietas makes one last attempt to delay the conflict: she comes down from the heavens to instil a sudden sense of peace into the soldiers' hearts. Tisiphone, however, immediately intervenes to drive her away by threatening her with snakes and torches. Terrified by her rival, Pietas flees, returning to her celestial abode.¹⁵ *Silvae* 3.3 overturns this narrative pattern: having left the earth at the end of the *Thebaid*, Pietas is now called back by Statius, whereas the Furies are exhorted to stay away.

In the first line of *Silvae* 3.3 Pietas is called *summa deum*, and her divinity is defined as *gratissima caelo*. This description reverses the portrait that opens the scene at *Theb.*

¹⁰ The Latin text is E. Courtney, *P. Papini Stati Silvae* (Oxford, 1990). This and all subsequent translations are from B.R. Nagle, *The Silvae of Statius* (Bloomington, 2004).

¹¹ White (n. 7), 279.

¹² See White (n. 7), 279–80; N.K. Zeiner, *Nothing Ordinary Here: Statius as Creator of Distinction in the Silvae* (London, 2005), 222.

¹³ B. Gibson, *Statius, Silvae 5* (Oxford, 2006), 343 notes that the intervention of Tisiphone in *Thebaid* Book 1 is evoked and reworked by Statius at *Silv.* 5.3.195–7, where the breaking out of the Civil War of 68–9 C.E. is portrayed as the result of the action of a Fury (*subitam civilis Erinys | Tarpeio de monte facem Phlegraeaeque movit | proelia*).

¹⁴ This parallel has been entirely neglected by previous scholarship, with the exception of F. Vollmer, *P. Papinii Statii Silvarum libri* (Leipzig, 1898), 258, who has a passing note on the influence of *Thebaid* Book 11 on *Silv.* 3.3.3, and G. Laguna, *Estacio, Silvas III. Introducción, Edición Crítica, Traducción y Comentario* (Madrid, 1992), 257, who restricts himself to pointing out that in both *Silvae* 3.3 and *Thebaid* Book 11 Pietas appears as the 'alegoría de la virtud de su nombre'.

¹⁵ On the defeat of Pietas (and *pietas*) in the *Thebaid*, see especially C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love. A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford, 1936), 54; W. Schetter, *Untersuchungen zur epischen Kunst des Statius* (Wiesbaden, 1960), 57; P. Venini, 'Furor e psicologia nella Tebaide di Stazio', *Athenaeum* 42 (1964), 201–13, at 201–3; Vessey (n. 3), 74–6; F.M. Ahl, 'Statius' *Thebaid*: a reconsideration', *ANRW* 2.32.5 (1986), 2804–912, at 2840; D.C. Feeney, *The Gods in Epic: Poets and Critics of the Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 1991), 352–3; W.J. Dominik, *The Mythical Voice of Statius: Power and Politics in the Thebaid* (Leiden, 1994), 38–9; D. Hershkowitz, *The Madness of Epic: Reading Insanity from Homer to Statius* (Oxford, 1998), 261; F. Ripoll, *La morale héroïque dans les épopées latines d'époque Flavienne: Tradition et innovation* (Louvain, 1998), 329–30; R.T. Ganiban, *Statius and Virgil: The Thebaid and the Reinterpretation of the Aeneid* (Cambridge, 2007), 152–75; C. McNelis, *Statius' Thebaid and the Poetics of Civil War* (Cambridge, 2007), 145–6.

iamdudum terris coetuque offensa **deorum**
aversa **caeli** Pietas in parte sedebat,
non habitu quo nota prius, non ore sereno,
sed **vittis** exuta **comam**.

nonnihil impulerat dubios, ni torva notasset
Tisiphone **fraudes** caelestique ocior igne
adforet increpitans: 'quid belli obverteris ausis,
numen iners pacique datum? cede, improba: noster
hic campus nosterque dies; nunc sera **nocentes**
defendis Thebas.'

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sluggish deity, made over to peace? Begone, shameless! This is our battlefield, our day. Too late you now defend guilty Thebes.'

In *Silvae* 3.3 Statius rewrites his own epic to restore the natural order of the world: while in the narrative universe of the *Thebaid*, dominated by chaos and characterized by a complete upheaval of all values, Pietas' attempted intervention to stop civil war was regarded as a trick, in the *Silvae*, where traditional morals are revived, *fraus* defines the banishment of Pietas instead.

At *Silv.* 3.3.6 Statius addresses Pietas with the typical invocation of kletic hymns,²⁰ *ades*, also used by Oedipus to summon Tisiphone at *Theb.* 1.81 (*huc ades*; note *huc* in the same line-position at *Silv.* 3.3.3).²¹ The hellish world described in the *Thebaid* provides the perfect setting for Fury's ascent to earth,²² which relegates Pietas to a marginal role; in the *Silvae*, on the other hand, Pietas is finally recalled, and the Furies are urged to stay away (3.3.26–8):

longe Furiarum **sibila, longe**
tergeminus custos, penitus via longa patescat
manibus egregiis.

Far off be hissing hair
of Furies, far, the triple-headed guard,
and let the lengthy road lie open wide
for such outstanding shades.

The wish that the Furies leave the deceased alone is a topos of Statius' consolations.²³ However, only in *Silvae* 3.3 does Statius address the Furies directly, reversing Oedipus' summoning of Tisiphone in *Thebaid* Book 1. In addition, the language used by Statius here is reminiscent of that employed at *Theb.* 11.492–5 by Tisiphone to drive Pietas away:

sic urguet, et ultro
vitantem aspectus etiam pudibundaque **longe**
ora reducentem premit **astridentibus hydrys**
intentatque faces.

So she urges, and as the other shrinks from her very aspect and draws her own modest countenance far back, presses her with hissing serpents and brandishes her torch.

The same adverb *longe* occurs in the two texts with reference to the banishment of two different characters: Pietas in *Thebaid* Book 11 and the Furies in *Silvae* 3.3 (where the adverb occurs twice, once in the same line-position as *Theb.* 11.493). Furthermore, in

²⁰ Laguna (n. 14), 257.

²¹ On the hymnic style of *Theb.* 1.81, see H. Heuvel, *Publii Papinii Statii Thebaidos liber primus* (Groningen, 1932), 92; W.J. Dominik, *Speech and Rhetoric in Statius' Thebaid* (Hildesheim, 1994), 102–4; S. Briguglio, *Fraternas acies: Saggio di commento a Stazio, Tebaide, I, 1–389* (Alessandria, 2017), 175; B. Gibson, 'Hymnic features in Statian epic and the *Silvae*', in A. Augoustakis (ed.), *Ritual and Religion in Flavian Epic* (Oxford, 2013), 127–44, at 137–8; A. Hubert, 'Malae preces and their articulations in the *Thebaid*', in A. Augoustakis (ed.), *Ritual and Religion in Flavian Epic* (Oxford, 2013), 109–26, at 111–13.

²² On the domination of Hell in the *Thebaid*, see especially Feeney (n. 15), 345–64; Hershkovitz (n. 15), 260–8; Ganiban (n. 15), 117–51.

²³ Vollmer (n. 14), 333 points out that the 'derselbe Gedanke' is expressed at 2.1.185–6, 5.1.192 and 5.3.278–9.

Thebaid Book 11 Tisiphone sends Pietas away by means of her ‘hissing snakes’, whereas in *Silvae* 3.3 Statius wishes that the ‘hissing of the Furies’ may not disturb Etruscus’ father.²⁴

An analogous reworking of the epic contrast between Pietas and Tisiphone is found in the *Laudes Crispini* of *Silvae* 5.2,²⁵ which features the only other reference to Pietas’ visit to earth in the collection. The return to earth of personifications of virtues is a recurring motif in panegyrics, and the *Silvae* are no exception: at 1.4.2 earth is visited by Astrea, whereas at 5.3.89–90 by Pietas and Iustitia together. Commenting on these figures, Gibson argues that ‘Statius is quite inconsistent in the names he employs’.²⁶ Rather, I suggest that by mentioning Pietas alone in 3.3 and 5.2 Statius deliberately differentiates the only two scenes that directly allude to *Thebaid* Book 11.

Among the several qualities of Crispinus, Statius cites his forgiveness, which enabled him to pardon his stepmother after she attempted to poison him. At lines 91–6 the addressee himself comments on this episode by pointing out that Domitian’s reign has finally allowed Pietas to come back:

exegit poenas, hominum cui cura suorum,
quo Pietas auctore redit terrasque revisit,
quem timet omne nefas. satis haec lacrimandaque nobis
ultio. quin saevas utinam exorare liceret
Eumenidas timidaeque avertere Cerberon umbrae
immemoremque tuis citius dare manibus amnem. 95

She has been made to pay by him who has
concerns for all his people, him whose reign
at last permits Devotion to return
and visit earth again, him who is feared
by every wickedness. This vengeance is
enough and ought to make us weep. But no,
I wish I were allowed to intercede
and stop the brutal Furies, turn away
Cerberus from your frightened shade, and give
your ghost a quicker drink from Lethe’s stream.

Bernstein has persuasively argued that the return of Pietas at line 92 reverses her banishment in *Thebaid* Book 11. By means of this allusion Statius praises Crispinus and Domitian, implying that they are able to contain the violence of the *Thebaid*.²⁷ In addition, in these lines, as also in *Silvae* 3.3, the return of Pietas is followed and complemented by a reference to the Furies, whom Crispinus wishes to keep away from his stepmother’s shade. The link between these two passages appears even stronger if one

²⁴ *Theb.* 11.494 is also evoked in the consolation for Glaucias on the death of his beloved *puer delicatus* Philetus, whose shade, Statius assures, will not be terrified by the hissing Furies (*nulla soror flammis, nulla adsurgentibus hydris | terrebit*, 185–6).

²⁵ The connection between 5.2.91–6 and 3.3.1–7 has been noted by Gibson (n. 13), 226, who, however, restricts himself to pointing out that these are two of Pietas’ rare visits to earth.

²⁶ Gibson (n. 13), 226.

²⁷ Bernstein (n. 4), 195–6. The importance granted by Statius to Crispinus’ incident with his stepmother, undermined by R.R. Nauta, *Poetry for Patrons: Literary Communication in the Age of Domitian* (Leiden, 2002), 307, is highlighted by Zeiner (n. 12), 203–4, who argues that it serves to stress Crispinus’ *pietas*, and so to connect him with Domitian, who is endowed with the same virtue.

considers that the three characters mentioned at 5.2.95–6—namely, the Furies, Cerberus and the *manes*—are cited in the same order at 3.3.26–8.²⁸

In conclusion, I suggest that in *Silvae* 3.3 Statius reverses the narrative pattern of *Thebaid* Books 1 and 11. In the *Thebaid* Oedipus summons Tisiphone to punish his own children by stirring up civil war, and the Fury promptly obeys, banishing Pietas from earth to prevent her from stopping the conflict. On the other hand, in *Silvae* 3.3, which celebrates Claudius Etruscus' loving relationship with his now departed father, the order is re-established, as Pietas returns, and the Furies are urged to stay away from the deceased. While in the *Thebaid* all fundamental values, including filial devotion, are turned upside down, in the *Silvae* Statius describes a more conventional and reassuring world, in which a son obtains distinction by helping his father be reinstated by the emperor, whose fair reign is further contrasted—although one might question how genuinely—in *Silvae* 5.2 with the horrifying narrative universe of the *Thebaid*, founded on vengeance.

University of Virginia

GIULIO CELOTTO
gc4fw@virginia.edu

²⁸ In all the other scenes in which Statius expresses the wish that the Furies may leave the deceased alone (see n. 23 above), the goddesses of vengeance are accompanied by different characters: at 2.1.85 they are cited with Cerberus and Charon, in a combination that Cancik (n. 2), 31–2 would define as a 'Mythologemtriade mit wachsenden Gliedern' (see H.-J. van Dam, *P. Papinius Statius: Silvae Book II, A Commentary* [Leiden, 1984], 162); at 5.1.192–3 they appear by themselves, and are mentioned along with Tartarus and Elysium; finally, at 5.3.277–87 Statius includes them in a long Virgilian 'collection of mythical creatures': Gibson (n. 13), 371.