

The Lap of a Fury: Images of Perverse Femininity in the *Thebaid's* Tisiphone

From the very beginning of Statius' *Thebaid*, when Oedipus calls upon Tisiphone for vengeance upon his sons, the Fury is evoked in explicitly feminine terms that sketch an entwined image of perverse motherhood and seduction that is particularly appropriate to this epic.

Though it plays on the core of the myth of Oedipus, the nature of Statius' depiction is draws on innovations in earlier Latin epic and goes on to be very influential on depictions of the feminine and monstrous in Western culture.

The role of the Furies as part of a general inversion of the divine order and the withdrawal of the Olympians as a fundamental current in the *Thebaid* (Feeney 1991, et al.) continues to be an important element in studies of the poem, and consideration of the role of Jocasta, and motherhood more generally, has been a welcome addition to recent scholarship (see for example Augoustakis 2010, Dietrich 2015, Gervais 2015, Keith 2013, Newlands 2006).

What has gone unexamined, however, is the way in which Tisiphone herself, who is perhaps as close as the poem comes to a protagonist, is introduced in a way that grounds her very specifically in feminine and maternal details. This is reinforced by later imagery of human mothers as Furies (both Jocasta and unnamed women within the besieged city) but this framing of the divine is of fundamental importance not just to our readings of the *Thebaid*, but also its influence on later Western figurings of the divine world and the role of the feminine within it.

Tisiphone is also positioned as patron goddess, one who has always looked after Oedipus and favored Thebes, but the intimacy implicit in both maternal and erotic imagery (precisely the elements of her depiction that are new in Latin depictions, and developments of associations established in the *Aeneid* and *Metamorphoses*), set up a pattern of seductive evil close at hand. As a patron goddess, Tisiphone is set up nicely as opposition to Jupiter by reference to her as a

power of the Underworld (*regina Barathri*, 1.85, and at 8.9-10, 24 the Furies in general are depicted at work there). This adds a layer to the image of her as patron goddess by evoking the image of Athena as both patron of heroes and her father's representative. The explicit conflict between Virtus and Tisiphone later in the poem consolidates the image of dueling deputies, so to speak.

In her opposition, patronage, and being depicted as a queen, Tisiphone also evokes Juno as divine antagonist. This draws especially on her roles in the *Aeneid*, opposing Jupiter, and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as antagonist of Thebes and its women. In the *Thebaid*, however, Tisiphone (along with Oedipus in the background) is arguably the protagonist; certainly she is in charge of the mission of the epic, Oedipus's curse on his sons, and when the brothers must be brought together, it is Tisiphone and her sister who drag them into the battle.

Intimacy is key to Tisiphone's representation in the *Thebaid*. In recent scholarship, the focus has been on representations of the human women and the role of traditionally feminine lament and grief. This is a very important contribution to our understanding of the *Thebaid*, but Tisiphone herself is figured as a maternal figure for Oedipus, and the maternal imagery on a divine (and demonic) level requires further consideration. Furthermore, Tisiphone is introduced in terms that emphasize her feminine nature, not just in the nurturing and protective role of mother, but as seductress. The combination of the two in a monstrous form is particularly appropriate for the tale of Oedipus, and a central part of Statius' world of the *Thebaid*.

Bibliography

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