

Like Father, Like Daughter(-in-Law)

This paper argues for the recognition of incestuous and sinister undertones in two passages of *Thebaid* 11 and 12: the speech of Antigone to Creon in defense of her father-brother Oedipus (11.708-739) and the lament of Argia over the body of Polynices (12.322-348). Erotic and thus unsettling language in the scene where Argia and Antigone both embrace the deceased Polynices (12.385-388) has been noted already (Vessey 1986, Henderson 1991 and 1993, and Hershkowitz 1998), but this is hardly the only instance of disturbing innuendo coming from the *Oedipodae confusa domus* (*Theb.* 1.17, “the confused house of Oedipus,” clinical understatement). I propose that Statius repeatedly assaults his genre’s sense of decorum regarding both explicit sexuality and potential jokes to demonstrate the insidious and transgressive nature of the *nefas* over which the *Thebaid* obsesses. And in a move characteristic for an author who devotes more attention to women and their voices than his epic predecessors, he explores how the young women of the family perpetuate the unspeakable, inescapable wrong.

In the first scene, Antigone intervenes after Oedipus’ outraged rant against Creon and insists that she will usher Oedipus away and take care of him in the future:

*pone metum, procul usque tua summotus ab aula
flebit; ego erectum subigam et servire docebo,
coetibus abducam solaque in sede recondam.* (11.727-9)

Don’t fear, he will weep far from your court. I will quell
him when he rises and teach him to be servile; I will lead
him away from the community and hide him in a lonely
dwelling.

Here the sequence *ego erectum subigam* stands out both in diction and oddity of thought; if she leads him away into exile, at what will he become *erectum* and why will he need to be subdued? The Latin *erectum* does not carry the sense of our own derivative, but the sexually-connotative *arrectum* is near homophonic, especially given the elision with *ego*. *Subigo* can have a sense of sexual conquest as well as manual sexual activity (Adams 1982). The subsequent *servire* and *docebo* both recall Ovid's love poetry and training and role of the *amator* (e.g. *Am.* 2.17, *Ars am.* 1). *Coetibus*, "the verbal euphemism *par excellence* for copulation" (Adams 1982: 179), even appears momentarily to be an ablative of means with either *servire* or *docebo*, enjambed for effect. A final plea from Antigone brings up the idea of illicit sex again, perhaps both past and future: *quid casus iuvat ostentare pudendos?* (11.735, "What good is there in displaying our appalling misadventures?").

My second example comes at the end of Argia's lament over her dead husband:

*ardebis lacrimasque feres quas ferre negatum
regibus, aeternumque tuo famulata sepulcro
durabit deserta fides, testisque dolorum
natus erit, parvoque torum Polynice fovebo.* (12.345-8)

You will burn and receive tears denied to kings, and a
forsaken faithfulness will forever endure, tending your
tomb; the witness of my sorrows will be our son, and with a
little Polynices I will warm my bed.

The clear model for this passage comes from *Aeneid* 4.327-30 when Dido berates Aeneas for leaving her. Dido's imagination is innocent, however obsessive it seems: she wants a memento of Aeneas to play in her court. On the other hand, Argia will warm her bed with her son, i.e.

sleep with him in the euphemistic sense. Again, erotic language from elegy – the final, suggestive *fovebo* – shows the sinister side and cyclical incest of Oedipus' family.

By means of these two scenes, Statius violates the high register of the genre just as the house of Oedipus violates the laws of gods and men. At the same time, he demonstrates how pervasive his epic's *nefas* truly is. The contagion of Oedipus' crime motivates the horrific acts seen throughout the *Thebaid* – Tydeus' cannibalism, Capaneus' climb, the conspicuous fratricide – but even the more peaceful and otherwise blameless ladies are trapped in the cycle of ingrown incest.

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