

STATIUS IN DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*

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As shown by Edwards in this volume,¹ Dante regards Statius as one of the great poets of Latin epic; his works are full of references which make it clear that he had an extensive and intimate knowledge of the *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*.² What makes Dante's *Commedia* such a unique and important moment in the reception of Statius is not this, however; it is that the poet appears as a significant speaking character his own right. What is more, Dante conceives of his Statius as a Christian,³ an intervention which has greatly perplexed readers from his day to ours. The puzzlement of Dante's near-contemporaries suggests that Statius' Christianity was news to them, too.⁴ To understand how Dante could have conceived of such a bold fiction, we must remember that the *Silvae* had not yet been discovered, so all of the biographical details we learn from that text were unknown. Dante drew his idiosyncratic portrait upon a nearly blank canvas.

There have been three main approaches to explaining the mystery of Statius' Christianity. The first has been to identify a particular moment in the *Thebaid* where the rhetoric might have belied for Dante a Christian theology. An early candidate was Capaneus' pronouncement that the pagan gods are mere projections from human fear: "it was fear that first brought gods into the world" (*primus in orbe deos fecit timor*, *Theb.* 3.661).⁵ This strategy was also adopted by Politian, who looked to Tiresias' mantic reference to an unknowable and unnameable god, the pinnacle of the three-fold universe (*triplicis mundi summum*, 4.516).⁶ Apart from the fleeting nature of these statements, the main problem with this approach is obvious: Capaneus is hardly the most noble mouthpiece to convey the author's theological sentiments, and Dante puts Tiresias in Hell with the false prophets (*Inf.* 20.40–5).⁷ Hence a second strategy: to look for an external source, either a biographical tradition or an allegorical reading of passages or characters in the *Thebaid* that Dante might have drawn upon. The search for a convincing biographical source has been a failure.⁸ There were medieval allegorical readings of the *Thebaid*, but their relevance has been greatly overstated.⁹ Much has been made of the allegorizing commentary falsely attributed to Fulgentius, but it is certainly late in date and there is no evidence that it circulated at all;

¹ Edwards, pp. {000–000}.

² Moore (1896) 243–55.

³ There is a vast bibliography on this aspect of the *Commedia*, and it would be beside the point of this Statius-focused study to attempt to survey it systematically. For starting points, see Paratore (1976) 425 and Heil (2002) 73–9.

⁴ See the mid-fourteenth century commentary of Benvenuto da Imola, in Lacaita (1887) 3.

⁵ Cf. Benvenuto da Imola, in Lacaita (1887) 3–4.

⁶ Mariotti (1975). Politian evidently was looking for a passage just before the Argives arrive at the Langia; see below.

⁷ Mariotti (1975) 156–7.

⁸ Anderson (2009) 3.65–73.

⁹ Caviglia (1974); Bauble (1975); Padoan (1977); Petrocchi (1983) 105; Kleinhenz (1988b) 32.

claims that Dante must have known it are unfounded.¹⁰ There were also obscure late-medieval allegorical traditions linking Theseus' killing of the Minotaur to Christ, but these are of scant relevance to the plot of the *Thebaid* and are attested later than Dante.¹¹ These allegories can serve as parallels for our own re-reading of the epic, but they are not very useful tools for explaining how Dante arrived at his ideas.

The third main approach to the problem has been to assert that the invention of a figure like the Christian Statius was simply a matter of poetic necessity for Dante.¹² It is true that Dante makes good use of the Christian Statius, but he could have achieved his ends in other ways. This mode of analysis tends to reduce Statius to a stick-figure rather than treat him as a real poet in whose works Dante was immersed, and does little to explain why Statius was selected as the writer to be granted the honor of Paradise. What tends to get short shrift in all three of these approaches is Dante's sense of the epic output of Statius as a whole, and its place in the Latin epic tradition beyond the gesture of respect to the *Aeneid* at the end of the *Thebaid*.¹³ We will begin from the assumption that Statius' Christianity was not invented as a superficial gimmick, but was intended as an important statement about the way to read Statius. Our discussion, therefore, will return to a mode of analysis which tries to situate an answer within Dante's own Statian hermeneutics.¹⁴ Instead of arguing for the importance of a single feature of the *Thebaid* in isolation, we will attempt to combine the best elements of earlier explanations into a single organic reading.¹⁵ I will also make a new suggestion for the external factor that may have planted the seed of Dante's interpretation of Statius. By challenging us to re-interpret the *Thebaid* as if it were written by a crypto-Christian author, Dante highlights the sheer novelty of Statius' treatment of the gods as well as constructing a Christian teleology for the epic tradition.

OVER-INTERPRETING LATIN POETRY

In addition to his mysterious Christianity, there are a number of other puzzles surrounding Dante's Statius which can give us an indication of Dante's methods. To start with, there is the question of Statius' excessive prodigality with money, the sin which Statius has just finished expiating when we meet him in Purgatory. This flaw was not made up out of the blue, but was the result of willfully over-interpreting a passing reference to Statius in Juvenal:¹⁶

curritur ad uocem iucundam et carmen amicae
Thebaidos, laetam cum fecit Statius urbem
promisitque diem: tanta dulcedine captos
adficit ille animos tantaque libidine uolgi
auditur. sed cum fregit subsellia uersu
esurit, intactam Paridi nisi uendit Agauen. (Juv. 7.82–7)

¹⁰ Hays (2002); Anderson (2009) 1.xxvi. As we will see below, Dante had a very positive view of Hypsipyle, whereas this document allegorizes Hypsipyle negatively as bearing the insufficient waters of secular knowledge; for the text, see Sweeney (1997) 702.

¹¹ Ronconi (1965) 566; Padoan (1977) 140–50.

¹² Brugnoli (1969) 124–5; Barolini (1984) 258; and *contra* Wetherbee (2008) 13–14.

¹³ Martinez (1995).

¹⁴ Scherillo (1902) 499, immediately contested by Albini (1902).

¹⁵ Cf. Wetherbee (2008) 22.

¹⁶ Lewis (1956) 133; Brugnoli (1969) 123.

STATIUS IN DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*

When Statius has made the city happy by setting a date, everyone rushes to hear his attractive voice and the song of his darling *Thebaid*. He snares them with his great sweetness and holds them enthralled, and the crowd listens with a passionate desire. But when he brings the house down with his verse, Statius starves, unless he sells his virgin *Agave* to Paris.

Juvenal attests to Statius' success and popularity as a poet, and then observes that he starved nevertheless, and was reduced to prostituting his talent by writing pantomime. Juvenal was simply saying that lack of patronage has a degrading effect on poetry. Dante, in attempting to wring accurate biography from the stone of satire, permitted himself to infer that Statius starved because he wasted the proceeds of his financial success. To make sure that we know this, he twice indicates his source for the detail. When Statius introduces himself to Vergil, he says that he moved from Toulouse to Rome on account of the success brought by the great sweetness of his voice (*tanto fu dolce mio vocale spirto*, *Purg.* 21.88), which clearly alludes to the "great sweetness" (*tanta dulcedo*, *Juv.* 7.84) and "attractive voice" (*uox iucunda*, 82) to which Juvenal attributed his popularity.¹⁷ Secondly, Vergil says that in Limbo Juvenal had already mentioned Statius to him (*Purg.* 22.14–15), thus providing an explicit footnote for the reader: for information about Statius' life, cf. Juvenal. Dante was willing to invent details of Statius' biography, but he did so on the basis of his close reading of Latin poetry, even in cases where he must have known that he was indulging in over-interpretation.

There are three other parables of (mis)interpreting Latin poetry in the encounter between Statius and Vergil. The most important is the passage in which Dante's Statius explains how he came to be converted. It was reading Vergil's fourth *Eclogue* that was responsible for his salvation, for it made him receptive to Christian teaching when he encountered it in person (*Purg.* 22.64–81). Thus in Vergil's work, as in Statius', a pagan exterior can conceal a Christian message.¹⁸ This apparently straightforward act of allegorical interpretation is complicated by the other Vergilian passage to which Statius equally owes his salvation. He attributes his realization of the sinfulness of his prodigality and his subsequent repentance to another Vergilian line: the exclamation of Polydorus against man's greed, his "accursed hunger for gold" (*auri sacra fames*, *Aen.* 3.56–7; cf. *o sacra fame de l'oro*, *Purg.* 22.40–1). It is very strange that Statius took an exclamation against the dangers of avarice to be a caution against its opposite, and one possibility is that Dante's Statius has misunderstood Virgil's *sacra* as "divine" rather than "accursed". There are other possibilities, but they all involve very strange mistranslations or misinterpretations of Vergil.¹⁹ However we resolve these problems it is clear that Statius' freakishly bizarre misreading of Polydorus' words is impossible to justify on an intellectual basis, as Dante surely knew. What justifies it is the crucial result that it produced in the internal reader, Dante's Statius, who was thereby saved from an eternity in Hell. The point is that the reading of pagan Latin poetry must answer to higher purposes for Dante than literal accuracy.²⁰

¹⁷ Moore (1896) 256–7; Ronconi (1965) 568–9. Dante probably found this passage quoted in his Statian *accessus*; Heil (2002) 83–92. This is also where he likely found the mistaken information that Statius was from Toulouse.

¹⁸ This view is endorsed by an even higher authority when Matelda praises the story of the age of gold as found in the ancient poets as an adumbration of the earthly paradise (*Purg.* 28.139–47).

¹⁹ Shoaf (1978) 195–6; Barolini (1984) 259–60 n. 72; Kleinhenz (1988b) 25–7.

²⁰ Franke (1994) 11–14. See also Dante's Vergil's effort to salvage his authority by re-

The final parable of misreading Latin epic is provided by another serious interpretive *crux* in this canto. When Vergil enumerates for Statius the many of his mythical heroines who are in Limbo with him, he includes “the daughter of Tiresias” (*Purg.* 22.113). We know of no daughter other than Manto, whom we have already met: not in Limbo, but among the damned in Hell. This could not have been a mere *lapsus* on Dante’s part, for he made Manto the subject of a long and elaborate digression on her role in founding Vergil’s home town of Mantua. Dante’s Vergil concludes with a stern warning not to believe any other accounts (*Inf.* 20.97–9). The irony is that the false prophet he warns us against is clearly the text of the real Vergil, who had told a version of the story that flatly contradicts this one (*Aen.* 10.198–200).²¹ Whom do we believe, the real Vergil or the fictional one who calls him a liar? Subsequently, Dante’s Vergil lies to Statius by putting Manto in Limbo rather than with the false prophets, perhaps out of consideration for Statius’ feelings about his own character. In other words, first Dante has his fictional Vergil undercut the truthfulness of the *Aeneid* and then he undercuts the reliability of his own Vergil by showing him telling Statius an obvious untruth. The moral of all these parables is surprising but clear: the yardstick for interpreting pagan poetry is not what the author meant at the time (Vergil did not know he was predicting the birth of Christ), or its sense as Latin (*auri sacra fames* does not really mean what Statius takes it to mean), or even what its author later tells you (in regard to Manto, the text of the *Aeneid* is contradicted by Dante’s Vergil, who is contradicted in turn by Dante). The only thing that matters for reading pagan poetry is the spiritual intent of the reader in applying the light of Christian revelation, which can make the worst misreading luminous and true.²²

Dante’s Statius authorizes such a strategy of a radical Christianizing reinterpretation for his own epic. This is set up by Vergil’s initial and pedestrian misreading, for he notes the pagan subject matter of the *Thebaid* and infers naively that Statius must still have been a pagan when writing it (*Purg.* 22.55–60).²³ Vergil has had no means of direct access to Statius’ epic, but he has presumably heard from Juvenal in Limbo about its subject and about the admiring reference to the *Aeneid* in its *envoi*.²⁴ On the basis of that superficial knowledge, he makes a mistaken inference about Statius’ inner religious life; the lesson we are invited to draw from that error is to refrain from making inferences about the deeper meaning of the *Thebaid* from its pagan appearance. In reply, Statius sets up a distinction between false interpretations based on pagan appearances and true ones based on deep Christian meanings (22.28–30). The correct inference is that the *Thebaid*, like its author, conceals a deep Christian truth under a pagan carapace. Dante strongly endorses a hermeneutics of secular Latin poetry in which surface appearances are not to be trusted, but in which deep wisdom may become apparent in the light of Christian revelation. But where should we begin in our search for a key to this kind of interpretation?

interpreting the passage in the *Aeneid* where the Sibyl apparently denies the efficacy of prayer for the dead (*Purg.* 6.28–48).

²¹ Barchiesi (1973) 106; Barolini (1984) 214–17; Kleinhenz (1988b) 41 n. 30; Hollander (1991).

²² *Contra* Brownlee (1993) 106.

²³ Grlic (1994) 81.

²⁴ *Pace* Wetherbee (2008) 163. Vergil’s reference to Clio (*Purg.* 22.58) may imply that he has heard the poem of the *Thebaid* as far as line 41, but we are surely not to imagine that Juvenal has memorized more than that.

STATIUS IN DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*

BEGINNING IN THE MIDDLE

Some readers have wrongly thought that Dante gives us an indication of a particular passage of the *Thebaid* that is crucial for indicating Statius' Christianity:

E pria ch'io conducessi i Greci a' fiumi
di Tebe poetando, ebb' io battesimo;
ma per paura chiuso cristian fu'mi,
lungamente mostrando paganesmo (Purg. 22.88–91)

And before I had led the Greeks to the rivers of Thebes in my poetry, I was baptized; but I was a hidden Christian out of fear, making a show of paganism for a long time

These lines have inspired many a wild-goose chase: the first problem is to decide which river Dante means. Some have assumed the Langia, others the Asopus, but Dante is using the trope whereby a poet does that which he describes, which need not signify anything more specific than the writing of the poem in general terms.²⁵ In any case, Statius' account of his conversion makes it clear that he was exposed to and influenced by Christian teaching and indeed was worshipping exclusively with Christians for some time before his baptism (Purg. 22.76–87), so we need not see the mid-point of the epic as marking a significant change in theological orientation. It is much more important that the rivers of Thebes are introduced as a pointed contrast to the true waters of baptism in which the poet found eternal life. It turns out that the rivers are a cryptic reference to a certain point not in the *Thebaid*, but in the *Commedia*.

The canto in which Statius first appears begins by contrasting the thirst for secular knowledge and the true water of faith. The pilgrim is desperately thirsting to know the cause of the earthquake that he and Vergil experienced at the end of the previous canto. Statius comes up behind them and explains that it was the sign that he has just completed his term of expiation and is free now to make his way to Paradise. Dante exclaims at the pleasure in having his thirst for knowledge quenched so thoroughly (Purg. 21.73–5). That is to say, at the rough middle-point of the *Commedia* as a whole, Statius has quenched the pilgrim's thirst, thus acting out for Dante the role played by Hypsipyle, "she who showed Langia" (22.112), for the Argives in the middle of the *Thebaid*.²⁶ That interlude in the middle of Statius' epic serves as a break in the grim action, and the joyous liberation of Statius from his penance and the beginning of his ascent to the beatific vision is a relief from the suffering of the rest of the *Purgatorio*.²⁷ The point of this complex of allusions is to show that we have now arrived at the equivalent central turning-point of the *Commedia*. It anticipates the moment at the end of the *Purgatorio* (33.127–35) when Dante and Statius drink together from the river Eunoe to ascend into Paradise. Thirst for divine revelation has replaced the thirst of an army on the

²⁵ Mariotti (1975) 150–1, 158; Heil (2002) 119–25; Dante may have in mind the prominent use of the trope in the proem of the *Achilleid*.

²⁶ A similar point is made on different grounds by Wetherbee (2008) 187: "Statius, as embodied in the *Thebaid*, is for Dante a kind of Hypsipyle."

²⁷ Hollander (1969) 69: "The apparition of the saved Statius is the surest evidence Dante has yet been granted of the actual Salvation found in Christ."

march as the mainspring of the epic plot.²⁸

So if the rivers of Thebes are not the vital clue, where are we to start? Let us turn back to the very beginning of the *Purgatorio*, where we meet another pagan whom we all know should not really be there. When we encounter Cato, it is much more the character from Lucan whom we meet than the historical figure.²⁹ He rebukes Vergil sharply and exposes the limits of his theological knowledge (*Purg.* 1.85–108); Dante's Vergil was master of all of hell's secrets, but he is as ignorant as the pilgrim Dante among the saved.³⁰ Cato thus functions with respect to Dante's Vergil as an analogue for the role played by Lucan vis-à-vis the real Vergil in the Latin epic tradition, savagely critiquing his theological certainty and his picture of the relationship between men and the Olympian gods. There can be no clearer illustration of Dante's keen understanding of the way Lucan eviscerated Vergil's prophetic authority than his startling invention of the story that Erichtho, Lucan's necromancer, his ersatz Sybil, compelled the newly-dead corpse of Vergil to serve her against his will (*Inf.* 9.22–30).³¹ One of the most striking aspects of Lucan's epic is, of course, the failure of the Olympian gods to appear. The gods whom Vergil had trusted to ensure the working out of a glorious Roman destiny have gone missing, and mortal efforts to communicate with them range from the ineffectual to the grotesque. It is no longer clear to the reader that the gods exist, and it is certainly not the case that there is any supernatural guarantee for Rome's destiny. Instead of a teleology of conquest ending in Augustan peace, Roman history is conceived of as an endless cycle of civil wars.

Dante understands that Cato is not Lucan's mouthpiece and distinguishes between the agonized despair of the poet and the clear-eyed self-certainty of his creation.³² The pure negativity of Lucan's demolition of the "false and lying gods" of Vergil (*dèi falsi e bugiardi*, *Inf.* 1.72) offers no theological way forward.³³ His Cato does, however. Dante, in his dedicatory epistle to Cangrande, quotes on the subject of the ubiquity of god (63) a famous line from Cato's refusal to consult the oracle of Ammon (*Luc.* 9.580), as an example of theological wisdom to be found in pagan texts. The question that remained for writers after Lucan is was whether there could be any longer a sensible role in epic for the gods or indeed for meaningful, teleological narratives. Statius' answer to this question is what fascinated Dante. He creates a world every bit as cruel and indifferent to human suffering as Lucan's; it could never be considered a return to Vergilian certainty. Yet at the same time it is a world, like that of Lucan's Cato, in which human choices are not futile; where the same mistakes are not destined to be repeated eternally. Statius does this, moreover, in a way that makes clear that this darker vision was always part of the *Aeneid*. Lucan's unspoken presence in the middle of the epic tradition is what renders the gesture of respect Statius makes to Vergil at the end of the *Thebaid* something more than simply a routine genuflection to authority.

²⁸ Caviglia (1974) 269–70 makes the connection between Statius and Hypsipyle, but wrongly presumes on the basis of the pseudo-Fulgentian allegory that these figures must bear unsatisfactory secular knowledge. In fact, the opposite is true; Statius is very clearly a *figura Christi* for the pilgrim in these cantos: Hollander (1969) 67–9; Heilbronn (1977); Kleinhenz (1988a) 37–8.

²⁹ His long white hair and beard (*Purg.* 1.31–6) fit better with Lucan's description (2.375–6) than with the historical Cato who died at the age of 49.

³⁰ Caviglia (1974) 267–8.

³¹ Butler (2003).

³² Wetherbee (2008) 103–11.

³³ On the radical atheism and the nihilism of Lucan, see Sklenář (2003) 1–12.

STATIUS IN DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*

Statius reaffirmed the centrality of Vergil which Lucan had done much to question while acknowledging the substance of Lucan's critique. Dante has his Statius repeat that gesture in the *Purgatorio* (21.130–1), when he attempts to embrace Vergil's feet. Dante thus recapitulates the dynamic of the Latin epic tradition, for Cato's disturbing and destabilizing presence at the start of the *Purgatorio* is similarly the prerequisite for the rehabilitation of Vergil's spiritual authority that the meeting with Statius accomplishes.

DANTE'S *THEBAID*

We can now begin to sketch the lineaments of an organic Christian interpretation of the *Thebaid*, beginning with the story of Coroebus in the first book of the *Thebaid*.³⁴ Adrastus tells how Apollo, having just killed the monstrous Python at Delphi, came to Argos and raped the daughter of the king. After she and her child are killed, Apollo "belatedly" (*sero memor*, *Theb.* 1.596) retaliates, sending against Argos a monster to kill the children of the city. Coroebus leads a successful mission to kill the beast, which so infuriates Apollo that he sends a plague upon the city; to end it he demands that the youths who killed his monster should be sacrificed. Coroebus offers himself willingly to the god and effectively shames Apollo into sparing him and his city.³⁵ One can easily imagine Dante viewing Coroebus' self-sacrifice for the good of his community as resembling Christ on the one hand and Cato on the other.³⁶ The similarity of the monster killed by the Argives in self-defense and the Python killed by Apollo highlights the unfairness of the situation. From the point of view of a Christianizing interpretation, this episode not only shows the amorality of the pagan gods, it also holds up as a paragon a Christ-like man who breaks the cycle of tit-for-tat retribution, rejecting the old law of an eye for an eye, by offering himself willingly as a sacrifice. The monstrous serpent which later kills Opheltes has obvious parallels with the Python and the child-killing creature that Coroebus killed; indeed, Statius compares the serpent to the Python (5.531–3). The child is attacked by the animal while asleep on the grass, just as happened to Apollo's ill-fated son (1.582–90; 5.502–4). The Argives kill the monster, an act for which no explicit revenge is taken; but the father of the boy desires revenge for Hypsipyle's negligence, which is prevented by the Argives and by her two sons' sudden recognition of their mother, an episode that Dante refers to later in describing his own change from grief to joy (*Purg.* 26.94–6).

Another part of the epic which has been linked to Statius' Christianity is the *katabasis* of Apollo's priest Amphiaras, whose piety cannot save him. When he is swallowed up by the earth, the shades are just as surprised to see a flesh-and-blood creature as are the souls in Purgatory to see the not-dead pilgrim Dante (*Theb.* 8.1–20). The descent of Amphiaras (recalled at *Inf.* 20.31–9) is thus an antitype for the earthquake that signals Statius' ascent from bondage.³⁷ The Argives wonder at Apollo's ingratitude to his priest (*sic gratus Apollo?*, *Theb.* 8.176), and the god himself later laments his inability to save him while consoling Diana for her similar failure to protect Parthenopaeus (9.650–62).³⁸ Apollo even denies he is worth being worshipped (9.657). Not long afterward, Tiresias announces that the price of Thebes' victory is the sacrifice of Menoeceus, who commits suicide with some encouragement from the divine personification of Virtus (10.628–782), recapitulating the

³⁴ Cf. Lewis (1956) 136–7.

³⁵ Feeney (1991) 357–8; Dominik (1994b) 63–70; Miller (2009) 118.

³⁶ Wetherbee (2008) 174–5.

³⁷ Barchiesi (1973) 76–99; Heil (2002) 125–33.

³⁸ Scherillo (1902) 501–2; Hardie (1916) 10–12.

principled suicide of his nephew Maeon near the beginning of the epic (3.53–113). Thus another figure sacrifices himself upon command of the gods to save his community, though the moral triumph of Coroebus is absent and the outcome is far sadder. At this point in the epic, the dominant figures become personifications such as Virtus, Pietas and Clementia on the one hand and Furies like Tisiphone on the other; they eclipse the Olympian gods, who have abandoned the field. This development is well-known and will have surely encouraged medieval readers to read the end of the poem in an allegorical vein.³⁹

The end of the *Thebiad* is dominated by the female office of burial of the dead, and one could argue that the women of the epic are its true heroes. It is telling that, when Vergil and Statius discuss the virtuous pagans in Limbo of mutual acquaintance, the males are all ancient poets and the females are Statius' own mythical heroines (*Purg.* 22.97–114). The Argive women seek relief at the Altar of Clemency in Athens, which has naturally seemed to many readers of Dante a crucial indication of Statius' supposed Christianity.⁴⁰ The medieval tendency to gloss *Clementia* in this passage as *Misericordia* was not necessarily as tendentious as some modern scholars claim; that was the correct Greek name (*bomos Eleou*), and *Misericordia* cannot fit in Statius' hexameter.⁴¹ Mercy is a feature more associated with the Christian god than with the Olympians, and Statius sets the altar in stark contrast to ordinary pagan sanctuaries. There is no graven image of the god; it accepts no expensive blood sacrifice from the powerful, but prefers the tears offered by the wretched and needy (*Theb.* 12.487–96). In this regard, it is immune to the criticisms of Lucan's Cato and Statius' Capaneus against the traditional paraphernalia of pagan religion; indeed Statius' claim that *Clementia* prefers to live in hearts and minds than in effigies (12.494) looks back to Lucan's Cato (9.578–9) as well as forward to St. Paul. It may seem a retrograde step to emphasize the importance of one episode of the *Thebaid* after insisting on the need to develop an organic Christianizing reading of its theology. It is reasonable, however, to place a significant emphasis on the role of the Altar of Mercy, for it usurps the role normally played by Zeus/Jupiter in Homeric/Vergilian epic in bringing the plot to a resolution.

In answer to the prayers of the Argive women, Theseus becomes the agent of Mercy, agreeing at once to wage a crusade against the powers of hell (*Theb.* 12.642–7).⁴² The device on his shield shows him defeating the Minotaur who, like the monster of Coroebus, was a half-human, half-bestial creature who devoured the children of the hero's city. Theseus broke that cycle of vengeance, like Coroebus, like Hypsipyle's Argive champions, and as he will do again by ending the cruelty of Creon. Dante's implicit interpretation of the poem as ending in the triumph of a crusader for justice and mercy over the brutal law of vengeance is of course only one of many possible interpretations and will not be shared by all readers. Many view Theseus as no better than the other invaders of Thebes and have pointed to the mission of the Epigoni against Thebes as evidence of his failure to break the cycle of retribution.⁴³

The Altar of Mercy is also the point where we have the only plausible candidate for an external factor which may have prompted Dante's reading of the *Thebaid*. There was a tradition that the Athenian altar at which the Argive women prayed and found relief was the very same as the altar of the unknown god in Athens which St. Paul had claimed on behalf of the Christian god in his sermon on the Areopagus, in which he, like Statius, contrasted it with

³⁹ Lewis (1936) 44–56; Feeney (1991) 364–91; Ramelli (1999) 422–4.

⁴⁰ Scherillo (1902) 503–4; Vessey (1973) 311 with n. 4.

⁴¹ Burgess (1972) 347–8.

⁴² Lewis (1936) 55.

⁴³ On the different views of Theseus, see Coffee (2009a).

STATIUS IN DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*

the emptiness of pagan cult images.⁴⁴ This is a very familiar argument with a long history in Dante scholarship, but it has long been fatally vitiated by attributing the idea to scattered glosses in individual manuscripts which there is no reason to believe Dante should have known.⁴⁵ More recently, it has been shown that this notion in fact formed part of the so-called *in principio* commentary on the *Thebaid*, which had a wider distribution.⁴⁶ I think we should go one step further and propose that Dante became familiar with the idea by reading it in its original form in the *Theologia Christiana* of Peter Abelard.⁴⁷

Dante never mentions Abelard, and it is usually assumed that he had no direct knowledge of his works, especially as he was the archenemy of St. Bernard, Dante's escort to the beatific vision at the end of the *Paradiso*. Because of the official condemnation of the theological works of Abelard, it is hard to trace their diffusion, but they were nevertheless enormously influential, and were of fundamental importance to controversies at the very heart of the *Commedia*. Echoes of Abelard have been claimed in Dante's work, but they are not conclusive; then again, definite echoes of the writings of St. Bernard are also hard to find, and Dante must surely have known those very well.⁴⁸ Dante is unique in inventing a Limbo in which the virtuous pagans continue to live after the harrowing of Hell, but the two main ingredients of this novelty are both drawn ultimately and very clearly from Abelard, who had explicitly posed the crucial question: whom exactly Christ had liberated from the dead (*Sic et Non* 84).⁴⁹ Abelard's indignation at the notion that God would punish the innocent led him to imagine a posthumous fate for unbaptized children in which there was no suffering except for the loss of supernatural heavenly bliss (*Commentaria in epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, Book 2, ad *Rom.* 5.19) This led directly to the creation of the Catholic doctrine of Limbo for infants. Dante added to this the tragedy of insight when he put Virgil and the other virtuous pagans there, and this other half of the equation also comes from Abelard. In the *Theologia Christiana*, Abelard glorified with great vehemence the lives of the sages of antiquity and their efforts to perceive the truth without the benefit of revelation, including the Sibylline prophecy in Vergil's *Eclogue* (*Theologia Christiana*, 1.128). These are the two strands of thought that collide in the *Commedia* to produce Dante's limbo, which creates the tragedy of Vergil and his companions, who are knowingly deprived of the beatific vision despite the surpassing justice of their lives. Dante would surely have been very skeptical, to put it mildly, of Abelard's tendency to privilege reason over faith, but it is ungenerous to assume that he only knew of these arguments, which were so crucial to his theology, via the subsequent, derivative scholastic tradition and was ignorant of the passion with which Abelard had ignited them. If Dante was ever influenced by the heretical Abelard, it was surely in the poet's most theologically heterodox creation: a benign Limbo not just for unbaptized babies or Old-Testament patriarchs but for righteous pagan philosophers and poets.

In his reference to the altar of *Clementia*, Abelard quotes the first two lines of Statius' description and makes the suggestion, apparently on his own authority, that this was the same

⁴⁴ *Acts* 17.22–31; cf. Landi (1913) 243–7.

⁴⁵ Landi (1913); Padoan (1977) 127–8.

⁴⁶ D. Anderson (1988) 187 n. 48; de Angelis (1997) 121–2 n. 126; H. Anderson (2009) 1.xxv–xxvii and 3.69–70.

⁴⁷ This source was noted by de Angelis (1997) 123, but she rejected a connection with Dante.

⁴⁸ P  zard (1968), esp. 61; Botterill (1994) 174–90.

⁴⁹ Iannucci (2005) 69.

Athenian altar claimed by St. Paul for his god in his sermon on the Areopagus.⁵⁰

Hinc est enim quod merito Deum appellabant ignotum, quasi qui a paucis uel summis sapientibus intelligeretur aut crederetur, nec in communem uulgi ueniret opinionem. Cui nec simulacrum, iuxta Macrobius, ausi sunt constituere. Quem iuxta etiam philosophos soli mundicordes et purgati animi conspiciere possunt. De quo et Lucanus ait: 'Incerti Iudaea Dei', hoc est absconditi atque ignoti. Cuius quidem ignoti dei aram magnus ille philosophus Dionysius Areopagita Paulo apostolo apud egregiam studiis ciuitatem Athenas legitur ostendisse. Haec quidem, ni fallor, illa est ara misericordiae cui a supplicibus non immolabatur nisi illud Brachmanorum sacrificium, hoc est orationes uel lacrymae; cuius uidelicet arae et Statius in XII meminit, dicens: 'Urbe fuit media nulli concessa potentum Ara Deum, mitis posuit clementia sedem'.

Theologia Christiana 3.45

Thus it is right that they used to call God the unknown one, as if he were understood or believed by only a handful or the very wisest and did not come into the commonplace beliefs of the masses. A god whose image, according to Macrobius [*Somn. Scip.* 1.2.16], no one dared to set up. A god whom, according to the philosophers, only those of pure heart and mind are able to perceive. A god of whom Lucan [2.593] spoke when he said "Judea of the uncertain god", which is to say hidden and unknown. This indeed is the unknown god whose altar the great philosopher Dionysius the Areopagite is said [*Acts* 17.23] to have shown to St. Paul in Athens, a city famed for its intellectual achievements. This is the altar of Mercy, unless I am mistaken, on which used to be sacrificed by suppliants only the [bloodless] offerings of the Brahmins, which is to say prayers and tears, the altar recorded by Statius in his twelfth book [12.481–2] where he says, "There was an altar in the middle of the city dedicated to none of the powerful gods; there gentle Clemency had her dwelling."

In this passage, Abelard also cites Plato, Augustine, and Hermes Trismegistus on the unknowability of God. This startling mixture of pagan and Christian authorities is characteristic of and fundamental to Abelard's theological project; what is unusual is the inclusion of the two epic poets. Abelard quotes Lucan a handful of times in his work, but this is his only reference to Statius. It would certainly have caught the attention of Dante, who will immediately have realized the far-reaching poetical implications of making the Argive women unwitting worshippers at the altar of the Judeo-Christian God, which therefore displaces Jupiter as the epic's agent of closure. Reading forward and backward from that moment, an anti-Olympian, Christianizing reading of the *Thebaid* such as the one we have limned here would have been straightforward to construct.

Abelard is not saying that Statius was a Christian any more than Plato was, but the point is not that Dante borrowed Statius' Christianity from another source as a fully-formed

⁵⁰ This is a reworking of a passage in an earlier version of the treatise (*Theologia Summi Boni* 2.22) which does not have the reference to Statius; thus we can date the genesis of Abelard's idea approximately to the years 1121–1126.

proposition. What Abelard can do is to give us an idea of how the notion of Statius' Christianity took shape in Dante's mind. To justify his Statian fiction, Dante must have believed that the *Thebaid* as a whole could bear a crypto-Christian reading, and this is why he does not draw particular attention to the Altar of Mercy; but there may well have been a seed such as this from which his interpretation germinated. If the notion that Dante read Abelard either in full or in excerpts is not acceptable, then it is perfectly possible that the poet found this remark on Statius' *ara Clementiae* elsewhere, as has often been argued; for it quickly found its way into glosses and commentaries, and indeed into medieval culture more broadly.⁵¹

Did Dante view his attribution of Christianity to Statius as the historical truth? As we saw above, for Dante the "correct" reading of pagan poetry for a devout Christian is a complicated matter. The secret Christianity of Statius may be considered a rational falsehood which is spiritually true, like Statius' misreading of a line from the *Aeneid* that saved him from damnation. It seems likely that Dante willfully and knowingly invented Statius' Christianity as a fiction worth believing and that he expected his readers to treat it as such. His misreading reflects a higher truth, the emergence of Christian culture from pagan; it is "truth with the appearance of a lie" (*quel ver c'ha faccia di menzogna*, *Inf.* 16.124), like the *Commedia* itself.

One final question remains to ask, which is whether Dante had a point when he saw Statius as standing at a religious crossroads. One of the more striking theological episodes in the *Thebaid* is Adrastus' grand prayer to Apollo at the end of the first book, which concludes by assimilating Apollo to Osiris and Mithras. The presence of Mithras as the emphatic last word of the first book of the epic is especially surprising, for this is an extremely early attestation.⁵² It is thus incontrovertible that Statius was aware of and interested in the spread of what we might call eastern mystery religions of personal salvation. Just as the story of Coroebus anticipates the coming of Theseus, Mithras participates in the ring composition of the first and last books. He is described as struggling with the bull which he sacrifices, and same language is used in the final book to describe the struggle of Theseus with the Minotaur as the iconographical device on his shield.⁵³ This is not to say that the historical Statius was a devotee of Mithras or Isis any more than he was a Christian, but it is hard to deny that the intuition of Dante has seen something startlingly relevant about the theology of the *Thebaid*. Dante urges us to reread Statius, seeing him not merely as an imitator of Vergil, but one who found a way, after the savage critique of Lucan, to give back to the genre a role for the supernatural and a sense that the universe is meaningful. The fact that this new theology drew on eastern religions of initiation and personal salvation which, unbeknownst to Dante, were connected with the spread of Christianity, is a remarkable confirmation of the intuition brought to bear by one great poet of religion upon the text of another.

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⁵¹ Padoan (1977) 128–9; Anderson (1988) 160–4.

⁵² Gordon (1978) 161–3; Newlands (2009).

⁵³ Vessey (1973) 135–6, 313; Griffith (2001) 114–15. For a very different interpretation of the connection between Mithras and Theseus, see Dominik (1992) 76–7.

PETER HESLIN

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STATIUS IN DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*

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PETER HESLIN

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