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Mourning Endless: Female Otherness and the End of the Thebaid

As critics have pointed out, the ending of Statius' *Thebaid* is remarkable and unique in Roman epic, precisely because the poet mingles female lamentation with the impossibility of poetic expression (Dietrich, Ramus 1999; Fantham, *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World* 1999; Pagan, *AJP* 2000). In this paper (building on the work of Nugent, *Scholia* 1996 and Keith, *Engendering Rome* 2000 among others), I focus on the role of foreign otherness in terms of gender differentiation, by examining the ending of the poem together with the Lemnian digression of books 4-6.

The center of the action is Thebes, and Argos is perceived as the periphery. As the poem progresses from the initial hostilities to the marching of the Argive army against Thebes, various oppositions between sameness and otherness operate simultaneously on different levels. In book 4, the Argives encounter Hypsipyle who is marked from the outset of the narrative as a foreigner (Lemnian). Within the embedded narrative of the Lemnian slaughter, the reader comes across further manifestations of otherness. The island's population twice faces barbarian influences, from the Thracians and subsequently from the Argonauts. Hypsipyle's impregnation by Jason is followed by the separation from her children and her exile. While she is a slave nurse, Hypsipyle finds in the baby Opheltes a substitute for her missing offspring. The baby's death lays bare Hypsipyle's own failure to secure generational continuity for Lycurgus. Even at the end, it still remains unclear how much her otherness has benefited the Argive army on its way to initiate civil war: Hypsipyle's failure as a queen on the public level, and as a daughter (her saving of Thoas is marked as *fraus*) and mother in the private domain, forebodes disasters.

Moreover, the sixth book of the poem starts with the lamentation for Opheltes' death that takes place within the imperial house of Nemea. Consolation proves impossible, despite Adrastus' efforts to comfort Lycurgus. The persistence of lamentation comes full circle at the end of the *Thebaid*, as the poet deems it is time to berth his opus in a safe haven at the moment when his poetic ability falls short of expressing the grief of the Argive women. The opening of the last book recalls the beginning of the sixth: immense loss and destruction are laid before the reader, now on Theban territory. In addition, the Argive wives are assimilated to Bacchantes, just as the Lemnian women were in book 5 and their lament becomes unbearable for the poet to pronounce.

At the end of the epic, there is a clear dichotomy between the Theban and Argive women. Both share losses and pain, both are assimilated to Bacchantes. The Ogygian-Theban mothers celebrate their liberation from Creon, the tyrant, like Bacchantes performing orgies in honor of Dionysus' conquest of India. The Pelasgian-Argive wives, however, mourn, as Thyades who have or are about to commit *nefas*. As the Argive other, the male threat, has been driven from the walls of the city, and the miasma of the Theban tyrant is extinguished, what remains is to relegate the mothers and wives to the margins of the poem, as the poet himself is ready to bring the boat of the *Thebaid* to harbor. What Hypsipyle has not dared to do at the funeral pyre of Opheltes, is now achieved by Evadne who leaps into the flames and dies. At the end of the poem, we are faced with the

impossibility of a solution to the civil war that has shattered the lives of so many,
resulting in endless lamentation and poetic powerlessness.

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