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Dante and the end of the *Thebaid*

Before the rediscovery of the *Silvae* by Poggio around the year 1417, Statius was an enigma. The amount of biographical data that can be gleaned from those passages in the epics where the poet speaks of his own work, such as the opening and closing of the *Thebaid* and the beginning of the *Achilleid*, is very small; the only other ancient source available to a medieval audience was six lines of Juvenalian polemic relating to Statius (7.82-7). This vacuum generated a great deal of spurious biographical information in the middle ages, a tradition that culminated most notably in Dante's depiction of the poet as a secret convert to Christianity in his *Purgatorio*.

Statius' Christianity serves an important structural purpose in the *Commedia*, as it allows Dante to position the Flavian epicist within the poem as an intermediary figure between the pilgrim's other companions, Virgil and Beatrice, and to make him a link outside of the poem between Virgil and Dante in conversion of the epic tradition itself to Christianity. It appears that Dante found in the text of the *Thebaid* the evidence he needed for Statius' secret conversion, and this has set scholars since Politian off on a hunt for the particular passage to which we should refer Dante's assertion of Statius' Christianity. This paper will attempt to review systematically the results of this hunt as reported in the scholarship on Dante. We shall find that these investigations have thrown up various Statian passages of interest in addition to certain medieval allegories of the *Thebaid* that may have contributed to Dante's thinking. In fact, it has been demonstrated that the search for just one crucial Statian passage is itself misguided, as it rests upon a misreading of Dante's text.

These results are interesting for their own sake, but I will go a step further and assert that Dante's interpretation of the *Thebaid* is not without relevance to us today. The course of rehabilitating Dante's Statius can be a dangerous one to steer, because it is but a small step to go from looking for hints in the *Thebaid* that Dante might have interpreted as signs of a Christian sensibility to interpreting those hints as genuine evidence for Statius' conversion. More than one Classicist has taken this unfortunate step. I hope to find some middle ground here, to take Dante's interpretation of Statius seriously without reading the *Thebaid* as a crypto-Christian text. We now know so much more about Statius than Dante did that it would be easy to reject entirely the tendentious portrait that he drew on what was for him a blank canvas. Dante was a shrewd reader of Latin epic, however, and we should not discount the requirement that his portrait of the artist should seem plausible to medieval readers of Statian epic.

I will argue that the figure of Theseus and the ending of the *Thebaid* had particular importance for Dante and his audience; and these are elements of the text that continue to be of great interest to readers who are concerned about the problem of closure in the epic tradition. By putting together the intuition Dante had about the way the end of the *Thebaid* works with our better information about Statius' life and the religious milieu of Flavian Rome, I hope to shed some light on Statius' conception of Theseus that is relevant to a modern interpretation of the *Thebaid* as a whole.