

WOMEN IN STATIUS' *THEBAID*

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by

Susan Lupack

1993

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The my...
and for my...

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by
Susan Lupack
1993

WOMEN IN STATUS THEATRE

For my sweetie Richie
and for my cool sister Joyce.

by

SUSAN LUPACK, B.A.

REPORT

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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Chapter One: Methodology

The women in Statius' *Thebaid* are striking characters. Statius gives them real roles to play; they don't just sit in the background of the epic waiting for the men to decide all the issues. Instead, they take active roles in the action and succeed in affecting the world around them. It is remarkable that Statius has his women make such a mark when you consider that the main concern of the *Thebaid* is the war between Argos and Thebes caused by the fraternal strife of Oedipus' sons. War and politics are realms traditionally associated with the actions of men. And yet, in the *Thebaid*, Statius has three major female characters, Argia, Antigone and Jocasta, who take an active role in directing events within those realms. Many other women throughout the epic also make their voices heard. Vergil also presents female characters who affect the political world. Dido is queen of Carthage in her own right and Amata is one of the main forces that starts the Italian war.¹ But these two women stand out in the *Aeneid* precisely because they alone possess such power. In contrast, Argia, Antigone and Jocasta stand within a great nexus of influential women, both common and noble, whose voices are of central importance to the meaning of the epic.² The question remains, how did Statius manage to incorporate his female characters into the world of war and politics without their presence seeming inappropriate to his readers? Was Statius working with certain societal mores that dictated the parameters

¹Vergil describes Dido as directing building projects and giving laws to her people, I.494-508. For Amata's Bacchic frenzy see VII.373-405.

²See chapter 5 for a discussion of how Statius uses his female characters to express his political views.

within which his characters could act so that they wouldn't strain the belief of his readers, and if so, what were those parameters?

Helene Foley, in her article "The Conception of Women in Athenian Drama" addresses similar questions in relation to Greek drama.³ She has established a methodology through which the role that women are allowed to play within Greek drama may be examined and, thereby, better understood. This methodology can be beneficially applied to other classical authors and their texts in order to define the roles their women are allowed to play. Specifically, I intend to apply it to the women of Statius' *Thebaid*. To do this effectively, a short review of Foley's work is in order.

Foley recognizes that women of Greek drama very often take active roles in the outdoor, political world traditionally reserved for men, just as Statius' women do. Women such as Medea and Clytemnestra take on masculinized roles in order to redress wrongs done to them, and Antigone defies her king's edict to accomplish what she perceives as her familial duty. Lysistrata calls women of warring factions together in a council modeled after the men's. Granted that Aristophanes probably got a lot of laughs from the absurd idea that women could act at all in a political manner, nonetheless the women successfully end the war.

However, Greek women never took on such roles in real life. In fact, upper-class women were entirely excluded from the political domain governed by men. Women were socially active within their own religious and household domains but these realms were kept quite separate from any public or political realm in which the men dominated. The women's religious

³Foley, pp. 127-168.

festivals, at least one of which did not even show up on the official religious calendars of the *polis*, were something of a mystery to Greek men; correspondingly, the business of government must have been a mystery to Greek women.⁴ Lysias plays on the idea that men preferred to see their women as both physically and mentally shut off from the outside world in his courtroom speeches. One of the strategies he uses to convince the jury of the respectability of his female client is to quote her as saying that "even though she had not before been accustomed to speak in the presence of men, the severity of [her family's] misfortunes would compel her to give a full account of their hardships."⁵ In *Against Simon*, Lysias plays on this theme again to accentuate the great offense Simon committed by breaking into his client's home. He says "within were my sisters and nieces, whose lives were so well ordered that they are ashamed to be seen even by their kinsmen."⁶ Of course Lysias may have been exaggerating the women's discomfort for the purposes of his argument. However, the fact that Lysias used this strategy and expected it to have the appropriate effect on the jury demonstrates that it was considered proper for women to live sequestered from the eyes of extra-familial men.

Furthermore, the image of the ideal Athenian woman was definitively described by Pericles in his funeral oration. His advice to the widows of the slain men is, "Your great glory is not to be inferior to what God has made

⁴See Winkler, pp.188-209 for a discussion of the women's various religious festivals that were outside of the men's jurisdiction and what the existence of these festivals may indicate about the women's view of their own role in Athenian society.

⁵Lysias, *Against Diogeiton*. 11, tr. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, 1988), p. 667.

⁶Lysias, *Against Simon*, 6, tr. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, 1988), p. 75.

you, and the greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about by men, whether they are praising you or criticizing you."⁷ Other prose authors and the speeches of the time all confirm this restrictive attitude towards women. As Foley says, "The major picture that emerges from prose texts is of a sharp division between political and domestic life, with respectable women confined to domestic spaces, and men dominating exterior space except during religious occasions, and of a concept of female virtue and of male honor which depended on the respectability, public silence and invisibility of the Athenian wife."⁸

This contradiction between historical reality and the portrayal of women in drama is the problem that Foley tries to explicate. She emphasizes that in order for an interpretation of the plays to be convincing, the social and historical context in which they were written "must be central to [the] analysis."⁹ This approach makes sense when you consider that "the Athenian audience must have brought to their experience of the remarkable women of drama a way of understanding these characters which grew out of their psychological, religious, political, and social lives and problems."¹⁰ Through her methodology Foley is able to define the parameters within which Greek female protagonists may act and expect to bring about a positive result. She finds that a woman could use her socially condoned religious powers to benefit her household or the state. However, if a woman dares to operate outside of this parameter "the intrusion of a being ill-equipped for political

⁷Thucydides, 2.46, tr. Rex Warner, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York, 1986), p. 151.

⁸Foley, p. 132.

⁹Foley, p. 135.

¹⁰Foley, p. 136.

life"¹¹ into the male's domain provokes disaster. The disapproval of the woman's actions is demonstrated by the consequences she suffers. "The dramas close with the punishment of the female intruder which implicitly reaffirms the cultural norm."¹²

Both this analysis of Greek drama and the methodology used to arrive at it have great bearing on the work of Statius. First of all, many of Statius' female characters are derived from the characters in Greek drama. Sophocles portrays Antigone burying Polyneices in his play *Antigone*. Euripides gives Jocasta a strong voice in *The Phoenician Women* and he shows the procession of Argive women in *The Suppliant Women*. Aeschylus of course depicts the infamous battle scene in his *Seven Against Thebes*. Foley points out that any sound analysis of the Greek texts must take into consideration the fact that the Athenian dramatists were adapting and molding mythological material already ancient to them in the fifth century B.C. In transferring Foley's methodology to Statius' *Thebaid*, the first step is to consider the extent to which he was reworking the Greek material. The instances in which Statius portrays a character differently from the way she is portrayed in a previous Greek version of the same story should be closely examined. Discerning the motivations behind Statius' choice to use a new version over an older one can help to explain how he viewed the women within the text.

Once some clues as to why Statius portrayed his women the way he did are derived from a comparison of the texts, they can be further explicated by an analysis of Statius' historical situation. Just as "the Athenian audience

¹¹Foley, p. 162.

¹²Foley, p. 162.

must have brought to their experience of the remarkable women of drama a way of understanding these characters"¹³ so must the Roman audience have had a way of understanding the women of the *Thebaid*. Athenian playwrights molded and adapted myths to reflect the concerns of Athenian society, and so did Statius adapt, in turn, the Athenian plays (along with the mythology) to reflect the concerns of his own society. Many of the differences between the texts can be seen to reflect a difference in the social positions of women in the authors' respective times.

Thus this methodology can be applied to Statius' *Thebaid*, as it was to Greek drama, to discover the precise limits set to the power of Statius' women and to explain why those boundaries were imposed. Although in Statius' day women acted with a great deal of independence, particularly when compared with fifth century Athenian society, nonetheless his society had its own mores that prescribed how a decent, and in particular, how a decent upper-class woman was supposed to act. Consequently, despite Statius' partiality towards his female characters, they too, like their Athenian fifth-century counterparts, are limited in their actions by a set of socially condoned restrictions.

Understandably, the restrictions that Statius' characters experience are different from those outlined by Foley for the Greek protagonists. A comparison of Sophocles' *Antigone* with Statius' clearly demonstrates the difference in restrictions on women's actions between the Greek and Roman texts. In both versions *Antigone* challenges the official edict of her *polis*, and she dares to assert herself within the men's political sphere. In Sophocles'

¹³Foley, p. 136.

version she justifies her actions by declaring that her religious duty to bury her brother takes precedence over Creon's authority.¹⁴ In fact, she does seem justified in her claim. Even Creon's son Haemon and Tiresias the seer urge Creon to repeal his edict. Antigone is in effect praised for her action. Nonetheless, in accordance with Foley's conclusions, Antigone is killed for having asserted herself within the political world of men. This is where Statius differs emphatically from the Greek tragedians. Statius' Antigone lives. Why Statius sees fit to save her when his predecessor did not is the central question of this paper.

Antigone's example is not alone in the work of Statius. Argia and Jocasta also stand out as women who are consistently outspoken and extremely courageous in their actions within the world of war and politics. They do not acquiesce to the men in charge when the men's policies do not agree with the women's view of how matters should be conducted. Quite often, even though the women's policies are not followed, Statius represents them as the better and saner courses of action. In fact, particularly with regard to the war, Statius seems to be expressing his own feelings and opinions through the words and actions of the women. In this way the women become the mouthpiece of Statius.

Ahl interprets Statius' epic as a political allegory that reflects his experience and attitude towards the several wars that Rome had seen in his lifetime and in particular to the events of 68-69 A.D.¹⁵ The contentions for the

¹⁴See Sophocles, *Antigone*, ll. 81-92 where Antigone presents her case to Ismene and says that to leave him unburied would be to "dishonor the laws the gods hold in honor." Tr. Robert Fagles, *The Three Theban Plays* (New York, 1984), p. 63.

¹⁵Ahl, 1986, p.2812.

principate were in effect civil wars, bloody in the extreme and just as pointless. These were not wars of conquest designed to expand or solidify the Roman empire. Rather they were characterized by in-fighting and retributionary tactics which benefited the Roman citizen not at all. This real historical situation is aptly paralleled by the fight between Oedipus' sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, for the throne of Thebes. The brothers' dispute is a fraternal one, which can easily be translated into civil war. As Ahl points out, any educated reader would have immediately recognized the phrase *fraternas acies* in Statius' opening line as an echo of Lucan's *cognatas acies* of the *Pharsalia*.¹⁶

Statius uses his female characters in various ways throughout the epic to demonstrate his attitudes towards this kind of war. The suffering of the wives and mothers serves to point out the permanent loss the war imposes on its innocent participants. His main characters, most prominently, Antigone and Jocasta, take a more active role in protesting against it. Finally, the Argive procession of women acts as a primary force in correcting the mad situation that their husbands and sons have been perpetuating. Statius viewed women as potentially having a very positive and restorative influence in the world usually reserved for men. It is this influence which finally succeeds in ridding the living world of the unburied corpses and Thebes of Creon, its latest tyrannical ruler.

Despite the significant and positive role Statius gives to his female characters, he does depict two instances in which women do not behave in this unifying manner. They are Eriphyle, Amphiaraus' wife, and the Lemnian

¹⁶Ahl, 1986, p. 2813.

women whose story Hypsipyle so vividly describes to the Argive host. Both have their own purpose within the text: Eriphyle serves as a foil to Argia and the tale of the Lemnian women serves to create structural parallels with the rest of the epic.¹⁷ It is particularly relevant to my inquiry that these two examples of "bad" women also help to define the boundaries within which Statius' powerful female characters were allowed to operate.

As I said above, Foley's methodology of applying the author's historical situation to the text can be useful in discovering the precise limits set to women's power and why those boundaries were imposed. When this methodology is applied to the actions of the bad women the results are particularly illuminating. This is because the boundaries set to women's actions are shown in the clearest relief when bad women succeed in transgressing them. Horrible consequences result from a bad woman's actions, emphatically defining those actions as bad. Interestingly, these consequences are similar to those suffered by Greek female protagonists who dared to assert themselves in politics at all. However, Roman women did not have to fear societal retribution for simply trying to affect the political world around them. Therefore, this is not the type of action which merits delimitation and correction. Instead, the general operating rule for women's conduct in Statius' *Thebaid* seems to be that a woman may act in the domain of politics and war as long as she is acting with the best interests of her husband or close male relative (e.g., brother or father) firmly in mind. In contrast, women who act outside of the parameters socially approved for a respectable woman's conduct, by acting for the sake of their own interests,

¹⁷Vessey, 1973, pp. 170-187.

will suffer consequences which make it clear that their actions were transgressive and which therefore "implicitly reaffirm the cultural norm."¹⁸

Just as the boundaries of action prescribed to Greek female protagonists reflects the social dynamics which generated the plays, so are the boundaries prescribed to women in the *Thebaid* a result of the social milieu in which Statius was writing. In order to examine further the validity of this assertion I will now briefly review the upper-class woman's social role within Roman society. This review will provide the groundwork with which the roles of women within Statius' *Thebaid* may be defined. In the subsequent chapters the separate roles of the ideal heroic women, the bad women and the mourning women will be explored in detail.

¹⁸Foley, p. 162.

Chapter Two: Historical Influences on Statius' Feminine Ideal

When Statius was writing his epic the *Thebaid* in the 80's A.D., his social milieu naturally affected how he portrayed his female characters. The influences were various and at times seemingly contradictory. First of all, over the first century B.C., Roman women had gained a great deal of freedom in their day-to-day lives. By the late Republican period women, and upper-class women in particular, were able to reap the benefits that accrued to them as a result of the earlier developments. Many women had acquired great wealth, and with wealth came the power to influence the world around them. Some women became active patrons of the arts or craftsguilds. But, of course, the names women that we are most familiar with, Octavia, Fulvia, Livia and Servilia, are those of the women who ventured to wield their influence within the realm of politics.

The difference between these women and those of fifth century Athens is readily apparent. Athenian women may have had some influence over public affairs through their husbands, but they never gained the prominence and renown for their influence that many Roman women of the first centuries B.C. and A.D. attained. Nonetheless, there were limitations set to the Roman woman's conduct as well. The founding society of Rome did not consider it appropriate for women to make their own decisions, particularly concerning her property and marriage, and therefore constructed legal provisions so that she would always remain subject to the men in her life.¹ It also gave the

¹The Twelve Tables, Table V.1, *Fontes Iuris Romani Antejustiniani*, (FIRA) 2nd edition, S. Riccobono et al., eds. For further discussion of these texts see pp. 11-12 within this chapter.

power of life and death to her father and/or husband. Chastity and abstemiousness were of prime importance; death was the penalty for a woman who was caught in an adulterous relationship or drinking.²

Even though these grim societal conditions concerning a woman's conduct were modified over time, their influence was felt up to Statius' time. An ideal of a Roman woman's conduct developed which influenced how a woman's actions were perceived and judged by Roman society. The ideal was very often expressed in the stories, both historical and mythical, that male authors chose to relate about women. Indeed, in many of the stories women are allowed to be courageous within that ideal, as are Statius' women. In fact, courageousness seems to be required of proper women when it came to defending their chastity, their menfolk, or some other aspect of traditional Roman values. Perhaps this courageousness, apparent in even the earliest stories that we have, was the seed that eventually, but very gradually, developed into the actual freedoms that first century B.C. women enjoyed.

The women in Statius' *Thebaid* reflect both the ideal and the historical actuality of women's capabilities during his time period. Their influence and actions within the domains of politics and war are indicative of what types of actions a Roman could accept from a fictional woman as being within the realm of possibility. The limitations set to those actions, and the consequences that devolve on those who transgress them, are manifestations of the ideal working through the literature.

Also see Sarah Pomeroy, pp. 150-151 and Jane Gardner, pp. 1-29 for discussions on the laws of the guardianship of women.

²These two laws are both attributed to the Laws of Romulus, paragraph 7., *FIRA* see note 1 for full reference.

From a study of Statius' historical milieu we gain two insights into why Statius portrayed his female characters in the way that he did: 1) Statius was writing at a time when there was a resurgence of the importance of the traditional, ideal Roman woman imagery, and 2) the ideal was defined in such a way that women who used their influence within the realm of politics for the interests of their husbands or sons obtained the approval of the men in their society while women who acted in their own interests were condemned by the same men. These judgments passed on actual Roman women's conduct manifest themselves in Statius' *Thebaid* as the parameters within which a female protagonist must act in order to be considered good and for her actions to have positive results. First I will consider the resurgence of the traditional Roman ideal of feminine virtue and consider its effects on Statius' female characters.

During Augustus' reign the ideal itself had taken on a new significance in the Roman world. It had become very important to the emperors' political agenda to promote the ancestral ideal version of feminine virtue, and to build it up once again into a strong force that could be used to condition the beliefs of the Roman populace. The reason for this new-found importance lies within Augustus' program for restructuring Roman society.

In 29 B.C. Augustus became sole ruler of a Rome that was demoralized and weary from the long years of civil war, and so, happy to accept a single ruler as long as he kept the peace. As time went on it became apparent that Augustus was determined to give more to Rome than just peace from civil war. He set about instituting a program of moral and social reform whose main objective was to restore Rome to its traditional values and the strict

moral outlook attributed to its ancestors. The idea was that if Romans could successfully emulate the moral stance of their forebears, which had made Rome the governing city of a vast empire, then they could once again secure divine goodwill for their enterprises and forestall further corruption of the Romans' sturdy nature. Considering the state of the Republic in the last half a century before Augustus stepped in, this renewal project was tantamount to the complete refoundation of Rome and would necessitate a program that would entail manipulating the Romans not only to act differently, but even to think differently.

Since his program was concerned with both the morality of Rome and with the production of an abundance of Roman soldiers, much of his legislation focused on the importance of women's chastity. This focus gave renewed importance to the concept of the ideal woman who was chaste, dutiful and obsequious to her menfolk. The ideal was considered to have actually been the norm for a woman's conduct in the past,³ and it had remained the ideal in the minds of Romans over centuries. However, the existence of women like Clodia, whom Cicero rails against in the *Pro Caelio*,⁴ demonstrated that the ideal no longer carried as much force in society as it once wielded. Since this situation was seen as part of the moral decline of the Roman society, and since it was Augustus' goal to halt that decline, it became Augustus' object to recreate this concept of the ideal woman as one which

³For instance, Valerius Maximus, after discussing the trivial reasons that would prompt men to divorce their wives in early Rome, says "And so, long ago, when the misdeeds of women were thus forestalled, their minds stayed far from wrongdoing." *Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, 6.3.12, tr., M. B. Fant, Lefkowitz and Fant, p. 176.

⁴Cicero, *Pro Caelio*, 13-16.

Roman women should emulate. It was his hope that the result would be the re-establishment of the ideal as a reality.

It is interesting to trace Augustus' method of re-establishing the ideal through the laws he instituted. In the *lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis* adultery was for the first time made a criminal offense. Previously the punishment of the woman had been the responsibility of her *pater familias* and/or of her male relatives, if she was married *sine manu*, or of her husband, if her marriage was *in manu*.⁵ Now, however, Roman law intruded on the private handling of such matters, presumably because they were not being handled strictly enough. Augustus went even further to insure that the adulterous women would be brought to justice; he also made it a criminal offense for the cuckolded husband to refuse to divorce and subsequently prosecute his wife.⁶ There was an asymmetry or double standard in this law which worked against women. Adultery was classified as sex with a married woman, which meant that women who had sexual relations outside of the marriage were always by definition guilty, while a husband would only suffer consequences if his extramarital sexual liaison involved another married woman. In addition, there was no legal basis for a woman to bring a husband to court on a charge of adultery because it was not considered a crime that involved her interests; and a woman could only bring a civil case if it directly affected her.⁷

This double standard is also expressed in several edicts issued by Augustus which were later, by the middle of the first century A.D.,

⁵Balsdon, p. 77.

⁶Gardner, p. 127. The charge was called *lenocinium* or pandering.

⁷Gardner, p. 127.

generalized as the *senatus consultum Velleianum*.⁸ These edicts proclaimed that it was illegal for women to give security or undertake liability on behalf of their husbands. The edicts quickly expanded in meaning to ban women from undertaking liability on behalf of anyone.⁹ The law was originally conceived in order to protect the wife from losing her dowry, which was considered to actually be the property of her male relatives, through the "weakness of the sex."¹⁰ In other words, it was meant to protect the property of the ^{men in the} woman's original family. Paul's paraphrase of it also makes it clear "that it arose from a feeling that such matters were properly the reserve of men."¹¹ In the form that the law eventually took on, it effectively banned women from a whole range of business pursuits.¹² Thus it is clear that Augustus' legislation focused on restricting both a woman's sexuality and her activity within the world of business more properly suited to men.

Augustus went further than just introducing these double standards into Roman law to achieve his goal of revitalizing the idea of the ideal Roman matron. Because part of the traditional ideal was for women to spend their time weaving and spinning wool, he had his wife and daughters learn and perform these crafts even though it was no longer the norm for upper-class women to do their own work.¹³ He advertised the fact that they were involved in such work by wearing the clothes they produced.¹⁴ His absolute

⁸Gardner, p. 75.

⁹Gardner, p. 234.

¹⁰Ulpian, *Digest*, 16.1.2, (See also Gardner, p. 75).

¹¹Gardner, p. 75.

¹²See Gardner's discussion of this on pp. 234-235.

¹³Suet., *Aug.*, 64.

¹⁴Suet., *Aug.*, 73.

sincerity in expecting women to accept once again the notion that it was their role in society and duty to the state to produce legitimate Roman sons is demonstrated by his actions when he was confronted with what he considered to be mockeries of the ideal within his own family. Augustus exiled both his own daughter Julia and his granddaughter (also Julia) when they were accused by informants of adultery. Suetonius says that Augustus bore the death of relatives far more easily than he did their disgrace.¹⁵ His grief was apparently very long-lasting; he excluded Julia from his will.¹⁶ It is interesting to note though that Augustus' attitude towards adultery within his family also exhibited a double standard. Augustus himself was known for his frequent extramarital affairs.¹⁷

Another casualty of Augustus' new moral program was Ovid. Although the precise nature of his "blunder" is unclear, it is considered fairly sure that it had to do with his publication of *Ars Amatoria*.¹⁸ Within the construct of Augustus' moral reform, this handbook on how to win a lover promoted all the wrong values. Augustus recognized the power literature had to direct and mold the morality of his people.¹⁹ Consequently, other authors, who were more aware of the needs of Augustus' moral program, display a greater sensitivity to the female ideal that Augustus was trying to promote in their depictions of female characters than Ovid did.

¹⁵Suet., *Aug.*, 65.

¹⁶Suet., *Aug.*, 101.

¹⁷Suet., *Aug.*, 69.

¹⁸Balsdon, p. 89.

¹⁹He knew that it would at least affect the upper class since both men and women were educated to read.

Vergil presents us with a stirring image of an extremely independent and capable woman in his portrayal of Dido. However, she is not the woman chosen to found the Roman race with Aeneas. Instead, that role is given to the blushing, weeping Lavinia who never says a word throughout the whole epic. Livy presents us with many examples of early Roman women who had great strength of character.²⁰ For example, there is Lucretia who proves her husband Collatinus superior to the other men present by virtue of her being found spinning in the company of her maidservants late at night.²¹ The wives of the other men had been found drinking wine, which was an offense that merited death according to the law codes of Romulus.²² Lucretia is the one who dies though, and by her own hand, because she had unintentionally kindled the flame of lust in Sextus Tarquinius. Once she has been raped by Sextus, Lucretia kills herself despite the protests of her husband and father. She says "nec ulla deinde inpudica Lucretiae exemplo vivet."²³ The example Lucretia does provide for the Roman woman is one who considers her chastity so crucial to her being that she is willing to die for it even though she herself concedes that her "animus insons [est]."²⁴ In Cloelia Livy gives us another example of a woman who has an extremely strong and virtuous character. Faced with being held hostage in Porsenna's camp, and with

²⁰See Sandra Joshel, pp. 112-130 for her interesting interpretation of Livy's Lucretia and Verginia.

²¹Livy, I.57.9. Spinning and weaving wool were important attributes of the good Roman woman. The approval that Augustus expressed of even upper-class women learning and practicing the craft was mentioned above. In addition, it is a feature that often shows up on tombstones of Roman women and was supposed to be indicative of the good character of the dead woman. See ILLRP 973/ILS 8403 and CIL VI.10230/ILS 8394 as examples of this motif.

²²FIRA, p.3, Lefkowitz and Fant, p. 173.

²³Livy, 1.58.10.

²⁴Livy, I.58.7.

whatever compromising of her chastity that is implied by the situation, Cloelia would rather swim the Tiber back to Rome under fire of the enemy, rather than stay in the camp. She succeeds in getting back to Rome and in winning the admiration of Porsenna who says that "supra Coclites Muciosque id facinus esse."²⁵ In contrast, Horace is lacking in portraits of ideal Roman women. However, in his *Carmen Saeculare*, which was commissioned by Augustus to be sung at the *Ludi Saeculares*, he makes it clear that Augustus is re-establishing an ancestral ideal of virtue that has been neglected in recent times.

iam Fides et Pax et Honor Pudorque
 priscus et neglecta redire Virtus
 audet, apparetque beata pleno
 copia cornu (57-60)

Thus Augustus influenced the authors of his inner circle to promote the ancestral ideals, including the ancestral ideal of a Roman woman, to the public.

Status was similarly influenced by the moral outlook of the emperor under whom he wrote his *Thebaid*. Domitian was the next emperor after Augustus to take a strong interest in the morality of his people.²⁶ He expressed his desire to control Roman morality and sexuality with laws similar to Augustus' as well as with measures that went far beyond Augustus'

²⁵Livy, 2.13.8.

²⁶Suet. *Dom.*, 8.

in severity and brutality. In his legislature, he banned women of immoral conduct from receiving any part of a legacy, effectively limiting the amount of wealth, and thereby the amount of influence, that those women might accrue.²⁷ He also forbade these women from riding about the city in litters, which, as Gardner points out, was "a more direct and frequent inconvenience."²⁸ Dio ^{Cassius} says that "Many men and women alike among the wealthy were punished for adultery" by Domitian.²⁹ He made an even more emphatic moral gesture by killing four of the Vestal Virgins. Apparently he considered himself quite humane in that he allowed the first three to choose the manner of their deaths. The fourth one though he killed with the traditional method of burying her alive.³⁰

As Statius was writing his epic at the time when Domitian was making his stance on moral issues clear, the portrayal of his female characters tends to reflect the feminine ideal that was being promoted by the current regime. Statius presents us with characters who embody the ideal of the Roman woman just as Livy and Vergil had done before him. His good women are chaste and selfless in their courage, while his bad women are punished severely just as the women labeled *probrosae*³¹ by Domitian had been. Statius' female characters therefore exhibit the qualities of the ancestral feminine ideal partially in response to its resurgence as an important concept in Roman society. It remains, however, to examine how that ideal developed and what

²⁷Gardner, p. 179.

²⁸Gardner, p. 179.

²⁹Dio Cassius, 67; Suet., *Dom.*, 8.

³⁰Dio Cassius, 67; Suet., *Dom.*, 8.

³¹Suet., *Dom.*, 8.3.

societal opinions defined the parameters that distinguished a good female character from a bad one.

As I mentioned above in this chapter, women's conduct during the time when Romans were first putting down their laws was heavily controlled by the men in her family. Women were always to be under guardianship "because of the levity of their minds."³² Their right of inheritance, and therefore of acquiring influence through property, was limited. Even when a woman did own property, nothing could be done with it without her guardian's approval. That guardian was her father until she was married, and beyond if the marriage was *sine manu*.³³ Before the second century B.C., however, marriage *cum manu* was more common. In this type of marriage the wife took on the legal status of a daughter in her husband's home.³⁴ If her guardian died, a *tutor* was appointed in his stead. At no time was a woman allowed to govern her own affairs, unless she was a Vestal Virgin. In addition, the power to kill your wife or daughter for adultery, which was traditionally first condoned by the Laws of Romulus³⁵ appears to have still been considered just in the second century B.C.³⁶ Therefore, the ideal of the chaste Roman matron seems to have been based on an actual historical situation. Livy's stories then, which purport to have taken place when these laws were

³²The Twelve Tables, *FIRA*, p. 23, tr., Johnson et al., Lefkowitz and Fant, p. 174.

³³See Treggiari, pp. 1-36 for the most up-to-date review of the definitions and parameters of the different types of marriages.

³⁴Gaius, *Institutiones*, 114, 136.

³⁵These laws were traditionally dated to the eighth century B.C., but may be taken rather to represent the *mos maiorum*.

³⁶Cato the Elder, *On the Dowry*, apud Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*: "Further, as to the right to put her to death it was thus written: 'If you should take your wife in adultery, you may with impunity put her to death without trial; but if you should commit adultery or indecency, she must not presume to lay a finger on you, nor does the law allow it.'"

established, may represent not just an ideal of ancient Roman women, but rather, perhaps, a glorification of the actuality.

Around the time of the second Punic war, an actual change in the status of Roman women seems to take place, which may be credited with either the increase in freedoms for women, or the decline of women's moral rectitude, depending on your perspective on the situation. Two factors contribute to this change. First, as Balsdon and many since him have pointed out, the wars caused the prolonged absence of a large portion of the male population, leaving many women without their guardians. Many of the husbands and fathers would have been permanently absented either by death or by being captured and enslaved. This would leave the women at home watched over by *tutors* who may be distant from the family and may therefore have no real interest in keeping informed about the actions of his ward.³⁷ In addition, in the extreme case, which actually may not have been so uncommon considering the dire circumstances Rome was facing at the time, women may have been left entirely to their own discretion. Indeed, Valerius Maximus, writing during the reign of Tiberius, said that "The end of the second Punic war...encouraged a looser way of living..."³⁸ Tacitus said that "The absence of men ... encouraged independence among women and unstable marriages."³⁹ Juvenal also implies that a decline in women's conduct starts after the end of the second Punic war.⁴⁰

³⁷Pomeroy, p. 179-181.

³⁸Valerius Maximus, 9.1.3.

³⁹Tacitus, *Annals*, 3.34.

⁴⁰"Poverty made Latin women chaste in the old days, hard work and a short time to sleep and hands calloused and hardened with wool-working, and Hannibal close to the city, and

In the quote cited above, Tacitus puts his finger on the second reason why women acquired greater influence in the second century B.C. Marriages were becoming inherently more unstable, not because of the women involved, but because of the type of marriage that was being favored. *In manu* marriages stipulated that the wife acquired some rights to the husband's property. It also required that whatever resources the woman brought to the marriage would become her husband's. During the second century B.C. the wealth of the Romans was growing and therefore men may have been more aware of the losses that could be incurred as a result of ^{the dissolution of} an *in manu* marriage. Neither the husband nor the wife's male relatives would want to risk losing even part of their fortunes in the event that the marriage turned sour. Therefore it would be financially beneficial to both parties to agree on a marriage contract *sine manu*. This type of marriage gave a woman more freedom in her daily life because the man who was directly responsible for her was not the one who was most aware of her actions.⁴¹ In addition, marriage *sine manu* would have made divorce easier because neither party would have had such a heavy financial investment which would have made the dissolution of the match prohibitive.

Thus an "increasing emancipation and self-assertion of women"⁴² was seen to be symptomatic of the years following the second Punic war. In general, Roman authors deplored the situation and considered it to indicate a decline in Rome's moral stature. A particularly fine example of both the

their husbands standing guard at the Colline Gate- that kept their humble homes from being corrupted by vice." Juvenal, Satire 6, tr. Lefkowitz, Lefkowitz and Fant, p. 157.

⁴¹See Pomeroy, p. 155, for her discussion of this matter.

⁴²Balsdon, p. 33.

"increasing self-assertion of women" and of the male Roman's opinion of that assertion may be found in Livy's account of the controversy that surrounded the attempt to repeal of the Oppian Law in 195 B.C.⁴³ Twenty years after the law had been passed, two tribunes of the people brought the motion to repeal the Oppian Law's drastic sumptuary measures. Several conservatives tried to block the tribunes' attempt. This caused the women to actually march in the streets of Rome and blockade the Forum in protest. "Before long," as Livy says, "they dared to go up and solicit the consuls, praetors, and other magistrates." This is an amazingly forceful example of women taking action in order to affect the realm of politics. The perceived outrageousness of their action is demonstrated by Cato the Elder's speech against the repeal:

Indeed I blushed when, a short while ago, I walked through the midst of a band of women. Had not respect for the dignity of certain ones (not them all!) restrained me ... I should have said, "What kind of behavior is this? Running around in public, blocking streets, and speaking with other women's husbands! Are you more charming in public with others' husbands than at home with your own? And yet, it is not fitting even at home (if modesty were to keep married women within their rights) for you to concern yourselves with what laws are passed or repealed here." Our ancestors did not want women to conduct any - not even private - business without a guardian.⁴⁴

⁴³See Balsdon, pp. 32-37 and Pomeroy, pp. 177-181 for discussions of the repeal of the Oppian Law and its relation to the moral decline associated with the end of the second Punic war.

⁴⁴Livy, 34. 2.10-11. All Livy quotes translated by M. B. Fant, Lefkowitz and Fant, pp. 176-180.

It is interesting to note how this speech succinctly lays out the ideal of women that is later promoted by Augustus and Domitian. The importance of chastity and faithfulness to one's own husband is emphasized implicitly by Cato's outrage over the women speaking to husbands other than their own. In addition, their proper place in relation to politics is made clear: they should have no interest in it whatsoever. The fact that they are disregarding their husband's authority and that they are taking an interest in politics demonstrates that they have violated their proper roles. This violation is perceived as threatening:

Give the reins to their unbridled nature and this unmastered creature, and hope that they will put limits on their own freedom. Unless you do something yourselves, this is the least of the things imposed upon them either by custom or by law which they will endure with hurt feelings. They want freedom, nay license, if we are to speak the truth, in all things. ... If they are victorious now, what will they not attempt? ... As soon as they begin to be your equals, they will have become your superiors.⁴⁵

The law was repealed despite this warning. However, it was not repealed because other men spoke up and said that women were capable of deciding for themselves what they wanted to wear. On the contrary, the reasoning for the repeal was grounded in a patronizing image of women that did not credit them with the will to make their own choices. Lucius Valerius says:

⁴⁵Livy, 34, 2-3.

"...never, while her men are well, is a woman's slavery cast off; and even they hate the freedom created by widowhood and orphanage. They prefer their adornment to be subject to your judgment, not the law's."⁴⁶

This is how the Roman male would like to deal with women who are suddenly sure enough of themselves to intrude their wishes on the political world, which up to that point they had been separated from. Valerius stresses that the women actually prefer their wishes to be subjected to the will of their husbands and thus he asserts that the traditional role of the ideal woman who acquiesces to her husband's desires has not been violated. This reaffirmation of the norm must have satisfied the assembly since this is the argument that wins the day.

There is another example in Roman history of a time when women took to the streets in order to protest a political situation. In 42 B. C., the triumvirs, finding that the money they had raised from confiscating and selling off the recently proscribed men's property was not sufficient for their needs, decided to tax 1400 of Rome's wealthier women. At first the women tried to work through the traditionally proper channels in order to register their complaints concerning the taxation: they approached the female relatives of the triumvirs. Although they were able to win over Octavia, Augustus' sister, and Antony's mother, they were repulsed by Antony's wife Fulvia.⁴⁷ It was only then, when the proper channels were not working for them and no other recourse was possible, did they take an open protest upon themselves. Indeed, Appian has

⁴⁶Livy, 34.7.12-13.

⁴⁷See Delia, pp. 197-217 for an interesting discussion of Fulvia's role in the Late Republic.

Hortensia, the woman chosen to represent them in the Forum, say: "As befitted women of our rank addressing a petition to you, we had recourse to the ladies of your households; but having been treated as did not befit us, at the hands of Fulvia, we have been driven by her to the Forum."⁴⁸

The women's hesitancy to use this type of protest and Hortensia's protest that they had been driven to it indicate that they would have preferred their actions to have remained within the bounds prescribed to them by their culture's mores for action taken in the public realm. However, the fact that they did take public action demonstrates that such action was not entirely unthinkable. When pressed, Roman women could take effective action within the realm of politics in order to protect their own interests.

Of course Appian adds that "the triumvirs were angry that women would dare to hold a public meeting when the men were silent; that they should demand from magistrates the reasons for their acts" and that "They ordered the lictors to drive them away from the tribunal." Interestingly though, despite the triumvirs anger at the way the women went about protesting, they nonetheless took the matter into consideration and subsequently modified their demands. The women were successful.

There are also two instances of women who succeed in asserting their independence and demonstrating their abilities in the courtroom. Women were banned from bringing cases before a criminal court, but they were allowed to bring civil cases if they or their property were the central concerns of the case. The fact that it was probably rather unusual for women to defend themselves, despite their being technically allowed to do so, is indicated by the

⁴⁸Appian, *Civil Wars*, 4.32-34.. Tr., H. White, Lefkowitz and Fant, p. 207.

paucity of examples of women who actually did bring their own cases and by the reaction they stimulated in men when they did do so. Valerius Maximus records only two such women.⁴⁹ The first and most outrageous was Gaia Afrania. According to Valerius Maximus she was "a woman disposed to bring suits and always represented herself before the praetor, not because she had no advocates, but because her impudence was abundant." Apparently, the fact that a woman would enter so often into the courtroom, a realm reserved for men by custom if not by law, was very disturbing to men. Maximus goes on in his description to say that:

And so, by constantly plaguing the tribunals with such barking as the Forum seldom heard, she became the best known example of women's litigiousness. As a result, to charge a woman with low morals, it is enough to call her 'Gaia Afrania.'

He concludes his description of Gaia Afrania by calling her a *monstrum*,⁵⁰ which serves to indicate just how out of the ordinary and bizarre her actions must have appeared. This is the same word used by Horace to describe Cleopatra,⁵¹ who constituted a definite political threat to the Romans and, they thought, to their way of life as well. Gaia Afrania also posed a threat to the established order in that she broke its rules by intruding her female self into the male's world.

⁴⁹Valerius Maximus, 8.3, tr. M. B. Fant, Lefkowitz and Fant, p. 206. All subsequent quotes concerning Gaia Afrania and Amasia Sentia are taken from this source.

⁵⁰Valerius Maximus, 8.3.2: "Tale enim monstrum magis quo tempore extinctum quam quo sit ortum memoriae tradendum est."

⁵¹Horace, *Odes*, I.37.21.

Amasia Sentia is the second woman whom Valerius Maximus discusses in this vein. It seems that she pled only one case before the tribunal, and that one was in her own defense. This makes her a little bit more palatable to the Roman men's sensibilities. Valerius Maximus even praises her by saying, "She pursued every aspect of her defense diligently and boldly and was acquitted, almost unanimously, in a single hearing."⁵² Valerius' description of Amasia's capabilities could not end there though. The peculiarity of the situation compelled him to add, "Because she bore a man's spirit under the appearance of a woman, they called her *Androgynē*."

The actions of these women in the courtroom, coupled with the examples of women protesting governmental action in public, despite the disparaging commentary given by the male authors, demonstrate that women were taking an interest in the public affairs of their time and that, in a few cases at least, they were able to take active and effective action within that realm when their own interests were at stake. The disparaging commentary does indicate though that Roman societal values, which favored a woman's staying far from the political world and which frowned upon those who dared to break the societal norm, were still in operation in the community. Not only were they still in operation, but they were also still very effective in setting limits to and defining a proper woman's conduct. It's true that neither Gaia Afrania nor Amasia Sentia were barred from the courts, but public opinion was forbidding enough that none of their female companions followed in their footsteps.

⁵²Valerius Maximus, 8.3, tr. M. B. Fant, Lefkowitz and Fant, p. 206.

However, not all the examples of women with strong characters are presented quite so negatively. In fact, many women are praised for their bravery and courageous action. Valerius Maximus gives the stories of three women who went to great lengths to save their husbands during the proscriptions of 42 B.C. An example of such a woman is Thuria, whose story was also told by her husband in a funeral eulogy of 9 or 10 B.C. which is often referred to as *laudatio Turiae*⁵³ Valerius Maximus says that:

When Q. Lucretius [Vespillo] was proscribed by the triumvirs, his wife Thuria hid him in her bedroom among the rafters. ... At great risk to herself, she kept him safe from imminent death.⁵⁴

Her husband goes further in describing her great courage as exemplified in a further incident. Apparently Augustus had reinstated this man, but Lepidus, who was in control of the city at the time, refused to honor the reinstatement. The eulogy says that at this point Thuria went to Lepidus and, prostrating herself at his feet,

was dragged along and abused as though a common slave, all covered with bruises, yet with unflinching steadfastness of purpose, you recalled to him Caesar's edict [of pardon] ... Braving his taunts and suffering the most brutal treatment you denounced these cruelties publicly so that

⁵³CIL VI. 1527/ILS 8393, see below for quote. This eulogy seems to fit with the story that Valerius Maximus relates even though the woman in the eulogy remains nameless; therefore it is often taken to indicate the same woman. In telling the story I will use evidence from both sources.

⁵⁴Valerius Maximus, 6.7.2.

he [Lepidus] was branded the author of all my perils and misfortunes. And his punishment was not long delayed.⁵⁵

Here is an example of a woman who could intervene in the political process and succeed in obtaining clemency for her husband. Appian also gives several examples of women who displayed their love and faithfulness for their husbands during the proscriptions.⁵⁶

Love and faithfulness not only for husbands but also for sons was highly praised by Roman authors. Roman mores dictated that a woman should spend all her energy taking care of her close male relatives and that all her own wishes should be subjected to the family's needs. This expectation had been built into the society early on, but it retained its force even as women acquired wealth and influence over the course of the second and first centuries B.C. A story told about Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi and the daughter of Scipio Africanus, serves to illustrate this attitude:

When a Campanian matron who was staying with Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, was showing off her jewels - the most beautiful of the period, Cornelia managed to prolong the conversation until her children got home from school. Then she said, 'These are *my* jewels.'⁵⁷

⁵⁵CIL.VI.1527/ILS 8393, tr. D. C. Munro, Lefkowitz and Fant, p. 208.

⁵⁶One interesting example is: "The wife of Coponius purchased his safety from Antony, although she had previously been chaste, thus curing one evil with another." (Appian, *Civil War*, 4.3940, tr. H. White, Lefkowitz and Fant, p. 212) Two facets of the ideal woman come into conflict here- the importance of chastity and the importance of a woman's duty to consider her husband's interests first- and it is interesting how Appian deals with the fact that she had to violate one aspect to uphold another.

⁵⁷Valerius Maximus, 4.4pr., tr. M. B. Fant, Lefkowitz and Fant, p. 138.

Servilia, Marcus Brutus' mother and Caesar's mistress, provides us with an example of a woman who used her influence within the realm of politics on her son's behalf. She may have had some influence on Caesar's decision to pardon Brutus after he fought against Caesar at Pharsalus in 48 B.C. It is clear, however, thanks to Cicero's letters to Atticus on the subject, that she directly influenced her son's and Cassius' decision not to accept the corn-commissionerships they were offered after Caesar's assassination.⁵⁸ Cicero says that she promised to rescind the corn commissionership herself. He also mentions that during the same family meeting at which she made her opinion so clear on the corn-commissionership issue, she also managed to shut up Cicero himself with "hoc vero neminem umquam audivi!"

Augustus' sister Octavia also had a large role in the politics of her day. Her actions consistently demonstrate her loyalty to her husband. In 37 B.C. she was instrumental in restoring the peace between her brother and Antony, to whom she had been married for the purpose of cementing the first reconciliation between the two men in 40 B.C. Later, in 35 B.C., Octavia herself brought both troops and money to Antony which he needed rather badly after his defeats in Parthia. She ^{was not allowed} did not get to deliver them in person though because Antony left her a letter in Athens instructing her to turn back and go home after sending on the supplies. Despite this rebuff, and others like it, Octavia remained faithful to her husband ^{and} by remaining ⁱⁿ in Antony's home despite Augustus' orders to abandon it. Finally, even though Antony had

⁵⁸Cicero, *Ad Atticum*, 15.11.1. The following quote is also from this letter and was translated by Balsdon as "I never heard such nonsense!" (p. 51).

divorced her before his death, Octavia insisted on bringing up his children both by Fulvia and Cleopatra.

Both Octavia and Servilia were highly esteemed in Rome despite the fact that they actively used their influence to direct Roman politics. This is in direct contrast with women like Gaia Afrania and the women who petitioned for the repeal of the Oppian Law. Both sets of women have strong, individual personalities characterized by courage and steadfastness and, yet, some are approved of while others are not. Why are these two sets of women regarded so differently by Roman society and the authors who relate their stories?

The difference lies in the different motivations that characterized the women's actions. The women in the first group were all acting with their own interests at heart; whereas the second set of women were taking action on behalf of their husbands or sons. As many of the examples cited above demonstrate, taking action on behalf of one's male relatives was praiseworthy and deemed to fit within the parameters prescribed for an ideal woman's actions. Therefore Octavia and Servilia's actions were condoned by society. In contrast, the female advocates and the street protesters, since they were acting with their own interests in mind, earned the condemnation of the male authors who told their stories. This is why Valerius Maximus is guided to define Thuria's independent actions as good but Gaia Afrania's as bad or deviant.

Thus, while a Roman woman could have a great deal of influence on politics, the way in which she used that influence was strictly censured by Rome's societal values. Where Greek society used its energies to keep Roman women out of public life altogether, Roman attitude used its force to direct in what fashion a woman might put her political influence to work. Women

were still supposed to look after their husbands and sons first, and, actually, exclusively. Most women, and indeed most of the truly powerful ones, seemed not even to consider going about it any other way.

This situation in Roman society is what sets the limitations to a good woman's actions in the *Thebaid*. Argia and Antigone work consistently for the protection of Polyneices, while Jocasta tries to use her influence to insure the safety of both her sons. The women who act on selfish motivations are punished for deviating from what is expected from a woman in Roman society.

Chapter Three: The Ideal Women

In the previous chapter I laid out the social considerations which shaped Statius' historical milieu, and which might be expected to have influenced the way he portrays his characters. Three factors are most relevant to this study: 1) the conception of the ideal Roman matron prevalent in Roman society since the time of the Twelve Tables, 2) its renewed prominence in Domitian's reign due to the emperor's political agenda of social reform and 3) the actual (but still relative) freedom of action that Roman women exercised in their daily lives. I feel it is the tension created between the first two factors and the last, between the ideal and the actuality, that creates such wonderful female characters as Argia, Antigone and Jocasta. Their actions are courageous and they succeed in affecting the world around them. However, they are guided by the constraints prescribed to virtuous women to act without exception for the well-being and advantage of their husbands and sons. Thus their actions are by definition selfless, and therefore impress us as being quite heroic. Most often they also exhibit that quality discussed in the Introduction with which Statius endows his female characters: the ability to bring chaotic and threatening situations back into the realm of an acceptable status quo. This quality, however, is most clearly demonstrated by the procession of Argive women and so will be discussed more fully in chapter 5 which will deal specifically with the procession. For now I will focus my attention on the individual heroines of the *Thebaid*: Argia, Antigone and Jocasta.

Stattus introduces Argia to us at the same time that he introduces her to Polyneices, her future husband. Because she is still an unwed virgin she acts appropriately and blushes at the sight of the *nova facies virum* (I.536-537).¹ However, the very fact that she has occasion to blush means that Stattus is endowing her with a certain amount of curiosity and confidence because she must have been surveying the crowd before that. Also, when she does see the new men, her *verentes oculi* seek the eyes of her father. She respects and trusts her father and looks to him now wondering what is going on.² She does not just look down at the ground meekly waiting and accepting her fate without question. Rather, she literally and figuratively faces her fate with her eyes and head held high. This is in direct contrast with Vergil's model maiden Lavinia who is pictured with downcast or weeping eyes, effectively denied the use of her eyes to survey the world around her.³ Stattus further emphasizes Argia's inherent courageousness by comparing her with Athena resounding with arms and quiver-bearing Artemis:

...mirabile visu

Pallados armisonae pharetrataeque ora Dianae
aequae ferunt, terrore minus (I.534-537).

¹All references, except where otherwise noted, are to Stattus' *Thebaid*.

²Their trusting and mutually respectful relationship is made clear later when Argia asks Adrastus to go to war for her husband Polyneices. III.678-721.

³Vergil, *Aeneid*, 11.479-480, 12.64.

Naturally Argia does not possess the power to inspire terror that these goddesses are capable of exhibiting; that would certainly not become a mortal maiden. Nonetheless the comparison does serve to foreshadow the strength of character she will display further on in the epic when confronted with extreme circumstances. Statius indicates right from the start that she is endowed with Athena's astuteness of mind and Artemis' propensity for decisive and daring action.

Once Argia is married, Statius immediately gives Argia a situation within which she demonstrates her astuteness in evaluating political situations. Barely twelve days after the wedding, Argia realizes that her husband is yearning to return to Thebes to reclaim his crown (II. 306-307). Because she is his faithful wife ("fida coniunx"), nothing about her lover (Argia says they are "amantes") escapes her.⁴

sed fida vias arcanaque coniunx
 senserat; utque toris primo complexa iacebat
 aurorae pallore virum, "quos, callide, motus
 quamve fugam moliris?" ait "nil transit amantes.
 sentio, pervigiles acuunt suspiria questus,
 numquam in pace sopor. quotiens haec ora natate
 fletibus et magnas latrantia pectora curas
 admota deprendo manu?" (II.332-335)

She has heard him complaining and groaning and she has seen that his sleep is disturbed. Argia feels her husband's cares weighing upon herself

⁴See Ahl, 1976 for a discussion of a similar contrast between wife and lover in the relationship between Pompey and his wife.

as well and wants to relieve the pain that Polyneices is experiencing. However, she knows that his cause will be a difficult one to win especially considering how unprepared Polyneices is to challenge his brother. At this point, he has no supporters to back up his claim. She points out the absurdity of walking into Thebes unarmed and on his own: "tunc incommittatus, inermis regna petes?" (II.343-344) and emphasizes the naiveté of such a thought by asking him whether he thinks that Eteocles will allow him to leave Thebes alive once his request has been refused (II.344-345). Even though she is a woman, she is aware of the rumors that Eteocles has grown arrogant in his power and she understands that Eteocles is not likely to hand over his crown at a mere request. Thus she demonstrates her ability to read political matters and to give sound advice based on her analysis.

Argia, and Statius through Argia, hastens to add that she is not objecting to his leaving in order to keep him home for her own pleasure. Rather, she fears for Polyneices' safety.

...nil foedere rupto
conubiisve super moveor viduaque iuventa,
etsi crudus amor necdum post flammea toti
intepuere tori: tua me, properabo fateri,
angit, amate, salus. (II.339-343)

It would be a bad thing if Argia seemed to be holding Polyneices back from his inheritance for selfish reasons. As I will show in chapter 4, a selfish wife brings terrible consequences upon her husband. But Statius makes it

clear that Argia is speaking with the purest of intentions so that we may correctly construe her advice.

Also, even though Argia denies that a concern for their marriage-bond is motivating her, the fact that she mentions it serves to remind Polyneices, and the reader, that he has recently entered into a new life, and that it is one he should value. She reminds Polyneices of his obligations even while she discounts them.

There are further indications that Argia is being very clever in the construction of her speech. In book 12, when Argia finally finds Polyneices' corpse on the battlefield, distracted by grief she addresses it and says that she asked him many times why he would march on Thebes when undivided power would soon be his in Argos.

dicebam: quo tendis iter? quid scepra negata
poscis? habes Argos, soceri regnabis in aula;
hic tibi longus honos, hic indivisa potestas. (XII. 333-335)

Argia has demonstrated astuteness sufficient enough to credit her with having these thoughts in mind even in her first speech to Polyneices. However, it would probably put Polyneices on the offensive if she came right out and said that he would be better off if he forgot about Thebes and stayed with her. She must be more subtle in her argument. Therefore, instead of the more blatant questions she asks of the Polyneices on the battlefield, she asks him this:

...quo tendis iter? ni conscius ardor
 ducit et ad Thebas melior socer. (II.351-352)

The wording is the same as in book 12: "quo tendis iter?" but the rest of the question is curious. She wonders whether he wants to return to Thebes for some other love and a better father-in-law. Ahl says that Argia is simply misconstruing what is bothering Polyneices.⁵ However, if we look more closely at the construction of her speech, and the skillfulness with which she has been handling Polyneices so far, it seems unlikely that she would make so great an error in judgment.

It is absurd that Polyneices would actually be hoping for a better marriage. Polyneices already has a faithful and loving wife in Argia. He could not expect to find a more honorable marriage than the one he has now in Thebes, which is emphasized throughout the epic as a poorer city than Argos.⁶ It is also unlikely that Argia could really be jealous of such an absurd possibility given the perceptiveness she has displayed thus far. And yet she says that she knows of no better reason to return to Thebes, thereby implying that all his other reasons are less compelling. But if returning for a different bride is a weak reason in itself, then any other reasons are even less valid. By positing a fictitious woman, she equates his yearning to regain the crown with her empty fantasy of another woman. The implication of the question hangs in the air: why go back if there is nothing in Thebes but unfulfillable fantasies, especially when here

⁵Ahl, 1986, p. 2871.

⁶For example, Eteocles tells Tydeus to ask Polyneices whether his new wife will endure Thebes when she has been accustomed for so long to her father's luxury, II.438-443.

Also, in I, 151 "pugna est de paupere regno."

you have just been accepted into a distinguished family and the rule of a richer realm is in your grasp. The question dovetails with the passage cited above where she implies that he should be honoring his new marriage while saying that it is not even a consideration. First Polyneices is reminded that he has a new family and a new responsibility in Argos and second, that what awaits him in Thebes is anything but the fulfillment of his desires. In this way Argia indicates both the needlessness and futility of his quest.

Unfortunately, Polyneices remains unpersuaded by her words. Because he is so wrapped up in his own concerns he misses all the implications of her speech and tells her with patronizing words that these cares are not becoming to her years (II.337-338). Ironically, Polyneices doesn't even seem to consider how his actions will affect Argia until he is setting off for battle. Then, although he is excited and already imagining himself master of Thebes, he looks back on Argia as she stands dazed on the highest turret watching the army move off. Statius indicates the power her image has over Polyneices by making Argia the subject of the next sentence. She draws back the mind and eyes of her husband and turns sweet Thebes out of his breast:

iam regnum matrisque sinus fidasque sorores
 spe votisque tenet, tamen et de turre suprema
 attonitam totoque exstantem corpore longe
 respicit Argian; haec mentem oculosque reducit
 coniugis et dulces avertit pectore Thebas. (IV.88-92)

For the time being though, all of Polyneices' thoughts rest on regaining the kingdom. This prompts him to make the rather ill-omened prophecy that perhaps the day will come when Argia may see the city walls of her husband and walk as a queen through two cities:

fors aderit lux tibi, qua moenia cernes
coniugis et geminas ibis regina urbes. (II.361-362)

This prophecy takes on pitiable overtones later when Argia does indeed approach her "once-desired" city of Thebes and declares herself to be the daughter-in-law of Oedipus, and thus its princess. When she finds Polyneices on the battlefield she implores him to lead her inside the city and show her his ancestral hearths as he had promised to do (XII.325-328). But since he has lost his battle, the way that Argia does eventually enter the city is far different from Polyneices' hopeful expectations for her. Instead of walking through Thebes by his side as a recognized queen, she is led through the city as a prisoner.

For now, though, Argia is unaware of her future. Once she realizes that regaining the Theban crown is Polyneices' only desire in life, she adopts it as her own as well. From this point on she subjugates her own desires to his even when she knows that they will probably cause her distress. Right away we see her using her influence within the palace to further his interests. After much debate it is decided that Tydeus will go to Eteocles as an ambassador to demand that Polyneices be given his year to rule according to their agreement. Deipyle, Tydeus' wife and Argia's sister

quite rightly tries to influence her husband not take on the expedition. At this point Argia intervenes on her husband's behalf and convinces Deipyle to let Tydeus go (II. 370-374).

More significantly, she also uses her influence with her father on his behalf. Two years have passed since Tydeus' expedition and Adrastus still hasn't said definitely whether or not he will support Polyneices in a war on Thebes. Argia has been listening to the groans of her husband as he sleeps for the full of those two years now, and because it is her desire to do whatever will relieve his pain, she goes to her father just before dawn with her child in her arms to ask him to wage the war that she thinks will cure Polyneices of his disturbed sleep and mind. She has been made miserable by her husband's pain and says to her father that he doesn't know how much love there is in a chaste wife who is married to a pitiable husband ("nescis, pater optime, nescis, quantus amor castae misero nupsisse marito," III.704-705). She is well aware, however, of the pain that she will eventually have to endure as a result of this request:

et nunc maesta quidem grave et inlaetabile munus,
 ut timeam doleamque, rogo; sed cum oscula rumpet
 maesta dies, cum rauca dabunt abeuntibus armis
 signa tubae saevoque genas fulgebitis auro
 et mihi! care pater, iterum fortasse rogabo. (III.706-710)

Nonetheless, she has chosen to use her influence for the sake of her husband. Her plea is considered praiseworthy by Adrastus and he tells her to put aside her fear ("pone metus, laudanda rogas nec digna negari"

III.713). Her opinion and wishes have considerable weight with him and consequently her plea has its effect. The war will be fought.

I have asserted above in chapter 1 that when a 'good' woman takes action, her influence should serve to bring about a resolution to a chaotic situation, or a return to normalcy. However, this is one instance in which a good woman's intervention does not bring about a return to normalcy. Indeed, Argia's plea has quite the opposite effect since it promotes the initiation of war. However, it is possible to resolve this apparent incongruity by considering again Argia's motivation for entering into the realm of politics. It was Argia's specific purpose to bring about a resolution to her husband's pain, which is an appropriate course of action for a faithful wife. Argia is the ultimate faithful wife and therefore does whatever she can for her husband regardless of the consequences. Besides, the situation she was in was not one of normalcy either. Argia's sleep had been troubled since their first night of marriage ("ex quo primus Hymen movitque infausta sinistram Juno facem, semper lacrimis gemituque propinquo exturbata quies" II.691-693), which means that her domestic domain was seriously disturbed. Argia's primary concern as the ideal matron, in addition to her husband, is her domestic domain. Therefore, she had to risk losing Polyneices in the hope that it would lead to the restoration of normalcy within her home.

The tragedy is that Polyneices could not accept the state of normalcy that Argia offered to him in the beginning. She was the vehicle through which he acquired a new kingdom. He would have been king after Adrastus and, since Argia had already borne him a son, his line was well

established. Perhaps Adrastus' compassionate words that "an ancestor's crime need not attach itself to the children" would have come true if Polyneices had heeded his warning "to earn with better deeds the redemption of his people" ("nec culpa nepotibus obstat. tu modo dissimilis rebus mereare secundis excusare tuos," I.690-692). Argos and the world Argia represented were not sufficient for him though and, consequently, the world had to bear for a while the chaos that he, his brother, and the curse of Oedipus brought upon it.

Jocasta also uses her influence in an attempt to direct the lives of the men in her family. She is not relegated to the background as she is in Greek versions of the myth, nor, apparently, has she killed herself in shame. Instead she works as a powerful force in trying to bring about a resolution to the war that is being waged by her two sons. Just as dawn is breaking and final preparations for battle are being completed, Jocasta breaks out of the city walls and demands to be admitted to the enemy's camp. She strikes quite a picture striding towards the camp with her wild eyes and white hair flowing over pale cheeks and bruised arms (VII.474-476). Antigone and Ismene support her on either arm and Statius says that they are "melior iam sexus" (VII.479). Indeed they are now the better sex as they have kept their respect for blood relations intact. The men participating in and engineering this war have stepped beyond the boundaries of what is right and natural by taking part in pointless fraternal strife. Statius makes this particularly clear in this scene with Jocasta.

Jocasta, having been granted an audience with her son, at first shames him by calling him the "hostem, quem peperit" (VII.490-491) and

by asking him why he makes a pretense of unmanly tears for her (VII.497-498). His show of filial compassion is overridden by the fact that he is about to attack her city. She quickly succeeds in making Polyneices realize how horribly he is violating custom by taking up arms against his brother. But she does not leave the situation at that. Jocasta realizes that the war plans have gone too far for the men to simply turn around and go home. Some honorable way out must be available to them if the war is to be averted, and so she offers the men a solution. She asks Polyneices to consider having a conference with his brother to resolve their differences. In order to guarantee a fair outcome to that meeting, she proposes that she herself be the arbiter. As the mother of both parties, she would not be partial to one side over the other, which qualifies her as the ideal judge. Jocasta also points out that if Eteocles refuses his request, then Polyneices may resume the war without having lost anything, but having gained a greater sense of right (VII.509-510).

While she is in the camp, Jocasta takes the opportunity to make an appeal to the *pudor* of the Inachian army as well. She reminds them that each one of them has left behind little ones and aged parents and tears like the ones she is shedding now:

...liquistis enim parvosque senesque
et lacrimas has quisque domi: sua credite matri
viscera! (VII.520-522)

The men's self-righteousness had blinded them to the horrors of war. But in her effort to stave off the war Jocasta becomes the voice of reason as she reminds the soldiers of the far-reaching effects of even one day's warfare. The crucial thing for them to remember is not that they will lose their lives, but that their loved ones at home will have to live on with the misery occasioned by their deaths.

Jocasta's arguments elicit the response she desires:

...tumidas frangebant dicta cohortes
nutantesque virum galeas et sparsa videres
fletibus arma piis. (VII.527-529)

The cohorts, having regained their perspective on the destructiveness of war, are now described as crying pious tears. Polyneices forgets about the kingdom that he was trying to win and Adrastus will not keep him from seeking a peaceful resolution to the war through arbitration (VII.534-538). Jocasta's proposal that she be the arbiter has been taken seriously: this fact reveals that she commands immense respect, even in political matters of the greatest consequence. She has offered an effective way out of the madness that accompanies fraternal strife. Tydeus, however, who is "iustae memor irae" (VII.538) breaks in and argues against this solution. The calm Jocasta created is broken, and her effort to restore political stability fails.

Jocasta tries to use her influence over her sons again later in an attempt to convince Eteocles not to face his brother in single combat. She

is described by Statius as "non sexus decoris memor" (XI.329) because she is again exhibiting a strength that surpasses normal women. In effect, she has transcended her own sex.⁷ Antigone is similarly described as she flies to the highest summit of the city walls in order to call out to Polyneices in a last effort to convince him to retract his challenge. She walks with silent steps through all the tumult, and her chaste maidenhood does not hold her back ("nec casta retardat virginitas" XI.355-356).⁸ She entreats him to look for a moment upon the city wall and see whether he finds an enemy there when he looks into her eyes.

comprime tela manu paulumque hanc respice turrem,
frater, et horrentes refer in mea lumina cristas!
agnoscine hostes? (XI.363-365)

Her arguments are effective just as Jocasta's had been. Polyneices grows quiet and tears are seen falling from his helmet (XI.382-387). For a moment it seems as if Antigone's efforts may bring about the results she desired. However, the Furies compel the brothers to single combat despite Jocasta's and Antigone's interventions.

Antigone has a bit more success when she intervenes on her father's part after the brothers have killed each other and Creon has succeeded to the throne. Creon would like to have Oedipus out of the way because Oedipus' former glory reminds him of his lesser status. Therefore,

⁷This scene will be discussed further in chapter 5.

⁸This description is echoed when Argia decides to depart from the procession of Argive women. Then she is said to have abandoned her sex ("sexu relicto", XII.178). All three women are thus seen by Statius as transcending their sex in their courage and bold action.

Creon banishes him.⁹ Oedipus responds in regal fashion and refuses to compromise his honor by begging for lenience. Antigone though is not afraid to speak up to this terrible new tyrant and handles him quite cleverly. The questions she asks him demonstrate an astute awareness of his motivations. She realizes that Oedipus makes Creon uncomfortable because of his regal nature and so she promises to subdue his haughtiness and to teach him to serve.

...felicibus hicne
 obstat? in hunc odiis et regni viribus exis,
 hunc abigis tectis? an ne prope limina clarum
 ingemat et votis intempestivus oberret?
 pone metum, procul usque tua submotus ab aula
 flebit; ego erectum subigam et servire docebo. (XI.723-728)

It almost seems as if she is teasing Creon by throwing in his face the worst of his fears. She does not let her scorn of Creon become too apparent though and even goes so far as to prostrate herself at his feet. Creon does not notice any cloaked criticism and is actually moved by her plea. He therefore mitigates his sentence.

This scene is reminiscent of the story about Thuria told by her husband in her funeral eulogy which I related in chapter 2 (pp. 30-31).¹⁰ Thuria prostrated herself at the feet of Lepidus just as Antigone prostrates herself before Creon, and both manage to win some clemency for their male relations. Both in real life and in literature women are able to

⁹"seseque minorem confessus tacite," XI.666-667.

¹⁰Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, 6.7.2; CIL VI. 1527/ILS 8393.

influence political situations through selfless action. The praise accorded to the women in historical literature indicates that Statius was distinguishing Antigone with this motif as a praiseworthy maiden. She too, like Argia, has the courage of Artemis combined with the wisdom and cunning of Athena.

Antigone will need to draw on both of these qualities in her later dealings with Creon since her powers of influence will not convince Creon to retract his edict that all the Argive host was to be left unburied. The edict she had to defy openly. It is tempting to interpret Antigone's defiance of Creon's edict as an action taken entirely independently and against the world of men. Indeed, in Sophocles' version of this myth, one of Ismene's reasons for not helping Antigone bury Polyneices is because she does not think it right to ^{take action} go against the *polis*.¹¹ However, if it were correct to interpret the actions of Statius' Antigone in this way, then she would be transgressing the boundaries set to a good woman's conduct defined in chapter two.

Statius gives us several reasons to suppose that Antigone and Argia as well are justified in their actions.¹² It must first of all be taken into consideration that Creon's edict flagrantly violated the customs of his society, and, consequently, his position as a lawful and just head of state was open to challenge. Indeed, when Capaneus' wife makes her entreaty to Theseus, she makes it clear that it is not revenge for the deaths of their

¹¹Sophocles, *Antigone* 53-54, 70-81, 93.

¹²I am leaving aside the question of how Sophocles views the situation. Although that would be a very interesting and illuminating line of inquiry, the scope of this paper will not allow for it.

men that they are seeking, for death in battle is the custom of warfare ("nec quaerimur caesos: haec bellica iura vicesque armorum" XII.552-553). They are approaching him specifically because Creon won't allow them to bury their dead. They were men, she says, born of the same seed as Theseus himself, and Creon is playing god in dictating whether or not their shades should be allowed to find rest in the underworld. Furthermore, Creon's actions themselves are an offense to the gods; dawn turns her horses from the sight and the star-bearing sky withdraws her brilliance from the world (XII.552-565). Theseus needs no further convincing. He too sees Creon's actions as horrific and wonders what Fury has inspired them ("quaenam ista novos induxit Erinys regnorum mores?" XII.590-591). He takes up their cause saying that his spear is thirsting for blood that deserves to be spilt ("sitit meritos etiamnum haec hasta cruores" XII.595). Furthermore, when Theseus is exhorting his soldiers to support him he emphasizes that they should take courage commensurate with their enterprise because they would be defending both the laws of the earthly realm as well as the covenants of the heavens.

terrarum leges et mundi foedera mecum
 defensura cohors, dignas insumite mentes
 coeptibus: hac omnem divumque hominumque favorem
 Naturamque ducem coetusque silentis Averno
 stare palam est; illic Poenarum exercita Thebis
 agmina et anguicomae ducunt vexilla sorores.
 ite alacres tantaeque, precor, confidite causae. (XII.642-648)

Thus, since Creon's edict is recognized as flouting the laws of both men and gods, his authority as leader of the people has been undermined. Antigone and Argia are therefore justified in defying his edict.

They are doubly justified in their actions because it was traditionally the woman's responsibility to dress and prepare the bodies of her family members for burial or cremation. This task was of great importance because if the body did not receive proper treatment, its spirit would be doomed to wander eternally between the world of the living and the Underworld. Evadne even states this as one of her fears in her speech to Theseus (XII.560-561). Mary Lefkowitz points this out when she discusses Antigone's motivations for defying Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*.¹³ She contends that Antigone was placing the *oikos*, which was supposed to be a woman's primary concern, above the *polis*, as was expected of her by society. In first century A.D. Rome the job of readying a body for burial was taken over, particularly among the upper classes, by professional undertakers.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the innate logic of the myth is carried over into Statius' version of it and the Argive women are depicted as retaining the responsibility for insuring their husband's burial. Thus Antigone and Argia were not only justified in their actions, but they were required to act as they did in order to fulfill the role of ideal women.

Both factors can be seen at work in Argia's attempt to give a proper burial to Polyneices. When Argia is finally nearing Thebes after her long and arduous journey, she addresses the city as the daughter-in-law of

¹³Lefkowitz, pp. 81-84.

¹⁴Scullard, pp. 177, 220.

Oedipus (XII.260), assimilating herself to Polyneices' blood relations and thereby establishing her right and responsibility to bury him. Then, in order to demonstrate that Argia is not flying in the face of the patriarchy in her attempt to bury Polyneices, Statius has her ask Thebes to allow her to find Polyneices and a pyre which would serve to cremate him. It is appropriate for her to address her plea to the city itself because Creon is no longer considered a valid ruler. Therefore, she deals directly with the personified Thebes as having higher authority than that which Creon holds. In this way Statius reconciles her familial duty with the dictates of patriarchal rule. Heavenly approval of Argia's quest is also given. When Juno is on her way to Athens to help the Argive women, she catches sight of Argia on the battlefield searching for Polyneices. Moved by the sight she asks Cynthia to help Argia find her husband with her moonbeams (XII.299-306).

Statius uses this burial motif to demonstrate the extremes to which an ideal woman would go in the interests of her husband or brother. Argia and Antigone go beyond even the efforts of the procession of Argive women and in this way become Statius' supreme examples of ideal feminine heroism.

Argia had demonstrated that her principal interest in life was her husband's when she petitioned her father to aid Polyneices in his war against Thebes. Now, in the death of Polyneices, she is profoundly affected. She leads the band of sorrowing women towards Thebes with no thought of her royal home nor of her father. Her only thought is of Polyneices.

...non regia cordi,
 non pater: una fides, unum Polynicis amati
 nomen in ore sedet; Dirce infausta que Cadmi
 moenia posthabitis velit incoluisse Mycenis. (XII.113-116)

After Ornytus tells the women about Creon's decree, Argia is so distressed at the idea of her husband lying unburied that she cannot even allow the delay of going to Athens and petitioning Theseus. Going through a male representative would be the more appropriate way for a woman to have her wrongs redressed, but Argia sees it as an unconscionable waste of time.

"anne," ait, "hostiles ego tabente per agros -
 heu dolor! - exspectem, quaenam sententia lenti
 Theseos? an bello proceres, an dexter haruspex
 adnuat? interea funus decrescit." (XII.209-212)

Instead, Argia chooses to risk her life and by turning her course towards Thebes in the hope that she may be able to bury Polyneices herself. Statius says that Argia is affected by a passion for her husband whose intensity goes far beyond that of normal women. He even says that in taking this course she has leaves her female sex behind.

hic non femineae subitum virtutis amorem
 colligit Argia, sexuque immane relicto
 tractat opus. (XII.177-179)

Thus she is depicted as transcending the virtue of normal women. Statius makes it clear though that Argia is not going beyond the bounds of the feminine ideal in her independent action. He says that she is urged to this path by piety and the flames of her chaste love ("hortantur pietas ignesque pudici" XII.186). Also, she devises the plan in the knowledge that it might bring on her own death ("immitesque deos regemque cruentum contemptrix animae et magno temeraria luctu provocet" XII.184-186). Argia is solely motivated by concern for her husband, even to the point that she is willing to risk her own life for him. It is the motivation, which is entirely laudable, that characterizes her independent actions as within the boundaries of appropriate action.

Indeed, Argia is so obsessed with worry for Polyneices that he appears constantly in her mind's eye as she presses on in her journey. She imagines Polyneices complaining to the Stygian divinities that she is too slow in coming even though she has done everything she could to get to him as soon as possible. Her sense of responsibility for her husband's burial becomes so great that, although her main source of apprehension has arisen from the thought that he may still be exposed, she deems it a sin if due to her slowness he has already been buried by someone else.

et nunc me duram, si quis tibi sensus ad umbras,
me tardam Stygiis quereris, fidissime divis.
heu si nudus adhuc, heu si iam forte sepultus:
nostrum utrumque nefas. (XII.214-217)

The pain that she imagines Polyneices' shade to be experiencing wracks her body and drives her to distraction.¹⁵ Her identification with Polyneices is so strong that she would rather give her own limbs to taloned birds than for her husband's body to suffer further decay ("et uncialitibus non hos potius supponimus artus?" XII.212-213). Statius symbolically affirms this identification by having Argia repeat, in reverse, Polyneices' disturbed journey to Argos. Polyneices was plunged in a mental darkness at the time, which was emphasized by the storm that crashed around him. Argia's mental state is similarly reflected in the language used to describe her journey:¹⁶

...nec caligantibus arvis
 terretur, nec frangit iter per et in via saxa
 lapsurasque trabes nemorumque arcana, sereno
 nigra die, caecisque incisa novalia fossis,
 per fluvios secreta vadi somnosque ferrarum
 praeter et horrendis infesta cubilia monstros.
 tantum animi luctusque valent! (XII.231-237)

The irony is that Polyneices found Argia as a young and blushing bride at the end of his journey, while Argia will find Polyneices dead and decaying.

The identification with Polyneices that Argia demonstrates is also stated explicitly by Antigone. When the two women meet on the

¹⁵In XII. 230-231, she is not even aware that day has ended.

¹⁶See Moreland, 20-31, for a discussion of the darkness imagery throughout the *Thebaid* and in particular in relation to Polyneices' voyage through the storm.

battlefield over Polyneices' corpse, they are wary of each other. But Antigone finally reveals herself by saying:

mea membra tenes, mea funera plangis. (XII.383)

Antigone's identification is so strong that she considers Polyneices' body to be her own; his flesh is her flesh, his death constitutes her own. Antigone had been the only one to go forth with Polyneices at the start of his exile's journey ("namque una soror producere tristis exsulis ausa vias" II.313-314) and now she is there to take the first steps with him on his journey to the Underworld. Antigone feels the weight of her responsibility to bury Polyneices just as Argia does and their complaints are similar. Antigone declares that she is ashamed that Argia reached the corpse before she did and deems herself unworthy of holding him.

cedo, tene, pudet heu! pietas ignava sororis!
haec prior - ! (XII.383-384)

The closeness both women feel with Polyneices motivates them to risk their lives in order to perform their duty by him and therefore seems to be a requisite characteristic of women who are depicted as ideal. It may also suggest why most prominent ^{Roman} women in the first centuries B.C. and A.D. at Rome never invested their intelligence and political astuteness in anyone besides their husbands and sons. Of course, Statius was a male writer and portrayed his good women in ways that would be considered praiseworthy by his audience and satisfying to him personally, and so we cannot assume

that his female characters will necessarily mirror the women who were alive when he was writing. However, if a woman identified with her husband or brother even a fraction of the amount that Argia and Antigone did, then as a man's pain was taken on by the woman, then so would she have taken on the joy and success of that man. Therefore, if she achieved some benefit for her husband, then that benefit would have ^{been felt to have} accrued to herself as well. His success would have been emotionally rewarding to her and ^{therefore} the main objective of her actions and ambitions becomes the man's. It is clear that this is what is occurring with the ideal women in the *Thebaid*. Whether or not this psychological construction could be applied to women like Servilia and Octavia is debatable, but their actions demonstrate that they have internalized the ideal promoted by their society. They work through their close male relatives in order to satisfy their ambitious natures. It makes sense that they derived some personal satisfaction from it.

In any case, Argia and Antigone certainly felt that their lives were only fulfilled when they had done their duty by Polyneices. Together they manage to wash his wounds in the Ismenos River. Statius emphasizes the ancient derivation and necessity of this ritual purification by comparing the two women with Phaethon's sisters who washed him after his fall from Hyperion's chariot (XII.413-414). Finally, after they have given Polyneices their last kisses they lay him upon the only pyre that has even a spark of fire left. When they discover that they have lain the brothers beside each other, and that even in death their spirits are fighting

through the fire, Antigone makes one last, but vain, attempt to reconcile them.

nil actum bello; miseri, sic dum arma movetis,
 vicit nempe Creon! nusquam iam regna, quis ardor?
 cui furitis? sedate minas; tuque exsul ubique
 semper inops aequi, iam cede: hoc nupta precatur,
 hoc soror, aut saevos mediae veniemus in ignes. (XII.442-446)

She also points out how pointless the war had been. Neither of them has gained his goal; they have only succeeded in clearing the throne for Creon. The divisiveness of the brothers is accentuated by the sisterly camaraderie and affection that Argia and Antigone display in their attempts to cremate Polyneices. This points up again that Statius' good women work in the best interests of the men in their lives, but they also work towards restoring a peaceful balance in chaotic and disruptive situations.

Once they have accomplished their mission, Argia and Antigone's courageousness does not diminish. The consequences of their actions are as severe as they had expected. When they are captured, they are sentenced to die. This does not disturb them one bit though and they proclaim their deed careless of their own lives now that they know Polyneices' body has been consumed by the fire. In fact, they seem to vie with each other in their eagerness to be sacrificed.

ambitur saeva de morte animosaque leti
 spes furit: haec fratris rapuisse, haec coniugis artus
 contedunt vicibusque probant: "ego corpus," "ego ignes,"

"me pietas," "me duxit amor." deprecere saeva
 supplicia et dextras iuvat insertare catenis. (XII.456-460)

Their own lives are no longer of any importance now that the object of their efforts and ambitions, Polyneices, no longer exists. Their only aim at this point is to demonstrate their commitment to Polyneices by boldly facing the consequences of their actions, their deaths.

Statius does not allow them to die though. Just in the nick of time Theseus' messenger appears on the scene and saves them. The fact that Argia and Antigone live, in contrast with Sophocles' Antigone, is significant. It shows that Statius approved of their defiance of Creon and their successful cremation of Polyneices. They were acting within the bounds of the current social mores dictated for ideal women because they had been motivated by their devotion to their close male relative.

Argia and Antigone, along with Jocasta, can be said to represent the ideal of womanhood to the Roman audience that Statius was writing for. They are brave and vocal, not hesitating to intervene in politics or even to take extremely courageous action in the face of dire consequences. Furthermore, their voices and actions have an effect on the world around them. This is because they are respected and their opinions carry weight even when they are addressing such subjects as war and the arbitration of peace. Statius' ideal women also work for a return to normalcy as they try to point a way out of the *furor* that the men have created for themselves and which pervades the whole of the *Thebaid*. Statius' heroic ideal women, Argia, Antigone and Jocasta, do everything they can both to

further their men's interests and to resolve their hatreds so that the world can once again exist free from the antagonisms of war.

In the previous chapter, Argia, Antigone and Junete were shown to represent the ideal of Roman women as Statius perceived it. They were not only courageous and sensitive, but they also worked for resolutions in chaotic and disruptive situations. I proposed that they were qualified to be presented as ideal women because their actions were consistently motivated by concern for the men in their lives. However, the rule is more convincingly established when Statius condemns women who transgress those boundaries that the ideal women stay within. This chapter will examine the women Statius portrays as evil or deviant in order to better define the parameters set for a good woman's actions.

Despite Statius' tendency to endow his female characters with favorable traits, he does provide us with three examples of women who do not conform to the ideal. They are Eriphyle, the Lemnian women, and the Amazons whom Theseus brings back to Athens with him as prisoners. All three are similar to the ideal women in that their actions are bold and courageous. However, the factor which differentiates them from the ideal women is their willingness to act in their own interests. It is important to note that Eriphyle and the Lemnian women are depicted not only as acting in their own interests, but also to the exclusion and disadvantage of the interests of the men in their lives. Theseus seems to equate women's self-subserving action with action that is inherently hostile towards men. Only the Amazons are not shown as actively hostile towards their own men, but the situation of women living without the governance of men is

Chapter Four: The Deviant Women

In the previous chapter, Argia, Antigone and Jocasta were shown to represent the ideal of Roman women as Statius perceived it. They were not only courageous and sensitive, but they also worked for resolutions to chaotic and disruptive situations. I proposed that they were qualified to be presented as ideal women because their actions were consistently motivated by concern for the men in their lives. However, the rule is more convincingly established when Statius condemns women who transgress those boundaries that the ideal women stay within. This chapter will examine the women Statius portrays as evil or deviant in order to better define the parameters set for a good woman's actions.

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dangerous enough in its implications. Therefore they are subdued and made to accept the rule of men. Other than the special case of the Amazons,¹ there are no women in the *Thebaid* who act in their own interests without harming their men. Thus they are the perfect foils for the ideal women who always act to benefit their men.

Stattius uses Eriphyle, Amphiaras' wife, to highlight the good qualities of Argia. Eriphyle's greed and disdain for her husband's well-being is clearly contrasted with Argia's selflessness in an incident concerning the famed necklace of Harmonia. The necklace had a long and tragic history before it came into the hands of Argia. Vulcan constructed it, appropriately enough, as a present for the daughter of Venus' adulterous union with Mars. In order to repay his wife's treachery he stamped the circlet with figures of ill omen ("infaustas figuras") and intertwined it with various plagues ("varias pestes" II.269-285). The curse thus brought upon Harmonia was that she should slither as a snake to Illyria with her husband Cadmus. Semele, the next wearer of the necklace, had been advised by Juno to ask Jupiter to reveal himself to her in his true form. Consequently, Semele was consumed by the blast of lightning that followed upon Jupiter's granting her request. It was borne next by Jocasta, whose bad luck with her husbands is one of the motivating forces behind the *Thebaid*. Finally, Polyneices gave Harmonia's necklace to Argia as a wedding gift. Terrible omens occur at Argia's wedding, and Statius says

¹The special role of the Amazons in the *Thebaid* and their association with Theseus will be discussed in the next chapter.

they are no wonder because she was wearing the beautiful piece of wickedness ("decorum...nefas" II.294-295).

Eriphyle saw Argia wearing the necklace at the wedding and conceived a burning desire to have it regardless of the ruin it would bring on her husband. Statius says that Eriphyle is deserving of whatever disaster should result from owning the necklace, but emphasizes that Amphiaraus is not and that her crime will also affect her innocent sons.

quos optat gemitus, quantas cupit impia clades!
 digna quidem, sed quid miseri decepta mariti
 arma, quid insontes nati meruere furores? (II.303-305)

As time passes Eriphyle sees a way to get the necklace from Argia. Amphiaraus is reluctant to join the forces coming together to march on Thebes. Eriphyle lets it be known that she will not encourage her husband to do so until she has the necklace in her hands. Statius says that "wifely treachery" was not absent from Amphiaraus' decision to add his strength to Adrastus' ("nec coniugis absunt insidiae" IV.190-191). The treachery does indeed characterize Eriphyle as evil: she was willing to exchange gold for her husband fully aware that she was thereby sealing his doom.

hoc aurum vati fata exitiale monebant
 Argolico; scit et ipsa -nefas!- sed perfida coniunx
 dona viro mutare velit, spoliisque potentis
 imminet Argiae raptoque excellere cultu. (IV.192-195)

Stattius does not stop at blaming Eriphyle for her husband's death and her son's misery; he also depicts her as the force that sets the whole war in motion.

sic Eriphylaeos aurum fatale penates
 inrupit scelerumque ingentia semina movit,
 et grave Tisiphone risit gravisa futuris (IV.211-213).

Thus the greed of one woman is presented as the cause of innumerable deaths and the destruction of two cities.

Stattius takes advantage of the situation to contrast the virtues which define Argia as ideal with Eriphyle's unconscionable self-absorption. As we saw in the previous chapter, Argia's main interest in life had become making it possible for her husband to return to Thebes. With her usual awareness of political matters, she recognizes that the morale of the army would be considerably weakened by Amphiaraus' absence, possibly to the point that the spirit for the campaign would entirely die. In order to forestall this from happening she gives Eriphyle the necklace in the hope that Eriphyle would then urge Amphiaraus to go (IV.196-197).

The speech that Argia gives as she hands the necklace over to Eriphyle has no reference within it to the blackmail and instead focuses on Eriphyle's shameless desire to beautify herself. As Argia points out, it is not fitting to worry about adorning oneself during war time, and she

asserts that the signs of her beauty could not please her without Polynices by her side.

“non haec apta mihi nitidis ornatibus” inquit,
 “tempora, nec miserae placeant insignia formae
 te sine: sat dubium coetu solante timorem
 fallere et incultos aris adverrere crines.
 scilicet -infandum!-, cum tu cludare minanti
 casside ferratus sonas, ego divitis aurum
 Harmoniae dotale geram?” (IV. 200-206)

Argia's final condemnation of Eriphyle is extremely harsh. She says “Let her wear it who desires it, and who is able to rejoice while her husband is at war.” (“nunc induat illa, quae petit at bellante potest gaudere marito” IV.209-210). Statius deliberately puts this condemnation of Eriphyle in Argia's mouth to emphasize their relationship as foils for one another: where Argia gives her most prized possession to further her husband's ambitions, Eriphyle takes it to satisfy her own desires despite the fact that she assures her husband's death by doing so. Where Argia thinks of her husband's well-being, Eriphyle thinks of herself.²

To be sure, Amphiaraus is not ignorant of his wife's designs and condemns her as well. His last request as he is being swallowed up by the

²This event is strikingly similar to the story of Valerius Maximus' that I related in chapter 2 about Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, and her Capanean friend. In both, a love of jewels is used to symbolize a woman's selfishness in caring about herself, and in both, the attention the woman pays to her own needs is shown to detract from the care she should be showing her male relatives. *+ to cond cast a woman who puts her men before her jewels!*

earth is for Apollo to avenge his home and the noble rage of his son by punishing his sacrilegious wife.

nunc voce suprema,
 si qua recessuro debetur gratia vati,
 deceptum tibi, Phoebæ, larem poenasque nefandæ
 coniugis et pulchrum nati commendo furorem. (VII.785-788)

Thus we are assured that Eriphyle will not escape the just consequences of her evil greed. It is important that the audience know that Eriphyle will be punished. As an evil woman, within the construct of the epic, she must suffer the consequences of her selfish actions. In addition, this final comment on her greed contrasts directly with Argia's final scene. Argia was sentenced to die but is saved, which demonstrates Statius' approval of her actions. Eriphyle seems to be getting off scot-free, but instead incurs the wrath of Apollo, which demonstrates Statius' emphatic disapproval. In this way, the results of a woman's actions can be said to define her actions as good or bad.

Another example of women acting solely in their own interests, and the dire consequences thereof, is provided by the Lemnian women. Hypsipyle's story has been criticized as a "digression within a digression."³ Indeed it does strike the reader as such at first because not only have the Argives digressed literally from the direct route to Thebes by stopping at Nemea, but also they have been transported away even from Nemea by Hypsipyle's tale. Vessey has gone a long way to counter that interpretation

³Cf. Legras, p. 152; Butler, p. 212; Summers, p. 31.

by demonstrating the structural parallels between the story Hypsipyle tells and the rest of the epic. Had Adrastus and Polyneices picked up on these parallels, he says, they "might have drawn important conclusions about their own position and fate."⁴ However, in addition to its structural importance within the epic, Hypsipyle's narrative is also instructive in helping us to understand why Statius portrayed his women in the way that he did.

The women of Lemnos were left alone by their menfolk for three years while they conducted a war on Thrace. This causes a great strain on the women. They cannot go on with their lives without their menfolk. The picture Statius paints of them is truly moving: at first they try to find solace in tearful conversation with each other or in staring out across the sea to cruel Thrace.

illae autem tristes...

...adsiduis aegrae in lacrimis solantia miscent

conloquia, aut saevam spectant trans aequora Thracen.

(V.81, 83-84)

Eventually, though, spurred on partially by the gods and partially by the flaw in their own hearts (*dis visum turbare domos, nec pectora culpa vacant*" V.57-58) the women gather together in a council that is a poor imitation of the normal male-controlled version.⁵ After being whipped into a Bacchic-like frenzy by Polyxo, they decide to murder all the men of

⁴Vessey, 1973, pp.170-187. Please also see these pages for Vessey's take on many of the following issues. See Ahl, 1986, p. 2886-2888 for his interpretation.

⁵See p. 70 of this chapter for further discussion of the council.

the city. As soon as the Lemnian fleet comes home, a terrible bloodbath ensues.

Statius removes much of the fault from the men by depicting them as gracious towards their wives on that last night.

dederat mites Cytherea suprema
nocte viros longoque brevem post tempore pacem
nequiquam et miseros perituro adflaverat igni. (V.192-194)

Thus the treacherous nature of the massacre is stressed. The women have gone mad with a passion for the "meliora foedera" which Polyxo dreamed that Venus was promising them (V.138). Therefore, even though their men have come home to them and the possibility of starting over again seems to be within their grasp, they go ahead with their plan.

Polyxo had urged them to strengthen their spirits and drive out their sex ("firmate animos et pellite sexum!" V.105), which makes a curious parallel with the way Argia and Antigone were portrayed at the height of their virtuous actions. Argia went to Thebes "relicto sexu" and Antigone flew to the top of the battlements "nec casta retardat virginitas" (XII.178, XI.355-356). In one case, the loss of feminine nature is seen as good, as if the women were transcending their sex. In contrast, in the case of the Lemnian women, the loss of feminine nature brings on a degeneration which causes the women to act like bestial monsters. The difference lies in the motivation behind the actions which entail the loss

of the women's sexual natures. Argia and Antigone were intending to help their men; the Lemnian women wished to murder them.

Through the Lemnian women Statius also demonstrates how dangerous it is for women to rule themselves. The Lemnian women make an attempt at conforming to the ways they know are proper for governing a community. They hold a council just as men do, but it is a corrupt version of a proper council. The women come together hastily and pack themselves in with no order (*"huc propere stipamur et ordine nullo congestae"* V.101-102). This contrasts sharply with the way the council of gods is depicted in book I. There the gods do not even dare to sit until Jupiter himself bids them to do so with his tranquil hand (I.203-205). Furthermore, the result of the women's disorderly council could not have been worse. This is when they decide to murder all their menfolk.

After they've slaughtered their men the Lemnian women try to set up a more elaborate government. They even make Hypsipyle their queen. It is strangely appropriate that she is the one chosen for this post because, since she was the only one who didn't succumb to the madness, and thereby did not sever her connection to the realm of men, she is the only one vaguely qualified to govern. However, Hypsipyle herself says that she succeeds to a pale mockery of power and to a Lemnos that is mournful without its leader (*"subeo -pro dira potestas!- exsanguie imperium et maestam sine culmine Lemnon"* V.324-325).

The Lemnian women continue their attempt at simulating a normal society by trying to defend themselves against the Argonauts. They were obviously making a mockery of themselves as Pallas blushes at

their squadrons and Mars laughs at them from Haemus ("audaces rubuit mirata catervas Pallas, et averso risit Gradivus in Haemo" V.356-357). However, once they have seen the huge, manly bodies of the mariners by the light of Jove's appropriately patriarchal thunderbolt, all pretense is dropped. The weapons fall from their hands and the women's true sex returns to their breasts.

ut vero elisit nubes Iove tortus ab alto
 ignis et ingentes patuere in fulmine nautae,
 deriguere animi, manibusque horrore remissis
 arma aliena dadunt, rediit in pectora sexus. (V.394-397)

From then on, the women behave more like natural women. They accept the Argonauts into their homes and make them their husbands. However, it is obvious that the women have not redeemed themselves, because once the winter has passed and the winds are favorable the Argonauts abandon them. Hypsipyle had seen them as they approached her shores as a delayed justice and punishment for their crimes sent to them by the gods ("divum sera per aequor justitia et poenae scelerum adventare videntur" V.359-360). In a way she was right. The Argonauts served to return the women's true nature to them, but the happiness they brought was short-lived. The women were again left without love in their lives and the reader is left to wonder whether these unnatural women will ever have redeemed themselves sufficiently to merit proper households and marriages.

It is not surprising that Statius paints such a horrible picture of women ruling themselves. A disapproval or even fear of independent groups of women is manifested in many myths and stories in the Greco-Roman tradition. An example of these sentiments can be found in the speeches given by Cato and Lucius Valerius over the proposal to rescind the Oppian Law.⁶ As was shown in chapter 2, Cato protested fiercely against the repeal not because he thought there was still a valid use for the law, but because he thought that giving in to the women would weaken the power of the men. In his answer to Cato, Lucius Valerius does not really address the validity of the law either. He argues that Cato has nothing to fear from the women because they hate the freedom created by widowhood and orphanage and are protesting now simply because they prefer their adornment to be subject to their husband's judgment rather than the government's.⁷ Both men are more concerned with the balance of power between the sexes and neither deems the women capable of ruling themselves. In fact, it is the prospect of women gaining even a bit of authority that makes Cato react so violently.

Of course, Statius was writing many years after the Oppian Law debate. However, the same image of the ideal woman that influenced the debate was being promoted in Statius' day, and thus it also influenced Statius in his particular portrayal of the Lemnian women. He depicts these women as failing miserably in their attempt to rule themselves, which is what the Roman male mind, so easily threatened by the idea that

⁶Livy, 34.1-8. See Balsdon, p.32-37, Pomeroy, 177-181 and my discussion in chapter 2, pp. 24-25.

⁷Livy 34.1-8.

women might supersede their control, would like to imagine happening.⁸ Furthermore, because the Lemnian women are motivated solely by the desire to satisfy their own interests, the Lemnian women's independent action goes tragically awry. This contrasts sharply with the ideal women who only consider the interests of their men, and therefore accomplish great deeds.

What then of Hypsipyle herself? She did not participate in the massacre, and yet, she seems to be punished as well. She was an unwilling partner in her marriage with Jason ("ut externas non sponte aut crimine taedas attigerim -scit cura deum" V.455-456). Furthermore, when the Argonauts leave Lemnos, some of the insanity returns as the women are again left without men to govern them, and they begin to think of murdering Hypsipyle because they have heard that she did not share in their crime. She flees Lemnos to escape death, but without the protection of Bacchus who had protected Thoas, her father, she is captured by pirates. They sell her to the king of Nemea where she becomes the nurse to the royal couple's son. All her misfortune indicates that she still owes a debt to Venus.⁹

While Hypsipyle is telling her tale to the Argives, her new charge Opheltes is killed by an immense snake sacred to Jupiter. Two things are

⁸Other instances of women who lack men in their society tend to confirm this observation. The Amazons are conquered and forced to submit to men's rule. The Argive women, who are among the women qualified as good, seek out a male advocate instead of trying to exist on their own. Statius cannot allow women to exist on their own and, therefore, in all three cases he corrects the situation by bringing men back into the picture. See Ahl, 1986, p. 2894-2898 and chapter 5, p. 87 for Theseus' association with women who lack their menfolk.

⁹See Vessey, 1973, pp. 187-191 for his discussion of Hypsipyle's guilt and its expiation through Opheltes' death. What follows is heavily indebted to Vessey's analysis.

accomplished in his death. First, because Opheltis was symbolically acting as her son,¹⁰ Hypsipyle's debt is paid. Hypsipyle herself recognizes the connection when she says: "exsolvi tibi, Lemne, nefas" (V.628). Second, Statius again makes it clear that a woman who indulges her own desires to the neglect of the males under her care will bring disaster down upon those men as well as upon herself. Hypsipyle's mistake was in telling the tale at all since she found it personally satisfying.

Dulce loqui miseris veteresque reducere questus (V.48).

It is obvious that Hypsipyle really should have been looking after the boy instead of indulging herself in recounting her own story of woe. She even admits as much. After blaming the gods for what happened she says:

...quos argua divos?
 ipsa ego te -quid enim timeam moritura fateri?-
 exposui fati. quae mentem insania traxit?
 tantane me tantae tenuere obliviae curae?
 dum patrios casus famaeque exorsa retracto
 ambitiosa meae -pietas haec magna fidesque! (V.622-627)

Indeed, she would have been killed for her negligence by Lycurgus, the boy's father, but, luckily, she has behaved properly towards the Argive army by showing them the only flowing stream in the area. By giving them the life that was embodied in that stream, she has, in effect, cared for

¹⁰At V.608 she addresses Opheltis as "natorum dulcis imago."

them as if they were her family, so that they now stand in for her as close male relatives. Adrastus makes their relationship clear when he declares her "the discoverer of the welcome stream" ("gratique inventrix fluminis ecce!" V.702) as he shields her in his chariot. The Argives reciprocate in this new relationship by protecting her from death.

Finally, because she has paid the debt due to Venus, her punishment is ended and her sons are returned to her.¹¹ Thus Hypsipyle stands on both sides of the fence that delimits the parameters of the ideal Roman woman. She neglects a male (Opheltes), thinking of her own interests first, and suffers the consequences of her actions. On the other hand, she also protects and cares for the men in her charge as she is supposed to (her father Thoas and the Argive army), and for this she is rewarded. Statius consistently follows his pattern for indicating an ideal or a bad woman even when shades of both are mixed within one character.

Thus Statius makes it clear that the main difference between the ideal woman and the bad one does not lie in their ability to take independent action, but in the motivation behind that action. The consequences of an action help to define that action as good or bad, and in turn, the woman herself. Eriphyle is the epitome of the bad woman, and will suffer grave consequences for her greed. The Lemnian women are doomed to live without the "teneri Amores" (V.70) whose absence caused

¹¹This also conveniently takes Hypsipyle off the Argives' hands. They wouldn't have had much use for her during the war.

all their strife in the beginning. And finally, Hypsipyle will live happily supported by her sons because she did not, after all, kill her father.

Statius' *Thebaid* has been assessed by Vessey as 'devoid of any subtle political allegory'.¹ He recognized that if the *Thebaid* were to be seen as a political allegory then it could only be interpreted as a negative evaluation of the current regime and the circumstances which brought the Flavians to power. However, Vessey does not believe that Statius could possibly take the political risk of writing anything that would reflect badly on the reign of Domitian. Therefore, he denies Statius the skill and political astuteness to embed political commentary within his mythological topics.

All vehemently opposes this view and credits Statius with 'a mind of his own, an individual view of the world, and sufficient literary skill to say or imply whatever he wished to say or imply'.² All takes the *Thebaid* to be Statius' commentary on Rome's chronic civil wars, specifically on the wars of about A.D. 68, which he had lived through. The Theban myth of internal strife is an obvious parallel for Statius' real-life civil wars, but at the same time serves to distance the writer from them and puts a protective veil over his criticism. This situation puts a hind on the emperor as well. The meaning of straightforward criticism such as that found in Lucan's historical epic, the *Pharsalia*, is readily apparent and its purpose is relatively clear, but even the theme of a work like Statius' *Thebaid* is removed from historical reality, so read any criticism that it is

¹ Vessey, 1973, p. 48.

² All, 1984, p. 201.

Chapter Five: Women as Statius' Political Mouthpiece

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Ahl vehemently opposes this view and credits Statius with "a mind of his own, an individual view of the world, and sufficient literary skill to say or imply whatever he wished to say or imply."² Ahl takes the *Thebaid* to be Statius' commentary on Rome's chronic civil wars, specifically on the wars of 68-69 A.D., which he had lived through. The Theban myth of fraternal strife is an effective parallel for Statius' real life civil wars, but at the same time serves to distance the writer from them and puts a protective veil over his criticism. This situation puts a bind on the emperor as well. The meaning of straightforward criticism such as that found in Lucan's historical epic the *Pharsalia* is readily apparent and its purpose is relatively clear; but once the theme of a work like Statius' *Thebaid* is removed from historical reality, to read any criticism into it is

¹Vessey, 1973, p. 63.

²Ahl, 1986, p. 2811.

tantamount to admitting that there is something to be critical about. Thus Domitian's best strategy would be to ignore any unfavorable implications about him in the *Thebaid*.³

In order to convey his criticism of the war, Statius had to choose an appropriate vehicle. The men of the epic are for the most part caught up in the struggle for power and are therefore rendered unsuitable for this purpose. Instead, Statius communicates his negative view of the war through his female characters. The role comes naturally to them since, in contrast with the men, Statius' female characters acknowledge the horrors of war and do not hesitate to make it clear that the world would be better off if they were avoided. They therefore act as a counter to the men's blind ambitions.⁴ For instance, Jocasta and Antigone remind Polyneices and Eteocles of the madness of civil war in their speeches. Jocasta provides the clearest example when she exclaims to her son:

quis furor? unde iterum regni integrata resurgit
Eumenis? (XI.329-330)⁵

Thus, through Jocasta, Statius characterizes the war as madness and something only a Fury could inspire. The criminal nature of Polyneices' and Eteocles' proposed battle is emphasized further on in Jocasta's speech

³See Ahl, 1984, pp. 40-124 for his argument on how authors used deniability as a ploy to forestall emperors from interpreting their work as criticism of the present regime.

⁴The exception to this is of course the Lemnian women. Their place in the epic has been described in the previous chapter.

⁵The imagery of a mother or sister condemning fraternal strife is found again in Statius' depiction of Pietas as she makes one last attempt to stop the brothers from fighting: "fraternaue bella, ceu soror infelix pugnantum aut anxia mater, deflebat" XI.460-462.

when she advises Eteocles to stop for a moment and think about the *crime* that he is daring ("adde moram *sceleri* et metire, quod audes" XI.347).

The futility of war, which Statius must have felt keenly after the wars of 68-69 A.D., is expressed by Antigone. As I have mentioned in chapter 3, when Antigone realizes that she and Argia have placed Polyneices on the same funeral pyre as Eteocles and that her brothers were still fighting in their death, she calls out to them to end their useless struggle:

nil actum bello; miseri, sic, dum arma movetis,
vicit nempe Creon! nusquam iam regna, quis ardor?
cui furitis? sedate minas; tuque exsul ubique
semper inops aequi, iam cede: hoc nupta precatur,
hoc soror, aut saevos mediae veniemus in ignes. (XII.442-446)

Neither Polyneices nor Eteocles has won the power they were fighting for. Indeed, they have only succeeded in clearing the throne for yet another cruel despot. Antigone is painfully aware of the irony of the situation and tries to make her brothers sensible to it as well. Her attempt is in vain. Perhaps Statius saw himself in Antigone, trying to warn his people of the futility and destruction of war through his work, but dubious as to the success of his endeavor.

Statius also registers an implicit condemnation of the war through women in their role as mourners. Vignettes of mourning women appear throughout the epic. Very often their purpose is to add pathos to battle scenes and poignancy to the death of the young. But they also symbolize

the fact that while men deal with the politics of the war, it is the women who recognize and deal with the resultant death.⁶ Thus Eurydice is shown to mourn for Opheltes, whose death fulfills the prophesy that Lycurgus will give the first death of the war,⁷ and Atalanta is shown praying for Parthenopaeus' safe return even though the omens in her dreams have told her that her prayers are in vain.⁸ As these mothers mourn for their lost children, Statius has all of us mourn for them as well. As Ahl points out, Opheltes becomes everyone's child and Parthenopaeus is everyone's son.⁹ In battle, the Thebans yield to him as he reminds them of their own sons ("dat sponte locum Thebana iuventus, natorum memores" IX.706-707). Statius closes the epic with a lament to Parthenopaeus, whom his mother and both sides of the army weep for.

Arcada quo planctu genetrix Erymanthia clamet,
 Arcada, consumpto servantem sanguine vultus,
 Arcada, quem geminae pariter flevere cohortes. (XII.805-807)

By emphasizing the universality of the pain caused by Parthenopaeus' death, and by making his audience experience the pain as well, Statius succeeds in making us well aware of the harsh realities of war: young men

⁶It is interesting in this context to note that when Oedipus finally mourns for his sons he characterizes his beating of the breast as soft or weak. The word he uses is *molles*, which can often be translated as "womanly" within the *Thebaid*, thus emphasizing mourning as a feminine activity.

⁷"prima, Lycurge, dabis Dircae funera bello," V.647. See VI.135-183 for Eurydice's lament.

⁸See IX.570-907 for Atalanta's prayers to Diana, Diana's attempt to at least make Parthenopaeus' death an honorable one, and Parthenopaeus' plea that Dorceus tell his mother of his death quietly and only when she is not holding a weapon in her hand. Parthenopaeus knows the grief his death will cause his mother.

⁹Ahl, 1986, p. 2905.

For men being
ambivalent.

die and their mothers and wives have to live on with the grief. Through these mourners Statius' makes his opinion of war clear. It causes more grief than he can tell about¹⁰ and ^{if} ^{is} ^{correct,} ^{it} ^{is} ^{all} ⁱⁿ ^{vain.}

Statius does insert some hope into this bleak picture, and again he uses his women to represent that hope. The mourners, besides representing the horrors of war, also represent an alternative to them. Through the women Statius shows that life will go on despite the deaths that have occurred. The women physically constitute a refuge from the war, as they are always at home carrying on the more normal pattern of life, to which the soldiers who survive will return when the war is over. The women are also represented as having a different view of the war. Argia, Antigone and Jocasta have all been shown to recognize and deplore the madness of civil war. Creon's wife, as she is mourning for Menoeceus, would like to dissociate women from the forces of war altogether, and she does so by emphatically asserting that none of the men's excessive love of war has been derived from their mothers.

...nimirum Martius anguis,
 quaeque novis proavum tellus effloruit armis-
 hinc animi tristes nimiusque in pectore Mavors,
 et de matre nihil. (X.806-809)

The fact that the women's different world view also involves a certain unity of feeling and purpose which the men lack is demonstrated

¹⁰See XII.797 ff. where Statius protests that "he could not tell...with what lament the Erymanthian mother cries for her son."

by the two processions of mourning women. The first procession is of Theban women and the second is the procession of Argive women. The two processions parallel each other in various ways. The Theban women stream out of Thebes to recover the bodies of the fifty men who were sent to ambush Tydeus, just as the Argive women stream out of Argos in order to bury their men at the end of the war. Their elderly spokesman Aletes (paralleled by Theseus in the second procession) declares that already they are pained by the extremities of war and thus marks these deaths as the first of many atrocities still to come ("et iam bellorum extrema dolemus" III.209). The Argive women will be marching to remedy the final atrocity. Aletes rails against Eteocles as a cruel and abominable king ("multumque nefas Eteoclis acervat crudelem infandumque vocans poenasque daturum" III.215-216) showing that the people think the war was brought upon them by an impious king. This view is confirmed in Statius' description of the Thebans as they prepare for battle. They are "sorrowed by the madnesses of their leader" ("maesta ducis furiiis" IV.346). Similarly, the Argive women will attempt to bury their dead in defiance of the impious edict of cruel and blood-stained Creon.¹¹ Furthermore, the women in both processions are united in their purpose despite their different affiliations, just as Argia and Antigone were united in their efforts to bury Polyneices. The women's unity is emphasized by the parallel nature of the two processions.

Unity betw. the men finally occurs in their mutual mourning for Parthenopaeus.

¹¹He is called *saevus* and *cruentum regem* as he is about to kill Argia and Antigone, XII.677-681.

Stattius consistently contrasts the women's unity with the divisiveness of the men in war. In this way he characterizes the women's alternative world as a saner and more cooperative one, whose presence is felt as a powerful undercurrent throughout the *Thebaid*. This theme is further emphasized by the structural positioning of the two processions within the *Thebaid*: they balance each other at the beginning and end of the war. This structural image assures us that the women and the saner alternative world they represent are constants. After the Theban procession, the mourning women remain in the background of the war, but the vignettes in which they do appear reminds us of their presence and lets us know that they are working for a resolution to the upheaval created by the men. This is the sustaining hope that Stattius injects into his rather gloomy epic; indeed ^{he} fulfills this hope through the procession of Argive women.

The Argive women have the most success in resolving the latest insanities occasioned by the war.¹² They are the ones who finally cremate the exposed corpses of their husbands and they set in motion the actions that remove Creon from the throne, thus concluding the wars at last in a satisfactory manner (Creon as ruler was not acceptable and had to be removed before a final resolution could be said to have been effected). In contrast, Argia and Antigone, despite their heroic efforts, do not accomplish this much. The great accomplishments of the Argive women may in part be attributed to the fact that they went through channels better suited to women than Argia and Antigone did. Argia and Antigone

¹²See Kytzler, pp. 57-59 for Juno's role in the procession of Argive women.

circumvented the men who were in their way in their effort to give Polyneices the proper last rites. Their success indicates Statius' approval of their actions, but the Argive women's greater success indicates a greater degree of correctness in their methods. This is because the Argive women, once they hear from Ornytus that Creon has decreed that their husbands' bodies should remain unburied, turn their course towards Athens. They are doubly correct in their actions because in addition to taking action exclusively in the interests of their husbands and sons, they also choose to have a male representative champion their cause for them.

In Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, the women take an even more proper route to accomplish their purpose. The chorus of women approach Aethra, Theseus' mother first. It is only through her that they succeed in their petition. Euripides had made Adrastus the spokesperson for the chorus of bereaved mothers, but he failed miserably in his attempt to win over Theseus. Aethra, on the other hand, being more adept at handling Theseus, convinces him that it would be to his benefit to stop the Thebans "from violating what all Greece holds lawful."¹³

The differences in Euripides' version and Statius' may reflect a difference in their societal values. There is evidence which shows that in first century B.C. Rome, working to influence men outside your family was still best done through the female members of that man's household. In 42 B.C., when the triumvirs were proposing to tax 1400 of the richest

¹³Euripides, *Suppliant Women* 311. See 286-364 for the full exchange between Aethra and Theseus. Statius' female characters, Argia, Antigone and Jocasta, were also shown to be adept at persuasion. See below for an examination of Evadne's strategy in her plea to Theseus.

women, the women tried at first to protest this taxation by approaching Octavian's sister and Antony's mother and wife. Only when they were repulsed by Fulvia did they resort to bringing their petition before the men in the Forum.¹⁴ This story does not only constitute evidence that going through female relatives was still considered best. It also shows that, unlike their Greek counterparts, Roman women could take their own representation upon themselves when they had to. This is reflected in Statius' portrayal of the Argive women. He no longer has any use for Aethra, or for Adrastus for that matter, and has Evadne make the appeal instead.

It is appropriate to have Evadne make the petition. Just as her husband Capaneus had no fear of the gods, so Evadne has no fear of kings. Therefore, Statius has her dare to speak before the others ("ausa ante alias Capaneia coniunx" XII.545).¹⁵ Her argument concerning the legitimacy of their request has been discussed in chapter 3, pp. 50-52. However, Evadne does not stop at saying how blasphemous it is for Creon to let bodies remain unburied. She also plays upon the honor of Theseus, just as Aethra had done in the *Suppliant Women*. She tells the Athenians to make haste because this vengeance would be becoming to them ("properate, verendi Cecropidae; vos ista decet vindicta" XII.569-570). Then Evadne says that it is known through the report of the Athenians'

¹⁴Appian, *Civil Wars*, 4.32-34. See my discussion of this protest in chapter 2, p. 26.

¹⁵It is also interesting to note that while Statius gives Evadne pride of place in this situation, and describes her suicide in honorable terms (XII.800-802), Euripides condemns her for her suicide. The difference may be due to a difference in the different cultures' expectations of women whose husband has died. Greek women were generally remarried whereas the cult of the *univira* was strong among the Romans (Pomeroy, 60-65, 206-208; Treggiari, 229-237).

outstanding deeds that they have allowed all their defeated enemies to be cremated. This gives her the chance to enumerate those outstanding deeds and, in the process, flatter Theseus (XII.575-582). At the end of all this she implores Theseus to deem this triumph worthy of his great reputation ("sed et hunc dignare triumphum" XII.579). Evadne's psychologically astute arguments are effective (just as Antigone's were when she was dealing with Creon on behalf of her father) and Theseus agrees to take up their cause.

The question may be raised though as to why the Argive procession decided to approach Theseus. It certainly cannot be true, as Vessey claims, that Staius brings him in at the last minute to "portray [in Theseus] the model of a clement and just king, worthy to rule over the city which is the home of Clementia."¹⁶ Staius has shown him committing too many deeds of questionable character before we meet him in Athens.¹⁷ He was a member of the Argonaut crew that took over Lemnos, used its defenseless women for a winter and abandoned them at the end of it (V.431-432). Theseus carries into battle a shield which bears on it the image of him killing the Minotaur. Ariadne is also depicted on the shield and thus reminds us of how Theseus abandoned her on Naxos (XII.676). Finally, as he approaches the Altar of Clemency, just before Evadne begins her plea, Staius calls attention to the fact that Theseus is returning home after having conquered the Amazons. The spoils of war, including the

¹⁶Vessey, 1973, p. 312. For his complete arguments see pp. 307-316. See also Ahl, 1986, 2892-2894 and Burgess, pp. 339-349 for the symbolism of the Alter of Mercy.

¹⁷Ahl, 1986 discusses Theseus' role in relation to the Amazons and the Argive women on pp. 2894-2898.

Amazons' "virgin chariots" ("virginei currus" XII.524) are being borne in front of him. Hippolyte, the queen of the Amazons is already pregnant, and the rest of the Amazons are described as "not yet afraid, nor yet do they confess their sex."¹⁸

ipsae autem nondum trepidae sexumve fatentur,
nec vulgare gemunt aspernanturque precari.
et tantum innuptae quaerunt delubra Minervae (XII.529-531).

The *nondum trepidae* has heavy implications. It promises that violence will be done to the Amazons in the future. No, Theseus cannot be considered an entirely unsullied ruler. Indeed, as all his deeds involve violence towards women, it would seem that he would not be the most sympathetic man for a group of mourning women to seek out as their representative. However, if we examine his deeds a bit more closely, the reason why Theseus is eminently qualified to represent the Argive women will become apparent.

Both the Lemnian women and the Amazons were without their menfolk when Theseus encountered them. As was demonstrated in chapter 4, pp. 70-72, this was considered to be a dangerous situation. The Amazons, like the Lemnian women, in trying to govern themselves constituted a reversal of the normal pattern of male/female relations accepted by society. Therefore, by imposing male domination on these unnatural women, Theseus was correcting an abnormal situation. In so

¹⁸See Ahl, 1986, pp. 2893-2894 for his take on this passage.

doing, he becomes the most appropriate advocate through whom the Argive women may correct their own abnormal situation. Theseus' motivation for taking up their cause is also clear.¹⁹ Just as the Amazons and Lemnian women had no male representatives, neither do the Argive women. Theseus was able to use this to his advantage in the first two cases, and sees an opportunity to benefit from it once again.

In any case, by using Theseus as their agent, the Argive women are able to effect a resolution to the entire epic. Because of their action, all the Argive dead are given the proper last rites, Argia and Antigone are saved, and Thebes is relieved of its latest tyrannical ruler. By depicting women as the instruments through which peace is achieved, Statius is demonstrating their ultimate power of returning unacceptable situations to a livable level. Their force is therefore a positive, life-affirming one. This energy is also exhibited by Statius' heroic women and by his mourning mothers and wives. All through the epic these women register Statius' protest against the insanity of war, and, when a resolution is finally possible, it is the life-affirming force of the women that engineers it. Thus Statius ends his epic with peace restored, and thereby sends out an optimistic message, one which he saw fit to embody within the procession of Argive women.

¹⁹See Ahl, 1986, pp. 2894-2898 for further discussion of Theseus' motivations.

Conclusion

In the first chapter I indicated the unusually prominent and effective roles Statius' women play in the realms of politics and war within the *Thebaid*. Because these realms are usually reserved for male activities I asked the question, "How did Statius manage to incorporate his female characters into the world of war and politics without their presence seeming inappropriate to his readers?" Helene Foley works through the same question, in relation to Greek drama, by applying the authors' historical milieu to the text. The same methodology produces informative results when applied to Statius' *Thebaid*.

The historical influences on Statius' work are threefold: 1) the conception of the ideal Roman matron prevalent in Roman society since the time of the Twelve Tables, 2) the ideal's renewed prominence in Domitian's reign due to the emperor's political agenda of social reform (Augustus was the initiator of the moral reform that necessitated the new emphasis on the ideal), and 3) the actual (but still relative) freedoms that Roman women exercised in their daily lives. The combined force of these historical influences worked through Statius to define the limits of what would be considered appropriate action for his female characters. Thus, since Roman women used their influence to direct political affairs, Argia, Antigone and Jocasta are allowed to do the same. However, they are guided by the constraints prescribed to virtuous women to act without exception for the well-being of their close male relatives.

Deviant women such as Eriphyle and the Lemnian women prove this rule by breaking it. They take action in order to fulfill their own desires and consequently receive the emphatic disapproval of Staius. They also suffer consequences for their actions which make it clear that they have violated the parameters that define a good woman.

Through his ideal women, and through women mourners, Staius also expresses his views on the wars of 68-69 A.D. Antigone and Jocasta give voice to Staius' views in their protests against Polyneices and Eteocles' fraternal war. The mourners demonstrate for Staius the futility and destruction involved in warfare. Finally, the respect Staius had for women is demonstrated by the role he gives to the Argive procession. The Argive women manage to bring about an acceptable resolution to the war. They succeed in cremating the corpses of their dead husbands and in ridding Thebes of its latest tyrant. The Argive women are also the agents through whom Argia and Antigone are saved.

By depicting women as the instruments through which peace is achieved, Staius demonstrates their ultimate power of returning chaotic situations to a more livable level. When his women use their influence and take action in ways acceptable to the society in which he was living (i.e., on behalf of their male relatives) their force is a positive, life-affirming one. In the same way, a woman who uses her influence in her own interests becomes the source of great havoc, not only for herself, but for the entire world around her. Staius prefers to accentuate his ideal women, leaving the reader with a very impressive picture of what women can accomplish.

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