CHAPTER 1

# *The Post-Ovidian World of the* Thebaid

## 1.1 Introduction

An exploration of the ways in which the *Thebaid*'s landscapes are informed and shaped by Ovidian intertexts is an appropriate starting point for my investigation of the broader influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on Statius' epic universe. As discussed in Introduction, the significance of Ovidian intertexts in the *Thebaid* has never been studied as systematically as that of Virgil's *Aeneid*.[1] Surprisingly, even less attention has been paid to Statius' treatment of landscape.[2] However, the so-called 'spatial turn' in the study of the Humanities has recently started to show how central the relationship between human society and natural environment was to Roman discourse.[3] The Latin world never developed a word comparable with the modern idea(s) of landscape, but representations of the relationship between human authority, nature and wilderness are often politically meaningful in Latin literature as they conceptualise power and reflect important socio-cultural issues.[4] Building on recent developments in the field of cultural geography, classical studies have started to explore not only the geopolitics of literary texts – the ways in which spatial narratives contribute to the creation of political meanings – but also what Alessandro Barchiesi has defined the 'geopoetics' of literature, referring to the ways

[1] Although this reading has been pressed less forcefully in the last couple of decades, scholarly debate remains primarily focussed on Statius' debt to Virgil: see Hinds 1998: 143; Smolenaars 1994: xvi; Pollmann 2001: 13; and McNelis 2007: 7–15. Ganiban 2007: 7 argues: 'if we are to search for intertexts [in the *Thebaid*], we must be centrally concerned with the *Aeneid*'.

[2] On the *Thebaid*'s landscapes, see Brown 1994; Augoustakis 2010: 30–91; and Briguglio 2022: 61–79. On Statius' use of geography and topography, see McNelis 2007: 87–122 and Parkes 2013: 406. On the *Silvae*, see Newlands 2002: 2–8.

[3] Soja 1996: 11; Spencer 2010: 1–4; and Gilhuly and Worman 2014.

[4] The concept of landscape as interest in contextual space belongs to early modernity. A univocal definition of landscape does not exist (cf. Spencer 2010: 1–15) but the idea of space as a unified spatial scene can be connected with the studies of space in the sixteenth-century Flemish and Dutch art: see Andrews 1999; on the idea of landscape in the ancient world: Parry 1957 and Leach 1988: 10–11.



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in which literary landscapes can become symbolically and meta-poetically charged places that facilitate the authors' intertextual dialogue with their predecessors.[5] Alison Keith and Carole Newlands were among the first to acknowledge such a symbolic significance in the *Thebaid*'s geographies, arguing that Statius deploys allusions to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in specific passages of his poem to intensify the horror of the descriptions of a world riven by civil war through a poetic gesture that is comparable with that of Lucan.[6] This view was more recently supported by Antony Augoustakis in his exploration of the points of contact between the *Thebaid*'s deadly landscapes and Seneca's *loci horridi* ('horrific places').[7]

Moving beyond the detection of precise verbal allusions to past poetic models in specific episodes of the poem, I suggest in this chapter that a more holistic study of the contrasting Virgil-Ovidian allusivity that shapes Statius' landscapes can help us to better understand the *Thebaid*'s worldview and the ways in which it engages with the poem's contemporary realities. More specifically, I first argue that Statius' landscapes conspicuously reference the post-Ovidian nature of the *Thebaid*'s world through verbal and thematic allusions to the *Metamorphoses*. Although the poem's *praeteritio* makes clear that the *Thebaid* will not focus on exactly the same episodes as Ovid's Theban histories, the places encountered on Tisiphone's journey to Thebes (*Theb*. 1.100–124), Polynices' journey to Argos (*Theb*. 1.324–387), Tydeus' embassy to Thebes (*Theb*. 2.375–384; 2.496–540), during Tyresias' necromancy (*Theb*. 4.419–448) and the march of the Argives against Thebes (*Theb*. 7.398–423), confirm the continued influence of the Ovidian literary and mythological past on Statius' Theban universe. I then delve more into the literary and political implications of this resurfacing Ovidian memory by suggesting that Statius does not just write an Ovidian landscape but also a worldview deeply informed by Ovid's critical rewriting of the *Aeneid*'s geopolitical plot. This is confirmed throughout the poem, in particular by the politically loaded clash between the idealised world of Argos – described through selective allusions to the *Aeneid* – and the reality of the *Thebaid*'s universe, where episodes of destruction of the landscape by natural (the storm, *Theb*. 1.346–379), divine (the desertification, *Theb*. 4.661–729) and chthonic forces (Tyresias' necromancy, *Theb*.

[5] On cultural geography in general, see Anderson, Domosh, Pile, and Thrift 2002. Geopolitical readings of classical literature can be found, for example, in Barchiesi 2012 and Skempis and Ziogas 2013. On the notion of 'geopoetics', see Hinds 2011 and Barchiesi 2017.

[6] Keith 2000: 57–63 and Newlands 2004.

[7] Augoustakis 2015: 386–387. On the influence of Seneca on the *Thebaid*, see also Rebeggiani 2018: 25–26.

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4.419–448; the monster of Nemea, *Theb*. 4.646–5.637) display the same tendency towards the natural and civil chaos of Ovid's Theban world. This opposition, I argue, is poetically and politically meaningful: at the literary level, the *Thebaid* influences our understanding of both the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* by making their worldviews collide in ways that eventually emphasise the darker aspects of Virgil's spatial narratives; politically, this operation engages with Rome's socio-cultural context, hinting at the possibility that the Flavian emperors' claim of having re-established a universal *pax Augusta* and begun a new Augustan golden age might in fact be incongruent with the conflictive reality of the world – a world that the *Thebaid* suggests is closer to Ovid's violent Theban universe than to some of Virgil's apparently pacified landscapes.

Statius' intertextual landscape-crafting in the *Thebaid* assumes a particular significance if we consider more broadly the highly symbolic and allusive nature of landscapes in Latin imperial poetry. According to recent scholarship, 'narrated spaces' often become a powerful narrative medium that shapes the literary and political meanings of a text by providing a subjective and socio-culturally loaded description of the relationship between humanity and the universe (a worldview) that readers can apply to their own world.[8] As we shall see later, both Virgil and Ovid use complex and politically loaded spatial narratives to explore the double-sided nature of Roman power.[9] Virgil's pastoral landscapes and visions of Italy at peace are redolent with Augustan values of renewal and prosperity, but they also show – sometimes indirectly, via the vulnerability of nature and its suffering – the costs of the establishment of human (and Roman) power.[10] Ovid's transformation of Virgil's ideologically loaded landscapes into deceptively beautiful settings for scenes of unexpected and blatant violence inverts the description of possible providential (even if not unproblematic) cooperation between humans, gods, and the natural world into a more critical reflection on the capricious misapplication of absolute power.[11]

In the following analysis, I will argue that Statius retains the political and meta-poetic significance of Augustan landscapes according to a tendency that characterises all of the Flavian epicists.[12] However, while

[8] See Ryan 2003; Dominik 2009: 111–118; Skempis and Ziogas 2013: 1–8 and Rimell 2015: 1–77. On the politics of landscape, see Newlands 1984: 109–122. See also Evans 2003: 285–287 and 2007: 1–21.

[9] On Virgil, see Barchiesi 2012 and 2017: 151–166. On Ovid, see Segal 1969; Ziogas 2013: 325–348 and Bernstein 2011.

[10] On Virgil's *loci amoeni*, see Dominik 2009: 111–122 and Weeda 2015: 1–19, 54–103.

[11] On the politics of deceptiveness in Ovid's landscapes, see Parry 1964: 275–280; Segal 1969; Hardie 1990: 224–230; and Hinds 2002: 130–132.

[12] Cf. Bernstein 2016: 403–405.

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in both Valerius' and Silius' poems Ovidian landscapes resurface only occasionally to raise doubts about the overall positive narratives of spatial dominion (the sea and Carthage, respectively), Statius is the Flavian poet who most explicitly exploits the narrative dynamics of Ovidian landscapes in ways that can be said to undermine the idea of human control over nature as a political metaphor.[13] Although this intertextual strategy might be said to parallel Seneca's and Lucan's 'amplificatory' technique on Ovid, the fact that Statius presents his story as a direct continuation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* through clear and abundant verbal allusions actually suggests his refusal to become an 'anti-Virgil'.[14] Of course, there are some points of contact between Statius' narratives and the treatment of landscape in Seneca, who transforms Ovid's landscapes into *loci horridi*, thereby reifying the inescapability of *nefas* in the Theban saga, and Lucan, who tragically develops the Ovidian link between natural chaos and Roman civil wars into an irredeemable collapse of the Roman world.[15] However, the *Thebaid*'s Ovidian intertexts seem to reflect – somewhat less pessimistically – on the unenforceability of what Statius describes as an Augustan worldview on a Theban universe that, like Rome, is characterised by a cyclic tendency to relapse into the chaos of civil wars. In particular, I will argue that Statius' rewriting of Ovid's juxtaposition of city and wild nature as the opposition between the illusory Virgilian city of Argos and the reality of its Ovidian surroundings seems to question the political applicability of the Flavian policies of *imitatio Augusti* deployed to present Rome as an ultimately pacified world, despite the constant recurrence of civil and political disorder.[16] Overall, this exploration of Statius' treatment of landscape will reveal the *Thebaid* to be the most complete reception of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Flavian epic.[17] Furthermore, it will offer insights into the ways in which the worldviews of the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* are originally reworked, compared, and contrasted in the *Thebaid* in order to shape a poetic universe that engages with the new socio-political issues of a changed imperial context.

[13] On Ovidian landscapes in the Flavian epicists, see also Keith 2013b and Augoustakis 2016b.
[14] Cf. Bessone 2008: 42. On Lucan as anti-Virgil and the limits of this definition, see Casali 2011: 82.
[15] On Lucan's so-called '*loci inamoeni*', see Papaioannou 2012: 73–110. On Seneca's treatment of landscape, see Smolenaars 1996.
[16] On the geopolitics of Ovid's Theban landscapes, see Segal 1969 and Hardie 1990. On Statius' engagement with the Flavian revival of the Augustan propaganda, see McNelis 2007: 5–15.
[17] Statius' extensive reception of Ovid's epic might well be only the first case of a long series that remains unnoticed due to our Virgil-centric reading of Latin epic, on the limits of which see Hinds 1998: 143, and because of the complex Virgilian intertextuality of the Ovidian narratives themselves. On the influence of Ovid on later imperial epic, see Keith 2000: 8–35 and Wheeler 2002.

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## 1.2 Reading Landscapes in Latin Poetry

Following the recent scholarly debate (the so-called 'spatial turn') that in the last decade has increasingly explored the accumulation of meanings invested in literary geographies, I will argue in the following analysis that Statius' landscapes often become a vehicle for both meta-poetic and political reflection.[18] To be sure, narrated spaces can only very rarely be considered a mere spatial frame (the Horatian *purpureus pannus*, cf. *Ars poet.* 14–19), as they almost always provide a setting that places the action in a specific mythic, geo-historical, and cultural context that interacts with the construction of the characters' identity and destiny.[19] More importantly, the way these 'story spaces' are organised in a poem creates a 'narrative world' that has inherent political significance, for it engages with the real world by suggesting a universal worldview that, although fictive, readers can apply to or compare with their own perception of reality.[20] Literary landscapes, then, can be considered inherently political – at least in a general sense – because they offer a culturally and politically loaded image of the relationship between humans and the natural world (the so-called 'poetic universe') that becomes a benchmark to celebrate, criticise, or explore the author's and readers' realities.[21] Every landscape described is ultimately a mediated space that represents not the world as it is but rather as it is interpreted (or, propagandistically, as it could be interpreted) by humans according to their different experiences, cultural backgrounds, and memories.[22] For example, this idea is apparent in the famous frescoes

[18] For reasons of space, I will here focus on Latin epic. However, the modern interest in space as 'landscape' begins in the visual arts of the sixteenth century (Azara 2008) and it has been approached in different ways from a wide range of disciplines (Spencer 2010: 1–15). On landscapes in Roman arts, see Spencer 2010: 137–185. Chambers 1994: 5–6 and Huskinson 2000 have shown that the comparison between urban and agricultural landscapes was already central to Republican literature (cf. Cato *Ap. Solinus* 2.2; Cic. *De. Rep.* 2.5–11) as a metaphoric discourse on the ongoing socio-political shifts characterising the Roman world between the third and the first century BCE. Leach 1988: 122–143 and Spencer 2010: 43–44 have considered the importance of landscapes for Lucretius, who first subverts the generally positive idea of a golden age as a primitivistic period characterised by a lack of knowledge and memory. More generally, on the use of landscape as an active narrative medium, see Skempis and Ziogas 2013; Hinds 2002: 124–125 and Dominik 2009: 111–112. For an overview of studies on spaces and literary narrations, see Ryan 2009: 421–422, whose terminology is used here.

[19] See, for example, Skempis and Ziogas 2013: 7 who argue: 'while human beings interact with the historical and literary backdrop of landscapes, the construction of a hero's identity becomes indistinguishable from narrated space; a character's biography extends to shape a landmark and vice versa'.

[20] On the definitions of 'story spaces' and 'narrative world', see De Jong 2012: 36–38.

[21] See De Jong 2012: 36–38. Cf. Evans 2007: 1–5, 19–21 and Dominik 2009.

[22] For example, the Ovidian image of the universal fire caused by Phaethon might assume a particular significance when evoked in texts composed just after the second civil war and the burning of the

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of the Villa di Livia, built in Rome by Augustus for his third wife around 40–20 BCE.[23] These paintings, executed with high levels of realism, depict a garden full of animals and plants in bloom, which in reality would flower in different seasons.[24] By showing them flowering at the same time the artist conveys ideas of harmony, abundance and renewal that resonate with Augustan values even though the frescoes do not contain elements that can be identified as explicitly political (in the narrower definition of the term).[25]

Similarly to the frescoes of the Villa di Livia, the symbolic potential of landscape is frequently exploited in Latin imperial poetry as a powerful tool to scrutinise the complex relationship between the universalising aspirations of Roman *imperium* and the universe over which Rome tries to extend its dominion.[26] Different spatial narratives, such as the interactions between city and countryside, between places of war and peace, or between human and divine realms, are used by Augustan poets to explore the political issues of their period.[27] At the same time, the highly allusive and intertextual nature of Roman poetic landscapes and their use in recurrent literary motifs also make them a privileged ground for meta-poetic discourse: by reshaping, subverting, or redeploying old landscapes to construct new meanings, the imperial poets not only suggest different worldviews, which engage with a changing socio-political context, but they also acknowledge and challenge their literary models.[28]

Virgil is the first imperial poet to make landscape an essential component of the political discourses of his poems, in which a 'natural dialectic' fully incorporates the reality of contemporary Rome and thereby expresses the expectations and the political upheaval at the dawn of the Augustan age.[29] The first verses of the *Eclogues* establish a connection between the

Capitol at the very heart of the city of Rome. Cf. Bate 2001: 45, 75–76; De Jong 2012 and Batstone 2006: 14–17.

[23] On the villa, see Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 15.136–137; cf. Settis and Donati 2008.

[24] See Beard and Henderson 2001: 55.

[25] See Newlands 1984: 109–122. For the idea of abundance and renewal in Augustan natural iconography, see Zanker 1988: 172–183.

[26] On the poetics of spatial dominion, see Hardie 1986: 3; Van Dommelen and Benjamin 2007. Landscapes allegorically embody the contradictions at the very heart of the empire: the desire of putting ordered boundaries to assure an everlasting *cosmos* and the inevitable instability and unboundedness that an ever-expanding spatial dominion always faces. Cf. Hardie 1993: 3 and Skempis and Ziogas 2013: 5–6.

[27] See Spencer 2010: 14–15, 36–37, 103–104, 155–172.

[28] See Hardie 1993: 1–18 and Spencer 2010: 49–56.

[29] Recent studies have started to show that landscape probably played an important role already in Ennius' *Annales*, although the few extant fragments of this work make it difficult for us to explore this topic thoroughly: see Elliott 2013: 223–265.

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natural and political world that would also inform the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*.[30] In *Ecl.* 1.1–5, the beautiful *locus amoenus* ('pleasant place') where Tityrus sings peacefully is not immune to the incursion of the external political forces that deprived Meliboeus of his lands (*nos patriae finis dulcia linquimus arva*, 'we left our country and pleasant fields', *Ecl.* 1.3) and of his source of poetic inspiration (*carmina nulla canam*, 'I shall not sing', *Ecl.* 1.77).[31] Here, the action of the Roman *deus* (*Ecl.* 1.60), who restores Tityrus to his *locus amoenus* (1.24–25) and who initiates a new golden age (*Ecl.* 4.9), is also problematically responsible for the turmoil provoked by the incursion of the urban military world into the countryside (*Ecl.* 1.70–72).[32] Similarly, the natural landscape of the *Georgics* displays both horror for the recent civil war (*squalent abductis arva colonis*, 'the fields lie waste, robbed of the tillers', 1.507) and the hope that Augustus' achievements will initiate a new era of prosperity (*hunc saltem everso iuvenem succurrere saeclo | ne prohibete*, 'at least do not forbid this young man from rescuing a world turned upside down', 1.500–501).[33] The fullest political potential of this inherent ambivalence of landscape is revealed in the *Aeneid* via a natural dialectic that can be interpreted through the Augustan worldview. Natural forces are introduced in the poem by a storm that displays their most chaotic and violent aspects, showing the need to overcome and control the natural world to make it pleasant and fertile.[34] Virgil had already delved into the destructive potentialities of the natural world in the *Georgics* by describing crops destroyed by disease (1.370–372) and animals affected by plague (3.440–566). However, in the *Aeneid* the dark aspects of natural forces are explored more explicitly, so much so that in Book VIII

[30] Dominik 2009 offers an overview of the treatment of landscape in the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid*, showing how 'Virgil uses nature to explore political issues' (p. 112). See also Segal 2014. On landscape in the *Eclogues* see Putnam's seminal study (1970), which focuses on the relationship between the idyllic pastoral world and Roman politics; see also Boyle 1986; Martindale 1997, who explores Virgil's sophisticated 'green politics'; and Chandler 2012, who studies their pastoral atmosphere. On the role of farmland and the metapoetics of landscapes in the *Georgics* see Farrell 1991. On the *Aeneid*'s geo-political discourse see Barchiesi 2017: 151–166. On Virgil's *loci amoeni* and their reworking by later poets see Newlands 1984 and Bernstein 2011.

[31] An allusion to the reallocation of the lands confiscated by Augustus in 42 BCE.

[32] Leach 1974; Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 25.

[33] See also: *Caesar | terrarumque velis curam, et te maximus orbis | auctorem frugum … | accipiat*, 'whether you, Caesar, choose to take care of our lands, and the great globe accepts you as bringer of fruits…', *Georg.* 1.25–28. On the friction between the simpler agricultural world and the new wealthy and cultured imperial world, see Patterson 1987:1–17 and Hardie 1998: 28–52.

[34] In the *Aeneid* natural violence goes from the storm (1.50–156) to Aetna's eruption (3.570–587), while scenes of war and violence are often compared with the destructive force of nature (cf. 9.708–710; 10.603–604; 10.602–603; 12.451–455). On the political implications of Aeneas' violent domestication of nature, see Dominik 2009: 119–121.

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Hercules is described in the act of eradicating the forces of evil embodied by the monster Cacus from the rural landscape where Rome would later be founded.[35] This idea also emerges from the politically loaded process of subjugation and reordering of the natural world that accompanies Aeneas' foundational mission and subsequent transformation of the rural environment into an urban setting.[36] The violent establishment of a new natural and social order ends with the glorious victory of Augustus as represented on Aeneas' shield, where the natural world is finally reorganised in an ordered and pacified form – but at a cost. The pure water of the seas, normally inhabited by dolphins, is now red with (Roman) blood and viscera after the battle between Antony and Octavian (*Aen*. 8.675–709).[37] Overall, Virgil's landscapes display the positive expectations that accompany the beginning of the new *aureum saeculum* but without resolving the contradiction at its heart: the forces that in the positive macro-narrative defeat the dangerous chaos of wild nature and establish a new universal order are the same that cause violent depredation, spoliation, and profanation of the natural environment, in a way that reveals the destructive side of Aeneas' (and Augustus') foundational mission. As Philip Hardie has argued, the inherent instability of the worldview suggested by Virgil becomes 'an open-ended invitation for successive epic poets to revise and redefine'.[38]

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Seneca's tragedies, and Lucan's *Bellum Civile* represent the first critical responses to Virgil's *Aeneid* and they are indispensable models for understanding the treatment of landscape in Flavian epic. Virgil's ideologically loaded representation of nature is both recalled and perverted in the *Metamorphoses*, where Virgil's landscapes are often transformed into dangerous *loci amoeni*.[39] These deceptively beautiful places are characterised by the same ambiguities of the *Aeneid*'s landscapes, failing to offer peace and protection, but they often frame episodes of violence that display the gods' arbitrary and capricious use of power against humans in tragic ways.[40] Accordingly, the storm that opens the *Aeneid* is transformed in the *Metamorphoses* into a destructive deluge that

35 On the politics of the storm and Hercules' killing of Cacus, see Hardie 1986: 86–95, 110–117.

36 Tarchon (*Aen.* 10.295–296) describes the wild land as something hostile to be controlled. Ancient forests are cut down to build an altar for Misenus (6.179–182) and to refurbish Aeneas' fleet. But see also the killing of the stags in North Africa (1.184–193); the deforestation in Thrace (3.20–40); the killing of animals (3.219–223) and the comment of Drances *ingentis et desolavimus agros* ('we made wide lands desolate', 11.367). On the urbanisation of rural landscape, see Dominik 2009: 120–121.

37 Hardie 1986: 97–109 and Dominik 2009: 125.

38 Hardie 1993: 3.

39 See Bernstein 2011: 67.

40 On the cooperation between humans, gods, and landscape in Virgil, see Halperin 1983: 42–49. On Ovidian landscapes, see Parry 1964: 275–280; Segal 1969; and Hinds 2002: 130–132.

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erases all order in the universe (*mare et tellus nullum discrimine habebant*, 'no longer was there any distinction between sea and land', *Met.* 1.291). In addition, the foundational mission underlying (with its contradictions) the *Aeneid*'s spatial narrative is almost completely absent from the *Metamorphoses*: Cadmus' saga (*Met.* 3.1–4; 4.603), which contains the only story of foundation recounted in detail in the poem, rewrites Virgil's dialectic between city and country in a way that exposes the failure of Aeneas' civilising action and the illusoriness of the Augustan idea of imposing a permanent and universal peace over the universe. Although like Virgil's Hercules Cadmus kills the monster that inhabits the wilderness where he would later found Thebes (*Met.* 3.50–94), the urban cosmos in fact fails to establish control over the wilderness: Cadmus, forced into a new exile, regresses into animal status, turning into a snake (*Met.* 4.570–603). Moreover, the landscapes surrounding Thebes, which seem to be places of such civilised beauty that they could almost have been shaped by the hand of an artist (cf. *simulaverat artem | ingenio natura suo*…, 'Nature, by her own genius, had imitated art', *Met.* 3.155–156), are a dangerous threat to the urban world: leaving the city to explore the hills results in the tragic deaths of Actaeon (*Met.* 3.155–164), Narcissus (*Met.* 3.339–510), and Pentheus (*Met.* 3.692–734). While the *Aeneid*'s landscapes display with their progressive and violent urbanisation the problematic establishment of a fragile natural and political order, Ovid's natural world remains pervaded by chaos, violence, and abuses of power that highlight the most critical voice of Virgil, suggesting – in a playful way – a subversive political and moral message.[41]

In the context of Neronian Rome, Seneca's tragedies continue the rewriting of Virgil's landscapes begun by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* but with darker tones. In the *De Tranquilitate Animi* (2.13–14), Seneca criticises the fascination of Neronian audiences with horrific and spectacular landscapes that were irreconcilable with Stoic doctrines of restraint.[42] However, while Ovid explored the contradictions inherent in Virgil's *loci amoeni* by creating a blatant contrast between their idyllic beauty and the immoral violence occurring within them, Seneca's tragedies engage predominantly with fearful *loci horridi*.[43] As scholars have noted, frightening scenery had already appeared in Virgil (*Aen.* 6.268–289) and later in Ovid (*Met.* 8.788–791; 11.592–607), who first uses the adjective *inamoenus*

[41] Newlands 1984: 95–114 and 2004: 136. See also Heath 1991: 242–243 and Hinds 2002: 131.
[42] See Töchterle 1994: 438; Santini 1999: 207 and Boyle 2006: 197–201.
[43] Segal 1984: 316 and Smolenaars 1996.

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(*Met*. 10.15) to refer to an infernal landscape.[44] Nevertheless, Seneca is the first author that consistently builds on Ovid's descriptions of the places inhabited by allegorised personifications of human emotions and physical states (e.g., Jealousy, *Met*. 2.760–782; Famine, *Met*. 8.788–791) to provide his tragedies with horrific and emotionally engaging landscapes.[45] Thus, just like Ovid's Cave of Sleep (*Met*. 11.410–748), Seneca's tragic landscapes (cf. Sen. *Oed*. 530–547) tend to be characterised by the absence of the typical elements of the *loci amoeni* (e.g., sunlight, pleasant vistas, vegetation, and birdsong). Much more than in Ovid, however, these frightening landscapes both predict and reify the anxieties experienced by the tragic protagonists, as Seneca endows them with a sense of horrid *religio* that prompts readers to anticipate the *scelus* that is about to happen within them.[46] In so doing, Seneca's *loci horridi* actively contribute to the depiction of a chaotic poetic universe dominated by *nefas*, dysfunctional families, indomitable nature, violent power, and the absence of those values set at the heart of Rome's history by the story of Aeneas, the ambiguities of which Virgil started to explore.

The most dramatic development of Ovid's geopolitics is perhaps found in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, where Virgil's *loci amoeni* are entirely replaced by hellish *loci horridi* that, by translating in Roman terms the mythic landscapes described by Seneca, display the absolute evil of the civil war that marks the end of Roman Republic and the beginning of the Caesarean age.[47] As Wheeler has suggested, Lucan models his poetic universe on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in order to present his account of the first of the civil wars in the cyclical patterns of creation and destruction used by Ovid to undermine the apparent teleology of the *Aeneid*.[48] However, while Ovid's narrative plot overall evolves – even if not unproblematically – from its original chaos to the final deification of Caesar (just as the *Thebaid* evolves towards the arrival of Theseus), Lucan's *Bellum Civile* focuses only on the destructive and declining period of the Ovidian historical cycles in order to represent a universe hopelessly stuck in the chaos and the violence of Ovid's Iron Age.[49]

[44] See Pypłacz 2015: 181 and Bernstein 2011. On the rare use of *inamoenus*, see Stat. *Theb*. 1.89; *Silv*. 2.2.33 and Plin. *Epist*. 9.10.3.2.
[45] Hinds 2011: 9–18.
[46] Segal 1983: 173–181 and 1984: 316; Schiesaro 1985: 220; Littlewood 2004: 17 and Pypłacz 2007: 293–295.
[47] On Lucan's *loci horridi*, see Garrison 1992: 98; Leigh 1999: 167–168 and Esposito 2004: 61–65.
[48] See Wheeler 2002: 356–357, 373 and Roche 2009: 149.
[49] See Hardie 1992: 60 and Tarrant 2002: 350–357.

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As for Seneca and Lucan, the different but equally ideologically loaded treatments of landscape in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* stood as a model for the Flavian epicists who interpreted, compared, and reworked them in different ways in response to a changing political context.[50] The overall Virgilian-inspired narrative of spatial dominion that informs the Argonauts' conquest of the sea in Valerius' *Argonautica*, for example, is at times complicated by the resurfacing of Ovidian landscapes, but this does not seem to create a consistent counter-narrative.[51] This emerges, for instance, in Book III, in which Valerius recounts how Hylas, Hercules' lover, is abducted by a nymph whose pool is described as a *locus amoenus* (*Arg.* 3.481–740). This passage not only reminds readers of the potentially dangerous nature of apparently beautiful landscapes (that was already suggested by Ovid) but also complicates the Argonauts' mission since Hercules, desperate to find his lover Hylas, abandons his companions.[52] Similarly, Silius' *Punica* occasionally uses Ovidian landscapes to display the danger of the degeneration of *loci amoeni*, symbols of the moral and civil order of the Roman world, into chaotic *loci horridi* (e.g., Sil. *Pun.* 13.562–578), but within a narrative that altogether proceeds towards the victory of the Roman order.[53]

Besides emphasising that narrated landscapes contribute to the shaping of the poetics and politics of Latin imperial texts, this brief excursus shows how Ovid's rewriting of the *Aeneid* can indirectly alter – at least to some extent – the readers' perception of Virgil's landscapes. Firstly, as Bernstein has argued, Ovid 'made the *locus amoenus* definitively associated with rape and metamorphosis, and it became the task of succeeding Roman poets to respond to this tradition inherited from the *Metamorphoses*'.[54] Moreover, the very fact that Ovid's spatial narratives engage in intertextual dialogue with those by Virgil in ways that suggest a certain degree of imperial disillusionment indirectly emphasises the differences between what we could call Virgil's martial, more Augustan voice and Ovid's playful scepticism.[55] Of course, reading the interplay between Virgil and Ovid only

[50] See Keith 2014: 350.

[51] A similar narrative strategy characterises the story of Medea (*Arg.* 5.333–351: 6.495–502) in which Ovidian landscapes (*Met.* 7.74–95) are used to reveal the erotic underpinnings of Valerius' martial narrative. However, in the story of Hercules and Hesione (*Arg.* 2.451–549), allusions to the geographies of Perseus' rescue of Andromeda (*Met.* 4.668–739) are used for the opposite purpose of emphasising that Hercules (differently from Perseus) is moved only by epic desire for glory and not by love. See Keith 2014: 350–360 and Zissos 2008: 153.

[52] See Hershkowitz 1998b: 146–159 and Bernstein 2011: 90.

[53] Silius' treatment of landscape is still largely unexplored: see Morzadec 2009.

[54] Bernstein 2011: 90.

[55] Cf. Wheeler 2000 and 2002: 341–347. See Spinelli 2019a and 2021a.

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in terms of opposition would be limiting, since Ovid actually builds on Virgil's own critical voice and often develops in new directions contradictions that were already hinted at in the *Aeneid*.[56] However, considering the ways in which Ovid fashions his relationship with Virgil's epic, helps us to interpret the tendency of Neronian and Flavian poets to compare – and even contrast – narratives, landscapes and ultimately worldviews from the Augustan classics. As we shall see in the following section, in this context Statius' *Thebaid* is the only Flavian poem in which the fullest poetic and political potential of Ovid's landscapes is consistently deployed to display the failure of all the characters that try to revive an Augustan worldview, neglectful of the fact that the universe in which they live is the blatantly chaotic and violent one of Ovid's Theban histories.

## 1.3 Statius' Ovidian Landscapes between Poetic Memory and Authorial Authority

Landscapes are some of the most visible protagonists of the *Thebaid*.[57] Statius' poem is an epic of voyage of which only one book (XI) is devoted to the fratricidal fight between Eteocles and Polynices, while the remaining eleven books are dominated by an incredible number of journeys that lead readers through the most varied human, heavenly, and infernal landscapes.[58] From the outset of the poem, geographical terms are programmatically deployed by Statius to define the subject of his epic: in the proem he asks the muses where to start (*unde iubetis* | *ire deae?*, *Theb*. 1.3–4), and the *praeteritio* ends with the imposition of a boundary (*limes mihi carminis esto*, *Theb*. 1.16) that limits the poem to Oedipus' house (*domus*, *Theb*. 1.17). The same connection between geography and poetics is further emphasised in the epilogue, where the *Thebaid* itself is compared to a ship approaching a harbour (*mea iam longo meruit ratis aequore portum*, 'now my ship, having travelled so much sea, deserves the harbour', *Theb*. 12.809) before being advised to follow from afar the footsteps of the *Aeneid* (*longe*

[56] See Keith 2002b.

[57] Augoustakis 2010 and Parkes 2014.

[58] Book I shows Tisiphone's trip from Hell to Thebes and Polynices' journey from Thebes to Argos, while readers are visually accompanied on another trip into Heaven, where Jupiter's council takes place. Books II–III are dominated by Tydeus' journeys between Thebes and Argos, but they display also Mercury's guidance of the ghost of Laius to Thebes and Maeon's return to Thebes. Books IV–VII recount the episodes and journeys that form the Argive expedition to Thebes (see esp. *Theb.* 4.812–815; 6.19–24; 6.799–801; 7.139–143). Book VIII shows Amphiaraus' descent into Pluto's infernal kingdom; Book XII focuses on the journeys of the Argive women and of Theseus. See also Augoustakis 2010: 3 and Parkes 2014: 405–406.

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*sequere et vestigia semper adora*, *Theb*. 12.817) on the road opened by Fame (*tibi Fama benignum* | *stravit iter*, *Theb*. 12.812–813). Here, I will argue that Statius' treatment of geography and landscape plays a fundamental role in shaping the poetics of the *Thebaid* and gives us the interpretative key to correctly read Statius' meta-poetic interventions.

At face value, both of these highly programmatic passages seem to exclude the possibility of reading the *Thebaid* against Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The epilogue speaks in adulatory tones of the *Aeneid* (*nec tu divinam Aeneida tempta*, *Theb*. 12.816), which is overtly acknowledged as Statius' main model; by contrast, Ovid's Theban histories seem to be cut off from the poem by the prologue, as the most famous episodes of the *Metamorphoses*' Theban saga are listed in the *praeteritio* (*Theb*. 1.3–17). However, as noted in the Introduction, through their Ovidian diction and structure, both passages actually indicate Statius' interest in Ovid. This friction between Statius' *praeteritio* and the Ovidian content in the prologue has an important programmatic and proleptic function: it introduces the contrast between Virgilian and Ovidian intertexts that will continuously play with the readers' epic expectations throughout the poem. From the beginning, Statius' readers are immediately put in the difficult position of deciding whether to believe Statius' authorial and anti-Ovidian claims or their own poetic memory, alerted by the abundance of visible Ovidian elements in the prologue. Such a contrast, which draws attention to the multi-level nature of the *Thebaid*, not only makes readers experience the internal division that on a larger scale characterises the theme of civil war, but it also has an important political significance. By indirectly suggesting the influence of the *Metamorphoses* on the *Thebaid*, the Ovidian intertexts in the *Thebaid*'s prologue raise doubts about Statius' programmatic statements, just as the multiple and incongruous creation-tales at the beginning of the *Metamorphoses* suggest disbelief towards Ovid's authorial authority.[59] As Andrew Feldherr has argued, this disbelief is a powerful vehicle for political reflection in the *Metamorphoses*, as it suggests a critical reading not only of Ovid's poetic universe but also of Augustan Rome, by hinting at the possibility that the Augustan world might actually be different from the way it is formally presented by Augustan monuments.[60] By reading Statius' treatment of landscape as a development of this Ovidian narrative strategy, the following analysis will show how the *Thebaid*'s Ovidian undercurrents suggest a less Virgilian reading of Statius' poem as well as providing readers

[59] On Ovid's creation-tales, see Wheeler 1995: 95–121.
[60] Feldherr 2010: 52–57, 270–271.

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with a worldview that indirectly suggests disbelief towards the ideology of a restored Augustan age that was promoted by the Flavian emperors in order to both consolidate their own power and prevent relapse into civil war.

The continuity between Statius' and Ovid's poetic universes, which is problematically hinted at by the prologue and the epilogue, finds its confirmation in a series of journeys that, just after the prologue, develop the interaction between geography and poetics by revealing the *Thebaid*'s world to be ultimately post-Ovidian and strikingly mythologically aware. The first of these journeys is that of the Fury who, summoned by Oedipus, goes to Thebes (*Theb*. 1.89–113):

> inamoenum forte sedebat
> Cocyton iuxta, resolutaque vertice crines
> lambere sulphureas permiserat anguibus undas.
> Ilicet igne Iovis lapsisque citatior astris
> tristibus exiluit ripis: discedit inane
> vulgus et occursus dominae pavet. Illa per umbras
> et caligantes animarum examine campos
> Taenariae limen petit inremeabile portae.
> Sensit adesse Dies, piceo Nox obvia nimbo
> lucentes turbavit equos; procul arduus Atlans
> horruit et dubia caelum cervice remisit.
> Arripit extemplo Maleae de valle resurgens
> notum iter ad Thebas; neque enim velocior ullas
> itque reditque vias cognataque Tartara mavult.
> Centum illi stantes umbrabant ora cerastae,
> turba minor diri capitis; sedet intus abactis
> ferrea lux oculis, qualis per nubila Phoebes
> Atracia rubet arte labor; suffusa veneno
> tenditur ac sanie gliscit cutis; igneus atro
> ore vapor, quo longa sitis morbique famesque
> et populis mors una venit; riget horrida tergo
> palla, et caerulei redeunt in pectora nodi:
> Atropos hos atque ipsa novat Proserpina cultus.
> Tum geminas quatit ira manus: haec igne rogali
> fulgurat, haec vivo manus aera verberat hydro.
> Ut stetit, abrupta qua plurimus arce Cithaeron
> occurrit caelo, fera sibila crine virenti
> congeminat, signum terris, unde omnis Achaei
> ora maris late Pelopeaque regna resultant.
> Audiit et medius caeli Parnasos et asper
> Eurotas, dubiamque iugo fragor impulit Oeten
> in latus, et geminis vix fluctibus obstitit Isthmos.
> Ipsa suum genetrix curvo delphine vagantem

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abripuit frenis gremioque Palaemona pressit.
Atque ea Cadmeo praeceps ubi culmine primum
constitit adsuetaque infecit nube penates,
protinus attoniti fratrum sub pectore motus,
gentilisque animos subiit furor aegraque laetis
invidia atque parens odii metus, inde regendi
saevus amor, ruptaeque vices iurisque secundi
ambitus impatiens, et summo dulcius unum
stare loco, sociisque comes discordia regnis.

By chance, she was sitting by the horrid Cocytus and, loosening the hair on her head, she let the snakes lap at its sulphurous waters. Swifter than the lightning of Jupiter and falling stars, she leapt up from the gloomy banks: a crowd of phantoms fled, fearing the meeting with their mistress; through the shadows and the fields obscured by the sea-wake of souls, she goes to the threshold of the Taenarus' gate, from where there is no return. Day felt her presence; Night, going towards her with a pitch-coloured cloud, frightened the gleaming steeds: the tall Atlas was horrified from afar, and nearly made the sky fall from his trembling neck. Immediately she leaps from the Malean valley and sets off along the road, well known to her, that leads to Thebes. There is no other way by which she goes and returns faster, nor is her native Tartar dearer. One hundred erect asps shaded her face, the smaller ones piled on the hideous head; a steely light lurked in her deeply sunken eyes, as when, in the midst of the clouds, the moon fades and turns red by the arts of the Thessalians; steeped in poison, her skin stretches and swells with corrupted blood; from the black mouth exhales a vapour of fire, from which drought and disease and hunger come to men, bringing death to all; on the back a coat, rigid and hideous; the bluish knots return to her chest: Atropos and Proserpina renew this clothing. Then anger shakes her hands: one flashes with funeral fire, the other lashes the air with a living snake. When she stood where Cithaeron's highest summit meets the sky, with her greenish hair she produced horrible whistles several times: a sign to the Earth of her presence, which every shore of the Achaean Sea and the kingdoms of Pelops echoed widely. Parnassus also heard it, raised in the middle of Heaven, and the impetuous Eurotas; the Eta, shaken by that sound, swayed on its side and the Isthmus barely resisted the two seas. Palaemon's mother, while her son wandered on the crooked back of a dolphin, tore him from the bridle and hugged him. And as soon as the goddess, arriving quickly, stopped on the roof of the palace of Cadmus, plaguing it with the well-known contagion, immediately a tumult of passions inflamed the hearts of the two brothers; their soul was invaded by the ancestral madness, the envy of the other's good fortune, and the suspect – source of hatred; the fierce desire for rule, the violation of bonds; the ambition impatient of subservience and the joy of being alone in power, and conflict, the companion of shared sovereignty.

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Placed at the beginning of the poem, just after Oedipus' curse, this passage has an important narrative significance because it introduces readers to the world of the *Thebaid*. As Stephen Hinds has suggested in his analysis of Seneca's allusions to Ovid, literary landscapes are poetically significant, as they may suggest – through their intertextual geographies – reading a myth in the light of another myth or another version of the same myth that happened in the same (or a similar) landscape.[61] For instance, according to Hinds, Seneca's spatial allusions to the *Metamorphoses* signal that 'the Thebes inhabited by Oedipus in the Senecan play … is inevitably a post-Ovidian Thebes'.[62] Interpreted from this perspective, the *Thebaid*'s first journey can offer insights into the nature of the poem's poetic universe and its models. So far, scholars have read the Fury's journey to Thebes as a Virgilian moment modelled on the intervention of Allecto in the story of Amata and Turnus in Book VII of the *Aeneid*.[63] The two passages do have some points of contact and Virgil's description of Allecto was an undoubtedly indispensable model that was reworked by his epic successors, including Ovid. Nevertheless, I argue that, if we moderate our traditional tendency to read Latin epic predominantly in the light of the *Aeneid*, in the *Thebaid*'s first journey we can recognise enough thematic and verbal allusions to the *Metamorphoses* to suggest the post-Ovidian nature of the poem's universe.

It is thematically meaningful that Statius opens his poem with a journey from Hell to the human world because it immediately suggests to readers that the *Thebaid*'s world is affected by the same susceptibility to chaos and chthonic forces that characterises Ovid's Theban world, where, for the first time in Latin epic, the goddess Juno personally descends into Hell to bring to Earth the infernal Fury Tisiphone.[64] Of course, as Philip Hardie has shown, Hell and Earth in the *Aeneid* are also not as safely divided as one might initially think.[65] As we shall see in more detail in the analysis of the *Thebaid*'s storm, Virgil begins his poem with a sea storm that shows not only the violence of nature and the anger of Juno but also the pacifying and reordering action of the heavenly gods.[66] By contrast, the first landscapes described by Statius introduce readers to a dark and wild

[61] Hinds 2011: 9–37.
[62] Hinds 2011: 13.
[63] These interpretations are summarised by Venini 1971: 70. See also Ganiban 2007: 153–154.
[64] Juno's summoning of a Fury was also described by Virgil (*Aen.* 7.341–405), but in the *Aeneid* the goddess does not descend into the Underworld. On the trespassing of boundaries between Heaven and Hell in Virgil and Ovid, see Hardie 1993: 73–86.
[65] Hardie 1993: 57–73.
[66] See Hardie 1986: 86–96.

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natural world dominated by chthonic forces. In this context, the summoning of the infernal Fury by the liminal figure of Oedipus (whose Junonian traits scholars have often highlighted) seems to draw the poem's universe close to that of the *Metamorphoses*.[67] Moreover, while the intervention of the Fury in the Theban saga is not an Ovidian invention, Statius here follows Ovid in giving unparalleled emphasis to the description of the Underworld (*Met.* 4.432–484; *Theb.* 1.90–96) and to its forces breaking into the human sphere. In fact, in reworking the crucial role that the Fury has in the *Metamorphoses*, he even updates the Greek tragic models. While in Euripides' *Phoenissae* (cf. 69–81; 474–486) and *Supplices* (cf. 150–190) Eteocles and Polynices rationally decide to live apart and rule in turns in order to avoid fulfilling Oedipus' curse, in the *Thebaid* they are described as divided and led into war by the hellish *furor* brought upon the Earth by the Fury (*Theb.* 1.100–124).[68] This use of macro-intertextuality, which relies on the similarity of themes and atmosphere, is important since it is particularly likely to influence readers – perhaps even unconsciously, like a soundtrack in a movie, while listening to or reading the poem.

However, the Ovidian atmosphere created by this generic intertextuality is also immediately supported by more precise verbal allusions that reasonably educated readers may have easily noted.[69] Strikingly, Statius begins his description of the Fury's location and subsequent journey with the Ovidian adjective *inamoenus* ('unpleasant') that in extant Latin literature is found only in the works of Ovid, who first uses it to describe the Underworld, in Statius, and once in Pliny's *Letters*. Besides setting the tone of the entire description, the rarity of this adjective – placed in such an emphatic position – can also be said to remark, almost programmatically, the Ovidian nature of this passage. This impression is strengthened by the fact that Statius' description of the Fury, who maintains her Ovidian name Tisiphone (*Met.* 4.474), is deeply indebted to *Met.* 4.481–484.[70] As in the *Metamorphoses*, the Fury appears in the *Thebaid* with her snake hair (*Theb.* 1.90–91; *Met.* 4.474–475), wearing a horrid cape (*horrida tergo | palla*, *Theb.* 1.109–110; *cruore rubentem | induitur pallam*, *Met.* 4.482–483) and carrying a torch (*inportuna facem*, *Met.* 4.482*; igne rogali*,

[67] The scholarly debate on the Junionan traits of Statius' Oedipus is discussed in depth by Ganiban 2007: 30–33.

[68] Statius' innovation of Greek models has been discussed in general by Bessone 2006 and 2011. See also Heslin 2008 and Marinis 2015.

[69] We must consider that epic was part of the school curriculum in ancient Rome and, unlike modern readers, students were often encouraged to memorise literary texts. See Quint. *Inst. Or.* 1.4.2; Keith 2000: 11–12 and Bonner 2012: 220.

[70] See Venini 1970: 20 and Keith 2004: 191.

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*Theb*. 1.112). Her journey to Thebes thus shows the Ovidian nature of the Statian world: hurrying as the Ovidian Fury (but more quickly than in the *Metamorphoses*), Tisiphone leaves her dwelling (*Theb*. 1.92*; Met*. 4.481) and starts her journey on a well-known path (*notum iter ad Thebas*, *Theb*. 1.101).[71] The text invites parallelism by giving particular attention to the fact that the Fury is familiar with that road (*neque enim velocior ullas* | *itque reditque vias*, *Theb*. 1.101–102), having already used it to curse the Theban house with her venom (*adsuetaque infecit nube penates*, *Theb*. 1.124), a reiteration that is also emphasised by the adjective *Cadmeus* that links the infection of Eteocles' and Polynices' palace to that of the first generation of Thebans in the *Metamorphoses*.[72]

The natural landscape that frames this journey draws continual attention to Statius' development of Ovid's Theban world, hinting at the increased power of the chthonic forces in the *Thebaid*. Statius' description of the journey, which is given just four verses in Ovid's account (*Met*. 4.484–488), is expanded in the *Thebaid* to twenty-four (*Theb*. 1.100–124). It appears that here Statius revisits and combines the descriptions of the places touched by the most dramatic events of the *Metamorphoses* (Niobe, Phaethon, Palaemon) to show the vulnerability of his poetic world to the power of the Fury, using a technique which we might compare to that deployed by Seneca in his Theban tragedies to refashion Ovid's landscapes into *loci horridi*.[73] Accordingly, the tremor that in the Ovidian account shakes the doors of Ino's house (*tremuisse*, *Met*. 4.486) becomes an earthquake in the *Thebaid* that upsets the world well beyond the borders of Thebes, reaching as far as the Peloponnesus (the Eurotas river and Corinth) and Thessaly (Mount Oeta). The places quoted in this description are important landmarks that immediately engage a reader's memories of the landscapes of the *Metamorphoses*. As Alison Keith has brilliantly noted, the mention of the Cithaeron (*Theb*. 1.114) is caught up in the same echoing acoustics that characterised the tragic night on which Pentheus there met his death by his mother's hand (*Met*. 3.701–707).[74] Statius associates the Isthmus with the story of Palaemon being transformed into a marine deity (*Theb*. 1.120–123) that is narrated by Ovid in *Met*. 4.525–542. Moreover,

[71] As Feeney 1991: 344 n. 106 has argued: the journey is 'familiar to readers in the first instance from Ovid (*Met.* 4.481–488)'. The increased speed of Statius' Fury could be seen as a reworking of the bland and formulaic *nec mora* used by Ovid.

[72] In the *Metamorphoses* Tisiphone's infection of Athamas and Ino (Cadmus' daughter) is ordered by Juno who is jealous of Ino's sister Semele.

[73] See Hinds 2011.

[74] Keith 2014: 361.

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Statius' catalogue of sites from the Argolis to the Isthmus recalls that of the story of Amphion and Niobe (*Met.* 6.412–421), another episode of Ovid's Theban saga, but he mixes it with images of the destruction of those places during the universal fire caused by Phaethon (*Oete*, *Met.* 2.217; *Parnasos*, *Met.* 2.221; *Eurotas*, *Met.* 2.247). In other words, while the prologue uses geographical terms to mark the division – the *limes* – between the *Thebaid* and the *Metamorphoses*, the poem's opening journey uses an aetiologically aware geography to suggest that the stories mentioned in the *praeteritio*, although not recounted by Statius, are constitutive elements of the poem's poetic universe, in which the Ovidian literary and mythological past of Thebes is still inscribed.

The highly symbolic and poetic nature of Statius' landscapes fully emerges in the journeys that in the first books of the poem see characters travelling to and departing from Thebes. At the macro-narrative level, the post-Ovidian dimension of the *Thebaid*'s world is confirmed by the fact that the spatial narratives shaping the Argive section of the poem (*Theb.* 1.312–2.743) closely retrace those of Ovid's Perseid (*Met.* 4.610–5.249).[75] The rampage of the Ovidian Fury Tisiphone having drawn Statius' Thebes close to Ovid's Theban geographies, these journeys display the broader influence of the *Metamorphoses* on Statius' treatment of space. In particular, given the meta-poetic significance of the Perseid as the section of the *Metamorphoses* in which Ovid most openly reworks the *Aeneid*, an exploration of its points of contact with the *Thebaid* suggests that Statius' debt to Ovid's treatment of space is not limited to the concurrence of topography or myth.[76] Placed between the first and the second books of the *Thebaid*, Statius' Argos narrative triggers its central plot: after Tisiphone has reiterated her malediction against the city, Polynices relives the exile of his ancestor Cadmus by leaving Thebes.[77] After surviving a storm, he meets Tydeus at Argos and the two are welcomed by the local king, Adrastus, with a banquet. Leaving Argos, Tydeus travels towards Thebes in an attempt to reconcile Eteocles with Polynices. The narrative ends with Polynices' marriage to Argia, Adrastus' daughter, and the return of Tydeus to Argos after his embassy at Thebes. At first glance, the Ovidian saga of Perseus might seem scarcely visible in this story, while points of contact with the *Aeneid* are abundant: Adrastus' reception of

[75] I follow Keith 2014: 366 in referring to these sections of the *Metamorphoses* and *Thebaid* as 'Perseid' and 'Argos narrative' respectively.

[76] On the Perseid's meta-poetics, see Hardie 2002a: 178–181; Keith 2002b and Fratantuono 2011: 104–152. On its politics, see Feldherr 2010: 313–339.

[77] See Feeney 1991: 343 and Keith 2002a: 394.

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the two exiles (*quae causa furoris | externi iuvenes…?*, 'young outlanders, what is the reason for this fury…?', *Theb.* 1.438–439) and his aetiological tale (*non inscia suasit | religio*…, 'not an ignorant superstition convinced…', *Theb.* 1.559–560) verbally recall Aeneas' arrival at Pallanteum and Evander's mythological tale (*iuvenes quae causa*…, 'young men, what is the reason…', *Aen.* 8.112; *non … vana superstitio*, 'not … a vain superstition', *Aen.* 8.185–188), while the Argive banquet evokes Virgilian scenes of hospitality (*Theb.* 1.516–21; *Aen.* 1.725–727; 7.524–526) and Adrastus' hymn to Apollo echoes Evander's prayer to Hercules (*Theb.* 1.696–720; *Aen.* 8.293–302).[78]

However, there are enough verbal and thematic similarities to confirm that these allusions occur within a narrative that closely follows that of the Ovidian Perseid in both its trajectory from Thebes to Argos and in its evocative rewriting of the *Aeneid*.[79] Like Ovid's Perseus, Polynices is found at the beginning of the Statian narrative trembling in the winds of a storm (*venti transversa frementes*, 'the winds quivering askew', *Theb.* 1.348 cf. 1.364–369; *venti discordibus actus*, 'pushed by discordant winds', *Met.* 4.621) and both heroes are indirectly compared to frightened sailors (*Theb.* 1.369–372; *Met.* 4.626–628). Similarly, just as Perseus is pushed to the extreme borders of the world in a Hesperia (*constitit Hesperio, regnis Atlantis, in orbe*, *Met.* 4.628) that is ostensibly different from the Hesperia reached by Aeneas (*est locus Hesperiam*, *Aen.* 1.530), Polynices moves east towards an Argos described as the falling Troy from which Aeneas escapes.[80] Interestingly, the story of Perseus in the *Metamorphoses* marks the narrative shift from the Theban histories to the saga of Argos (*urbis | Argolicae*, *Met.* 4.608–609), and likewise Polynice's journey in the *Thebaid* leads readers from Thebes to Argos. More explicitly, the storm that in the *Aeneid* (1.81–123) causes Aeneas to seek refuge is paralleled by both Ovid and Statius, with Perseus going to Atlans in the *Metamorphoses* and Polynices to Adrastus in the *Thebaid* (*Met.* 4.627; *Theb.* 1.386–387). Furthermore, Polynices' fight against Tydeus at the end of his journey is similar to Perseus' against Atlans.[81] In this context, Adrastus' immediate recognition of Polynices as his son-in-law (*Theb.* 1.494–496) might even be interpreted as a correction of the 'failure' of Ovid's Acrisius to recognise

[78] See McNelis 2007: 27–28 and Caviglia 1973: *ad vv.* 1.390–720.

[79] I have noted more similarities in an article (Spinelli 2019a: 291–299) that I reference here.

[80] Cf. *vis maesta timoris*, *Theb.* 1.379; *lucem in moenia fundens | Larisaeus apex*, *Theb.* 1.381–382; *maestumque timore*, *Aen.* 1.302; *fundere lumen apex*, *Aen.* 2.682.

[81] See: *in verba minasque | cunctantur … | exertare umeros nudamque lacessere pugnam*, *Theb.* 1.410–13; *vimque minis addit manibusque expellere temptat | cuntanctem*, *Met.* 4.651–652.

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Perseus as his grandson (*Met.* 4.612–614). In Statius, verbal and thematic allusions continually pervade the descriptions of the places visited by his and Ovid's heroes (e.g., *regalia turba atria complentur*, 'the halls of the palace are crowded', *Met.* 5.3–4; *regalia coetu | atria complentur*, 'the halls of the palace are crowded', *Theb.* 2.214–215; *Gorgonis extulit ora*, *Met.* 5.180; *Gorgoneosque orbes*, *Theb.* 2.278), and both narratives end with the description of natural landscapes being polluted by conflict.

In the *Thebaid*, Tydeus combats a group of soldiers sent by Eteocles after his embassy at Thebes while in the *Metamorphoses* Perseus faces Phineus and his troops. The landscape is important to both narratives, as both heroes use the surrounding environments to their advantage in their respective conflicts. For example, Tydeus uses cliffs to protect his back from the mass of Theban attackers (*scopuloque potitus | unde procul tergo metus*, 'reached the clifftop that protects him from behind', *Theb.* 2.557–558), which recalls Perseus using a column to protect himself (*applicat hic umeros ad magnae saxa columnae | tutaque terga gerens*, 'he sets his shoulders against a massive stone column, protecting his back', *Met.* 5.160–161). Similarly, the giant mixing bowl that Perseus throws at his enemies (*multaeque in pondere massae | ingentem manibus tollit cratera duabus | infligitque viro*, 'a mixing bowl, very heavy in weight, he lifted high in the air, with both hands, and dashed it down on a man', *Met.* 5.81–83) appears to be the inspiration for the crater-like rock hurled at the Theban warriors by Tydeus (*dein toto sanguine nixus | sustinet, inmanem quaerens librare ruinam, | qualis in adversos Lapithas erexit inanem | magnanimus cratera Pholus*, 'then he lifted it with all his strength, trying to throw the heavy mass, like the great-hearted Pholus lifted an empty mixing-bowl to throw it against the Lapithes, his adversaries', *Theb.* 2.561–564).[82] Finally, as a result of the fighting, the ground in both poems ends up covered in blood and human remains (*sanguine quo late tellum madefacta tepebat*, 'the ground was warm and drenched with blood on every side', *Met.* 5.76–77; *simul ora virum, simul arma manusque | fractaque commixto sederunt pectora ferro*, 'heads of men, hands, weapons and shattered breasts lied mixed with armour', *Theb.* 2.567–568; cf. *Aen.* 9.333).

In comparison to the strikingly Ovidian allusions that pervade the description of Tisiphone's first journey, the macro-intertextuality characterising the spatial narratives of the *Thebaid*'s Argive section might appear less evident, but these points of contact are nevertheless there and are particularly interesting if we consider the thematic and meta-poetic

[82] For more similarities, see Moulder 1954: *ad vv.* 2.527–613.

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roles played by both the Argos narrative and the Perseid.[83] The Argos narrative stands out from other sections of the *Thebaid* as having the most programmatic significance: not only does Polynices' arrival at Argos and his marriage to Argia set the terms for the war against Thebes, but a dense series of allusions to Virgil and Ovid also anticipates forthcoming events, meaning that this narrative could in fact be seen as an interpretative key for the entire poem.[84] By contrast, the Ovidian Perseid is the section of the *Metamorphoses* in which Ovid most directly defines his relationship with Virgil, completing the rewriting of the *Aeneid* begun in the Theban histories (*Met.* 3.1–4.603). Specifically, as Lee Fratantuono and Andrew Feldherr have shown, Perseus' saga follows the narrative development of the *Aeneid* in miniaturised form.[85] Moreover, while Perseus' Herculean traits and the transformation of his enemies into statues connect him with Augustan policies of monumentalisation, the petrifying power of the Gorgon also becomes a meta-poetic image for Ovid's art, as it shows his ability to metamorphose Virgilian poetry into a new epic.[86] That the beginning of the *Thebaid* follows very similar narrative and spatial developments to Ovid's Perseid thus signals that the Ovidian allusions in the Fury's journey are not just occasional points of contact that result from the shared Theban theme of both epics. On the contrary, these allusions can be better interpreted as a deliberate development of the narrative strategies used earlier by Ovid to critically rewrite the *Aeneid*'s geopolitical discourse in the *Metamorphoses*.

Looking more closely at the specific journeys of the Argos narrative, it is also apparent that their Ovidian intertextuality reinforces the impression that the *Thebaid* is the chronological and narrative sequel of the *Metamorphoses*' Theban saga. This section of the poem is characterised by frequent travel: in Book I, Polynices, exiled by his brother Eteocles, decides to leave Thebes and go to Argos (*Theb.* 1.324–328), and in Book II, Mercury brings the ghost of Laius back to Thebes while Tydeus travels there as an ambassador (*Theb.* 2.375–742) before returning to Argos. As

[83] As far as I know, this is the first time that an Ovidian narrative is so extensively reproduced in a later poem, raising to a programmatic model of imitation the technique used by Ovid on the *Aeneid*, on which see Hardie 1990. By contrast, evocations of shorter episodes of the *Metamorphoses* are well attested in post-Ovidian epic; see Keith 2014: 70–85.

[84] We shall explore these allusions in detail in Chapter 2. The programmatic nature of Statius' Argos narrative has been discussed by McNelis 2007: 25–49.

[85] On the politics of the Perseid, see Fratantuono 2011: 104–152; on its engagement with Augustus' monumentalising policies, see Feldherr 2010: 313–339; on its meta-poetics, see Hardie 2002a and Keith 2002b.

[86] See Spinelli 2019a.

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stated earlier, the act of leaving the city to cross its surrounding natural world assumes a particular significance in Ovid, as the fatal deceptiveness of apparently beautiful landscapes subtends an opposition between city and wilderness that is overcharged with political meanings.[87] The first interactions between the *Thebaid*'s characters and the natural world become an opportunity for Statius to explore and respond to the most important spatial narratives at the core of the *Metamorphoses*' Theban saga. Interestingly, Statius' descriptions of these journeys have been questioned by scholars for their lack of accuracy and temporal awareness – and apparently rightly so. As Parkes has argued, Polynices' journey from Thebes to Argos does not give readers clear information about its development and it is made in an exceptionally short time, only a day, despite adverse weather conditions.[88] With that in mind, it seems that the significance of this trip must be sought in the mythological and literary past evoked by Statius' landscapes rather than in their geographical accuracy. As the anonymous Theban citizen suggests in his *rhesis* as Polynices leaves Thebes, his journey has a clear literary dimension, for it revisits Ovid's Cadmean pattern of exile (*Theb*. 1.180–185):

> An inde vetus Thebis extenditur omen,
> ex quo Sidonii nequiquam blanda iuvenci
> pondera Carpathio iussus sale quaerere Cadmus
> exul Hyanteos invenit regna per agros,
> fraternasque acies fetae telluris hiatus
> augurium seros dimisit ad usque nepotes?

> Or has the ancient curse extended to Thebes since the time Cadmus was ordered to seek in vain the pretty burden of the Sidonian bull through the Carpathian Sea, found a kingdom in the Boeotian fields as an exile, and left as an augury to his late progeny the fraternal strife that emerged from the aperture of the fertile earth?

Evoking the same events just recounted in the *praeteritio*, the *ignotus* highlights the connection between the Ovidian past and the Statian present of Thebes (*Theb*. 1.185) with particular attention given to the exile of Cadmus (*exul Hyanteos*, *Theb*. 1.183; cf. *Hyantius ore*, *Met*. 3.146) that is now reenacted by Polynices (*vagus exul ab oris Oediponides furto deserta pererrat*, *Theb*. 1.312; cf. *orbe pererrato ... | ... profugus patriam*, *Met*. 3.6–7).[89]

[87] On the interactions between urban landscapes and wilderness in the *Metamorphoses*, see Hardie 1990.
[88] The route should take at least 32 hours at walking speed in normal conditions. Cf. Parkes 2014: 415–416 and Caviglia 1973: 124–125.
[89] Cf. *Tyrii exsulis*, *Theb*. 1.153; *Tyria de gente profecti*, *Met*. 3.35.

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This is the first time since Ovid's histories that a Theban character has left his city to enter the woods in which the tragedies of Actaeon, Narcissus, Athamas, and Pentheus took place. Consequently, this landscape has an almost inherent literary value that is seemingly hinted at by the *Thebaid* through emphasis of its post-Ovidian nature. Speaking with the ghost of Laius, who lived two generations before Eteocles and Polynices, the shades of the Underworld nostalgically recall the *loci amoeni* around Thebes (*et virides terras et puros fontibus amnes*, *Theb*. 2.24) that, as Carole Newlands has suggested, readers might also remember from the *Metamorphoses* (e.g., 3.28–31; 3.155–162; 3.407–412).[90] However, the landscape traversed by Polynices seems to have lost its original loveliness and to have been physically transformed by the memory of the Ovidian episodes of violence that occurred there. Wearing a lion skin like his ancestor Cadmus (*Theb*. 1.483; *Met*. 3.52) but led by the Fury instead of Apollo's oracle (*praevia ducit Erinys*, *Theb*. 1.326; *hac duce carpe vias*, *Met*. 3.12), Polynices symbolically retraces the trajectory of Ovid's Theban narrative from Thebes to Argos, accompanying the readers in a visual and acoustic tour of the *Metamorphoses*' most famous episodes.[91] The caves full of frightening noises that he encounters after having left Thebes (*ululata furoribus antra*, *Theb*. 1.328) recall the Bacchic setting in which Pentheus was torn to pieces by his possessed mother (*ictus longis ululatibus aether*, *Met*. 3.706), while the hills fertilised by the blood spilled for Bacchus bring to mind both the death of Pentheus and the location of the morally ambiguous punishment of Actaeon (*mons erat infectus variorum caede ferarum*, *Met*. 3.143).[92] The first well-defined landmark of Polynices' journey is Mount Cithaeron (*sedens in plana Cithaeron*, *Theb*. 1.330), another place, as we have seen previously, that is full of poetic memory (cf. *Met*. 3.702). Similarly, Statius evokes other violent stories narrated in the *Metamorphoses* through topographical references: Sciron's cliffs (*infames Scirone petras*, *Theb*. 1.333; *scopulis nomen Scironis inhaeret*, *Met*. 7.447), where the bandit Sciron killed passers-by by throwing them into the sea; the kingdom of Scylla (*purpureo regnata seni*, *Theb*. 1.334), alluded to in the story of the purple hair of King Nisus (*Met*. 8.6–151), and the marsh of Lerna (*veteri spumavit Lerna veneno*, *Theb*. 1.360), the mythological past of which (*fecunda veneno | Lerna*, *Met*. 9.340–341) is emphasised with the adjective *vetus* ('ancient').

[90] Newlands 2004: 133.
[91] On the meta-poetics of this trajectory, see Keith 2014: 365–366.
[92] For more spatial similarities, see Keith 2014. Statius here maintains the link between the fate of Actaeon and Pentheus already established by Ovid (*Actaeonis umbrae*, *Met.* 4.720).

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During Tydeus' travels to and from Thebes (*Theb.* 2.375–384; 2.743–3.347), journeys that assume the tone of Aeneas' descent into the Underworld (*iter durum*, *Aen.* 6.688; *iter silvis ac litore durum*, *Theb.* 2.375), we see again that the *Thebaid*'s landscapes display not only the memory but also the visible traces and ongoing effects of the episodes that occurred throughout their mythological and literary pasts. Here, the mention of the same places traversed by Polynices just a few verses before enriches the *Thebaid*'s world with a new feature: the literary past recalled in the first journeys of the poem is now shown to retain an active role in contemporary Theban reality and thus also in Statius' epic. At the beginning of his journey Tydeus crosses the marsh of Lerna, which we now discover is still warm because of the fire used to kill the Hydra that was poisoning its surroundings (*qua Lerneae palus*, *ambustaque sontibus alte* | *intepet hydra vadis*, 'here is the swamp of Lerna, and the burnt Hydra stirs in the depths of the cursed waters', *Theb.* 2.376–377), and the valley of Nemea, where he encounters shepherds who are still fearful after the fight between Hercules and the lion (*Nemea nondum pastoribus ausis*, 2.378). Interestingly, Tydeus travels to the same places quoted by Ovid's Hercules in his own account of his deeds (*nec profuit hydrae*, *Met.* 9.192; *his elisa iacet moles Nemea lacertis*, 9.97). The Isthmus of Corinth is also referred to in the story of Palaemon (*Theb.* 2.381), whose tale first appears in extant Latin literature in *Met.* 4.416–542 and which farmers interpret as an omen of the present war (*Theb.* 7.420–421). The landscape in which the Thebans ambush Tydeus is dominated by the Sphinx that Statius describes with the Ovidian adjective *Oediponioniae* (cf. *Theb.* 2.505; *Met.* 15.429).[93] Despite the fact that this monster was slain a generation before, its legacy is still vividly inscribed in the landscape (*monstrat silva nefas*, 'the forest displays the crime', *Theb.* 2.519), where 'bullocks abhor the grass in the nearby meadows, and flocks, though hungry, refrain in disgust from the cursed pasture' (*horrent vicina iuvenci* | *gramina*, *damnatis avidum pecus abstinent herbis*, *Theb.* 2.519–520).[94] In Book III, describing the burial of the victims of this ambush, Statius himself connects the awareness of the Theban landscape (*apicem qui conscius actis*..., 'the hilltop that knows the events...', *Theb.* 3.175) to its Ovidian past, the most famous events of which are later remembered by Aletes (*Theb.* 3.179–190; 201–205).

For the sake of brevity, this section is focussed on the landscapes described in the poem's first books because of their almost programmatic nature.

[93] Keith 2014: 370.
[94] Translation by Mozley 1928.

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That said, memory of the *Metamorphoses* is not limited to just the Argos narrative: as we shall see in the following analysis, it resurfaces throughout the poem. To mention one example, the final part of the Argives' march against *Thebes* in Book VII is framed by a series of landscapes and omens that, with their clearly Ovidian background, exemplify the continued influence of the Ovidian literary and mythological past on Statius' Theban universe (*Theb*. 7.398–423). In this case too, scholars have noted that 'Statius closely follows the structure of the *Aeneid*'.[95] However, while being comparable with typical lists of prodigies such as those described by Virgil (*Georg*. 1.469) and Lucan (*B.C.* 1.522–589), the supernatural phenomena that affect the landscapes in Book VII seem to particularly emphasise the post-Ovidian nature of the *Thebaid*'s world by recalling the memory of famous Ovidian myths and of the portents (*Met*. 15.782–798) that accompany the death of Caesar in the *Metamorphoses*. Firstly, both Ovid's and Statius' passages are dominated by ghosts (*Met*. 15.797; *Theb*. 7.409). In this context, the reawakening of the barking ghost of Lycaon (*Theb*. 7.414) recalls not only the metamorphosis of Ovid's Lycaon into a wolf (*Met*. 1.209–243) but also similar portents involving dogs that appear in *Met*. 15.797. Similarly, Acarnania is linked by Statius to the memory of Achelous (Cf. *amnis Acarnanum*, *Met*. 8.570), who is described as missing one horn (*Theb*. 7.416; *Met*. 9.85) – this description hints at the river's fight with Hercules that Achelous himself recounts in the *Metamorphoses* (9.85). Moreover, the description in the *Thebaid* of the ivory statues of Perseus and Juno recalls the Ovidian image of 'crying ivory' (*Perseos effigiem maestam exorantque Mycenae | confusum Iunonis ebur*, 'In Mycenae people pray the gloomy image of Perseus and the troubled ivory statue of Juno', *Theb*. 7.418–419; *mille locis lacrimavit ebur*, 'in a thousand places ivory statues wept', *Met*. 15.792), while Palaemon is heard weeping from the sea (*Theb*. 7.421; *Met*. 4.542) by the inhabitants of those regions (*gemini maris incola*, *Theb*. 7.420; *incola ponti*, *Met*. 13.904). In addition to this accumulation of myths that had received their fullest treatment in Latin literature in the *Metamorphoses*, one can note that the term *Apollineus*, used by Statius to describe Delphi's oracle, was coined by Ovid (*Met*. 11.155), and Statius also revives here the contrast between Jupiter and the Fate that characterises the Ovidian list of omens (*Theb*. 7.423; *Met*. 15.780–782). Although individually these verbal and thematic echoes might appear generic, their cumulative articulation in a few verses inscribes Statius' landscapes with the memory of Ovid's mythological narratives in ways that confirm the

[95] Smolenaars 1994: 180.

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continuity between their poetic universes after the *Metamorphoses* is introduced by the geographical descriptions at the beginning of the *Thebaid*.

Overall, Statius' use of landscape plays an important role in the definition of the *Thebaid*'s poetics by interacting with its programmatic *praeteritio* and epilogue and suggesting an interpretative lens through which these sections can be re-read. If at first the influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* seems absent from a poem overtly compared to the *Aeneid*, closer examination of the *Thebaid*'s literary landscapes shows that the *Metamorphoses* should play a fundamental role in the interpretation of Statius' epic world, which is still deeply informed by an Ovidian literary past. The stories of Cadmus (*Theb.* 1.5; 1.181; 3.180), of the Earthborn Men (*Theb.* 1.8; 1.181; 3.182–184), of Juno's jealousy (*Theb.* 1.12; 3.184), of Actaeon (*Theb.* 3.201–203), Athamas (*Theb.* 1.13; 3.186), Pentheus (3.188–190), and even of Perseus are not only repeatedly recalled in verbal and thematic allusions to the *Metamorphoses* by both the narrator and the characters, but they are also vividly inscribed in a landscape that is itself strikingly aware of its own mythology.[96] Far from being mere background or a simple display of Statius' erudition and according to a well-established tendency in Latin literature, this landscape becomes a symbolic literary space in which different poetic voices overlap, potentially triggering the readers' poetic memory at different levels. While the *Thebaid*'s macro- and situational intertextualities invite a generic (and easily understandable) comparison between Statius' and Ovid's Theban histories, there is a deeper level to Statius' Theban world that demands detailed memory and understanding of Ovid. In fact, readers who have not read the *Metamorphoses* would struggle to understand the allusions that pervade the prologue and the geographical descriptions of the *Thebaid*'s first books, in which the poet often uses rare and at times obscure terms that are only explained by the Theban histories recounted by Ovid.[97] Furthermore, by reifying the presence and the ongoing effects of the major episodes of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the *Thebaid*'s Ovidian landscapes suggest a reading of the poem and its poetic universe as a continuation and a development of the stories and spatial narratives begun in Ovid's critical rewriting of the *Aeneid* in the *Metamorphoses*. As

[96] See Davis 1994: 464 who argues: 'the Thebans are a people acutely conscious of their own past'.

[97] See, for example, the adjective *Oeneae* with which Statius refers to Diana (*Oeneae vindex sic ille Dianae*, *Theb.* 2.469). Calling Diana the 'Oenean' makes apparently no sense, because Oeneus is Tydeus' father who, according to the myth, has neglected the deity. However, by using the adjective for Diana, Statius here is verbally alluding to the myth as recounted by Ovid (*…vindexque Dianae. | Oenea namque ferunt…*, *Met.* 8.272–273), the knowledge of which is indispensable for understanding the sense of the Statian verse.

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we shall see, this emphasis on landscapes as places where (poetic) past and present are in conflict not only situates the *Thebaid* within a literary tradition that saturates spatial narratives with political meanings, but also makes Statius' landscapes themselves engaged witnesses to the ongoing socio-political discourses of Flavian Rome, chiefly the Flavian emperors' attempts to bring back (or rather to construct) the memory of an idyllic Augustan past in the contemporary physical and cultural landscape of Rome.

## 1.4 Reworking the Geopolitics of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Flavian Rome

I have suggested thus far that Statius' symbolic landscapes programmatically acknowledge the literary descent of the *Thebaid* from the *Metamorphoses* through verbal and thematic allusions. This is apparent from the very beginning of the poem: the highly mythologically aware landscapes travelled by Tisiphone, Polynices, Laius, and Tydeus visually signal that the world of the *Thebaid* still shows the remnants or ongoing effects of the Ovidian episodes recalled by the *praeteritio* (simultaneously excluding them from the poem's main narrative). In the second part of this chapter, an exploration of the most significant events that occur in the natural world of the *Thebaid* will show that Ovid's Theban saga does not just constitute the mythological and literary background of Statius' Thebes but rather informs the *Thebaid*'s whole poetic world, of which the dangerous deceptiveness, tendency to chaos, and accessibility to infernal forces closely resemble the most important geopolitical features of the *Metamorphoses*' universe. As well as being a literary manoeuvre, this shifts the poem's politics, as Statius seems to further develop the fundamental opposition between urbanity and wilderness found in Ovid's Theban histories into a new politically loaded contrast between the apparently idyllic world of Argos and its surrounding Ovidian universe. The study of this new spatial narrative, which ultimately shows the failure of what we could call Argos' 'Augustan' worldview, will not only help us to better understand Statius' poetic technique as a development of Ovid's intertextual and geopolitical strategies, but it will also offer new insights into the ways the geopolitics of both the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* are reworked in the *Thebaid*. Specifically, it will show how the poem's contrastive Ovidian-Virgilian intertextuality encourages sophisticated reflections on the new political issues of Flavian Rome, chief among which are the potential illusoriness of the Flavian policies of *imitatio Augusti*.

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The dialogue between city and (pre-urban) natural environment has always been a key discourse in Roman culture. As noted in Introduction, even in Republican texts the complex relationship between Rome, countryside, and wilderness is saturated with political meaning.[98] In Augustan literature especially, control of the natural world becomes a powerful allegorical basis from which to indirectly discuss the establishment of Roman power in the new form of the Principate. In Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, for instance, the construction of Roman walls (*muros … moenia mea*, 1.7.2) marks the first transition of Rome from primitive to civilised (1.4.8), as well as the first fratricidal conflict of Roman history.[99] In Ovid's Theban histories, it is precisely this opposition between city and wilderness that plays a pivotal role in the rewriting of the *Aeneid*'s geopolitics and in the description of Thebes as a critical mirror of Augustan Rome. While in Virgil's epic the natural world bears marks of the violent urbanisation of the wilderness effected – though only superficially – by civilising heroes, the Theban histories overtly show Cadmus' failure to create stable urban order.[100] Thus, Ovid's Theban saga both perverts the spatial narratives of the *Aeneid* and recalls them selectively, emphasising the opposition between Virgil's so-called 'optimistic' voice and the *Metamorphoses*' scepticism – which in fact builds on and emphasises Virgil's own critical voice.[101] Accordingly, just like Aeneas, Cadmus is introduced in Ovid's Theban books as an exiled hero (*Met.* 3.6–7) who, following the advice of an oracle, founds a city – but the fertile white sow with thirty piglets that in the *Aeneid* (8.25–66) positively marked the site of the foundation of Alba is replaced in the *Metamorphoses* with an unyoked wild cow (*Met.* 3.1–49), which could be interpreted as an allegorical image of the unresolved tension between city and wild nature that constantly resurfaces in Ovid's Theban histories. Here, the wilderness symbolically subjugated by Cadmus slaying the dragon monster – in mimicry of Virgil's Hercules (*Aen.* 8.184–305) – in fact continues to destabilise the urban order, as displayed by the birth (from the monster's spoils) of the fratricidal warriors that found Thebes (*Met.* 3.95–137) and by Cadmus' own transformation into a snake (*Met.* 4.563–603). Moreover, the tragic ends of Actaeon (*Met.* 3.138–252), Narcissus (*Met.* 3.402–510), Athamas (*Met.* 4.464–511), and Ino

[98] Spencer 2010: 38–41.

[99] See Bannon 1997: 165; Wiseman 1995: 9–11.

[100] On Ovid's intertextual technique and its politics in this section, see Hardie 1990; Feldherr 1997 and Keith 2002a, 2002b.

[101] On the *Aeneid*'s different voices, see Parry 1963: 66–80; Thomas 2001 and Weeda 2015. On Ovid's technique, see Spinelli 2019a.

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and Pentheus (*Met*. 3.692–733) in the woods surrounding Thebes reveal the untamed wilderness of the natural world and its tendency towards chaos and violence that 'short-circuit[s] the Virgilian vision of an enduring foundation for Rome'.[102] By intertextually manipulating the *Aeneid*'s spatial narratives of opposition between urbanity and wilderness, Ovid transforms his anti-Virgilian world of Thebes into a dark political metaphor for Rome, a lens that magnifies those instances of civil chaos and problematic violence, such as the memory of a founding marred by a fratricide, that were mentioned in the *Aeneid* but were perhaps kept to the background by the overall teleological development of the poem.[103] In the following analysis, I shall argue that the re-enactment of this identification between Theban world and contemporary Rome through a politically charged spatial narrative that rewrites the geopolitics of both the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* represents Statius' most significant debt to Ovid's Theban histories in terms of intertextual technique and themes, as well as one of the most politically reflective aspects of his *Thebaid*.

Although the study of ancient – and especially poetic – intertextuality is often limited to focussed reading of precise verbal repetitions, the influence of the *Metamorphoses* on the *Thebaid*'s spatial narrative is particularly visible if we expand our analysis to include what is sometimes called macro-intertextuality, especially in relation to historiography.[104] In fact, in the *Thebaid* single verbal allusions to both the *Metamorphoses* and the *Aeneid* are often articulated in much larger intertextual systems that influence their meanings while rewriting entire passages and narrative dynamics of the Augustan classics. Such an intertextual technique, which Philip Hardie has examined in his study of Ovid's Theban histories as a critical rewriting of the *Aeneid*, seems to have been deployed here by Statius to update Ovid's spatial narratives in ways that make them more meaningful for Flavian Rome.[105] For example, just like Ovid's Cadmus, Polynices is described in the *Thebaid* as an *alter*-Aeneas: wearing a Herculean lion skin, he faces exile and a storm before being welcomed by the old king in a new city (*Theb*. 1.364–473) but, again just like Ovid's Cadmus, his mission is actually the opposite of that of Aeneas, because his exile marks the beginning of a destructive fratricidal war, reminiscent of the fratricide of the origins, that will destroy, rather than found, two cities. However, Polynices' journey from Thebes to Argos in the *Thebaid* does much more

[102] See Hardie 1990: 228.
[103] As McNelis 2007: 5 has argued, for Rome 'Thebes is no longer the other. It has become the self.'
[104] See especially O'Gorman 2009 and 2014. See also Damon 2010.
[105] See Hardie 1990: 224–230.

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than just retrace the narrative direction of *Metamorphoses* 3–4.[106] By reducing the distance between these two cities to the spaces of a few verses, this journey – which incorporates elements from the stories of both Cadmus and Perseus – connects and collides two worlds that, already described as different in the *Metamorphoses*, are now presented by Statius as two symbolically opposite polarities.[107] The consideration of Statius' Ovidian macro-intertextuality is thus of vital importance to fully understanding the ways in which the *Thebaid*'s spatial narratives engage with the context of Flavian Rome. By allusively connecting his poem to Ovid's critical rewriting of the *Aeneid*'s geopolitics, Statius acknowledges the political and Roman significance of the *Thebaid*'s spatial narratives and collocates them within the broader spatial discourse ongoing in Latin epic.

A macro-intertextual comparison with the spatial dynamics of *Met.* 3–4 highlights the new and important role that the theme of the opposition between Argos and Thebes – left undeveloped by Ovid – assumes in the *Thebaid*. Statius' Argos and Thebes are presented from the start as two clearly opposite worlds: while in the last scene in Thebes an anonymous citizen describes his city as a poor and obscure kingdom scarred by wars (*nuda potestas | armavit fratres*, 'an unadorned power summoned the brothers to arms', *Theb.* 1.150–151), Argos is described as a peaceful and luminous place (*ab Inachiis victa caligine tectis | emicuit lucem devexa in moenia fundens | Larisaeus apex*, 'from the city of Argos, overcoming the darkness, a light shone on the peak of Larissa, and spread over the walls below', *Theb.* 1.380–382).[108] In the poem this dichotomy is supported by more precise conflictive Virgilian-Ovidian allusions that reapply to both the *Metamorphoses* and the *Aeneid* the intertextual technique already used by Ovid on Virgil.[109] While the Theban landscapes, as we have noted, are darkened by the allusive memory of the tragic Ovidian stories which happened there, the bright kingdom of Argos is initially described as a luminous bubble through selective allusions to the *Aeneid*. To Polynices, who wanders through a stormy night like the exiled Aeneas (*vis maesta timoris*,

[106] Keith 2014: 365.
[107] Barchiesi and Rosati 2005: 324 *ad vv.* 4.604–606.
[108] On the bright and positive nature of Argos, see Vessey 1973: 94 and Dominik 1994: 98.
[109] Hardie 1990: 224–235 has convincingly shown how Ovid's Theban histories are based on the use of undercutting allusions to the *Aeneid*, a technique that Keith 2002b has recognised as one of the major traits of Ovid's Perseid (*Met.* 4–5) and that Tarrant 2002: 26–27 has more broadly defined as a constitutive feature of Ovid's competitive engagement with Virgil. By articulating its politics and poetics via a dense intertextuality that continuously intertwines Virgil's *Aeneid* with its Ovidian rewriting, the *Thebaid* emphasises this opposition even more, altering our reading of both the Augustan classics.

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*Theb*. 1.379; *maestumque timorem*, *Aen*. 1.202), Argos appears as a stronghold of salvation and its longstanding peace is compared to that of the Virgilian kingdom of Latinus (cf. *rex ibi tranquillae*, *medio de limite vitae* | *in senium vergens*, *populos Adrastus habebat*, 'there Adrastus, on the verge of old age, ruled his people peacefully', *Theb*. 1.390–391; *Rex arva Latinus et urbes* | *iam senior longa placidas in pace regebat*, 'King Latinus, already old in years, governed fields and towns in the tranquillity of a long peace', *Aen*. 7.45–46).[110] Here Polynices' fight with Tydeus recalls the description of the boxing match in *Aen*. 5 and Adrastus' welcome of his guests parallels that of Latinus to Aeneas (cf. *Theb*. 1.393; *Aen*. 7.81). Additionally, as noted earlier, the first meeting of the hero with the king verbally alludes to Aeneas' first meeting with Evander and Pallas (*quae causa furoris* | *externi iuvenes*..., *Theb*. 1.438–439; *iuvenes quae causa* ..., *Aen*. 8.112; *non inscia suasit* | *religio*, *Theb*. 1.559–560; *non* ... | *vana superstitio*, *Aen*. 8.185–187) and the banquet held by Adrastus in honour of his guests is an amalgamation of several Virgilian scenes of hospitality (*Theb*. 1.483–484; 520–521; *Aen*. 7.665; 1.726–727) that concludes with an aetiological tale and a hymn that revisit those of Evander in the *Aeneid* (*Theb*. 1.696 ff.; *Aen*. 8.293 ff.). More than alluding to a specific episode of the *Aeneid*, then, Statius appears to describe Argos as a bright world in the dark universe of the *Thebaid* through selective and cumulative allusions to the *Aeneid*. These allusions, however, also have a negative potential.[111]

Though some scholars have more optimistically interpreted this world of Argos, the dense allusions to the *Aeneid* assume a much less positive significance for Flavian Rome if we read them in light of the systemic intertextuality that throughout the poem opposes Adrastus' city to its surrounding Ovidian universe. Critics such as David Vessey and William Dominik have respectively pointed out that Polynices' trip can be considered almost as a symbolic and moral pilgrimage 'from *caligo* to *lux*' and that Adrastus' kingdom represents the only positive example of kingship in the *Thebaid*.[112] That said, a second reading might reveal instead that the depiction of Argos as a peaceful kingdom blessed by the gods is an illusion and that this in fact foreshadows the collapse of the city under the pressure of Theban chaos. Firstly, the initial description of Argos ominously recalls a rare expression used for the first time in Latin poetry by

[110] This description is more complex than it appears at a superficial reading, since Latinus' city too will be eventually involved in the war in Latium in the *Aeneid*.

[111] For interpretation of the scene as referring to specific Virgilian episodes, see McNelis 2007: 27–28 and Caviglia 1973: *ad vv*. 1.390–720.

[112] See Vessey 1973: 94 and Dominik 1994: 98.

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Virgil in the description of the fall of Troy (*lucem devexa in moenia fundens | Larisaeus apex*, *Theb*. 1.381–382; *fundere lumen apex*, *Aen*. 2.682).[113] In the *Aeneid*, the appearance of this supernatural light is certainly a positive omen – even in the tragic moment of the fall of Troy – as it forecasts the presence of a divine plan that will guide Aeneas towards the foundation of a new city. In contrast, its appearance in the *Thebaid* is more ominous: the Statian description of the light links the memory of the last night of Troy to the night in which Polynices arrives at Argos. Moreover, the positive foundational plan hinted at by Virgil's omen is strikingly reversed in the *Thebaid*, in which Jupiter has just planned the destruction of both Thebes and Argos (cf. *Theb*. 1.201–311). Accordingly, while the interpretation of that positive omen initiates Aeneas' founding mission, Adrastus' (mis)interpretation of the divine prophecy concerning Polynices' arrival in the *Thebaid* will lead Argos into a destructive war. More importantly, the peace of Adrastus' kingdom is allusively compared to that of Latinus. This is another ominous allusion, considering that Adrastus, just like Latinus, is described as an old king (*Theb*. 1.391; *Aen*. 7.45) who lacks legitimate heirs (*Theb*. 1.393; *Aen*. 1.50) and wants to bring stability to his kingdom through the marriage of his daughter Argia to Polynices. Indeed, similarly to Adrastus' Argos in the *Thebaid*, Latinus' peaceful city is led into a violent war by the marriage of his daughter to Aeneas, and is even threatened with sacking in Book XII of the *Aeneid*. In addition, as we shall see better in Chapter 2, Adrastus' aetiological tale reverses the story of Hercules and Cacus (*Aen*. 8.184–309) by showing that in the *Thebaid* – just as in the *Metamorphoses* – the providential alignment between humans and gods has been replaced by capricious divine malevolence.[114] All these elements suggest that the apparently peaceful and stable kingdom of Argos is actually built upon a series of contradictions. While Adrastus appears to live in what Statius describes as a 'Virgilian' world in which he can trust the gods' providential plan that assures everlasting peace in his kingdom, his city is on the edge of a social and political crisis: he is old and without an heir, his familial policies (*Theb*. 2.168–172) are leading the country into a destructive fratricidal war and the gods, though supposedly thought of as benevolent patrons, are worshipped in an expiatory ceremony that overtly betrays the fear of new divine punishments (*Phoebeaque placat | templa novatus honos*, 'with renewed sacrifices the temples of Phoebus are appeased',

[113] This allusion is mediated by Ovid (*collis apex*, *Met*. 7.779), who uses the term with the same meaning that it has in the *Thebaid*.

[114] See Galinsky 1966: 65.

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*Theb*. 1.668–669).[115] In the following analysis we shall see how the negative potential of these allusions emerges particularly clearly from their intertextual interplay with the most chaotic traits of the *Metamorphoses*' narratives. However, it is important to note here that it would be deceiving to read this intertextual phenomenon as an uncomplicated opposition between the politics of the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*. In fact, while Statius' allusions to the *Aeneid* initially seem to refer especially to what modern scholarship would define as the more optimistic of Virgil's (or rather, the poem's) voices, their interactions with the narratives of the *Metamorphoses* in which Ovid's critical voice is louder, actually illuminate the polyphonic nature of Virgil's own narratives, hinting at their potentially tragic significance in the *Aeneid*.

The contradictions inherent in Adrastus' kingdom can also be said to trigger a pessimistic comparison in the *Thebaid* between the political atmospheres of Argos and Flavian Rome, which develops the Ovidian link between Thebes and Augustan Rome. Indeed, just as the bloody foundation of Ovid's Thebes emphasises the most critical aspects of the establishment of the Principate, Statius' Argos, with its gates left open at night (*reclusis* | … *portis*, 'being the gates open', *Theb*. 1.85–86) – perhaps too optimistically – seems to reflect one of the most visible political features of Flavian Rome: the attempt of the newly established dynasty to legitimise its power, gained from civil war, under the guise of a return to the peace and stability promised by Augustus. Many pieces of evidence, from Flavian coinage with the slogans *pax Augusta* and *fortuna redux* to the official reclosure of the doors of the Temple of Janus and the reconstruction of the Augustan Temple of Apollo Palatinus, suggest that the Flavian emperors attempted to ward off the ghost of civil war by celebrating Rome as an ultimately pacified place and by presenting themselves as the dynasty that would be able to bring Rome back to its golden Augustan age, assumed as an idealised political model.[116]

Much like Argos, however, this display of peace and stability was not easily accommodated by an empire still reeling from the recent civil wars and pervaded by religious anxiety and by new instances of political disorder. As the literature following the civil wars suggests, Rome was gripped by a sense of religious guilt (*non esse curae dei securitatem nostram*, *esse ultionem*,

[115] It is worth remembering that Statius' Virgilian allusions tend to simplify the polyphonic nature of the *Aeneid*, developing the narrative strategy that, as we have seen, was already used by Ovid on Virgil.

[116] It is in this context that we must also read the Flavian re-establishment of the Augustan *Ludi Saeculares*. See McNelis 2007: 5–8 and Tuck 2016: 109. On the Flavian *imitatio Augusti*, see Boyle and Dominik 2003: 4–28.

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'the gods no longer want our salvation but our punishment', Tac. *Hist.* 1.3) that is visible in the public *supplicationes* organised by the emperors that were recorded on coins.[117] Notwithstanding the nuances of the world of myth, the echo of this atmosphere is recognisable in the *Thebaid* in the anachronistically Roman nature of Adrastus' expiatory ceremony.[118] In addition, the family-based Flavian reorganisation of the imperial institution faced problems of succession of the kind that we see represented and discussed in the Statian saga of Argos and Thebes. Vespasian's decision to inaugurate a biological principle of succession lasted just for his reign.[119] His son Titus was the first Roman emperor to succeed his biological father, but a lack of heirs brought his brother Domitian, with whom his relationship was perhaps not entirely harmonious (Suet. *Dom.* 13), to power.[120] When Statius wrote his *Thebaid*, Domitian was aging and without sons (*Dom.* 3.1; Cass. Dio 67.4.1–7). The lack of heirs and the rise of new instances of civil disorder, such as the rebellion of Saturninus (89 CE), probably revived some anxiety over the possibility of new civil wars, as we can see from the verses in which Statius pins the stability of the empire on the hope that the emperor will never die (*annos perpetua geres iuventa*, 'in perpetual youth you shall spend the years', *Silv.* 4.3.149; *aeternum sibi Roma cupit*, 'you whom Rome wishes to be eternal, for her sake', *Theb.* 1.24).[121] Statius' Virgilian allusions, rather than suggesting a positive political significance for Adrastus' Argos, seem designed instead to open readers' eyes to the possibility that the Theban-Argive world of the poem may be read as a negative metaphor for Flavian Rome in a way that simultaneously maintains and refashions the political significance given by Ovid to his Theban saga. In this new spatial narrative, the Argives' conspicuous allusions to the *Aeneid* seem to capture the policies of *imitatio Augusti* adopted by the Flavian emperors to legitimise their power as a return to an idealised Augustan past. At the same time, at least in the case of Argos, these policies

[117] The fear expressed by Horace (*Carm.* 3.6.1–9) and Lucan (*B.C.* 4.807–809) that the original sin of Romulus can affect the future generations of Romans, appears more strongly in Flavian texts such as Tac. *Hist.* 2.38.2 and Stat. *Silv.* 5.3.195. Although the Tacitean accounts are not unproblematic (Buckley 2018: 86–107), in this case they seem confirmed by other elements, such as the re-establishment of the *Ludi Capitolini* to appease the gods after the destruction of the temples during the civil war (see Monaca 2002: 153–171 and Rebeggiani 2018: 200, 248) and the big *supplicatio* of 80 CE recorded by the coin *RIC* 1.114.

[118] Adrastus uses the Roman legislative expression *occumbere leto* (*Theb.* 1.595), eventually reminiscent of Domitian's moralising policies. See Caviglia 1973: *ad v.* 1.595 and Griffin 2000: 19–21.

[119] See Murison 2016: 76.

[120] On the scholarly debate concerning the historical credibility of second-century sources, see Adams 2005 and Spinelli and Gregori 2019.

[121] On Saturninus' revolt, see Suet. *Dom.* 6.2 and McNelis 2007: 5–6.

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are described by Statius as inherently fragile in a way that suggests a reconsideration of the suitability and effectiveness of the Flavian deployment of Augustan propaganda to ensure peace and stability to Rome.

## 1.5 A Chaotic Universe: The *Thebaid*'s Ovidian Flood and Desertification

The fullest political potential of Statius' analogy between the Theban saga and Flavian Rome emerges from the collision between the world of Argos, described through abundant allusions to the *Aeneid*, and a series of natural and supernatural phenomena that reveal the *Thebaid*'s universe to be thoroughly informed by the three most important features of the *Metamorphoses*' universe: the tendency to chaos, the permeability to chthonic forces, and deceptiveness. The Statian refashioning of Ovid's geopolitics carries important poetic and political considerations for the entire poem. On a poetic level, contrastive allusions to the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* in the description of the natural world build on the intertextual technique that, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, was earlier deployed by Ovid to rewrite Virgil's epic and explore the ambiguities inherent to its foundational legends. In so doing, the *Thebaid*'s intertextuality complicates optimistic readings of both the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*, emphasising the most dramatic nuances of their narratives. Moreover, these allusions develop the war between Argos and Thebes – the main subject of the *Thebaid* – well beyond the specifically martial narratives of Books VIII, IX and X, transforming the mythic war between the two cities into a symbolic collision of two different views of the world, as well as, ultimately, different views of imperial Rome. On a political level, this literary operation assumes particular significance if we read it within the socio-cultural context of Flavian Rome as analysed in the previous section. The progressive revelation of the Ovidian nature of the Theban universe and the subsequent failure of Argos' proto-Augustan worldview seem to view the imperial policies of *imitatio Augusti* with disillusionment while deconstructing the idea of the 'Augustan golden age' in itself. In other words, by repeatedly setting Ovid's and Virgil's interpretations of the Roman world at the dawn of its imperial age in dialogue, the *Thebaid* emphasises how the Augustan world, viewed by the Flavian emperors as an ideal political model, was never really pacified, but was rather fraught with chaos, dissent, and political instability.[122]

[122] On Statius' own rewriting of both the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* through 'conflictive' intertextuality, see Introduction.

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The tendency to chaos is probably the most recognisably Ovidian feature of the *Thebaid*'s poetic universe. As Stephen Wheeler, Alessandro Barchiesi, and Andrew Feldherr have noted, the chaotic nature of the world in the *Metamorphoses* constitutes the most distinctive and politically loaded trait of Ovid's critical rewriting of the *Aeneid*'s teleological plot.[123] That is not to say, however, that the *Aeneid*'s poetic universe is immune to chaos, which emerges from the violence of storms, the depredation of natural landscapes, and the action of monstrous forces.[124] In fact, the overall teleological trajectory of Virgil's poem is complicated by the destruction caused, for example, by Hercules' violent killing of Cacus and by the natural disorder that accompanies the battle of Actium, which ends with the sea turning red with blood and human remains (*Aen.* 8.675–709).[125] Nevertheless, while Virgil's poem begins by reassuring his readers that the episodes of natural violence that threaten Aeneas (*multum ille et terris iactatus et alto*, 'hurled about heavily by land and sea', *Aen.* 1.3) are part of a providentially ordered plan (*fato profugus*, 'exiled by the will of fate', *Aen.* 1.2; *dum conderet urbem*, 'until he founded a city', *Aen.* 1.5), Ovid begins his *Metamorphoses* by revealing the disordered and chaotic nature of the universe (*unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe | quem dixere Chaos*, 'nature had the same appearance in the whole world: what we would call Chaos', *Met.* 1.3–4). Here the inherent conflict between elements (*discordia semina rerum*, 'the discordant atoms of things', *Met.* 1.9), which Ovid describes with terms reminiscent of civil war (*obstabat aliis aliud quia corpore in uno … | pugnabant*, 'elements opposed each other, as in one body … fought', *Met.* 1.18–19), continuously challenges the fragile peace and order imposed over nature by the divine power that the *Metamorphoses* provocatively depicts in Augustan terms (*dissociata loci concordi pace ligavit*, 'he fixed in harmonious peace the element divided in separate spaces', *Met.* 1.25).[126] Thus, the overall narrative progress from original chaos to the deification of Caesar (*ab origine mundi | ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen*, 'from the first origins of the world to my own time, spin out an unbroken song', *Met.* 1.3–4) is undercut by multiple narratives of creation and destruction that throughout the poem display the Ovidian universe's cyclical relapse into primordial chaos (e.g., *in chaos antiquum confundimur*, 'in the chaos of the origins we get lost',

[123] See Wheeler 2000: 12–23; Barchiesi 1986, 2005: 156 *ad v.* 1.25 and Feldherr 2010: 75.

[124] See Hardie 1993: 60–73 and Dominik 2009: 120–125. See also the reflection by Virgil's Tarchon on the hostility of wild nature (*Aen.* 10.295–296).

[125] See Hardie 1986: 97–109.

[126] On the Augustan undertones of Ovid's description, see Barchiesi 2005: 153–154.

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*Met*. 2.299).[127] As Wheeler has argued, the political dimension of this chaotic worldview emerges fully in Book XV, in which Pythagoras' insertion of Rome into the cyclical patterns of natural creation and destruction (*Met*. 15.420–435) casts doubt on the durability of the cosmic (and imperial) order that is finally re-established at the end of the poem with the deification of Caesar.[128]

Following the subversive path initiated by Ovid, Statius also opens his poem with an evocation of chaos by programmatically summarising the *Thebaid*'s argument with the expression 'the chaotic house of Oedipus' (*Oedipodae confusa domus*, *Theb*. 1.17). Moreover, Thebes is described from the beginning through allusions to the *Metamorphoses* as a kingdom dominated by political and natural instability. As we saw in the first part of this chapter, the arrival of Tisiphone on the Earth not only produces the political chaos denounced by the anonymous Theban citizen as a consequence of Cadmus' sins (*totiens mutare timendos | alternoque iugo dubitantia subdere colla*, 'so many times we had to change tyrants, and to subdue the reluctant neck to alternate yokes', *Theb*. 1.174–175), but also affects the natural world, where the mountains bend their tops and the sea is shaken by violent waves that clash against the Isthmus' cliffs (*Theb*. 1.118–120). Far from being resolved by a progressive narrative development, in the *Thebaid* this chaos pervades the entire poem up to the final duel of Eteocles and Polynices, where the most dramatic moment of political and familial chaos is accompanied by the upswing of natural elements: daylight disappears (*dulci terrae caruere sereno*, *Theb*. 11.135) and the earth is shaken by thunder and earthquakes (*intonuit terque ima soli concussit*, *Theb*. 11.412). In the following analysis, I shall argue that the two biggest natural disasters of the *Thebaid*, the storm and the desertification, connect this chaos to the politically loaded natural disorder that characterises Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, ultimately revealing the illusoriness of Adrastus' proto-Augustan faith in a providentially structured and orderly reality, which Statius colours with Virgilian undertones.[129]

### *1.5.1 The Storm*

In Book I, a storm threatens Polynices' journey from Thebes to Argos (*Theb*. 1.345–380). This natural violence that follows the chaos created by

[127] See, for instance, *Met.* 1.89–150; 1.159–162; 348–415; 256–258; 162–347; 2.204–271. See also Wheeler 2000: 10–46 and O'Hara 2007: 108–114.

[128] Wheeler 2002: 372–373.

[129] Cf: *non haec incassum divisque absentibus acta*, 'not in vain and not in the absence of the gods these things happened', *Theb.* 1.471; *non … | vana superstitio veterumque ignara deorum …* 'not … a vain superstition or neglect of the ancient gods…', *Aen.* 8.185–187.

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the arrival of Tisiphone represents the most spectacular and dramatic natural phenomenon of the entire poem. Precisely in the moment in which the dark and dangerous Theban landscape is left behind by the hero as he crosses the Isthmus to enter the peaceful Argolis, the quiet of the night is suddenly broken by the outbreak of a storm that soon assumes the traits of a real natural disaster: darkness covers the Earth; the rivers flood; the peaks of the mountains, bare of trees, collapse; and deadly landslides cover the fields with rocks and mud, almost killing Polynices (*Theb*. 1.345–369):

> densior a terris et nulli pervia flammae
> subtexit nox atra polos. Iam claustra rigentis
> Aeoliae percussa sonant, venturaque rauco
> ore minatur hiems, venti transversa frementes
> confligunt axemque emoto cardine vellunt,
> dum caelum sibi quisque rapit; sed plurimus Auster
> inglomerat noctem, tenebrosa volumina torquens,
> defunditque imbres sicco quos asper hiatu
> praesolidat Boreas; nec non abrupta tremescunt
> fulgura, et attritus subita face rumpitur aether.
> Iam Nemea, iam Taenariis contermina lucis
> Arcadiae capita alta madent; ruit agmine magno
> Inachus et gelidas surgens Erasinus in undas.
> Pulverulenta prius calcandaque flumina nullae
> aggeribus tenuere morae, stagnoque refusa est
> funditus et veteri spumavit Lerna veneno.
> Frangitur omne nemus, rapiunt antiqua procellae
> bracchia silvarum, nullisque aspecta per aevum
> solibus umbrosi patuere aestiva Lycaei.
> Ille tamen, modo saxa iugis fugientia ruptis
> miratus, modo nubigenas e montibus amnes
> aure pavens passimque insano turbine raptas
> pastorum pecorumque domos, non segnius amens
> incertusque viae per nigra silentia vastum
> haurit iter; pulsat metus undique et undique frater.

A thicker night, impenetrable by any light, rose from the Earth and plunged the Heavens into darkness. The doors of the cold Aeolia, being struck, resound, and the near storm announces itself hoarsely; the winds, puffing sideways, collide and – fighting for the sky – almost break the axis of the world, unhinging it: but Auster more than any other thickens the night, turning spirals of darkness, and rain pours, which sharp Boreas immediately condenses with his dry breath; lightning flashes and the sky, struck, is torn by the sudden glow. Already Nemea, already the high peaks of Arcadia, bordering the sacred woods of Taenarus, are wet with rain; the Inacus and the Erasinus burst under the pressure of an immense current, swelling with icy waves. No embankment could contain even those rivers that were dry

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> and fordable shortly before: the stagnant waters of Lerna stirred from the depths and foamed with ancient poison. Each tree breaks and the waters drag the ancient trunks; the shadowy clearings of the Lyceum, never before penetrated by the sun, are opened. But Polynices, now surprised by the boulders that roll along the broken hills, now terrified by the roar of the streams (the clouds' sons) that come down from the mountains, and by the violent storm that sweeps on all sides the shelters of the shepherds and flocks, though lost and uncertain of the way, does not slow down on the desolate path walking through dark silences: terror pushes him from every side, and the thought of his brother.

Surprisingly, these verses have not been examined closely by scholars and are usually read instead simply as Statius' manipulation of an epic and rhetorical cliché.[130] However, several elements suggest that this scene carries a highly symbolic and political significance that is important for the interpretation of the entire poem. Described in a passage of more than thirty-five verses, this storm has the most detailed description of a natural event in the *Thebaid* and its occurrence in the first book of the poem immediately signals Statius' programmatic engagement with a specific post-Virgilian tradition that posits the storm as one of the most powerful means to offer a politically charged image of the world at the beginning of a poem.[131] Storms, of course, are one of the most canonical scenes in the epic tradition and can be found in works from Homer (*Od.* 5.291 ff.; 10.1 ff.) and Livius Andronicus to Silius Italicus.[132] However, it was Virgil who first modified the epic canon by placing a storm in a prominent position at the beginning of the first book of the *Aeneid*.[133] This decision, copied by all post-Virgilian epicists save Silius, is justified by the political significance assumed by the storm scene in the interpretation of the entire poem.[134] The storm that troubles Aeneas at the outset of the *Aeneid* offers an insight into the structure of the universe that to some extent implicitly justifies (though without preventing ethical unease about the excesses and violence of untrammelled control) Aeneas' and Augustus' mission, suggesting that it is necessary for a power to establish order over rebellious natural forces.[135] In Virgil's description, the violent power of the *rex* Aeolus is the only thing

130 Caviglia 1973: 125 speaks of the nightfall and the storm as typical scenes, described by Statius 'secondo i moduli più convenzionali'. For symbolic interpretation of this passage, see Vessey 1973: 93.

131 On storms in Latin epic, see Morford 1967: 20–36 and Dunsch 2014: 56–73.

132 Cf. Lucretius (6.537–685) and Val. *Arg.* (1.574–642).

133 A storm was described earlier by Ennius in his *Annales* (cf. Macr. *Sat.* 6.2.28). However, the few extant fragments of the poem do not allow a thorough exploration of its significance.

134 Cf. Ov. *Met.* 1.253–312; Luc. *B.C.* 1.504–677; Val. *Arg.* 1. 374–699. Silius rewrites the *Aeneid*'s storm in *Pun.* 17.236–291. See Klaassen 2010: 101–102.

135 Hardie 1986: 90–96.

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that prevents the winds from destroying the world (*luctantes ventos tempestatesque sonoras | imperio premit ac vinclis et carcere frenat*, 'the writhing winds and the roaring tempests he dominates, and curbs them with chains and imprisonment', *Aen.* 1.53–54).[136] Thus, when Juno succeeds in freeing them against Aeneas, readers, just for a moment, see the 'potential cosmic catastrophe' that could derive from the absence of a central power.[137] Virgil highlights the contemporary significance of this image by comparing the natural reordering of the elements by Neptune to the pacifying action of a skilled political man – often compared to Augustus – able to stop the rebellion of the *plebs* in Rome with his *auctoritas* (*Aen.* 1.148–154). To be sure, as it often happens in the *Aeneid*, Neptune's pacifying action is not immune to contradictions, since the god actively fights on Augustus' side in the crucial moment of the battle of Actium, a scene in which Virgil describes 'Neptune's fields' growing red with the fresh slaughter of Roman soldiers (*Aen.* 8.694–700).[138] Nevertheless, as Bate has noted, the politics and poetics of the *Aeneid*'s storm are rewritten in a much more critical way by the great flood that Ovid describes in Book I of the *Metamorphoses*.[139] Instead of displaying the necessity of a hierarchically structured *imperium* to preserve the natural cosmos, Ovid's storm suggests that the inherently conflictive and chaotic nature of the universe does not accommodate any permanent order.[140] Accordingly, the gale that threatens Aeneas' fleet in the *Aeneid* becomes a universal deluge in the *Metamorphoses* – this time unleashed by Neptune, not stopped (*Met.* 1.275–283) – that subverts every form of division between natural elements (*Met.* 1.292–296) and returns the universe to its initial chaos (*iamque mare et tellus nullum discrimen habebat: | omnia pontus erant, derant quoque litora ponto*, 'the land and sea were no longer distinct; everything was the sea, and the sea did not have shores', *Met.* 1.291–292), to the point that a new creation becomes necessary (*Met.* 1.313–415).

Although the inclusion of a storm in the first book of the *Thebaid* has been traditionally read alongside the *Aeneid*, neglected allusions to the *Metamorphoses* suggest that Virgilian allusivity is actually used by Statius

[136] The potentially destructive effects of the winds and the fundamental importance of Neptune's action are explicitly described by Virgil: *ni faciat, maria ac terras caelumque profundum | quippe ferant rapidi secum verrantque per auras*, 'should Aeolus not do this, the winds would surely carry off with them in rapid flight the seas and lands and the highest Heaven, sweeping them through the air', *Aen.* 1.58–59.

[137] Cf. Hardie 1986: 93.

[138] On Neptune in the *Aeneid*, see Harrison 1988: 55–59 and especially Fratantuono 2015: 130–148.

[139] Bate 2004: 295–310.

[140] See Wheeler 2000: 27–37.

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to highlight his reversal of the *Aeneid*'s storm into an Ovidian deluge, as well as showing us that the *Thebaid*'s worldview is actually even more tragic than that of the *Metamorphoses*.[141] At first glance, Polynices, just like Aeneas, faces a storm that begins with the image of violent winds leaving their cave (*illi indignantes … | circum claustra fremunt*, *Aen.* 1.55–56; *iam claustra rigentis | … venti transversa frementes*, *Theb.* 1.346–348) followed by thunderbolts (*abruptibus nubibus ignes*, *Aen.* 3.199; *abrupta tremescunt | fulgura*, *Theb.* 1.353–354); like the Virgilian hero, he is frightened and disorientated (*caelum undique et undique pontus*, 'everywhere sky and everywhere sea', *Aen.* 3.193; *metus undique et undique frater*, 'everywhere fear and everywhere the brother', *Theb.* 1.369). However, a more careful reading shows that these allusions to the *Aeneid* are designed to emphasise the distance of Statius' Ovidian storm from the Virgilian model. Firstly, on a narrative level, Statius follows the structure of Book I of the *Metamorphoses* by placing his storm just after a divine council, during which a despotic Jupiter arbitrarily decides to punish humanity for their sins (*Theb.* 214–247; *Met.* 182–242). Both the poems, in addition, change the Virgilian sea-gale into a storm over the mainland (*Theb.* 1.358–359; *Met.* 1.285) but maintain its association with marine imagery (*Theb.* 1.370; *Met.* 1.292). These structural similarities correspond to a series of Ovidian allusions that systematically frustrate readers' Virgilian expectations. At the beginning of the Statian storm the winds apparently make the same noise as Virgil's (*rauco | ore minatur hiems venti transversa frementes*, *Theb.* 1.347–348; *illi indignantes magno cum murmure montis | circum claustra fremunt*, 'The winds angrily roar around the bolts with the great murmur of the mountain', *Aen.* 1.55–56), but in the *Thebaid* this noise is not produced by Jupiter's safe trapping of the winds in a cave, as it is in the *Aeneid*, but rather by their uncontrolled escape. This is highlighted by Statius' use of the Ovidian technical verb *percutio* in a rare passive form (*iam claustra rigentis | Aeoliae percussa sonant*, *Theb.* 1.348–349).[142] In the *Metamorphoses*, the Virgilian image of Neptune calming the storm is reversed into the description of the god releasing the storm with his trident (*ipse tridente suo terram percussit at illa | intremuit motuque vias patefecit aquarum*, 'he struck the ground with his trident, so that it trembled and paved the way to the waters', *Met.* 1.283–284). By further developing Ovid's rewriting of the

[141] For Virgilian readings of this storm, see Heuvel 1932 and Caviglia 1973: 125–130.

[142] The destructive power of the winds is perfectly understandable if we note that later in the poem Polynices' desire of fratricidal war is described by using the same expressions as this storm (*saevaque portarum convellit claustra*, *Theb.* 11.296; *iam claustra*, *Theb.* 1.346; *emoto cardine vellunt*, *Theb.* 1.349).

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*Aeneid*'s storm, Statius uses the same verb *percutio* to simultaneously evoke and deny the significance of the image of Aeolus striking the ground with his trident to release the storm (*conversa cuspide montem | impulit*, 'turning his spear he struck the mount', *Aen.* 1.81–82) that was used by Virgil as an allegory of the hierarchical order of the universe: in the *Thebaid* the subject of the past participle is not a deity in control of the natural world but rather the doors of the Aeolian cave struck by the winds; no god controls this storm, and the presence of Aeolus is reduced to a mere geographical reference.[143]

Such changes might appear marginal to modern readers, but they were probably much more visible to imperial readers who would have at least read (and probably memorised) the canonical poems in school.[144] Storms were among the most conventional type-scenes of the epic tradition and the gesture of a god releasing the winds appears as a standard image as early as the Odyssey (5.291–295), as well as in the figurative arts.[145] The absence of the god in the *Thebaid* is even more meaningful when one considers the particular importance of Neptune in imperial Rome. Symbolically associated with the victory of Augustus at Actium, the god was celebrated both in the Augustan period (with a new temple in the Campus Martius and on coins) and in Flavian Rome, where he was associated with the victory over the Jews in order to create a parallelism with the Augustan victory at Actium.[146] Given also the particular prominence of Neptune in the storm in the first book of Valerius' *Argonautica*, it is likely that the absence of gods in the *Thebaid*'s storm did not go unnoticed in its symbolic import to Flavian readers.[147]

We see the *Thebaid*'s innovation of the epic canon in the transformation of the traditional epic storm into a cosmic collapse, the violence and extent of which find a parallel in Ovid's great flood, as suggested by Statius through verbal allusions. Both the *Thebaid* and the *Metamorphoses* seem to explore the other side of the conditional *ni faciat* ('should he not do so', *Aen.* 1.58) – a phrase used by Virgil to note the necessity of an *imperium* over natural forces – by allowing the winds to fight for the dominion of the sky and to destroy the world (*dum caelum sibi suisque rapit*,

[143] As it was in *Met.* 1.262 (*Aeoliis Aquilonem claudit in antris*).
[144] On the role of epic in the Roman educational system, see Keith 2000: 8–35 and Too 2001.
[145] See Dunsch 2014. On the connection between literature and Roman art, see Fantham 1972; Murgatroyd 1995: 9–25 and Manolaraki 2008: 374–394.
[146] See the engraved gems with Augustus as Neptune discussed by Gołyźniak 2020. On the *Basilica Neptuni* see Richardson 1992. On the Flavian reuse of Augustan images of Victory and Neptune on coins see *RIC* 2 (*Vesp.* 22–25; 39; 44; 90–94; 175–178; 238–239; 358; 365–366) and Hurlet 2016: 32.
[147] See Val. *Arg.* 1.211–652.

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'until each snatches the Heavens for itself', *Theb.* 1.350; *quin lanient mundum: tanta est discordia fratrum*, 'they would tear the world apart: such is the discord between the wind-brothers', *Met.* 1.60); in both cases, the storm is described as an event of universal impact. In the *Metamorphoses* the entire world is covered by water, while the list of rivers and mountains in the *Thebaid*, recalling the list of regions and rivers destroyed by Phaethon (*Met.* 2.239–259), confirms the exceptional dimension of the storm.[148] Among them, the name *Erasinus* shows Statius' debt to Ovid for it occurs for the first time in Latin poetry in the *Metamorphoses* in a verse that seems reworked in the *Thebaid* (*surgens Erasinus in undas*, *Theb.* 1.357; *ingens Erasinus in arvis*, *Met.* 15.276).[149] In addition, when the Statian rivers overflow (*flumina nullae | aggeribus tenuere morae*, *Theb.* 1.358–359), just as the streams did when ordered to do so by the Ovidian Neptune (*mole remota | fluminibus vestris totas immittite habenas*, 'having removed every obstacle, loosen the reins of your rivers entirely', *Met.* 1.279–280) they destroy any division between elements. Like Ovid's deluge (*arbusta … pecudes … viros … tecta*, *Met.* 1.286–287; *rapiunt*, *Met.* 1.361), the Statian storm destroys hills, forests, houses, and humans (*nemus … silvarum*, *Theb.* 1.361–362; *pastorum pecorumque domus*, *Theb.*1.367; *rapiunt*, *Theb.* 1.287). Simultaneously, the mountain Lykaion, the setting of Lycaon's crime that in the *Metamorphoses* causes Jupiter to send the great flood (*gelidi pineta Lycaei*, *Met.* 1.217), is stripped of its trees (*patuere aestiva Lycaei*, *Theb.* 1.363). In such natural turmoil, Polynices, who at the beginning of his journey was described as a new Aeneas, is now instead wandering in a desolated land just like Ovid's Deucalion and Pyrrha (*per nigra silentia vastum*, *Theb.* 1.368; *desolatas agere alta silentia terra*, *Met.* 1.349) and has the same feelings (*miratus*, *Theb.* 1.365; *pavens*, *Theb.* 1.366; *incertusque viae*, *Theb.* 1.368) that Ovid's Phaethon had during the cosmic fire that destroys the world (*ignarus stupet*, *Met.* 2.191; *ipse pavet*, *Met.* 2.169; *nec scit qua sit iter*, *Met.* 2.170). Far from a cosmetic refashioning of the *Aeneid*'s storm, then, Statius' flood actually develops the most dramatic traits of Ovid's deluge as a pessimistic reflection on the enforceability of power over a reality that is inherently hostile to any form of control. While Adrastus' Argos tries to read this reality according to a providential worldview (similar to that heralded, at least superficially, by the *Aeneid*'s storm scene), the complete absence of the gods and the inevitable tendency to chaos displayed

[148] Cf. Keith 2013b: 363–365.
[149] While Tarrant 2004 reads *ingens Erasinus in arvis* (*Met.* 15.276), Luck 2017: 57 maintains the form *surgens Erasinus* that is attested in some manuscripts.

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by the storm suggest that the *Thebaid*'s universe is even more chaotic than that depicted by Ovid, in which a despotic Jupiter still tries to control conflicting natural forces, or that of Lucan, in which the gods are at least replaced in the storm scene by the almost deified figure of Caesar.[150]

### *1.5.2 The Desertification*

At the end of Book IV another natural event seems to confirm the illusoriness of the Argives' faith in a providentially structured reality: the desertification caused by Bacchus. This natural disaster does not hit the Argolis directly, but it does involve the Argive troops that are crossing the forests of Nemea to reach Thebes, reversing the route taken by Polynices in Book I (*Theb.* 4.680–704; 711–715; 730–740):

> Tempus erat medii cum solem in culmina mundi
> tollit anhela dies, ubi tardus hiantibus arvis
> stat vapor atque omnes admittunt aethera luci.
> Vndarum vocat ille deas mediusque silentum
> incipit: 'agrestes, fluviorum numina, Nymphae,
> et nostri pars magna gregis, perferte laborem
> quem damus. Argolicos paulum mihi fontibus amnes
> stagnaque et errantes obducite pulvere rivos.
> Praecipuam Nemeen, qua nostra in moenia bellis
> nunc iter, ex alto fugiat liquor; adiuvat ipse
> Phoebus adhuc summo, cesset ni vestra voluntas,
> limite; vim coeptis indulgent astra, meaeque
> aestifer Erigones spumat canis. Ite volentes,
> ite in operta soli; post vos ego gurgite pleno
> eliciam, et quae dona meis amplissima sacris
> vester habebit honos, nocturnaque furta licentum
> cornipedum et cupidas Faunorum arcebo rapinas'.
> Dixerat; ast illis tenuior percurrere visus
> ora situs, viridisque comis exhorruit umor.
> Protinus Inachios haurit sitis ignea campos:
> diffugere undae, squalent fontesque lacusque,
> et cava ferventi durescunt flumina limo.
> Aegra solo macies, tenerique in origine culmi
> inclinata seges, deceptum margine ripae
> stat pecus, atque amnes quaerunt armenta natatos.
>
> (…)
>
> Aret Lerna nocens, aret Lyrceus et ingens

[150] Cf. Luc. *B.C.* 1.504–677, on which see Morford 1967: 44.

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Inachus advolvensque natantia saxa Charadrus
et numquam in ripis audax Erasinus et aequus
fluctibus Asterion, ille alta per avia notus
audiri et longe pastorum rumpere somnos.

(...)

Ergo nec ardentes clipeos vectare nec artos
thoracum nexus (tantum sitis horrida torret)
sufficiunt; non ora modo angustisque perusti
faucibus, interior sed vis quatit: aspera pulsu
corda, gelant venae et siccis cruor aeger adhaeret
visceribus; tunc sole putris, tunc pulvere tellus
exhalat calidam nubem. Non spumeus imber
manat equum: siccis inlidunt ora lupatis,
ora catenatas procul exertantia linguas;
nec legem dominosque pati, sed perfurit arvis
flammatum pecus.

It was the hour when the panting day brings the sun to its zenith, when a suffocating heat weighs on the cracking fields, and the woods let the light through. He calls the nymphs and, while they stay around him silently, he begins to speak: 'country Nymphs, gods of rivers, important part of my entourage, do carry out the task that I entrust to you. For a while, block the rivers and ponds of Argolis at their sources, cover the stray streams with dust. Above all, shall the water disappear entirely from Nemea, through which the war now advances against my city. As long as your commitment is not lacking, Phoebus himself (still standing at the top of his way) comes to your aid; the influence of the stars blesses the enterprise, and the burning dog of my Erygon is excited. Go with good effort, go deep into the earth: when I call you back out, later, your currents will be abundant and you will have the honour of the most beautiful gifts of my sacrifices, and I will defend you from the nocturnal snares of the lascivious cornipedes and from the eager assaults of the Fauns'. Thus he spoke, and a faint sheen seemed to cover their faces, the green sap drying on their hair. Suddenly a burning thirst devours the fields of Inachus: waters flee, springs and lakes dry up, the seething silt dries up in the riverbed. A sick heat strikes the ground, the tender stalks of wheat bend in the bud; the disappointed flock stops on the banks; the herds look for the rivers in which they used to dive.... The putrid swamp of Lerna dries up, the Lyrceus and the great Inachus dry up, and also the Charadrus that overwhelms boulders with its current, and the Asterion with its calm course and the impetuous Erasinus that cannot keep itself within the banks: it makes its roar heard on inaccessible heights and breaks the sleep of the shepherds from afar.... Thus, the soldiers are no longer able to carry neither the fiery shields nor the armour tightened on the body – so tormenting is the thirst that burns them; and not only the mouth, not only the throat are burnt and sealed, but an internal fire torments them: the heart is fatigued, the veins freeze, the blood clings tiredly to the dry bowels;

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> the earth, parched by the sun and crumbling, exhales a fiery cloud. No foam falls from the horses' mouth: jaws clench dry bites and let the harnessed tongue hang; no longer they obey the orders of their masters, but run across the fields furious with thirst.

In this passage, Bacchus decides to cause a severe drought in an attempt to slow the army so that he has time to change Jupiter's mind about the war (*Theb*. 4.670–677): he asks the nymphs to hold back the rivers, except those that supply the river Langia (*Theb*. 4.680–698), to the banks of which the Argives are diverted. This decision triggers a series of events that, on a strictly narrative level, are very successful, for they divert the flow of the narration for the unusual length of three books. Exhausted and thirsty, the Argives meet Hypsipyle (*Theb*. 4.746 ff.) who tells them her story (*Theb*. 5.28–504) before leading them to the river Langia. During this journey, the young Opheltes, entrusted to her care, is killed by a dragon-like monster (*Theb*. 5.534–587) and, after having killed the dragon and cut the Nemean forest to build a funeral pyre, the Argives organise epic games in honour of his funeral (*Theb*. 6.84–117). Attracted instead by the narratives of Books V and VI, namely the killing of the dragon monster and the epic games, critics have paid little attention to the desertification as the cause of these events.[151] However, this second natural disaster is another powerful vehicle of the destructive and politically loaded chaos that dominates the *Thebaid*'s universe, as highlighted by Statius through the link with the politics and poetics of the storm in Book I. These two events, that are opposite on a natural level, are linked in the poem by structural and verbal similarities that suggest reading them as different but complementary faces of the same reality. Both the flooding and the desertification are introduced by a description of the natural cosmos that draws attention to their subversive nature: just as the storm transforms a normal night into an unnatural darkness that prevents the sun from rising (*Theb*. 1.342–346), the desertification seems to stop the sun at its zenith (*cum solem in culmina mundi | tollit*, *Theb*. 4.680–681; *adiuvat ipse | Phoebus adhuc summo … | limite*, *Theb*. 4.689–691) increasing the effects of its heat. Similarly, both events begin as local meteorological phenomena, but they soon assume a larger dimension as displayed by the two lists of rivers that alternatively flood or dry out (*Nilus*, *Theb*. 4.706; *aret Lerna nocens*, *aret Lyrceus et ingens | Inachus*, *Theb*. 4.711–712; *Charadrus … Erasinus … Asterion*, *Theb*. 4.713–714; cf. *Theb*.

[151] Both Newlands 2004: 133–155 and Keith 2013b in their explorations of the *Thebaid*'s treatment of landscape only mention Bacchus' desertification. Ganiban 2007: 97–107 focuses on the relation between Bacchus and Virgil's Juno in this scene while Brown 1994 reads the passage as a tragic monologue to be compared with Euripides' *Bacchae*.

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1.355–360); in both cases, moreover, the focus progressively moves from natural disorder to its destructive consequences on the landscape and on humanity (*Theb.* 1.359–369; *Theb.* 4.700–710; 730–737).

At the root of these structural similarities is Statius' reuse of the same Virgilian-Ovidian contrastive intertextuality deployed in the description of the flood to transform the desertification into another rewriting of the geopolitics of the *Aeneid*'s storm that questions the providential worldview of the Argives. Just as the Statian storm begins by recalling the Virgilian gale in the description of the winds leaving the Aeolian cave, the desertification scene begins by portraying Bacchus looking down at the Argive troops and breaking into an angered monologue that mimics that of Virgil's Juno (*Theb.* 4.670–678; *Aen.* 1.36–80).[152] Just like the Virgilian goddess, Bacchus begs lesser deities (*fluviorum numina Nymphae*, *Theb.* 4.684; *praestanti corpore Nymphae*, *Aen.*1.71) to subvert the natural order, adding a promise of a sexual favour. But in the *Thebaid*, the *Aeneid*'s model is meaningfully reversed: while Juno promises to marry Aeolus to one of the nymphs (*conubio iungam*, *Aen.* 1.73), Bacchus promises to save their virginities (*nocturnaque furta licentum | cornipedum et cupidas Faunorum arcebo rapinas*, *Theb.* 4.695–696). More importantly, what follows is not a quick sea-gale but a desertification that reproduces in the *Thebaid* the same effects of the universal fire of Phaethon (*Met.* 2.171–324), as the copyist who arguably interpolated a manuscript of the *Thebaid* seems to have realised: *sic Hyperionios cum lux effrena per orbem | rapta ruit Phaethontis equos* ('just as when the luminous chariot of Hyperion, dragged irrepressibly across the sky, overturned Phaethon's horses', *Theb.* 4.716–717).[153]

Since the beginning, the *Thebaid*'s desertification is described as a reversal of the Ovidian deluge: a storm of fire and heat. Here Bacchus' command literally reverses the order given by Ovid's Neptune to the rivers during the flood (*obducite pulvere rivos*, 'block the streams with sand', *Theb.* 4.687; *aperite domos ac mole remota | fluminibus vestris totas inmittite habenas*, 'open the doors and, having removed the embankments, loose the reins of all your streams', *Met.* 1.279–280) and in both cases the alteration of the natural order is achieved with the help of another god (*caeruleus frater iuvat*, *Met.*

[152] For the occurrences of this scene in epic, see Ganiban 2007: 97. Statius' allusions to the *Aeneid* are clearly mediated by Ovid: Statius' Bacchus refers to Juno with the same words (*furor*, *Theb.* 4.671; *ira*, *Theb.* 4.672) used for her in *Met.* 4 (*furor*, 4.429; *irae*, 4.448).

[153] These lines are probably an early medieval interpolation designed to further clarify Statius' reference to Ovid because the oldest surviving manuscript of the *Thebaid* (*Parisinus* 8051, ninth century CE) mentions the name of Phaethon in this passage, but the ancient grammarian Priscian (*GL.* 2.72.22–24) does not cite these lines when he quotes the same passage of the poem. See Reynolds 1983: 395.

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1.275; *adiuvat ipse Phoebus*, *Theb*. 4.689). The effects of this anti-deluge are described by Statius through images reminiscent of Ovid's description of Phaethon's *ekpyrosis*. The Earth becomes arid, rivers dry up (*cava ferventi durescunt flumina limo*, *Theb*. 4.701; *tellus | fissaque agit rimas et sucis aret ademptis*, *Met*. 2.210–211) and the harvest perishes (*aegra solo macies … | inclinata seges*, *Theb*. 4.702–703; *pabula canescunt … | … seges arida damno*, *Met*. 2.212–213). In Statius' simile, the Nile disappears (*se magnis refluus suppressit in antris | Nilus*, *Theb*. 4.705–706; *Nilus in extremum fugit perterritus orbem*, *Met*. 2.254–256) and its riverbed becomes an arid valley (*fumant desertae gurgite valles*, *Theb*. 4.707; *pulvurulenta vacant septem sine flumine valles*, *Met*. 2.256). As we have seen, in both cases the remarkable extent of the phenomenon is signalled by similar lists of now dry rivers (*Theb*. 4.711–714; 844–846; *Met*. 2.239–259), and the comparable reactions in each poem of humanity and nature to the desertification. Statius' Argive warriors cannot touch the screeching chariots, just like Ovid's Phaethon (*Theb*. 4.730–731; *Met*. 2.229–230) while the Earth releases steam (*Met*. 2.283; *Theb*. 4.735) and the horses of the Argives and of the Sun's chariot run wild (*nec legem dominosque pati*, *Theb*. 4.739; *sine lege ruunt*, *Met*. 2.204).[154] Although individually these verbal and thematic echoes might appear generic, their cumulative articulation in a larger intertextual system is likely to trigger the readers' memories of the Ovidian scenes, progressively revealing the illusoriness of Argos' worldview, that Statius has presented as 'Virgilian'.

The political potential of the *Thebaid*'s natural chaos can be fully understood only in terms of the Flavian ideology in which Statius' readers would have been immersed. Controlling the landscape of the *Urbs*, especially the dangerous waters of the river Tiber, has always being politically significant in Rome.[155] Although the Flavian emperors' management of the Tiber has gone largely unexplored so far, several elements suggest the importance of this theme. Anna Lonardi has shown that, according to extant epigraphical evidence, the so-called *cura riparum et alvei Tiberis* ('the management of the Tiber's banks and river bed') established by Augustus continued in the Flavian period.[156] Moreover, as Carole Newlands has noted, 'it is on Flavian coins that the Tiber first appears in numismatic representations', while inspiring 'important sculptural representations'.[157] The coin type

[154] The myth of Phaethon, used by Statius in the description of both the deluge and the desertification, is often overcharged with political meanings in post-Ovidian poetry. See Newlands 2002: 284–285; Rosati 2008: 188; and Hinds 1987: 28–29.

[155] On water and display of power in imperial Rome, see Aldrete 2007: 204–225 and Thomas 2012.

[156] Lonardi 2013.

[157] Quotation from Newlands 2002: 302.

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with the Tiber represented as a civilised, reclining river god, was minted under both Vespasian and Domitian.[158] These innovative representations can perhaps be linked to the measures adopted by the Flavians to prevent new floods. In his hydrogeological survey of Rome, Ugo Ventriglia has shown that in the second half of the first century CE the level of the district of Campus Martius – rebuilt by the Flavians – was artificially raised by about three metres, arguably to limit the damages of eventual floods.[159] A similar technique was used in Ostia during the Principate of Domitian, when the level of new buildings was raised by about one metre.[160]

More generally, emerging from the turbulent Year of the Four Emperors, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian faced the urgent necessity to legitimise their new dynasty by presenting it as an effective antidote to every form of social and political chaos.[161] Thus, under the guise of a symbolic return to the stability of the Augustan age, they transformed the *urbs* into a powerful display of renewed order and stability with a pervasiveness and a strength that Flavia Marcello has compared to that of Fascist propaganda.[162] From the urban fabric of Rome to spectacles and social life, every aspect of the Roman world was redesigned to encourage the perception of the empire as orderly and stable. The rebuilding of the Capitoline temples burnt during the war and the reclosure of the Temple of Janus heralded the return of the *pax Augusta*, physically erasing the traces of the recent political chaos from the urban landscape. Guarantor of this peace was the new family-based political order, glorified by the *Templum Gentis Flaviae* and by the new imperial palace; the construction of the Colosseum near the Forum further monumentalised the Flavian worldview.[163] Neatly divided by social class, Romans here were both spectators and actors in a show of order and power in which the wilderness and the war that once surrounded and threatened Rome were now safely enclosed by the arena, reduced to an entertaining game for the Roman audience.[164] This new perception of the world as a pacified reality is also found in the poems of this period: *Silv*. 2.3, for instance, describes the development of the landscapes on which Rome fought its prehistorical battle for civilisation (2.3.2–14; 39–42) into peaceful *loci amoeni* beautifying the estate of

[158] See Newlands 2002: 302 n. 63.
[159] See Ventriglia 1971. See also Bersani and Bencivenga 2001.
[160] See Wilson 1935: 52.
[161] Cf. Tac. *Hist.* 4.51–52.
[162] Marcello 2017: 120.
[163] On the imperial palace as a displayer of power, see Zanker 2002: 105–118.
[164] See the connection between theatre and imperial power made already by Calpurnius Siculus (*Ecl.* 23–72). See also Cannadine 1987: 10–15 and Newlands 2002: 227–231.

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Atedius Melior.[165] Similarly, *Silv*. 4.5.50–51 uses the image of the 'captive Rhine' trampled by Domitian's horse to merge together imperial power and control of nature, while in the *Silv*. 2.2 a wild landscape has been transformed into a collaborative and beneficent nature by Pollius' architectural project.[166] Such an idyllic view of the Flavian world, however, did not have a solid foundation.[167] Arguably, the trauma of the civil wars was still fresh in the Roman collective memory, and new dramatic events caused it to resurface in the years immediately preceding the composition of the *Thebaid*. In 79 CE, the eruption of Vesuvius was interpreted as Jupiter's retribution for some offences against the gods (cf. Stat. *Silv*. 5.3.205–208).[168] The following year the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus and much of the district of Campus Martius were destroyed by a fire of such ferocity that Cassius Dio thought it to be 'not of human but of divine origin' (*Hist*. 66.24). These natural disasters challenged the Romans' optimistic worldview; as we know from the extraordinary coinage of the year 80, Titus organised a new *supplicatio* to implore the gods' mercy.[169]

By progressively revealing the illusoriness of Argos' orderly worldview in a universe dominated by an Ovidian tendency to chaos, the *Thebaid*'s intertextual narratives seem to engage with precisely these ambiguities and fragilities of Flavian discourse. In his Theban world, Statius reproduces the same two events (flood and universal fire) that Jupiter recalls at the beginning of the poem as part of his Ovidian past (*Phaethontea mundum squalere favilla*, *Theb*. 1.221; *ire per inclitum pelago*, *Theb*. 1.223), which is simultaneously an acknowledgement of the Ovidian nature of its poetic universe and a revelation of the tragic illusoriness of Adrastus' worldview (that Statius colours with Virgilian allusions).[170] The peace of the Argive kingdom, symbolised by the city gates that are left open at night (*reclusis | … portis*, *Theb*. 1.386–387; *tranquillae … vitae*, *Theb*. 1.390) is denied by a conflictive natural world dominated by violent excesses. Adrastus' idea of the world as a providentially structured reality in which 'things do not happen in the absence of the gods' (*non … divisque absentibus acta*, *Theb*. 1.471) is negated by a storm that – for the first time in the

165 See Nauta 2002: 226–227 and Hardie 2006: 208.
166 Newlands 2002: 173.
167 McNelis 2007: 1–25.
168 See Rebeggiani 2018: 28–37, 167–175.
169 The ideological impact of these events has been analysed by Closs 2016: 102–123.
170 The allusive connection that in the *Metamorphoses* cautiously links the great flood to Phaethon's fire (see Wheeler 2000: 27–47 and Barchiesi 2005: 257 *ad vv.* 262–269) is further emphasised in the *Thebaid*, suggesting that the storm and the desertification are two different expressions of the same Ovidian worldview.

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epic tradition – explicitly occurs without divine influence. Similarly, the Argives' faith in benevolent gods is at least problematised by Adrastus' repeated misunderstandings of the gods' real intentions. In Argos, he believes that Apollo, the god who destroyed his city, and Jupiter, who is going to punish his kingdom, are his patrons (*Iovem de sanguine ducens*, *Theb.* 1.392; *vocat ordine cunctos caelicolas*, *Phoebum ante alios*, *Theb.* 1.552; *Phoebe parens*, *Theb.* 1.696), while in Book IV he is so convinced of the gods' benevolent plan (*Theb.* 4.768–769) that he mistakes Hypsipyle for the goddess Diana coming to his aid (*succurre propinquis | gentibus*, *Theb.* 4.755–756) and completely misunderstands that the drought is actually caused by the gods, namely Bacchus and Apollo.[171] Despite Adrastus' efforts to interpret reality according to Augustan ideals of a pacified world firmly controlled by benevolent gods, the *Thebaid*'s Ovidian landscapes suggest that the universe tends towards social and natural chaos and that failure awaits those who wish to transfer the Augustan ideals of everlasting peace, order, and stability onto their chaotic world.

## 1.6 Hell on Earth

The providential, orderly worldview of the Argives is further undermined in the poem by the chaos caused by the Earth's permeability to infernal forces.[172] As Denis Feeney has noted, the *Thebaid* is one of the epic poems in which the borders between Heaven, Earth, and Hell are most frequently crossed.[173] Significantly, the poem begins with the summoning of the infernal Fury Tisiphone by the liminal figure of Oedipus, himself described as the living dead (*aeterna damnatum nocte*, *Theb.* 1.48; *mortem imperfectam*, *Theb.* 11.582).[174] In the following books, the road between Hell and Earth is walked countless times, not only by the Furies but also – more disturbingly – by human and divine characters. In Book I, Apollo descends into Hell to summon a monster against Argos, while in Book II, Mercury goes into the Underworld to bring Laius back to Thebes (2.165). Tiresias performs a necromantic rite in Book IV (4.443–487), and in Book VIII (8.1–126) Amphiaraus descends alive into the Underworld, retracing

[171] On Adrastus' naïve worldview, see Briguglio 2020.
[172] Cf. Venini 1970: *ad v.* 11.58; Hill 1990: 103; and Ganiban 2007: 180, 184.
[173] Feeney 1991: 345 suggests that in the *Thebaid* 'there is continual movement from each sphere to the others, so that there comes to be an anxious tension as to where the centre of gravity of the poem resides'.
[174] Hill 1990: 103 suggests that in the *Thebaid* the Furies influence the most important events happening on the Earth (cf. *Theb.* 8.334; 8.757; 10.831; 11.57–112, 150; 12.590).

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Aeneas' *nekyia*. Modern scholarship has often noted the Lucanian nuance of these boundary-breaking narratives that seem to reveal Statius' criticism against the excessive ambitions of imperial power (especially deification) and its propagandistic celebration of the boundless expansion of the Flavian empire.[175] However, the abundant verbal and thematic allusions to Ovid's Theban world informing these passages suggest the equally important role played by the *Metamorphoses* in characterising the fragility of the *Thebaid*'s cosmic boundaries, which tragically develops that which in the *Aeneid* is occasionally described as a 'confusion' between Hell and Heaven.[176] Although often overlooked, this is dense with both poetic and political significance and gives us the possibility to deepen our political analysis by shedding light on the different and sophisticated ways in which the *Thebaid*'s Ovidian poetics of chaos can be said to engage with Flavian readers' visual perception of Rome.

The violation of cosmic boundaries in the *Thebaid* is not surprising. In imperial epic cosmic boundaries often experience the same problems and paradoxes that characterise the narratives of geographical boundary-making in wider Latin literature.[177] As noted in Section 1.1, boundaries are a key element in Roman discourse, for they visualise power and control over space.[178] As such, they embody the contradictions at the very heart of the Roman *imperium*: the universalising ambition to control the world via solid boundaries is inevitably frustrated by the very same expansion of the empire (potentially *sine fine*) that requires at every step the breaking of existing boundaries and temporary violent chaos.[179] As Philip Hardie has noted, this tension is already visible on a cosmic level in the *Aeneid* when Juno summons the Fury Allecto from the Underworld and Jupiter is described as sending infernal agents of chaos (*Dirae*) to Earth.[180] In the *Aeneid*, however, trespasses of boundaries between world and Underworld are limited in number and embedded in an overall teleological plot: Juno's descent in Aeolus' cave in *Aen.* 1.50–64 offers a glimpse of the hierarchically ordered structure of the Virgilian universe that is of course not immune to chaos. In Book VI (268–898), Aeneas' descent into

175 See Newlands 2012: 47–49. On boundary-breaking narratives in Flavian epic, see also Hardie 1993: 76–77; Augoustakis 2016a *ad vv.* 8.1–126; and Gervais 2017: xxviii.

176 This 'confusion' has been analysed thoroughly by Hardie 1993: 57–87.

177 See Skempis and Ziogas 2013: 4–6 and Rimell 2015: 1–39.

178 Boundaries as displayers of power are a 'human cultural universal': Lotman 2001: 131. See their role in Livy (1.7.2) with Miles 1997: 168 and in the *Aeneid* with Hardie 1986: 336–367.

179 On the ongoing contrast between opening and closure of space in Roman literature, see Rimell 2015.

180 Hardie 1993: 3, 73.

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the Underworld is framed by purifying rites and allows Anchises to prophesise the future greatness of Rome, although the mention of Marcellus (Augustus' recently deceased nephew and heir) simultaneously raises doubts on the mechanisms of imperial succession.[181] Similarly, in Book VIII (235–246), Hercules' symbolic breaking of the Earth's crust purifies the site of the future foundation of Rome from monsters.[182] In Ovid's Theban histories, however, the trespassing of borders brings chaos and destruction to Earth in ways that magnify the contradictions inherent to the *Aeneid*'s universe up to the point of questioning its teleological development. For example, Cadmus' symbolic opening of the earth creates a path for the Earthborn Men to come into light and to start a fratricidal battle that is explicitly compared to a civil war (*'ne cape' de populo, quem terra creaverat, unus | exclamat 'nec te civilibus insere bellis'*, '"stand back", one of those sprung from the Earth cries out, "and do not interfere in civil war"', *Met.* 3.116–117). Similarly, Juno's descent into the Underworld (to summon Tisiphone) not only reverses the positive foundational value of Aeneas' *nekyia* but also shows for the first time an Olympian deity trespassing the borders of the Underworld, as Ovid himself remarks (*sustinet ire illuc caelesti sede relicta | – tantum odiis iraeque dabat – Saturnia Iuno*, 'having left her celestial home, Juno, Saturn's daughter, endured travelling to the Underworld – that is how much her rage and fury drove her!', *Met.* 4.447–448). The negative political significance of boundary violation is taken to an extreme in Seneca's tragedies, in which the borders that are trespassed are not only the physical boundaries between Hell and Earth (*Oed.* 559–568), but also the moral ones, as displayed by Atreus' savagery (*Thy.* 682–690); similarly, in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, the collapse of every geographical and cosmic boundary serves to describe Rome on the edge of a Stoic cosmic dissolution.[183] Here, as Myers has argued, the very same Roman notion of space as an expression of power is perverted into a space defined only by the violence of Caesar's cosmic violations.[184] This world, characterised by multiple geographical and moral infringements, has passed the point of no return, making a clear division between Earth and Hell impossible.

Statius follows Ovid in showing an increased permeability of cosmic borders, but the *Thebaid*'s originality in this literary discourse is shown by

[181] See Tracy 1975.
[182] On these episodes, see respectively Hardie 1986: 90–96, 110–118 and 1993: 74–76.
[183] On Seneca, see Ahl 2015: 258–262 and Augoustakis 2015: 377–389. On Lucan, see Lapidge 1979: 344–370 and Henderson 1987: 122–164.
[184] Myers 2011.

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the fact that he allows both Olympian gods and humans to break into the Underworld in a way that has no precedent in the epic tradition.[185] The engagement with the *Metamorphoses*' boundary-breaking poetics is metapoetically acknowledged by Statius from the prologue. Here, the decision to impose ordering boundaries over the Theban saga collides with the inherent tendency to chaos that characterises Ovid's Theban histories on both a thematic and narrative level (*limes mihi carminis esto | Oedipodae confusa domus*, 'I will limit my singing to the chaotic house of Oedipus', *Theb*. 1.16–17), as emphasised by the chronological reordering of the most famous Theban episodes of the *Metamorphoses* in the *Thebaid*'s *praeteritio* (*Theb*. 1.4–15).[186] This tension is confirmed by the first event of the poem: Oedipus' summoning of the infernal Fury to bring chaos to Thebes. As I have noted, Statius' Fury maintains her Ovidian name Tisiphone and shows a metatextual familiarity with the road that she has already walked in the *Metamorphoses*.[187] Allusions to the *Metamorphoses* signal the Ovidian nature of the other episodes of cosmic boundary-violations through the poem. As Alison Keith has noted, Statius' description of the Underworld during Mercury's and Amphiaraus' journeys is notably similar to that of Ovid, while Apollo's summoning of a monster in *Theb*. 1 is described using allusions to the monster-scene at the beginning of Ovid's Theban histories.[188] Moreover, the descent of Ovid's Juno into Hell can be said to provide Statius with a generic paradigm of cosmic transgression that resurfaces in several narratives in the poem. Specifically, in the *Aeneid* Juno summons Allecto whilst safe in Heaven herself, but in the *Thebaid* Mercury personally descends into the Underworld – like Juno in *Met*. 4.[189] While this might sound mildly surprising when one considers that Mercury Psychopompos is used to pass between the upper world and the Underworld, the same model seems to inform also Amphiaraus' journey into Hell. Unlike that of Aeneas, this *nekyia* is not prepared by religious rites and it does not use the conventional gate of the Underworld. Rather, at Apollo's command, a living Amphiaraus breaks into the Underworld

[185] See the comparative analysis of the precedent epic tradition by Vessey 1973: 238–243.

[186] On familiar boundary-violations in the Theban saga, see Manioti 2016: 144.

[187] Cf. respectively *Theb*. 1.90–91, 1.109–110; *Met*. 4.474; 4.482 and the verbal allusions discussed by Keith 2014: 360 and Feeney 1991: 344.

[188] On Mercury, cf. *medica firmat vestigia virga*, *Theb*. 2.11; *firmatque soporem | … medicata lumina virga*, *Met*. 1.715–716. Cf. also *Theb*. 2.28, *Met*. 4.442; *Theb*. 2.31, *Met*. 4.450–451; *Theb*. 8.4, *Met*. 4.434; *Theb*. 2.3, *Met*. 4.331, 334; *Theb*. 2.32, *Met*. 4.432; *Theb*. 2.4–5, *Met*. 4.433; *Theb*. 2.12, *Met*. 4.436. See Keith 2007: 8–9. On the underworld, cf. *Theb*. 1.173, *Met*. 1.437–438; *Theb*. 1.168, *Met*. 1.157; *Theb*. 1.167, *Met*. 1.158 with Keith 2014: 368–369.

[189] Moreover, Mercury here does not accompany a soul into the Underworld, as we might expect from the Greek Hermes, but rather he brings Laius back on the Earth on Jupiter's behalf.

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and surprises its inhabitants in a way that seems reminiscent of Juno's unexpected arrival in the Underworld.[190] More importantly, while in the *Aeneid* the symbolic breaking of boundaries is somehow justified by positive foundational purposes (the killing of Cacus in *Aen.* 8 and Anchises' positive, although not unproblematic, prophecy in *Aen.* 6), Statius maintains the destructive significance of boundary-breaking in the *Metamorphoses*.[191] In the *Thebaid*, these trespasses seem to make the Theban world regress into its Ovidian chaos: the arrival of the Fury infects the Theban house just as it does in the *Metamorphoses* and Apollo brings a monster to Earth that is analogous with Ovid's Python.[192] Moreover, as we shall see better in the following section, Tiresias' necromancy (*Theb.* 4.553–645) evokes the souls of Cadmus, Harmonia, the Earthborn Men, Ino, Semele, Agave, and Niobe (all described in their Ovidian gestures) while Pluto responds to Amphiaraus' invasion by promising to make the world regress to its Ovidian pre-Jovian chaos (*pereant agedum discrimina rerum*, 'may now the boundaries between things be erased!', *Theb.* 8.37; *nullum discrimen habebat*, 'there was no division' *Met.* 1.291; *discordia semina rerum*, 'the discordant primordial particles of things', *Met.* 1.9).[193]

The presence of conspicuous Ovidian intertexts in the episodes that most clearly show the fragility of cosmic boundaries in the *Thebaid* carries important poetic and political significance. These allusions not only suggest the important role played by the *Metamorphoses* in shaping the *Thebaid*'s worldview but also they emphasise the differences dividing Statius' and Lucan's poetic universes.[194] In the *Bellum Civile*, boundary violations are predominantly committed by Caesar on the Earth, and not much attention is paid to the crossing of cosmic boundaries – the exception being Erichtho's necromancy.[195] This serves to describe a universe of which the cosmic boundaries have already collapsed and the most visible

[190] *Turbavit funere manes | horror habet cunctos, Stygiis mirantur*, *Theb.* 8.3–4; *quo simul intravit sacroque a corpore pressum | ingemuit limen, tria Cerberus extulit ora*, *Met.* 4.449–450.

[191] Already in the myth of the ages Ovid (*Met.* 1.89–150) associates the progressive transition from the Golden to the Iron Age to the breaking of different boundaries such as the sea (*Met.* 1.94–96), the earth (*Met.* 1.38–40), and kinship (*Met.* 1.143–148).

[192] Keith 2014: 368–369 has noted conspicuous verbal and thematic similarities. For example, Statius' Python is born of the earth (*Theb.* 1.173; *Met.* 1.437–438) and of immoderate size (*Theb.* 1.168; *Met.* 1.157) just like Ovid's Python, which is also killed by the same technique (*Theb.* 1.167; *Met.* 1.158).

[193] The Ovidian allusions in the necromancy scene have been noted by Parkes 2010: 15–16.

[194] Gervais 2017: xxviii has argued that Statius deploys a Lucanian style to describe 'the rise of the Underworld to Earth, the route of the gods above, and ever-increasing horror'. On Lucan's landscapes, see Leigh 1999: 167 and Santini 1999: 207. On the influence of Lucan on Virgil's epic successors, see Hardie 1993: 76–77.

[195] See Masters 1992: 1–3 and Ahl 1976: 107–108.

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Hell is the Earth itself, as suggested by Lucan's use of traditionally hellish imagery to describe Italian geographies.[196] By modelling the violation of cosmic boundaries after those in Ovid's Theban saga, Statius develops in a much more pessimistic way the instances of disorder that resurface in the *Aeneid*'s world, but refuses to be straightforwardly anti-Virgilian on a literal or political level. As Tarrant has argued, while Lucan pessimistically reverses Ovid's 'chaos to cosmos' process, the *Thebaid* follows the *Metamorphoses* in displaying fragile cosmic boundaries that, though occasionally transgressed, are never dissolved, consequently leaving open the possibility of a moral and political redemption.[197] This also marks the most visible difference between the poetic universe of the *Thebaid* and of Seneca's Theban tragedies, in which a reality dominated by hellish forces seems to 'underscore the inescapability from the *nefas*' that pervades the Theban saga, upsetting the possibility of *katharsis* ('redeeming purification').[198] By contrast, these violations in Statius' poem can be said to emphasise the necessity of boundaries and to pave the way for their (at least superficial) re-establishment in Book XII by Theseus, the Athenian king who pacifies Thebes and Argos and sends the Furies back to Hell (*Theb*. 12.64).[199]

A reconsideration of Statius' literary models also warns us not to oversimplify the *Thebaid*'s worldview and its engagement with the poem's contemporary realities. At first glance, we might be tempted to read the *Thebaid*'s boundary violations as a Lucanian anti-imperialist gesture that 'hints at the dangers of imperial and divine ambitions', differentiating 'Statius' epic poetics from the mainstream imperial ideology'.[200] This interpretation, which valorises the most negative nuances of the *Thebaid*'s spatial narratives, appeals to modern readers who approach the poem by considering the darkened image of Flavian Rome proposed by second-century writers after Domitian's demise. As Francesca Santoro-L'Hoir has pointed out, 'boundaries' and 'transgressions' are two key themes of Tacitus' depiction of Rome in the *Historiae*.[201] Similarly, Cassius Dio transforms the account of the eruption of Vesuvius during Titus' reign into a symbolic image that portrays the Flavian world as relapsing into pre-Jovian chaos, threatened

[196] See Lapidge 1979.
[197] Quotation from Tarrant 2002: 357.
[198] Quotation from Augoustakis 2015: 376.
[199] See Criado 2015: 292–299 and Rebeggiani 2018: 11, 88, 275. I discuss the problematic nature of Theseus' action in Chapters 2 and 3.
[200] Quotation from Newlands 2012: 47–52.
[201] Santoro-L'Hoir 2006: 111–264.

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by the rise of the giants from the Underworld (*Hist. Rom.* 66.23.1–2). However, we must be aware that these interpretations risk overstating the subversive potential of Statius' Ovidian narratives while overshadowing the possibility that Flavian readers interpreted them in line with Flavian ideology.[202] In fact, the prominence of boundaries in the *Thebaid* can also be read as an engaged witness of the centrality assumed by boundary-making narratives in Flavian socio-cultural discourse. As I have noted, the power of the new dynasty was largely predicated upon the idea of a return to the peace and order of Augustus' golden age after the hellish chaos of the civil wars.[203] The re-establishment of social, geographical, and moral boundaries played a pivotal role in this cultural and monumental discourse, affecting many aspects of everyday life. For example, to divert attention from their participation in the recent civil wars, Vespasian and Titus presented themselves as those who had brought stability to the Roman empire by consolidating their borders and subduing those regions left unpacified by the Julio-Claudians (Suet. *Vesp*. 6): Judaea, Germany, and on the northern *limes* Britain – the land that Virgil could only wish had been conquered by Augustus (*tibi serviat ultima Thule*, *Georg*. 1.30).[204]

The emphasis on *bella externa* in imperial image-making was closely linked with the celebration of the internal pacification of Rome. For instance, four extant epigraphs document that on the *cippi* marking the perimeter of Rome Vespasian's and Titus' decision to enlarge the *pomerium* in 73/74 CE was presented as directly connected with the expansion of the empire.[205] As Andrew Gallia suggests, the positioning of these *cippi* was a ceremony of great ideological impact as it 'suggested a symbolic re-founding of Rome, and marked the emperor's responsibility for the city in its fullest territorial extent'.[206] Similarly, the dedicatory epigraphs of the Colosseum reminded every Roman able to read that the amphitheatre was built with the money from Flavian military campaigns (*Imp. Caes. Vespasianus Augustus | amphitheatrum novum | ex manubiis fieri iussit*, 'Emperor Caesar Vespasian Augustus ordered a new amphitheatre to

[202] One might wonder to what extent the Flavian's 'territorial ambition' was disturbing for Flavian readers – cf. Newlands 2012: 47. In fact, earlier Ovid had stated that 'the extent of the City of Rome and of the world is the same one' (*Romanae spatium est urbis et orbis idem*, *Fast.* 2.684), not to mention the Virgilian idea of a temporally and geographically unlimited empire (*imperium sine fine dedi*, *Aen.* 1.279) and the positive value given to the extension of imperial power in *Silv.* 4.3.

[203] Marcello 2017: 19–20; Tuck 2016: 110.

[204] Evans 2003: 255–257. On the Flavian consolidation of political and military boundaries, see Luttwak 1976; Isaac 1990: 101–218 and Dart 2016: 207–208.

[205] *CIL* 6.31538a; *CIL* 6.1232 = 31538b = *ILS* 248; *CIL* 6.31538c; *CIL* 6.40854 with Hurlet 2016: 27.

[206] Gallia 2016: 162.

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be made from spoils', *CIL* 06.40454a1/a2) – in particular, as Kathleen Coleman suggests, the Judaic war.[207] This message would have been understood even by illiterate Romans, who would have seen images of Roman soldiers carrying the menorah and the rich spoils of the Judaic war in the decorations of the Arch of Titus erected next to the Colosseum by Domitian in 82 CE.[208] The most politically loaded of these monumental policies was perhaps the placement of marble maps (created under Augustus and updated under Vespasian) that represented both Rome and the empire in the *Templum Pacis*. Not only did these monumental maps provide every Roman with an enduring testament of the city's revival under the Flavians, they also visually conceptualised the nature of Flavian rule by displaying (in the temple celebrating the internal and external pacification of Rome) both the *urbs* and the *orbis* as orderly spaces safely controlled by a complex series of *limites* imposed by the imperial power.[209] The desire of the Flavian rulers to distance themselves from having participated in the civil conflict that resulted in the inauspicious destruction of the Capitoline temples also necessitated the restoration of social and religious boundaries in both physical and moral terms. Under Vespasian this concern emerged in the quick rebuilding and reconsecration of the sacred areas affected by the fire as well as the inclusion in the *lex de imperio Vespasiani* (the constitutional law of the Flavian power) of the possibility for the emperor to modify the *pomerium*, the sacred boundary of Rome.[210] Such policies continued through the Flavian era: in the district of Campus Martius, most affected by the fire of 80, Domitian erected the holy precinct of the *Porticus Divorum* that delineated (with columns and two temples) a sacred grove symbolising the order brought by the new dynasty.[211] In addition, a series of large *arae* devoted to Vulcan were built by Domitian to visually mark the perimeter of the zone destroyed by Nero's fire in 64.

These monumental boundary-making narratives were accompanied on a social level by a vigorous programme of *correctio morum* that dictated severe punishments for moral transgressions, as documented by the reintroduction of the death penalty for vestals who broke their vow of chastity.[212] From this, we can also infer renewed attention to social structure and the subsequent necessity of a clear division in classes made tangible by

[207] Coleman 2006: 65–66 and Welch 2007: 131–133.
[208] See Darwall-Smith 1996: 166–212.
[209] Evans 2003: 255–256 and Gallia 2016: 162.
[210] See respectively Rebeggiani 2018: 204 and Hurlet 2016: 25.
[211] Darwall-Smith 1996: 159–160.
[212] Charles and Anagnostou-Laoutides 2010: 173–187.

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Flavian architecture (cf. *suscepta correctione morum*, *licentiam theatralem promiscue in equitem spectandi inhibuit*, 'having undertaken the correction of public morals, he put an end to the unruly habit of sitting in a socially promiscuous manner in the sector reserved for equestrians', Suet. *Dom.* 8.3).[213] For example, Paul Zanker has noted that the most striking feature of the new imperial palace was precisely the careful arrangement of private and public spaces aimed at emphasising the elevated position of the emperor and the different social status of his guests.[214] This is confirmed by the unparalleled attention given to social boundaries by Statius in his description of a dinner in the imperial palace (*Silv.* 4.2).[215] These monumental and spatial narratives had a notable symbolic impact on the urban fabric of Rome and on its visual perception, as they conceptualised and redefined the nature of imperial rule over public space while suggesting the necessity of boundaries and rules to maintaining order.[216] Indeed, as Flavia Marcello has suggested, 'the Flavians used new landmarks to convey the benevolence of orderly rule' through 'carefully constructed civic narratives that depended upon citizens' capacity to read the urban landscape like a book'.[217] The echo of these policies is visible in contemporary texts in which, again for the first time in Latin poetry, the building of new roads is celebrated as an image of the empire's ability to impose boundaries over nature.[218] In *Silv.* 4.3.72–94, for instance, Statius uses the containment and subjugation of the wild river Volturnus as an image of the beneficent nature of Domitian's power.[219] Similarly, Silius' Jupiter links the future greatness of Rome with the action of Vespasian who 'will restrain the Rhine with banks … and will subdue palm-bearing Judea by war' (*Pun.* 3.599–600).[220] By contrast, at the beginning of his *Argonautica*, Valerius seems concerned about the boundary-breaking aspects of the Argonauts' mission, which are overtly discussed by Jason and Neptune in Book I.[221]

Consideration of this socio-cultural context does not erase the pessimistic aspects of Statius' poetics of chaos but documents the sophisticated ways in which the *Thebaid*'s boundary-breaking narratives engage with the readers' perception of Flavian Rome. By refashioning the fragility of

[213] Cf. Stat. *Silv.* 4.2.
[214] Zanker 2002: 111–115.
[215] See Newlands 2002: 266–271, 171.
[216] Cf. Fredrick 2003: 199 and Marcello 2017: 121–122.
[217] Marcello 2017: 140.
[218] See Newlands 2002: 294–303.
[219] See Coleman 1988: 102.
[220] See Aldrete 2007: 204–225 and Thomas 2012.
[221] See Stover 2012: 95.

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cosmic boundaries, which in Ovid's Theban histories undermines the unconvincing and superficial stability of *Aeneid*'s poetic universe, Statius can be said to simultaneously engage with and question the Flavian discourse.[222] At the surface level, the *Thebaid*'s world reflects the Flavian concern for boundaries. In particular, the negative description of the chaos caused by their infringement and the depiction of Theseus as an imperial boundary-maker can be said to match the mainstream discourse to which Statius' contemporary readers would have been exposed in their everyday lives, being surrounded by Flavian monuments and their dedicatory epigraphs.[223] In this respect, the recurrent violation of cosmic boundaries and then their eventual re-establishment in the *Thebaid* offers a more optimistic worldview than in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, in which the world has passed the point of no return and is becoming a Hell on Earth. At the same time, however, for eleven books the *Thebaid* displays a universe that is completely open to infernal forces and that draws on but also develops the chaos characterising Ovid's Theban histories as a critical rewriting of the *Aeneid*. This seems to raise questions about the ways in which Flavian readers might approach the monumental narratives adopted by their rulers to herald a return to the order and the stability of Augustan Rome. In fact, until the very end of the poem, we are left to doubt whether monarchical power (and by analogy the Flavian *imperium*) is more responsible for the breaking of boundaries caused by the civil wars than for their positive re-establishment, a doubt that for Flavian readers ultimately hinted at the possibility that their perception of Flavian Rome as a stable and orderly world might be as illusory as the worldview of Statius' Argives.

## 1.7 The Deceptiveness of Statius' Ovidian Landscapes

The interaction between the *Thebaid*'s worldview and its readers' perception of their contemporary realities is further enriched by the deceptive tendencies of Statius' natural world. I noted in Introduction that deceptiveness, in the context of natural landscapes, can be defined as the insidious ability of a dangerous place to deceive its innocent visitors with its apparent beauty and safety. As Charles Segal and Stephen Hinds have shown, deception is the quintessential feature of the *Metamorphoses*' landscapes and it plays an important role in Ovid's reworking of Virgil's *loci*

[222] Chomse 2020 suggests that Martial's urban poetics use a similar strategy to critically reflect on Flavian discourse.
[223] On the imperial traits of Theseus, see Braund 1996: 9–13.

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*amoeni*.[224] In Virgil's *Aeneid*, *Eclogues*, and *Georgics* the pleasantness and the sufferings of the landscape bear witness to both the new (at least superficially civilising) order progressively established by Aeneas and Augustus and its cost, as William Dominik has suggested in his overview of the topic.[225] Although the *Metamorphoses*' landscapes apparently maintain and even surpass the beauty of some of Virgil's *loci amoeni*, they often fail to provide the protection that they seem to offer.[226] For instance, while in Virgil's first *Eclogue* (cf. 1.1–5) Tityrus sings his poems at ease in a beautiful landscape (*lentus in umbra*, 1.4) that both inspires him (*silvestrem … Musam*, 1.2) and participates in his poetry (*formosam resonare doces Amaryllida silvas*, 'you teach the woods to resound, pretty Amaryllis', 1.5), in Ovid's Theban saga the luxuriant woods of Thebes often trick their human interlopers who, enticed by their natural beauty, find there a tragic and violent death (cf. *Met*. 3.165–231; *Met* 3.339–512).[227] In these stories, the deception of Ovid's natural world is politically meaningful as it deprives Virgil's landscapes of their trustworthiness as conceptualisations of the Roman order, consequently emphasising their inherent less positive aspects.[228] While Statian scholarship has tended to entirely rule out this Ovidian feature of deceptiveness from the *Thebaid*'s landscapes, my consideration of the verbal and thematic intertextuality informing the poem's spatial narratives suggests that Statius' Theban world maintains – although in different forms – a tendency for deception, its politics skilfully reworked to engage with the new socio-political issues of a different imperial context.

The Ovidian nature of some of Statius' landscapes has led scholars to believe that 'the very lack of deception' makes the *Thebaid*'s poetic world 'an innocent victim' of human violence.[229] According to this view, the Ovidian allusivity of Statius' poem removes any possibility of deceiving

[224] See Segal 1969: 1–109 and Hinds 2002: 122–128. See also Parry 1964 and Newlands 2004: 137.

[225] Dominik 2009.

[226] Cf. Bernstein 2011: 79–80 who summarises: 'the locations characteristically associated with pastoral now provide the landscape for the action of much of the *Metamorphoses*, and will retain their associations with rape rather than Virgilian tranquillity … Ovid's characters experience the *locus amoenus* quite differently from Virgil's Tityrus, who enjoys pleasure and safety on his own land'.

[227] However, as I suggested in Introduction, the fact that Virgil's landscapes do not deceive their inhabitants does not imply that they are immune to suffering and disruption as Meliboeus suggests: *nos patriae finis et dulcia linquimus arva | nos patriam fugimus*, 'we left the borders of our country, the dear countryside, and our homeland', *Ecl.* 1.3–4.

[228] As Feldherr 2010: 48 argues, Ovid's narratives suggest 'powerful connections between representation and reality' in ways that undercut the readers' perception of Augustan Rome. Cf. Galinsky 1999; Feeney 1991: 224 and Wheeler 1999: 165–177.

[229] Quotation from Newlands 2004: 138.

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either the characters or the readers, all of whom can remember the dangerous potential of the Theban landscapes from the *Metamorphoses*.[230] Of course, verbal and thematic allusions to the *Metamorphoses* can be said to partially defuse the deceptive potential of the *Thebaid*'s landscapes. More generally, the fact that Statius tends to incorporate sinister elements in his natural descriptions – following a tendency that Daniel Garrison has shown characterises other Flavian poems – makes canonical forms of deception more unlikely.[231] Having said that, my exploration of the poem's spatial narratives suggests that Statius' allusions to the *Metamorphoses* do not simply alert readers about the dangerous potentials of landscapes but also recall the stories of deception recounted by Ovid, suggesting reading the events narrated in the *Thebaid* as a revival of those stories. In so doing, these intertexts both acknowledge the role played by deceptiveness in the *Metamorphoses* and incorporate this quintessentially Ovidian feature in the *Thebaid*, the grim atmosphere of which makes violence hardly unexpected. In inscribing the memory of past episodes of deception into the *Thebaid*'s landscapes, then, Statius' allusions can be said to rework deceptiveness into new forms that surprise readers not only through episodes of violence, but also by revealing the Ovidian nature of the *Thebaid*'s world.

Statius' reformulation of an Ovidian story of natural deception can be seen, for example, in the episode of Opheltes' death in the woods of Nemea. In Book IV, three years have passed since the beginning of the hostilities between Eteocles and Polynices and the Argives gather with their allies. The book begins with a clear martial tone: while in Thebes a woman seized by Bacchic frenzy predicts the imminent war and Eteocles consults Tiresias, the Argive troops begin their march that is abruptly delayed by a dramatic drought caused by Bacchus. Stranded in Nemea, the Argives encounter Hypsipyle, who nurses Opheltes, the son of Lycurgus, the Nemean king; to help the Argives tormented by thirst, she temporarily leaves the young prince on the ground and leads the soldiers to the one remaining spring, Langia. Here Hypsipyle recounts the long story of the Lemnian massacre that continues in Book V (*Theb*. 5.49–498), and when the story ends, readers are brought back to the world of the *Thebaid* and

[230] See both Newlands 2004 and Keith 2014: 372. On the poetic memory of Statius' characters, see Davis 1994: 464–467.

[231] Garrison 1992 argues that from the end of the first century BCE Roman descriptions of landscapes start to incorporate potentially sinister elements, perhaps as a consequence of the dark, dangerous forests encountered by Romans in the Rhine region. Consequently, he suggests (1992: 112) that in so-called 'silver literature', 'the spiritual landscape of the Romans and their literary heirs was permanently altered by the addition of a "Senecan" dimension'.

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discover that the innocent Opheltes, who they believed had been left sitting safely on the grass of Nemea, had in fact been accidentally slain by a monstrous serpent sacred to Jupiter (*Theb.* 5.534–540).[232] This event has important consequences: when Lycurgus is informed of his son's death (*Theb.* 5.638–649), he decides to kill Hypsipyle, a decision that causes a conflict between the Nemeans and their Argive allies, who defend her (*Theb.* 5.650–709).

As I noted earlier, this narrative displays abundant verbal and thematic allusions to Virgil: Statius' catalogue of Argive allies (*Theb.* 4.1–344) is reminiscent of the catalogue of heroes at *Aen.* 7.623–817; Bacchus's drought is modelled after the first storm of the *Aeneid* and the Statian god parallels the speech of Virgil's Juno.[233] Moreover, Jörn Soernik has noted that the snake that kills Opheltes 'looks back to Virgil's Calabrian water-snake', while the *locus amoenus* in which the young prince is left by Hypsipyle recalls that inhabited by the *puer* in Virgil's famous fourth *Eclogue*, and the Argives' disfiguration of the landscape is modelled after the Trojans' cutting of the Italian grove at *Aen.* 6.179–182. However, more recently, scholars have also noted allusions to both Euripides' *Hypsipyle* and Callimachus' *Victoria Berenices*, reflecting on how Hypsipyle's story 'deflects the narrative away from martial themes' and opens a space in the poem for a Callimachean-inspired digression.[234] Although these latter interpretations might tend to downplay the martial elements that do in fact emerge in this section of the poem through Virgilian intertexts, they highlight something surprising: in stark contrast with the bleak world of the *Thebaid*, Nemea is depicted as a peaceful pastoral world. Despite the drought caused by Bacchus, the forest in which Statius' story is set is a green landscape (*dumeta*, 'greeneries', *Theb.* 4.647) and a *locus amoenus* (*silvarum Nemea longe regina virentum*, 'Nemea, undisputed queen of the verdant woods', *Theb.* 4.832) – an impression

[232] In her account, Hypsipyle recounts that having provoked the wrath of Venus, the women of Lemnos were punished by the goddess. Mad with rage, the Lemnian women killed the entire male population of the island, which will later be replaced by the Argonauts. Only Hypsipyle, daughter of King Thoas, managed to save her own father from the massacre. I do not discuss Hypsipyle's story in detail here because its interactions with Ovid's *Heroides* (6.1) have been already explored thoroughly: Vessey 1970: 44–54 and Scaffai 2002: 151–170 have noted abundant points of contact between Statius' and Ovid's treatments of this myth concerning the chronology of the story and the description of Jason (*Theb.* 5.474–476; *Her.* 6.22; 6.41). More recently, Briguglio 2019b: 41–49 and Econimo 2020: 171–191 have explored Statius' debt to Ovid in this story. Scaffai 2002 has also noted the tale's interplay with Valerius' *Argonautica*. Falcone 2011: 491–498 has discussed the points of contact between Statius' and Valerius' versions of the myth, showing how in the *Thebaid* Hypsipyle's story-telling incorporates elegiac modules derived from Ovid.

[233] Quote from Soerink 2015: 1. On Statius' catalogue of the heroes, see Micozzi 2007. On Bacchus, see my analysis of the drought (Section 1.5.2) and Ganiban 2007: 97.

[234] Quotation from McNelis 2007: 77. See also the scholarly overview by Soerink 2015.

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strengthened by the fact that the name Nemea would presumably have reminded Roman readers of the word *nemus* ('wood').[235] Nevertheless, this place is also depicted in terms reminiscent of the Theban woods in which a dragon kills Cadmus' companions in the first episode of deception of Ovid's Theban histories.[236] Just like the woods entered by Ovid's Cadmus, the Nemean forest is full of ancient huge trees (*Theb*. 5.515; *Met*. 3.28), rivers, streams, and ponds (*Theb*. 5.516–522; *Met*. 3.31) and, besides being inhabited by demigods and nymphs (*Theb*. 4.684–696; 5.579–582), is a place of worship of Jupiter (*sacra Iovis*, *Met*. 3.26; *Iovis sedes*, *Theb*. 4.833). In both cases, though the landscape is characterised by a pleasant coolness (*gelidam Nemeen*, *Theb*. 4.646; *nemus gelidum*, *Met*. 2.455), it is described through the potentially negative adjective *gelidus* ('spine-chilling').[237] In fact, in both the *Thebaid* and the *Metamorphoses* the place suddenly becomes the setting of a murder committed by a dragon-monster (*terrigena*, *Theb*. 5.506; *terrigenis*, *Met*. 3.118).[238] The description of the monsters further enhances the readers' sense of *déjà vu*: both are crested (*Met*. 3.32; *Theb*. 5.572), compared with the constellation of the dragon (*Met*. 3.44–45; *Theb*. 5.529–533), and slain by the Herculean heroes Cadmus (*Met*. 3.55–91) and Capaneus (*Theb*. 5.560–578).[239] The tension between the beauty of the landscape and the dragon's killing of an innocent human (ending in a fight that brings warfare into what we initially perceived as a pleasant place) suggests that deception is not entirely absent from the *Thebaid*, although the violent drought that frames this episode and Statius' allusions to the *Metamorphoses* can be said to let readers expect new episodes of violence. Moreover, the intertextual transformation of the Nemean Forest into a typically deceptive Theban landscape might trigger the readers' poetic memory, calling for a comparative reading of Statius' and Ovid's stories.

Statius' intertextual reworking of Ovid's deceptive landscapes can also be seen in the description of Diana's Forest (*Theb*. 4.419–433), although this narrative cannot be considered a canonical case of deception because it does not involve a sudden case of violence against an innocent human.

[235] Taisne 1972: 358 suggests that this landscape might even recall 'so-called idyllic landscapes, widely spread in Roman painting'.

[236] Brown 1994: 12 recognises the Ovidian fashion of this passage: 'woods so dominate the Ovidian landscape that on entering Nemea, the reader of the *Thebaid* is arguably obliged to recall the topography of Statius' Augustan predecessor'. On the Nemean landscape, see also Briguglio 2022: 61–79.

[237] See the point made by Brown 1994: 21–22, arguing that *gelidus* 'casts a mysterious chill over the scene'.

[238] In Ovid 'born from the earth' is not the dragon itself but its descendants.

[239] On the connection of Cadmus and Hercules, see Barchiesi and Rosati 2005: *ad vv.* 3.52–60; on Capaneus and Hercules, see Harrison 1992: 249–252.

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In the first half of Book IV, following the catalogue of the Argive warriors, Statius shows the reactions of the Thebans to the imminent war. While a series of portents predicts the upcoming disaster (*Theb*. 4.374–477) and the Queen of the Bacchants leaves Mount Cithaeron to prophesise the deaths of Eteocles and Polynices, the Thebans realise that they lack the means to defend their town, the walls of which 'have crumbled down with long neglect' (*ipsa vetusto* | *moenia lapsa situ*, *Theb*. 4.356–357). In this context of chaos and fear, Eteocles asks the clairvoyant Tiresias to predict the outcome of the war. To answer this request, the old *vates* organises, with the help of Manto, a necromantic rite to interrogate 'the souls of the dead summoned from the threshold of harsh Death' (*durae … Mortis limite manes* | *elicitos*, *Theb*. 4.413–414).

Scholars have long argued that Statius' necromancy is modelled on that described by Seneca in the second and third act of the tragedy *Oedipus* and on the Erichtho scene in Book VI of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*.[240] A comparative reading of these passages, however, reveals that Statius innovatively blends elements of Seneca's and Lucan's necromantic rites with the descriptions of Theban deceptive landscapes in the *Metamorphoses*, using the necromancy to bring back into his poem the protagonists of Ovid's stories. In fact, both Seneca and Lucan set their grim oracular rites in woods described as *loci horridi*: in Seneca's *Oedipus*, the necromancy takes place in a grim forest (*lucus … niger*, *Oed*. 530) where an oak 'spreads its gnarled branches rotten and collapsing' (*curvosque tendit quercus et putres situ* | *annosa ramos*, *Oed*. 534–535), trees fall apart in decay (*illa*, *iam fessa cadens* | *radice*, *fulta pendet aliena trabe*, 'the other, falling, with its roots broken in two, hangs leaning against a nearby trunk', *Oed*. 536–537), the place is affected by a perpetual cold (*frigore aeterno*, *Oed*. 546), and 'an oozing swamp surrounds a sluggish pool' (*limosa pigrum circumit fontem palus*, *Oed*. 547); similarly, the grove into which Erichtho and Sextus descend in the *Bellum Civile* (6.642–645) is described as a liminal chthonic place, in which the only light is provided by Erichtho's sorcery (6.646–648) and the air is fetid (6.648–649).[241] By contrast, while Statius uses some potentially ominous terms such as *horror* and *male* to describe, respectively, the religious fear and the dim light that pervade the place, the *Thebaid*'s 'grove is distinctly free of corruption and decay' (*Theb*. 4.419–433):[242]

[240] See Vessey 1973: 238–243 and Augoustakis 2015: 379.

[241] Cf. *B.C.* 3.420. See Soubiran 1998: 170.

[242] Quotation from Augoustakis 2015: 381. Newlands 2004: 140 focuses on these details to suggest that 'the grove does not deceive' as its 'illusion of safety is largely dispelled'. However, as the *OLD* shows, both the term *horror* ('fear of the supernatural, roughness of appearance, terror') and the

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Silva capax aevi validaque incurva senecta,
aeternum intonsae frondis, stat pervia nullis
solibus; haud illam brumae minuere, Notusve
ius habet aut Getica Boreas impactus ab Vrsa.
Subter operta quies, vacuusque silentia servat
horror et exclusae pallet male lucis imago.
Nec caret umbra deo: nemori Latonia cultrix
additur; hanc piceae cedrique et robore in omni
effictam sanctis occultat silva tenebris.
Huius inaspectae luco stridere sagittae
nocturnique canum gemitus, ubi limina patrui
effugit inque novae melior redit ora Dianae;
aut ubi fessa iugis, dulcesque altissima somnos
lux movet, hic late iaculis circum undique fixis
effusam pharetra cervicem excepta quiescit.

There is an ancient forest, curved by robust old age, the foliage never cut, inaccessible to the rays of the sun; storms do not affect it, nor can Noto prevail against it, nor Boreas, who blows from the northern regions of Thrace. In the forest, there is a secret peace, an empty religious fear keeps the silence, and a glimmer of the light that cannot penetrate barely glows. This darkness has its own divinity: Latona's daughter protects the wood; her image is imprinted on the pines and cedars and on every tree of the forest; a sacred darkness hides it. In the wood, her arrows are heard whistling, without being seen, and the dogs whimpering in the night, when she leaves her uncle's houses and takes on, more beautiful, the renewed appearance of Diana; or when, tired of going on the mountains, while the sun at top of its course inspires sleep, she hangs here and there, everywhere, her darts, and rests, her head abandoned on the quiver.

As Carole Newlands has noted, 'this grove has some of the basic features of a *locus amoenus* in its canopy of shaded seclusion' and 'is reminiscent of the *locus amoenus* where Narcissus meets his obsessive end (*Met.* 3.407–412)'.[243] Moreover, Statius' description seems to simultaneously reverse the elements that characterise Seneca's *locus horridus* and highlight the similarities between Diana's forest and the one in which several of the Ovidian stories of deception take place. While Theban woods are generically described in the *Thebaid* as Ovid's *loci amoeni* (*virides terras et puros*

adverb *male* ('hardly, scarcely, unpleasantly') are open to different interpretations. For example, Thomas 1994: 116 interprets the term *horror* as '*l'horreur religieuse*' typical of a '*bois sacré*'. Similarly, Traglia and Aricò 1980: 285 interpret Statius' expression in a less ominous way, as '*un silenzio religioso*'. This *horror* is probably the so-called *horror silvestris* that, according to Garrison 1992: 112, characterises descriptions of forests in post-Augustan literature.

[243] Newlands 2004: 140.

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*fontibus amnes*, *Theb*. 2.24), of this forest Statius remarks that, despite its old age, its trees are robust and their foliage intact (*Theb*. 4.419–421; cf. *silva vetus stabat nulla violata securi*, 'there was an ancient forest, never violated by the ax', *Met*. 3.28). The place is devoid of sunlight (*Theb*. 4.420; *Met*. 3.412), but unlike Seneca's forest it is not affected by the cold of winter (*Theb*. 4.421). Just as in Ovid, moreover, Diana inhabits this wood (*Theb*. 4.426–427; *Met*. 3.155–164), but while Ovid's wood is the setting of Actaeon's death, there is no direct killing in the *Thebaid*'s forest. As I mentioned earlier, the presence of potentially ominous elements and the absence of direct violence prevent the interpretation of this passage as a standard case of deception. In fact, here Statius intertextually references Ovid's deceptive narratives and populates his poem with their protagonists; thus, the description of the forest as a pure place of shelter where Diana likes to rest ends abruptly and readers are immediately reminded that the Theban soil is in fact the very same as that which 'was made pregnant by Cadmus, who first dared to plough those lands and turn over the clods soaked in blood after the appearance of the consanguineous warriors from the cursed furrows' (*fetus ager Cadmo*, *durus qui vomere primo* | *post consanguineas acies sulcosque nocentes* | *ausus humum versare et putria sanguine prata* | *eruit*, *Theb*. 4.435–438).

The victims that appear in this landscape are those who died in Ovid's Theban histories and who are now evoked on the Earth through a necromantic rite that surprises readers by transforming what they may have initially perceived as a sacred grove into a place dominated by death and hellish chaos (*panditur Elysium chaos*, *Theb*. 4.520). The first ghosts evoked by Manto and Tiresias are those of Cadmus (*primus … Cadmus*, *Theb*. 3.553), the protagonist of the first narrative of natural deception of Ovid's Theban histories (*Met*. 3.28–98), and of the Spartoi, born from the teeth of the dragon killed by Cadmus (*terrigenae comites*, *Theb*. 3.556; *terrigenis*, *Met*. 3.118; cf. *gens mavortia*, *Theb*. 3.556; *proles mavortia*, *Met*. 3.531). After mentioning Cadmus' sons and grandsons, the poem remembers Pentheus' death on Mount Cithaeron (*Met*. 3.511–733) and the tragic end of Actaeon that is described with clear allusions to Ovid (*necdum ille aut habitus aut versae crimina formae* | *mutat Aristaeo genitus*, 'the son of Aristaeus has not yet changed his aspect, nor the reproach of his metamorphosis', *Theb*. 4.572–573).[244] Just as in the case of the Nemean monster-killing, Statius' allusions and long list of Ovidian Theban characters (*Theb*. 4.553–578),

[244] On the other characters mentioned by Statius, see Parkes 2010: 14–23.

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can be said to enhance the reader's sense of *déjà vu* by repopulating the *Thebaid*'s forest with Ovid's characters.[245]

While Statius' reformulation of the Ovidian feature of deceptiveness takes original, more nuanced post-Lucanean and post-Senecan forms, the natural world in both the *Thebaid* and the *Metamorphoses* seems to be associated – to different degrees – with the idea of deception in ways that question the worldview that is respectively conveyed by *loci amoeni* in Augustan literature and upheld by the Argives in the *Thebaid*. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the *Metamorphoses*' Theban landscape builds critically on Virgil's use of the natural world as a foil for complex political reflections on the double-edged nature of Roman power, and makes the establishment of every form of order particularly difficult, showing a world that keeps undoing civilisation and causing Cadmus' foundational mission to relapse into chaos.[246] Working within the complex network of links connecting Statius' and Ovid's Thebes with Rome the acknowledgement and reuse of Ovid's spatial narratives in the *Thebaid* seems to suggest a general sense of disbelief towards both the Augustan idea of orderly and stable reality and its reapplicability in Flavian Rome.[247] This emerges from the ways in which Statius refashions the Ovidian episodes of deception into much more sophisticated narratives that progressively reveal the chaotic nature of the *Thebaid*'s universe and consequently the illusoriness of Argos' worldview, which Statius depicts (in a biased but politically meaningful way) through allusions to the *Aeneid*. In fact, while in the *Metamorphoses* 'deception' primarily concerns the unexpected violence that affects characters in beautiful *loci amoeni*, 'deceptiveness' in the *Thebaid* is occasionally used, at a deeper level, to frustrate the characters' and the readers' epic expectations by turning apparently Virgilian narratives into easily recognisable Ovidian episodes of divine or natural violence.

Looking carefully, we can recognise this technique underlying most of the episodes that I have analysed in this chapter. For instance, in the storm scene, the allusions to Virgil in the description of the nocturne (*Theb.*

[245] Interestingly, Statius describes many 'Ovidian' ghosts that are absent in Seneca's *Oedipus*: see, for instance, Cadmus (*Theb.* 4.553–455; *Met.* 3.3–137; 4.563–605); Harmonia (*Theb.* 4.554; *Met.* 4.568–605); Ino, Palaemon, Learchus, and Athamas (*Theb.* 4.562–570; *Met.* 4.467–542); Semele (*Theb.* 4.564; *Met.* 3.256–312); Actaeon (*Theb.* 4.572–574; *Met.* 3.138–252); Autonoe (*Theb.* 4.562; *Met.* 3.719); Proteus (*Theb.* 4.589; *Met.* 5.238–241); and Echion (*Theb.* 4.569; *Met.* 3.126–128). See also Parkes 2010: 15.

[246] Hardie 1990: 224–229 and Feeney 1991: 224.

[247] In Introduction, I explained how Thebes is often used by Latin authors as a perverted image of Rome; see Henderson 1998: 218–222 and Braund 2006. On 'disbelief' in the *Metamorphoses*, see Feldherr 2010: 324.

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1.336–346), the presence of a storm at the beginning of the poem's plot, and the assimilation of Polynices and shipwrecked Aeneas, can be said to activate the readers' memory of the *Aeneid*. That said, the expectations stimulated by these elements are suddenly reversed by the evolution of the storm into an Ovidian deluge that, as we have seen, destroys every form of natural order while casting Polynices in the position of a neo-Phaethon caught in a cosmic collapse.[248] In Book IV, both the description of Nemea as a *locus amoenus* made safe (like Rome in *Aeneid* VIII) by heroic Herculean action and the assimilation of Bacchus with the Virgilian Juno asking for a storm are reversed by the severe drought that disfigures the place and triggers the events that result in the killing of the child Opheltes by an Ovidian-inspired python-monster. Similarly, Amphiaraus' *katabasis* soon frustrates the readers' memory of Aeneas's *nekyia* (*Aen.* 6.268–901) by showing an Underworld reminiscent of that visited by Juno in *Met.* 4.420–480 and by reversing the positive teleological significance of Anchises' prophecy into Pluto's threat to bring the world back to Ovid's pre-Jovian chaos. In each of these instances, Statius' characters (and readers) are deceived, not just by sudden episodes of violence or by the unexpected breakout of chthonic forces on the Earth, but also by the surprising ways in which the natural world displays its tendency towards chaos and violence through Ovidian narratives that trigger the readers' poetic memory of the *Metamorphoses* (and of their rewriting by Seneca and Lucan).[249] This process, which at first glance might appear a mere emulation of some episodes of the *Metamorphoses*, in fact reveals the post-Ovidian nature of the *Thebaid*'s epic universe as it underlines Statius' sophisticated refashioning and further development not only of the *Aeneid*'s geopolitical discourse but also of the narrative strategies deployed by Ovid in his critical rewriting of Virgil's *epos*.

Considering the *Thebaid*'s post-Ovidian nature allows us to better understand the poem's politics well beyond it being a generic repetition of Virgil's and Ovid's political reflections. In particular, the innovative connection that Statius draws between deception, chaos, and Ovidian memory seems to engage on a deeper level with the mechanisms regulating the readers' perception of Rome. As noted in Introduction, the link between space and memory is central to imperial discourse and dense with political significance. Both the *Res Gestae* and Vitruvius' *De Architectura* show that Augustus had already semiotically intervened in the landscape of the *urbs* in order to present it simultaneously as the natural continuation

[248] See Caviglia 1973: *ad vv.* 1.336–380.
[249] On Ovid and Lucan, see Keith 2011: 111–132. On Seneca and Ovid, see Hinds 2011.

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of Republican Rome and as the *telos* of Roman history.[250] The remaking of the Roman landscape redefined the boundaries between past/present and public/private, ultimately modifying the ways in which Romans conceptually perceived their reality. As Flavia Marcello has shown, such a link between memory and landscape was extensively exploited by Flavian emperors who 'reconstructed and repurposed monuments to act as nodes and landmarks within each district to imprint their new form of rule and reinforce their narrative of triumph and resurrection of Augustus' golden age'.[251] Yet this architectural and moral renewal was based on an inherent contradiction: the very same act of rebuilding Augustus' Rome after it was physically and morally destroyed by fires and civil war inevitably made visible the failure of the Augustan promise of everlasting peace and order, casting an ominous shadow on the Flavian attempt to revive it. In this respect, the Tacitean account of Vespasian's reconsecration of the Capitoline Temple of Jupiter offers an interesting comparison that aids our understanding of the deeper politics of the *Thebaid*'s deceptive landscapes. Tacitus' account also uses the idea of deception to suggest the illusory nature of the image of Rome as proposed by Flavian discourse. The rebuilding of the temple is presented as a highly symbolic event that marks the beginning of a new era.[252] In visible contrast with the civil disorders that destroyed this sacred place, now the Romans are finally reunited in harmony, presenting their pious offerings to the gods under a pure sky (*ceteri magistratus et sacerdotes et senatus et eques et magna pars populi studio laetitiaque conixi*, 'the magistrates, priests, senators, equestrians and a great part of the people put their strength together in one enthusiastic effort', Tac. *Hist.* 4.53); Romans joyfully parade before the highest authorities, divided in their social ranks in a way that displays renewed peace and social order. However, the assassination of the proconsul Lucius Piso under suspicion of betrayal that precedes this passage, and the description of the revolts of the Gauls, the Germans, and the Roman legions on the northern borders that immediately follow, both heavily imply that the image of Flavian Rome purported by this Flavian ceremony was in fact illusory.[253]

Of course, Tacitus is not entirely unbiased in his description of Flavian Rome, as the *Historiae* looks back at the Flavian era with a privileged

[250] Cf. Elsner 1996: 40 who suggests: 'The *Res Gestae* framed the viewing of Augustan Rome' in a way that 'told Romans how their city should now be seen'. On the role of memory, architecture and politics in Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, see McEwen 2003 and Milnor 2005: 119. See also the use of *monumenta* such as the *tigillum* (*Hist.* 1.26) and the Capitoline temples (*Hist.* 5.134) in Livy.

[251] Marcello 2017: 123.

[252] See Chomse 2020 and Rebeggiani 2018: 204.

[253] See Fredrick 2003: 200.

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*post eventum* awareness that Statius' contemporary readers did not have. However, as Emma Buckley has recently suggested, in Tacitus' account we can read traces of Flavian analysis (even a Flavian *Zeitgeist*) that predate and inform the *Historiae*.[254] In other words, the fact that the *Thebaid*'s post-Ovidian landscapes anticipate the sense of disbelief that fully emerges in the accounts of second-century writers to some extent suggests the insightfulness of the poem's political reflections. In this respect, the *Thebaid*'s refashioning of the deceptiveness of Ovid's landscapes and of their politics can be read in light of the narrative strategies employed by other contemporary texts to scrutinise the fragilities of Flavian discourse. Thomas Baier has suggested that the willingly artificial nature of Valerius' aetiologies is an *Entschlüsselung* (a decryption) that overexposes Virgil's attempt to provide Augustan Rome with a legitimising (although not unproblematic) foundational legend in the moment in which the Flavian emperors try to redeploy it.[255] Similarly, Chomse has pointed out that instability and fragility are two key themes in Martial's urban poetics.[256] In the *Epigrams*, the grandiose monumentality of the Flavian buildings and their ideological significance are continuously undermined by the resurfacing awareness that those monuments have in fact cannibalised the Julio-Claudian past that they promised to resurrect.

Overall, Statius' epic can be said to engage with this sense of fragility and disbelief that both contemporary and Trajanic sources reveal to have accompanied the Flavian urbanistic attempts at representing post-civil-war Rome as the ultimate fulfilment of the Augustan promise of peace and stability. By characterising the deception of the Theban world as a revival and a development of the politically loaded spatial narratives of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the *Thebaid* does much more than simply provide readers with a chaotic worldview. On a literary level, conspicuous verbal and thematic allusions to the *Metamorphoses* call the reader's attention to the poem's self-conscious post-Ovidian nature by emphasising that they are reviving a deception that they have already seen and should therefore recognise. Simultaneously, this sense of *déjà vu* could become a powerful critical lens that might suggest re-reading Flavian Rome as a time-lapse revival of the Augustan dynasty rather than as its fulfilment. This would not be limited to a generic criticism of Flavian discourse: Statius' refashioning of the deceptiveness already employed by Ovid to both expose the darker aspects inherent in the *Aeneid*'s geopolitical discourse and to

[254] See the exploration of retroactive intertextuality by Buckley 2018: 88–107.
[255] See Baier 2001: 51–52. Cf. Buckley 2018: 102–103.
[256] See Chomse 2016.

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suggest a certain degree of disillusionment towards the Augustan world-view indirectly questions the very idea of a 'golden age' by hinting at the possibility that the Augustan claim of everlasting peace and stability, now revived by the Flavians, was in fact unenforceable, perhaps illusory, even in Augustan Rome itself.

## 1.8 Conclusion

Building upon recent developments in the scholarly debate on landscape and spatiality in different disciplines, this first in-depth exploration of *Thebaid*'s natural world has shown that the spatial configuration of Statius' major poem represents an important development in the history of Latin literary landscapes for its highly symbolic, political, and meta-literary possibilities.[257]

More specifically, my analysis has shown that the traditional symbolic force of Latin landscapes is maintained and further developed in the *Thebaid*, in which the most important spatial narratives of the Augustan classics and their geopolitics are reinterpreted in light of the new socio-political issues of Flavian Rome.[258] In this process, a pivotal – although often overlooked – role is played by the intertextual refashioning of the spatial poetics and politics of Ovid's Theban histories as a critical rewriting of the *Aeneid*'s geopolitics. An initial reading of the *Thebaid*'s mythologically aware landscapes has suggested that the *Metamorphoses* is not just a past literary model towards which Statius has a generic debt in terms of style and Theban setting: rather, the visible traces and the ongoing effects of the most famous episodes of Ovid's Theban histories in the *Thebaid*'s landscapes reveal in an intuitive and visual way that Statius' poetic universe is still characterised by the most distinctive geopolitical features of the *Metamorphoses*' world: deception, susceptibility to chthonic forces, and tendency to chaos.[259] Far from being limited to generic stylistic allusions to the *Metamorphoses*, the emergence of this intertextual Ovidian memory significantly influences the poem's engagement with both its contemporary realities and their readerly perception. Exactly as in the *Metamorphoses*, the fragility of cosmic borders and the inherent chaos of the natural world

[257] No study has systematically studied the *Thebaid*'s natural world. Landscapes are occasionally mentioned by Brown 1994; Augoustakis 2010: 30–91; and Parkes 2012: 406. Keith 2000: 57–63 and Newlands 2004 analyse allusions to the *Metamorphoses* in the descriptions of some specific places. On the necessity of looking at narrated spaces beyond their geographical significance, see Rimell 2015: 1–27.

[258] See, for instance, Caviglia 1973.

[259] On Ovid's landscapes, see Segal 1969 and Hinds 2002.

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cause 'un-civilisation' and wilderness to prevail over urban and civilised order in Statius' Theban universe. However, Ovid's challenge to conceptualisations of natural, political, and poetic order is developed in the *Thebaid* into a new and politically loaded opposition between the providential and almost proto-Augustan worldview of the city of Argos (that Statius depicts through a patchwork of Virgilian allusions) and the strikingly Ovidian world of Thebes that runs throughout the poem, unifying its individual episodes. In this macro-narrative, the juxtaposition of different stories, narrators, and settings is not random or limited to the superficial reproduction of Ovid's spatial strategies: it plays a fundamental role in shaping the poem's worldview by frustrating the readers' and the Argives' expectations. This contrasting Virgil-Ovidian intertextuality not only draws attention to the poetic and political distance of the *Thebaid* from Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, but also warns us about the limits of our tendency to interpret Flavian epic in a very Virgil-centric manner. In the *Thebaid*, even allusions to the *Aeneid*'s more optimistic 'voice' do not necessarily convey an optimistic political message, but rather need to be interpreted in terms of the much broader intertextual network in which they are embedded, which may in fact emphasise the most critical traits of Virgil's stories.[260] Furthermore, the development in the *Thebaid* of the Ovidian technique of recalling entire episodes and spatial narratives of the *Aeneid* in order to interrogate them through unexpected narrative twists suggests – at least to a certain extent – Statius' self-conscious updating of the intertextual strategies deployed by Ovid to rewrite the *Aeneid*. While this does not mean limiting the political and poetic possibilities of the poem's treatment of space to Statius' agenda, it prompts a fresh reconsideration of the long-debated issue of authorial intentionality.[261] Overall, this chapter has shown that by making landscapes an active protagonist in his epic, the *Thebaid* amplifies the symbolic force of landscape in Latin epic as a vehicle for literary, political, and meta-poetic reflections. By acutely reworking a dense and complex tradition, the *Thebaid*'s spatial narratives and geopolitical strategies successfully employ the inherent moral and political potential of Latin literary landscapes in ways that both question the transferability of an Augustan worldview to Flavian Rome and acknowledge Statius'

[260] See Hinds 1998: 140–143. On the polyphonic nature of Virgil's authorial voice in the *Aeneid*, see Parry 1963: 66–80. On the ways in which Virgil hints at the fragilities of the Augustan voice pervading his poem, see Thomas 2001.

[261] On this technique in the *Metamorphoses*, see Hardie 1990: 224–227. Statius' self-consciousness is also signalled by the use of meta-poetic adjectives such as *notum* (1.101) and *adsueta* (1.124). See Feeney 1991: 334.

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competitive repurposing of his Augustan models and their politics in his Theban and Flavian *epos*.

In addition to allowing a better understanding of the *Thebaid*'s poetic world, my analysis has raised some questions about the way in which we study literary landscapes and their politics in Flavian literature and beyond. Firstly, the exploration of the complex intertextual dynamics informing the *Thebaid*'s landscapes suggests that narrated spaces provide a tableau onto which poetic memory can be inscribed and mapped in ways that develop understanding of a text's engagement with the former tradition and its (geo)politics. In this respect, I have shown that it is important not to limit the intertextual analysis of literary landscapes to the detection of precise verbal allusions to past literary models or to physical geographies. The fullest literary and political significance of spatial narratives emerges only when we consider the ways verbal, semantic, and structural allusions to different models interact amongst themselves and with the readers' perception of their contemporary realities. Moreover, this analysis has shed light on the many sophisticated ways in which literary landscapes are politically meaningful even when they are not explicitly modelled after recognisable Roman landmarks or geographies involved in important historical events.[262] Thus, while recent studies of the *Thebaid* have mainly focussed on simply tracking allusions to specific historical events or individuals, I suggest that the poem's geopolitical discourse can be thought of more broadly or even in more generic terms without becoming less powerful. For instance, we have seen that by revealing the chaotic nature of the Theban universe, the contrasting Virgil-Ovidian intertextuality informing the *Thebaid*'s landscapes provides readers with a *Weltanschauung* that is political in so far as it interrogates and problematises the ways in which they approach their contemporary realities, shedding light on the contradictions of Flavian discourse, of its cultural and monumental boundary-making narratives, and of its attempt to enforce on post-civil-war Rome the Augustan ideals of order and stability. Acknowledging this reminds us of the necessity of broadening the horizons of our intertextual analysis by setting literary texts in dialogue not only with other elite literary texts but also with so-called 'documentary sources' and even with pieces of material culture. These contextual sources can help us as contemporary readers to better understand the physical and socio-cultural landscape of the period, through their experiential knowledge of which ancient readers would have interpreted the poem in politically meaningful ways.

[262] Cf. the historicising analysis of Flavian epic landscapes proposed by Bernstein 2016: 403–405.

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