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**Female Monsters and Monstrous Females
Readings of Monstrosity in Statius' *Thebaid***

by

Isabelle Jane Duroe (B.A. Hons.)

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I declare that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of another degree or diploma in any tertiary institution, nor any material published or written by others, except when due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Isabelle Jane Duroe
20.12.2018

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Abstract

In the early stages of the *Thebaid*, Statius provides graphic descriptions of three female monsters: in book 1 the Fury Tisiphone and the hybrid snake-woman Apollo sends against Argos; and in book 2 the Theban Sphinx. In their wake, the poem contains several further representations threatening femininity which evoke these monsters in language, imagery, and theme. Not only representing the troubled and troubling women of the Theban household, Statius infuses his epic with images of disturbing femininity seemingly disconnected from the Theban mythological cycle, namely Thessalian witches (implicitly, Lucan's witch, Erichtho) in book 3, and the Lemnian murderesses in book 5. While recent Statian scholarship has examined the representation of femininity in the *Thebaid* with a view to unpacking the ambiguous, often threatening portrayals of female grief in the poem, studies have often separated the theme of femininity from that of monstrosity. Utilising aspects of the developing field of monster studies (recently brought into contact with Classics by Lowe (2015), Felton (2012), and Murgatroyd (2007)), this thesis analyses the textual and cultural significance of Statius' 'monstrous-feminine'.

In Chapter 1 I argue that Statius' three female monsters appear early in the text not only to portend the violent horrors about to unfold and signify the chthonic powers that dominate the epic, but also to embody physical and behavioural transgression and disorder, giving these themes a particularly feminine edge that overshadows the subsequent characterisations of prominent females in the text, and establishes Statius' own version of the monstrous-feminine. In Chapter 2 I argue that female figures such as the Theban mothers Ide and Jocasta, along with Argia and the Argive mourners, and the Lemnian women of book 5 are connected to the theme of monstrosity in the poem, and vital to a pervasive anxiety within the epic that relates to maternity, cyclicity, and regression. In Chapter 3 I argue that,

in his formulation and utilisation of monstrosity, Statius employs archaic (but nevertheless prevalent) tropes of misogyny to create an epic overwhelmed by a feminine horror that speaks to Flavian anxieties regarding regression and repetition, and broader Roman anxieties relating to power, gender, the body, and identity.

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Introduction

In the first two books of the *Thebaid*, Statius establishes monstrosity as a prominent theme, and firmly grounds it in the feminine. In three extended descriptive passages, the poet introduces the Fury Tisiphone as a key protagonist in the main action of the epic, and the snake-woman of Argos, and the Theban Sphinx in twin digressive episodes that are separated from, but nonetheless significant to the primary narrative. Following these female monsters, several female characters appear in the epic, ostensibly to condemn the mortal cost of civil war, and to enact epic laments over the corpses of their kin. The Argive princess, Argia, along with two Theban matriarchs, Ide and Jocasta, though in voice and action clearly opposed to the horrors of the war are, through a series of similes and parallels, associated with the monsters of books 1 and 2, as well as figures of threatening femininity from Theban and Roman myth-history and literature. This technique of association serves to undercut the pious, virtuous rhetoric and deeds of these female characters. Feminine monstrosity seems to reach its apex in the very heart of the epic, where the poet incorporates a narrative of surpassing feminine transgression and horror, where human female characters, the Lemnian women, enact a violent assault on their community, slaughtering every male on the island. While recent Statian scholarship has examined the representation of femininity in the *Thebaid* with a view to unpacking the ambiguous, often threatening portrayals of female grief in the poem, studies have often separated the theme of femininity from that of monstrosity. Utilising aspects of the developing field of monster studies, this thesis will investigate the intersection of monstrosity and femininity in the *Thebaid*, and determine the nature, function, and significance of Statius' monstrous-feminine.

Given their important role in defining culture, monsters are prominent and prevalent figures in traditional narratives from all over the world, and modern critics have duly

evaluated the primal figure of the monster in its capacity as both cultural metaphor, and literary device. Due to the universal appeal of the figure of the monster for a wide range of disciplines (from archaeology and anthropology, to film, literary, and cultural studies, and even the biological sciences), “Monster Studies” has in recent decades developed into a field that encompasses a variety of critical approaches to monsters and monstrosity in literature, art, film, and culture, particularly from the arts and social science disciplines.¹ Monster Studies privileges the monstrous as a theme in its own right, broadly establishing that monstrous figures have important textual and cultural functions.² As Yasmine Musharbash showed in her recent anthropological study of monsters in Australasian myth and folklore, “monsters are bloodcurdlingly potent of meaning”,³ and the fearsome creatures of ancient Greek and Roman myth and literature were no exception.

The Latin term *monstrum* – from which we get the English term ‘monster’ – is defined in Lewis and Short’s *Oxford Latin Dictionary* as ‘an unnatural event regarded as an omen, portent, prodigy, sign’, ‘an awful monstrous thing, event’, ‘a monstrous or horrible creature, monstrosity, monster’, ‘a person of extreme wickedness, monster’, ‘a monstrous act, horror, atrocity’, and is etymologically linked with the verbs *monere* (‘to warn’), and *monstrare* (‘to show’). These verbal connections suggest that a monster is an entity that has something to

¹ For example: Creed, B., *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, London, and New York: Routledge, 1993; Halberstam, J., *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Durham, and London: Duke University Press, 1995; Cohen, J.J., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996; Gilmore, D.D., *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003; Mittman, A.S., and Dendle, P.J., (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, Farnham, and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2012; Musharbash, Y., and Presterudstuen, G.H., *Monster Anthropology in Australasia and Beyond*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

² Lowe, D., *Monsters and Monstrosity in Augustan Poetry*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015, pp. 28-9.

³ Musharbash, Y., “Introduction: Monsters, Anthropology, and Monster Studies” in Musharbash, Y., and Presterudstuen, G.H., (eds.), *Monster Anthropology in Australasia and Beyond*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 1.

reveal, something that is *other* than itself, whether that be the displeasure of the gods, a sign of impending doom, or a crucial boundary that must not be crossed.⁴ Picking up on this ambiguity, and variety of meaning, the notion of “monster as metaphor” has recently gained widespread acceptance. As Jeffrey J. Cohen established in the mid-1990s, in his influential study “Monster Theory”, the monster is “an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place” that incorporates a society’s fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy, and the monster exists to be read.⁵ Though it shifts and transforms in accordance with changing cultural attitudes, the monster always embodies and enacts (and thereby reveals) the anxieties of both author and audience.⁶ By observing the various forms that monsters take, researchers can further understand how a particular community perceived itself, the world, and its position within it.⁷

Monster Studies has been brought into closer contact with Classics particularly by the research of Dunstan Lowe, Debbie Felton, and Paul Murgatroyd.⁸ Utilising Cohen’s theory, Debbie Felton has argued that mythical monsters, like modern monsters, were largely shaped by their respective culture’s particular set of concerns and anxieties. She argues that the mythical monsters of ancient Greece and Rome were manifestations of fundamental oppositions these societies perceived in their world, such as those between reason and emotion, order and disorder, nature and culture, knowledge and the unknown, civilisation

⁴ Musharbash, “Introduction”, 2014, p.2; Gilmore, *Monsters*, 2003, p. 9.

⁵ Cohen, “Monster Theory”, 1996, p. 4.

⁶ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 30.

⁷ Musharbash, “Introduction”, 2014, p. 2.

⁸ Barton, C.A., *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: The Gladiator and the Monster*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993; Atherton, C., (ed.), *Monsters and Monstrosity in Greek and Roman Culture. Nottingham Classical Literature Studies. Midlands Classical Studies vol. 6*, Bari: Levante, 2002; Murgatroyd, P., *Mythical Monsters in Classical Literature*, London: Duckworth, 2007; Garland, R., *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World. Second Edition (first published 1995). Bristol Classical Paperbacks*, London: Bristol Classical Press, 2010; Felton, D., “Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous in Ancient Greece and Rome”, in Mittman, A.S., and Dendle, P.J., (eds.), *Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, Farnham, and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2012; Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015.

and savagery, and the feminine and the masculine.⁹ In his 2015 study of Augustan monsters, Dunstan Lowe establishes the significance of monstrous bodies for reading Roman culture.¹⁰ Lowe's reading of monstrosity focusses primarily on "mythical hybrids with human parts or aspects that endanger or show antipathy towards humans." He discerns two distinct themes that unite the monsters of Augustan poetry, which are that they tend to embody gender stereotypes, and that they represent the conflicts between traditional norms and novel thinking. Lowe sees that monsters were prominent in Augustan texts for both political and aesthetic reasons. Rich and intense physical and psychological descriptions reflected the influence of Hellenistic tastes and styles, but monsters may also have reflected the "fresh spectre of the civil wars", and the tumultuous transition from Republic to Principate¹¹. In assessing female monsters such as Scylla, Medusa, and the Sirens, Lowe argues that these gendered monstrosities are reflections of "male-centric fantasies" that cast the female sex as either (or simultaneously) attractive and repulsive, both desirable, and dangerous.¹² Addressing the Furies and the Harpies, Lowe argues that these female winged menaces, as they are presented in Latin poetry, are exaggerated reflections of misogynistic ideas that underpinned ancient ideas of gender.¹³ Lowe also notes that the Augustan poets give these female monsters greater agency, and narrative prominence than their Greek predecessors did – they are all the more powerful and more horrifying. He also notes that the Harpies and Furies, as part-human bestial hybrids reflect the "insistent Roman connection of female bodies with animals and contagion."¹⁴

⁹ Felton, "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous", 2012, 103.

¹⁰ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 27.

¹¹ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, pp.1-2.

¹² Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, pp. 3, 70-113.

¹³ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, pp. 3, 114-63.

¹⁴ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 3.

In recent decades Stasian scholarship has expanded our understanding of the human females of the *Thebaid*, with scholars such as Elaine Fantham, Antony Augoustakis, Mairéad McAuley, Carole Newlands, Astrid Voigt, Jessica Dietrich, and Alison Keith focussing on the themes of maternity and lament, and the feminine narrative that exists alongside the masculine narrative of perverse *virtus* in the epic.¹⁵ My analysis of the female figures of the *Thebaid* will focus on the element of monstrosity present in female characterisation, and build upon some of these earlier studies of feminine representation, as well as the general studies of Vessey, Dominik, McNelis, and Ganiban, in order to further develop our understanding of Statius' embedded, alternative feminine narrative.¹⁶

Barbara Creed's "monstrous-feminine" and Cohen's "monster theory" are instructive concepts for an examination of Stasian monstrosity, as their analyses of monstrosity in patriarchal culture provide useful guides for examining monsters embedded in texts produced by the hierarchal, misogynistic culture of imperial Rome, and its ideologies of gender, sexuality, and corporeality. Using Creed's theory, in Chapter 1 I argue that, through the monstrous trio featured at the outset of his epic, Statius establishes his own version of the monstrous-feminine, which focalises and magnifies the tropes of feminine monstrosity in

¹⁵ Fantham, E., "The Role of Lament in the Growth and Eclipse of Roman Epic", in Beissinger, M., Tylus, J., and Wofford, S., (eds.), *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World*, Berkely, and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999; Dietrich, J.S., "Thebaid's Feminine Ending", *Ramus*, 28, 1999, pp. 40-50; Newlands, C.E., "Mothers in Statius' Poetry: Sorrows and Surrogates", *Helios*, 33.2, 2006, pp.203-226; Augoustakis, A., *Motherhood and the Other: Fashioning Female Power in Flavian Epic. Oxford Studies in Classical Literature and Gender Theory*, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010; Newlands, C.E., *Statius, Poet Between Rome and Naples. Classical literature and society*, London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012; Keith, A., "Sexus Muliebris in Flavian Epic", *EuGeStA*, 3, 2013, pp.282-302; McAuley, M., *Reproducing Rome: Motherhood in Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, and Statius. Oxford Studies in Classical Literature and Gender Theory*, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016; Voigt, A., "The Power of the Grieving Mind: Female Lament in Statius' *Thebaid*", *Illinois Classical Studies*, 41.1, 2016, pp. 59-84.

¹⁶ Vessey, D., *Statius and the Thebaid*, Cambridge, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973; Dominik, W.J., *The Mythic Voice of Statius: Power and Politics in the Thebaid*, Leiden, New York, and Köln: Brill, 1994; McNelis, C., *Statius' Thebaid and the Poetics of Civil War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Ganiban, R.T., *Statius and Virgil: The Thebaid and the Reinterpretation of the Aeneid*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

earlier literature, such as bestial hybridity and hostility, and a focus on female sexual and maternal physicality, but expands the ancient trope to incorporate features of graphic death imagery, along with pollution and contagion. In Chapter 2 I examine the prominent, outwardly bold and virtuous female characters of the *Thebaid* in relation to the theme of monstrosity and horror in the poem, establishing that they are associated with and corrupted by the monsters of books 1 and 2, and, furthermore, that they are linked with other paradigmatic figures of threatening and perverse femininity from outside of the text, namely Erichtho, the night-hag of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, the murderous Theban mother Agave, and the transgressive, destructive figures of wrathful Ceres, and a maddened priest(ess) of Cybele. Framing the discussion with Cohen's monster-as-culture thesis, in Chapter 3 I argue that cultural anxieties are reflected in Statius' epic via the intersection of the feminine and the monstrous, as the poet incorporates prevailing stereotypes of feminine mental and corporeal permeability to highlight the erosion of masculine power and autonomy, the troubling theme of regression, and the threat of the female.

Chapter 1: Female Monsters

In the opening phases of his *Thebaid*, Statius introduces three distinctly feminine monsters during key narrative episodes. In Book 1 the Fury Tisiphone appears following the authorial prologue, Apollo's snake-woman on the eve of the fateful alliance between Polynices and Adrastus, and in Book 2 the Theban Sphinx is described immediately prior to the first frenzied slaughter of the epic, when Tydeus kills forty-nine Theban ambushers. This chapter will argue that these monsters are connected by the shared features of heightened feminine sexual and maternal physicality, bestial hybridity, death imagery (decay, violence, and gore), as well as pollution and contagion. They are amplifications and amalgamations of the monstrous female figures encountered in earlier mythological epic and tragedy, exceeding their mythic and literary forbears in terms of their poetic function and physicality. Tisiphone, the snake-woman, and the Sphinx are also programmatic in that they introduce several of the key overarching themes of the epic, as well as foreshadow key events that occur later in the poem. At the outset of the epic, then, Tisiphone, the snake-woman, and the Sphinx function as portents and paradigms for the horrors that follow them in the poem, and effectively establish Statius' own variety of the monstrous-feminine.

The Ancient Monstrous-Feminine

The contemporary concept of the "monstrous-feminine" was developed by Barbara Creed in her study of female representation in popular horror cinema. Creed argues that Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject (defined as the ambiguous, that which confounds borders and disturbs identity¹⁷) is regularly manifested in contemporary horror in three ways. First, the

¹⁷ Kristeva, J., *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (trans. Roudiez, L.), New York; Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 4, 9.

horror film abounds in images of abjection, for example that of the corpse (the ultimate abjection, for Kristeva¹⁸), along with bodily wastes such as blood, faecal matter and putrefying flesh.¹⁹ Second, the crossing or confusion of borders, whether the border is that between life and death, the clean and unclean, the formed and the deformed, human and inhuman, natural and supernatural; the thing that threatens the border, and the stability it imposes, becomes the abject.²⁰ And third, the construction of the maternal body (the original abject, for Kristeva²¹) as abject through presenting her as an inhibitor to progression into the social symbolic realm of meaning, law, and language (and of clean and proper bodies), and as an unbreakable, unbearable tie to the world of nature, maternal authority, and bodily materiality and waste.²² For Creed, these aspects of abjection in horror films, in particular the threat of the maternal, often serve to establish feminine figures as the monstrous-feminine, a pervasive trope within the genre. She asserts that the monstrosity of female monsters is persistently established in direct relation to the female sexual-maternal body and its functions, and that figures of fearful femininity in modern horror films reveal much about masculine patriarchal anxieties.²³ Creed's theory is detectable, in an inchoate, prototypical form, in the mythological poetry of ancient Greece and Rome, where female forms are frequently configured as monstrous through overt association with the inhuman and emphasis on feminine, maternal materiality.²⁴

From the epic works of archaic Greek bards through to those of Roman imperial epicists of the first century CE, the monsters of the Greek and Roman mythic imagination

¹⁸ Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, 1982, pp. 3-4.

¹⁹ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 1993, p. 10.

²⁰ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 1993, pp. 10-11.

²¹ Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, 1982, p. 13.

²² Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 1993, pp. 11-12.

²³ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 1993, p. 7.

²⁴ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 70.

were regularly characterised by physical and behavioural transgression and excess.²⁵ They could be disproportionately vast, multi-headed, multi-limbed, and often wielded destructive strength and supernatural powers, combined with an intense hostility towards humankind.²⁶ Anatomical hybridity was a common feature, with fantastic creatures such as the Chimaera, the Sphinx, Medusa, and Scylla representing what Cohen terms “ontological liminality”,²⁷ or what Carroll might call ontological “fusion”²⁸, in that they are unstable figures combining mismatched types of beings, existing between normative categories of existence, transgressing physical and natural boundaries. Monstrosity could also be determined by behaviour that targets and transgresses a society’s particular set of behavioural codes, such as extreme violence, murder, harmful magic, infanticide, and cannibalism.

In Greek and Roman antiquity, as in modernity, the physical and behavioural transgression, excess, disorder, and unreason of the monstrous was frequently linked with the feminine. An archaic prefiguring of Creed’s monstrous-feminine can be perceived particularly in the foundational mythological poetry of Hesiod and Homer.²⁹ Both poets present female monsters and monstrous females exhibiting threatening behaviour and hybrid, bestial bodies,³⁰ who are strongly associated with male failure and death, and whose threat is located in their sexuality and reproductive capacity.

²⁵ On defining and identifying the monster, see Gilmore, *Monsters*, 2003, pp. 6-9; Carroll, N. *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York: Routledge, 1990, pp. 42-52.

²⁶ Felton, “Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous”, 2012, p. 104.

²⁷ Cohen, “Monster Theory”, 1996, p. 6.

²⁸ Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 1990, p. 45.

²⁹ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 72.

³⁰ Female hybrids can be differentiated from male hybrids by their persistent a-sociality, and the insistent behavioural trope of androphagy: Doniger, W., “Put a Bag over Her Head” Beheading Mythological Women”, in Eilberg-Schwartz, H., and Doniger, W., (eds.), *Off With Her Head! The Denial of Women’s Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1995, p. 28; Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 71.

Hesiod's *Theogony* begins with an account of the emerging cosmos, and the chaotic reproduction of the maternal earth, Gaia, which resulted in a proliferation of monstrous entities. Gaia produces many savage monstrosities, including Uranus (with whom she mated, and who would force his offspring back into their mother's womb), Cronus (who would castrate his father, and later devour his own children), the Cyclopes, the Hundred-Handers, the Giants, and the Furies (*Theog.* 137-88). Gaia also bore the primal sea-goddess Ceto (237), who bore many feminine, chthonic, physically anomalous beings, all of whom mingle divine, human, and animal features: including the Graiai, the Gorgons, and the giant snake-woman Echidna (295-303), who in turn bore her own monstrous brood comprising of Cerberus, the Hydra, the Chimaera, the Sphinx, and the Nemean Lion (304-332). Observing Hesiod's catalogue of monsters, it can be seen that many of the primordial monsters that stalked across the Greek mythic imagination sprang from an era characterised by excessive fertility and uncontrolled maternal reproduction, and may reflect a deep-rooted patriarchal fear and mistrust of the female.

The prominence and prevalence of female monstrosity in Greek and Roman myth is indicative of a broader cultural association of the feminine with the wildness and danger of uncontrolled nature.³¹ Sue Blundell has suggested that the female capacity for reproduction connected women with the unsettling, ambiguous forces of nature that were beyond male comprehension and control.³² Female monsters such as the Furies, Harpies, Gorgons, and many others, functioned, at least in part, as embodiments of a masculine, patriarchal anxiety regarding the uncontrolled, uncontrollable, and potentially dangerous nature of the female sex.³³

³¹ Felton, "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous", 2012, p. 105.

³² Blundell, S., *Women in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 16-19.

³³ Felton, "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous", 2012, p. 105.

Anne Carson's influential research regarding the notion of feminine pollution in ancient Greece informs our understanding of the ancient monstrous-feminine, as female monsters in Greek (and later Roman) myth and poetry persistently represent boundary transgression linked with their threatening sexuality and unstable corporeality. Carson emphasises that the transgression of boundaries, and confusion of categories are crucial elements to the notion of female pollution that persisted in ancient Greek society.³⁴ For the Greeks, argues Carson, personal and social boundaries were guarantors of human and civil orderliness, and women possessed 'special talents and opportunities' for transgressing those boundaries, thereby inducing fear and loathing in the rest of society.³⁵ The ancient belief that the female body was biologically unstable and potentially polluting can be seen in prominent cultural texts of both Greece and Rome, such as Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*, where the philosopher-scientist suggests that the female is actually a deformed male (GA 737a25-30), and furthermore that she is unformed malleable matter, and Pliny's *Natural History*, where the naturalist describes the female body, with its various functions and excretions, as potentially overpowering and destructive (HN 7.64-5, 28.77-86). These authors characterise women's physicality as moist and generative, a formless, fertile substance uncontrolledly receiving and releasing matter and moisture.³⁶ This fluidity of form aligns woman with the elemental, natural world; she is an unstable creature, both physically and mentally aligned with the wild and the bestial.³⁷ An ancient concept of the monstrous-feminine can be perceived in the writings of these authors, as well as in Greek and Latin mythological epic,

³⁴ Carson, A., "Dirt and Desire: The Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity", in Porter, J.I., (ed.), *Constructions of the Classical Body*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999, p. 77.

³⁵ Carson, "Dirt and Desire", 1999, p. 77.

³⁶ Carson, "Dirt and Desire", 1999, pp. 78-79.

³⁷ Carson, "Dirt and Desire", 1999, pp. 84-85.

which regularly represented female emotional and anatomical instability through both human and hybrid figures.

The inherent physical and psychological disorder of the female was a prevalent concern throughout antiquity, with authors from archaic to imperial periods representing threatening females endangering male minds and bodies.³⁸ Female mythical monsters who confounded physical and psychological boundaries, such as the Furies and Harpies, were terrifying to classical society, because they manifested an anxiety regarding women's bodies and their mutable boundaries. These contemporary concerns regarding the mutability of women's bodies are reflected in early Greek mythic narratives, in which the female body is shown to be unstable, with women often assuming bestial or hybrid forms, for example Io, Callisto, Scylla, and Medusa.³⁹ Mythic women are also often portrayed as having a physically and psychologically disfiguring effect on masculine figures, for example the maddened Agave beheads Pentheus, Cybele's maddening influence emasculates Attis, Medea dismembers her brother, and the Furies instil guilt and madness within their victims' minds.⁴⁰ Thus females have their boundaries confounded, and also often confound the boundaries of men, threatening their bodily wholeness, their control, and so their masculinity.

In mythic narratives, monsters that embodied these socio-cultural preoccupations were frequently shown being overcome (or else skilfully avoided) by male heroes, who symbolise the forces of power, order, reason, and civilisation.⁴¹ Therefore many Greek myths can be read as being symbolic of the triumph of ordered, patriarchal culture over the irrational and uncivilised; and the narratives that recounted the defeat or evasion of monsters may

³⁸ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 70.

³⁹ Carson, "Dirt and Desire", 1999, p. 79.

⁴⁰ Carson, "Dirt and Desire", 1999, p. 80.

⁴¹ Felton, "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous", 2012, p. 103.

represent a cultural fantasy of the male disempowering and domesticating the female, and nature with her.⁴² Two key examples of this type of myth are Zeus' confrontation with Typhoeus, another monstrous child of Gaia (*Theog.* 824-8), and Apollo's confrontation with Python, also born of Gaia. In both of these narratives warrior-gods battle chthonic "chaos-monsters"⁴³ who are vestiges of the earlier generation of earthborn entities, and ultimate obstacles to masculine patriarchy in the cosmos.⁴⁴ Typhoeus and Python each take the form of a giant serpent and are representative of a primordial, feminine generation characterised by chaotic, excessive, maternal reproduction. The dramatic defeat of these monsters was symbolic of a larger, cosmic triumph: that of masculine reason, order, and culture, over feminine unreason, disorder, and uncontrolled nature.⁴⁵

The generational struggles between the warrior-gods and chaos-monsters are replicated in the earthly combat myths of mortal men fighting the offspring of Echidna, with the triumph of masculinity, patriarchy, and civilisation replayed in the stories of heroes such as Heracles, Bellerophon, Perseus, and Theseus. The civilising mission of men was regularly obstructed by the monstrous progeny of the elder, chthonic gods, such as the Chimaera, the Hydra, Scylla, and the Sphinx. It was up to mortal heroes to disempower these symbols of wild and barbarous nature and the monstrous-feminine, and save civilised society from savagery and chaos.⁴⁶ The killing of monsters often ushered in the establishment of a new city or a new order, as in the case of Cadmus' founding of Thebes. The trope of the civilising hero defeating the giant serpent was a common, cross-cultural motif and symbolised the taming

⁴² Felton, "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous", 2012, p. 104.

⁴³ The term is Felton's, p. 107.

⁴⁴ On this narrative convention in Latin epic, see McNelis, *Statius' Thebaid and the Poetics of Civil War*, 2007, pp. 25-32.

⁴⁵ Felton, "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous", 2012, pp. 108-12.

⁴⁶ Felton, "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous", 2012, pp. 113-4.

of nature by men.⁴⁷ In the stories of mortal heroes, we see the continuation of the theme of a younger, male generation triumphing over the elder, feminine and chthonic generation.⁴⁸

While Hesiod prefigures Creed's monstrous-feminine in his descriptions of reproductive, inhuman female creatures, it is in the poetry of the early imperial period that the ancient monstrous-feminine becomes more defined. In the figures of Tisiphone, the Argive snake-woman, and the Theban Sphinx, the Statian reader can see the monstrous-feminine foregrounded in the *Thebaid*. The archaic monstrous-feminine is tied to primitive, disordered, and unreasoning chaos of the female, with feminine monsters being overcome or avoided for the prospering of reason, order, and male power. In the *Thebaid* the monstrous-feminine is emphasised, and comparatively uninhibited, and Statian monsters engender and portend new chaos and destruction.

Statius' Monstrous-Feminine

In Statius' female monsters we can see an evocation and amplification of the monstrous-feminine established in earlier myth and epic, with a continued emphasis on abjected femininity. By placing these monsters at key, opening stages in the narrative, the poet effectively establishes their roles as portents for the violent episodes that ensue. Their prominence establishes their importance to the overall reading of the poem – it is as though the audience is positioned to read the text *through* the lens of horror that these monsters set up at the poem's outset. Tisiphone, the Argive snake-woman, and the Theban Sphinx are presented in graphic, detailed portraits that highlight their mixed features of bestial hybridity,

⁴⁷López-Ruiz further establishes that this subtype of combat myth anticipates the enduringly popular dragon-slaying narratives of later traditions: López-Ruiz, C., (ed.), *Gods, Heroes, and Monsters: A Sourcebook of Greek, Roman, and Near Eastern Myths*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 110.

⁴⁸Felton, "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous", 2012, p.116.

death imagery, and pollution and contagion. Statius' three female monsters are presented in graphic descriptions that draw the audience's eyes through a series of terrible features, dwelling on the feminine, the deathly, and the gruesome, effectively transforming the female body into a grim, mesmerising spectacle evoking fear and disgust.⁴⁹

In Book 1 Tisiphone enters the narrative directly after Statius' authorial prologue, at the invocation of Oedipus. The poet describes her as she sits by Cocytos river, allowing the serpents that protrude from her head to lap at the waters (88-91). Upon hearing Oedipus' prayer she leaps into action, and, faster than Jupiter's lightning bolts, or a shooting star (92-93), she ascends from the underworld, hastening towards Thebes, scattering fearful shades as she goes (93-101).

*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 ueneno
tenditur ac sanie gliscit cutis; igneus atro
ore uapor, quo longa sitis morbique famesque
et populis mors una uenit; riget horrida tergo
palla, et caerulei redeunt in pectora nodi:
Atropos hos atque ipsa nouat Proserpina cultus.
tum geminas quatit ira manus: haec igne rogali
fulgurat, haec uiuo manus aera uerberat hydro.*

1.103-13

⁴⁹ These highly visual portrayals are in keeping with the tradition of epic monster description exemplified in Vergil and Ovid. On the Augustan conventions of monster description in Latin epic, see Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015.

One hundred vipers stand shadowing her face, the lesser crowd of her dire head; cruel light sits within her sunken eyes, as when Atracian arts redden Phoebe's labour through the gloom; suffused with venom, her skin stretches and swells with diseased blood; in her black mouth is fiery vapour, whence comes long drought and disease and famine, and one death for the peoples; her horrid robe is stiff upon her back, and dark knots fall against her breast: Atropos and Proserpine herself fashion her attire. Then rage shakes both her hands: one blazing with flame of the pyre, the other lashing the mist with a living serpent.⁵⁰

From Cithaeron's peak, her fierce hisses reverberate throughout Greece, causing widespread disruption (114-122). She assails the citadel of Thebes, infecting the royal house with *furor* (123-130), thus dispersing the violent madness that will dominate and drive the subsequent events of the epic. Following Tisiphone's entry into the poem, Statius presents two monsters in twin narrative digressions that recount similar combat myths to those featuring the warrior-gods and mortal-heroes of earlier myth

Statius' monstrous snake-woman is introduced later in Book 1, when the Argive King, Adrastus, recounts the aetiological story of Apollo and Coroebus as part of his explanation of an Apolline festival to his guests, Polynices and Tydeus.⁵¹ As Adrastus narrates, in retribution

⁵⁰ All translations from Statius' *Thebaid* are my own, though drawing on that of Shackleton-Bailey

⁵¹ In his account of Apollo's *monstrum*, Statius rehearses and expands a story first mentioned in Callimachus' fragmentary *Aetia* (Fragments 26-31e, Pfeiffer) in connection with the foundations of the Argive celebration of the Arneia, a festival which commemorated the death of the infant Linus in the sheepfold, and involved the ritual slaying of dogs: Harder, A., *Callimachus: Aetia*, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 265-75.

for an offence committed by a previous Argive king, Apollo created and dispatched a monster sending it against the city of Argos to exact his vengeance (596-597).⁵²

Phoebe, paras monstrum infandis Acheronte sub imo
conceptum Eumenidum thalamis, cui uirginis ora
pectoraque; aeternum stridens a uertice surgit
et ferrugineam frontem discriminat anguis.
haec tum dira lues nocturno squalida passu
inlabi thalamis, animasque a stirpe recentes
abripere altricum gremiis morsuque cruento
deuesci et multum patrio pinguescere luctu.

1.597-604

Apollo procures a monster conceived in the Furies' abominable chambers beneath Acheron, it had the face and breast of a virgin; from its head rose an eternally hissing serpent, splitting the dark brow. Then this dire, squalid pest stalks by night, sliding into bedrooms, it tears infant souls from their nurses' breasts, to devour them with bloody jaws and grow fat on the country's grief.

A young Argive hero, Coroebus, and a band of youths, approach the monster as she makes her way towards the city (605-9), having already collected fresh victims:

lateri duo corpora paruum
dependent, et iam unca manus uitalibus haeret
ferratique unguis tenero sub corde tepescunt

⁵² This act by Apollo constitutes a complete inversion of standard mythic narratives, where the warrior-god defeats the chaos-monster – instead of eradicating disorder (as he does with Python at 1.562ff.), Apollo engenders it.

1.609-11

twin corpses of children hang from her side, and already her hooked hands sink into their vitals, and beneath a young heart iron talons grow warm.

Plunging his sword deep into the monster's *pectore duro* ('hard heart', 613), Coroebus dispatches the creature, sending her spirit back to Hades (612-6). Adrastus then describes the aftermath of the monster's death:

iuuat ire et uisere iuxta

liuentes in morte oculos uterique nefandam
proluuiem et crasso squalentia pectora tabo,
qua nostrae cecidere animae. stupet Inacha pubes
magnaque post lacrimas etiamnum gaudia pallent.
hi trabibus duris (solacia vana dolori)
proterere exanimos artus asprosque molares
deculcare genis; nequit iram explere potestas.
illam et nocturno circum stridore uolantes
impastae fugistis aues, rabidamque canum uim
oraeque sicca ferunt trepidorum inhiasse luporum.

1.616-26

It was pleasing to go and see up close the eyes livid in death, and the abominable flowing excrement of the womb, and the breasts squalid with thick rot, where our souls were lost. The men of Inachus were stunned, and after tears great joy, yet still they paled. Some with wooden clubs crushed lifeless limbs, and smashed its face with sharp rocks (vain solace for grief). They were powerful, yet unable to appease their rage. Ravening birds fled from it, flying

around, screeching in the night, dogs were rabid, and anxious wolves gaped with dry jaws.

Statius introduces the figure of the Theban Sphinx in the midst of his description of the Theban ambush of Tydeus in Book 2, and in her description continues the imagery of bestial hybridity, death and disease.⁵³ Having been deployed by Eteocles, a band of Theban soldiers hastens along a hidden track through the dense forest outside the city, and seeks cover in a dark, hidden grove (496-504). Stressing the position of their hiding place in relation to the craggy outcrop that was once home to the Theban Sphinx (502-504), Statius launches into a vivid description of the creature.

hic fera quondam

pallentes erecta genas suffusaque tabo

lumina, concretis infando sanguine plumis

reliquias amplexa uirum semesaque nudis

pectoribus stetit ossa premens...

nec mora, quin acuens exertos protinus ungues

liuentesque manus strictosque in uulnere dentes...

2.505-14

Here the savage creature once stood with pallid face, and eyes suffused with decay, her feathers congealed with terrible blood, she sat atop the remains of men, pressing half-eaten bones to her naked breast...quickly sharpening her long claws, and with livid hands and fangs bared to wound...

⁵³ As noted by Vessey, the account Statius gives of the monster recalls the snake-woman from Adrastus' tale: Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, p. 146.

The poet briefly references her defeat at the hands of Oedipus, before describing her death and its aftermath:

donec de rupe cruenta
... cessantibus alis
tristis inexpletam scopulis adfligeret aluum.
monstrat silua nefas: horrent uicina iuueni
gramina, damnatis auidum pecus abstinet herbis.
non Dryadum placet umbra choris non commoda sacris
Faunorum, diraeque etiam fugere uolucres
prodigiale nemus.

2.516-23

While from the bloody cliff, yielding with ceasing wings, she smashed her insatiate belly upon the rocks. The forest shows the horror: bullocks fear the nearby meadow, and the flock abstains from the cursed grass. The ghost does not please the Dryad choirs, or accommodate the rites of the Fauns, even carrion birds flee from the prodigious grove.

Statius' incorporation of female hybrid monsters shows that he is operating within the tradition of monstrosity established by earlier Greek and Roman poets. The highly visual descriptions of female monsters reveal the influence of Statius' Roman predecessors, Vergil and Ovid, in particular their renderings of mythic monsters such as Scylla, Medusa, the Furies and the Harpies. Tisiphone displays the full repertoire of serpentine furial imagery that had expanded in the Republican and Imperial periods.⁵⁴ Like her Vergilian and Ovidian

⁵⁴ On furial iconography in Imperial Roman literature, see Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, pp. 149-53.

predecessors, she is strongly associated with death and the chthonic realm through the snakes she wears and wields, and her ability to fly marks her out as supernatural and birdlike. Giving a far more detailed description of the Sphinx's physical formation than his literary predecessors, Statius details the creature's protruding talons, feathers, and sharp, bared teeth in vivid opposition to her womanly face and torso. The snake-woman of Argos is a seemingly novel figure in the epic genre, and the poet's expanded, highly physical description connects her with several archaic paradigms of female threat (specifically hybrid monsters) familiar from classical myth.

The hissing serpent that protrudes from her brow, along her conception within the *infandis...Eumenidum thalamis* (597-8), aligns her with the Furies (especially Tisiphone, who appears to be the creature's foster mother), who wear snakes variously about their bodies, and commonly wield them as whips (for example, *Theb.* 1.46ff, Seneca, *Herc. F.* 88, *Thyestes* 98-9).⁵⁵ Her hooked, bird-like talons, and maidenly face, along with the foul discharge that seeps from her abdomen, suggest a connection with the rabid, ravenous Harpies of Vergil's *Aeneid* (3.216-218), as well as the vampiric, child-snatching *striges* described in Ovid's *Fasti* (6.131-40).⁵⁶ Her staring eyes and serpentine head remind the reader of the *graves oculos* and snake hair of Medusa, who is depicted on Adrastus' ancestral cup in Book 1 (546-7).⁵⁷ The monster's serpentine hybridity also connects her with Hesiod's she-dragon and mother of monsters, Echidna, who was also born in a subterranean cavern, and who gave birth to such monstrosities as Cerberus, the Chimera, and the Sphinx. Statius does not detail the snake-woman's lower portions, but his use of the terms *squalida passu*, meaning "scaly step"

⁵⁵ Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, p. 103.

⁵⁶ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 128.

⁵⁷ Keith, A., "Medusa, Python, and Poinê in Argive Religious Ritual", in Augoustakis, A. (ed.), *Ritual and Religion in Flavian Epic*, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 312.

at line 601, and *inlabor*, meaning "to flow or glide" at 602, suggests that the creature possesses a serpentine lower half.⁵⁸ This composite form also aligns Statius' snake-woman with later descriptions of folkloric *lamiai*, rendered in two texts of the Second Sophistic, Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* (4.25ff.), and Dio Chrysostom's *Discourses* (5). However, whereas these later creatures are characterised by a proclivity for seducing and eating (or sucking the life from) young men, Statius' snake-woman preys upon small children exclusively.

By associating his monster with the Harpies, Furies, Gorgons, and the archaic, excessively fertile, flesh-eating drakaina of Hesiod's *Theogony*, Statius renders a figure emblematic of female corruption and disorder. Her mytho-literary antecedents are all characterised by a disturbing ability to confound mental and physical boundaries: the Harpies by dropping foul, polluting excrement; the Furies by instilling irrational madness and rage; the Gorgons, particularly Medusa, by literally turning living (generally male) bodies into stone; and Echidna by embodying and reproducing chaotic hybridity. As monsters that transgress the boundaries of human existence, and manifestly confuse the categories of man, beast, and god, these female terrors are extreme embodiments of the persistent notion of female physical and mental disorder that existed in the Graeco-Roman world. Observing all her monstrous features together, it is possible to see that Statius' snake-woman is a terrifying amalgamation of multiple menacing female figures familiar from mythology, literature, and folklore, all of whom act as scourges to society, instilling death, disease, and grief.

⁵⁸ This interpretation of the *monstrum*'s physical form is further supported by Ogden's identification of the same creature on a fifth-century BC Greek lekythos, which depicts Apollo, seated on his *omphalos* with his tripod and bow, accompanied by an anguipede which rears up before him, humanoid above the waist, with hooked hands outstretched, and a dark serpent rising from its forehead: LIMC Apollon 998 = Musée du Louvre CA1915: Ogden, D., *Drakōn: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 88.

In his description of the snake-woman, Statius evokes Ovid's Medusa (*Met.* 4. 790-803) and Scylla (*Met.* 14.50-67) by emphasising her virginal, vulnerable attributes,⁵⁹ highlighting that the creature has some attractive elements (her breast and face), however these feminine aspects are quickly joined by bestial imagery, which ultimately culminates with a focus on a wounded, seeping womb. Thus, the feminine imagery of the snake-woman is thoroughly perverted (the maidenly face is split by a fierce serpent, the naked torso tapers into a serpent tail), and the potential of the snake-woman to embody both allure and repulsion gives way to pure threat and horror, engendering fear and loathing amongst the Argives. Despite their womanly aspects, the snake-woman, along with Tisiphone, and the Sphinx retain no sense of feminine vulnerability or beauty, they, with their savage violence, insatiable appetites, and overwhelming hostility, embody the pure physical and psychological threat of the female.

The emphasis on feminine sexuality and maternity combined with chaotic bestial hybridity reveals how Statius' monstrous-feminine is deeply rooted in the imagery and stereotypes of archaic misogyny. With each monster, emphasis is immediately placed upon their hybrid physicality, and their bestial aspects are directly, and significantly linked with their femininity. The focus on the breasts of these female monsters, along with their hair, faces, hands, and eyes, emphasise their femininity. Whereas earlier Latin poets such as Vergil and Ovid frequently invoked the ancient monstrous-feminine to sketch the paradox of woman's simultaneous allure and vulnerability, and inherent repulsiveness and threat (for example, Ovid's Scylla, *Met.* 14.1-74, and Medusa, 4.753-803),⁶⁰ Statius transgresses their precedent, representing a pure, unambiguous female horror that instils fear and madness

⁵⁹ On Augustan representations of Medusa and Scylla, and the "maidenization" of female monsters, see Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, pp. 73-84, 96-113.

⁶⁰ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 71.

among men. Hybridity highlights his monsters' threatening, transgressive sexuality: Tisiphone is a Medusa-like figure, her serpent tresses (along with her corpse-like appearance) graphically manifesting the threat of the female form; the Sphinx has female face and breasts, but her lower strata are part-feline, and part-avian, she is bestial from the waist down; the snake-woman has a virginal face and naked breasts, but also a serpent which rises, as Mairéad McAuley observes, phallically from her head.⁶¹ The Sphinx and the snake-woman are split at the waist, and where their reproductive anatomies should begin, savage, chthonic, bestial parts intrude.

The theme of hybridity in myth reflects a pervasive anxiety regarding the boundary between human and animal, between culture and nature, that persisted in the Roman imperial period. These female monsters combine and confuse real-life forms, assembling them so that as beings they cannot be adequately categorised, and identity slips and shifts – their hybrid forms make them unclassifiable, unknowable, uncontrollable. Tisiphone, the Sphinx and the snake-woman reflect a concern for physical and psychological boundaries and integrity – both of which were vital to contemporary ideals of masculine power and control. They reveal the horror that ensues when the boundary between man and beast is transgressed, and connect that horror with the female sexual and reproductive anatomy. Further to this, through their graphic, accentuated hybridity, Tisiphone, the snake-woman and the Sphinx signal at an early stage the imminent erosion of boundaries and categories that separate humans from savage beasts, and the subversion of order and reason, as male heroes come to exhibit unreasoning, bestial madness and violence. The monsters' mingling of human and bestial forms provides an early, ominous literalisation of Statius' persistent

⁶¹ McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 337.

alignment of his male protagonists with dangerous beasts; both Polynices and Eteocles are likened to aggressive bulls (2.323-32; 11.251-6), Tydeus to a tiger (8.474-5) and a lion (8.593-6), later, ominously, Theseus with a bull (601-5).⁶² Through the Argive snake-woman and the Theban Sphinx, Statius heightens the atmosphere of dread in his epic, and foreshadows the bestial madness that will overcome the protagonists of the poem.

Adding to their bestial elements, Statius also heightens the chthonic, deathly associations of his female monsters by incorporating imagery of death into their characterisations. Each monster in turn is rendered as decaying corpse, and each is responsible for extreme violence that is aligned with their female nature. Tisiphone, the snake-woman and the Sphinx embody fear and death, and introduce humanity to the threat of being made unstable, un-whole, and furthermore (especially with the latter two monsters) to the primal threat of being eaten.⁶³ Tisiphone is both dead and deadly, she is patently vital and powerful, and yet characterised as a swollen, toxic carcass spreading death and disease on her very breath. The Sphinx is similarly cadaverous in her appearance, with her *pallens* ('pale', 'greenish') face, eyes suffused with *tabum* ('decaying matter', 'plague'), her feathers congealed with *infandus sanguis* (atrocious blood). Both the snake-woman and Sphinx enact violent and perverse parodies of maternity, and are ultimately rendered as rotting, noxious female carcasses with bare breasts and wounded wombs. Graphically prefiguring Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine, and embodying the core components of Kristeva's abjection, these living-dead monsters are heightened images of gross bodily excess and

⁶² On the ominous alignment of Theseus with the hereditary madness of Thebes through the use of the bull simile, see Hershkowitz, D., "Sexuality and Madness in Statius' Thebaid", *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici*, 33, p. 145-7.

⁶³ On the threat of being eaten as a primal and defining feature of monstrosity, see Andriano, J.D., *Immortal Monster: The Mythological Evolution of the Fantastic Beast in Modern Fiction and Film*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999, p. 91; Gilmore, *Monsters*, p. 7.

waste, they confuse and transgress the boundaries of life and death, and of the human body, and they represent the maternal figure as malevolent and destructive, incompatible with and inhibitive to proper, functioning society and civilisation.

Apollo's avenging monster acts out a perverse parody of maternity, snatching infants away from their mothers' breasts, and devouring, rather than birthing and nourishing.⁶⁴ This feature of specifically female-oriented violence serves to align the snake-woman with yet another paradigm of female threat: the child-killing reproductive demon of Mediterranean folklore, sometimes known as the Lamia.⁶⁵ The snake-woman's connection to the *lamiai* figures of the Second Sophistic, along with the backstory of the molested Argive princess, her dead infant, and Apollo's vengeance, narrated by Adrastus prior to her entry into the text,⁶⁶ further connect her with the archaic and obscure figure of the archetypical Lamia. The Lamia surfaces varyingly in ancient Greek myth, literature and folklore. Stesichorus identifies her as the mother of the sea-monster Skylla (Stes. F220, PMG/Campbell), in fifth century comedy she is a comically repellent, flatulent, hermaphroditic creature (Aristophanes, *Wasps*, 1035; *Peace* 758). The 'archetypical Lamia', whom Ogden identifies through distinct narrative parallels present in several sources for the figure,⁶⁷ was a beautiful Libyan woman, or queen,

⁶⁴ McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, p. 337.

⁶⁵ On the figure of the ancient Greek reproductive demon, see Johnston, S.I., "Penelope and the Erinyes: Odyssey 20.61-82", *Helios*, 21.2, 1994, pp. 137-59; Johnston, S.I., "Defining the Dreadful: Remarks on the Greek Child-Killing Demon", in Meyer, M., and Mirecki, P., (eds.), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World*, 129, Leiden, New York, and Köln: Brill, 1995; Johnston, S.I., *Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

⁶⁶ Prior to the entrance of the snake-woman in Book 2, Adrastus recites the story of the daughter of a previous Argive king, who was raped by Apollo and gave birth in secret (571-577). The princess entrusted her newborn to a shepherd from the mountains (578-585), but the infant was soon attacked and torn apart by rabid dogs as it slept in a meadow (587-589). Overwhelmed by guilt and grief, the daughter revealed to her father that she gave birth, and he sentenced her to death for deceiving him (590-595), thus incurring the wrath of Apollo. Statius does not provide names for the daughter of Crotopus, or her baby, however Pausanias' supplies names in his later description of the same myth (*Description of Greece*, 1.43.7-8, 2.19.8), according to his account, they are Psamathe, and Linus (respectively).

⁶⁷ Ogden, D., *Dragons Serpents & Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds*, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 98-99.

impregnated by Zeus, who consequently lost her children to Hera's wrath, and became disfigured and misshapen by her grief, ultimately transforming into a fearsome (sometimes paedocidal, sometimes paedophagous) female monster (described by Diodorus Siculus 20.41, and Heraclitus *De incredibilibus* 34, as distinctly bestial) intent on repeatedly inflicting her own terrible fate upon other women, creating a violent cycle of birth and death.⁶⁸ Joseph Fontenrose highlights the concurrence of the narratives of the archetypical Lamia and Staius' Argive princess, both being beautiful royal women impregnated by visiting gods and subsequently losing their children. Fontenrose determines that the similar fates of (queen) Lamia and the princess, and similar evil behaviours of (bestial, disfigured) Lamia and Apollo's snake-woman, show that Staius' portrait of the avenging snake-woman resembles, and likely descends from, the archetypical Lamia.⁶⁹ Thus the womanly features of the snake-woman belong to the very woman she was created to avenge, the virgin princess; and her maidenly face and breasts can be interpreted as the defiled princess metaphorically returning from the dead as defiling demon to avenge herself and her child, just as Lamia returned in monstrous form.⁷⁰

The association of the snake-woman with the archetypical Lamia highlights the maternal aspect of the creature's characterisation, as does the image of her balancing two infants on her hips (609-611), and the focus that is repeatedly drawn to her breasts (599, 613, 618), and her womb (617-618). These maternal aspects of the snake-woman only serve to highlight her monstrosity, however, as the two infants that she carries are already corpses skewered upon her iron talons, her breasts are covered in blood, and her womb is ruptured

⁶⁸ Duris of Samos, *FGrH* 76 F17; Diodorus 20.41.3-6; Schol. Aristophanes *Peace* 758; Heraclitus *De incredibilibus*, 34.

⁶⁹ Fontenrose, J., *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and its Origins*, Berkeley, and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959, pp. 113-114.

⁷⁰ Keith, 'Medusa, Python, and Poine', 2013, p. 312.

and leaking foul *proluuies*.⁷¹ Like the snake-woman, the Sphinx is also figured as a grotesquely distorted mother, nesting atop piled bones, embracing the dismembered, half-eaten remains of her male victims against her naked breast as though they were suckling infants.⁷² Slaughtering, dismembering, and eating, rather than feeding and nourishing, is a key aspect of the maternal inversion and perversion inherent in these figures. The aberrant maternal gestures of the female monsters serve to heighten the disturbing reflection of the female in the *Thebaid*.

The death of the Theban Sphinx mirrors that of the snake-woman, in that the monster's womb is the site of her fatal wounding. Creed establishes that the monstrous-feminine is not strictly embodied in the maternal figure or her physicality, but more in her dismembered, disembodied reproductive parts: her breasts and her womb.⁷³ Likewise, Judith (Jack) Halberstam is conscious of the deconstruction of the maternal body as vital to the construction of gothic horror, they argue that woman becomes monster when she is "deconstructed into her messiest and most slippery parts, as images of the reproductive body grotesquely unravelled".⁷⁴ Halberstam's discussion of woman's monstrous materiality is instructive for a reading of Statius' maternal monsters:

"The reduction of the female monster to pulp gives us a very literal metaphor for the threat of female monstrosity as opposed to the threat figured by male monstrosity. The pulp that Frankenstein scatters about his laboratory floor is the female monster, is female monstrosity. It is both a fleshy sexuality that

⁷¹ Vessey sees these twin corpses as portents for the twin corpses of Polynices and Eteocles, and the *monstrum* therefore as a symbolic figuration of Tisiphone, driving the princes towards their deaths: Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, pp. 103-4.

⁷² McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 338.

⁷³ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 1993, pp. 49-53; McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 342.

⁷⁴ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 1995, p. 52; McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 342.

Frankenstein originally fled from by leaving his home, his mother, and his bride to be and also formless flesh that refuses to become human....The female monster cannot be human because it is always only an object, a thing, “unfinished”.”⁷⁵

This formlessness, boundlessness, and messiness of Statius’ female monsters stands in direct, and menacing opposition to masculine society and its whole, ordered patriarchal structures.

In the snake-woman and the Sphinx we see two paradigmatic inverted and perverted mother figures – each belonging to a city drawn into the conflict by the very curse that the Theban queen, Jocasta, embodies and transmits – who graphically display the disturbing truth of Jocasta’s *nefas*-infused maternity. While Jocasta is only figuratively constructed as a monstrous maternal figure,⁷⁶ Apollo’s snake-woman and the Theban Sphinx are two literal mother-monsters, they are extreme images of ‘corrupted, primal maternity’ that is ruinous and all consuming, rather than nourishing and generative.⁷⁷ Their lack of fertility, shown in their ruptured wombs, and their abhorrent distortions of maternal gestures (seen in the snake-woman holding an eviscerated infant on each hip, and the Sphinx pressing dead men to her naked breast) connect them with the reproductive body of the Theban queen, who involuntarily engenders the violence, horror, and death that pervades the Theban epic.

These female monsters are further linked by the disempowering, emasculating effect they have upon men: the snake-woman though slain by Coroebus, in death continues to provoke fearful pallor in the Argive youths, who cannot seem to put aside their anxiety (1.619-623),⁷⁸ the Sphinx literally destroys men by tearing them to pieces, eating them and clutching

⁷⁵ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 1995, p. 51.

⁷⁶ Further discussion in Chapter 2.

⁷⁷ McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p.338.

⁷⁸ Vessey argues that the band of Argive youths parallel the Argive champions who follow Polynices to war: Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, p. 105.

at their dismembered parts (2.508-509), and Tisiphone psychologically overwhelms Polynices and Eteocles, infecting them with the *furor* and compulsion for *nefas* that will ultimately engulf Argos and Thebes. The gruesome imagery that accompanies the snake-woman and the Sphinx, in particular their proclivity for dismembering and consuming human bodies – specifically the bodies of men, and a generation of infants – can be seen as foreshadowing the violence and gore of Tydeus’ gory fight against the Theban ambushers in Book 2,⁷⁹ and his later cannibalism on the Theban battlefield in Book 8, along with the cataclysmic fratricide of Book 12, where Polynices and Eteocles, having returned to their origins, effectively dismember their generation of the cursed Theban dynasty, through their mutual destruction. By overwhelming and devouring men and children, Tisiphone, the snake-woman, and the Sphinx effectively emasculate and disempower patriarchal society, violently depriving it of generational continuity, politico-military dominance and control, and the civilising influence of masculine power, reason, and order.

The disorder and death that Statius’ three female monsters embody and engender is replicated in the broader context of the narrative, in the obsessive, maddened fixation of both Theban princes on dominating their cursed ancestral city, as well as the collective, blind savagery and bloodlust of the Seven, and the overarching context of a criminal, cannibalistic civil war that consumes a generation of heroes. The destructive violence of the snake-woman can also be seen to reflect the cyclical, suicidal, and cannibalistic nature of the Theban curse, which causes generations to be consumed by recurring, regressive *furor* and *nefas*. The snake-woman prefigures the civil war in general; her cannibalism symbolic of the imminent internecine destruction, and her infanticide the generational slaughter that attends the war.

⁷⁹ On the connection between the Sphinx and the madness and violence of Tydeus, see Gervais, K., “Tydeus the Hero? Intertextual Confusion in Statius *Thebaid* 2, *Phoenix*, 69.1, 2015, pp. 72-3.

Tisiphone prefigures (and controls) the whole narrative, as a graphic embodiment of spreading *nefas*, *furor*, and horror. The Fury, the snake-woman, and the Sphinx expose the visceral horror of death, portending the horrific, inglorious deaths of the Seven, and thereby building a sense of dread in the poem.

Statius' version of the monstrous-feminine is intensified by the feature of pollution and contagion. The physical and psychological disorder and messiness of Tisiphone, the snake woman, and the Sphinx reflects misogynistic stereotypes that cast the female form as innately unstable and infectious. With their porous forms, they reflect the poet's (and his audience's) concern for mental and physical boundaries. While Statius does not overtly dwell on the female aspects of the Fury's anatomy, in his description of her noxious form and its impact upon the epic protagonists, he does capture an essential aspect of contemporary attitudes regarding the female – that of feminine corruption and corruptibility. The combined focus on the reproductive, sexual anatomy of the snake-woman and her oozing womb highlight the misogyny behind her characterisation, as Statius links the natural, exposed female body with destructive, deathly substances.⁸⁰ Continuing in this vein, Statius draws attention to the Sphinx's female anatomy and the pollution it manifests, in his description of her death, after she has been defeated by Oedipus: the corpse of the Sphinx, with its ruptured, insatiate belly (which, observing the potential ambiguity in the term 'aluus', may also be cast as her womb), infects the landscape around it, its noxiousness warding off nearby cattle and sheep (519-520); the grove is abandoned and abhorred by Dryad choirs and Fauns, and even carrion birds will not venture into it (521-522).

⁸⁰ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 128.

Each female monster in turn is described with language that vividly evokes defilement, filth, and disease (*nefandus, squalidus, proluuies, tabum*). The poet's use of the term *proluuies* in his description of snake-woman is particularly significant for the poet's association of the feminine with pollution and contagion, as it evokes the imagery of plague.⁸¹ Lucretius utilises the term *proluuies*⁸² in his description of symptoms suffered by victims of the Athenian plague:

quorum siquis, ut est, vitarat funera leti,
ulceribus taetris et nigra proluvie alvi
posterius tamen hunc tabes letumque manebat...

De Rerum Natura 6.1199-1202

And if one of them, as may happen, had escaped the destruction
of death, yet afterwards by foul ulcers and a black discharge from
the bowels, wasting and death still awaited him...⁸³

By using plague imagery in his depiction of the dead snake-woman, Statius connects her body with the pestilence that Apollo visits upon Argos, the second phase of the cycle of ruin that afflicts the city (which prefigures the third phase, the Theban civil war), as punishment for her destruction. The plague that follows the monster's death serves to further her contrast with the Sphinx, whose death was also followed by a devastating pestilence.⁸⁴ The added detail of ravening animals too afraid to approach the corpse also finds a parallel in Lucretius (6.1215-1218), further emphasising the terrible contagion that the snake-woman embodies.

⁸¹ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, pp. 127-8.

⁸² Closer to Statius' time, the term is also used by agricultural writer Columella to describe the diarrhoea of humans and cattle, as well as the liquid excrement of birds, which has the potential to pollute food and water (*De Re Rustica* 6.7, 12.36, 8.3.9).

⁸³ Rouse's translation, 1975.

⁸⁴ Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, p. 107.

Stattius' specification that the *proluuies* leaks from the corpse's womb endows the corruption with a distinctly, and perversely feminine, maternal quality. This link between contagion and femininity manifested in the snake-woman's corpse may be further revealed by a comparison with the Harpies of Vergil's *Aeneid*.

uirginei uolucrum uultus, foedissima uentris
proluuies uncaeque manus et pallida semper
ora fame...
at subitae horrifico lapsu de montibus adsunt
Harpylae et magnis quatiunt clangoribus alas,
diripiuntque dapes contactuque omnia foedant
immundo; tum vox taetrum dira inter odorem.

Aeneid, 3.216-218, 225-8

Maiden faces have these birds, foulest filth they drop, clawed hands are theirs, and faces ever gaunt with hunger...But suddenly, with fearful swoop from the mountains the Harpies are upon us, and with loud clanging shake their wings, plunder the feast; and with unclean touch mire every dish.⁸⁵

The term *proluuies* is significant here. In his discussion of Vergil's Harpies, Dunstan Lowe notes the ambiguity of the term, and argues that whilst it may stand for the birdlike excrement of these avian monsters, it may also refer to feminine sexual and menstrual secretions.⁸⁶ These female bodily discharges were, for the Romans, substances that proved women to be biologically closer to nature and the bestial. Debbie Felton, too, argues that

⁸⁵ Fairclough's translation, 1918.

⁸⁶ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 127.

proluuies refers to menstrual discharge, demonstrating that contemporary Roman folkloric notions of *menses* reflect a strong perception of the contagious, pollutant properties of the substance.⁸⁷ According to the account of Pliny the Elder, rendered in his *Naturalis Historia*, menstruating women were contagious and malodorous, their touch and even their mere approach had a sterilising effect upon the world around them, their glances could rust metal, tarnish mirrors, blunt knives, and their blood, if touched or tasted, could cause rabies or infection (7.64; 28.77-86). Felton also notes that the word Pliny uses to refer to menstrual flow, *profluvium*, conspicuously resembles *proluuies*, furthering her point that Vergil intended to – perhaps subliminally – characterise his monstrous, winged females that drip foul excrement from their *ventres* (‘stomach’, ‘womb’) as toxic, menstruating women.⁸⁸ By using the term *proluuies* and specifying that it leaks from the snake-woman’s *uterum*, Statius renders a monster whose monstrousness and contagiousness is directly and unambiguously linked to her sexual anatomy, graphically representing contemporary concerns Roman society had regarding women’s bodies.

The Sphinx shares the imagery of corruption and pollution with Tisiphone and the snake-woman. Her body is similarly described as being suffused with disease and putrefying matter, her wings covered in congealed gore. The heightened emphasis on pollution and contagion in Statius’ description of the Sphinx can be perceived through comparing his descriptions with those rendered in the Theban plays of Seneca and Euripides:

You came, you came, O winged creature, born of earth and
hellish viper, to prey upon the sons of Cadmus, full of death, full of
sorrow, half a maiden, a murderous monster, with roving wings

⁸⁷ Felton, D., “Were Vergil’s Harpies Menstruating?”, *The Classical Journal*, 108.4, 2013, pp. 405-418.

⁸⁸ Felton, “Were Vergil’s Harpies Menstruating?”, 2013, p. 414.

and ravening claws; you once caught up youths from the haunts of Dirce, with discordant song, and you brought, you brought a murderous grief, a deadly curse to our native land. A deadly god he was who brought all this to pass. Mourning of mothers, mourning of maidens, filled the houses with groans; a lamenting cry, a lamenting song, one after another wailed out, in turn throughout the city. The roar of the groaning was like thunder, whenever the winged maiden bore a man out of sight from the city.⁸⁹

Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 1020-1040

The Sphinx, weaving her words in darkling measures, I fled not; I faced the bloody jaws of the fell prophetess and the ground white with scattered bones. And when from a lofty cliff, already hovering over her prey, she prepared her pinions and, lashing her tail like a savage lion, stirred up her threatening wrath, I asked her riddle. Thereupon came a sound of dread; her jaws crashed, and her talons, brooking no delay, eager for my vitals, tore at the rocks.⁹⁰

Seneca, *Oedipus*, 92-100

While Euripides and Seneca offer detailed, evocative descriptions of the Sphinx, Statius goes further than both, offering a magnified portrait that highlights the creature's femininity, and physical corruption. As with the snake-woman, Statius stresses both the Sphinx's femininity

⁸⁹ Coleridge's translation, 1938.

⁹⁰ Miller's translation, 1917.

and bodily impurity in his description of her death; throwing herself from her cliff, she becomes a mangled carcass with a burst *aluus*, the corpse then contaminates the surrounding landscape, and the creatures living nearby dread to approach the infected grove.

Detailing sexual features and linking them with images of sterility and infection, Statius casts his female monsters as nightmarish embodiments of two negative tropes of femininity: threatening feminine sexuality, and repulsive feminine anatomy. In her bodily permeability (runniness, seepage), Tisiphone resembles the Eumenides of Aeschylus' *Libation-Bearers* (1058) and *Eumenides* (58), who also emit disgusting, damaging, substances. Like her mythic and literary forebears, the Fury embodies the pervasive notion of feminine liquidity, and physical and psychological instability and corruptibility. The Fury both suffers and spreads the wasting condition of extreme negative emotion, casting it down on the Theban princes, overpowering and impairing their rationality, their mental and physical integrity. The pallor and putrefaction of her flesh, the snakes on her head and in her hands, the distemper she breathes, all combine to signify her venomous, infectious condition. The Fury effectively functions as an embodiment of infectious feminine irrational passion – meaning that the *Thebaid's* driving force, *furor* and *nefas*, is gendered in the feminine.⁹¹

Tisiphone, the snake-woman and the Theban Sphinx not only present the protagonists of the epic with the threat of pollution, rather they reveal (to the Statian audience, at least) that they are already polluted, their vital boundaries have been breached by the uncontrolled savagery usually attributed to women and beasts. Statius' emphasis on the reproductive body in these monstrous descriptions highlights a narrative focus on the maternal body as a point

⁹¹ McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 336-7.

of both origin and contagion and for the Theban sickness. This idea is invoked several times in the text, both through the speeches of the Theban mother Jocasta, who appears in books 7 and 11 to physically confront her warring sons with their origins, specifically her womb and her breasts, and in the poet's description of the final fratricide as "one vast war from a single womb" (*unius ingens / bellum uteri*, Theb. 11. 407-8).⁹² In each of these episodes, Theban war, hitherto characterised by bestial madness and violence, is presented as originating in, and being enacted upon, the body of the mother. The pollution and instability, and the boundary transgression that is manifest in the feminine bodies of the Fury, the Argive snake-woman and Theban Sphinx supplies the poem with an early paradigm for the contagious, regressive and self-destructive sickness that wreaks havoc upon the Theban family,⁹³ and highlights the role of Theban maternity in guaranteeing the reproduction of Thebes' hereditary *furor* and *nefas*. They are graphic, grotesque embodiments of the uncontrolled, uncontained minds and bodies characteristic of women and beasts, and portend the spread of bestial, corrupting madness amongst the male heroes of the epic.

By incorporating Tisiphone, the snake-woman, and the Sphinx at the outset of his epic, Statius gives the ancient monstrous-feminine primacy and power. He allows a female monster to dominate his epic, as Tisiphone controls the action at crucial junctures. While Statius' Fury is clearly modelled upon the prominent Furies of earlier Roman epic, she surpasses her literary antecedents in terms of her narrative potency and agency.⁹⁴ Tisiphone's immense power is partly established prior to her entry into the main narrative, in Oedipus' address.⁹⁵

⁹² McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 332ff.

⁹³ Keith, "Medusa, Python, Poine", 2013, p. 317.

⁹⁴ Hershkowitz, D., *The Madness of Epic: Reading Insanity from Homer to Statius*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 53-4, 260-8; Dominik, *The Mythic Voice of Statius*, 1994, pp. 45-8

⁹⁵ Hershkowitz, D., "Sexuality and Madness in Statius' *Thebaid*", *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici*, 33, 1994, p. 128

She is the sole focus of Oedipus' curse-prayer. He mentions the gods of the underworld and the river Styx as preamble, before aiming his speech directly at the fury (56-60). As he recounts the events of his life, Oedipus emphasises that he was only able to defeat the Theban Sphinx under her guidance (67), and entered into unnatural and evil wedlock resulting in children borne *for* her (*tibi*, 70), as she herself knows (70). Oedipus then refers to her as his appropriate champion (*tu...debita vindex*, 80), and as the queen of the Tartarean chasm (*Tartarei regina barathri*, 85). Oedipus effectively establishes that Tisiphone has been invested in his life since its beginning; she nursed him in her lap after Jocasta's attempted infanticide (60-61), and herself orchestrated both his triumphs and tragic, ruinous mistakes, all for her own benefit (62-74). Tisiphone is thus set up at the outset of Statius' epic as Oedipus' mother,⁹⁶ master, tutor, and divine avenger, as well as queen of the underworld – and just as she has long dominated the lives of Oedipus and his offspring, she will dominate the events of the narrative. Tisiphone's supremacy is further established through the narrator's description of her being swifter than Jupiter's lightning bolts (92), this suggestion that she is more potent than the Olympian king is confirmed in Book 11 when he withdraws in horror, advising the other supernal gods to follow him, and casting an obscuring darkness upon Thebes, that he might not witness the final fratricide (119-135). Her potency in Hades is also suggested when Statius describes Atropos, the eldest of the fates, and Proserpina, the true queen of the underworld, as her handmaidens, designers of her horrid mantle (110-111).

Tisiphone's power can be further realised when she is contrasted with Vergil's Fury, Allecto, and Ovid's Tisiphone.⁹⁷ In the *Aeneid*, Tisiphone's sister, Allecto, is summoned from Hades by Juno, who requires her assistance in thwarting the Trojans in Italy (7.312-25). Allecto

⁹⁶ On Tisiphone as (surrogate) Oedipal matriarch, see McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, pp. 336-7.

⁹⁷ Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, p. 75.

is described as relishing war, madness, and crime, she is loathed by all, and has many fearsome forms, with many black serpents sprouting from her visage (325-329). Juno commands Allecto to sow violent discord between the Latins and the Trojans (330-340). The Fury obeys, infecting both the Latin queen, Amata, and the Rutulian prince, Turnus, with Bacchic and warlike frenzy (respectively: 341-405; 406-474). Having instilled rage and hatred between the two peoples (475-518). At the sound of Allecto's shriek, the Latins and Trojans rush to arms, and a violent skirmish breaks out (519-539). With her task completed, Allecto returns to Juno, offering to extend her maddening influence and draw bordering towns into the war (540-551). Juno declines her offer, stating that Jupiter had never wished for Allecto to wander freely in the upper realm, she dismisses her, and resumes control (552-560). Obedient, Allecto returns to her dismal cavern, to the relief of heaven and earth (560-571). Ovid provides an even more extreme representation of furial potency and physicality in *Metamorphoses* 4, in his retelling of the story of Ino and Athamas (*Met.* 4.464-511). Ovid's Tisiphone surpasses Vergil's Allecto in terms of both vindictiveness and visceral detail.⁹⁸ Tisiphone is adorned and armed with more snakes than Allecto, and appears to be driven by more mad energy, firing her torch by whirling it madly around her head, she is also equipped with various infernal poisons extracted from fellow monstrous figures such as Cerberus and the Hydra. Upon completing her task, Ovid's Tisiphone sheds her furial accessories "as if removing a costume"⁹⁹ (4.511).

Statius endows his Fury with far more power and agency than Vergil allows his Allecto, or Ovid his Tisiphone. Allecto is introduced in the seventh book of the *Aeneid*, and Ovid's Tisiphone in Book 4 of the *Metamorphoses*, whereas Statius positions Tisiphone at the outset

⁹⁸ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 150.

⁹⁹ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 151.

of his epic, before any of the Olympian gods have intervened. The two earlier Furies are secondary figures, subordinate to both the supernal and infernal deities; they fulfil cameo appearances in their respective epics, being summoned, deployed, and dismissed by Juno. In both the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*, furial power and influence is established, then promptly curtailed by a more powerful deity. Statius' Fury is not summoned by a superior power, rather she *is* the superior power; she is the being to whom invocations are addressed, and acts as a powerful goddess in her own right. Thus, at the beginning of Statius epic, there is a powerful, monstrous infernal queen looming over the narrative, rather than a wrathful supernal one.

Tisiphone also outdoes Allecto, and Ovid's Tisiphone in terms of her agency and influence in the epic. Whereas both earlier furies are limited to one main narrative episode, Tisiphone reappears throughout the *Thebaid* in varying contexts, showing that she influences not only the unfolding events of the text, but also events of the past. Later in Book 1, she is cast as foster mother to Apollo's snake-woman, who was raised within the Furies' infernal bower, giving Tisiphone a place within Argive myth-history (597-598). The Fury also appears in the ecphrasis of Book 2, when Vulcan entwines Harmonia's fatal necklace with the most potent of Tisiphone's serpent hairs (2. 282-283), and in Book 4 she smiles to see the necklace being worn by Eriphyle, ensuring Amphiaraus' death (4.211-214). In Book 5 she is Venus' accomplice in instilling violent rage amongst the Lemnian women, inciting them to enact their own grisly civil war, and kill their husbands (5.65-67). Tisiphone is even reflected in the appearance of Jocasta, who is described with a simile likening her to the eldest of the Furies (7.477).¹⁰⁰ Throughout Book 11, Tisiphone is shown to have complete control over the events

¹⁰⁰ Further discussion in Chapter 2.

leading up to the fratricide, as she boasts of her wicked deeds and planned *grande opus* (11.100) with her sister Megaera: Tydeus' grisly anthropophagy (11.85-8; 8.751-7), Capaneus' maddened challenge to Jupiter (11.88-91; 10.897-939), the climactic, catastrophic duel of Polynices and Eteocles (11.97-112; 11.552-73). Tisiphone's power and agency thus pervades the *Thebaid*, as she lurks in Argive myth-history, in the fashioning of cursed heirlooms, behind tales of foreign wars, in the appearance of the Theban queen, the monstrous deeds of the Seven. She has even seized the future:

*lamque in miseros pensum omne Sororum
scinditur, et Furiae rapuerunt licia Parcis.*

8.381-2

And now against the wretches all the woolwork of the Sisters' is torn, and the
Furies have seized the threads of the Fates.

Unlike Allecto, and Ovidian Tisiphone, Statius' Tisiphone is permitted to range and rage unchecked in the *Thebaid*, appearing at regular intervals to incite violence and madness. Her influence in the epic is both cosmic and miasmatic, as she seeps into every aspect of the narrative.

While Vergil incorporates the Furies into his epic narrative to illustrate his interest in the tension between male reason and female passion,¹⁰¹ Statius uses this tension as his starting point, and within the first act of the epic, the tension is irrevocably broken – the epic is overshadowed by the feminine horror that Tisiphone embodies. She manifests perverse femininity, death, disease and decay, along with bestial hybridity and behaviour. Her entry into the narrative introduces not only the overarching, overwhelming themes of *furor* and

¹⁰¹ Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 116.

nefas, but also the theme of monstrous femininity, reiterated in the figures of Apollo's snake-woman, and the Theban Sphinx. Tisiphone seems to act as a *monstrum* in both senses of the term: ostensibly she is a monstrous, physically and psychologically transgressive hybrid, but she is also a grim portent for the ensuing horror of the text, as fear and foreboding enter the narrative with her. Tisiphone's physical form corporealises her contaminating, uncontainable nature – she embodies the misogynistic stereotypes of feminine unreason, bodily excess, and instability. The Fury is preeminent in the infernal, supernal, and mortal realms; she constitutes the beginning and end of the criminal war; and she is omnipotent, and omnipresent. So, while the action of the *Aeneid* is fuelled by a vindictive Olympian goddess, the *Thebaid* is dominated by a repulsive and terrifying female monster. Tisiphone powerfully represents the monstrous-feminine overpowering and destroying the masculine, exerting catastrophic influence over male minds, and the masculine spheres of war and politics.

The Fury, the snake-woman, and the Sphinx collectively establish Statius' own powerful version of the monstrous-feminine. They are connected by their close textual proximity to each other, and their presence at the narrative forefront. They all reflect back on each other, each in turn being characterised with clear emphasis on the feminine aspects of their anatomy, as well as their bestial hybridity, and the imagery of death and disease. Each female monster is also shown to have a destructive, violent impact upon the city it victimises, inspiring terror and irrationality among men. Tisiphone, the snake-woman, and the Sphinx prove vital to the narrative, the Fury for her control over the actions of the heroes, the snake-woman, and the Sphinx for the shadow their descriptions cast over subsequent events. The foundational books of Statius' epic are thus infused with a horror that is strongly associated with the feminine.

As mythic monsters rendered in vivid descriptive passages, Tisiphone, the serpent-woman and Sphinx may function straightforwardly as narrative digressions designed to inspire a pleasing thrill of fear in the poet's audience, or as early signs of the poet's intent to deliver a narrative of unrelenting horror. They may also function as portents of the terrible violence and destruction that is about to unfold. They certainly exemplify a prevalent contemporary anxiety relating to the female body and its functions. Tisiphone, the snake-woman and the Sphinx show that Statius utilises monstrosity sophisticatedly, in order to represent key themes that underlie his epic. These monsters are designed by the author to reflect upon the narrative itself, emphasising the lack of control exercised by the protagonists of the poem, and the total dominance of destructive chthonic powers, and the contagious Theban curse.

The Argive snake-woman and the Theban Sphinx, though promptly defeated by their male opponents are shown to have a lasting effect both on the minds of men, and the world of nature, especially the animals and landscapes that surround them. Further to this, they overshadow the feminine narrative that follows them in the epic, associating the prominent themes of femininity and maternity with death, decay, and destruction, as well as sickness, infanticide, and cannibalism. And so, unlike the female, hybrid monsters of earlier myth and literature, and the Furies of earlier Latin epic, Tisiphone, the snake-woman, and the Sphinx are not summarily expelled from the narrative to make way for the restoration of masculine, patriarchal reason and order. From their respective contexts in Argive and Theban myth-history, they exemplify the polluted and perverted nature of Statius' epic universe, graphically suggesting that the cities of Argos and Thebes have long been afflicted with, and infected by gruesome violence, *furor* and *nefas*. This in turn highlights the tragic blindness of the mortal protagonists of the poem; they do not perceive the lessons and omens of the past, as these

insights are presented through the monster descriptions to the external audience of the text, who must watch with mounting dread as the warring Theban brothers move irrevocably towards their violent ends.

Although the Fury, the snake-woman, and the Sphinx appear to be marginal, presented as they are in passages seemingly disconnected from the main, human narrative, they are in fact central to Statius' program of horror. From their prominent narrative positions, these monsters foreshadow the oncoming horrors of the epic, effectively offering previews for the *furor*- and *nefas*-fuelled events such as the violent generational slaughter enacted by the Seven and the Theban forces, the masculine dissolution presented on the Theban killing fields, and the gruesome anthropophagy of Tydeus. More than this, with their deathlike bodies, they embody and symbolise one of the main accelerants of the narrative, the Theban curse, and in their maternal figurations they emphasise the inescapable, all-consuming contagion of the Theban mother's womb.

We see in Statius' epic a development of the archaic, prototypical monstrous-feminine of Hesiod. The construction of monstrosity in the *Thebaid* is rooted in feminine repulsion and threat. They share the overlapping features of bestial hybridity, death imagery, and physical and psychological contagion – through them, Statius explores, expands, and amplifies both the mental and bodily threat of the monstrous-feminine. Monstrous figures threaten because they violate the norms that maintain the proper functioning of society, clarifying boundaries by manifesting what must be avoided, for the prospering of reason, order, and cultured civilisation. Statius' female monsters, at the outset of his epic, breakdown these boundaries, and show that his epic universe is infected with the forces of disorder, and unreason that were so unnerving to structured, rational society. Through these monsters, Statius evokes the chaos and disorder of Hesiod's monstrous, primal, feminine cosmos, and the patriarchal fears

regarding the female body and its functions that are present in archaic Greek epic (and later adapted and expanded in imperial epics) are recreated in the *Thebaid*, in the figures of Tisiphone, the snake-woman and the Sphinx. Instead of being unambiguously slain by heroes, or confined to brief episodes, they – with their bestial hybridity and hostility, deathly visages, and polluting aspects – seep and seethe within the text, like the Theban sickness itself. Statius' monsters are not marginal to the narrative, but close to its core, revealing and embodying the madness and violence that drives the story to its grim conclusion.

Our understanding of Statius' material and maternal depictions of Tisiphone, Apollo's snake-woman, and the Theban Sphinx is developed by the application of Barbara Creed's modern critical concept of the monstrous-feminine. In Statius' descriptions of these monsters, the reader can perceive those aspects of Kristeva's abject outlined by Creed (bodily waste, boundary confusion, threatening maternity), and, furthermore, three ancient representations of Creed's monstrous-feminine. Each creature is overwhelmingly feminine and maternal, completely transgressive, traversing the borders of the natural and unnatural, life and death, clean and unclean, man and beast, and all are rendered as terrible, toxic corpses, reminding the Statian audience of their own bodily materiality and mortality, as well as the contagion of woman. As Creed finds reflections of the abject in modern horror film, so too the abject may be found in the ancient text as that which brings patriarchal society into contact with its inherent, primal fears.

Chapter 2: Monstrous Females

In the *Thebaid* there are several prominent female characters who, despite being outwardly concerned with condemning the civil war and reinstating socio-moral norms in the warped world of the epic, are described with seemingly inconsistent similes and parallels that associate them with the negative, transgressive, and destructive forces at work within the poem. Statius' representations of female figures such as Argia, Ide and Jocasta, Polyxo, and the Lemnian women share references and contrasts that are a vital aspect of the poet's technique of association, which creates a pervasive web of feminine threat that spreads across his epic, undermining the proposed narrative of feminine virtue that resists the masculine narrative of perverse heroism.¹⁰² William Dominik has recently demonstrated the significance of similes in the *Thebaid* in aligning the epic's heroes with the central themes of the epic, and therefore keeping the key ideas that underpin the poem at the narrative forefront.¹⁰³ Dominik's discussion of Statius' similes focusses on the male protagonists, and emphasises three central themes within the poem: the abuse of supernatural power, the abuse of monarchical power, and the consequences of these abuses. The similes used to describe key *female* figures are also thematically significant, as they extend the theme of distinctly feminine menace and monstrosity, making this another persistent theme within the poem, closely connected to the motifs of violence, criminality, madness, death, and destruction. Whereas Statius predominantly uses bestial, nautical, and natural similes to describe his heroes, prominent female characters are likened to paradigmatic figures of female transgression, excess, and perversion, such as witches, Furies, Amazons, Maenads,

¹⁰² On the moral agency and heroism achieved by Statius' mourning females in opposition to the moral void engendered by the male protagonists, see Voigt, "The Power of the Grieving Mind", 2016.

¹⁰³ Dominik, W.J., 'Similes and Their Programmatic Role in the *Thebaid*' in Dominik, W.J., Newlands, C.E., Gervais, K., (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Statius. Brill's Companions in Classical Studies*, Leiden, and Boston: Brill, 2015, p. 266.

and wrathful goddesses. The female characters of the poem are yet further aligned with Statius' program of horror through their distinct resemblances to figures of monstrous femininity both within, and outside of the narrative.

Argia

In the opening and closing stages of the *Thebaid*, Argia is presented as a figure of idealised femininity. In Book 1, she appears as the dutiful, and virginal daughter of the Argive king, Adrastus; in Book 2 she is the modest bride of the exiled Theban prince, Polynices; in *Thebaid* 3 she is the devoted wife, assuming and promoting her husband's politico-military desires and aspirations, and in Book 12 Argia's marital fidelity to Polynices reaches new heights (and transgresses new boundaries) as she heroically pursues her warring (now dead) husband into Theban territory. These virtuous aspects of Argia's characterisation have been the focus of several recent analyses of her role in the narrative,¹⁰⁴ with Helen Lovatt arguing: "In comparison with the men who desired and carried out the war of destruction, the female seems to be represented here [in Argia's character, Book 12] as the positive, generative part of humanity, giving birth rather than causing death."¹⁰⁵ Argia's characterisation is complicated, though, by the embedded Argive aetion of Book 1, which contains features that belie Argia's identity as virtuous daughter, wife, and mother, and prove ominous for the actions and fate of the Argo-Theban queen. Through her connection with the princess-

¹⁰⁴ Keith, A., "Sexus Muliebris in Flavian Epic", 2013, pp. 291-4; Bessone, F., "Love and War: Feminine Models, Epic Roles, and Gender Identity in Statius' Thebaid", in Fabre-Serris, J., and Keith, A., *Women and War in Antiquity*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015; Manioti, N., 'Becoming Sisters: Antigone and Argia in Statius' *Thebaid*' in Manioti, N., (ed.), *Family in Flavian Epic. Mnemosyne supplements: Monographs on Greek and Latin Language and Literature 394*, Leiden, and Boston: Brill, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ Lovatt, H., "Competing Endings: Re-reading the End of Statius' *Thebaid* through Lucan", in Augoustakis, A. (ed.), *Flavian Epic, Oxford readings in classical studies*, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p.279.

monster of Adrastus' action, Argia is aligned with the themes of infanticide, cannibalism, and distinctly feminine corruption that permeate the text.

Argia is first mentioned in the poem during the introduction of the Argive king, Adrastus, who is described as lacking in sons (*sexus melioris* 'the better sex', 393), but being invigorated by female offspring, who support him as twin promises of daughters (*pignora natarum*, 394). Here, the narrating voice outlines a mysterious prophecy of Apollo, which foretold the arrival of his future sons-in-law: a bristly boar, and a tawny lion (395-400). Neither Argia, nor her sister Deiphyle, are named at this point, instead they are referred to as *proles feminea* ('female offspring', 393-94). Argia herself enters the narrative later, after Adrastus has recognised his guests, Polynices (wearing a lion skin) and Tydeus (wearing a boar skin), as the two men prophesied to marry his two daughters (482-96). The maiden girls appear at 533, having been summoned to the banquet hall by the king – via their aged nurse, Acaste, who is employed to conceal the girls' 'modesty sacred to lawful sex' (*sacrum iustae Veneri... pudorem*, 531) – from their 'secret chamber' (*arcano thalamo*, 529-34). Here they are nameless still, referred to as *utra virgo* (533), and are described as *mirabile visu* ('glorious to see', 534), resembling the fearsome virgin goddesses Pallas Athena, and Diana (534-6). As the Argive princesses silently look upon the men whom they will fatefully wed with *pudori facies* (bashful faces, 536-7), their cheeks simultaneously blush, and blanch (537), and they dutifully turn their eyes back to their father (538-9).

When Adrastus' banquet is concluded, he calls for his servants to bring in an ancient, sacred bowl, that he might perform the accustomed annual libations for the gods, especially for Apollo (539-56). Explaining these rituals to his guests, Adrastus recounts the unfortunate incidents of the past that have led the Argives to appease Apollo in particular. Adrastus' aetiological retelling of Argive myth-history entails description of Apollo's defeat of Python

(562-8), and the god's subsequent expiatory sojourn at Argos in the home of an ancient Argive king, Crotopus (569-71). Crotopus had a young, and beautiful (*mira decore*, 572) daughter who was 'innocent of the marriage bed' (*intemerata toris*, 573), who kept his pious home (*pios penates*, 572). The unnamed daughter was raped by Apollo on the banks of Inachus, and became pregnant (575-78). After giving birth to a son, fearing her father's wrath, the princess took her child to a remote area outside the city, and secretly entrusted him to the care of a nomadic mountain shepherd (578-81). The infant son of Apollo settled within the sheepfold, but was later torn apart by rabid dogs (587-90).¹⁰⁶ When the princess, now *mater* (591), learned of her son's grisly death, fear, shame, and her father left her mind (591-2). She filled the royal house with savage shrieks, and, bearing her unveiled breast (*vacuum pectus velamine*, 593), she confessed all to her father (590-94). Crotopus was unmoved, and ordered that his daughter be met with the violent death she so desired (594-95).

In this tragic narrative, the characterisation of the Argive princess echoes the recent description of Argia.¹⁰⁷ The past and present princesses share the features of wondrous beauty (*mirabile visu*, 534; *mira decore*, 572), virginity, and filial piety. Both women are nameless daughters of sonless kings, characterised primarily through their relationships with their fathers, and their potential familial roles as wives and mothers.¹⁰⁸ The narrative focus on their roles as royal daughters and future matrons serves to highlight the importance of the female socio-familial role – producers of children and preservers of bloodlines – in their respective characterisations; through these characters the issues of maternity, fertility, and dynasty are focalised. The parallel Argive father-king figures, Adrastus and Crotopus,

¹⁰⁶ On the link this scene of dismemberment forges with Thebes, see Newlands, "Mothers in Statius' Poetry", 2006, p. 206.

¹⁰⁷ Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, p. 160.

¹⁰⁸ Gervais, K., "Parent-Child Conflict in the *Thebaid*", in Dominik, W.J., Newlands, C.E. and Gervais, K., (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Statius, Brill's Companions in Classical Studies*, Leiden, and Boston: Brill, 2015, p.223.

themselves intensify the emphasis on these concerns through their apparent shared preoccupation with their daughters' virginity, and purity: Adrastus sees his daughters as the lesser sex, symbols of the children they will bear and the dynastic continuity he might achieve through them; he worries over their prophesied yet indeterminate marriages, and keeps them cloistered away in a secret chamber, where their modesty can be vigilantly guarded by their nurse (529-34); Crotopus has his daughter mercilessly executed when he discovers that she has been raped by Apollo, borne an illegitimate child, and subsequently become a bereft mother, seeing these terrible misfortunes as defilement and deceit, and the contamination of his royal blood, so great is his obsession with his daughter's purity. This narrative concern with femininity, maternity, purity, and piety is introduced and focalised through Argia and her predecessor, and tainted with an aspect of grim foreboding by the terrible fate of the ancient princess. These themes are further overshadowed, and made more disconcerting as Adrastus' narrative goes on, and the key features of the parallel princesses return, horribly warped in the figure of Apollo's *monstrum*.

Through her association with the Argive princess, Argia is also linked to Apollo's child-eating snake-woman. Apollo's snake-woman is closely connected with the ancient princess whose death she was created to avenge. The characters appear in close narrative proximity to each other, and share a distinct lack of identity, and a focus on their feminine physicality. The snake-woman's princess-predecessor can be readily perceived in the bodily configuration of the creature: its maiden face and torso are symbolic of Apollo's guilt and grief regarding the princess, and the serpent that protrudes from its head reflects the god's wrath and power, as a representation of chthonic Python (depicted earlier in the action, at 1.562-8).¹⁰⁹ The

¹⁰⁹ Ahl, F., "Staius' *Thebaid* a Reconsideration", in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.32.5, 1986, p. 2853; Gervais, "Parent-Child Conflict in the *Thebaid*", 2015, p. 223; Keith, "Medusa, Python, and Poine", 2013, p.312.

monster and the princess are also linked through vocabularic repetitions. The execution of Crotopus' daughter is described as *infandum* (595), and the author uses the same term to describe the snake-woman's birth just one line later (597),¹¹⁰ creating a connection between the death of the princess and the birth of the monster. While the princess keeps her father's *penates* (572), the snake-woman – inverting the princess' precedent – ravages Argive *penates* (608). Just prior to her execution, the Argive princess runs to her father bearing her *pectus* in a gesture of maternal grief, focus is also drawn to the *pectus* of the snake-woman, first in the initial description of her appearance (599), then in her death (613), then again in her corpse (618). The imagery of femininity and maternity presented in the figure of the ancient princess is thoroughly distorted in the figure of the monster. Adrastus' aetiological narrative casts a grim shadow over Argia in her role as *filia* and *matrona* (though the king fails to realise this¹¹¹), as the dual entity of the princess-*monstrum* acts as a terrible figuration of Argia's present, as virginal princess, and her future, as contaminated, contaminating female.¹¹²

As observed in Chapter 1, in the figure of the snake-woman, the idea of feminine impurity and corruptibility is amplified to terrifying degree. Concern regarding female purity has already been highlighted in the text through the author's emphasis on the young women's virginity, and the Argive father-kings' mutual concern regarding the purity, and reproductive output of their daughters. In the characterisations of the princesses, there is a prominent concern regarding containment and concealment. This paternal anxiety regarding the female body reflects a pervasive, patriarchal, misogynistic anxiety relating to female physical and psychological instability and impurity. The snake-woman's body amplifies this anxiety relating

¹¹⁰ Gervais, "Parent-Child Conflict in the *Thebaid*", 2015, p.224.

¹¹¹ On the failure of humans to comprehend their position in relation to malevolent, implacable deities, see McNelis, *Statius' Thebaid and the Poetics of Civil War*, 2007, p. 26.

¹¹² It may be that both Argia and the snake-woman enter the narrative having emerged from secluded *thalami* (1.534, 597-8), emphasising their separation from the masculine and mortal spheres (respectively).

to women's bodies and boundaries, as it embodies both bestial hybridity, and contagion. The poet clearly links the monster's horror with her female anatomy, describing her *uterum* as leaking *nefandam proluviem* ('abominable flowing excrement', 617-18), and her *pectora* as *squalentia crasso tabo* ('squalid with thick rot', 618). The creature's corpse is a vision of perverse femininity and maternity, mixed with bestiality and pollution, inspiring irrepressible fear in the Argive warriors (619-23). The connection drawn between the maternal body and insatiate, regressive, and cyclical violence is portentous for the marriage (and the prospective maternity) of Argia and Polynices, as Argia's absorption into the Theban dynasty serves to engulf Argos in criminal civil war;¹¹³ through her female body, the rest of Argos becomes infected with warmongering, vengeful spirit.¹¹⁴ The contagion that the snake-woman embodies is significant for Argia, as, in the main narrative, she becomes polluted with the Theban sickness. Argia can be seen to absorb her husband's disturbed obsession with his *patria* and *familia* in Book 3 (678-710), and the Theban sickness spreads from her, to her family, to her city, and to her son (who, beyond the scope of the text, will lead the sons of the Seven, the Epigonoï, in another Theban civil war). The contagious snake-woman may therefore function as an omen for Argia, symbolising her imminent transformation into a mother and carrier of the Theban infection and *nefas*. The snake-woman's behaviour is also significant for Argia's fate, as its proclivity for terrorising city and society by attacking mothers and new-borns presents the complete perversion and rejection of the female socio-familial role that was so important to the respective characterisations of Argia and the ancient princess. Rather than reproducing, the monster repeatedly eats children, deprives mothers

¹¹³ On Argia's assumption of Theban horrific past, present, and future, through her union with Polynices, see Newlands, C.E., "Fatal Unions: Marriage at Thebes", in Maniotti, N., (ed.), *Family in Flavian Epic. Mnemosyne supplements: Monographs on Greek and Latin Language and Literature 394*, 2016, p. 152.

¹¹⁴ Keith, "Medusa, Python, Poine", 2013, p.316.

of their maternal role, destroys family and society, and thoroughly upsets generational continuity. Throughout Argia's introduction into the poem, she remains unnamed, and focus is thus drawn away from her individual, personal identity, as she is defined by her role as pious and pure daughter, prophesied wife, and prospective mother. These prominent facets of her character find a deeply ominous parallel, though, in Adrastus' aetiological narrative, in the figure of an ancient Argive princess, and her monstrous avenger.

Argia's role and identity is further overshadowed and complicated in Book 12, when she undertakes her own pious, heroic feat: overcoming both gendered and geographic boundaries she scours the Theban battlefield for the corpse of her husband, and infiltrates the Theban *urbs* herself (12.177-348).¹¹⁵ Prompted by her *pietas*, *pudor*, and mighty mourning, Argia is resolved to perform funeral rites for Polynices, and therefore acts in opposition to the tyrant Creon (177-86). The poet stresses her unwomanly courage and strength by comparing her to two paradigmatic figures of threatening, transgressive femininity from the distant and foreign Black Sea region, Medea, and the Amazons (181-2), whom she outdoes. Paradoxically, in her bravery and piety, Argia highlights the horrors of civil war, and the drastic, violent social inversions it engenders.¹¹⁶ She is completely fixated upon her dead husband (194-5) and eventually detaches herself from her cohort of Argive women, determined to reach Thebes. She takes as her guide the man who had guarded her virgin modesty, and makes for the city (195-207). Ravaging (*rapit*, 220) the fields in her haste, she is heedless of the fearsome sights and sounds of the battlefield (219-20, 222-3), she is *atrox*

¹¹⁵ Voigt notes the paradox of this action, as Argia, in upholding the traditional moral values expected of the ideal *matrona*, takes action that is contradictory to idealised femininity: Voigt, "The Power of the Grieving Mind", 2016, p. 69.

¹¹⁶ Newlands, "Fatal Unions", 2016, p. 161.

('dreadful', 222) to see, and inspires terror in those who encounter her (220-21). Here Statius' incorporates a simile seemingly inconsistent with her virtuous characterisation:

nocte uelut Phrygia cum lamentata resultant
Dindyma, pinigeri rapitur Simoentis ad amnem
dux uesana chori, cuius dea sanguine lecto
ipsa dedit ferrum et uittata fronde notauit.

12.224-7

just as in the Phrygian night when Dindymus echoes with lamentation, the leader of the band is swept toward pine-bearing Simois' river, the goddess herself having elected her blood, gave the blade and marked her with the leafy sacrificial band.

The simile refers to Cybelean worship, and casts Argia as a maddened, knife-bearing priest(ess), bringing the imagery of gender and bodily transgression, and of blood and supernaturally-inspired madness, to the image of a pious, lamenting woman. Again the Statian audience is reminded of feminine disorder and unreason, which, through the simile, is shown completely overwhelming the masculine body and mind, as the masculine *dux* becomes the feminine *uesana*.

Statius' employs another incongruous simile just forty-three lines later, as Argia continues her journey, rushing wildly over the horrid battlefield (269), unafraid of the dark, treacherous landscape, with its slumbering beasts and dreadful monsters, she is emboldened and empowered in her grief (231-7).

qualis ab Aetnaeis accensa lampade saxis
orba Ceres magnae uariabat imagine flammae
Ausonium Siculumque latus, uestigia nigri

raptoris uastosque legens in puluere sulcos;

illius insanis ululatibus ipse remugit

Enceladus ruptoque uias inluminat igni:

Persephonen amnes siluae freta nubila clamant,

Persephonen tantum Stygii tacet aula mariti.

12.270-77

even as grieving Ceres, having lit her torch from the rocks of Aetna, spread the image of the mighty flame across Ausonia and Sicily, reading the tracks of the dark ravisher, vast furrows in the dust; Enceladus himself bellows back at her insane ululations, and his spouting flames illuminate her path, rivers, forests, seas, and clouds cry out, "Persephone", "Persephone"; only the halls of the Stygian husband are silent.

Here, the poet incorporates an image powerful feminine transgression and excess, tying it to the lamenting woman, again linking virtuous feminine devotion with violence, madness, and destruction. The myth of Ceres, as it is told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (5.425-86), entails the loss and destructive grief of the maternal harvest goddess. When Ceres finally realises that her daughter Proserpine is lost, having been raped by Hades, she is wroth, and metes out destruction upon the earth, spoiling the fertility of the land and spreading ruin.

Both of Argia's similes, along with narrative allusions to both Medea and the Amazons, are suggestive of feminine power and threat.¹¹⁷ They also indicate the subversion of the masculine body, mind, and civilisation, and the dismantling of masculine reason, order, and power; this subversion is contrasted with the supernatural overwhelming the mortal.

¹¹⁷ Lovatt, "Competing Endings", 2016, p. 284.

Together the allusions to threatening and transgressive maternal-feminine goddesses emphasise that even after the fratricide, when the Argo-Theban war has ended, the human protagonists are mentally and physically still subject to the will of inscrutable supernatural powers, and to the overwhelming power of *furor* and *nefas*. Even as she enacts her virtuous transgression to reassert proper socio-moral codes, Argia's action is warped and twisted, made monstrous by the horror of the civil war context.

Ide and Jocasta

Both Ide and Jocasta, two prominent Theban matrons, like Argia enact monstrous metamorphoses in their grief, with both women ultimately becoming feminine figures of death, terror and awe, like the monsters of books 1 and 2.¹¹⁸ Ide appears in Book 3, in the midst of a huge throng of maddened Theban mourners, who have poured out of the city walls to collect their dead, who were slaughtered by Tydeus during the night (3.114-32). She is introduced as "great mother of youths, now of twin corpses" (3.134), and is described as she crosses the battlefield, searching for the bodies of her sons. Her hair, caked in squalor, stands on end, she gouges at her bruised face with her nails, and inspires terror in her misery (133-7). The frenzied mother scrambles through discarded arms and dismembered men, rolling her grey hair in the dirt, wailing at every corpse (137-9). Then comes a disturbing simile:

Thessalis haud aliter bello gavisia recenti,
cui gentile nefas hominem revocare canendo,
multifida attollens antiqua lumina cedro
nocte subit campos versatque in sanguine functum

¹¹⁸ McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 335.

vulgus et explorat manes, cui plurima busto
imperet ad superos: animarum maesta queruntur
concilia, et nigri pater indignatur Averni.

4.140-6

Not otherwise does a woman of Thessaly, for whom the hereditary crime is to summon dead men back, delight in recent battle and plunge into the fields in the night, raising her split torch of ancient cedar and turning the slain masses over in their blood, probing the dead, to which grave should she give the most orders in the upper world: the gloomy gathering of souls lament, and the dark father of Arvernus is enraged.

This detailed simile is a conscious nod towards Lucan's Erichtho, the criminal and all-powerful superwitch of *Bellum Civile* (6.507-830).¹¹⁹ The simile appears to refer to Erichtho particularly, not only because she is the most prominent, and arguably the most horrifying, Thessalian witch of antiquity, but also because she enacts the specific deeds outlined in the Statian simile. Lovatt says of Erichtho "she raises the dead, as the grieving mother longs to do; she mutilates the dead body rather than tearing her own hair and cheeks. She is a figure of female power grounded in the toils of death, yet at the same time a perversion of the lamenting woman."¹²⁰ McAuley furthers this observation, arguing that Ide, the "Theban Everymother" is transformed from mother of twin sons, into a barren, haggard witch, desecrating rather

¹¹⁹ Lovatt, "Competing Endings", 2016, p. 282; McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 317; Roche, P., "Lucan's De Bello Civili in the Thebaid", in Dominik, W.J., Newlands, C.E., and Gervais, K., (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Statius. Brill's companions in classical studies*, Leiden, and Boston: Brill, 2015, p. 399. On this and other ambiguous similes relating to lamenting women in the *Thebaid* being indicative of the "excessive energy" and madness that pervades the epic, but not denoting any real destructive potential in the women, see Voigt, "The Power of the Grieving Mind", 2016, pp. 74-77.

¹²⁰ Lovatt, "Competing Endings", 2016, p. 283. On the misogyny and abjection of Erichtho's characterisation in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, see Stratton, K.B., "Magic, Abjection, and Gender in Roman Literature", in Stratton, K.B., and Kalleres, D.S., (eds.), *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World*, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 152-3.

than commemorating the battle dead, signifying the complete perversion of the proper maternal role in the patriarchal, political and military context.¹²¹

In the *Bellum Civile*, Erichtho is vividly depicted rummaging through corpses on an abandoned battlefield, searching the carcasses, and revivifying dead soldiers to deliver prophecies, inspiring hatred and anxiety in both gods and mortals. She is a figure of extreme transgression, as an uncontrolled female wielding overwhelming cosmic power, who dominates the masculine landscape of the battlefield, molesting masculine bodies, and violating the crucial boundary between life and death. Thus, in this strange, dissonant simile, Statius adopts the very heart of Lucanian horror, and the very emblem of the breakdown of boundaries, further aligning the feminine with the monstrous, and revealing that his epic universe and its characters are inverted and perverted by the horror of civil war.¹²²

By evoking Erichtho at this point, during the first of many affective feminine laments in the *Thebaid*, Statius abruptly causes his audience to recall a figure who perverts and parodies female mourning rituals.¹²³ While Ide displays all the signs of traditional, maternal mourning, having engaged in the ritual acts of self-defacement, and desperately seeking proper burial for her sons (135-9), her intertextual counterpart enacts the shocking inverse of these rites, and the grieving mother becomes a potent symbol of horror, rather than piety and pity.¹²⁴ Erichtho buries the living and raises the dead (*BC* 6.529-32); she steals bones and

¹²¹ McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 319.

¹²² Alternatively, David Vessey has observed that the simile is incongruous, that the only point of contrast between Ide and Erichtho is the terror they inspire, and that the poet's reference to a Thessalian witch is intended to suggest that the intensity of Ide's grief cannot be captured by conventional poetic language and metaphor: Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, p. 126; Paul Roche adds to Vessey's reading, arguing that by alluding to Erichtho the poet manipulates Lucan's figure of highest horror, effectively enlisting her in the representation of tragic pathos, and that the evocation of the witch's necromantic revival of her dead soldier contrasts powerfully with the permanent loss and powerlessness of the mourning mother: Roche, "Lucan's *De Bello Civili* in the *Thebaid*", 2015, p. 399.

¹²³ Lovatt, "Competing Endings", 2016, p.283.

¹²⁴ Newlands, "Mothers in Statius' Poetry", 2006, p. 209.

ashes from pyres, and blood and body parts from corpses (533-4, 554-8); she bites and tears at bodies (540-3, 563-8), rather than bruising her own body, and tearing at her own hair; and instead of burial and lament, she offers necromantic incantations (695-718). Thus, even as she searches for the corpses of her sons to perform the accustomed rites, the mourning mother becomes assimilated with the mock-mourning mother, a transgressive and destructive figure who abuses, and uses the corpses of soldiers for her own ends. The Erichtho simile completely undermines the power and pathos of Ide's grief, marking her pious action, and her speech condemning civil conflict and lamenting her son's inglorious deaths (151-168), as perverse, and futile.

Ide's fearsome, highly physical display of grief prefigures the later appearances of Argia, as well as the Argive mourners of Book 12, meaning that the image of Erichtho is transferred into the final stages of the text, and Lucan's night-hag overshadows the epic's feminine narrative. Argia resembles Ide in that she performs the same frenzied journey across the same Theban battlefield, and like the Theban mother she slips and stumbles through weapons and carnage, bending back each corpse and scanning bloodied faces for the one she recognises (284-90). Argia is implicitly contrasted with Erichtho when she finds the right corpse, as she lays her full body upon it, kissing it, and gathering up the gore from his hair and clothes (318-21), just as the witch does (*BC* 6.525, 554-6, 563-8).¹²⁵ The allusion to Erichtho is reproduced – and multiplied, and amplified – in the closing scene of communal lament (12.797-809). Here the poet describes the Argive mourners, who have rushed out onto the battlefield to perform funeral rites for their male kin; Evadne throws herself upon Capaneus' funeral pyre (800-1); and Deiphyle lies upon and kisses Tydeus' terrible corpse (802-3). The

¹²⁵ On Argia as figurative association with Erichtho, see Hardie, P., *The Epic Successors of Virgil: A Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition*, Cambridge, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 45.

association of Erichtho and the first mourning mother of the *Thebaid*, ensures that the horror of the necromantic witch is dispersed among other mourning women, weakening the impact of epic feminine lament, and associating it with the monstrous even in the last stage of the poem. The first and final laments are shown to be entirely perverted by civil war; they become excessive, and transgressive, and indicate cosmic corruption that cannot be exorcised by Theseus' masculine triumph in Book 12, or the cathartic, palliative act of feminine lament.¹²⁶ Just as Erichtho is a symbol of catastrophic feminine disorder, so Ide, and Argia, and the Argive mourners, through their explicit and implicit connections to this figure, signify civil and universal chaos, the breakdown of boundaries, and the impossibility of redemption.

Ide also acts as a precursor to Jocasta, as the Theban queen also laments (though pre-emptively) twin sons, who will die embracing each other and be cremated on a single pyre.¹²⁷ Jocasta intensifies Ide's model though, as she appears twice, accompanied each time by a simile likening her to a figure of feminine monstrosity and transgression. She is first likened to the eldest of the Furies (7.477), and is later contrasted with her murderess predecessor, Agave (11.318-20). In Book 7 Jocasta appears before Polynices and his Argive allies, attempting to avert the imminent *nefas* of civil war. She appears at dawn, and like Ide she displays all the traditional signs of mourning and supplication: her eyes are fierce, her cheeks bloodless, her hair dishevelled, her arms are blackened from the self-defacing acts of ritual lamentation (474-6), and she bears an olive branch entwined with black wool (477). She exits the city gates with the great majesty of sorrow (*magna maiestate malorum*, 478). As with Ide, in the midst of his description of the grieving Theban mother Statius includes a discordant

¹²⁶ On the insufficiency and ambiguity of Theseus' role as civilising hero in Book 12, see Dietrich, "Thebaid's Feminine Ending", 1999, pp. 43-4.

¹²⁷ Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, p. 125; McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, pp. 316-7.

simile, likening her to the most ancient of the Furies: *Eumenidum velut antiquissima* (477).¹²⁸ Through this simile, Statius links Jocasta with the infernal power that fuels the fratricidal conflict, even as she tries to establish peace between her sons.¹²⁹ The simile reveals Jocasta's unwitting alignment with Tisiphone, both of these active female figures function as progenitors of the Theban curse and civil war; as McAuley asserts, the Furies have corrupted Jocasta's maternal identity, contaminating her sexuality and fertility.¹³⁰ By gesturing towards Tisiphone at this point, before Jocasta has even spoken, the potency of Jocasta's pious plea is undercut, and the audience is reminded of the total dominance of the monstrous Fury in the mortal realm.¹³¹

In Book 11 Jocasta ventures out again, this time to make an emotional plea to Eteocles in an attempt to prevent the *nefas* of the fratricide. Forgetting her female role, she goes before Eteocles and his cohort as they prepare for battle; her hair and face are torn, her breasts bloodied (315-18). Here, again, Statius intensifies his description with a simile likening Jocasta to an earlier Theban mother, Agave.

...Pentheia qualis

mater ad insani scandebat culmina montis,

promissum saeuo caput adlatura Lyaeo.

11.318-20

¹²⁸ On the relation of this simile to Vergil's disguised Allecto-Calybe figure, see McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 336, and on the further implicit contrast with Lucan's Erichtho, see Augoustakis, *Motherhood and the Other*, 2010, pp. 61-3.

¹²⁹ An ironic assimilation, Augoustakis argues, as the Furies are virgins: Augoustakis, *Motherhood and the Other*, 2010, p. 62.

¹³⁰ Keith, A.M., *Engendering Rome: Women in Latin Epic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 96; McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 336; Newlands, too, asserts that this simile highlights Jocasta's pollution by Tisiphone, the core of the poem's spreading evil: Newlands "Fatal Unions", 2016, pp.166-7.

¹³¹ McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 341.

...just as the mother of Pentheus scrambled up toward the peak of the mad mountain, bearing the promised head to savage Lyaeus.

Here the poet recalls another instance of malicious and ruinous supernatural intrusion into the mortal realm, again associated with the feminine and maternal. This reference to Agave in Jocasta's characterisation alludes the cyclicity inherent in Theban history; the past sexual, moral, social, and familial crimes of the Theban household continually return to blight the present generation, creating a pattern of constant regression and repetition that is engendered (though unwittingly) by the feminine. Here, through Jocasta, the overpowering nature of Theban *furor* and *nefas* is highlighted, as the Theban mother, seeking peace and redemption, evokes the ultimate maternal transgression of her predecessor.¹³² Agave's dismemberment of Pentheus (who so prized his masculinity) amounted to primal and ultimate emasculation, the act playing out a nightmare scenario of a symbolic return (or regression) of the masculine into the mental and physical chaos, boundlessness, and endlessness of the feminine and maternal.¹³³ The references to the Fury, and the Maenad-mother in Jocasta's characterisation highlight the perversion and subversion of masculine epic values, and hint darkly at the true powers within the text: the Fury Tisiphone, and the inescapable, cyclical curse that drives the Theban house to *furor* and *nefas*. These allusions are at odds with Jocasta's voice, and actions; she is contrasted with the instigator of the fratricidal conflict, and a frenzied filicidal mother, even as she tries to avert the outbreak of war and protect her children.¹³⁴ As with Ide, Jocasta's maternal grief and piety is augmented,

¹³² On Jocasta's transgressive nature, see Ganiban, *Statius and Virgil*, 2007, p. 159-65.

¹³³ McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 314; Zeitlin, F.I., *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*, Chicago, and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 352.

¹³⁴ Dietrich, J., "Dead Woman Walking: Jocasta in the *Thebaid*", in Dominik, W.J., Newlands, C.E., and Gervais, K., (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Statius. Brill's companions in classical studies*, Leiden, and Boston: Brill, 2015, p. 308.

and made disturbing by associations with the infernal, and the forces of madness and crime. Rather than acting as a redeeming figure of Theban familial *pietas* and social morality, she confirms the impossibility of escape from cursed, contaminating Theban heredity, and highlights the ultimate failure of human agency socio-familial piety and morality in the poem.

Both similes serve to darken Jocasta's characterisation with the threat of maternal infanticide – an act symbolically represented in the violent maternal gestures of the snake-woman and the Sphinx. Oedipus' prayer to Tisiphone in Book 1 hints at Jocasta's initial attempted infanticide, as he describes his infant self as being dropped from his mother's lap (before being picked up by Tisiphone), whereas the similes identifying the Theban mother with the ancient Fury and Agave cast her as the maternal victimiser of her own house. As herself, as Fury, as murderous Theban mother, Jocasta appears as the symbolic (and inescapably physical) criminal origin that all descendants of Cadmus must ultimately return to,¹³⁵ as Hershkowitz asserts "Jocasta functions as an ever-present Fury in the Theban house."¹³⁶

Jocasta's characterisation is rooted in her maternity, and in the physical and psychological frenzy she experiences. Twice she opposes masculine, military arms with her naked maternal body (7.481-2; 11.326-8), transgressing her role as *mater*, and becoming a threatening, transgressive and warlike figure.¹³⁷ In her entreaty to Eteocles, she explicitly sets her breasts and her womb, the symbols of her cursed and dangerous sexuality and maternity, against the weapons of her son. Twice her appearance has a temporarily paralysing, emasculating effect on her male audience (7.488-9; 11.316-8). The intense, violent imagery she evokes when she challenges Eteocles to drive his armoured force over her maternal body

¹³⁵ McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, pp. 333-4.

¹³⁶ Hershkowitz, *The Madness of Epic*, 1998, p. 58.

¹³⁷ Augoustakis, *Motherhood and the Other*, 2010, p. 66.

if he wishes to take the field, Jocasta effectively invites Eteocles to symbolically re-enact the regressive, incestuous, and disastrous crimes of his father-brother by both killing and sexually violating a parent, an act that parallels the socio-moral violation of civil war.¹³⁸ Furthermore, the emotive “uterine rhetoric”¹³⁹ of Jocasta, which emphasises her maternity and physicality, citing her breasts and womb as the site of her authority, only serves to connect her with the monsters of books 1 and 2, who have already graphically portrayed the corruption of the female body, and the maternal role. The perverse, destructive maternity of Jocasta is hinted at once more when the climactic duel between Polynices and Eteocles is enacted and cast as *unius ingens bellum uteri* (huge war of a single womb).¹⁴⁰ Having returned to their origin, Polynices and Eteocles become fused in their bestial savagery, and their mortal materiality.

Polyxo and the Lemnian Women

Prior to Statius’ presentation of the character, Polyxo appears in two prominent versions of the myth of the Lemnian women: Apollonius Rhodius’ Hellenistic *Argonautica*, Valerius Flaccus’ Flavian epic of the same title. Statius offers a far more extensive and comprehensive characterisation of Polyxo than his predecessors do. Whereas Apollonius and Valerius present her as a wizened nurse and a foreign prophetess, respectively, in Statius’ epic Polyxo is transformed into a maenad, mother, wife, Fury, and murderer. In Polyxo’s rhetoric, and in the collective characterisation of the Lemnian women, references to Theban bacchantes, the Danaides, Thracian Procne, and Scythian Amazons combine to focalise the imminent

¹³⁸ Ganiban, *Statius and Virgil*, 2007 p. 162; McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p.339.

¹³⁹ I borrow this term from McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 332.

¹⁴⁰ McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 341; on Jocasta’s womb, and reproductive abilities as responsible for the conflict, see Newlands, “Mothers in Statius’ Poetry”, 2006, p. 204.

spectacle of gruesome and ruinous feminine transgression, as Polyxo's fury (5.90-91) corrupts and engulfs the Lemnian women.

David Vessey and, more recently, Simone Finkmann have argued that the prominence of Polyxo's character in the Lemnian narrative is a significant Statian innovation, and that her function in episode is important to our reading of the epic as a whole.¹⁴¹ Through her apparent anxiety regarding her increasing age, wasting youth, and the waning of her sexual identity, Polyxo accentuates key themes raised within the text, such as mortality and (often perverse) sexuality.¹⁴² For Finkmann the figure of Polyxo highlights the vulnerability of humankind and the futility of mortal will, as well as the dangers of gender transgression.¹⁴³ Polyxo can also be seen as a figure aligned with the monstrous figures who precede her in the text, as she also embodies and enacts the perversion of the feminine and the maternal, and her ringleader role highlights the degradation of masculine, patriarchal order, reason, and society in the *Thebaid*.

In Apollonius' and Valerius' renderings of the Lemnian narrative, Polyxo is introduced into the story *after* the massacre of the Lemnian men – which is only briefly described by the narrating voice in Apollonius' epic (1.609-26), and more comprehensively presented in Valerius' version (2.174-241) – before the admission of the Argonauts into the city. In Apollonius' version, Polyxo appears as the elderly nurse of queen Hypsipyle (1.667-674), who speaks during an emergency assembly of the Lemnian women (1.675-696). Polyxo is a voice of wisdom and pragmatism; reasoning that the Lemnian women are already vulnerable to attacks from their enemies, and that, if they should somehow survive, in their childless future

¹⁴¹ Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, p. 173; Finkmann, S., "Polyxo and the Lemnian Episode – An Inter- and Intratextual Study of Apollonius Rhodius, Valerius Flaccus, and Statius", *Dictynna* [online], 12, 2015, <http://dictynna.revues.org/1135> (accessed 29 August, 2017).

¹⁴² Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, p. 173.

¹⁴³ Finkmann, "Polyxo and the Lemnian Episode", 2015, 4.33.

they will grow old and weak and be unable to tend their fields, Polyxo advocates the invitation of the Argonauts into Lemnian homes, to ensure the survival and security of their community (1.675-697). Valerius presents Polyxo similarly as an aged wise woman, but imbues her character with vatic abilities, transforming her into a mysterious, foreign priestess of Apollo. As with Apollonius' Lemnian narrative, Polyxo enters the narrative after the androicide and before the arrival of the Argonauts. She appears during the assembly of the distressed matrons of Lemnos, having been drawn across the sea (by a team of seals) from unknown lands in order to counsel them on the matter of the Argonauts' imminent arrival (2.311-321). The prophetess gives a brief speech, advising that the Lemnian women receive and breed with the strangers who are, as she reveals, a sign of divine forgiveness and favour, godsent replacements for their former husbands (2.322-328).

Statius preserves the figure of Polyxo but completely transforms the nature of her character. The first modification can be seen in his incorporating her into the story *before* the massacre of the Lemnian men, rather than before the arrival of the Argonautic warriors. After a detailed description of Venus, accompanied by the Furies, wrathfully instilling *Odia, Furor*, and *Discordia* in the Lemnian *thalami* as revenge for their neglect of her honours (5.49-74), and following the divinely-induced departure of the Lemnian men for war in Thrace (5.75-84), there is sudden cosmic disruption (84-9). Amidst the unrest, aged Polyxo, who had previously confined herself to her chambers, suddenly rushes forth through the deserted city in a terrible frenzy (90-91). Raving like a Theban bacchant, with bloodshot, quivering eyes turned upward, she rouses the city, calling the women to an assembly, with her ill-fated children clinging to her sides (92-99).

The Lemnian wives burst from of their homes and rush towards the citadel of Pallas, where they convene in confusion (99-102). Here Polyxo addresses the assembled women at

length, ominously calling them *viduae* ('widows', 105), and brandishing a sword, she tells them that her *meriti doloris* ('just grief', 104), along with the will of supernal gods, compels her to act (104-105). She urges the Lemnian women to strengthen their courage and drive out their sex (105). In words that "seethe with sensuality",¹⁴⁴ she reminds them of their empty houses, wasting youth and fertility, and long laments, and claims to have a solution for their sorrows (106-110). Citing the example of birds and wild beasts joined through copulating as her model of normality, Polyxo asserts that the emptiness of their marriages, and their wombs, goes against nature (111-117). She demands that they take the daughters of Danaus, who dutifully slaughtered their sleeping husbands, and Thracian Procne, who with her own hands avenged her marriage and ate with (*pariter*, 122)¹⁴⁵ her spouse, as their inspiration (117-122). Polyxo then expresses her intention to lead by her own example, assuring the women in graphic terms that she will kill her four sons despite their clinging embraces and tears, along with their father:

quattuor hos una, decus et solacia patris,
in gremio (licet amplexu lacrimisque morentur)
transadigam ferro saniemque et uulnera fratrum
miscebo patremque super spirantibus addam.

5.125-8

these four together in my lap, glory and solace of their father, though they
delay me with tears and embraces, I shall drive through with steel and the
diseased blood and wounds of the brothers I will mix, and add their father on
top as they still breathe.

¹⁴⁴ Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, p. 180

¹⁴⁵ The Latin term here suggesting, contrary to the Ovidian tradition (*Met.* 6.619-52), that Procne consumed her son *with* her husband.

Polyxo then asks the Lemnian women if they will dare as much as she (129). Her speech then is cut short by the arrival of the Lemnian fleet (130-131). She exhorts the women into action, claiming that an avenging god endorses their crime (131-134). She reveals that Venus came to her in a dream, and commanded that she and the women of Lemnos, rid themselves of their old, unsatisfactory husbands, promising new and better matches, the goddess then laid a sword upon her bed (134-139). Polyxo then suggests that there may be Thracian brides returning with their husbands (140-142). This last goad enflames the sexual jealousy and discontent of the Lemnian women, and elicits an enraged cry from the whole crowd (143-44). The women are like Scythian Amazons in their fury, and they are united in their madness and bloodlust (144-151).¹⁴⁶

At this point the tumultuous scene retreats into a shaded grove near Minerva's mountain, described as being doubly dark (*gemina caligine*, 154), where the Lemnian women pledge themselves to the task with a blood sacrifice (152-155). Hades is opened, and both Enyo and Ceres, though never having been summoned, stand presiding over the gathering (155-157). Venus is also present, though invisible, providing weapons and wrath to the women (157-158). Polyxo, in keeping with her promise, offers up her son as a binding sacrifice, and the Lemnian women commit themselves to their crime by plunging their swords, all at once, into the boy's *mirantia pectora*, each groping at the body with greedy hands (159-161). The ghost of the boy rises up to hover by his mother, as the women affirm their imminent *dulce nefas* with his *sanguis vivus* (162-163).

From the outset of her appearance, it is clear that Polyxo's character, though preserved from Apollonius' and Valerius' renditions of the story, has undergone a radical and

¹⁴⁶ Augoustakis argues that in their frenzy, the Lemnian women become abjected, alien 'others', akin to the uncivilised Thracian women from across the sea: Augoustakis, *Motherhood and the Other*, 2010, p. 50.

monstrous transformation. The importation of Polyxo's character into this part of the Lemnian narrative drastically changes the cause, tone and effect of the whole episode.¹⁴⁷ Whereas Apollonius and Valerius present Polyxo as an aged wise woman, conscientiously promoting a return to the security and stability of traditional patriarchal society, Statius renders Polyxo as a vivid, maenadic and furiat antagonist who incites violence and destruction. She is like Venus (5.57-69) and Tisiphone (1.88-130) in her vengeful rage, taking decisive action; independently and assertively she calls an assembly, so spreading the disease of madness and bloodlust amongst the mourning, vulnerable women of Lemnos.¹⁴⁸ The tone of Polyxo's speech, and the assembly itself, becomes menacing rather than optimistic, portending intrafamilial murder and mayhem instead of the restoration and renewal of wholesome social and familial bonds. The result of the altered assembly scene, and the grove scene that follows, is an intense portrait of feminine transgression and horror, where feminine, nostalgic and erotic imagery is disturbingly melded with masculine military and political imagery of swords, war councils, inflammatory rhetoric, and gruesome slaughter.

The emphasis Statius places on Polyxo's maternal and conjugal identity, through focussing on her children and marital dissatisfaction, intensifies the horror of her metamorphosis into a violent, vengeful maenad-fury set upon paedocide and mariticide.¹⁴⁹ Her speech exhibits disturbed logic, that invokes then inverts the arguments of the Polyxos who appear in the earlier Argonautic narratives, as she promotes advantageous, prospective new marriages and pregnancies, while also advocating the indiscriminate slaughter of legitimate husbands, fathers, and sons. Polyxo's reference to the habits of birds and animals signals the forthcoming inhuman exploits of the Lemnian women (5.164-169, 203-205); this

¹⁴⁷ Finkmann, "Polyxo and the Lemnian Episode", 2015, 5.42.

¹⁴⁸ Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, p. 173.

¹⁴⁹ Finkmann, "Polyxo and the Lemnian Episode", 2015, 4.27-34.

is particularly ominous given that Statius' audience has already encountered several disturbing figures that combine femininity with bestiality, namely Tisiphone (1.88-130), Apollo's snake-woman (1.596-626) and the Theban Sphinx (2.496-522). Polyxo's use of the precedents set by the Danaides' and Thracian Procne in justifying her plan is also worrying, as Danaus is a symbol of excessive hate and impiety, and Procne is infamous for her gruesome punishment of her husband, which involved the killing and cannibalising of her son. These mythic forebears utilised their feminine roles (daughters, mothers, wives) to brutally punish and kill their male kin. Through Polyxo, the themes of perverse sexuality and madness, and violent rejection and inversion of maternity are focalised.

Statius' combination of maternal, maenadic, and furiat imagery also creates a significant connection between the Lemnian mother, and the matriarch of the Theban house, Jocasta. Both Jocasta and Polyxo bear *infelix* sons, whose lives they forfeit due to the infectious *furor* they embody. They both rush forth, with unnatural speed, and deliver impassioned and affective speeches (Ide at 5.104-129; Jocasta at 7.483-527, and 11.329-353), usurping traditionally masculine roles of political and military leadership. Both mothers are also characterised with reference to Bacchic worship, with Polyxo's bacchant simile mirroring Jocasta's in terms of length, and imagery evoked:

insano veluti Teumesia Thyias
 rapta deo, cum sacra vocant Idaeaeque suadet
 buxus et a summis auditus montibus Euan

5.92-94

just as a Teumesian Thyiad seized by the mad god, when
 the sacred rites call and Idaean boxwood flute calls,
 and Euan is heard on the mountain's summit

Through their parallel similes, Polyxo and Jocasta are, implicitly and explicitly (respectively), connected with the most infamous Theban bacchant, Agave, and her terrible maternal crime: the frenzied dismemberment of her son, Pentheus.¹⁵⁰ Presented as figurative Agaves, Polyxo and Jocasta bring transgressive, destructive, emasculating maenadism into the masculine spheres of war and politics, ultimately overwhelming (though in Jocasta's case only momentarily) their respective male counterparts. As the Theban queen's narrative counter figure, Polyxo undermines the moral agency of Jocasta even as she makes her emotional plea for peace and the restoration of Theban familial fidelity, as she has already established the futility of maternal piety in the face of *furor* and *nefas*. Through Polyxo and her accomplices, Statius intensifies the theme of atrocity-tainted maternity, and the perversion of the feminine, which has already surfaced in the figures of Tisiphone, Apollo's snake-woman (1.596-626), the Theban Sphinx (2.504-523), and Ide (3.133-168). The Lemnian women effectively act out a horror show that confirms the inherent female malevolence symbolically represented in the monsters of books 1 and 2, and only hinted at in the ambiguous descriptions of Statius' female characters.

Compounding the distinctly female menace of the episode, Statius also evokes key features from descriptions of witches and witchcraft from earlier Latin literature in his description of the violent crimes of the Lemnian women (5.49-498). The women of Lemnos, like the witches of Horace and Lucan, are spatially, physically, and behaviourally associated with the chthonic, bestial world, and exhibit transgressive appetites for sex and violence. Witch figures such as Canidia, Sagana, Veia, Folia, and Erichtho show a disregard for cultural norms which would have been disturbing for a contemporary Roman audience. These

¹⁵⁰ Augoustakis, *Motherhood and the Other*, 2010, p. 62.

characters are asocial, in no way controlled or restrained by civilised society or its strictures regarding the proper performance of gender. Horace's witches seek sex, and abuse male bodies for their love spells, and Lucan's Erichtho seeks ultimate power over the dead, engaging violently and erotically with male corpses to signal her control. Statius' Lemnian women likewise violate the integral cultural boundaries that stood between genders, and between bodies. These aberrant mothers, wives, sisters and daughters, and the crimes they commit, represent the breakdown of human (masculine, rational, ordered) control over the natural (feminine, irrational, disordered) world, and may be regarded a literary manifestation of a distinctly Roman, patriarchal nightmare. By evoking the witches of earlier literature, Statius presents a society of women who reflect, in a condensed episode, the undesirable, terrifying aspects of femininity that Roman authors used to denigrate, and regulate female existence.

The grove scene in the Lemnian episode is the first and most significant parallel between the Lemnian women, and the witches of Roman literature. Horace's Canidia, Sagana, Veia, and Folia perform their rites in a secret and secluded inner court within a *domus*, where they have burrowed deep into the ground to create an earthen prison for their victim *puer* (Hor. *Ep.* 5.25-31); Canidia and Sagana are also described as stalking the squalid burial sites outside of Rome by night, exhuming human remains and inhuming animal substances (Hor. *Sat.* 1.8.20-22, 28, 42-43). Horace's witches are thus presented with sinister emphasis on their closeness to the earth, and the infernal realm, and their isolation from, and rejection of civilisation. Lucan's Thessalian superwitch, Erichtho, also dwells in wild, uncivilised spaces, and is presented as having complete control over the natural world (BC 6.465-491). She first appears sitting atop a rocky outcrop (572-575), and later performs her necromancy in a hollow cavern in the mountainside (6.640-641). Statius' description of the Lemnian women's

retreat into a dark grove shares several parallels with the setting of Erichtho's necromancy.

haud procul a Ditis caecis depressa cavernis
in praeceps subsedit humus, quam pallida pronis
urguet silva comis et nullo vertice caelum
suspiciens Phoebo non pervia taxus opacat.

Bellum Civile, 6.639-45

There [in the side of a mountain] the ground fell in a sheer descent, sinking almost to the depth of the invisible caverns of Pluto. A dim wood with forward-bending trees borders it, and yew-trees shade it – yew-trees that the sun cannot penetrate, and that turn no tops towards the sky.¹⁵¹

tunc viridi luco (late iuga celsa Mineruae
propter opacat humum niger ipse, sed insuper ingens
mons premit et gemina pereunt caligine soles),
hic sanxere fidem.

Thebaid 5. 152-5

Then, in a green grove that widely shades the earth near the high summit of Minerva, dark itself, but above the great mountain presses down and the suns perish in double darkness, here they swore their promise.

The two scenes share the features of a mountainside setting, and a darkened, isolated atmosphere that sunlight cannot penetrate. The retreat of the Lemnian women into the doubly-dark grove at the side of Minerva's mountain (5.152-155) mirrors Erichtho's sinister

¹⁵¹ Duff's translation, 1928.

withdrawal from light, and the world of the living, signalling their disconnection from the city and the civilisation it symbolises, and their immersion in chthonic, inhuman realm. Like Erichtho, their descent into the dark, wild space of the shaded, cavernous grove brings them into close contact with the infernal realm (155-157).

Roman witches have also been characterised as physically and behaviourally bestial. Canidia and her companion Sagana are described digging up the earth with their nails, and tearing a lamb to pieces with their teeth (Hor. *Sat.* 1.8. 26-28). Canidia is also presented as having serpents writhing in her hair (Hor. *Ep.* 15-16; cf. *BC* 6.656), while Sagana's hair bristles like a sea urchin or a boar (Hor. *Ep.* 27-28). Lucan depicts Erichtho harrying human corpses (*BC* 6.541-549), squabbling over the carnage alongside the scavenging beasts and birds (550-553); and as she performs her necromantic rites, her voice incorporates sounds of a barking dog, a howling wolf, a screeching owl, a roaring beast, and a hissing serpent (688-690). The Lemnian women are likewise characterised as distinctly bestial. They savagely tear at their sacrificial victim with their hands (5.160-162), and in their murderous frenzy they are likened to bloodthirsty wolves (164-169), and later to Hyrcanian lions (203-205). The absorption of these female figures into the natural, bestial world, where they become monstrous, powerful, and predatory creatures, illustrates the inversion of natural, "normal" order, in which civilised, civilising men exert control over nature, and women.¹⁵² The Lemnian women are characterised by the same monstrous a-sociality, and animosity directed against the cultured, male-dominated world, as Horace's witches and Erichtho are; by spatially, physically and behaviourally merging with the natural world, they invert the hierarchies that governed

¹⁵² Spaeth, B.S., "From Goddess to Hag: The Greek and Roman Witch in Classical Literature", in Stratton, K.B., and Kelleres, D.S., (eds.), *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World*, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 45.

culture, gender, and power, and signal the imminent violent overthrow of Lemnos' patriarchy, and the arrival of primal, feminine chaos on the island.

The witches of early imperial literature are also marked by a particular focus on biological materiality, and bodily desire. Witch figures are even further removed from human society through their frequent use of human body parts in their rituals. In *Epode* 5 Horace details how Canidia, Sagana, Veia, and Folia prepare to remove the bone marrow and liver of a young man who they intend to starve, in order to provide the elements of hunger and yearning for their love potion (11-40). Lucan has his Erichtho utilise whole human bodies in her rites, burying them living and reviving the dead (*BC* 6.529-532), collecting the ashes and burned bones of children (533-534), gouging eyeballs from sockets, gnawing at the fingernails of dead hands (540-543), collecting fresh, warm blood (554), as well as human foetuses (557-558). By utilising human ingredients in their spells, these witch figures dehumanise the human body, rendering it an object to be used. The Lemnian women also reflect this practice: their use of the *sanguine vivo* (*Theb.* 5.162) of Polyxo's *natus* to bind themselves to their terrible crime evokes and inverts the animalistic sacrifice scene of *Satire* 1.8, where Canidia and Sagana tear a lamb apart, pouring its blood into a ditch (28-30). The Lemnian women also resemble Erichtho as she harasses corpses with her gouging *manus* (541), collects the *sanguine vivo* she needs for her spells (554-556), and pierces the *pectus* of one of her corpse-victims, filling the wound with *ferventi sanguine* (667-669). These Roman witches and Lemnian women are shown exerting unnatural control over human and, more significantly, *masculine* bodies, inverting their vital roles as sons and soldiers, and rendering them as mere biological material, powerless, and equal with animals.

In addition to this disturbing emphasis on biological materiality, and the concomitant degradation of the masculine, witches are also strongly associated with human physiology

through being driven by bodily desires. In this regard, Roman witches are again portrayed as invading male bodies, effectively assuming the active, penetrative masculine role for themselves.¹⁵³ In *Epode 5* Horace's witches abuse the body of a young boy in order to prepare a spell designed to infect the mind of Canidia's scornful ex-boyfriend, Varus, making him burn with love for her (42-82). Horace adds that Folia, his fourth hag, possesses a *masculae libidinis* (41), placing explicit emphasis on female sexual transgression and the inversion of normative gender roles. Erichtho, too, appears to be driven in part by physical urges, as she is described rejoicing to lay atop funeral fires (*BC* 6.525), and hanging above a dead body, kissing and mutilating the head, opening its mouth with her teeth, and biting the tip of its tongue (563-568). The Lemnian women are likewise shown to be driven by a physical desire for sexual fulfilment. As discussed above Polyxo's speech (104-129) emphasises that the Lemnian women's main motivations are bodily desire and sexual jealousy, as she ominously prompts the women to compare themselves to the *feras* and *volucres* who copulate freely in nature (116-117).¹⁵⁴ She also incorporates floral, bridal, maternal, and sexual imagery into her argument (106-116), and her final goad, which ignites the wives' rage, suggests that their husbands may be bringing home Thracian brides to replace them (142). The sexualised fury of the Lemnian women culminates in the gruesome, frenzied sacrifice of Polyxo's son (159-163), then surfaces again – after a dread-inducing intermission, during which the Lemnian men return, and the Lemnian women feign a warm, wifely welcome (170-192) in Gorge's sexualised slaughter of her husband, Helymus (207-217).¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ On witches and the subversion of sexual and gendered roles, see Stratton, "Magic, Abjection, Gender", 2014, pp. 162-3.

¹⁵⁴ Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973, p. 180-1.

¹⁵⁵ Nugent, S.G., 'Statius' Hypsipyle: Following in the Footsteps of the *Aeneid*', *Scholium*, 5, 1996, p. 63; Gervais, K., *Dealing With a Massacre: Spectacle, Eroticism, and Unreliable Narration in the Lemnian Episode of Statius' Thebaid* (MA Thesis), Kingston, Ontario, Canada: Queens University, 2008, p. 72.

Helymum temeraria Gorge
euinctum ramis altaque in mole tapetum
efflantem somno crescentia uina superstans
uulnera disiecta rimatur ueste, sed illum
infelix sopor admota sub morte refugit.
turbidus incertumque oculis uigilantibus hostem
occupat amplexu, nec segnius illa tenentis
pone adigit costas donec sua pectora ferro
tangeret... ora supinat
blandus adhuc oculisque tremens et murmure Gorgen
quaerit et indigno non soluit brachia collo.

5.207-17

Bold Gorge looms over Helymus crowned with branches and upon a pile of tapestries, breathing out wine that grows stronger in sleep, she tears open his dishevelled clothes, seeking to wound, but his unlucky sleep flees under the approach of death. Confused, and with eyes of uncertain wakefulness, he seizes the enemy with an embrace, not hesitating in his arms *she* drives behind his ribs until the blade touches her own breast... he upturns his face and still fawning with trembling eyes and murmurings he seeks Gorge, and does not release his arms from her shameful neck.

As with the witch depictions of earlier literature, in Statius' Lemnian episode sexual imagery is mingled with imagery of gruesome violence and death, and the violation of masculine bodies. The horror of the female, especially male horror of female sexuality, is literalised in

the emasculating murders of the Lemnian women. Here the Statian reader sees men reduced to victims of both sexual and violent crimes.

Roman witches regularly violated the physical boundaries of the men, figuratively transforming their victims into the perverse, socially unacceptable figure of the passive male *cinaedus*, and themselves assuming the equally undesirable role of the fearsome, libidinous *virago*. Canidia, Sagana, Veia, Folia, and Erichtho, each performing the role active penetrator, transgress the physical limitations of their gender by utilising knives, hands, and teeth to penetrate their prey. These witches even subvert the act of rape, bypassing the normal bodily orifices and violently creating new openings in the body, into which they thrust knives and gouging fingers.¹⁵⁶ In this way the Lemnian women also become active penetrators, as they violate male bodies with swords (206-239), and in the case of Polyxo's infant son, with their own hands (161). The Lemnian women may even exceed the transgressive horror of the witches of Horace and Lucan, as they not only physically violate male bodies, but also violate the revered space that the Roman *vir* was supposed to control and defend – the city. In the Lemnian episode, the violent spirit of the Lemnian women is ignited at the citadel (143-4), then amplified and consolidated in the doubly-dark grove (152-169), and from this point the savagery of the women spreads, ultimately engulfing the city, as is shown in the vividly recounted scenes of piled corpses, and mixed blood and wine overflowing in the sacred spaces of the deserted *urbs* (248-257).

The Lemnian women violently reject traditional feminine identities of *mater*, *matrona*, *filia*, *soror*, and in doing so they necessarily destroy the masculine roles of *pater*, *vir*, *filius*, and *frater*. They induce horror because they, like the witches of earlier literature, invert

¹⁵⁶ Spaeth, "From Goddess to Hag", 2014, p. 55.

normality and stability first by abandoning the *domus* and the *urbs*, retreating into nature and assuming bestial identities, then by appropriating the active, masculine sexual and military role. They outdo their Julio-Claudian predecessors however, by departing from nature, and returning to masculine, civilised culture to wreak violence and destruction. Unrestrainedly performing abhorred social crimes such as infanticide, filicide, mariticide, and patricide, they slaughter their male kin, and effectively dismember the Lemnian patriarchy.

Through a web of similes and allusions, the women of Statius' *Thebaid* are associated with figures of monstrous, threatening, and destructive femininity both within and outside of the text. The prominent female figures of the *Thebaid* are connected not only with each other, but with the female monsters of books 1 and 2, and yet more menacing female characters from earlier myth and poetry. Through the dissonant similes applied to prominent female characters, Statius increases his audience's sense of dread and horror, as with each intertextual or mythological reference they become more aware of the impossibility of escape or redemption for the protagonists of the poem, and the inconsequentiality of human agency, as maddened heroes move irrevocably onwards, being forcibly driven by malignant deities, toward the final fratricide. Even as mothers and wives lament and supplicate the male protagonists of the poem, even as they strive to perform the appropriate burial rites, their palliative and cathartic undertakings are undermined by their respective similes, and associated with menace and monstrosity.

Witches, Furies, and Maenads are marginal and liminal figures, existing outside of the civilised world, between the mortal, the bestial, and the supernatural; they represent what must be avoided for the proper function of civilisation and society. Eunuch priestesses, and wrathful goddesses are also deeply threatening, as they represent extremity, and the

unknowable and uncontrollable powers that ensure that (hu)mankind can never be all-knowing, and all-powerful. Although monstrous figures are usually incorporated into a text to represent the transgression of critical boundaries (physical, psychological, behavioural, moral, social) and to act as negative exemplars of what must be avoided or overcome, the monstrous (in particular the monstrous-feminine) pervades the *Thebaid*, regularly resurfacing in prominent characters to underscore the inescapability of fate, and the collapse of boundaries, agency and identity in Statius' epic universe. The monstrous similes signify that that civilising masculine, patriarchal order, reason, and power is ultimately irrelevant and inadequate.

Even as they ostensibly act in service of popular morality and social values by condemning war, advocating a peaceful resolution, and attempting to give their dead proper burial rites, and in bold defiance of the destructive, uncivil male actions that drive the poem, female characters such as Ide, Argia, and Jocasta are assimilated with the negative forces that govern Statius' epic universe. While the mothers and wives of Statius' *Thebaid* outwardly perform as emblems of virtuous, culturally productive maternal agency, their persistent association with the forces of *furor* and *nefas*, with transgression and excess, imbues their characterisation with the alternative attitude towards the feminine and maternal, that of deepest fear, mistrust, and loathing.¹⁵⁷ The unsettling, allusive references to maddened, terrifying, violent women of earlier myth and literature accumulate to undermine feminine piety and pathos, and affirm that in civil war even positive action is warped and tainted by *nefas* and *furor*, and the dominance of infernal Tisiphone. These similes, and allusions serve to connect the prominent female voices of the poem with the forces of madness, disorder,

¹⁵⁷ McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, p. 2016, p. 331.

death, violence, and criminality. They support the theme of feminine monstrosity and transgression that runs throughout the epic, always hinting at masculine destruction, and the collapse of boundaries.

Chapter 3: Flavian Fears

As Jeffrey J. Cohen established in the mid-1990s, in his influential study “Monster Theory”, the monster is “an embodiment of a certain cultural moment” that incorporates a society’s anxieties and fantasies; as such, the monster acts as a cultural construct or projection, a cipher to be de-ciphered.¹⁵⁸ Like the monsters of modern film and fiction, the monsters of ancient literature not only provided a “safe scare”, but also embodied the fears and fascinations of the societies that created them, and furthermore revealed what was regarded as good and normal. According to Paul Murgatroyd, mythical monsters “give us insights into a view of the human situation – the trials and horrors of life, and how they are overcome (or not); the dangers of... the transgression of borders.”¹⁵⁹ By observing the various forms that monsters take, readers can further understand how a particular community perceived itself, the world, and its position within it.¹⁶⁰

The female monsters and monstrous females of Statius’ Theban narrative must be read against the cultural context of an era seeking to distance itself from a troubling past and legitimise a new dynasty in the wake of a traumatic year of civil and political discord. Tisiphone, the Argive snake-woman, and the Theban Sphinx, along with the ambiguous human females of the poem, are reflective of a culture that was characterised by an intense focus on masculine patriarchal and hierarchical power systems, order and control, as well as an anxiety regarding regression, origins, and identity. They are also emblematic of Flavian society’s inherited and amplified anxieties regarding threatening and transgressive female power, physicality, and sexuality. Through the combined and recurring themes of monstrosity

¹⁵⁸ Cohen “Monster Theory”, p. 4.

¹⁵⁹ Murgatroyd, *Mythical Monsters in Classical Literature*, 2007, p. 2.

¹⁶⁰ Musharbash, “Introduction”, 2014, p. 2.

and dangerous femininity, Statius' epic presents a Theban horror show that plays out Flavian fears.¹⁶¹

Flavian Culture: Power, Order, Control

Given the brevity of Flavian rule (the dynasty only held power for 27 years) compared with the long reign of the Julio-Claudians and the adoptive emperors who followed Domitian, the question of whether the Flavian era retains its own distinctive, discernible culture is still contested.¹⁶² However, the efforts of Vespasian and his successors (his sons, Titus and Domitian) to escape the shadow of Nero and the Julio-Claudians, establish their dynasty and assert their dominance, did produce marked social, cultural, and political discontinuities, as well as restitutions and amplifications of traditional values and ideals.¹⁶³

Flavian culture was characterised by a renewed emphasis on power, order, and control after a period of weakness, disorder, and transgression. In his *Histories*, Tacitus characterises the period that followed the death of Nero and preceded the Flavian principate as one of moral, social, and political turmoil:

The story which I am approaching is rich with disasters, grimly marked with battles, rent by treason and savage even in peacetime. Four emperors perished violently. There were three civil wars, still more foreign campaigns and often conflicts which combined elements of both. Success in the East was balanced by failure in the West...Now too, Italy herself fell victim to new disasters or ones which had not occurred for many centuries. Towns were swallowed up or

¹⁶¹ On the relevance of the *Thebaid* to contemporary anxieties regarding the Flavian (in particular the Domitianic) political climate, see Dominik, *The Mythic Voice of Statius*, 1994, pp. 130-80.

¹⁶² Zissos, A., "Introduction", in Zissos, A., (ed.), *A Companion to the Flavian Age of Imperial Rome. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World*, Chichester, and Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016, p. 7.

¹⁶³ Zissos, "Introduction", 2016, p. 7.

buried along the richest part of the Campanian coast. Rome was devastated by fires, her most venerable temples were destroyed and the very Capitol was set alight by Roman hands. Things holy were desecrated, there was adultery in high places. The sea swarmed with exiles and the cliffs were stained with blood. Still fiercer savagery gripped Rome. Rank, wealth and office, whether surrendered or retained, provided grounds for accusation, and the reward for virtue was inevitable death. The profits of persecutors were no less hated than their crimes. Some obtained priesthoods and consulships as the prize of victory, others acquired official posts and backstairs influence, creating a universal pandemonium of hatred and terror. Slaves were bribed to turn against their masters, freedmen against their patrons, while those who lacked an enemy were ruined by their friends.”¹⁶⁴

Tac., *Hist.*, 1.2

After this period of civil unrest, and the era of Neronian transgression and excess that preceded it, it was for Vespasian and his successors to restore stability in Rome and the empire, and establish a new dynasty with an ideological and cultural identity at once distanced from the degeneration that came with the end of the Julio-Claudian line, and connected with the glory and grandeur of Augustus’ principate.¹⁶⁵

In pointed opposition to Neronian excess and weakness, Vespasian, Titus, and, to an extent, Domitian projected (or sought to project) an imperial image of order restored, and traditional morality renewed.¹⁶⁶ Their successive architectural and iconographic programs, their privileging of spectacle, Domitian’s moralistic legislative reform, along with literary

¹⁶⁴ Wellesley trans., 2009.

¹⁶⁵ Zissos, A., “Introduction”, 2016, p. 7; McNelis, *Statius’ Thebaid and the Poetics of Civil War*, 2007, pp. 5-8.

¹⁶⁶ Zissos, “Introduction”, 2016, p. 7.

evidence from the period combine to show that, in the wake of the downfall of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and the civil war of 69 CE, the Flavians were determined to restore a pious, powerful, ordered patriarchy and masculine hierarchy, supported by a system of binaries and categories that would, at least publicly, safeguard the crucial boundaries (of body, of sex, of gender) that underscored elite Roman culture.

One of the most prominent and distinguishing features of the Flavian age was its program of urban renewal. Vespasian instigated an extensive program of architectural development that would forever transform the landscape of the imperial city, visually and spatially promote Flavian values, and a new imperial ideology based on peace, power, and order, and continue the restoration of Rome after the catastrophic fire of 64 CE, and the destruction wrought by the civil war of 69 CE.

The architectural and artistic projects conducted under the Flavians show that they, like Augustus, were attuned to the importance of space, location, and meaning.¹⁶⁷ Buildings, monuments, and sculptures were erected, and strategically positioned within the capital to emphasise and legitimise Flavian leadership, power, and wealth. New urban structures such as the Temple of Peace and the Arch of Titus monumentalised Flavian military glory, imperial power, and peace and order restored, as well as piety and dynasty.¹⁶⁸ The (re)monumentalisation of the Palatine, the Capitol, the Quirinal, along with the Baths of Titus, the Temple to the Divine Vespasian, the Temple to the Divine Claudius displayed the great piety, and opulence, of the Flavians. Domitian's program of urban renewal was especially visual, projecting a sense of omnipresence and omnipotence. According to Suetonius, the last

¹⁶⁷ Boyle, A., "Introduction", in Boyle, A., and Dominik, W.J., (eds.), *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text*, Leiden, and Boston: Brill, 2003, p. 30.

¹⁶⁸ Boyle, "Introduction", 2003, p. 30; Dietrich, J., "Rewriting Dido: Flavian Responses to *Aeneid 4*", *Prudentia*, 36.1, 2004, p. 26.

Flavian restored the Capitol, raised a temple to Jupiter, along with a temple dedicated to the Flavian *gens*, as well as the Stadium, the Odeum, and an artificial lake (Suet. *Dom.* 5.1); and Statius himself provides a description of Domitian's vast palace looming over Rome (Stat. *Silvae* 4.2.18-37). The Flavians transformed, and thereby controlled space in the imperial city, simultaneously legitimising their leadership, and making Flavian wealth, peace, power, and piety key, and inescapable features of the Roman cityscape.

Older structures and sculptures were restored and refashioned, with new structures often erected on top of existing Julio-Claudian ones, and Julio-Claudian iconography was adapted to represent Flavian faces and values. Many of Nero's portraits were reconfigured to depict Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, a move which graphically suggested a departure from, and erasure of the past.¹⁶⁹ The Flavians meaningfully superimposed public buildings upon Nero's characteristic private spaces – in particular, they positioned their emblematic Colosseum and Temple of Peace in such a way as to overwhelm Nero's *Domus Aurea* in a dramatic display of Flavian might, and disconnection from the past.¹⁷⁰ The Flavians' reorganising of the city and its Julio-Claudian features provides a vital representation of the dynasty's determination to establish themselves in contradistinction to Nero.¹⁷¹

While new and renewed structures and sculptures on the one hand proclaimed the might and difference of the Flavians, they are might also be suggestive of surveillance and oppression by the emperor, as they visually and physically dominated the public spaces of the city, so frequented by the male elite.¹⁷² In *Silvae* 4.2, Statius describes Domitian's new palace

¹⁶⁹ Varner, E., "Nero's Memory in Flavian Rome", in Bartsch, S., Freudenburg, K., and Littlewood, C., (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero*, Cambridge, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 237-57.

¹⁷⁰ Zissos, "Introduction", 2016, p. 8.

¹⁷¹ Dietrich, "Dead Woman Walking", 2015, p. 320.

¹⁷² Boyle, "Introduction", 2003, p. 32.

with emphasis placed on the immense, visually imposing nature of the structure, and its divine grandeur; in doing so the poet implicitly comments on the observable, invasive power of Domitian, as well as his remoteness and closeness to the gods.¹⁷³ David Frederick argues that under Domitian urban spaces became arenas in which the emperor could control the bodies and behaviour of the male elite; architectural and sculptural representations (especially portraiture) of Flavian immanence and omnipotence invaded public spaces and encroached on private lives, disempowering and undermining the autonomy of the male elite.¹⁷⁴

By transforming the capital, the Flavians provided a highly perceptible demonstration of their values, and marked a new phase of governance separated from that of Nero and his predecessors. The renovation of Rome also powerfully confirmed the Flavians' dominance and control over the city and its occupants. According to Anthony Boyle: "A new architecture and iconography meant not only a new Rome, but a new *romanitas*, one in which 'Romanness' was a subject relationship to the Flavian emperor, who was everywhere immanent in the city through building and repetitious iconography."¹⁷⁵

The Colosseum, perhaps the most prominent Flavian architectural innovation, was a key feature of Flavian culture. The building was a vast visual and material validation of Flavian and Roman supremacy and power, and perhaps the most obvious representation of the Flavian dynasty's emphasis on control and dominance. As the largest amphitheatre in the empire, the Colosseum dominated the gaze within the city, towering over crowds and performers in the very heart of the capital. In a move that can be read as a pointed

¹⁷³ McCullough, A., "Heard but Not Seen: Domitian and the Gaze in Statius' *Silvae*", *The Classical Journal*, 104:2, 2008/2009, 155.

¹⁷⁴ Frederick, D., "Architecture and Surveillance in Flavian Rome", in Boyle, A.J., and Dominik, W.J., (eds.), *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text*, Leiden, and Boston: Brill, 2003, pp. 199-227.

¹⁷⁵ Boyle, "Introduction", 2003, p. 30.

repudiation of the Neronian past, the Flavians established their amphitheatre on top of the site of Nero's private lake, within his *Domus Aurea*, giving the space over to public entertainment enjoyment, symbolically returning Rome to the people (Mart. *Spect.* 2.1-4, 11-12).¹⁷⁶ In establishing their grand public monument to entertainment over the private monument of Nero's excesses, the Flavians provided visual confirmation of their separation and difference from their Julio-Claudian predecessors.

The Colosseum also provides a clear visual demonstration of the importance of Rome's strict social hierarchy, and the Flavians' efforts to maintain this system through the categorisation and division of the spectators within the structure. Inside the amphitheatre, the strict stratification of Roman society was on display. Following Augustan legislation (Suet. *Aug.* 44) regarding theatrical seating arrangements, spectators within the Colosseum were arranged and separated on the bases of class, and sex. Senators and Vestal Virgins were positioned separately towards the front of the arena, with soldiers, civilians, tutors and their pupils confined to their own designated seating areas, and women were positioned unfavourably in the outer, higher seats.¹⁷⁷ The Colosseum reflects the way that, under Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, Roman society became more thoroughly, and more strictly, stratified and pyramidal, with the court, upper classes, lower classes, and social 'others' all arranged beneath the emperor.¹⁷⁸

It was in the Flavians' interest to establish their legitimacy through public displays of wealth and power, but the sheer size and opulence of the Colosseum reflected more than the glory of the Flavian dynasty and its leadership, it also stood as a representation of the empire's

¹⁷⁶ Lovatt, H., "Flavian Spectacle: Paradox and Wonder" in Zissos, A., (ed.), *A Companion to the Flavian Age of Imperial Rome. Blackwell companions to the ancient world*. Chichester, and Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016, p. 362.

¹⁷⁷ Lovatt, "Flavian Spectacle", 2016, p. 364.

¹⁷⁸ Boyle, "Introduction", 2003, p. 2.

power and supremacy, as the structure was funded by the spoils of foreign conquests.¹⁷⁹ In his *Liber Spectaculorum*, Martial suggests that the Colosseum is the most wondrous edifice in the empire, outdoing the pyramids of Egypt, and the city of Babylon (1.1-2, 7-8). The implication being that Rome dominates all the territories within its empire.¹⁸⁰ The Flavians emulated Augustus in their awareness of the power of the public spectacle, and like the first *princeps* they were generous in the provision of games for the consumption of the Roman populace.¹⁸¹ Under Domitian the Colosseum became the emblem of Flavian power, and the arena within played a key role in exhibiting the supremacy of the emperor,¹⁸² and of Rome's domination of and separation from undesirable, alien or animal "others". During his reign, Domitian provided plentiful entertainment for the capital (Suet. *Dom.* 4), effectively providing repeated reminders of social hierarchies and boundaries, and his own domination and closeness to the gods.

In her study of Flavian spectacle, Helen Lovatt has observed that public games, shows, and parades served as visual representations of imperial power and reinforcements of Roman identity.¹⁸³ As Martial's *Liber Spectaculorum* shows through its focus on the figure of the emperor and his production of spectacles of nature, animals, and humans – the emperor had power over all.¹⁸⁴ The Colosseum displayed the Roman world within its walls, reserving distinct platforms for Roman society, human and animal outsiders of the empire, the gods, and the emperor.¹⁸⁵ As Lovatt observes, "The reality of the emperor's power is underscored by the ability of his spectacle to be more than empty show, guaranteed by the ruptured

¹⁷⁹ Lovatt, "Flavian Spectacle", 2016, p. 363.

¹⁸⁰ Lovatt, "Flavian Spectacle", 2016, p. 365.

¹⁸¹ Lovatt, "Flavian Spectacle", 2016, p. 362.

¹⁸² Boyle, "Introduction", 2003, p. 19.

¹⁸³ Lovatt, "Flavian Spectacle", 2016, p. 361.

¹⁸⁴ Lovatt, "Flavian Spectacle", 2016, pp. 366-7.

¹⁸⁵ Lovatt, "Flavian Spectacle", 2016, pp. 367-8.

bodies of animals and human beings....The emperor pervades the cosmos, making the spectacle a reality, not just a show.”¹⁸⁶ The imposing Colosseum, and the gruesome and degrading events of the arena, combined to create an enormous spectacle of imperial power and dominance. The Colosseum is a potent image of Roman self-perception, and self-fashioning, as well as the imperial city’s world view. Within the vast amphitheatre (especially the arena), the Romans (in particular their emperor) were able to cast themselves as a wealthy, all-powerful, and physically whole master race, ruling the fates, and rupturing the bodies, of criminals, animals, conquered enemies, and barbarians.

The Flavian concern for power, order and control can also be seen in Domitian’s numerous legislative and moral reforms, which reflect a pervasive anxiety relating to the Roman socio-sexual and corporeal hierarchies, and the concomitant gender binaries that were integral to Roman society and culture. Domitian proved to be concerned with constraining both men and women through the reintroduction of several laws that restricted their private lives. His focus on control is discernible in his reinstatement of the *Lex Scantinia*, a law which prohibited sex between free-born Roman males (Suet. *Dom.* 8.3), as well as his introduction of a law against castration (Suet. *Dom.* 7; Mart. *Epigr.* 2.60, 6.2). Domitian showed a particular concern for controlling and limiting women’s personal power and autonomy. Along with his revival of Augustus’ famous *Lex Iulia de Adulteriis Coercendis* (Mart. *Epigr.* 6.4, 7, 22, 45; Suet. *Dom.* 8.3), which prescribed divorce, banishment, or death for adulterous wives (and often their partners), Domitian also placed restrictions on the inheritances of elite women through the *Lex Voconia* (Suet. *Dom.* 8.3), and reintroduced (and strictly enforced) the death penalty for Vestal Virgins who broke their vow of chastity (Suet.

¹⁸⁶ Lovatt, “Flavian Spectacle”, 2016, p.367.

Dom. 8.3-4). These legal impositions limited women's independence from their male relatives and the state, and compelled them to confine themselves to their crucial roles as breeders of noblemen.¹⁸⁷ It is clear that female social and sexual activity and independence were threatening to the emperor and elite citizenry, and were therefore publically suppressed.

Coinciding with Domitian's control of women's socio-sexual lives, was a renewed emphasis on both virginity and traditional domesticity. The importance of these idealised feminine virtues can be perceived in the prominent Temple of Minerva that adjoins the forum, and the virgin goddess' prominence on Domitian's coinage,¹⁸⁸ along with the many images of women tending to their woolwork depicted on Domitian's Forum Transitorium.¹⁸⁹ Domitian's legislation, and the gendered iconography of his program of urban renewal, reinforced the notion that women's lives and social roles should be confined to the household, and to the marriage- and child-bed.¹⁹⁰

Domitian's legislative changes strongly accorded with the socio-sexual ideology that had underpinned elite Roman culture for centuries,¹⁹¹ and indicate renewed attempts at controlling women's social and sexual lives. The emperor's renewal of *Lex Julia de Adulteriis Coercendis* and the *Lex Voconia* reflects an increased interest in reinforcing the gender binaries and oppositions that, at least publically, divided men and women in to comprehensible categories that upheld Roman patriarchy, and a sense of masculine control and order. Men could not assume passive sexual roles or emasculate themselves, and women

¹⁸⁷ Boyle, "Introduction", 2003, p. 25.

¹⁸⁸ Boyle, "Introduction", 2003, p. 16.

¹⁸⁹ Van Abbema, L.K., "Women in Flavian Rome", in Zissos, A., (ed.), *A Companion to the Flavian Age of Imperial Rome. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World*, Chichester, and Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016, p. 308.

¹⁹⁰ The restriction and exclusion of women can also be seen in the spectatorial arrangements within the Colosseum, as women were relegated to the outer fringes, to watch the games alongside gladiators, and other social outsiders: Boyle, "Introduction", 2003, p. 25-6.

¹⁹¹ Boyle, "Introduction", 2003, p. 25.

could not engage in extra-marital affairs, or attain fortunes for themselves. The moral legislation of Domitian regarding sexual intercourse, adultery, women's inheritance, and chastity constitutes invasive personal and physical control by the emperor.

The successive architectural, iconographic, spectatorial, and legislative programs of Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian reveal a renewed focus on power, order, and control. Under their leadership social hierarchies were firmed up, boundaries and categories became more strictly stratified, and everywhere every body was arranged beneath the emperor's supreme power. In the symbolic structures and strictures that the Flavians used to organise and stabilise Roman society, it is possible to see a reflection of anxieties regarding coherence, and containment of the body, identity, and society.

Inherited Anxieties: Roman Sexual, Corporeal, and Gender Ideologies

As with the bodies of monsters, the manner in which the bodies of males and females are represented in Roman texts reveals much about the anxieties and attitudes of the society they spring from.¹⁹² As Barbara Gold asserts in her study of the body in Juvenal's *Satires*: "Concepts of physiology and corporeality determine identity – both male and female, but especially female – throughout ancient texts."¹⁹³ The ancient author's approach to representing, shaping, and controlling the body reveals much about ancient ideas and ideals regarding gendered bodies, and sexualities.

Elite Roman society retained a pervasive sexual and corporeal ideology based on inherited anxieties about the female, which determined the way that male Roman citizens conducted and controlled themselves, as well as how they viewed Roman women, and

¹⁹² Gold, B.K., "'The house I live in is not my own': Women's bodies in Juvenal's *Satires*", *Arethusa*, 31:3, 1998, p. 369.

¹⁹³ Gold, "Women's bodies in Juvenal's *Satires*", 1998, p. 369.

persons of inferior status, such as slaves, foreigners, and criminals. The bodies of elite males were considered to be naturally superior to those of the opposite sex and the underclasses, but the constant demonstration of physical and psychological inviolability and self-control was necessary for the cultivation and maintenance of elite male identity.¹⁹⁴ The ideal Roman *vir* behaved in strict accordance with an array of moral and behavioural virtues such as *disciplina*, *continentia*, *pietas*, *fides*, and *virtus*, along with more physical and psychological qualities such as *fortis*, *duris*, *sanus*, and *integer*.¹⁹⁵ Conforming with traditional and contemporary theorising of the gendered body, Roman imperial culture typically configured the male body as contained, controlled, and complete – these positive qualities ensured the masculine self.

The corporeal ideology of the Roman elite can also be observed in the degrading punishments enacted against criminals and members of the underclasses. During the Republic and the early imperial period, Roman citizens were protected from having their bodies violated by corporal punishment.¹⁹⁶ The Valerian and Porcian laws of the Republic (Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*, 10.9) protected the integrity and sanctity of citizen *corpora*, exempting them from capital and corporal punishment by affording them the right of *prouocatio*.¹⁹⁷ These laws highlighted and legalised the demarcation of *honestiores* and *humiliores*.¹⁹⁸ The citizen's body was legally immune to punishment, and crimes enacted by the leading class were usually punished with exile, meaning that the perpetrator would lose

¹⁹⁴ Walters, J., "Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought", in Hallett, J.P., and Skinner, M.B., (eds.), *Roman Sexualities*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 30.

¹⁹⁵ Manwell, E., "Gender and Masculinity", in Skinner, M.B., (ed.), *A Companion to Catullus. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 113-4.

¹⁹⁶ Walters, "Invading the Roman Body", 1998, p. 37.

¹⁹⁷ Cook, J.G., *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 327*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015, p. 366.

¹⁹⁸ Edwards, C., *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.124.

property and status, but never suffer the indignity of public execution.¹⁹⁹ Slaves however, were openly and often punished with torture, executed by burning or crucifixion, or made to fight in the gladiatorial arena for the entertainment of the city; prisoners and criminals could be killed in the forum, thrown from cliffs, sewn into a sack and cast into the ocean, fed to wild animals in the arena, hung, or buried alive.²⁰⁰ To attack or penetrate the body of an elite Roman male, was to assimilate him with these tainted, vulnerable, and penetrable ‘others’ of Roman society.

Female bodies, on the other hand, were frequently presented as uncontained, contaminating, boundless, and incomplete – these negative qualities determined the feminine *lack* of self, of identity, ensuring her separation and otherness.²⁰¹ Pliny’s perception of the female body (particularly its menstrual blood, as discussed in Chapter 1) suggests, the Romans of the first century CE, like the Greeks, were concerned with the contaminating, destabilising nature of the feminine form. Ovid’s *Remedia Amoris*, conveys explicit exemplars of the Roman mistrust and anxiety over the female body and its perceived inherent unpleasantness. At 353-58 the poet explicitly links the made-up woman, who has covered herself in oozing, oily ointments, with the foulness and bestiality of the harpies – suggesting that her true nature is barely concealed by her cosmetics.²⁰² First and second century medical authorities such as Galen and Soranus, like ancient Greek poets and theorists, represented the female body as innately defective, unstable, and imperfect, yet the fertility of women was a major concern, and a cause for male interference and control, as the elite woman had a

¹⁹⁹ Richlin, A., “Cicero’s Head”, in Porter, J.I., (ed.), *Constructions of the Classical Body*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999, p. 195.

²⁰⁰ Bauman, R.A., *Crime and Punishment in Ancient Rome*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 7, 18.

²⁰¹ Gold, “Women’s bodies in Juvenal’s *Satires*”, 1998, p. 374.

²⁰² Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity*, 2015, p. 137.

crucial function in society as the bearer of noble children, and therefore as preserver of the bloodlines that ensured elite masculinity and legitimacy.²⁰³

As Kimberly Stratton observes, the inherent penetrability and mutability of Roman women's bodies was problematic, and women's breachable boundaries, and perhaps their distended, pregnant bodies, capable of harbouring two lives at once, in particular, would have been disconcerting for a culture so fixated on bodily integrity.²⁰⁴ Jonathan Walters further suggests that the disinclination of Romans to publically mention sexual intercourse in relation to elite marriage was a result of this tension regarding the debased and mysterious nature of the penetrable, mutable, and generative female body.²⁰⁵ Although Roman socio-sexual ideology conditionally accepted and allowed sexual relations between men,²⁰⁶ sexual relations between women were intolerable, as can be seen in Martial's *Epigrams*, where lesbianism is presented as terrible and transgressive adultery (1.90). As Walters has established, to be an elite Roman *vir*, retaining personal power and prestige, one had to maintain the role of "inpenetrable penetrator."²⁰⁷ The emasculation, and feminisation of the Roman male body was equated with the complete loss of social status. As Boyle observes, in Martial's epigrams "we witness a blanket disapproval of anything which looks like female sexual power (and the personal liberty and control that implies)" and sexually transgressive females violated "the socio-sexual boundaries [that were] essential to the poet's world."²⁰⁸

²⁰³ D'Ambra, E., *Roman Women*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 12.

²⁰⁴ Stratton, "Magic, Abjection, and Gender", 2014, p. 157; Dietrich, "Rewriting Dido", 2004, p. 26.

²⁰⁵ Walters, "Invading the Roman Body", 1998, p. 34.

²⁰⁶ As Boyle asserts, in ancient Rome "penetration is an index of social status", the active, penetrative role was acceptable for an elite male, but the passive/pathic role was inappropriate and degrading: Boyle, "Introduction", 2003, p. 24.

²⁰⁷ Walters, "Invading the Roman Body", 1998, p. 48.

²⁰⁸ Boyle, "Introduction", 2003, p. 24-5.

Regarding the misogynistic representation of the female in Greek and Roman literature, Barbette Stanley Spaeth has suggested that the witch figures that emerged in literature during the early imperial period appeared in response to contemporary concerns relating to male and female social and sexual roles.²⁰⁹ The Julio-Claudian era was characterised in later Latin literature as a period of social, political and cultural transition, accompanied by a decline in public morality.²¹⁰ Literary accounts of the period reflect an anxiety relating to the behaviour of elite women, with several of the Julio-Claudian *matronae* being characterised as unrestrained in their appetites for sex and power. Augustus' wife Livia, for example, is represented negatively by Suetonius as interfering in political affairs, and attempting to attach power and prestige to her own name, thus impairing the image of masculine dominance in the imperial family itself (Suet. *Tib.* 50). In Book 13 of Tacitus' *Annals*, Nero's mother Agrippina is thoroughly demonised as treacherous, and power hungry. Juvenal's Sixth Satire seems to demonstrate the extremity of male anxiety over the supposed shift in the social and sexual roles of Roman women, as he details how Messalina, the third wife of Claudius, would disguise herself as a prostitute, seek out brothels and offer herself to customers, before returning to the imperial palace (Juv. *Sat.* 6.115-32).²¹¹ The edicts that Augustus promoted regarding adultery and abortion further reveal prevailing anxieties regarding the sexual conduct of women in Rome, and symbolise an ideological campaign to reassert absolute masculine, patriarchal control over female bodies and behaviour.²¹²

For Spaeth, monstrous witch-figures such as Horace's Canidia, Sagana, Veia, and Folia, and Lucan's Erichtho, can be read as extreme negative examples of female transgression,

²⁰⁹ Spaeth, 'From Goddess to Hag', 2014, pp. 54-55.

²¹⁰ Spaeth, 'From Goddess to Hag', 2014, p. 54.

²¹¹ Spaeth, 'From Goddess to Hag', 2014, p. 54

²¹² Spaeth, 'From Goddess to Hag', 2014, p. 54

graphically exaggerating the notion of a woman disregarding traditional gender roles, thus threatening masculine physical and social control, and by extension the stability of society itself.²¹³ These witches represent the complete inversion of ideal feminine behaviour; they are hideous, shameless, lustful, castrating, violent, active, infertile, and dominant, rather than beautiful, modest, chaste, dutiful, passive, fertile, and pious.²¹⁴ This inversion signifies a radical reversal of natural order, and undermines the image of feminine domesticity and purity that was so important to the ideology of Augustus', and later Domitian's, regime.

The transgressive female figures of Statius' *Thebaid* similarly reflect, and exaggerate the concerns of Roman society. As monstrous characters who appear in a male authored text, written for a largely male audience, they can be read as symbols of male fears – a collective other onto which a society, reeling from an era of social degeneration characterised by female transgression of gender boundaries and expectations, might project its deepest anxieties. The prominence of disturbed, disturbing femininity in the *Thebaid*, reflects a latent anxiety regarding female power that swelled in response to female political influence in the triumviral, and early imperial periods, an anxiety detected perhaps most clearly in Tacitus' portrayals of Agrippina and Messalina. It is possible that the transgressive *matronae* presented in the *Thebaid*, namely Argia, Ide, Polyxo, and especially Jocasta, who so actively intervene in the narrative to subvert and defy destructive male actions, reflect contemporary anxieties of Rome regarding the inversion and perversion of normative roles induced by civil war conditions, as well as the interference of women on two key platforms of patriarchal power: war and politics.²¹⁵ Tacitus reflects this insecurity regarding women's threatening

²¹³ Spaeth, 'From Goddess to Hag', 2014, p. 54-55.

²¹⁴ Spaeth, 'From Goddess to Hag', 2014, p. 54.

²¹⁵ McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016, p. 330; Markus, D.D., "Grim Pleasures: Statius' Poetic Consolations", *Arethusa*, 37.1, 2004, pp. 117-20.

influence and ambition outside of the domestic sphere in his writings on Roman history, it is perhaps most evident in his critiques of the bold military addresses of elite wives and mothers in his *Annals* (1.69, 3.33).

Imperial Rome's emphasis on the establishment and maintenance of boundaries, hierarchal structures, and autonomous identity is linked with the rejection and exclusion of the female, and the disruption, and mental and physical disorder she embodies.²¹⁶ Flavian Rome's renewed public focus on the rational, the separate, individual, and independent, the ordered, structured, and controlled, the known, the cultured, and the lawful, necessarily involves the repression, or suppression of the mother, and severance from her womb. The presence of blood, viscera, corpses, and dismembered remains of men in Statius' depictions of feminine monstrosity, demonstrates the fragility of the human physical form, destabilising the concept of bodily integrity and autonomy that was so vital to Roman identity and society and associates it with the female and the maternal. Thus Statius' portraits of highly physical, feminine horror expose the anxieties lurk beneath the surface of the rigid corporeal ideology of patriarchal, hierarchal Rome. These descriptions of perverse, and transgressive femininity would have been profoundly disturbing to a Roman audience.

In the *Thebaid* the monstrous and the feminine are prominent, interconnected themes in which the anxieties of the Flavian era are reflected. The female monsters and monstrous females of the poem are uncontrolled as they appear throughout the text, always engendering chaos, and the subversion of (especially gendered and corporeal) norms and boundaries. Statius' three female monsters, with their hybrid forms and unclean,

²¹⁶ On feminist theory and the paradox of maternal representation (reverence and repression) in Imperial Roman literature, see McAuley, *Reproducing Rome*, 2016.

contaminating flesh, can be regarded as a distorted, amplified symbols of masculine society's concerns regarding the permeability and instability of women's bodies; they graphically embody the confusion of physical categories, and feminine contagiousness that made women's bodies so disturbing to patriarchal society. The horror of these figures is amplified by an understanding of Rome's pervasive sexual and corporeal ideologies, as these monsters violate the physical and psychological bounds of the men who seek to subdue and avert them. Tisiphone, the Argive snake-woman, and the Sphinx represent a complete loss of control; they are feminine, gluttonous, insatiable in their appetite for human flesh. Their infectious corpses are dark perversions of generative sexuality and maternity, disturbingly highlighting human materiality and vulnerability, and the inescapability of deterioration and death, as well as the fearful, unstable nature of the female. These creatures force the Roman audience to confront the breakdown of the vital boundaries of the human body, and their viscerally repulsive, noxious maternal bodies reflect a deep anxiety relating to feminine biology. Although the monstrous figures of the *Thebaid* certainly exhibit the influence of an extensive cultural inheritance of archaic Greek misogyny, they also expose the anxieties of their contemporary Roman audience.

The mortal women of Statius' epic struggle to maintain their identity; for all of them, their sense of self, of maternal and female identity, occasionally (but importantly) slips and shifts to reveal the malevolent supernatural forces, and the inescapable regressive heredity that controls the narrative. In their behaviour, they display the slippage of self that was terrifying to the elite Roman male. Ide transforms from a traditional lamenting mother into a threatening witch figure, perverting ancient mourning rituals. Assuming a masculine role, Argia leads her own expedition to Thebes, then performs her own *aristeia*, and is then compared through a simile to the goddess Ceres, and a castrated priest of Cybele. Jocasta

usurps the masculine political and military role as she attempts to subvert the war between her sons, before being characterised as the Fury who fuels the war, and as her filicidal ancestor, Agave. Statius' Theban epic, and the monstrous female figures depicted therein, manifests a fear of disorder, regression and repetition that haunted the Roman cultural psyche in the wake of violent civil discord, and socio-moral decline and transgression, and embeds those anxieties in the ambiguous, threatening figure of the female.

Conclusion

In his *Thebaid*, Statius evokes and expands the ancient trope of the mythic female monster, imbuing her with more potency, agency, and overall narrative significance than his literary predecessors. While traditional combat myths frequently presented the female monster being defeated for the restoration or establishment of masculine, patriarchal order, reason, and control, and while Furies were usually incorporated only temporarily into epic and tragedy to ignite or fuel the main action, Statius allows his female monsters to overshadow his narrative from its outset. From their narrative positions outside of the main action, the snake-woman and the Sphinx portend further chaos and destruction, and Tisiphone actively engenders the breakdown of order, reason, and masculine power; these monsters are all introduced in conjunction with male disempowerment and the violent dissolution of masculine structures. In his presentation of these monsters, the poet establishes his own version of the ancient monstrous-feminine, which expands the trope to incorporate imagery of feminine sexual and maternal materiality, as well as of death and disease, adding to the conventional feature of bestial hybridity in female monsters.

In the *Thebaid* monsters and monstrous figures establish what is evil and abnormal (violence, gore, infanticide, androicide, cannibalism, disease, death), and align it with the feminine. In his formulation and utilisation of the monstrous, Statius shows that the boundaries that monsters are supposed to symbolically establish are breached in his epic universe, allowing disorder, transgression, and excess, to seep into his protagonists, both male and female. Statius' Tisiphone, snake-woman, and Sphinx are so uncontainable that they infect the subsequent female characters in the epic, even as they act out their pious laments; when the virtuous female characters appear, the feminine has already been established in connection with the monstrous, transgressive, perverse, and threatening.

Observing Statius' representation of monstrosity, and using the theses of Creed and Cohen to focalise analysis, it is possible to see that the poet establishes his own monstrous-feminine by foregrounding and amplifying those elements of femininity that patriarchal Roman society found so profoundly unsettling, such as the instability, permeability, and the uncontrolled, inescapable materiality of the female body. Statius' female monsters are grotesque narrative figurations of prevalent misogynistic stereotypes regarding feminine physiology and psychology. Set against a culture seemingly defined by a fixation on demarcating and enforcing physical, mental, moral, temporal, and social boundaries, a society characterised by an emphasis on stability, control, and order, the female monsters and monstrous females of Statius' *Thebaid* embody anxieties regarding regression and repetition, internecine violence and disorder, unstable identity, and the dangers of female power.

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