

## Style in Latin Poetry

# Trends in Classics – Supplementary Volumes

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## Volume 159

# Style in Latin Poetry



Edited by  
Paolo Dainotti, Alexandre Pinheiro Hasegawa  
and Stephen Harrison

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# Preface

Most of the papers in this volume derive from a workshop held at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, on Saturday 19 March 2022; we are most grateful to the conference staff of the college (especially Donna O'Sullivan) for enabling this in-person event to happen, not least after two years where such things were not possible, to the college itself for its generous research funding and to its Centre for the Study of Greek and Roman Antiquity for its academic support. We also thank those who attended the workshop and contributed to a lively discussion.

We are particularly grateful to Antonios Rengakos and Franco Montanari for accepting this book for the Trends in Classics series at De Gruyter, and to all those at De Gruyter who smoothed its way to publication.

Paolo Dainotti, Alexandre Hasegawa, and Stephen Harrison



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Federica Bessone

# Statius' Paradoxical Style

**Abstract:** Paradox is a hallmark of Statius' style: it arouses tension in the reader, and performs epistemological as well as aesthetic functions. The *Thebaid*, *Achilleid*, and *Silvae* share a taste for paradoxical expression, imagery, and structures: in the sublime, the playful, and the polite registers, a rhetoric of wonder is at work. Perversions of language embody the perversions of a war between equals; spectacular illusions transform a cross-dressed hero under our eyes; oxymoronic definitions exalt the excellence of patrons. As he makes words, images, and ideas (or even poetic traditions) collide with each other, Statius intensifies his text and creates an aesthetics of surprise.

*j'aime mieux être homme à paradoxes que homme à préjugés*  
J.-J. Rousseau, *Émile*

## 1 Introduction

I will examine Statius' paradoxical style as an expression of a poetics of paradox. Firstly, I will explain why I think that paradox is a hallmark of Statius' poetry; secondly, I will present examples of stylistic procedures by which he creates paradoxical effects; finally, I will argue that the most sublime scene of the *Thebaid* is also an exercise in paradoxical style. A closer integration of stylistics and literary criticism is needed.<sup>1</sup> Statius' style is still often labelled as 'mannerist', or 'baroque': it is time to outline its 'anatomy'.<sup>2</sup> I hope that a new investigation of this complex style can contribute to a better understanding of Statius' poetics, offer a tool for textual criticism, and open new perspectives for reception studies, helping us appreciate even Dante's sensitivity to this poet's diction.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite Conte's claim (2021, 67), style is not a central concern in Flavian studies. On stylistics, see Stockwell and Whiteley 2014; Burke 2017a; 2017b; Stockwell 2020<sup>2</sup>; for Latin literature, overview in Oniga 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the Flaubertian title of Conte 2007, ch. 3; Bessone 2018a; 2020. On mannerism see Fernaldelli's chapter in this volume.

## 2 Poetics of paradox

Paradox pervades all levels of Statius' text; the tension between opposites, the unexpected, and surprise are the energy of his writing. Statius is an experimental poet, and the very conception of his works is a provocation. Newlands (2011, 3) captures this quality: 'Paradox is a favourite stylistic trope of the *Silvae*'. 'Trope' is used here in a loose sense. For ancient (and modern) rhetoric, paradox is neither a trope, nor a clearly identified figure in itself: it escapes a precise definition, and is rather an effect associated with different *tropoi* and *schemata*.<sup>3</sup> In Greek, (τὸ) παράδοξον is what goes against δόξα, common opinion (Lat. *inopinatum*), and creates surprise, like the wonders of paradoxography (Lat. *mirabile*, or *admirabile*). '*Paradoxon*', spanning both the factual or conceptual and the verbal level (*in re / in verbis*), applies to a number of rhetorical arguments and procedures that rely on a contradiction, in thought and language. The modern use of the term tends to identify 'paradox' with the paradoxical *sententia*:<sup>4</sup> the *paradoxa Stoicorum* — pointed *sententiae* that give effective rhetorical form to philosophical truths contrary to common sense — contributed to this semantic evolution;<sup>5</sup> in addition to the *acutum dicendi genus* of the Stoics, Roman declamation was a training ground for what we now, more commonly, call 'paradoxes'.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.1 'Mannerism', 'rhetorical poetry', and paradox

The *Silvae* are Statius' most original accomplishment, but the *Thebaid* too is born from this experimental vocation, and this taste for paradox. Here I touch on a problematic point. Post-Virgilian epic has often been accused of excessive compliance with the Augustan model, and, at the same time, of rhetorical excess and 'mannerism'.

'Rhetorical poetry' was almost a definition of post-Augustan poetry at the turn of the twentieth century, in the wake of Leo: this is a dismissive label, born from a

<sup>3</sup> Lausberg 1990<sup>10</sup>, § 37, 1 (*genus admirabile/turpe*, or παράδοξον σχῆμα); 1998, § 64, 3, n. 1. Quintilian presupposes παράδοξον/*inopinatum* as a figure of thought (*Inst.* 9.2.23; see Russell 2001, ad loc.). A definition is missing in Mortara Garavelli 2004 (cf. 280). Gruppo μ 1976, 220–221 lists a specific paradox under the 'paralogisms' (akin to the 'figures of thought': 49).

<sup>4</sup> A narrow definition of 'paradox' as a primarily linguistic phenomenon in Lefèvre 1970 (59–60 and n. 5), 1992 (209–210 and n. 5), vs the (much) broader notion of Brooks 1947 and Hardie 2009b.

<sup>5</sup> Moretti 1995, 163–164. See Galli 2019. On Stoic paradoxes in poetry, Demanche 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Geyer and Hagenbüchle 1992. In modern philosophy, a logical antinomy can be defined as 'a resistant contradiction' (D'Agostini 2009, 21–22).

Romantic prejudice.<sup>7</sup> 'Mannerism' is a term from art history, first applied to literature by Curtius,<sup>8</sup> and mostly associated with a notion of decadence.<sup>9</sup> Curtius intended 'mannerism' as an (ahistorical) category of style — 'the common denominator for all literary tendencies which are opposed to Classicism, whether they be preclassical, postclassical, or contemporary with any Classicism' — and he exemplified it with a review of characteristic rhetorical figures, from Statius to Baltasar Gracián. His pupil Hocke traced this modernising trend throughout European culture, rather identifying 'mannerism' with an (ahistorical) category of the human spirit, and a disquieting vision of the world.<sup>10</sup> Another pupil of Curtius, Erich Burck, focused on Neronian and Flavian epic and tragedy as expressions of an age of anxiety; however, he did not discuss theoretical issues, and did not address the question of style.<sup>11</sup> Today, the use of the term in Latin studies is rather generic: it points to gloomy themes typical of first century CE,<sup>12</sup> or highlights contrived form and conceit, from archaic expressionism, to Ovid, to the post-Augustans.<sup>13</sup>

'Mannerist' (together with 'baroque') is a label often applied to Statius' poetry.<sup>14</sup> In the theoretical debate of the 1960s, it defined both the distorted world of the *Thebaid* and the precious style of the *Silvae*.<sup>15</sup> Schetter contrasted the *Thebaid* with the 'classical' balance of the *Aeneid*: Statius' epic is dominated by *furor*, the Inhuman and the Superhuman; it is characterised by dissonances, 'manneristic experimentalism', and 'manneristic taste for variation'; overall, it makes artifice prevail over reality, verisimilitude, and nature. Cancik attempted a comprehensive assessment of Statius' epic and occasional poetry as a manneristic oeuvre, tracing the Unreal and Perverse, the Artificial and Unnatural in it — deformation, of reality and language, is a distinctive feature of Mannerism.

Relationship with literary models is central to the notion of 'mannerism', as well as of 'rhetorical poetry': both imply a, potentially disparaging, comparison between the elaborate structures and style of this poetry and its literary precedents (or ideals of classicism). The charges of uninventive imitation and artificial

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7 Cancik 1986, 2701–2702.

8 Curtius 1948, 277–303 [= 2013<sup>2</sup>, 273–301]; see Galasso 2012 and Fernandelli's chapter in this volume.

9 Curtius 2013<sup>2</sup>, 274.

10 Hocke 1957; 1959 (cf. Conte 1985<sup>2</sup>, 81 n. 11).

11 Burck 1971 (written in 1966).

12 E.g. Frings 1992.

13 A hint at Ovid as an anticipator of 'imperial mannerism' in Rosati 2021, 173 [= 1983, 168–169].

14 Vessey 1973, 7–14, esp. 12.

15 Schetter 1960, 122–125 (cf. 56–63); Cancik 1965 (vs Vollmer 1898); Friedrich 1963. See Cancik 1986, 2702–2704.

distortion of a ‘classical’ model like Virgil were the Scylla and Charybdis of Statian criticism until fairly recent times. In what follows, I will take for granted a by now unprejudiced view of the rhetorical construction of poetry,<sup>16</sup> and will do without a critical category, that of ‘mannerism’, that proved historically useful at a crucial turn, but comes too loaded with preconceptions. I will also avoid the misleading label of ‘baroque’, despite a general affinity between Statius’ poetics and the poetics of surprise that was theorised and practised, in literature and art, in the baroque age.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.2 The *Thebaid* and the paradoxes of ‘secondariness’

Almost until the end of the last century, a Romantic prejudice conditioned studies on all Flavian poetry, on the basis of a flat reading of the *Thebaid*’s *envoi*: Statius’ invitation to his poem not to ‘challenge’ the divine *Aeneid* (*nec tu... tempta*), ‘essay not the divine *Aeneid*, but ever follow her footsteps from afar in adoration’ (12.816–817).<sup>18</sup> The declaration of ‘secondariness’<sup>19</sup> was read at face value, and legitimised a devaluation of Silver Latin poetry as inferior to the Augustan Golden Age.<sup>20</sup> Today, this is recognised as an ambitious self-affirmation. Divinising the predecessor means proposing oneself as a candidate for succession:<sup>21</sup> he who follows in such footsteps is preparing to receive in turn divine honours after death (819).<sup>22</sup>

This epilogue itself is a paradox — and it contains more than one within it. Fame has already paved a way for the poet’s work, in its journey to posterity: *iam certe praesens tibi Fama benignum / stravit iter coepitque novam monstrare futuris* (‘Already, ‘tis true, Fame has strewn a kindly path before you’, 812–813). A bold fusion of present and future is conveyed through the breathtaking combination *novam ... futuris*. This varies an oxymoronic phrase by Horace, C. 3.30.7–8 *usque ego postera / crescam laude recens*, ‘I shall grow with the praise of posterity ever fresh’.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Statius boldly replaces Callimachus’ ‘untrodden path’

16 See Peirano 2019.

17 On this category from art history (applied to literature by Wölfflin 1888), Ibbett and More 2019; Battistini 2012<sup>2</sup>; Russo 2012.

18 Translations of Statius are from Shackleton Bailey 2003, occasionally modified.

19 Hinds 1998, 91–98.

20 Williams 1978.

21 Rosati 2008.

22 Hardie 1993, 110.

23 Tr. Woodman 2022, 377.

with the philosophical image of 'following' a 'divine' teacher (Lucretius 3.3–4; 15),<sup>24</sup> an image that in Lucretius coexists with the untrodden paths of the Muses (1.926–927 = 4.1–2).<sup>25</sup>

The Flavian poet dares to mention a sacred name, in such a way as to suggest his own future consecration. Almost every Augustan poet before Ovid fashions himself as the 'first' Latin equivalent of a Greek canonical author: this is the *primus ego* motif, the paradox of originality as imitation. Statius is in fact the first to fashion himself as the new Virgil, his heir in the role of national epic *vates* (814–815). This ambitious poet has the audacity to represent himself as a follower of an Augustan Latin classic, in the same language, and at a relatively close temporal distance: 'challenging' the *Aeneid* (*temptare*) is the ambition he declares in *Silv.* 4.7.25–28.<sup>26</sup>

Every new reading of post-Augustan poetry cannot but address its relationship with its predecessors: what changes are our cultural assumptions. A limited vision of Virgil's 'classicism' led to condemning both the flatness and the excesses of his imitators. A more attentive reading of the tensions of the *Aeneid* made us recognise the vitality of its Neronian and Flavian reception: Virgil's 'Epic Successors' strike us today as acute readers, and creative interpreters, of the Virgilian text.<sup>27</sup> The changed evaluation of Ovid also favoured the re-evaluation of Neronians and Flavians: the new *aetas Ovidiana* has revealed the lines of continuity between Ovid's experiments and the experimentalism of the post-Ovidians.

Even the study of paradox must be framed in this relationship with the Augustans. The ongoing reappraisal, of the Flavian successors and of Statius, will not make some extremes of expressive provocation pleasant to our taste. However, recognising the presuppositions of this paradoxical style, and of post-Augustan 'mannerism', in the Augustans themselves — in the *cacozelia* and the enallages of Virgil, in the oxymorons and *callidae iuncturae* of Horace, as well as in the syllepses and conceits of Ovid — can help us consider, with less prejudice, the dynamics of continuity and rupture between the different phases of the imperial age.

Paradox can be a gesture of rebellion towards the forms and thought of Virgil and the Augustan models; but it can also express an extreme interpretation of the

<sup>24</sup> Hardie 1993, 110–11. Notice the language of imitation in 3.1–13 (esp. 5–6; 10–12).

<sup>25</sup> In Hor. *Epist.* 1.19.21–2, the boast of having 'planted' one's 'footsteps freely in the void' and 'placed' one's 'feet in no other's steps' coexists with the boast of 'following the metre and spirit' of Archilochus (21–22; 24–25); cf. Hardie 2009a, 53–56 (from which the transl.).

<sup>26</sup> Coleman 1988, ad loc.; Hinds 1998, 142–144.

<sup>27</sup> Hardie 1993. On Statius as an interpreter of Virgil, Bessone forthcoming b).

models themselves, which makes the contradictions of thought left open by Virgil explode — and takes even his expressive tensions to the extreme.

### 2.3 Paradoxes and epic of *nefas*

At key points in the *Thebaid*, a violent paradox disrupts the norms of the genre, and conflicts with the Virgilian model; Statius renews the rebellious gesture of Lucan, in dialogue with tragedy.

The *epiphonema* on the fratricidal duel (11.574–579) reverses Virgil’s apostrophe to Nisus and Euryalus (*Aen.* 9.446–449) and stages a crisis of the memorial function of epic, when its subject is a *nefas*.<sup>28</sup> By invoking oblivion for the events he has just sung, Statius reformulates Lucan’s refusal to represent the horror of Pharsalus (7.552–556). This paradoxical attitude of the narrator empties the epic form from within, and recharges it with a new energy.<sup>29</sup>

Shortly before, a narrative paradox reduces the conventions of epic to absurdity. Once ‘bloodshed has begun’ (*coeptus sanguis*, 536), the ‘Furies’ step back before a human ‘fury’ greater than their own: this is a paradoxical picture, fixed in a conceptual antithesis; *nec iam opus est Furiis; tantum mirantur et astant / laudantes, hominumque dolent plus posse furores* (‘There is no more need of the Furies; they only marvel and stand by applauding, chagrined that men’s *fury* is mightier than their own’, 11.537–538). These words almost amount to a *sententia*: something similar to a paradox by Lucan, in a less concentrated syntax.

The verb of wonder, *mirari*, is a textual marker of paradox.<sup>30</sup> The reader is invited to be amazed at this narrative invention — human passions as ‘Hell on Earth’ —, and at how Statius has transformed Allecto’s exit in the *Aeneid*, when she is no longer needed (*Aen.* 7.552–559, cf. 554 *sanguis novus imbuat arma*, ‘the arms... are now stained with fresh blood’; 569–571).<sup>31</sup> Here, the Furies are not sent back to the Underworld: they remain on the field, enjoying the spectacle.

In rewriting the *Aeneid*, Statius exploits the creative energy of paradox, on the narrative, intellectual, and verbal level, and sometimes he signposts, with paradoxical formulas, his inversions of Virgilian structures. But this is only part of the story. As we shall see, it is in Virgil himself that Statius finds no small reserve of the paradoxical energy with which he animates his writing.

<sup>28</sup> Bessone 2011, 75–101.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Conte 1985<sup>2</sup>, 75–108 (not included in Conte 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Traina 1984<sup>3</sup>, 111–112 (see Tola’s piece in this volume).

<sup>31</sup> Tr. Fairclough and Goold, adapted.

## 2.4 Paradox as a programme. Statius and the Augustan models

All of Statius' oeuvre is under the sign of paradoxes. To create some of these, in programmatic passages, the Flavian poet looks at the Augustans. The *Achilleid* — a 'Paradoxical Epic' —<sup>32</sup> puts an eccentric poem like Ovid's *Metamorphoses* back at the centre of Roman epic tradition.<sup>33</sup> Its proem reproduces the contradiction of Ovid's proem between 'cyclical' epic and Callimacheanism, *perpetuum carmen* and *deducere*:<sup>34</sup> *tota iuvenem deducere Troia* ('sing the warrior through Troy's whole story', or 'accompany the young hero all around Troy', *Ach.* 1.7). The contrast between *tota* and *deducere* is intensified by the juxtaposition of *deducere* and *Troia*, a toponym that stands for the highest Homeric epic.

This effect was already part of a 'proemial' move in the middle of the *Thebaid*. The warrior-poets of Helicon are compared to 'swans escorting bright Strymon when pale winter yields' (7.286–287 '*quales... reudentem deducunt Strymona cyni*'), and are destined for immortality, as 'the Muses shall celebrate your wars in perpetual song' (289); here, the Callimachean *deducunt* (together with the swans) is juxtaposed with the martial 'Strymon', in the frame of another *perpetuum carmen*.

Making words and thoughts, images and languages, genre conventions and poetical affiliations collide with each other is a predilection of Statius, which comes to the foreground at programmatic points — in the *Silvae* too.

*Silvae* 4.7 opens by reversing Virgil's invocation to Erato to sing a *maius opus* (*Aen.* 7.37–45); Statius calls Erato back from the *ingens opus* of epic to a minor measure, *minores... gyros*, and inverts his master's words to legitimate his own poetic career, that frequently re-descends from the sublime (ll. 1–4). In the third strophe, Horatian oxymora are reused, for a lyric experiment that attenuates the rhythm of the epic poet, but intends to be worthy of the addressee: *Maximo carmen tenuare tempto* ('For Maximus I essay to trim my verse', 9).

'Composing a tenuous song' — and at the same time 'attenuate the song' — 'for Maximus' (a *pun*): this oxymoronic program recalls the closure of Horace's *Ode* 3.3, *desine... magna modis tenuare parvis* ('Stop... diminishing momentous matters with your trivial ditties'), a recall of the Muse to a minor measure, with a reproach for daring a song too great for the lyric metre (3.3.69–72). In Horace,

<sup>32</sup> Davis 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Hinds 1998, 142–144.

<sup>34</sup> Uccellini 2012, ad loc.

behind that reproach, there is pride in his experiment; so it is also in Statius, who once again uses the verb of poetic audacity, *tempto*.<sup>35</sup>

Paradox functions as a programme. In his poetic statements, Statius contradicts Callimachus, revises the Augustan manifestos or recalls them in their most provocative extremes; he exalts the paradoxes he finds in the models or creates new ones — and, pushing the images, the language, the moves of the Augustans to the point of paradox, he designs his innovative profile as a poet.

### 3 Paradoxical style

A well-known article by Lefèvre, after analysing the paradoxical style of Ovid, Seneca and Lucan, ends by contrasting Statius with the last.<sup>36</sup> Differently from Lefèvre, I could say that every paradoxical poet is paradoxical in his own way. Statius does not show, in the *Thebaid*, the unmistakable, monochord tendency of Lucan to compose by *sententiae*, the intensified intellectualism, or the uninterrupted sequences of figures that hammer a paradoxical conceit.<sup>37</sup> However, he has a wider range of paradoxical effects, which he uses with different density, intensity, and functions, and adjusts to the different needs of his works. Different too are the models of paradoxical style to which Statius looks: not only Ovid, Seneca, and Lucan, but also Horace, and Virgil himself — whom Hardie (2009b) has recently rediscovered as a Silver poet (his joke) in an article entitled *Virgil: A Paradoxical Poet?*

In his introduction to *Thebaid* 10, Williams captures this distance in style between Lucan and Statius: ‘*Sententiae* as such are much rarer than in Lucan, and Statius’ aim is to be striking not so much by intellectual wit or conceit or paradox, as by colour, exaggeration, brilliance’ (1972, XVI–XVII). Here, again, ‘paradox’ is used in a specific sense, and to define Lucan’s style. However, Williams’ commentary reveals a number of paradoxical procedures, which are often examined in detail, although they are mostly labeled as ‘typically Silver-Age’ (or accompanied by Barth’s judgments on *grandiloquentia* & *grandiniloquentia Papiniana*).

At the beginning of the 1970s, Flavian epic was still largely excluded from the horizon of studies. Kenney, in his essay on the style of the *Metamorphoses*,<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> More in Bessone 2018b, 40–44.

<sup>36</sup> Lefèvre 1970, 82 [= 1992, 242].

<sup>37</sup> Conte 1985<sup>2</sup>, 80. Cf. Martindale 1976; Moretti 1984; Bartsch 1997, 48–72; Nadai 2000; Dinter 2012, 89–118 (‘rhetorical epic’: Morford 1967).

<sup>38</sup> Kenney 1973 (reprinted almost identically in Kenney 2002).



wrote: 'The existence and instant canonisation of the *Aeneid* confronted all subsequent aspirants to epic honours with a most intractable problem. Of surviving Latin epicists only Ovid and Lucan can be said to have tackled it with originality and anything approaching success'. Today, after the reappraisal of Ovid has induced the reappraisal of Flavian poetry, we also know better the Ovidian poetics of Statius<sup>39</sup> — who rethinks Ovid's style originally (if not successfully), both in the epic and in the occasional poetry.

Statius' style is complex and original.<sup>40</sup> Paradox is its hallmark: it arouses tension in the reader, and performs epistemological as well as aesthetic functions. The *Thebaid*, the *Achilleid*, and the *Silvae* share a taste for paradoxical expression, imagery, and structures: in the sublime, the playful, and the polite registers a rhetoric of wonder is at work. Scandals of language embody the scandal of a war between equals; spectacular illusions transform a cross-dressed hero under our eyes; oxymoronic definitions exalt the excellence of patrons. The perverted world of the *Thebaid* is cast in distorted epic formulas; in the *Achilleid*, the changing poetic register exploits the antithesis, and coincidence, between love and war; *Überbietung* ('outdoing') and *Vermischung* ('combination'), in the *Silvae*, capture the marvels of 'the best of all possible worlds'. As he makes words, images, and ideas (or poetic traditions) clash with each other, Statius intensifies his text and creates an aesthetics of surprise. Hyperbole is a basic constituent of this poetry, and is constitutively linked to paradox. There is more. A characteristic feature of this writing, dense and provoking, is polysemy: and it is precisely the union of polysemy and paradox that produces the most interesting results.

### 3.1 Techniques of paradox

It is time to point out some techniques of this paradoxical style: I will distinguish them by categories, that are intertwined with each other (*schemata*, themes, models); I will give a few examples; and I will start from the simplest figure: oxymoron.<sup>41</sup> In the *Thebaid*,<sup>42</sup> it often accompanies the theme of *furor*, and sometimes works out Horatian *callidae iuncturae*.

<sup>39</sup> Hardie 2006; Bessone 2018c, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Micozzi 2019, 15–19.

<sup>41</sup> Lausberg 1990<sup>10</sup>, § 389.3; 1998 [= 1973<sup>2</sup>], § 807; Gruppo  $\mu$  1976, 183–185; Mortara Garavelli 2004, 243–245; Fontanier 1977, 137 ('paradoxisme'). On poetic oxymoron, for semantics and psycholinguistics, Shen 1987; in classical literature: e.g. Büchner 1951; Fehling 1968; Muecke 1997, 781 (also Tartari Chersoni 1997, esp. 805–806); a mention in Oniga 2002, 329.

<sup>42</sup> See Barth 1664 on 10.240 [234], with Berlincourt 2013, 396.

Oedipus' prayer to Tisiphone starts the poem under the sign of a 'sweet fury': 'si **dulces furias et lamentabile matris / conubium gavisus ini**' ('if I joyfully entered sweet furies and my mother's lamentable wedlock', 1.68–69).<sup>43</sup> *Dulce...furere* is an oxymoron of Horace (*C.* 2.7.27–28), of ancient origin.<sup>44</sup> Here it takes on an erotic flavour, and recalls the 'mournful joy' of incest, anticipating the sweetness of another *furor*, that is a *Leitmotiv* of the poem: the eros of power.<sup>45</sup>

Impiety and sweetness are conjugated in the *dulce nefas* of the Lemnian women, inspired by Venus (***dulce nefas in sanguine vivo coniurant***, 'in the living blood they swear the delicious crime', 5.162–163): the killing of the husbands in the *thalami*, stylised in the Lucretian forms of sex-as-war.<sup>46</sup> Here, a verbal paradox is the poetic manifesto for a whole paradoxical episode.

Justice and impiety conflict with each other in the cause of Polynices, exiled by his brother: *nefas... iustus*, in the duel (*cui fortior ira nefasque / iustus*, 'he whose anger is the stronger and crime the juster', 11.540–542), condenses in an oxymoron an issue raised by Lucan, and an ethical paradox: *quis iustus induit arma / scire nefas* ('which had the fairer pretext for warfare, we may not know', Lucan. 1.126–127).

These are the paradoxes of a distorted world, that subverts the values and language of morality and justice, as in the *Bellum civile* (Lucan. 1.2). Also in the *Thebaid* this programme of style is announced from the beginning, following the pact of alternation between the brothers. Statius launches it with another oxymoron, which exalts the paradox of Fortune made fickle by man: *sic iure maligno / Fortunam transire iubent* ('Thus by an ungenerous law they bid Fortune change sides', 1.140–141); and he brands it with the violent distortion of verbal meaning: ***haec inter fratres pietas erat*** ('This was brotherly devotion between the two', 1.143; cf. Lucan. 4.565–566).

On the paradoxical technique of similes, and intertextuality, I refer to what I wrote elsewhere about the preceding comparison (1.131–138).<sup>47</sup>

The language of emotions is a paradoxical language. ***Spes anxia mentem / extrahit et longo consumit gaudia voto*** ('Torturing hope drags out his soul and in prolonged desire exhausts his joy', 1.322–323): this is Polynices who, in exile,

<sup>43</sup> Here a play with *Furia* can be felt. Cf. *Ach.* 1.398.

<sup>44</sup> Nisbet and Hubbard 1978; *C.* 3.4.5–6; 3.19.18; 4.12.28 (*dulce*); *Anacreontea* 53.14 (also 9.3); *Sen. tranq.* 17.10.

<sup>45</sup> Briguglio 2017a, 48–62; 2017b; Bessone 2018a, 152–154; 2018d, 172–178. In the Alcaic *Silvae* 4.5 (22–28), Horace's *dulce periculum*, a formula for Bacchus' inspiration to praise Caesar (*C.* 3.25.18–20), is adapted to Statius' competing in the Ludi Albani: Bessone forthcoming a).

<sup>46</sup> Rosati 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Bessone 2020, 149–152.

longs for the throne.<sup>48</sup> 'Hope' makes him 'anxious'. 'Joy' is 'consumed' in advance and 'exhausted' by desire. Statius often exploits *consumere*, and its polysemy, for the paradoxes of absent presence and the anticipation of the future (*ductor in absentem consumit proelia fratrem*, '[so] ... does the chieftain fight it out against his absent brother', 2.133). This is a usage Dante will appreciate (*Inf.* 2.40–42).

Elsewhere the effect is more concentrated. The oxymoron *consumpsit ventura timor* ('Fear has devoured the future', 10.563) exploits the opposition in meaning, mode, and tense between the two juxtaposed verbs. This picture of the besieged Thebans is one of the paradoxical set-pieces of the poem, passages in which a number of effects strengthen one another,<sup>49</sup> and which stand out in a narrative sequence — like a surprising departure, or a closing in climax.

One of these paradoxical pieces is the entrance on stage of Oedipus. Everything, here, is paradoxical, and tends towards an *aprosdoketon*: *illum [...] tamen adsiduis circumvolat alis / saeva dies animi scelerumque in pectore Dirae* ('and yet the fierce daylight of his soul flits around him with unflagging wings and the Avengers of his crimes are in his heart', 1.49–52). Here, an oxymoron (blindness, in the dark, illuminated as by daylight) is empowered by a striking gesture of 'allusive perversion'.<sup>50</sup>

The paradoxes of fear are a predilection of the *Thebaid*, and have a manifesto in the portrait of *Pavor*:<sup>51</sup> a poetological emblem, like the House of Fame in the *Metamorphoses* (12.39–63). *Pavor* is a creator of deformed images, hallucinations, and mental obsessions (7.109–112); his *acre ingenium* is that of the poet, who 'puts his keen talent to a new fiction', and almost 'renews his keen wit, making it innovative': *tunc acre novabat / ingenium* (116–117).<sup>52</sup> This very passage exemplifies the poet's skill at creating hallucinations by paradoxical stylistic effects. The following picture of the 'field of Nemea' that Panic 'raises with false dust', *falso Nemeaeum pulvere campum / erigit* (v. 117, tr. mine), conjures up an impression of the ground being literally raised, and this by a striking enallage; a stylistic trick that is almost glossed by *falso*.

As a self-reflexive *sententia* declares, *nil falsum trepidis* ('to the frightened nothing is false', 7.131). The 'attacks' with which *Pavor* 'drives cities mad' are

<sup>48</sup> See Briguglio 2017a, ad loc., and cf. [Sen.] *Herc. O.* 811.

<sup>49</sup> On this concept, the so-called 'convergence of expressive factors', see the Introduction to this volume.

<sup>50</sup> Bessone 2020, 139–144.

<sup>51</sup> Hardie 2012, 207–214.

<sup>52</sup> Not only 'then he bethought him of something new and clever' (tr. Shackleton Bailey); *acre ingenium* has also its current, abstract meaning: 'ora dà una nuova prova del suo ingegno' {he now gives new proof of his talent} (tr. Traglia and Aricò).

nothing but ‘panic attacks’: *bonus omnia credi / auctor et horrificis lymphare incursibus urbes* (‘on his authority all things are easily believed, and he drives cities mad with his terrifying onslaughts’, 112–113). And nobody but the poet conveys the fictional effects of p/Panic, through inventive imagery or ambiguous words. In *horrificis... incursibus*, military and psychic language coincide: Statius’ paradoxical style changes the human mind into a theatre of war.

Subjective deformation of reality and distortion of stylistic forms into paradoxes are foregrounded in Polynices’ fears, as he is caught by a storm on his way into exile (1.364–369). The epigrammatic close of the sequence, *pulsat metus undique et undique frater* (‘Terror strikes from every side, and from every side his brother’), reuses a Virgilian matrix for a new effect: *Aen.* 3.193 *caelum undique et undique pontus* (‘sky on all sides and on all sides sea’), describing Aeneas’ ships just before the storm. Playing on the metonymic and literal use of *frater*, and the figurative and literal meaning of *pulsat*, Statius visualises Polynices’ monomania in the, subjectively real, image of his brother ‘hurting’ him. Similarly, antithesis, chiasmus, personification, and a polysemic verb, heighten the paradoxical effect of a terrifying absent presence when, after the omens, Thebes ‘clamours’ in Amphiarus’ mind: *iam bella tubaeque / comminus, absentesque fremunt sub pectore Thebae* (‘Now war trumpets are at hand and absent Thebes clamours in his breast’, 3.566–569).

Joy also has its paradoxes.<sup>53</sup> In the *Achilleid*, joy makes Thetis anxious, *angunt sua gaudia matrem* (‘her joys torture the mother’, 1.183), in face of her son’s heroic beauty.<sup>54</sup> But it is in the *Thebaid* that the oxymoron, associated with personification and other devices, produces more intense effects: so in the reaction to the killing of the monster by Coroebus, *magnaue post lacrimas etiamnum gaudia pallent* (‘after tears great joy, but pallor still’, 1.620), with the multi-level oxymoronic clausula mixing joy and fear, literal and metaphorical, abstract and concrete. Even more striking are the paradoxes of the poem’s end, expressing its tragic complexity: *gaudent lamenta novaeque / exultant lacrimae* (‘Lamentations rejoice, new tears exult’, 12.793–794). ‘New tears exult’ is yet another instance of polysemy and paradox, where two meanings coexist in the verb (‘spring up’ and ‘exult’), one of them clashing with the substantive.<sup>55</sup>

Statius’ visual poetics and his sophisticated technique of ekphrasis exploit the force of paradox intensively (Econimo 2021a). This is so in a pair of descriptions of the Gorgon. In the ekphrasis of Adrastus’ *patera*, the lifelike representation of

53 Cf. Nisbet and Hubbard 1978 on Hor. C. 2.19.6.

54 *Gaudia* is also concrete. With the oxymoron, Statius renews *Aen.* 1.502.

55 Bessone 2011, 177 and n. 4.

death is doubled by further paradoxical effects, such as the play on the inchoative form and ambiguous sense of *palescit* (1.546–547 *illa graves oculos languentiaque ora / paene movet vivoque etiam palescit in auro*, ‘almost she moves her heavy eyes and drooping countenance and pales even in the living gold’). In the reaction to Tydeus’ cannibalism, the monster itself seems to be petrified, instead of petrifying (8.762–864 *stetit aspera Gorgon*, ‘The Gorgon stood rough’). The Ovidian manner of Statius’ pointed descriptions, and paralogisms, are also analysed by Econimo (2021b).

I offer only one example of an oxymoron resulting from a metaphor. This is the most refined trait in the description of the hero in the *Achilleid*:<sup>56</sup> *niveo natat ignis in ore / purpureus* (‘A purple fire swims in his snow-white face’, 1.161–162).

Finally, just a mention of enallage. There is no need to recall its role in Virgil (Conte 2007, ch. 3), nor is it necessary to underline the more violent effects it produces in Seneca and Lucan.<sup>57</sup>

Enallages with a Senecan-Lucanian and Stoic imprint, in the *Thebaid*, serve to represent heroism pushed to the point of martyrdom: this is the style of the body that strikes the weapons. Antigone and Argia, in chains, challenge Creon and joyfully go to death, as two ‘Senecan martyrs of self-destruction’ (12.679–681 *ambae hilares et mortis amore superbae / ensibus intentant iugulos regemque cruentum / destituunt*, ‘Both of good cheer and proud in their eagerness to die, they hold out their throats to the swords, disappointing the bloodthirsty king’).<sup>58</sup>

Another paradox is based on polysemy: *regemque cruentum / destituunt* means not only ‘disappoint the bloodthirsty king’, that is, frustrate his expectations, and his bloody pleasure. Here we should also feel the almost technical and institutional sense of *destituere*, when it refers to the supreme political authority, or is joined with *regem*, or *principem*.<sup>59</sup> Thus the image gets its full force — and this is a forceful paradox: Creon is ‘removed’ from power by his female victims, even before being killed by Theseus.

*Virtus* (disguised as Manto) pushes Menoeceus into a voluntary divine possession, and premature death: 10.670 *‘rape mente deos, rape nobile fatum’* (‘Quickly seize the gods in thought, seize a noble destiny’).<sup>60</sup> Polysemy and

<sup>56</sup> Bessone 2018b, 26.

<sup>57</sup> Hübner 1972, 600.

<sup>58</sup> Bessone 2011, 216–218. With *mortis amor* cf. the joy/hope of death (e.g. 10.444; 11.715; 12.456–457).

<sup>59</sup> Svet. *Ner.* 40.1; 40.2; *Galb.* 11.1, cf. 10.5; *Dom.* 14.4 *destitutionem*; Tac. *Hist.* 1.5.2; 1.30.16; ‘destituere [un re]’ or ‘destitute king’ may come from here, through ‘destituer’: *GDLI* (<https://www.gdli.it/>) s.v. *destituere*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. 10.676–677 *letique invasit amorem* (‘and rushed on love of death’).

paradox conspire: *rape* (= *rapide cape*) expresses the need to hurry, and quickly seize one's destiny (*fatum*), instead of being seized by it (*fato rapi*);<sup>61</sup> moreover, *rape*, joined with *deos*, reverses by a paradox the usual image of being possessed and 'driven on' by a god<sup>62</sup> — while the whole phrase replaces an epic imperative like *rape arma*.

Finally, a double enallage that gives an essay of mimetic syntax. This is Thiodamas, divinely inspired: *sertaque mixta comis sparsa cervice flagellat* ('tossing his neck he flails the garland entwined with his hair', 10.169). *Furor* disrupts, together with the augur's head, even the syntactical relations between words (*spargere* would rather go with *serta*, *flagellare* with *cervicem*). The violence of the scene is matched by the violence against syntax, a sort of unnatural rotation, and a paradoxical one. Statius has gone a long way from a double enallage like Virg. *Aen.* 6.268.<sup>63</sup> We shall soon see what Statius can make of a Virgilian enallage. To conclude, just a few words on Capaneus.

## 4 Paradox and the sublime

Hyperbole is anything but unexpected when dealing with a Giant-like hero, and a man fighting a god is a paradox in itself, but I would like to point out the sustained use of paradox that marks the theomachy of *Thebaid* 10 even at the verbal level. Statius' Capaneus stands in a gallery of 'paradoxical portraits' in Roman literature. And paradox is here an effective tool for testing the limits of heroism, of a sublime poetics, and of a sublime style.

Capaneus' assault on the sky is continually made to clash with expressions and images suggesting the ascent of a noble soul to heaven — as if this were a paradoxical apotheosis. The very words that describe the hero's ladder, *innumerosque gradus, gemina latus arbore clausos, / aerium sibi portat iter* ('he carries steps beyond count enclosed on both sides by wooden beams, an airy path for himself', 10.841–842), were branded by Curtius as an instance of the manneristic 'abuse of periphrasis' that, in European literature, 'begins with Statius': 'If someone has to climb a ladder, we find [...] "innumerable steps, enclosed between twin trees, an airy road"'.<sup>64</sup> Yet these words portray, not 'someone', but a sublime hero; and they expand a lofty periphrasis from Greek tragedy (Eur. *Phoen.* 1173–4 *et al.*)

<sup>61</sup> Cf. 10.316 and, e.g., Ov. *Am.* 3.9.35; Sen. *Oed.* 125; Lucan. 9.825; 10.22 with Berti 2000.

<sup>62</sup> Hor. *C.* 3.25.1–2 (Sen. *Thy.* 261 *rapior*).

<sup>63</sup> Conte 2007, 96–97.

<sup>64</sup> Curtius 2013<sup>2</sup>, 276.

with a paradoxical apposition. *Aerium... iter* is Capaneus' — jarring — version of 'Virtue-as-a-path-to-the-sky'. Here the poet mixes physical with spiritual elevation, carpentry with philosophy, and an arrogant ascent with ethical sublimity.<sup>65</sup>

The first two verses of the proem set the stylistic mode of the episode: *hactenus arma, tubae, ferrumque et vulnera: sed nunc / comminus astrigeros Capaneus tollendus in axes* ('Thus far of arms, trumpets, of steel and wounds. But now Capaneus must be raised aloft to fight the starry vault at close quarters', 10.827–828). Line 828 makes the language of martial epic collide with the language of divinisation: theomachy looks like a perverted apotheosis. *Comminus* continues the sequence of words started by *arma* — a signpost for the epic genre. But Virgilian epic is left behind, as the poet represents himself literally raising his hero to the starry vault — indeed, 'close' to the sky, so as to fight it in 'close combat'.

By a common convention, the poet portrays himself as doing what he sings of: here, the narrator provides Capaneus with his ladder up to the walls, and up to heaven. However, the metaphorical import in phrases like *tollere in astra* is also fully felt here (*pace* Williams, and as Lactantius Placidus saw). The epic poet is going to extol his hero's *aristeia* — the impious deed of the *superum contemptor*. As Leigh (2006, 235) notes, 'That the language employed here is more commonly that reserved for ecstatic praise renders the assertion the more arch, the more troubling'.

There is more. 'Extolling to the sky' has a second meaning that is also literal, in the fictive worlds of epic and imperial ideology, as well as in Stoic philosophy: that of raising a hero to divine level, namely, divinisation. With *astrigeros... tollendus in axes* we may compare Jupiter's promise of Aeneas' deification in *Aen.* 1, the (eulogy and) apotheosis of Daphnis in *Ecl.* 5, and many similar passages.<sup>66</sup> Statius' request of a *maior amentia* from the Muses, so that he can raise Capaneus to the stars, thus comes close to Horace's Bacchic frenzy, which enables the poet to be heard 'practising to install among the stars and in Jupiter's council the everlasting adornment of exceptional Caesar' (*C.* 3.25.3–6). A divine ecstasy is required, to sing of god-like heroes aspiring to heaven.

Statius' provocative language almost equates Capaneus with Menoeceus, his mirror-image and polemical target: Menoeceus, who was sent to heaven by *Virtus* (10.662–665), and whose 'spirit is long since before Jupiter, claiming for itself a pinnacle among the highest stars' (10.782). Capaneus' boast that his own *virtus* is

<sup>65</sup> 10.845–846 evokes the 'steep' path of virtue, leading to heaven.

<sup>66</sup> *Enn. Ann.* 54–55 Sk.; Verg. *Ecl.* 5.51–52; *Aen.* 1.259–260 (cf. 12.795); Ov. *Met.* 14.814; cf. 15.843–844.





Nor would he have fallen; but his earthly limbs desert him and his spirit is set free. If his body had yielded a little later, he might have hoped for a second bolt.

*Membra virum... relinquunt*: a striking enallage personifies the *membra*, and extols the *vir*. This unyielding hero, deserted by his limbs, that are now his weapons, has something to do with Virgil's Camilla.<sup>70</sup> Capaneus' incineration, and Camilla's gradual slipping to the ground (*Aen.* 11.827–831), do not weaken their resistance: both heroes do not want to fall down (10.937 *nec caderet* ≈ *Aen.* 11.828 *ad terram non sponte fluens*, 'slipping to earth against her will'), they do not yield. At last, her weapons abandon the heroine: *arma relinquunt* (830) is the reading of the indirect tradition.<sup>71</sup> Probus explained the phrase as *hypallage... vel contrarium*, while 'others understand *arma relinquunt* as a eulogy (*cum laude dictum*), that is, her weapons fell from the hands of the dying Camilla' (DServ.). A Virgilian enallage, praised by ancient and modern critics alike, may have impressed the keen critic, and creative reader, of Virgil that Statius is.<sup>72</sup>

Paradoxes do not end here. *Terrena* (10.937) recalls *iam sordent terrena viro* ('Now the warrior despises aught terrestrial', 837; cf. 664–665): contempt of earth is thus suggested, while the *animus* freeing itself from the body (938) is redolent of spiritualist philosophy. Once again, Capaneus the atheist, blasphemous, Epicurean, rationalistic hero<sup>73</sup> is described in terms conflicting with his 'creed'.

Finally, in 10.939 J.B. Hall prints the variant *meruisse*, and Nau (2008) defends it. Barth (1664) knew his poet better, and upheld *sperare* with characteristic flair: *illius perditae ambitioni, huius affectato acumini nil accommodatius inveneris. et quis librariorum cerebro tale quid deberi crediderit?* ('You could not find anything more appropriate to the wretched ambition of the hero, and the mannered poignancy of the poet. And who would believe that something like this could be due to the copyists' brain?').

*Potuit fulmen sperare secundum*, 'he might have hoped for a second bolt', is the *fulmen in clausula* that closes this epic book, like an epigram — in the sublime register.<sup>74</sup> Capaneus' fight, against Thebes and against Jupiter, does not end with his death (as book 11 will show). And precisely this paradox, of the undefeated

<sup>70</sup> For another contact between Capaneus and Camilla, Harrison 1992, 251–252.

<sup>71</sup> Defended by Timpanaro 1986, 94–99; 2001, 73–77; Delvigo 1987, 69–81; Conte 2007, 93–95.

<sup>72</sup> Delvigo 1987, 77–78 finds traces of *arma relinquunt* in Silius' and Statius' *arma fluunt*.

<sup>73</sup> Fucecchi 2013; Chaudhuri 2014, ch. 8; Reitz 2017; Pontiggia 2018; Rebeggiani 2018, ch. 3.6; Agri 2020.

<sup>74</sup> By an additional paradox, the clausula *sperare secundum* (cf. Lucan. 7.349; 9.243) conjures up the sense of 'hoping for the favour of' someone or something (e.g. the gods). Lucan, book 4 also has an epigrammatic ending.

loser, is reposed by Dante in the paradox of the indomitable damned man (*Inf.* 14.51–60). The poet of the *Divine Comedy* extends indefinitely – and for eternity – Capaneus’ hope for a ‘second bolt’; and his character appropriates the unreal hypothesis, and counterfactual mode, of the *Thebaid*’s narrator:

‘Qual io fui vivo, tal son morto.  
**Se Giove** stanchi ’l suo fabbro da cui  
 crucciato prese la folgore aguta  
 onde l’ultimo di percosso fui;  
 [...]
 e **me saetti** con tutta sua forza:  
 non ne potrebbe aver vendetta allegra’.

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