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1 Bacchus enters the realm of Flavian epic endowed with a rich and varied metapoetic history and a wealth of cultural and political associations, the symbol of a particular brand of tragic or epic inspiration. Dionysiac themes form a recurrent and important thread in Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* gives Bacchus a palpable presence on stage when he deals with the vicissitudes of his fateful city. Seneca's plays, too, offer a striking instantiation of the force of 'Bacchic poetics,' and, as they endow extraordinary characters such as Atreus with Bacchic features, they systematically blur the boundary between the political and the poetic. Statius grants this multifaceted, naturally plural,¹ and traditionally metapoetic god a central role in the *Thebaid*, but while he builds on the tradition of Bacchus' symbolic associations, he also strives to subvert it. In this paper I intend to explore what this strikingly new representation of Bacchus implies for the poetics of the *Thebaid*, and also, given the long-standing association of Dionysus and Bacchus with ruler-figures, for the poem's ideological texture.²

The diffraction and reorganisation of the theological landscape of the *Thebaid* is matched by the poem's structural ambivalence and hesitations. This is a poem of contradictions and extended self-denial, where delay replaces action as the paradoxical driving force of the narrative, in a plastic embodiment of the tragic tensions at the heart of the two brothers' tale. Comparison with its most influential predecessor, Virgil's *Aeneid*, only places into sharper relief the drastic differences which characterize the dominating divine forces in the two poems. There are no surprises in the cast of divine characters, except that all of them – and Jupiter first of all – do not follow the scripts they inherit: they retain the outward appearance and, in principle, the received position of their traditional incarnations, but with radical differences in psychological complexion and in the nature of their actions.³ There is paradox, yet again, in this unexpected behaviour: the tragedy awaiting Thebes and

¹ Pairs and doubles feature prominently in the *Thebaid*, as Braund 2006: 270 discusses, twice in connection with Bacchus (a Bacchante sees the two brothers as two bulls at 4.397-400; the two tigers in book 7, later p. 000). On 'Dionysiac doublings' see Hardie 2002: 170-1.

² See now Rebeggiani 2018 for a sophisticated discussion of these issues.

³ Feeney 1991: 337-91 and Criado 2000 are the indispensable starting points for the theology of the *Thebaid*.

Argos, two cities opposed on the surface,⁴ but deeply similar to one another, is inscribed in their destiny (the *fatum* guaranteed by Jupiter), and encoded in a quasi-Aeschylean predictability of *genus*,⁵ so much so that gods can largely relinquish their directive role and explore new territories at the expense of each other. The gods' past, however, remains always readable, if under erasure, and the interplay between his models and the novelties Statius introduces sustains the dialectical patterns of the poem as a whole.

Although Bacchus plays a much more extensive role in the *Thebaid*, what is striking is that his ability to influence, let alone determine, the course of events, is severely limited. Overall, the actions and emotions of this Bacchus are at odds with the models prevailing in the literary texts which constitute Statius' key points of reference. He is, or at least appears to be, ineffectual at best, yet he also fails to emerge as either a fully-fledged cultural hero, generous in his benevolence, or as a fearsome divinity intent on punishing those who belittle his might.⁶ His diffracted and shifting overall image - in contrast to the traditional representation of Dionysus/Bacchus as both terrible and soothing, 'most terrifying, but also most sweet to mankind',⁷ 'a mediator of peace but midmost in the fight'⁸ - mirrors the poem's deferral of a clear-cut choice between war and peace, or between its own existence and oblivion.⁹

Early on, the *Thebaid* forces us to confront the fact that its divine characters are bound to subvert expectations,¹⁰ and are particularly adept at encroaching on the attributes and features of their fellow gods. Jupiter's appropriation of the foundational function of Virgil's Juno at the beginning of the poem sets the tone with a reversal of roles which goes

⁴ The 'Argive proem' which occupies the second part of book 1 underscores the symmetrical relationship between the two cities. Cf. Schiesaro (forthcoming).

⁵ The *Thebaid* promotes an immutable view of human destiny, encapsulated by the early reference to *gentilis furor* (1.126). People do not change their minds (1.226 *mens cunctis imposta manet*) and their actions and reactions are therefore deeply motivated and easily predictable. A key articulation of this concept centres on the use of the word *semen*, at the same time 'genealogy', 'cause' and 'pretext', which turns upside-down Lucretian physics as well as Seneca's optimistic *omnium honestarum rerum semina animi gerunt* (*ep.* 94.28–29). *Semina* are of course at the heart of the Theban *Spartoi* myth: *uipereo sparsi per humum, noua semina, dentes* (*Ov. Met.* 4.573).

⁶ Zeitlin 1993 offers a seminal treatment of Dionysus' polymorphic image.

⁷ Eur. *Ba.* 861.

⁸ Hor. *carm.* 2.19.27–28 *sed idem | pacis eras mediusque belli*, with Nisbet-Hubbard ad loc.

⁹ Bacchus is not new to a revision of his status and reputation: see Smith 2007 for a convincing treatment of the 'taming of Bacchus' in the *Georgics*, following his dangerous association with Mark Antony's excesses. The topic is now further developed by Mac Góráin 2014, who teases out the interaction between positive and negative aspects of the god.

¹⁰ Feeney 1991: 337–64.

far beyond, for instance, the ambivalent message Venus delivers early on in the *Aeneid* as she appears in Diana-esque disguise. Statius' own Venus and Mars, as well as Diana and Apollo, like to ignore their colleagues' prerogatives. Venus' behaviour in the Lemnian episode told by Hypsipyle (5.48-498) is a case in point: a warlike, vengeful and cruel figure, she unleashes the aggressive potential always latent in the *furor* of erotic passion when she spurs the women of Lemnos to slaughter all their menfolk.¹¹ But it is Bacchus who really defies preconceptions, flexible and accommodating as they may be in the case of a naturally polymorphous, fluid and metamorphic god. At stake here is the assumption which emerges in different forms in Roman epic and tragedy from Virgil to Seneca that the force of Dionysiac/Bacchic inspiration is inextricable from a poem's very coming into being. While Statius flaunts his engagement with these influential models, his Bacchus undergoes a remarkable metamorphosis and goes on to tell a different story.

2 Bacchus intervenes directly in the epic action of the *Thebaid* at two crucial junctures in the development of the plot: first in book 4, when he attempts to, and very briefly manages to forestall the Argives' attack on Thebes, and later on, in book 7, as he confronts Jupiter about his lack of sympathy for the city.¹²

By the end of book 4 the Argives have occupied the plain of Nemea and are bursting with martial ardour (*iam Sidonias auertere praedas , | sternere, ferre domos ardent instantque*, 4.648-9). The threat to Thebes is now tangible and imminent, but we are warned even before Bacchus enters the fray that the delaying tactics adopted so far will continue to carry the day. The narrator announces as much in a brief prologue which, whilst ostensibly announcing the imminent arrival of Bacchus, appeals to Apollo as guarantor of the correct retelling of events long past: he will explain the origin of both *morae* and *error*, and how their *irae* have been deflected (4.649-51). As he returns after his two-year victorious campaign against Thrace and the Getae, Bacchus, in what is almost certainly a Statian innovation, comes onto the scene overshadowed by Apollo's unquestioned authority,¹³ blurring boundaries between the two gods and the poetics they traditionally embody. At the same time, his appearance at the beginning of Hypsipyle's Lemnian narrative signals that the

¹¹ As Rosati 2005 shows, Statius fully exploits in this episode the association between love and war developed by Lucretius in book 4 of *de rerum natura*.

¹² On 'Bacchus and the outbreak of war' see the excellent treatment by Ganiban 2007: 96–110, to which I am much indebted.

¹³ Vessey 1970: 49; Parkes 2012 on 652–79. Note, however, that lines 653–57 emphasise Bacchus' role in diverting the *armiferi Getae* towards non-bellucose pursuits.

Thebaid will now engage directly with tragic themes.¹⁴ His presentation is subtle: the rare adjective *marcidus*¹⁵ opens line 4.652 in strong hyperbaton with *Liber*, delayed until the following line. He is more than merely ‘drunk’, for Statius is likely developing a suggestion he found in Seneca’s *Medea* (69–70), where Hymen is addressed in terms which are also suitable for his father Bacchus,¹⁶ and evoke both his propensity to feisty drunkenness and his ambivalent, languorous sensuality:¹⁷ *huc incede gradu marcidus ebrio | praecingens roseo tempora uinculo*.¹⁸ Bacchus’ retinue looks familiar at first, as it includes lynxes and tigers, as well as Bacchantes carrying the limbs of slaughtered beasts, but the Satyrs and Silens we would normally expect are replaced by the personifications of Anger, Madness, Fear, Valour and Passion (*Ira, Furor, Metus, Virtus, Ardor*), the latter *numquam sobrius* (4.662)¹⁹ and unsteady on his feet. This is an impressive line-up, which, in spite of *marcidus*, raises the expectation of an all-powerful Bacchus, active in both war and peace, in both the emotional and the social sphere: this retinue is far from powerless (4.671 *nec comitatus iners*). Indeed *Ira, Furor* and *Virtus*, for instance, are traditionally better suited to flank Mars rather than Bacchus, and *Metus*, too, will be found among Mars’ guards at 7.49.²⁰ All of this would still be in keeping with the dualistic nature of Dionysus/Bacchus, god of revelry and battles alike. Remarkably, however, although he can rely on such an impressive cortège,

¹⁴ The ‘Bacchic frame’ to Statius’ own Hypsipyle, which opens here and closes with the reference to Bacchus at 5.729–30, directly engages Euripides’ homonymous play, as Soerink 2014: 177–83 well shows (I have not been able to consult Brown 1994, which according to Soerink also makes the point that Bacchus’ arrival signals the beginning of closer engagement with tragedy). The Dionysus of *Hypsipyle* is very different from his counterpart in *Bacchae*, showing his benign, positive aspect, and engineering the liberation of his grandchild: cf. Collard - Cropp - Gibert 2004: 173–6, and Zeitlin 1993: 171–177.

¹⁵ Statius uses *marcidus* 4x in the *Thebaid*, always in connection with Bacchus, and once in the *Silvae* (1.6.33 *marcida uina*, ‘languorous wine’ [transl. D. A. Slater]). The adj. carries marked negative connotations in Luc. 1.628 (of rotten entrails) and fares no better in Pliny’s *NH* and in both Senecas (with moral overtones).

¹⁶ Cf. 110 *candida thyrsigeri proles generosa Lyaei*, with *digitis marcentibus* at 112. The genealogy is attested among others by Servius on *Aen.* 4.127.

¹⁷ Masterson 2005 offers a valuable discussion, mainly focussed on Amphiaraus, of the construction of manhood in the poem and its relationship with contemporary reality.

¹⁸ Seneca in turn develops an effete and feminine image of Bacchus in the footsteps of Cat. 61 (see Costa on *Med.* 69), which may have been favoured by Ovid’s ‘Catullan’ imagery at *Met.* 10.192 (Hyacinthus dies and falls like flowers which are abruptly cut: *marcida demittant subito caput illa grauatum*, cf. Cat. 61.91–93 and 193–95, provocatively reticent).

¹⁹ See Soerink 2015: 7 for an interesting discussion of *Ardor* in this section of the poem.

²⁰ Cf. Criado 2000: 65–6 for a comparison between the two lists of personifications; Zeitlin 1993: 159 points out that his ‘positioning ... between the two antithetical forces of an Ares and an Aphrodite ... seems to tipify the workings of Dionysus in the tragic theater of Thebes.’

and is fresh from a stunning victory, Bacchus' preoccupation for the future of his beloved city does not push him to resort to any of those forces, and to repel the Argives' military ardour with *Ardor*, which would aptly mirror the *calor* of Statius' inspiration (1.3).²¹ Rather, he will limit himself to causing a further delay, and not a very substantial one at that, in the confrontation between the two armies: this he will accomplish, as he crisply announces at 4.677, by weaving delays through deceit (*nectam fraude moras*).

Although we cannot point with any degree of certainty to a precedent where Bacchus is responsible for the delay about to occur in Nemea,²² Bacchus' actions here are clearly modelled on those of Juno in books 1 and 7 of the *Aeneid*. In book 1, which in turn harks back to *Odyssey* 5 and Poseidon's rage against Odysseus, the goddess succeeds, as her Homeric counterpart had done, in almost annihilating the object of her anger, and at any rate in throwing him off course; she thus opens up, in principle, a possible alternative to the plot sanctioned by Jupiter. This delaying strategy will become explicit over the course of the next few books, especially in book 4, even before Juno spells it out in her second programmatic intervention at the beginning of book 7, when she declares that since the decrees of fate cannot be altered, at least she can still 'drag things along and cause delays to such momentous events' (*Aen.* 7.315 *trahere atque moras tantis licet addere rebus*). *Morae* carry a gendered connotation: they are the evasive steps associated with Penelope's feminine guile, and the use of the verb *nectere*, more pointed than Virgil's *trahere*, reinforces the point.

The intertextual parallel with Virgil's Juno, however, highlights by contrast the ineffectiveness, at this stage, of Statius' Bacchus, who manages to cause only a brief delay, and even proceeds to engineer its reversal in the near future, since he specifically prepares (746 *ipse pararat*) the encounter between the Argives and Hypsipyle, who will come to their rescue by pointing to the one surviving source of water that saves them from certain death.

In the course of a few lines, and just one scene, both traditional and contextual expectations about the god have been subverted. He arrives basking in military glory, surrounded by a retinue which would not embarrass Mars himself, but he shows no sign of his fierce and often violent behaviour, nor indeed of his inebriating, liberating influence. This is neither the Bacchus who punished Pentheus, nor even the one who managed to escape the pirates, let alone the generous benefactor who bestowed the gift of wine. We wonder

²¹ On the Bacchic connotation of *calor* at 1.3 see Briguglio 2017: 108-9.

²² Criado 2000: 58.

how, on this form, he could have accomplished his oriental campaigns at all.²³ The god associated with speed and thrust now adopts *morae* and *error* (4.650) in order to avert the looming crisis, following in the footsteps of his archenemy, Juno, but with much more limited results.

Bacchus' apparent conversion to peaceful means is not the only marker of his metamorphosis. Two more aspects deserve mention. Just as he avoids anger and violence, he also promises the water nymphs, whose help he needs to enlist, that they will be shielded from the sexual attentions of Fauns and Satyrs, whose lustful nature is part and parcel of their traditional characterization. In a final twist, Bacchus reveals that his plan to stop the incoming army relies not, as in Juno's and Poseidon's case, on unleashing a major storm, but on the drying up of all the sources of water. Again, this is a gesture towards inaction rather than action, stillness rather than movement, a message which is hammered out at 4.730–40 by a string of negatives and a series of words which insist on the absence of motion.²⁴

The Argives are not vanquished or pushed back, they simply lose the energy to fight (4.730–32 *nec... sufficiunt*; cf. 4.743 *sedent*), while Bacchic *furor* affects only the horses, thus rendering them useless.²⁵ Adrastus barely manages to bring his appeal to Hypsipyle to an end before dehydration causes him to collapse (4.772–75).²⁶ Crucially, in order to achieve his goal, Bacchus here disclaims his traditional association with all the liquids which testify to Nature's vitality and exuberance, water, wine,²⁷ milk, semen, sap, blood, the 'whole wet element in nature', as Plutarch puts it.²⁸ When he orders 'let water abandon Nemea from deep down' (4.689 *ex alto fugiat liquor*) he pointedly subverts²⁹ one of the causes for praise which his fellow Thebans had emphasised in the *populare carmen* at the centre of

²³ The contrast between military success abroad and the experience of civil war at home -which Bacchus strives to delay with his actions on book 4- may actually mirror historical reality: as Ash 2015: 220 points out, foreign campaigns were the emperor's preserve, whilst for most Roman aristocrats, civil war is a far more likely sphere in which they will see military action'.

²⁴ Negatives: 730 (2x), 732, 736, 739. Cf. *artos* | ... *nexus* (730–31), *angustisque* ... | *faucibus* (732–33), *gelant* (734), *adhaeret* (734), *catenatas* (738).

²⁵ 4.739–40 *nec legem dominosue pati, sed perfurit aruis | flammatum pecus.*

²⁶ 4.772–75 *dixit, et orantis media inter anhelitus ardens | uerba rapit, cursuque animae labat arida lingua; | idem omnes pallorque uiros flatusque soluti | oris habet.*

²⁷ At *Silv.* 4.3.11–12 Statius praises Domitian for actually limiting the expansion of vines: *quis castae Cereri diu negata | reddit iugera sobriasque terras.*

²⁸ *Moralia* 365 a.

²⁹ In a further twist, Mars will provide rich, if macabre, sources of liquid nourishment: *sanguineis mixtum ceu fontibus ignem | hausissent belli magnasque in proelia mentes* (5.5–6).

Seneca's *Oedipus*: *pumice ex sicco | fluxit Nyctelius latex; | garruli gramen secuere riui, | conbibit dulces humus alta sucos | niueique lactis candidos fontes | et mixta odoro Lesbia cum thymo* (491–96).³⁰

3 Even for a god with a multifaceted and shifting personality, the Bacchus of book 4 appears too idiosyncratic for comfort, and his return to the fore in book 7 (lines 151–64) does nothing to allay puzzlement. Once again, his intervention is set in motion by the realisation that the Argives are on the verge of attacking. His distressed appearance attests that a metamorphosis has already taken place, as the description by negation at lines 149–50 conveys: the thyrsus has slipped from his hands, grapes have fallen from his horns, his usual rubicund complexion is marred by anxiety. Deprived of his decorum (7.151 *inhonorus*), Bacchus pleads with Jupiter for the salvation of Thebes in terms which are directly modelled on Venus' appeal in *Aeneid* 1, but naturally this second intervention also recalls Juno's actions in *Aeneid* 7: Statius' Bacchus appears to be torn between two competing models, both female ones, but starkly opposed to each other in the Virgilian mastertext. His dualistic nature morphs here into a synchronic conjunction of opposites, as if he were trying to promote, at one and the same time, action and inaction, progression and delay.

Bacchus is convinced that Jupiter, forgetful of his deep bonds with the city, plans to destroy Thebes at the behest of his *saeua coniunx*, in a replay of the cruel punishment which Juno had demanded of Jupiter against Semele. Then, as Bacchus concedes, he had been forced to act, his feelings notwithstanding (7.158 *inuitum*); this time Jupiter's direct responsibility would be greater, because he is not bound by an oath, and there is greater scope, or so he appears to believe, for reversing his decision.

While Virgil's Venus frames her case in favour of Aeneas and the Trojans in compelling theological and geopolitical terms (the fates have decreed the demise of Troy but have also guaranteed the eventual rise of Rome: *Aen.* 1.238-39) Bacchus relies almost exclusively on emotional considerations absent in the Virgilian model. Unlike Venus, who is temporarily worried about the latest misfortunes befalling her *protégé* but is after all on the winning side of Fate's masterplot, Bacchus confronts the same unmovable Jovian

³⁰ This metapoetic *carmen* is an important precedent for Statius' own take on Bacchus, which is markedly different. In this case Lucan may also have provided a suggestion: at 9.433–34 Bacchus (here a metonymy) is listed among the victims of the excessive heat that characterizes the coast along the Syrtis.

determination which Juno herself had already attempted in vain to deflect.³¹ All he can do is to remind Jupiter of the fact that he has brought him to term in his own body after his mother's death, and that the destruction of Thebes would deprive him (Bacchus) of his due honours and would force him into exile. Amplifying a rhetorical move already exploited by Venus, who reminds her father that Antenor had been allowed to settle in Italy unscathed, Bacchus lists instances of other gods, including his brother Apollo, who have secured the protection of their favoured localities. In the *Aeneid*, Jupiter does not pick up in his reply the corroborating example presented by Venus, while Statius has Jupiter focus on Bacchus' incidental, and scarcely believable, disclaimer that he is not speaking out of jealousy for his brother (7.183 *nec inuideo*) and laughs away his son's whole tirade as an outburst of *inuidia* (7.193 *inuidiam risit pater*).

The predominance of the personal over the political is most evident in the argument Bacchus deploys in defence of the Thebans at 7.168–74. They are an indolent, unwarlike people,³² who can at best engage in the *proelia* typical of Bacchus (7.169) and live in fear of the Bacchic rites in which their women traditionally engage, *thyrsos nuptarum et proelia matrum* (7.168–71). Contrast Venus' reminder that the descendants of the Trojans have been promised unlimited power over land and sea (*Aen.* 1.236), and Jupiter's reassurance that Aeneas will successfully fight a *bellum ingens* against fierce opponents (*Aen.* 1.263). Bacchus had been introduced in the poem as a victorious army leader returning from a campaign, but the subsequent narratives underscore his weakness and emphasize his 'feminine', side, which he also, unsuccessfully, attempts to bring out in Jupiter.

The father of the god has different ideas in mind (7.208–14):

scis ipse (ut crimina mittam
Dorica) quam promptae superos incessere Thebae;
te quoque...sed, *quoniam uetus excidit ira*, silebo.
non tamen aut patrio respersus sanguine Pentheus,
aut matrem scelerasse toris aut crimine fratres
progenuisse reus, lacero tua lustra repleuit
funere: ubi hi fletus, ubi tunc ars tanta precandi?

³¹ 1.248–82. Jupiter's reply is unequivocal: *horrendos etenim latices, Stygia aequora fratris, | obtestor, mansurum et non reuocabile uerbum, | nil fore quod dictis flectar* (1.290–92). Juno takes note, and promptly disappears from the scene for much of the poem. Cf. the same peremptory reply to Bacchus at 7.197–98: *immoto deducimur orbe | fatorum; ueteres seraeque in proelia causae*.

³² Bacchus deploys as a defense the very set of accusations that Ovid's Pentheus had voiced against him: *at nunc a puero Thebae capientur inermi, | quem neque bella iuuant nec tela nec usus equorum, | sed madidus murra crinis mollesque coronae | purpuraque et oictis intextum uestibus aurum* (*Met.* 3.553–56).

He not only dismisses all of Bacchus' emotional arguments, arguing that the Thebans have always been ready to challenge divine authority (7.209), but he also comments polemically on his remarkable change of heart *vis à vis* his previous dealings with them. Jupiter sums up Bacchus' metamorphosis with pithy effectiveness: *uetus excidit ira* (7.210).³³ His traditional wrath having 'fallen away' just like his thyrsus and the grapes, Bacchus is no longer the god of the *Bacchae*, trailing his tragic *syрма* as in Seneca's *Oedipus* (423),³⁴ who had exacted a furious revenge on Pentheus for a crime which pales in comparison to Oedipus' *nefas*. This Bacchus has truly heeded Virgil's invocation, at the beginning of *Georgics* 2,³⁵ to 'take off his buskins' and contribute to the georgic project in a milder, non-tragic guise.³⁶ The Thebans are his descendants, *Oedipodionidae* (7.216), and *pietas, fides* and the very laws of Nature and of the Eumenides, guarantors of family order, demand – Jupiter states – that they be punished.

A number of loose ends complicate Jupiter's speech, and his assessment of the relationship between his own powers and those of fate is especially debatable (7.195–98). In this context, however, it is worth stressing the fact that he not only remarks explicitly on Bacchus' unexpected metamorphosis, but also that he calls into question, to a degree, its very motives and its veracity: the aposiopesis at 7.210 shows that Jupiter is puzzled by his son's behaviour.³⁷

Bacchus' reaction to Jupiter's words is no less surprising. Although his father's final remark is far from reassuring –he declares that *at this time* he is not prepared to destroy Thebes, then adding ominously that 'more dangerous days and other avengers will come in the future' (7.219–21) – Bacchus soon returns to his old self (7.222 *mentemque habitumque recepit*), his *honus* suddenly comes back (7.225), and he is compared to a rosebush restored by a breeze after suffering under the sun and a strong wind. Yet this is not the most martial of similes, and even after he regains his more usual aspect, this is nothing like the fierce and fiery Bacchus of old. Nor is he the Bacchus who figures in *Aeneid* 6 as a paradigm

³³ Clearly Bacchus' wrath, not Jupiter's, whose hostile feelings against Thebes are alive and well (cf. 1.227–32): see Smolenaars 1994 ad loc.

³⁴ As well as in *HF*. 475; the word's lineage goes back to Afr. 64 R.² and the one extant line of Valerius' mime *Phormio* (R.²)

³⁵ *Georg.* 2.7–8 *huc, pater o Lenaee, ueni, nudataque musto | tinge nouo mecum dereptis crura coturnis*, with *nouo* signalling the suggested shift in function and attitude. Cf. Mac Góráin 2014: 6.

³⁶ Or at least according to a very different style of tragedy, see above n.14

³⁷ Bacchus will turn Jupiter's question to him back at 10.888–89: *nunc ubi saeua manus, meaque heu cunabula flammae? fulmen, io ubi fulmen?*

of warlike success, or the possible source of inspiration for Lucan in his proem (1.65–66). All this is in his past.

The series of actions inaugurated by Bacchus' display of rhetorical weakness and ineffectiveness finds a revealing parallel later in the same book. Eunaeus is the god's double: he is his priest (7.650), and his beloved (7.684), and when Capaneus swiftly dispatches him he hopes that Bacchus himself could appear to face the same fate (7.678–79).³⁸ The young man's age, clothing, appearance and weapons are all unsuitable for the fight ahead: they are redolent of oriental luxury and effeminacy and provide direct confirmation of the Thebans' lack of military prowess, which Bacchus had pointed out to Jupiter earlier in the book.³⁹ Even the narrator regards Eunaeus' decision to abandon the god's sacred groves as a *furor* different from, but comparable to, Bacchic enthusiasm (7.651). The question he addresses to Eunaeus inevitably involves Bacchus, too: 'Whom do you think you can frighten?', *quem terrere queas?* (7.652).⁴⁰ Comparable attacks that foreground the opponents' effeminacy often end up revealing a fatal underestimation of their danger: Virgil's Trojans, repeatedly berated along these lines, ultimately succeed; Ovid's Pentheus⁴¹ is foolishly confident that the 'weaponless boy' (*Met.* 3.553 *puero ... inermi*) who holds Thebes in thrall, uninterested in martial endeavours (3.554 *quem neque bella iuuant nec tela nec usus equorum*), his hair wet with perfumes (3.555 *madidus murra crinis*), can be quickly made to confess his lies and be defeated; Seneca's Bacchus may sport a long tunic as he progresses on his lion-driven chariot in India, but he does so as a conqueror.⁴² In Statius, however, Eunaeus – and by implication Bacchus himself – are portrayed as implausible warriors, and so they are. Indeed, already in book 2.661–68 Tydeus had poured scorn on the Thebans by pointing out that the *furor* of war has nothing to do with the

³⁸ As Bernstein 2013: 233 n.1 remarks, Capaneus kills Eunaeus just as the latter is extolling the sacred nature of the Thebans: *gens sacrata sumus* (7.666).

³⁹ The connection is underscored by the similarity between 7.169–70 *mea tantum proelia norunt*, [sc. Thebans] | *nectere fronde comas...* and 7.652–53 (Eunaeus' attire) *clipei penetrabile textum* | *pallentes hederæ Nysaeaque sertæ coronat*. It is significant that when Bacchus' intervention is described as effective - Hypsipyle says that he does succeed in saving Thoas from the slaughter on Lemnos (5.265–95)- he has dispensed with his usual attire and appearance (5.268–70). Hypsipyle's claim, however, is part of a narrative whose truth-value has been called into question, cf. n. 46.

⁴⁰ Capaneus will taunt Bacchus (who limits himself to complaining to Juppiter, 10.886–9) in similar terms: '*nullane pro trepidis*', *clamabat*, '*numina Thebis | statis? ubi infandae segnes telluris alumni*, | *Bacchus et Alcides? piget instigare minores* (10.899–901). Capaneus is

⁴¹ *Ov. Met.* 3.553–58.

⁴² *Sen. Oed.* 424–28 *uidit aurato residere curru | ueste cum longa regere et leones | omnis Eoae plaga uasta terrae, | qui bibit Gangen, niueumque quisquis | frangit Araxen*.

excesses of Bacchic rites: *hic aliae caedes, alius furor* (2.667). Eunaeus is surely not a Bacchic force to be reckoned with, a real threat to the serious business of war as embodied here by no less a fighter than Capaneus himself, who descends upon the young man as a lion attacking a doe or a young bullock (2.672). The traditional comparison of a menacing warrior with a lion is here brought into sharper relief by the fact that Eunaeus' attire recalls the association of Bacchus with wild beasts, but only in so far as he also wears the gilded skin of a lynx among his many fashionable accessories (7.661 *aurata lynce*). As we will see shortly, this is a telling, almost parodic symbol of his, and his master's, new-found tameness, which cannot stand up to the real world of conflict and war in which Capaneus wallows.

4 Venus encroaches on Bacchus' traditional prerogatives by staging in Lemnos her own version of the *Bacchae*, as told by Hypsipyle in an extended *rhexis* at 5.48-498. The goddess resolves to punish the island for foolishly neglecting her cult, mirroring Dionysus' motivation for punishing Pentheus. As Hypsipyle remarks, gods, or at least the gods of the *Thebaid*, are prone to taking revenge, *Poena*, when they are slighted or hurt (5.57-60).⁴³ As she prepares to fulfil this novel role, Venus signals her metamorphosis by abandoning her previous aspect (5.62 *nec uultu nec crine prior*) and dismissing the Idalian doves (5.63), a process which evokes Bacchus' own metamorphosis and paves the way for the goddess' appropriation of his role: this is indeed a topsy-turvy world, where traditional expectations about divine behaviour do not hold true.⁴⁴ Indeed, Bacchus himself declares his surprise when faced with Venus' violence: *unde manus, unde haec Mauortia diuae | pectora?* (5.282-3). When Love relinquishes Lemnos for good, Polyxo, seized by an unaccustomed *furor*, plays Agave to Venus' Bacchus: *insueta* (5.91) is the first of several textual markers referencing the novelty and oddity of the plot which is about to unfold, a novelty which the subsequent comparison with traditional Bacchic enthusiasm only puts into sharper relief (5.92-94).⁴⁵ Polyxo may well recall a Bacchant *rapta deo*, but we should not forget that she

⁴³ This is made very clear at an early stage in the poem, when Adrastus explains the background to the festivities in honour of Apollo. The god had, inter alia, sent a *monstrum* (*Poena*) to avenge the killing of his former lover Psamathe: *sero memor thalami maestae solacia morti, | Phoebe paras monstrum* (1.596-7). But *poena* is already signalled as a Leitmotif in this poem of revenge in the initial speeches by Oedipus (1.56-57; 1.71; 1.79-80) and Jupiter (1.216-18; 1.224; 1.245-46). Note especially Oedipus' programmatic aim to 'set out to punish all his descendants' (*totos in poenam ordire nepotes*), as he asks Tisiphone to do at 1.81.

⁴⁴ Cf. Rosati 2005 on inversion as the defining characteristic of the Lemnos episode.

⁴⁵ Cf. 5.159-60 *nec de more cruor: natum Charopeia coniunx | obtulit*, referencing novelty while subtly subverting Atreus' obsession for ritual appropriateness in the context of

is actually *rapta dea*. It was one of Pentheus' fatal errors of judgment to assume that the women of Thebes had left their homes and rushed to Mount Cithaeron⁴⁶ in order to please Aphrodite rather than Bacchus (*Ba.* 225 τὴν δ' Ἀφροδίτην πρόσθ' ἄγειν τοῦ Βακχίου).⁴⁷ While she urges her fellow Lemnians to take revenge on the men who abandoned them, Polyxo clearly signals her key role model by extolling Procne's revenge (she is the *Rhodopeia coniunx* of 5.121) with an urgency which recalls Atreus' own reference to her crimes in Seneca's *Thyestes*.⁴⁸ Under the unexpected banner of Aphrodite, here Statius does compete with Seneca in the same field in which his predecessor had confronted Ovid's legacy. If in *Thyestes* Atreus will have to surpass Procne's *Thracium ... nefas* (56) by slaughtering more victims, *maiore numero* (57), here Polyxo offers her own take on the *maius*-motive as she kills not just one or two, but as many as four children (5.125).⁴⁹ The contact between the two narratives extends to the very logic of Polyxo's and Atreus' motivations. The king consistently regards himself as the wronged party, able to survive simply because he shrewdly takes the initiative instead of waiting for Thyestes' attack.⁵⁰ Polyxo remarks that all the women of Lemnos are already widows because their husbands have deserted them: the proleptic vocative *o uiduae* at 5.105 signals the paradoxical atmosphere of inversion which dominates the episode as a whole, where women take on the role of men and Venus appears in Polyxo's dream holding a sword as the presiding deity of an oxymoronic *dulce nefas* (5.162).⁵¹ Here Polyxo may overturn Procne's admission that *scelus est pietas in coniuge Tereo* (*Met.* 6.635), but is also echoing the *dulce periculum*

his perverse sacrifice: *seruatur omnis ordo, ne tantum nefas | non rite fiat* (*Sen. Th.* 689–90).

⁴⁶ Cf. *Ba.* γυναῖκας ἡμῖν δώματ' ἐκλελοιπένας with 5.100–1 *erumpunt tectis, summasque ad Pallados arces | impetus*.

⁴⁷ Pentheus will be put right on this point by the messenger at 686–88.

⁴⁸ Cf. 5.120 *at nos uulguis iners?* with the beginning of Atreus' self-address at *Th.* 176 *ignauae, iners, eneruis...* He will explicitly invoke Procne at 275–76 *animum Daulis inspira parens | sororque*. A further point of contact between the tragic action of *Thyestes* and this section of the *Thebaid* is the reference to the perverse course of the sun and of time at 5.177–85 (cf. *Sen. Th.* 990–5); see also n. 000.

⁴⁹ Note the emphatic *quattuor* at the beginning of the line.

⁵⁰ As Atreus plainly puts it at the beginning and the end of his revenge plot: *non poterat capi, | nisi capere uellet. regna nunc sperat mea* (288–89); *scio quid queraris: scelere praerepto doles* (1104).

⁵¹ Cf. Rosati 2005: 151. Venus holding a sword is also without parallel.

inspired by Bacchus which seduces Horace in *carm.* 3.25.18:⁵² the oxymoron perfectly captures the bewildering combination of pleasure and fright provoked by *enthousiasmos*.⁵³

Thus Venus infects her followers (or victims) with the power of Bacchus, who enters Hypsipyle's narrative only at the very end, with the limited aim of rescuing his son Thoas.⁵⁴ He appears suddenly in a flood of light (5.267 *et multa subitus cum luce refulsit*) and yet, as befits a god who has completely lost his power to influence actions, he is dishevelled⁵⁵ and uncharacteristically sad (5.270 *nubilus indignumque oculis liquentibus imbrem*). ~~It is now his own oxymoron to mark the novelty and excess which this inversion of roles and domains between gods has fatally caused.~~ Venus has been granted by her father 'an unspeakable honour', *infandum ... honorem* (5.277) while he, the god of Bacchic revelry, is relegated to the role of a mourner.

5 Where has the Bacchus of old gone? Or, as Jupiter puts it, where has his old tragic *ira* ended up? And why? In the divine economy of the *Thebaid*, as we have already mentioned, no god is safe from the drive to rupture tradition, and the interaction among the gods is often novel and unexpected. Even so, this apparently tame, weak, almost gullible Bacchus is so far removed from his prevailing characterization that we cannot simply attribute his metamorphosis to a general restructuring of the theological landscape of the poem.

Let us turn in search of an answer to a passage which precedes Bacchus' actions in book 4, and involves him explicitly, if *in absentia*, the possession scene at 4.377–405, where a woman, the 'queen of the sylvan choir' (4.379), is suddenly overwhelmed by the god and addresses him in words which combine invocation, reproach and prophecy (4.383–405). The Maenad runs down from Mount Cithaeron, symbolically occupied by the advancing Argive army,⁵⁶ brandishing a pine torch lit by three flames, and starts off by accusing

⁵² Cf. also the *iunctura dulce ... | pondus* at 7.165–66, where Bacchus reminds Jupiter that he has brought him to term (cf. p. 000), a further inversion of roles between the goddess of Love and Bacchus. *dulce onus* is a more common *iunctura*, esp. in Ovid (see McKeown on *am.* 2.16.29–30), but *dulci ... pondere* recurs at Mart. 14.151.1.

⁵³ See Nisbet-Rudd ad loc. Statius has *dulce periculum* at *Silv.* 4.5.25.

⁵⁴ Or so Hypsipyle avers. But how far can we trust her self-exculpatory version of the events at this juncture? Nugent 1996 and Casali 2003 are skeptical; according to Herodotus (6.138) Thoas, too, died alongside all the men of Lemnos.

⁵⁵ Note the repeated negatives at 268–69: *non ille quidem turgentia sertis | tempora nec flaua crinem distinxerat uua*.

⁵⁶ *Th.* 4.370–31.

Bacchus of forgetting Thebes and his people.⁵⁷ The contrast between what Bacchus is actually doing and what he should rather do is emphasized in both spatial and chronological terms. He reserves all his military might for his Oriental campaigns (4.389 *perfuris*), not for Thebes, and he has cast aside his customary love for his people (4.383–84 *cui gentis auitae | pridem lapsus amor*). The woman is horrified at the new scenario in which the once-peaceful city protected by Bacchus is now turned into a battlefield, and asks the god to rush her away to the slopes of Aetna or to the Caucasus, rather than being forced to utter her prophecy about the final outcome of the civil war.⁵⁸

In her ersatz request for displacement – she would rather be dragged to Aetna or Caucasus than witness Thebes' demise⁵⁹ – the woman resorts to the traditional Bacchic imagery of *oreibasia* and selects terms which are often associated with the god's intervention, such as the verbs *fero* and *urgeo* (4.395–96), but in doing so she underlines the god's inability to perform his traditional duties. She also testifies to the prophetic power inspired in his followers by Bacchus, whom Tiresias himself labels a μάντις in Euripides' *Bacchae* (298).⁶⁰ The association with prophecy represents a distinctive, if marginal aspect of the representation of both Dionysus and Bacchus, which, alongside other factors, goes partly to explain the intricate relationship between him and Apollo.⁶¹ Here the prophetess distinguishes between the mantic *furor*, or μανία, which Bacchus is now provoking, and a different kind of *furor*, *alium ... furorem* (4.396),⁶² evidently more positive, which she had hoped for as she was initiated into his mysteries.⁶³ It is also worth noting, incidentally, that the bull imagery chosen to convey the prophecy is distinctly Bacchic, not just because there are other instances of people seeing bulls under the influence of the god, but because the

⁵⁷ Cf. Gibson 2013: 141-2 for an analysis of the unusual hymnic features of the invocation. As he rightly remarks, '[e]ven though Bacchus is behind the inspiration of the Bacchant, his status as a god is not enhanced but diminished' by the matron's speech.

⁵⁸ Cf. Ganiban 2007: 62–65.

⁵⁹ Note the contrastive *potius/quam* at 393–95.

⁶⁰ Dodds 1951: 86 n. 30; Padel 1995: 87.

⁶¹ A similar syncretistic approach is explicitly mentioned by Lucan in connection with Thebes at 5.72–74: *cardine Parnasos gemino petit aethera colle, | mons Phoebus Bromioque sacer, cui numine mixto | Delphica Thebanae referunt trieterica Bacchae*.

⁶² 396–400 *en urgues (alium tibi, Bacche, furorem | iuravi): similes uideo concurrere tauros; | idem ambobus honos unusque ab origine sanguis; | ardua conlatis obnixa cornua miscent | frontibus alteraque truces moriuntur in ira*.

⁶³ On *alius furor* see also 7.649–87 and 2.661–68 (667 *hic aliae caedes, alius furor*), with Hershkowitz 1998: 46 and n. 189.

bull is one of the traditional symbols of Bacchus. This element of ambiguity will of course play a relevant role at the very end of the poem.⁶⁴

The direct model for this scene is the matron's prophecy in Lucan's *Pharsalia* 1.678–95, with which it shares numerous points of detail, including the keynote use of *feror* in the first line. Lucan explicitly mixes Apollinian and Dionysiac influences: the woman is *plena Lyaeo* (1.675), but she addresses Paeon and Phoebus in the midst of her prophetic trance, during which she foresees some of the main events of the conflict. The similarities between the two passages highlight their very different implications. Lucan's *matrona* is in the grip of Bacchic frenzy, the source and means of her inspiration,⁶⁵ and the points of contact between these lines and Horace's *Ode* 3.25, one of the mastertexts of Horace's 'Bacchic poetics',⁶⁶ seal the metapoetic implications of the passage. Lucan's Bacchus – with Apollo's cooperation – carries the *matrona* to the very end of the world, both horizontally and vertically, in a quest for a sublime poetic experience which, emphatically positioned at the very end of the first book, amounts to a major programmatic statement.⁶⁷

Statius' take on the same scene is different. His *matrona*, for one thing, displays a degree of self-consciousness which the full force of Bacchic *ekstasis* denied her predecessor. She is *entheos*, but is also aware of being so, and aware of the problematic nature of this particular instance of possession. She is able to reproach Bacchus for not being *there*, at Thebes, but also for failing to carry her away to the remote regions which Lucan's character feels she is being dragged to. This *furor*, as we have seen, is different from the usual Bacchic *furor* which she had been entitled to expect, and different from the overpowering, totalizing experience of the *matrona* who, in the *Bellum Ciuile*, reveals the true nature of the poem's poetics of the sublime: her *furor* is the *furor* of the civil war itself.

Further confirmation of the different nature and impact of the *Thebaid's* scene as compared to its Lucanian model is offered by comparison with another possible intertext. As she rushes down from the mountain, the frenzied woman carries a torch with three flames. This is a standard complement for a Maenad, but the combination of this detail with the mention of *Fama* just a few lines earlier (4.369) may point to a text which is also active

⁶⁴ Parkes quotes Orpheus at Aesch. *Bassarides* fr. 23 Sommerstein and Pentheus at *Ba.* 618–22 and 920–22. See also Parkes 2012 on 69–73.

⁶⁵ This is all the more significant because, as Feeney 1991:275-6 rightly remarks, Bacchus and Apollo had pointedly been omitted as possible source of inspiration in Lucan's poem, where their place is taken over by Nero.

⁶⁶ Cf. Schiesaro 2009.

⁶⁷ On Lucan's *matrona* and her metapoetic implications see Hardie 1993: 107; Hershkowitz 1998: 45–46; Taisne 1994: 191–92; Day 2013: 95–100.

elsewhere in the *Thebaid*, Amata's possession scene in *Aeneid* 7, a connection potentially enhanced by the fact that the *matrona* is here called *regina chori* (4.379). The pervasive programmatic and metapoetic import of Virgil's scene have been thoroughly investigated:⁶⁸ Virgil launches into the Iliadic half of his poem with a bold move. He envisages an alliance between an upper goddess, Juno, and her chthonic acolyte, Allecto, in order to replicate in the human world, between Latinus and Amata, the dualistic tension between the opposing principles and objectives which sets Juno apart from Jupiter. Crucially, this operation is carried out in the name of and through the force of Bacchic frenzy, which combines the strength of inspiration with that of revenge. This is technically incorrect at first – Amata is Juno's victim, not Bacchus' – but we rapidly realize that the Bacchic dimension of Amata's fury is authentic.

Not so in the *Thebaid*: the *matrona* does not set anything in motion. Statius' possession scene raises the expectation of metapoetic engagement, but fails to provide a blueprint for a poetics of sublimity which its Lucanian counterpart had offered. It largely amounts to a statement in the negative: Bacchus is *not* present, his power to shape the poem is *not* perceptible, at least not yet, and not in this manner.

Compared with the Virgilian, and especially the Lucanian model, the intervention of Statius' own *regina chori* is almost a *recusatio* – a choice of poetics which is articulated as a rejection of its alternative. The Bacchic poetics of Virgil, and of Lucan, are an available option, but not one which Statius appears eager to embrace. In the *Thebaid*, Bacchus dries up that particular brand of inspiration together with (almost) all the sources of water in the plain of Nemea.⁶⁹ His intervention literally deprives men of words: their tongues are parched, their *flatus* is weak and uncertain (4.772–75). The rushing waters of epic poetry thin out and cease to be heard. A no less catastrophic thirst had beleaguered Afranius' troops in book 4 of the *Pharsalia*. There, however, Caesar, generous in victory, allows them to reach the restoring waters from which he had until then barred them (4.262–66).⁷⁰ He is *facilis vultuque sereno* (4.363), a smiling, life-giving Dionysus, and a most determined agent in the pursuit of epic action.

6 To a degree, Bacchus' unusual behaviour in the *Thebaid* is about setting a poetic agenda. Leaving aside for a moment Virgil and Ovid, Lucan and Seneca had offered major

⁶⁸ Bocciolini Palagi 2007 and Mac Góráin 2013 are especially valuable on this topic.

⁶⁹ On the possible Callimachean implications of this move on Statius' part cf. McNelis 2007: 87 and n. 31.

⁷⁰ As Bacchus promises the nymphs as a reward: 4.693–4.

models, in two different genres, of the productive force of a Dionysiac sublime, which is embodied by ‘inspired’ characters such as Caesar, Atreus, Medea,⁷¹ or even Pompey,⁷² who transcend their human limitations and are driven by the epistemic and aesthetic power of *furor*. In Statius, paradigmatically, Capaneus embodies an aesthetic of the sublime which leaves him an isolated and ultimately failed figure.⁷³ As he develops the logic of *maius*, Statius strains to breaking point the strategic option suggested by his most immediate and imposing models,⁷⁴ and assigns an expanded metapoetic role directly to the Furies,⁷⁵ Pluto⁷⁶ and Tisiphone. In letting go of vengeful *ira* and in dropping his thyrsus, the Bacchus of the Thebais relinquishes his role as the god of tragedy, and is no more capable of imposing his own brand of Dionysiac poetic sublimity than he is of acting decisively in the war between Thebans and Argives. He is the necessarily ambivalent signifier of an author who competes with his predecessors by, paradoxically, choosing to play down rather than amplify the volume of the Bacchic sublime. The logic of *maius*⁷⁷ becomes an impossible option for the poem as a whole, and new paths must be attempted. In his proem, Statius includes Bacchus’ *graves irae* (1.11) against his own city among the subjects that fall outside the scope of his project, for it would take too long to go as far back as that in retelling the story of Oedipus’ family (and, as Jupiter will point out at 7.210, Bacchus ‘old wrath’ is no longer in evidence). This *praeteritio* is a thinly disguised judgement of poetic value: Bacchus’ anger has been dealt with already, and more than once - *omnia iam uulgata*.⁷⁸ As Laius says when he finally brings to an end what until then has been an elaborate pageant of intertextual models with next to no value in terms of understanding the future, *satis est meminisse priorum*, ‘enough remembering the past’ (4.628). This time an *alius furor*, and another Bacchus, will set the tone and provide a blueprint.

⁷¹ Cf. esp. the nurse’s description of Medea at Sen. *Med.* 382–86.

⁷² On Pompey’s sublimity see Day 2013: 174–233.

⁷³ On Capaneus cf. esp. Delarue 2000: 83–85, Leigh 2006.

⁷⁴ See now Hardie 2013. As Hardie 2013: 135 puts it, the freedom inscribed in the striving for sublimity takes the form, in the Flavian authors, of ‘an attempt to break free of the shackles of intertextuality.’

⁷⁵ At the expense of the Muses, in yet another display of tension between traditional expectations of poetics and Statius’ innovative approach: Rosati 2002.

⁷⁶ His monologue at the beginning of book 8, coming shortly after Bacchus’ ineffectual performance in book 7, is closely modelled on Atreus’ and Medea’s programmatic speeches in Seneca (see esp. 8.65–83).

⁷⁷ On the poetics of *maius* in the *Thebaid* see esp. Bessone 2011: 87–94.

⁷⁸ Or, as Adrastus tells Polynices, *quid nota recondis? | scimus* (1.682–83). His story is well known even at the extreme boundaries of the world (1.684–88).

The metamorphosis of Bacchus is remarked upon more than once in the *Thebaid* itself, almost with glee. Jupiter, we noted, comments on it with a mixture of surprise and incredulity, before moving to capitalise on it, in a display of metapoetic awareness. Later in the same book another densely intertextual episode elaborates on the point when the Erinys attempts to bring the armies closer to war (7.564–81). Here the place of Silvia’s stag⁷⁹ is taken by two tigers, who had once (7.565 *quondam*) wreaked havoc under Bacchus’ command in his eastern campaigns, but have recently (7.566 *nuper*) been set free by the god in recognition of their good service. Mirroring their master’s transformation, they have forgotten the taste of blood (7.569 *sanguinis oblitus*) and roam the countryside or even enter town peacefully (7.576–7 *benigno | ... gradu*), an object of care and veneration for the locals. Indeed, they act as a double for Bacchus in his more peaceful, civilised aspect: homes and temples are warmed up by sacrifices as if the god himself had appeared. After Tisiphone infects them with *furor*, they turn back into ‘their prior spirit’ (7.580 *animumque ... priorem*), and at a speed compared to lightning (7.582) they kill a number of Argive soldiers before being wounded by Aconteus and returning to die against the city walls. The Thebans, shocked at the tigers’ fate, resolve to fight.

Tisiphone pours *furor* into the tigers by touching them three times with a ‘snakey rod’ (7.579 *uipeo ... flagello*), a detail which echoes Allecto’s seizing of Amata in *Aeneid* 7, and, more importantly, evokes the actual initiation rites of the Bacchic cult. Here, however, fury and revenge are no longer Bacchus’ own province, and (albeit metonymically) he turns into an object rather than an agent of possession. His tigers have lost the fearsome sublimity that used to characterize them. Now that they are adorned with ribbons by the god’s priests, they embody the enfeebled and gilded lion,⁸⁰ *languidus* and *bratteatus*, which Seneca’s *Epistle* 41.6 compares unfavourably to the lion who is *incultus* but fearsome. The latter is *speciosus ex horrido*, attractive because of its sublime strength, whereas the former’s lack of energy is aesthetically unsatisfactory.⁸¹ Statius reworks the image, and its implications, in *Achilleid* 1, when Achilles, excited at the prospect of fighting at Troy, drops the disguise he had adopted at Thetis’ urging (incidentally, quoting Bacchus as a precedent: 1.260–63),⁸²

⁷⁹ On the Bacchic connotations of the stag scene see Bocciolini Palagi 2007: 131–37.

⁸⁰ On lion similes see Kytzler 1962: 150–52.

⁸¹ *aliter leo aurata iuba mittitur, dum contractatur et ad patientiam recipiendi ornamenti cogitur fatigatus, aliter incultus, integri spiritus: hic scilicet impetu acer, qualem illum natura esse voluit, speciosus ex horrido, cuius hic decor est, non sine timore aspici, praefertur illi languido et bratteato.* On this passage and its implications in terms of poetics cf. Schiesaro 2003: 127–8.

⁸² For the episode see Sen. *Oed.* 418–21.

and is compared to a tamed lion suddenly finding his old self (1.858–63).⁸³ We were told at the beginning what Achilles' true nature, uneasily repressed for a while, is like: a triumph of epic sublimity, which Charon conveys with an almost *verbatim* quote of Propertius' excitement at the birth of the *Aeneid* (1.147-8 *nescio quid magnum - nec me patria omina fallunt - | uis festina parat tenuesque superuenit annos*), combined with a suggestive nod to Atreus' own self-presentation as a sublime tyrant (*Th.* 267–78 *nescio quid animus maius et solito amplius | supraque fines moris humani tumet*).⁸⁴ In the *Thebaid*, Statius deconstructs the Lucanian-Senecan compact of Dionysiac inspiration and sublimity, promoting deferral and displacement as the motivating forces of his epic. He achieves this by presenting a (momentarily) unthreatening Bacchus, and channeling some of his energy into other characters.

Shorn of the implications that had turned him into such an iconic advocate of *furor* and *nefas*, Bacchus is ready to be recruited, at the end of the poem, as an appropriate term of comparison for the victorious, and yet generous and mild, Theseus (12.782–96).⁸⁵ He enters Thebes as, by now, a *hospes*, and the enthusiasm of the local women matches the one India had displayed towards Bacchus' conquest –the repetition of *marcidus* seals the connection between the two scenes.⁸⁶ This positive recasting of Bacchus is in keeping with the association between Dionysus/Osiris and the emperor which recurs with some frequency in the *Silvae*, where the god shines as the cultural hero of Flavian Rome, a suitable point of comparison for the virtues of the ruler, but also a reminder that he can display strength when needed.⁸⁷

Yet such a soothing conclusion to the vicissitudes of Thebes, and to the *Thebaid's* valiant attempts to chart a new path in narrative epic, is, however, more easily announced than realised, especially given the glaring absence of divine agency at this juncture in the plot.⁸⁸ The acquiescence and growing warmth which the Thebans display towards Theseus,

⁸³ *ut leo, materno cum raptus ab ubere mores | accepit pectique iubas hominemque vereri | edidicit nullasque rapi nisi iussus in iras, | si semel adverso radiavit lumine ferrum, | eiurata fides domitorque inimicus, in illum | prima fames, timidoque pudet servisse magistro.*

⁸⁴ Pluto's orders to Tisiphone at 8.65–68 are also directly connected with Atreus' self-exhortation.

⁸⁵ Hercules is also redefined along similar lines, see Rebeggiani 2018: 150-1.

⁸⁶ Theseus's return to Athens after his victory over the Amazons already alludes to the pattern of Bacchus' return in book 4 (12.519–22).

⁸⁷ Rebeggiani 2018: 265, with further bibliography; see also Rebeggiani 2018: 46 and *passim* on the ideology of the *mitis princeps*. On the contrary, Dominik 2015: 278-9 stresses the 'disturbing aspect' of the representation of Theseus as a just ruler.

⁸⁸ Feeney 1991: 357.

conveyed by the comparison with Bacchus' Indian subjects, is immediately contrasted by the turmoil of the Argive women's frenzy, who, in the throes of Maenadic possession, wander on the hills and look as if they have just committed or plan to commit a *magnum nefas* (792–93).⁸⁹ The two contrasting sides of Bacchus' personality and influence are set side by side, *ecce* at 789 emphasizing the contrast. Now it is the Argive women's turn to indulge in the same behaviour Jupiter had listed in 1.227–32 as the reason for his decision to punish Thebes and set the *Thebaid* in motion, as they, too, threaten a re-enactment of the archetypal *sparagmos* of the *Bacchae*.⁹⁰ Now, however, the act of following the *impetus* of the Argives' despair, which is described with sublime overtones, would demand of the poet a *furor* which he emphatically disclaims: *uix nouus ista furor ueniensque implesset Apollo, | et mea iam longo meruit ratis aequore portum* (808–9). There is no room, at least at this time, for a continuation of the poem in the name of *nefas*, fuelled by the boundless energy of Bacchic inspiration and, again, under Apollo's tutelage,⁹¹ as the narrator adopts once again the stance of *praeteritio* and tiredness that he had advertised in the proem (1.16 *praeteriisse sinam*)⁹² and extended, for instance, to Hypsipyle (5.38 *hoc memorasse sat est*), or metaphorically encoded in Polynices' wanderings.⁹³ According to Jupiter, Bacchus, too, could have said more in defense of Thebes, but didn't.⁹⁴

And yet it is Bacchus, after all, who has the last word. As these final phases of the narrative and its abrupt ending with an aposiopesis go to show, the untameable strength of the god's double nature cannot be restrained forever, neither in Thebes nor in Rome.⁹⁵ He may have been dressed as a woman, like Achilles in the *Achilleid*, but he is always ready to return to the fray. He may have momentarily stopped the Argives' advance in the plain of

⁸⁹ Argos is also involved in the worship of Bacchus: *et Argos | praesente Bacchum coluit nouerca* (Sen. *Oed.* 486–87).

⁹⁰ 1.229–30 *mala gaudia matrum | erroresque feros nemorum*, which is better taken as a specific reference to Pentheus' demise than to the generic sinfulness of the Theban mothers (cf. Briguglio 2017: 283). The sins of the Argives are more summarily dealt with at 1.245–7.

⁹¹ Henderson 1998: 216–17.

⁹² This passage is discussed by Criado 2000: 237–8.

⁹³ Among the places he crosses the narrator lists *pingues Baccheo sanguine colles* (1.329).

⁹⁴ 1.287–9 *neque me, detur si copia, fallit | multa super Thebis Bacchum ausuramque Dionen | dicere, sed nostri reuerentia ponderis obstat*.

⁹⁵ On the complex tension and the tragic models which enliven the end of the poem see Hardie 1993: 46–48, Bessone 2011: 128–199 and Heslin (2008).

Nemea, but at the price of destroying a *locus amoenus*.⁹⁶ Again, he has shown himself as a more sober source of ecstasy in book 2, when the Bacchae roam mount Cithaeron ‘sound of mind’ (2.79 *sanas*) prodded by ‘a better Bacchus’ (2.80 *meliore Baccho*) momentarily oblivious of his *ueteres irae* (1.11).⁹⁷ But we need only think of Juno, who at the end of the *Aeneid* supposedly lets go of her hatred,⁹⁸ and in Ovid *Met.* 14 finally brings her *ueteres ... irae* to an end.⁹⁹ We can no more trust these happy endings as we can believe that Bacchic *furor* is tamed once and for all.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ As Soerink 2015 shows. I agree with Soerink that an idealised (and overly Callimachean) reading of the Nemean episode is unwarranted, although I place more emphasis on the (at least momentarily) taming of Bacchus’ martial ardour.

⁹⁷ The following simile (2.81-88), which refers to the flesh-eating Thracians at a banquet, **immediately qualifies the characterization of the atmosphere.**

⁹⁸ Significantly, when he admits his reluctant acquiescence to Jupiter’s plan in book 7 (178 *cedo equidem*), Bacchus takes a leaf from Juno’s book at *Aeneid* 12.818: *cedo equidem pugnasque exosa relinquo*.

⁹⁹ *Met.* 14.581–82 *iamque deos omnes ipsamque Aeneia uirtus | Iunonem ueteres finire coegerat iras*.

¹⁰⁰ I am grateful to Fiachra Mac Góráin for organising a stimulating (if sober) conference and shepherding the volume, and this paper, to publication with his usual combination of tact and insight. Thanks are also due to Federica Bessone, Antonino Pittà, Ludovico Pontiggia, Victoria Rimell and Stefano Rebeggiani, who read earlier drafts and offered very useful suggestions.

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