

# Ire per omnes heroas:

Statius' Cyclic OEuvre

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### Abstract

Statius' *Achilleid* is meant to "go through the entire hero" (1.4–5 *ire per omnem / ... heroa*). This plan consists of re-singing a considerable portion of the poems from the archaic Greek Epic Cycle narrating the Trojan saga. It thus ensures a direct continuation of Statius' first mythological epic poem, the *Thebaid*, whose subject engages in close dialogue with the part of the archaic Greek Epic Cycle dedicated to the Theban saga. This paper argues that Statius' poetic engagement with both the Theban and the Trojan sagas amounts to an ambitious endeavour to create a new, distinctly Latin Epic Cycle re-singing the two wars that destroyed the race of heroes and, therefore, heralding the dawn of a new golden age under the banner of the Flavian dynasty.

This paper presents an innovative perspective on Statius' mythological epic poems, the *Thebaid* and the *Achilleid*. It argues that these works are Roman analogues to the two heroic parts of the archaic Greek Epic Cycle, the Theban and the Trojan sagas. In light of this interpretation, Statius' poetic engagement with both wars which were blamed for destroying the race of heroes, that is, the Theban and the Trojan Wars, amounts to an ambitious endeavour to create a new, distinctly Latin Epic Cycle supplanting the old Greek one and heralding the dawn of a new golden age under the banner of the Flavian dynasty.

To delve into Statius' interest in the Greek Epic Cycle, I start with an overview of the proem of the *Achilleid*. This passage, rich with echoes from previous epic proems, reveals a hyper-epic, unapologetically cyclic plan to retrace Achilles' entire life and possibly his afterlife throughout the Trojan saga. I focus on Statius' reworking of events covered in the *Cypria*, which was considered the prequel of the *Iliad* and the first poem of the Trojan saga. I argue that Statius appeals for the beginning of a new Trojan saga, an equivalent of the Greek one in Roman epic. A similar appeal for a new Theban saga might underlie Statius' conception of the *Thebaid*.

I then demonstrate that the association of the Theban and Trojan Wars as the two quintessentially epic subjects was a prevalent theme in literary discourse before Statius. This association was likely linked to the notion, dating back to archaic Greek literature, that the race of heroes perished in those two wars. Virgil partially revived this notion in *Eclogue 4*, heralding the return of the race of heroes under the boy's reinvigorating influence. Given that Statius' presentation of a new epic poem on the Trojan War is deeply indebted to Virgil's announcement, I argue that the close dialogue between the two texts indicates Statius' intention to reassess the entire epic tradition in light of the Flavian dynasty's consolidation of power in Rome.

### 1. The proem of the *Achilleid*

The proem of Statius' *Achilleid* has attracted much scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> Critics have made strenuous efforts to solve a Gordian knot of poetic issues that, to quote Peter Heslin's cutting remark, "perhaps

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In being extraordinarily epic, this hyper-poem seems to place itself on higher ground and encompass every epic poem before/beneath it. The first two words resound with multiple echoes signalling the martial quality of the poem. Scholars have drawn attention to the aural and rhythmic similarity between *Magnanimum Aeaciden* and Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά (Hom. *Il.* 1.1), as well as to the similar vocalic sequence in *Magnanimum* and *Arma uirum* (Verg. *Aen.* 1.1).<sup>7</sup> The Homeric-Virgilian paradigm of putting a hero on centre stage informs the entire first part of the proem, which is composed of seven lines like the proems of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* (if one excludes the poet's invocation to the Muse at 1.8–10).<sup>8</sup>

A more tenuous echo points to the paradox inherent in Statius' choice of Achilles as the subject of his poem. An *animus* in such a prominent position cannot but recall Ov. *Met.* 1.1, *In noua fert animus*. Taken alone, the first half line of Ovid's poem suggested that Ovid's spirit brought him to new things.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, by shifting the emphasis from novelty (*noua*) to greatness (*Magna-*), Statius implicitly acknowledges the triteness of his subject, which is as old as poetry. At the same time, by reworking Ovid's *fert* into his appeal that the goddess re-tell what she has already told (3 *re-fer*), he makes explicit his intention to bring up that subject again for reconsideration.

To this paradoxical claim of triteness, Statius adds one of completeness. He aims to “go through the entire hero” (4–5 *ire per omnem / ... heroa*), from his hiding place on Scyros to his duel with Hector and beyond “through the whole extent of Troy” (7 *tota ... Troia*), a panoramic perspective ranging extensively in both spatial and temporal terms. This plan consists of re-singing a considerable portion of the poems from the archaic Greek Epic Cycle narrating the Trojan saga, if not the whole six, then at least the first three: the *Cypria* (mentioning Achilles' marriage with Deidamia on Scyros, though most probably not in the circumstances of Statius' poem),<sup>10</sup> the *Iliad* (ending with Hector's funeral) and the *Aethiopis* (including Achilles' post-Iliadic feats until his death). The three proper names punctuating the last three lines of the proem's first part in increasing proximity to the end of the line (5 *Scyro*; 6 *Hectore*; 7 *Troia*) mirror the narrative's progression from *Antehomerica* (the *Cypria*) through *Homerica* (the *Iliad*) to *Posthomerica* (the *Aethiopis* and possibly other cyclic poems), while the enjambments (5–6; 6–7) provide a visual counterpart to the carrying over of the narrative from one cyclic poem to the next. The *Achilleid* thus invokes the very bugbear of Callimacheanism as its primary aim: a continuous, cyclic poem bringing another author on a road that has already carried many.<sup>11</sup>

This ostentatious display of poetic backwardness proclaiming fondness for wholeness and aversion to originality is, however, no more than a bluff rooted in Ovidian poetics. When one realizes that Statius' *formidatam* (1) sounds like a virtual crasis, in reverse order, of Ovid's *mutatas ... formas* (1.1), one gets the sense that Statius is actively engaging with previous poetic traditions through a transformative approach derived from and meant to confront the *Metamorphoses* itself. The constitutive contradiction to which the *Metamorphoses* subscribed was embodied in the juxtaposition of *perpetuum (carmen)* and *deducere* at the end of its proem (1.4), the former hinting at the poem's linear narrative, the latter at its Callimachean slenderness. The same contradiction emerges at the end of the first part of the *Achilleid*'s proem, where the tension between *tota* and

<sup>7</sup> Ganiban (2015) 75; Barchiesi (1996) 49, also pointing out the rhythmic similarity between *Achil.* 1.1, Verg. *Aen.* 1.1 and Ov. *Met.* 1.1 (cf. also Lucan 1.1 and Sil. *Pun.* 1.1).

<sup>8</sup> McNelis (2015) 578.

<sup>9</sup> Barchiesi/Rosati (2024) 53–54.

<sup>10</sup> Heslin (2005) 202–5; McNelis (2015) 579–80, 590.

<sup>11</sup> Callim. *Aet.* fr. 1.3; *Epigr.* 28.1–2 (2 πολλοὺς ᾧδε καὶ ᾧδε φέρεται ~ 3 *re-fer ... multum inclita*); cf. Hor. *Ars P.* 136–37 (*scriptor cyclicus*), with Heslin (2005) 81–82 (cf. Koster (1979) 195).

*deducere* (7) heralds the poem's Ovidian approach to a comprehensive narrative.<sup>12</sup> Statius will transform the most anti-Callimachean type of poetry into a Callimachean manifesto.

## 2. Beginning like the *Cypria*

The *Cypria* was the first poem of the Trojan Cycle.<sup>13</sup> According to Proclus' summary, it opened with Zeus planning the Trojan War in concert with Themis.<sup>14</sup> A seven-line fragment from the *Cypria* transmitted in a scholium to the *Iliad* might reflect this episode and, therefore, almost certainly started the narrative, probably after a Muse invocation.<sup>15</sup> The fragment refers to when Zeus "resolved to relieve the all-nurturing earth of mankind's weight by fanning the great conflict of the Trojan War" (4–5 κουφίσαι ἀνθρώπων παμβώτορα σύνθετο γαῖαν, / ῥιπίσσας πολέμου μεγάλην ἔριν Ἰλιακοῖο). The outcome of "Zeus' plan" (7 Διὸς ... βουλή) is that "the heroes at Troy" (6–7 οἱ<sup>16</sup> δ' ἐνὶ Τροίῃ / ἦρωες) kept being killed. Themis does not appear.

Themis' absence may be explained by the fact that the poet compressed things in this summary introduction to the events. She may have played a role later in the poem when Zeus discussed the details of his plan with her. However, echoes of the *Cypria* in Euripides also assign the plan to Zeus alone.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Themis seems rather to be linked with the second episode of the *Cypria* in Proclus' summary, the marriage of Thetis and Peleus, during which the quarrel between the three goddesses broke out.<sup>18</sup> In some sources, differing only over details, Themis counsels Zeus precisely to marry Thetis to a mortal since she is fated to have a son mightier than his father.<sup>19</sup> Further variations on this motif replace Themis with other figures (Prometheus, Proteus), but the content of the prophecy is the same.<sup>20</sup> Is Themis' advice on matters conjugal somehow related to her alleged role in Zeus' plan to fan the Trojan War?

According to Philodemus, the author of the *Cypria* stated that Thetis refused Zeus to please Hera, so he got angry with her and swore that she would marry a mortal; apparently, Themis was not involved.<sup>21</sup> However, it is not impossible to reconcile Philodemus' testimony with the version involving Themis. Apollonius Rhodius might provide us with the whole picture. In *Argon.* 4.790–804, Hera recalls that Thetis abstained from Zeus' love in reverence for Hera herself, who had raised her; consequently, Zeus swore that Thetis would never marry a god. However, he did not cease spying on her, so Themis eventually revealed to him that his son from Thetis would dethrone him, and Zeus gave up his desire for her, fearing that someone else might be his match. Philodemus

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<sup>12</sup> Koster (1979) 191–96; Hardie (1993) 63n8; Barchiesi (1996) 58–59; Hinds (1998) 142n26; Heslin (2005) 72–73; Uccellini (2012) 39–40. More cautious: Ripoll/Soubiran (2008) 152–53; Nuzzo (2012) 10n35.

<sup>13</sup> Davies (1989) 33–52; West (2013) 55–128; Currie (2015). Influence on Statius' *Achilleid*: McNelis (2015).

<sup>14</sup> *Cypria* arg. lines 84–85 Severyns.

<sup>15</sup> Schol. Hom. *Il.* 1.5 van Thiel (Bernabé, *PEG* fr. 1 = West (2003) fr. 1, whose trans. is used here), on which see below; cf. Davies (1989) 34–35; West (2013) 65–69; Currie (2015) 295–97.

<sup>16</sup> West (2003) prints οἱ.

<sup>17</sup> *Hel.* 36–41; *El.* 1282–83; fr. 1082; *Or.* 1639–42 generically speaks of "the gods".

<sup>18</sup> *Cypria* arg. lines 86–88 Severyns.

<sup>19</sup> Pind. *Isthm.* 8.26a–46a; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.799–804; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.13.5.

<sup>20</sup> Aesch. *PV* 908–26 (see below); Ov. *Met.* 11.221–28.

<sup>21</sup> *Piet.* B 7241 Obbink (Bernabé, *PEG* fr. 2 = West (2003) fr. 2; cf. Hes. fr. 210 M–W; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.13.5); cf. Davies (1989) 35–36; West (2013) 69–71; Currie (2015) 285–86.

and Apollonius share some verbal material which might even go back to the *Cypria*.<sup>22</sup> If Philodemus' testimony is to be reconciled with Apollonius' account, then in the *Cypria*, too, Themis may have counselled nothing more than Thetis' marriage to Peleus. In this context, Themis will have made some reference to their son's death in the Trojan War,<sup>23</sup> thereby somehow endorsing Zeus' plan, if not suggesting it in the first place. Alternatively, Proclus or his sources may have cursorily merged Themis' advice on Thetis with Zeus' plan to fan the Trojan War because Thetis' marriage was the occasion for the outbreak of the "conflict" (personified as Ἐρις) that ultimately led to "the great conflict of the Trojan War" mentioned at the beginning of the poem (fr. 1.5 πολέμου μεγάλην ἔριν Ἰλιακοῖο).

In its very first lines, Statius' *Achilleid* mentions precisely the counsel episode. The papyronymic *Aeaciden* (1) specifies Achilles' mortal nature from his father's side of the family, while *formidatamque Tonanti / progeniem et patrio uetitam succedere caelo* (1–2) may hint exactly at the way Themis phrased her advice for Zeus. According to Pindar (*Isthm.* 8.26a–46a), "wise-counselling Themis" (31 εὔβουλος ... Θέμις)<sup>24</sup> told Zeus that Thetis was fated to bear a son better than his father; accordingly, if Thetis were joined to Zeus, she would give birth to a son "who would hurl with his hand another dart, mightier than a thunderbolt" (34–35 ὃς κεραυνοῦ ... κρέσσον ἄλλο βέλος / διώξει χερὶ). Therefore, Themis' advice was to give Thetis to "Peleus, son of Aeacus" (38–39 Πηλεΐ ... / ... Αἰακίδα), and let her see her son die in war, a son "resembling Ares in his hands and flashes of lightning in the power of his feet" (37 χεῖρας Ἄρει <τ> εἶνα-λίγκιον στεροπαῖσι τ' ἀκμὰν ποδῶν).

Similarly, Aeschylus (*PV* 908–26) has Prometheus, "son of right-counselling Themis" (18 τῆς ὀρθοβούλου Θέμιδος ... παῖ), prophesize that, no matter how confidently Zeus shakes "in his hands his fire-breathing dart" (917 ἐν χεροῖν πύρπνουν βέλος), he is hastening his own ruin. For the marriage he is preparing for himself will produce a monster "who will indeed discover a flame mightier than a thunderbolt and a strong crash surpassing thunder" (922–23 ὃς δὴ κεραυνοῦ κρείσσον' εὐρήσει φλόγα / βροντῆς θ' ὑπερβάλλοντα καρτερὸν κτύπον). In light of the close similarities between Pindar's and Aeschylus' texts, Pindar likely was Aeschylus' immediate source for his version of the myth. However, one cannot exclude that, though echoing Pindar, Aeschylus' account ultimately drew from a source known to both authors, the *Cypria* being the most suitable candidate.<sup>25</sup>

Given these variations on Themis' and her surrogates' words, it is probably no coincidence that, when referring to this prophecy at *Achil.* 1.1–2, Statius calls Jupiter "the Thunderer" (1 *Tonanti*).<sup>26</sup> His son from Thetis would have surpassed his thunderbolt. That son actually would have been somewhat of a thunderbolt himself, emitting flashes of lightning (στεροπαῖσι), flames (φλόγα) and crash (κτύπον). Achilles is the thunderbolt that Jupiter did not dare to discharge: he cannot fly back to heaven because he was never actually ejected from there. If these arguments are sound, one may conclude that the *Achilleid* begins with a reference to one of the first scenes of the *Cypria*, later considered the opening scene of the entire Trojan Cycle: Themis' counsel to marry Thetis to a mortal husband.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> τῆι Ἡραὶ χαρ[ιζομένη]ν ~ 796 ἐμὲ αἰδομένη; τὸν γάμον Δ[ιός] ~ 793 εὐνή Διός; τὸν δ' ὀμόσαι ~ 797 ὁ δ' ... ὄμοσεν.

<sup>23</sup> As she does in Pind. *Isthm.* 8.36a (see below).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Ol.* 13.8; fr. 30.1 Snell–Maehler.

<sup>25</sup> Griffith (1983) 5.

<sup>26</sup> Barchiesi (1996) 48.

<sup>27</sup> McNelis (2015) 586 overstates the importance of Philodemus' testimony in excluding any link between the *Cypria* and the *Achilleid* in relation to the context of Thetis' marriage.

Starting from Achilles' conception in the *Cypria*, Statius' plan for the *Achilleid* may have included events after his death, possibly even his afterlife, much as the *Thebaid* does not end when the two brothers of its proem (cf. 1.1 *Fraternas acies*) die. Traces of this plan have been detected in Deidamia dreading Achilles' infatuation with Helen (1.945–46 *aut ipsa placebit / Tyndaris, incesta nimium laudata rapina*, "or Tyndareus' daughter herself will charm you, too much praised as she was for being sinfully carried off") and asking him that no barbarian wife bear a child for him (954 *pariat ne quid tibi barbara coniunx*), a possible hint at a minor tradition about Achilles' afterlife, in which Achilles and Helen got married on an island and had a son. According to this hypothesis, Statius would have dealt with Achilles' posthumous destiny, even if only briefly in a prophecy by Jupiter.<sup>28</sup>

However attractive it may be to posit that the narrative dealt with Achilles' afterlife, it may be unnecessary. The *Cypria* included a meeting between Achilles and Helen, arranged by Aphrodite and Thetis on account of Achilles' desire to see her: Aphrodite's presence as Helen's chaperon testifies to the erotic charge of the meeting.<sup>29</sup> Deidamia's malicious remark about the excessive praise that Helen received (*nimium laudata*) may point to the *Cypria* meeting by implying that Achilles will eventually yield to the desire to verify those rumours. Accordingly, Deidamia's request that hers be Achilles' only child may have been granted in the end. Incidentally, traditions about Achilles' children other than Neoptolemus are dubious.<sup>30</sup>

Whether Deidamia's words hint at Achilles' encounter with Helen on earth or in their afterlife (or both), Achilles' relevance for the Trojan saga goes beyond his death. Not only is he posthumously responsible for such further developments as Ajax' suicide (narrated both in the *Aethiopsis* and in the *Ilias parua*, the fourth poem of the Trojan saga) and Polyxena's sacrifice on his grave (narrated in the *Iliou persis*, fifth poem), but he also appears as a ghost/soul in other poems of the Trojan saga (*Ilias parua*; *Nostoi*, sixth poem; *Odyssey*, seventh poem).<sup>31</sup>

Given Achilles' prominence in the Trojan War even after his death, Statius' plan to "lead the young man down through the whole extent of Troy" (1.7 *tota iuuenem deducere Troia*) may have amounted to re-singing the whole Trojan War with a focus on its main protagonist, alive and dead. The spatio-temporal indication *tota ... Troia* seems to encircle *iuuenem* on both sides, thus suggesting the centripetal force directed towards Achilles in Statius' comprehensive reassessment of the Trojan War. Hinging upon Achilles as the centre of the narrative, Statius' plan would have resulted in a new Trojan Cycle, this time entirely in Latin.

### 3. The Cyclic *Thebaid*

<sup>28</sup> Achilles' afterlife: Roscher, *Lex.* s.v. "Achilleus" 56 and *RE* s.v. "Achilleus" 240–41, with further traditions about his posthumous marriage (Medea, Iphigenia, Polyxena). In the *Achilleid*: Méheust (1971) xvi–xviii; Rosati (1994) 56–57 (also suggesting that *barbara coniunx* may hint at Medea); Ripoll/Soubiran (2008) 278; *contra*, Nuzzo (2012) 8–9.

<sup>29</sup> *Cypria* arg. lines 157–58 Severyns; cf. Davies (1989) 48; Gantz (1993) 596; West (2013) 118–19; Currie (2015) 292–93.

<sup>30</sup> The only source is Ptolemy Chennus/Hephaestion's *Novel Research* (survived in Photius' epitome: *Bibl.* 148b.21–24, on Achilles' and Deidamia's second son, Oneiros; 149a.18–23, on Achilles' and Helen's son, Euphorion), notoriously blurring the lines between fact and fiction (Hartley (2014)).

<sup>31</sup> Ajax' suicide in the *Aethiopsis*: Bernabé, *PEG* fr. 5 = West (2003) fr. 6; Ajax' suicide in the *Ilias parua*: arg. lines 209–10 Severyns; Achilles' appearance in the *Ilias parua*: arg. line 218 Severyns (cf. Bernabé, *PEG* arg. 2.9); Polyxena's murder in the *Iliou persis*: arg. lines 273–74 Severyns; Achilles' appearance in the *Nostoi*: arg. lines 291–93 Severyns; Achilles' appearance in the *Od.*: 11, 467–540.

Stattius must have been deeply interested in the archaic Greek Epic Cycle, at least since he decided to write the *Thebaid*. A *Thebaid* belonged to the first part of the Greek Epic Cycle, dedicated to the Theban saga.<sup>32</sup> Scholars have generally neglected this poem as a source or model for Stattius' *Thebaid*, while the classic confrontation is with Antimachus of Colophon's *Thebaid*.<sup>33</sup> Evidence of Stattius' use of Antimachus remains dubious, but Antimachus' status as a literary symbol undoubtedly played a decisive role in Stattius' decision to write a *Thebaid*. A contemporary of Stattius, Quintilian affirms that, although nearly all grammarians agreed with giving Antimachus second place after Homer amongst epic poets, Antimachus put considerable distance between Homer and himself.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, whereas Virgil's *Aeneid* tried to compete with Homer, Stattius' *Thebaid* presents itself with calculated modesty as a Roman challenge to a number two, a vice-Homer. Stattius' prayer that his *Thebaid* "follow the *Aeneid* from afar" (*Theb.* 12.816–17 *tu ... Aeneida ... / ... longe sequere*) shows his intent to be placed second after and as far from Virgil as Antimachus was from Homer.<sup>35</sup>

However, Stattius' show of modesty need not be more than a pose. In fact, it may distract the reader from Stattius' prime, much more tempting, target. Interestingly enough, if the Cyclic *Thebaid* was ever attributed to anyone, that was Homer, and no other name was ever mentioned as an alternative author.<sup>36</sup> When Propertius warns a friend of his, the epic poet Ponticus, of what might happen if Ponticus falls in love (1.7), his words sound familiar. Ponticus is writing a *Thebaid*: his subject, "Cadmus' city, Thebes, and the sorrowful arms of fraternal warfare" (1.7.1–2 *Cadmeae ... Thebae / armaque fraternae tristia militiae*), is the same as Stattius', "fraternal armies and alternate reigns fought for in unholy hate and guilty Thebes" (*Theb.* 1–2 *Fraternas acies alternaque regna profanis / decertata odiis sontesque ... Thebas*).<sup>37</sup> Propertius acknowledges that, by writing an epic poem on Thebes, Ponticus is attempting to take away Homer's first place (1.7.3 *primo contendis Homero*). From Propertius' words, it does not necessarily follow that he, too, believed the author of the Cyclic *Thebaid* to be Homer. However, his testimony aligns with the praise heaped on the Cyclic *Thebaid* throughout antiquity and reflected in its attribution to Homer.<sup>38</sup> Ponticus is not fighting with any vice-Homer: his duel is with the "first", one and only Homer.

Two elegies later (1.9), Propertius describes how Ponticus has been captured by a girl and how his *Thebaid* is now useless. Ponticus must now put away his epic poem because "in love, one line by Mimnermus is worth more than the whole of Homer" (1.9 *plus in amore ualet Mimnermi uersus Homero*). Again, Homer appears as Ponticus' primary model for his *Thebaid*, and no mention is made of Antimachus. Accordingly, Stattius' decision to write a *Thebaid* may not simply amount to settling for second best. In fact, in his capacity precisely as a Roman Antimachus, a Roman vice-Homer, Stattius is ultimately testing himself in a contest against Homer. Like Ponticus before him, he is challenging Homer for primacy (cf. 1.7.3 *primo contendis Homero*). After all,

<sup>32</sup> Davies (1989) 23–29; Torres-Guerra (2015).

<sup>33</sup> Vessey (1970) 118n1.

<sup>34</sup> *Inst.* 10.1.52 *sed quamuis ei secundas fere grammaticorum consensus deferat, et adfectibus et iucunditate et dispositione et omnino arte deficitur, ut plane manifesto appareat quanto sit aliud proximum esse, aliud secundum* ("However, although nearly all grammarians give him second place, he is weak in passions, charm of style, arrangement of arguments and technique in general, so that it becomes largely manifest how much coming next is another thing than coming second").

<sup>35</sup> Barchiesi (1996) 50; cf. Heslin (2005) 81, 102. *Secundus* is an old gerundive of *sequor*: *OLD* s.v.

<sup>36</sup> Torres-Guerra (1998).

<sup>37</sup> Also, Prop. 1.7.17 *longe castra tibi, longe miser agmina septem* ~ Stat. *Theb.* 5.43 *immo age, dum primi longe damus agmina uulgi*.

<sup>38</sup> Davies (1989) 23; Torres-Guerra (1998) 134–35. Propertius' testimony: Torres-Guerra (1998) 139.

Antimachus' very name (from ἀντίμαχος, “capable of meeting in battle”) evoked the notion of standing up to one's opponent and may have played a role in Propertius' depiction of a literary fight between Ponticus (the new “Challenger”) and Homer.<sup>39</sup>

The Homeric tone of the Cyclic *Thebaid* and, more specifically, its affinity with Homer's *Iliad* were apparent from the very beginning of the *Thebaid*: Ἄργος ἄειδε, θεά, πολυδίψιον, ἔνθεν ἄνακτες (“Sing, goddess, of much-parched Argos, from where the lords”).<sup>40</sup> By presenting the same injunction to a goddess in the same position within the first hexameter (cf. *Il.* 1.1 Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά), the two poems formed a diptych, suggesting that Homer first wrote a *Thebaid*, a poem about Thebes (and Argos), then an *Iliad*, a poem about Ilion (Troy).

Stattius seems to echo the beginning of the Cyclic *Thebaid* at the beginning of his own *Thebaid*. In the opening line of the Greek poem, the poet's injunction to the “goddess” (θεά) comes right before a strong caesura and is followed by a bucolic diaeresis separating the main clause, which encapsulates the central theme of the epic, from the final relative clause “from where the lords” (ἐνθεν ἄνακτες). Stattius seems to have this structure in mind when, after setting out the subject of his poem in the first two and a half lines, he splits the third line with a bucolic diaeresis to introduce a question: “From where do you enjoin me to begin, goddesses?” (*Theb.* 1.3–4 *unde iubetis / ire, deae?*), with “goddesses” right before a strong caesura.<sup>41</sup> The poet of the Cyclic *Thebaid* knew precisely where to start: his lords waged war from Argos, so he commanded his goddess to start from there. In Stattius' *Thebaid*, it is the goddesses who lord it over the poet and give him his heroes (cf. 41 *quem prius heroum, Clio, dabis?*), so they get to decide where to start.

If there is indeed a dialogue between the two openings, this would provide a perfect counterpart to the aural and rhythmic similarity between the beginning of Stattius' second poem, the *Achilleid* (1.1 *Magnanimus Aeaciden*), and the beginning of the *Iliad* (1.1 Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά). If one attributed the Cyclic *Thebaid* to Homer, it was natural to assume that Homer's goddess sang first of Argos (and Thebes), then of Achilles' wrath. From that perspective, planning an *Achilleid* right after a *Thebaid* amounted to re-singing Homer's *Iliad* right after his *Thebaid*. Once completed, such an epic oeuvre would have covered the entire Greek Epic Cycle, both in its first part, the Theban saga, and in its second part, the Trojan saga. Stattius would have been the Roman Homer, logically preceding not only Virgil, who recounted post-Homeric events, but Livius Andronicus' *Odisia*—that is, the entirety of Latin literature, much as the Greek Epic Cycle was considered as giving rise to the entirety of Greek literature.

#### 4. The association of the Theban and Trojan sagas

The association of the Theban and Trojan sagas, usually in this order, was very common. More specifically, these two subjects (occasionally just a pair in a list of more items) were sometimes mentioned only to be discarded right after in favour of other, more suitable subjects.<sup>42</sup>

The occurrence of this motif in Prop. 2.1 has been compared with both the beginning of the *Thebaid* and that of the *Achilleid* for different reasons.<sup>43</sup> To those who ask him how it is that he composes love poems (1 *amores*) so often, Propertius answers that his girl herself creates his literary talent (4 *ingenium nobis ipsa puella facit*): if she struggles naked with him, then he

<sup>39</sup> For a potential pun on Antimachus' name, see Cass. Dio 69.4.6 τὸν γοῦν Ὅμηρον καταλύων Ἀντίμαχον ἀντ' αὐτοῦ ἐσηῆγεν (“at any rate, he [Hadrian] abolished Homer and introduced Antimachus in his stead”).

<sup>40</sup> Bernabé, *PEG* fr. 1 = West (2003) fr. 1; cf. Davies (1989) 24; Torres-Guerra (2015) 229.

<sup>41</sup> Also, πολυδίψιον ~ *Theb.* 1.3 *calor incidit*, extraordinary heat being the focal point of both images.

<sup>42</sup> Anacreont. 23.1–4; 26.1–3; Mart. 14.1.11; cf. Lucr. 5.326; Prop. 2.8.10; 2.28.54.

<sup>43</sup> Heslin (2005) 75; Briguglio (2017) 124.

composes long *Iliads* (14 *tum uero longas condimus Iliadas*). But if fate had given him the talent to lead the hands of a hero to arms, or rather bands of heroes into battle (18 *heroas ducere in arma manus*)—that is, if he could compose real *Iliads*, not just love poems of Iliadic size—he would not sing of Titans or Giants (19–20), “nor of ancient Thebes or Pergamum (Troy), Homer’s glory” (21 *nec ueteres Thebas nec Pergama, nomen Homeri*), nor of any other ancient historical facts (22–24): he would sing of “Caesar’s (= Augustus’) wars and policies” (25 *bellaque resque ... Caesaris*) and of Maecenas (25–26). The list of discarded mythical subjects (19–21) seems to reproduce the entire Greek Epic Cycle, including its initial pre-heroic part: Titanomachy/Gigantomachy, Theban saga and Trojan saga.<sup>44</sup> If so, *nomen Homeri* (21) could be in apposition not just with *Pergama* (the usual interpretation) but also with *ueteres Thebas*, an interpretation fitting well with Propertius’ designation of Homer as Ponticus’ primary rival. In other words, Propertius could never write an epic poem, but if he could, he would never sing of anything from the Greek Epic Cycle or of any past event: he would sing of Caesar.

Ovid’s reworking of Propertius’ passage (*Am.* 3.12) is worth exploring. Ovid blames his own verses for gathering suitors to his girl’s door and admits that he should have sung of something else. Unfortunately, though there was Thebes, Troy and Caesar’s deeds to sing of, only Corinna stirred his inspiration (15–16 *cum Thebae, cum Troia foret, cum Caesaris acta, / ingenium mouit sola Corinna meum*). Propertius’ multiple-item list has shrunk to three options: the Theban saga, the Trojan saga—that is, the two subjects of the heroic Greek Epic Cycle—and Caesar. In a second reworking of Propertius’ passage (*Tr.* 2), Ovid’s regret takes on a more serious tone because his erotic inspiration has turned out to be a lack of judgement (316 *paenitet ingenii iudicique mei*). He really should have sung of Troy (317–18), Thebes (319–20; here, the two cities appear in this alternative order), patriotic martial history (321–22) or, better still, Caesar’s meritorious actions (323–24; cf. 335 *Caesaris acta*).<sup>45</sup>

Stattius learned Ovid’s lesson: singing of Thebes, Troy, and Caesar’s deeds is better than composing love poetry. His programme as an epic poet reproduces, in exactly the same order, exactly the three options over which the young Ovid favoured the elegies of his *Amores*: Thebes (= the *Thebaid*), Troy (= the *Achilleid*) and Caesar’s deeds (= the always-promised, but never-produced poem about Domitian). Accordingly, Stattius’ epic oeuvre is the opposite of Propertius’ programme as an aspiring epic poet. If Propertius could “lead bands of heroes into battle” (2.1.18 *heroas ducere in arma manus*) instead of writing his “love poems” (2.1.1 *amores*), he would never sing, among other things, of Thebes or Troy: he would sing of Caesar. On the contrary, Stattius can indeed “lead bands of heroes into battle”, as he does in the *Thebaid*.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, he does not markedly contrast love and epic and declares that it was “love” (*Achil.* 1.5 *amor*) that inspired him to “lead the young man down through the whole extent of Troy” (1.7 *tota iuuenem deducere Troia*). Ultimately, he kept postponing that poem on Caesar that would have been Propertius’ primary aim as an epic poet and settled for Propertius’ main bugbear, an epic cycle on Thebes and Troy. In other words, the Greek Epic Cycle was at the top of Stattius’ wish list.

## 5. The race of heroes

<sup>44</sup> Cyclic *Titanomachy*/*Gigantomachy*: Davies (1989) 13–18; D’Alessio (2015). Propertius does not explicitly mention Giants but “Ossa piled on Olympus so that Pelion might be a path to heaven” (19–20 *Ossan Olympo / impositam, ut caeli Pelion esset iter*; on 17–26, see Fedeli (2005) 57–65). Strictly speaking, Aloeus’ sons, Otus and Ephialtes, did that (cf. Hom. *Od.* 11.305–20), but their coalescence with the Giants is endemic in Roman writers (cf. Ov. *Met.* 1.151–55).

<sup>45</sup> On 317–26, see Ingleheart (2010) 267–73.

<sup>46</sup> Juxtapositions of *arma* and *manus* (in this order) in the *Thebaid*: 2.566, 3.643, 7.819, 9.183, 11.406, 12.618.

At quite an early stage in Greek literature, the association of the Theban and Trojan sagas, or rather of the Theban and Trojan Wars, which was at the basis of the Epic Cycle, was explained on account of their joint role in exterminating the race of heroes. This notion emerged as early as Hes. *Op.* 162–65, where the heroes are said to have been destroyed by evil war and dread battle, “some under seven-gated Thebes in the land of Cadmus while they fought for the sake of Oedipus’ sheep, others brought in boats over the great gulf of the sea to Troy for the sake of fair-haired Helen”.<sup>47</sup> This idea was soon coupled with the notion found in fr. 1 of the *Cypria*, according to which Zeus resolved to relieve the earth of humankind’s weight by initiating the Trojan War, and “the *heroes* at Troy kept being killed” (6–7 οἱ δ’ ἐνὶ Τροίῃ / ἦρωες κτείνοντο) as a result of Zeus’ plan. Consequently, a more comprehensive narrative framework developed, within which Zeus explicitly devised both the Theban War and the Trojan War to eliminate the race of heroes.

Although probably foreign to the Greek Epic Cycle, this broader framework prompted a thorough reconsideration of the entire Cycle itself. An emblematic result of this retrospective is the contradictory content of schol. Hom. *Il.* 1.5. First, the scholiast gives an elaborate account of both the Theban War and the Trojan War as originating from Zeus’ plan to relieve the earth of a superabundance of impious humankind; then, as proof of this account, the scholiast quotes fr. 1 of the *Cypria*, which, however, as shown above, makes no mention of the Theban War nor of humankind’s impiety.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, a second-century CE papyrus account of pre-Iliadic events possibly going back to a summary of the *Cypria* affirms that Zeus’ deliberation on the Trojan War aimed to a complete destruction of the race of heroes owing to its iniquity.<sup>49</sup> The two accounts only partially overlap: the scholiast does not explicitly refer to humankind as the race of heroes, whereas the papyrus does not mention the Theban War. However, they easily dovetail and suggest that connecting the *Cypria* to the Theban saga within the Greek Epic Cycle and subsuming both the Theban War and the Trojan War under an overarching scheme must have been relatively straightforward. In a later, more extensive and probably less accurate perspective on the Greek Epic Cycle, the Theban and Trojan Wars were two chapters of the same divine plan to annihilate the race of heroes.

This comprehensive interpretation of the Greek Epic Cycle might have influenced Statius’ choice of composing a *Thebaid* and an *Achilleid* in this order. On the one hand, Statius ends the proem of the *Thebaid* by asking Clio whom he should sing “first among the heroes” who went to Thebes (1.41 *quem prius heroum, Clio, dabis?*). On the other hand, the *Achilleid* is meant to go “through an entire hero” (1.4–5 *ire per omnem / ... heroa*) until the end of Troy (7 *tota ... Troia*). Statius’ two epic poems seem precisely to match the two heroic sagas of the Greek Epic Cycle in their account of how the race of heroes was destroyed. The *Thebaid* recounts the first chapter of this extermination (cf. *prius heroum*), while the *Achilleid* finishes the story with its aim for completeness (cf. *tota*). The two epic poems realize Propertius’ pretended aspiration to “lead bands of heroes into battle” (2.1.18 *heroas ducere in arma manus*), except that Statius’ heroes are no generic heroes but the eponyms of their race. In retrospect, Statius appears to traverse not just one entire hero but the entire race of heroes.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Trans. by Most (2006). Some heroes were separated off to dwell apart: Hes. *Op.* 166–73; fr. 204.102–3 M–W = Most (2018) fr. 155.102–3.

<sup>48</sup> Schol. Hom. *Il.* 1.5 van Thiel (Bernabé, *PEG* fr. 1 = West (2003) fr. 1); cf. Bernabé, *PEG* fr. 1 app. crit. According to Apergis (2018), the impiety of the race of heroes was indeed a motif from the *Cypria*.

<sup>49</sup> *POxy.* 3829 ii.9–12 (West (2003) arg. 1); cf. Hes. fr. 204.95–101 M–W = Most (2018) fr. 155.95–101; Apollod. *Epit.* 3.1, where ἀρθῆ probably does not mean “might be exalted” but “might be put an end to” (*LSJ* s.v. ἀείρω III).

<sup>50</sup> Is *omnem ... heroa* cryptically pointing at “every single hero” as Statius’ real target? Statius’ usage of *omnis* here may have sounded exceptional: cf. August. *Loc. Hept.* 4.70 ‘*omnis homo*’, *quod de omnibus dicitur, longe utique aliud quam ‘totus homo’, quod de uno dicitur.*



(4.4.94; “I am attempting Troy and great Achilles”). In Statius’ line, the two extremities of Virgil’s account of a new heroic age, Peleus’ sexual assault on Thetis (cf. Verg. *Ecl.* 4.32 *temptare*) and Achilles’ dispatch to Troy (cf. 36 *ad Troiam magnus mittetur Achilles*), collapse into one. Statius portrays himself in the act of assaulting Troy, and the sexual undertones of his attack on the city infuse the following reference to “great Achilles” as a subject Statius is trying to master.<sup>54</sup> It is no coincidence that the *Achilleid* opens with Paris’ ship sailing across the Hellespont, a sea journey which will be ultimately fatal to Troy but which Thetis perceives primarily as an assault on herself and her son (1.31–51).

By linking the *Achilleid* to Virgil’s account of a new heroic age, Statius presents his poem as fulfilling Virgil’s prophecy about Achilles being sent to Troy again. In so doing, the poem implicitly subscribes to Virgil’s notion of a new cycle around the deeds of a new race of heroes, from a second expedition of the Argonauts to a second series of wars involving (probably) a second Theban War and (certainly) a second Trojan War. The *Thebaid* is easily included alongside the *Achilleid* in this cycle insofar as the two epic poems re-enacted the two martial events which destroyed the race of heroes, the Theban and the Trojan Wars.

And what about the second expedition of the Argonauts? From Statius’ perspective, this was undoubtedly represented by Valerius Flaccus’ poem. His *Argonautica* functions as a prequel to the *Achilleid*, as signalled at the very beginning of Statius’ poem.<sup>55</sup> By riveting his *Achilleid* and Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica* together, Statius creates a continuity between the two poems, which mirrors Virgil’s merging of the Argonauts’ saga with the Trojan saga. The *Thebaid* wedges itself right in the middle by both flashing back at length to the Argonauts’ saga in Hypsipyle’s account of her life on Lemnos (*Theb.* 5) and flashing forward to the Trojan saga (cf. e.g. 4.126–27). In Statius’ retrospective look at his epic oeuvre, his decision to write an *Achilleid* amounted to fulfilling Virgil’s prophecy in its entirety insofar as a second expedition of the Argonauts narrated by Valerius Flaccus had segued into a second series of wars narrated by himself.

Within this retrospectively teleological framework, the fulfilment of Virgil’s prophecy meant that a heavenly boy was growing into a man and would soon cause a golden race to spring up throughout the world. Who was the boy who brought about this new era in humankind’s history? Statius presents his “great Achilles” as a prelude to Domitian in the last line of the *Achilleid*’s proem: *magnusque tibi praeludit Achilles* (1.19). This wording is linked to Statius’ announcement of the *Achilleid* in the *Siluae* (4.4.94 *Troia quidem magnusque mihi temptatur Achilles*), a passage contrasting the newly begun poem about “great Achilles” with a future, much more difficult poem on Domitian’s “greater arms” (95–96 *arma ... / ... maiora*). As shown above, this passage engages in close dialogue with Virgil’s description of the new race of heroes in *Eclogue* 4.<sup>56</sup> In its focus on Statius’ shift from a “great” to an even “greater” topic, the *Siluae* passage seems precisely to reproduce Virgil’s account of a second heroic age with sea expeditions and world wars (31–36) segueing into a second golden age of spontaneous prosperity (38–45) through a gradual shift marked by the boy’s growth into a man (37). Also, Statius’ long and not yet confident preparation for a poem on Domitian (*Achil.* 1.18–19, esp. *longo ... paratu*) corresponds to Virgil’s prayer that he may have the last part of a long life and enough breath at his disposal to sing of the boy’s deeds (*Ecl.* 4.53–54, esp. *longae ... uitae*). Through these parallels, Statius points at Domitian as the boy who caused a new golden age to start and at himself as the poet who might celebrate the new era.

To recapitulate, Statius seems to subsume his epic production as well as previous Flavian epic, most notably Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica*, under a more comprehensive framework centring around the heroic age as its primary subject. Within this conceptual framework, Statius’ epic oeuvre

<sup>54</sup> For *tempto* = “to make an attempt on (by military force), try to get possession or mastery of”, see *OLD* s.v. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Parkes (2009). *Stat. Achil.* 1.2–3 *patrio ... caelo, / diua, refer* ~ Val. Fl. 4.335–36 *patriis ... oris, / diua, refer* (cf. Nuzzo (2012) 39).

<sup>56</sup> Feeney (2004) 86; Nuzzo (2012) 42; Uccellini (2012) 52.

appears as a new, completely Latin Epic Cycle replacing the old Greek one. Ultimately rooted in Virgil's call for universal rebirth in *Eclogue 4*, this attempt at appropriating the foundations of Greek literature is supposed to herald the birth of a new race of heroes and thus prelude to a grander final extolling Domitian as the initiator of a new golden age.

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