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## Review of Statius, *Thebaid IX*

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Edited with an English translation and commentary by Michael Dewar.

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## Review of Statius, *Thebaid IX*

### Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Classics

### Comments

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**Statius, *Thebaid* IX. Edited with an English Translation and Commentary by Michael Dewar. Oxford Classical Monographs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. Pp. xlvi + 232. ISBN 0-19-814480-6. \$69.00.**

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**Reviewed by Joseph Farrell, University of Pennsylvania.**

This book, a revised doctoral dissertation, is the most ambitious commentary on any part of the *Thebaid* to appear in almost ten years, and in its scope and learning bears comparison with the works of Mulder (book 2), Snijder (3), Fortgens (4.1-295), Smolenaars (7.1-451), Williams (10), and Venini (11). It contains a general introduction to Statius' life and work, to the *Thebaid* as a whole, and to book 9 in particular, with brief discussions of 'themes and characters,' 'the text,' 'sources,' 'language, style, and metre,' 'the Parthenopaeus episode: success and contemporary taste,' and 'Statius and later European literature.' Text and apparatus (both based on those of previous editions, preeminently Hill's, from which Dewar departs in some 21 places: see p. xxviii) faced by a clear, workmanlike translation share pp. 1-55 and are followed by a commentary that reaches p. 222. Indices *verborum* and *rerum et nominum* complete the volume.

As a guide to Statius' language and manner of expression, his engagement with the previous literary tradition, and other such matters, this commentary seems to me excellent. The author is interested above all in explicating a rather challenging text, not (for the most part) in grinding axes. Passages where the text is difficult to establish or to construe are discussed straightforwardly and sensibly (e.g. 123, 254f.). Notes on Statius and the *Dichtersprache* are common; many of them simply state the frequency with which certain words and word types occur in prose and poetry (e.g. the notes on *quippe* 210, *amne* 254, *conamine* 268, *defluus* 325, *nec* 329, *salo* 463), and not all of these seem strictly necessary (e.g. *signa dedit* 447, *putres* 467, *sator ... divum* 511f.), but others show a fine sensitivity to stylistic register (e.g. *tremibunda abies* 552, *Tegeatis ephebi* 571). Stylistic notes rightly emphasize that many of the features that used to be ascribed routinely to Silver Age lapses in taste actually are not uncommon even in "the best" poetry and derive quite directly from Alexandrian models (e.g. n. 135f.). Discussions of Statian *imitatio* / *aemulatio* show a close attention to significant detail and help to illuminate what we may imagine were Statius' working methods even if the conceptual apparatus imagined to form the basis of such allusions remains rather pedestrian (as in the note on 225-569, where a good discussion of formal relationships among Homer, Statius, and Silius is accompanied by comparatively banal conjecture about the motives that lie behind the decisions of both Latin poets to base scenes on Homer, and by an unnecessary verdict announcing Statius' superiority to Silius).

As for literary interpretation on a larger scale, Dewar's Statius is, for better or worse, the Statius that all classicists know and love, or, more accurately, the one that too many Latinists all but ignore. Dewar, like most who have put some effort into studying Statius, does not really disagree with the standard handbook assessment of his author (pictorial imagination, mannerism, etc.) but, again like most other Statians, differs from the *communis opinio* only in putting the best possible spin on it. Thus Statius' faults aren't really faults, or at least not all of them are, and some are actually strengths if we read them properly. He rehearses the evidence for Statius' popularity in later antiquity

and in the Middle Ages, blaming the Enlightenment for introducing a horizon of aesthetic expectations that put the poet at a considerable disadvantage, and notes that these expectations still obtain today. He closes his survey with the optimistic thought that the final chapter in the history of Statius' influence on European literature is still to be written.

The argument that Statius, whatever we may think of him ourselves, was for a very long time influential on other poets whom we still revere, and so perhaps we had better revise our opinion of him, is a familiar one. It has never really carried conviction. It is clear enough what poets like Dante and Chaucer saw in Statius (inspiringly far-fetched rhetoric, the possibility of Christian allegoresis, and so forth), and it is equally clear that these aspects are not likely to speak with great urgency to creatures of the late 20th century. But does the standard account do justice to Statius? Is that really all he is? I doubt it. I certainly would not claim to know Statius as well as Dewar; but in my own encounters with the poet, I continue to find a *nescio quid* that I have not encountered in the secondary literature. Admittedly, students of the *Thebaid* lack some of the basic analytical tools that those who till other fields -- Augustan poetry, Greek tragedy, Homer -- take for granted. It would be unfair to expect Vessey (*Statius and the Thebaid*, 1973), working without such tools, to produce the kind of analysis that was possible for Heinze, Pöschl, Otis, and others in Vergilian studies. Nor is this what Dewar set out to do. My point is that, admirable as this commentary is, I hope we will not have to wait until the entire *Thebaid* has been covered in this and similar works before someone with the necessary energy, enthusiasm, and seasoning tackles the job of presenting Statius' distinctive qualities in an equally distinctive and sympathetic way. A complete commentary on the poem might be the format in which to do so, and it would certainly be a gift to posterity. The person who takes on this challenge will enjoy the advantage, which Dewar unfortunately did not have, of building upon such work as Denis Feeney's *The Gods in Epic* and Philip Hardie's new study of post-Vergilian epic (the latter reviewed elsewhere in this issue).

The strength of this volume, then, is not its ability to make us see Statius anew or to appreciate more fully a poem that has tended to languish on the margins of most classicist's attention. It will, however, be of great interest to Latinists who take a serious interest in matters such as epic diction and style, imitative technique, and the light that such considerations shed upon literary history.

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