
In a review in this journal (Prudentia 27.1 [1995], 71-73) of D’s earlier work on Statius’ Thebaid (Speech and Rhetoric), the hope was expressed that the publication of the present book would display his profound knowledge of the epic to greater advantage. To an extent that hope has now been realised.

The book is divided into four main sections, of which the first three deal primarily with the topic of the misuse of power, underlined by the use of ‘abuse’ in the chapter headings (‘Use and abuse of supernatural power’, ‘Pursuit and abuse of monarchical power’, ‘Consequences of the abuse of power’). These headings cover the progression of misuse downwards from the gods through rulers and leaders to the people who inhabit the epic and thus suffer the consequences of power misuse. The fourth section deals with ‘The political relevance to contemporary Rome’, and this aspect will be addressed separately.

On one level at least, D is probably successful in proving that the whole poem is a powerful condemnation of divine and human abuse of power. His grim view is relentlessly pursued through the first three parts, and the reader is left in no doubt that the epic is firmly centred on abusive, heartless, self-interested and often mindless cruelty on the part of those possessing power, inflicted without conscience on those without it. The gods are actively malevolent and are directly involved in pushing along the self-destructive instincts of mankind. The kings and leaders fit the same pattern, though D nuances his view of this group by his recognition that Statius’ treatment of Adrastus at least is generally favourable: this in particular needs a much more substantial discussion than it gets. The people who make up the mass of the civilian population of Thebes and Argos or the contending armies are the sufferers, and D is certainly right in showing the pointlessness of their suffering and the futility of opposition.
D’s view would be entirely acceptable if the epic with the features he analyses were the only piece of Silver Age imaginative literature to survive; but in choosing not to situate Statius in and as a part of his milieu, he does not address the larger questions of the apparent taste of the age for luridness, gore, sensationalism, and spectacle (features that can be described as ‘post-Vergilian technicolor’!), even though Statius’ near-contemporaries Seneca, Silius Italicus and Lucan all demonstrate many such characteristics in common with him. It is perhaps legitimate to ask if the age was in fact so pessimistic and despairing.

In Chapter Four, D claims that the *Thebaid* is a coded attack on the abuses of power of the Flavian period (in particular of Domitian’s reign), and goes to considerable lengths to prove it. It may well be true; as D says, the sophistication of the Roman literary elite allowed such subtle allusive mechanisms to be successfully incorporated. But the prime objection to his view is that Domitian was by no means different from the Roman literary elite -- he was a great and generous patron of the arts, and of poetry in particular; and there is no reason to suspect that his intelligence and powers of literary observation were diluted by his being the emperor: he would most certainly have been alert to the presence of such coding if it were in fact present. Would Statius have put himself into a dangerous position by criticising persistently the institutional apparatus of a man whose suspicion was well-known? whose all-pervasive power was everywhere apparent? D bases much of his supporting argument on a wholesale use of Suetonius’ *Domitian*. This procedure is seriously flawed: there are so many oversimplifications of the historical record and of the historiography that it cannot be taken seriously. A convenient example is this: D says (167) that ‘the malicious and unwarranted acts of cruelty instigated by Jupiter correspond to the wanton acts of violence and bloodshed perpetrated by the Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties that feature so prominently among the pages of the ancient historians and biographers’. So many questions are begged by this sort of approach that the mind boggles: at the most basic level the issue of Tacitus’, Pliny’s and Suetonius’ aims and viewpoints must receive at least token acknowledgment before the
sweeping generalisation is indulged. Further examples abound in this chapter.

D’s neo-latinate style in this volume is less controversial than in the previous one (there is nothing to match that one’s ‘ocular effusion’!), but occasional bizarreries and linguistic puzzles persist: ‘Specifically the efformative relationship between Polynices and Tydeus exemplifies the lust for monarchal power’ (81); ‘the innocent’ paralleled with ‘the flagitious’ as victims of supernatural vindictiveness (75); ‘Tyranny is emblematized in wicked liegemen’ (85); ‘Polynices is jaundiced when he spots Eteocles’ accoutrements’ (87); ‘The duel also serves as index of war’s lack of finality’ (109); ‘Even the god-like heroes experience that they are human in regard to their mortality and the limited power of their knowledge’ (111). And so on.

The standard of proofreading is excellent, with very few mistakes, and D’s translations of his quoted passages are exact (I still wonder about ‘falso... velo’ [12.626, 94] as ‘lying canvas’; could it not be ‘mistaken canvas’?).

In summing up, one reaches a mixed conclusion: there is no possible question of the soundness of D’s knowledge of Statius and the Thebaid, but over its deployment unease supervenes.

Norman Austin
Massey University

- o -


BCP continue to reprint the classics. This reprint represents the state of the Spartan debate in 1968, with some additional