Introduction

Statius’ *Thebaid* is a poem about identity. It is a work obsessed with its own identity, status and belated place within the literary canon. The opening words *fraternal nas acies alternaque regna* (1.1) are not only a summary of the poem’s contents, but also a violent challenge to the poet’s predecessors; his brothers in literature will be fought against and new poetic kingdoms will be established only to crumble; the lines of battle that the poet draws up also act as intertextual sight-lines down which we can see Statius’ omnipresent scholarly back-stories.

Statius’ first authorial intervention, *unde iubetis / ire, deae?* (1.3–4), is a cry for help, as much ‘where is there left for me to go?’ as it is ‘where do you want me to go?’. It is also an acknowledgment of his own lack of ability to carve out a space for himself and an astonishing relinquishing of his own autonomy so early in the poem.1 The poem drips with instances of characters going where they have gone so many times before and who are horribly self-conscious of their repetitions.2

It is also a poem that examines the heart of characterization in Roman epic. At one level, it pits the exemplary world against the identity of the individual.3 It

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1 The opening invocations of Muses in classical epic poetry generally allow the poet to assume a commanding position in relation to the inspiring deity: both Homer *Il.* 1.1 and *Od.* 1.1 begin with imperatives instructing the Muse to ‘sing’ or ‘tell’ his narrative; Apollonius *Argo.* 1.1–2 is, if anything, more authoritative, starting with a participle (ἀρχόμενος, 1.1) and then shifting to a first person verb (μνήσομαι, ‘I shall recall’, 1.2); Catullus 64 is reluctant to provide an authoritative narratorial voice, *DRN* 1.24; Lucretius is similarly self-effacing, labelling Venus a *sociam ... scribendis uersibus,* *DRN* 1.24, before commanding her to banish martial poetry, *effice,* *DRN* 1.29; Virgil makes himself the primary mover of his epic narrative (*Aen.* 1.1, *arma uirumque cano,* before engaging his Muse at 1.8 (*Musa, mihi causas memora*). Lucan (*BC* 1.2 *canimus*) and Valerius Flaccus (*Argo.* 1.1 *canimus*) do much the same. Ovid’s *animus* is the driving force of the *Metamorphoses* (1.1) and he commands the gods to breathe on his enterprise (*di, coeptis ... aspirate meis*, 1.2–3). Silius Italicus, if anything, ups the ante by asserting control not only of his Muse (*Pun.* 1.3, *da, Musa*), but also of his Virgilian intertext (*Pun.* 1.1, *ordior arma*). Statius’ deferential position gives the poem a much more lyric feel, like that of Horace *Odes* 1.12 (1–3, *quem uirum aut heroa lyra uel acri / tibia sumes celebrare, Clio, / quem deum?*), itself an imitation of Pindar *Ol.* 2 (1–2, ἀναξιφόρμιγγες ὕμνοι, / τίνα θεόν, τίν’ ἥρωα, τίνα δ’ ἄνδρα κελαδήσομεν;). See Clay 2011, 339 for the programmatic importance of these lines. For an exploration of Statius’ aesthetic autonomy in the *Silvae*, see Roman 2014, 270–300. On Statius’ Jupiter’s failed imitation of the Virgilian and Lucanian openings, see below, ch. 2.3.


3 For intertextuality shaping character, see Seo 2013; for a sociological study of Roman historical *exempla*, see Roller 2018.
asks the question: should the author build a character from the dozens or even hundreds of previous and parallel examples to create a self that is momentary and contingent, flat because it is only good for this one moment in the text and inconsistent with the exemplarity adduced in other places in the text? Is the epic subject nothing more than a name therefore? Or can subjects construct their own identities and build something not simply determined by literary-historical convenience?

This leads the poet to the individual’s place within a social and cultural world. The ancient world is not, as we shall see shortly, a place which is comfortable or even capable of internalizing thoughts of selfhood. The self is performed externally and when a poet like Statius wishes to explore constructions of selfhood he can only engage through external media. The identity of the ancient subject is thus performed through the mechanisms of the social and cultural world, but it is also only to be explored and identified through those same mechanisms: ‘the Subject is always already related to some heterogeneous substantial context, it always comes second.’ Thus the poem explores the way in which its characters exist within their socio-cultural environments, either embracing or rejecting the opportunities, those possible selves, which the world around them offers.

This externalized engagement is part and parcel of our understanding of the identity of the poet as it is of his poem and its characters. Statius is, in my view, as much a man for the 21st century as he was for the first. He comes after the ‘modernist’ golden age of Augustan Rome, where the rules of the game were established and after the racy, ‘post-modern’ fireworks of Ovid, Seneca and Lucan where all those rules were laughed at and re-written. The son of a grammaticus born in the Greek colony of Naples, yet trying to make his way in Rome as a Latin poet, Statius is the classic ‘outsider’; his lowly status, need for patronage, and his ethnic identity, which was neither one nor the other, mark him out as Other. An extended reflection on identity and selfhood is as relevant to the historical Statius as it is to the poet of the Thebaid. The poem begins by staging its engagement in, yet simultaneously shying away from, Domitianic Rome in an elaborate recusatio

4 Gill 1996; and 2006.
5 Žižek 2012, 379.
6 For a general overview of Statius and his geographical otherness, see Newlands 2012. Naturally, he shares status issues with some of the big names of Augustan poetry. Virgil’s Mantua had only recently been granted citizenship when Virgil was born in 70 BC and he, unable to cope with the pressures of a career in Rome, moved to Naples (Geo. 4.563–6). Horace constantly vaunts his status as the son of a freedman and regularly proclaims his gratitude to Maecenas and Augustus for the financial patronage.
(1.17–33) which lists Domitian’s victories in Germany and Dacia and the emperor’s emerging sense of divinity whilst rejecting the opportunity to engage fully with such topics, citing weakness and a lack of daring (nondum ... ausim, 1.17–18; cum ... fortior, 1.32). The complex relationship with ‘Rome’ as a literary-historical environment is adumbrated in the poem’s final lines (12.810–19) where the poet famously warns his poem not to get too close to the *Aeneid*.

The complexities of identity in the *Thebaid* are best introduced in a scene which has burned itself into the minds of many of its readers. At the end of the eighth book, the dying hero Tydeus loses the chance of immortality when his patron goddess Athene finds him eating the head of Melanippus, the man who dealt him a fatal wound:7

> erigitur Tydeus uultuque occurrit et amens
> laetitiaque iaque, ut singultantia uidit
> ora trucesque oculos sesesque agnouit in illo,
> imperat abscisum porgi laeuaque receptum
> spectat atrox hostile caput gliscitque tepentis
> lumina torua uidens et adhuc dubitantia figi.
> infelix contentus erat: plus exigit ultrix
> Tisiphone. iamque inflexo Tritonia patre
> uenerat et misero decus inmortale ferebat.
> ecce illum effracti perfusum tabe cerebri
> aspicit et uiuo scelerantem sanguine fauces

_Theb. 8.751–61_

Tydeus raises himself and turns his face to meet him. He is wild with joy and anger as he sees the gasping visage, the fierce eyes, and recognizes himself in the other. He orders that his enemy’s head be cut off and brought to him. Holding it in his left hand, he glares at it savagely and swells as he sees it still warm and the eyes, grim and still uncertain grow fixed. The wretch was content, but avenging Tisiphone exacts more. And now Tritonia had come; she had swayed her father and was bearing immortal glory to the unhappy warrior. She looks at him, sees him wet with the issue of the broken brain and polluting his jaws with living blood [...][8]

For Tydeus at least, identity is cannibalism. The final moment of introspection, of self-examination, is externalized (*agnouit ... imperat ... spectat*). Tydeus looks at the dying face of the enemy who is his twin. He finds himself in otherness

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7 On this passage, see Augoustakis 2016, xxx–xlii and *ad loc*.
8 Text of the *Thebaid* and *Achilleid* is based on Hall *et al.* 2007, although I have added punctuation for direct speech for clarity. Occasionally I am more conservative in my readings of the text, but have included their emendations for comparison. Translations of Statius throughout are taken from Shackleton Bailey 2003, sometimes lightly and occasionally heavily adapted.
(seseque agnouit in illo, 8.753) and is content (contentus erat, 8.757). Yet that moment of identification, where Tydeus becomes the subject he was always meant to be, is also a moment of obscene violence. The search for the self in this poem is never a comfortable or a reassuring process.

Identity Crisis: Historiographic Interplay in the Argive Invasion

Before we plunge into the complexities of identity formation in the Thebaid, we need to clear some methodological ground by exploring two literary reasons why the self is so much at issue in this poem. In particular, we need to think about Statius' authorial persona and his intertextual method within the poem. The extent of Statius' intertextual reach can have disconcerting effects upon his narrative. As a test case, we can explore the ways in which Greek historiographical narratives suffuse the Thebaid and push our reading of individual and collective identities in surprising directions. An illustration of this is provided when the Argive and Theban armies are fighting in book 8. There, the quantities of arrows and other missiles fired are so dense that it shuts out the sun:

exclusere diem telis, stant ferrea caelo
nubila nec iaculis artatus sufficit aer.
hi pereunt missis illi redeuntibus hastis,
concurrunt per inane sudes et mutua perdunt
uulnera, concurrunt hastae, stridentia fundae
saxa pluunt, uolucres imitantur fulgura glandes
et formidandae non una morte sagittae.

Theb. 8.412–18

They shut out the day with missiles, iron clouds stand in the sky, the crowded air does not suffice for the darts. Some die by spears discharged, others by spears returning, stakes clash in the void, losing the wounds each carries, spears too, slings rain whistling stones, swift bullets and arrows threatening double death imitate lightning.

The image of the sun blocked out by the quantity of arrows is a very familiar one, taken from the build-up to the Thermopylae narrative in Herodotus' Histories:"

9 On the close interaction between historiography and poetry in imperial literature see Miller & Woodman 2010 passim, esp. their introduction, 1–7. For Statius and Greek literature in book 8, for example, see Augoustakis 2016 passim, esp. xxiv–xxvii, xxx–xxxiii.

10 On the passage, see Augoustakis 2016 ad loc. He suggests a further connection in the imagery to Pindar Isth. 5.50. Cf. also Enn. Ann. 266 Sk, hastati spargunt hastas, fit ferreus imber.
He [Dienekes] had learned from a Trachinian that there were so many of the barbarians that when they shot their missiles, the sun was hidden by the multitude of their arrows. He was not at all disturbed by this and made light of the multitude of the Medes, saying that their Trachinian foreigner brought them good news. If the Medes hid the sun, they could fight them in the shade instead of in the sun.

Although the central image is the same, the version in the *Thebaid* has been extensively developed according to the tastes of the time. Herodotus’ story of Dienekes is a joke and a light-hearted, hypothetical response to the Trachinian’s (apparently) exaggerated statement which is designed to provoke fear among the Spartans; if the Medes really do block out the sun, it will be easier for us to fight. Statius’ version makes a reality of the Trachinian’s story: missiles from both armies really do blot out the sun. However, Statius takes an image that is, at best, implicit in Herodotus, that of the storm. The arrows form iron clouds (*ferrea nubila*), stones rain down (*saxa pluunt*) and the weapons imitate lightning (*imitantur fulgura*). This process may be the result of Statius reading Herodotus through an intermediary text, that of Lycophron’s *Alexandria*. Statius certainly tells us that his father taught Lycophron’s poetry to him (*tu pandere doctus / ... latebrasque Lycophronis atri*, Silv. 5.3.156–7, ‘you were skilled to teach ... the hidden places of dark Lycophron’) and the *Alexandria*, which relates the cryptic, oracular speech of the prophetess Cassandra, includes a brief allusion to Xerxes’ invasion of Greece in 479–8 BC (*Alex.* 1412–34). Lycophron’s Cassandra consistently re-works Herodotus in her re-telling of that invasion:

κώφελλα δ’ ἰῶν τηλόθεν ῥοιζουμένων
ὑπὲρ κάρα στήσουσι, Κίμμερός θ’ ὅπως,
ακιά καλύψει πέρραν, ἀμβλύνων σέλας.

*Lyc. Alex.* 1426–8

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11 See Ash 2015, 217.
12 On this poem, see Hornblower 2015; and McNelis & Sens 2016.
13 On poetic instruction and the relationship with his father in *Silvae* 5.3, see Holford-Strevens 2000; McNelis 2002; and 2007, 22.
14 Text and translation are taken from Hornblower 2015.
They will raise clouds of whizzing arrows from afar over their heads; and like Kimmerian
gloom, the shadow will hide the sun, and dim its brightness

Lycophron’s more extended imagery of clouds, gloom and a darkened sun pro-
vides a neater link to the better-known story in Herodotus. Statius’ later allusion
to dark Lycophron’s hiding places may even conflate a very accurate description
of Cassandra’s magnificently obscure utterance with the more specific intertext-
tual connection to Persian arrows blotting out the sun. This would be an inter-
esting if perhaps obscure moment of intertextuality in the Thebaid were it not the
case that there are other occasions where the text is ‘Medized’. Already in book 8,
the new Argive seer Thiodamas is compared to a youthful Persian king in a simile
that seems surprisingly inappropriate for the context:

sicut Achaemenius solium gentesque paternas
except si forte puer, cui uiuere patrem
tutius, incerta formidine gaudia librat,
an fidi proceres, ne pugnet uulgus habenis,
cui latus Euphratae, cui Caspia limina mandet:
sumere tunc arcus ipsumque onerare ueretur
patris equum, uisusque sibi nec sceptra capaci
sustentare manu nec adhuc inplere tiaran.

_Theb. 8.286–93_

So if a boy of Achaemenes’ line, for whom it were safer had his father lived, happened to
take over the paternal throne and peoples, he balances joy with doubtful fear: are his nobles
loyal, will the people not fight the reins, to whom shall he entrust Euphrates’ bank or the
Caspian threshold? Then he fears to take the bow and mount his father’s own horse, thinks
his hand still too small to wield the sceptre and his head to fill the diadem.

The longest simile in the eighth book is initially arresting for its anachronism (the
Achaemenids must ‘come after’ the mythical invasion of Thebes). While the sim-
ile is too generic in content to point specifically to Xerxes any more than any other
Achaemenid king, it also seems quite wrong for Thiodamas’ situation, at once
making him seem childlike and also turning him from a Greek substitute prophet
into a barbarian monarch. The simile focalizes these problems from a Persian
point of view, making Thiodamas seem like an outsider to the Greek world. The

15 On the (un)reliability of Cassandra, see McNelis & Sens 2016, 7–8.
16 On Thiodamas, see Augoustakis 2016 _ad loc._; Rebeggiani 2018, 114–16; Hulls forthcoming b.
use of *excipio* for taking over from a predecessor may also suggest intertextual appropriation as well as political or religious succession.\(^{17}\)

However, the invocation of Persian models is not confined to book 8.\(^{18}\) When the Argive army is delayed in Nemea in book 4, it is because the god Bacchus persuades Nemea’s water nymphs to cause the rivers to run dry:

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\text{dixerat: ast illis tenuior percurrere uisus}
\]
\[
\text{ora situs uiridisque comis exaruit umor.}
\]
\[
\text{protinus Inachios haurit sitis ignea campos:}
\]
\[
\text{diffugere undae, squalent fontesque lacusque}
\]
\[
\text{et caua feruenti durescunt flumina limo.}
\]
\[
\text{aegra solo macies tenerisque in origine culmis}
\]
\[
\text{inclinata seges; deceptum margine ripae}
\]
\[
\text{stat pecus atque amnes quaerunt armenta natatos.}
\]

*Theb. 4.697–704*

[Bacchus] spoke. A thin mould seemed to spread over [the nymphs’] faces and the green moisture dried out from their hair. Straightaway fiery thirst drains the Inachian fields. The waters disperse, the springs and lakes are encrusted, the riverbeds harden with hot mud. The soil is sick with drought and the grain bends at the base of the tender stalk. The flock stands disappointed at the bank’s edge, the herds seek in vain for the rivers they once swam.

This is, of course, a passage replete with metaliterary implications,\(^{19}\) but for the reader looking back for Persian imagery, this passage also fits the equally famous image of Xerxes’ army being so big that it drank rivers dry (Hdt. 7.43, 58, 108; Xerxes’ baggage train alone drinks a lake dry near Pisytus, 7.109). The drying up of the rivers is explicitly articulated in terms of thirst (*sitis ignea*). Later on, when they discover the Langia with the help of Hypsipyle, the Argive army will charge into the river and drink its waters (*Theb. 4.804–30*).\(^{20}\) Having briefly turned this little stream into a muddy torrent, the Langia will be much reduced in size by the Argive troops (*pulsa sitis fluuiio, populataque gurgitis alueum / agmina linquebant ripas amnemque minorem, 5.1–2*, ‘thirst quenched by the river, the army was leaving its ravaged bed and banks – a smaller stream’). The colour change which Statius’ depicts as the river being muddied by men and horses may also evoke Lyco- 

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17 On this and on possible contemporary resonances for the simile, see Augoustakis 2016 *ad loc.* with OLD s.v. *excipio* 15.

18 For the intertextual range of book 4, see Micozzi 2007 *passim*, esp. 3–15; Parkes 2012 *passim*, esp. xxix–xxxiii.


20 On this passage, see below, ch. 4.2.
νασμὸς αὐανθήσεται, / χανδὸν κελαινὴν δίψαν αἰονωμένων, Alex. 1424–5, ‘The waters of every torrent will be dried up as the troops quench their black thirst with gaping mouths’). Similarly, the decision by Mars to send the personification 

Pauor into the Argive army in order to get them moving again after their sojourn in Nemea (7.108–44) may suggest the assistance of the god Pan at the battle of Marathon and the Panic he is able to create in the Persian ranks (Hdt. 6.105, 112).

These Persian images create problems for identities which might be comfortably established. The sun blotted out by arrows in Herodotus creates a clear order of ‘us and them’. Laconic wit shows Hellenic defiance in the face of the absurd multi-ethnic scale of Xerxes’ army. But in Statius’ Thebes, the blotting out of sun serves to erase any distinction between an Argive ‘us’ and Theban ‘them’ (or vice versa). The scene simply dissolves into a carefully ordered confusion where the poet neatly anonymizes both sides. It is difficult to know which army should play the Spartan role when both come from polities which Medized during Xerxes’ invasion. In a similar vein, it deeply complicates the depiction of this poem as one of fraternal and pseudo-civil conflict (fraternas acies, 1.1, suggests not only ‘brother against brother’ but also ‘Greek against Greek’) when the invading Argive force is made to seem so much like a barbarian, both by drinking rivers dry and by being the army that Panic acts against.21 The search for possible identifications is further confused when we consider that the Theban native Bacchus, who instigates drought in Nemea, is also potentially playing the part of a Xerxes. It is he, after all, who has descended on the Peloponnese from northern Thrace with an army (marcidus edomito bellum referebat ab Haemo / Liber, 4.652–3, ‘in exhaustion, Bacchus was bringing back his army from conquered Haemus’).

However, to complicate matters further, Statius’ narrative of the Argives finding the Langia also contains a second Persian narrative, that of Xenophon’s Anabasis. The Xenophontic comparison is much more overt. When the Argives find water they send up a repeated cry of joy (‘aquae!’ longusque uirum super ora cucurrit clamor, ‘aquae!’, 4.811–12, ‘water!’ and over the warriors’ mouths ran the long clamour, ‘water!’) which can only be in imitation of Xenophon’s most famous line (καὶ τάχα δὴ ἀκούουσι βοώντων τῶν στρατιωτῶν θάλαττα θάλαττα καὶ παρεγγυώντων, Xen. Anab. 4.7.24, ‘and in a moment they heard the soldiers shouting, ‘The Sea! The Sea!’ and passing the word along’) both in the repetition

21 The resemblance of the Argive army to that of Xerxes may also be found in the presence of the gigantic Hippomedon and Capaneus, who may ape Lycophron’s depiction of Xerxes as a giant: ἀλλ᾽ ἀντὶ πάντων Περσῶς ἕνα σπορᾶς / στελεῖ γίγαντα, Alex. 1413–14.
of aquae and in the way word is passed along the line (παρεγγυώντων). The total disorder with which the Argives enter the water (incubuere uadis passim discrimine nullo / turba simul primique, 4.816–17, ‘everywhere common soldiers and officers plunge indiscriminate into the stream’) mimics the way in which the 10000 lose all sense of hierarchy when they finally reach the Black Sea (ἐπεὶ δὲ ἀφίκοντο πάντες ἐπὶ τὸ ἄκρον, ἐνταῦθα δὴ περιέβαλλον ἀλλήλους καὶ στρατηγοὺς καὶ λοχαγοὺς δακρύοντες, Xen. Anab. 4.7.25, ‘and when all had reached the summit, then indeed they fell to embracing one another, and generals and captains as well, with tears in their eyes’). The passage in Xenophon is important as it recalls how he came to be in the army in the first place (Anab. 3.1.2–4) and that, following the betrayal and execution of Clearchus and their other original leaders by Tissaphernes, the Greeks have had to elect new leaders for their march to the coast. For the Argives, who have not had to endure anything like so arduous a march and whose leaders are all still living, the breakdown in hierarchy seems infinitely more worrying and anticipates their ignominious retreat from Thebes at the end of book 11 (nulli sua signa suusque /ductor, 11.758–9, ‘none have their own standard and their own leader’). A further Xenophontic moment may be visible towards the end of the chariot race in book 6. Polynices, hurled from his chariot, is narrowly missed by the other competitors in the race:

    at hunc praeter putri tellure iacentem
    Taenarii currus et Thessalus axis et heros
    Lemnius obliqua, quantum uitare dabatur,
    transabiere fuga. tandem caligine mersum
    erigit ad cursu comitum caput aegraque tollit
    membra solo, et socero redit haud speratus Adrasto.
    Theb. 6.507–12

As for him, as he lies on the sandy earth the Taenarian car and the wheels of Thessaly and the Lemnian hero fly past him, swerving to avoid him as best they could. At last his companions run up, he raises his head, sunk in darkness, and lifts his injured limbs from the ground, and returns unhoped-for to Adrastus his wife’s father.

Polynices as charioteer bears strong resemblances to Ovid’s Phaethon and, in being thrown by his horse after Apollo terrifies him with a monstrous vision (6.491–

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22 On the intertext, see Parkes 2012 ad loc. On the afterlife of this moment of the Anabasis, see Rood 2005.
23 On the Argives as unworthy of the comparison to the 10000, see Parkes 2012 ad 4.809–12.
As for the enemy’s chariots, some of them plunged through the lines of their own troops, others, however, through the Greek lines, but without charioteers. And whenever the Greeks saw them coming, they would open a gap for their passage; one fellow, to be sure, was caught, like a befuddled man on a race-course, yet it was said that even he was not hurt in the least, nor, for that matter, did any other single man among the Greeks get any hurt whatever in this battle.

Miraculously, none of the Greek mercenaries is killed (Xenophon reports that one man is wounded by an arrow, 1.8.20) in a battle against a vastly larger loyal Persian army under Artaxerxes (1.8.13) when the rest of Cyrus’ rebel force is wiped out. Polynices fills the role of the one Greek at Cunaxa who is hit by a chariot; both men are at a race course, both lose their wits (ἐκπλαγείς, caligine mersum), both are astonishingly without serious injury.

Like the interweaving of Herodotean narrative into the Thebaid, the allusion to key moments of the Anabasis serves to complicate, rather than elucidate the thrust of Statius’ story. Again, there is a sense of anachronism in likening mythical characters to 5th century Greeks. The Argives’ imitation of Xenophon’s survivors only serves to highlight the ways in which the Argives are not like the 10000. Polynices eschews the opportunity to become a second Phaethon or a second Hippolytus by not dying on the race-track. Instead, the intertextual reconfiguration through the Anabasis is intensely belittling; Polynices is, temporarily at least, transformed into an anonymous Greek mercenary who carelessly gets himself run over during an utterly disastrous defeat.

We should make two broader conclusions concerning Statius’ epic voice. Firstly, the density and range of intertextual affiliation in the Thebaid is remark-
able. While readers of Statius may tend (not unreasonably) to focus their attention on 1st century AD intertexts, especially those written in the epic and tragic genre, it is clear that 5th and 4th century BC Greek historiography alongside relatively obscure Hellenistic narrative poetry can exert an equally intense pressure upon Statius’ text at one and the same time. Secondly, we should affirm that the weight of this intertextual inheritance is oppressive and causes the text to run in directions contrary to readers’ initial expectations. We do not need to make a biographical point here; rather, we can see the text of the *Thebaid* being pulled away from its normative track by the gravitational pull of the intertextual networks within which it operates. It might make sense, for example, to compare an invading Argive army with Xerxes’ Persians or Cyrus’ mercenary Greeks. Yet these parallels also serve to close off other potential intertextual attachments (Polynices stops being Phaethon and starts being an anonymous Greek) or to blur the boundaries between different sides of the conflict (Bacchus becomes an invading Xerxes, both sides become Persians and Spartans simultaneously). When the arrows blot out the sun, no one can tell which side is which.

**Statius’ Flea: Reading Authorial Anxiety in Nemea**

In addition to the disconcerting effects of Statius’ intertextual practice, we need to consider his authorial self-presentation. The earliest receptions of the *Thebaid* come from Statius’ own pen. As the poet produced the *Silvae* in the late 80s and early 90s AD, we can see an obsessive concern for the fate of his epic poem, but also an increasing confidence in its success. Bound up in that concern is an interest in his own literary career and how that career is projected as a transition from one literary project to the next. Virgil, not least through his fixated early readers Propertius and Ovid, constructed a normative model of the poetic career as one which began with smaller scale poetry before moving onto bigger projects and finished with a full-scale martial epic. It is a career path that is apocryphally inscribed into his work in the *incipit* recorded in Donatus’ life of the poet:

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25 Modern commentaries on the *Thebaid* have been especially good at teasing out the astonishing intertextual richness of the poem, see e.g. Micozzi 2007; Parkes 2012; Augoustakis 2016; and Gervais 2017. For further elucidation of Statius’ intertextual technique, see e.g. Micozzi 2002; 2009; 2015; and Gervais forthcoming.

ille ego, qui quondam gracili modulatus auena
carmina et egressus siluis uicina coegi,
ut quamuis auido parerent arua colono,
gratum opus agricolis, at nunc horrentia Martis
arma uirumque cano.

Donatus Vit. Virg. 42

I am that man who once sang on a slender reed and coming out of the woods forced the
neighbouring fields to obey their owner, however greedy for gain, a work pleasing to farm-
ers, but now of Mars’ bristling arms I sing and the man.

The pseudo-Virgilian opening shows us clearly the path from the light pastoral
Eclogues, through the meatier didactic Georgics, culminating with the epic Aeneid. In the opening preface of the first book of the Silvae, Statius professes his
concern that the Thebaid, published in about AD 92, should pre-date these poems
which are so clearly smaller in scale and lighter in theme:27

quid enim <opus eo tempore hos> quoque auctoritate editionis onerari, quo adhuc pro The-
baide mea, quamuis me reliquerit, timeo? sed et Culicem legimus et Batrachomachiam
etiam agnoscinus, nec quisquam est inlustrium poetarum qui non aliquid operibus suis
stilo remissiore praeluserit.

Silv. 1 praef.

For why <should they too> be burdened with the authority of publication <at a time> when
I am still anxious for my Thebaid, although it has left my hands? But we read The Gnat and
even recognise The Battle of the Frogs; and there is none of our illustrious poets who has
not preluded his works with something in a lighter vein.

Publication is, of course, a tricky concept in the 1st century. Individual poems
from the Silvae had undoubtedly circulated in various forms before being gath-
ered together (probably at first in individual books before being re-re-issued, as
it were, in the three-book collection which we know as Silvae 1–3)28 and published
very soon after the Thebaid. Likewise, if we (and most modern critics do) take
Statius at his word and assume a 12–year composition process for the Thebaid,
then we must also assume that parts of the whole circulated in various forms and in various contexts between AD 80 and 92. That said, Statius clearly sees the Silvae in its final form as chronologically second to the Thebaid (adhuc … timeo). Furthermore, he evidently wishes one of his poems be viewed as a second Culex. The Culex is a hexameter poem which poses as a project from Virgil’s youth (i.e. pre-Eclogues), but which was in all likelihood written by an anonymous author posing as Virgil early in the 1st century AD. Indeed, the Culex bases its own poetic structure on the Virgilian career path. The poem tells of a shepherd who fell asleep while pasturing his flock. A gnat sees a snake about to attack the sleeping shepherd and wakes him up by biting him. Unaware of the gnat’s motive, the shepherd squashes him, but sees the snake and kills it. That night, the ghost of the gnat returns to the shepherd to tell him what had happened before describing the Underworld to him. The shepherd then builds a garden memorial to the gnat. Readers generally see a tripartite structure to the poem. The morning scene of the flock grazing (Culex 42–97) is pastoral; the afternoon where the shepherd kills the snake is didactic, especially evoking Georgics 3 (Culex 98–201); the night time scene where the gnat’s ghost describes the Underworld is epic in subject matter, clearly imitating Aeneid 6 in particular (Culex 202–414). This poem both presents itself as the start of Virgil’s career and structures itself as his actual career. The Culex is a doubly appropriate poem to invoke when thinking about one’s own poetic career therefore.

Our earliest ancient attestations of the Culex as a Virgilian poem come from Statius and Martial, although I am unconvinced that either poet really thought the poem to be genuine. In the preface to Silvae 1, most commentators would assume that the Silvae, as a collection of shorter poems mainly in hexameters, would make the more obvious stand-in for the Culex in Statius’ own career.

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29 On recitation by Statius, see Juv. 7.82–7; Markus 2000; and 2003. On recitation in the younger Pliny, who comments inter alia on Silius’ recitation process, see Johnson 2010, 42–62. Pliny also probably read Statius, although he does not mention him by name, see Guillemin 1929, 125–7. For the complexities of the intertextual relationship between Statius and Silius, see Hulls 2013; and Soerink 2013.

30 However, references to the Thebaid at Silvae 1.5.8–9, 3.2.40–1, 142–3 all suggest that the epic is unfinished when some of the shorter poems are first produced, see Nauta 2002, 196 and n.8.

31 See Mart. 8.55; Silv. 2.7.73–4; Suet. Vit. Luc.; Seeleltag 2012, 9–11. See also Peirano 2012, 59–69 who is similarly unconvinced. She suggests, 2012, 65–6, that both legitimus and agnoscimus: ‘introduce an element of distance and ironically present the two works as being integrated into the canon because of some philological discussion.’ For agnosco as a bilingual parallel for ἀναγιγνώσκω and the Culex in Martial’s Apophoreta, see Bonadeo 2017, 160 and 162–3 respectively.
other words, although the collection was published shortly after the *Thebaid*, individual poems were published earlier, and these shorter poems should be seen as trifling and youthful. If Statius knew the poem to be apocryphal, then the idea of retrojecting the *Culex*-like *Silvae* to the beginning of Statius’ career path makes good sense. Given that Statius is highly self-deprecating about the quality of the poems, whose speed of composition is their only positive attribute (*sed apud ceteros ... gratiam celeritatis*, *Silv.* 1 praef.), remodeling them as *Culices* also seems a sensible strategy.\(^{32}\)

However, I am not so sure. Statius’ professed concern (if Shackleton Bailey’s conjecture is correct, and for *quo* to work this must give the sense if not the original wording as well) is that the *Thebaid* and *Silvae* are being published more or less simultaneously (*<eo tempore> ... quo*). One of the texts needs to be seen in a less serious light for the other to find its own literary audience and be appreciated for its quality. Given that it is the *Silvae* which are to be released, it makes much better sense for Statius to be privileging them by re-purposing the *Thebaid* as a youthful prelude.\(^{33}\) As an artfully constructed collection of shorter hexameter (and hendecasyllable) poems, the *Silvae* fit the model of a Virgilian first collection (i.e. as *Eclogues*) much better than the *Thebaid*. The extemporaneous quality may also work better with the pastoral conceit of shepherds in a spontaneous singing competition than the much belaboured *Thebaid*. Reading the epic poem as a gnat-like prelude to Statius’ proper career fits equally well. The syntax of Statius’ preface does not preclude his taking the *Thebaid*, which he had referred to in the previous sentence by name, as a second *Culex*. The katabasis and Underworld descriptions of the *Culex* have much more in common with the *Thebaid*, as would the battle scenes of the *Batrachomyomachia*. It is tempting to see Statius dismissing his recently published poem as a ‘prelude’ and announcing the *Silvae* in his preface as the start of his career proper.

This thesis would be plausible but for the evidence we have of other poetry by Statius. Juvenal tells us of a pantomime *Agave* which was sold to the actor Paris (Juv. 7.82–7). Even if we do take Juvenal at his word, we might comfortably discount this work from Statius’ literary career as one commissioned rather than published in his own name (*nisi vendit Agaven*, Juv. 7.87). Statius must have sold any such pantomime to Paris before the latter’s murder in AD 83. Although it is possible that Statius had begun recitations of the *Thebaid* by this date, the chronology looks unlikely. However, it makes more sense to view Juvenal’s attestation

\(^{32}\) On this apologetic strategy, see Cucchiarelli 2017.

\(^{33}\) On *ludus* and *praetulere*, see Lovatt 2005, 8–10. For *praetulere* as indicating an axiological, not chronological meaning, see Aricò 2008.
as spurious. Elsewhere, a scholion preserves four lines of a *de Bello Germanico* which Juvenal parodied in his catalogue of members of Domitian’s *concilium* (Juv. 4.72–118). This poem is most likely to have treated Domitian’s campaign against the Chatti in AD 82–3. The existence of such a poem would throw a serious spanner in the works of a poet trying to construe his occasional collection as the starting point of a Virgilian career. However, I think it unlikely that the *de Bello Germanico* is by our Statius. It seems far more likely that the poem was written by Statius’ father, who almost certainly had the same name as his son and enjoyed a successful career as a poet and an orator. If they did share a name it would be no surprise to find that a scholiast had confused the two. Such a poem seems well within the compass of a poet who, according to his son, had mastered a full variety of genres (*Silv.* 5.3.100–3) and had composed poems on the fighting on the Capitol in AD 69 and the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 (*Silv.* 5.3.195–208). The contemporary subjects of these poems seem much closer to what we think the *de Bello Germanico* may have included. The confusion between the poet of this fragment and ‘our’ Statius is probably further caused by his acknowledgement in a later poem that he sang of Domitian’s German and Dacian campaigns when he won a poetry competition at Alba:

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Troianae qualis sub collibus Albae,
cum modo Germanas acies modo Daca sonantem
proelia Palladio tua me manus induit auro.
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*Silv.* 4.2.65–7

[... ] when under Trojan Alba’s hill your hand invested me with Pallas’ gold as I sang now of German battles, now of Dacian.

Given that this (probably extemporized) poetic composition must have celebrated Domitian’s double triumph in AD 89, for his campaign against the Chatti who had supported Saturninus’ revolt and his second campaign in Dacia, Statius’ success

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34 This is the conclusion of Courtney 1980 *ad* Juv. 7.87; and Newlands 2011, 2.
36 See Hardie 1983, 6–7 with *Silv.* 5.3.134–45. Statius’ father first competed in the Neapolitan Augustalia, winning in several subsequent festivals and travelled to Greece to win victories in the Pythia, Nemea and Isthmia. There is a statue base at Eleusis (*IG* II² 3919), restored by Clinton 1972 with the name *Poplion Papinion St[ation]*. This may have been awarded to Statius’ father in honour of his poetic victories, see Holford-Strevens 2000.
37 Although one might object that Statius nowhere attests the *de Bello Germanico* to his father, he nowhere claims it as his own either.
at Alba took place in AD 90.\footnote{38} Thus this poetry is not the same as the \textit{de Bello Germanico}. Moreover, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that Statius gave a project which he started in the early 80s chronological priority over a competition entry made nearly a decade later. Statius in the \textit{Thebaid}, by contrast, is a poet who refuses to contemplate Domitianic subject matter (\textit{Theb.} 1.17–33); the \textit{recusatio} makes much more sense if Statius had not previously written such a poem (cf. \textit{nondum}, 1.17). Statius’ father is now generally considered to have died in c. AD 90 at the age of about 65, which would have given him ample time to compose a poem dedicated to Domitian’s exploits.\footnote{39} If we discount the \textit{Agave} and reattribute the \textit{de Bello Germanico} to Statius’ father, then the \textit{Thebaid} becomes the earliest work of ‘our’ Statius.

Nonetheless, Statius might now be a little too old to consider his \textit{Silvae} to be an equivalent to Virgil’s \textit{Culex}. In the \textit{Silvae}, Statius portrays himself on the verge of old age (\textit{patria senium componere terra}, \textit{Silv.} 3.5.13; cf. 4.4.70; 5.2.158–9) whereas he claims that Lucan had already written his \textit{Bellum Civile} by the age when Virgil was writing his \textit{Culex} (\textit{haec primo iuuenis canes sub aeuo / ante annos Culicis Maroniani}, \textit{Silv.} 2.7.73–4, ‘all this you shall sing as a young man in early life before the age of Maro’s Gnat’). Although the Suetonian-Donatian life records Virgil as being sixteen when he wrote the poem, this is generally emended to twenty-six, the age at which Lucan died.\footnote{40} If we date Statius’ birth to around AD 50, then he would not be too much older when he began composing the \textit{Thebaid} in about AD 80. Statius seems to play pretty fast and loose with his age (his claims of senility seem rather premature) and the chronology can just about be stretched to fit the model, which is put forward only semi-seriously at any rate.

However, what really sells the notion of the \textit{Thebaid} being prefigured in the preface to \textit{Silvae} 1 as a second \textit{Culex} is the attention which Statius pays to the pseudo-Virgilian poem in the \textit{Thebaid} itself. Specifically it is the Nemean narra-
ative in books 4–6 of the poem which shows a consistent connection with the *Culex*, amongst a range of other intertexts.\footnote{See Soerink 2014b *ad loc*.; and Soerink 2015, 7–9 on the Nemean episode’s engagement with *Georgics* 3 and the *Culex*. On the episode generally, see Frings 1996; Nugent 1996; Gibson 2004; Soerink 2014; and Soerink 2015. See Heslin 2016, esp. 95–100 for Statius’ engagement with Callimachus *Hecale* and the Molochrus narrative in the *Aetia*. Cf. McNelis 2007, 84–100 on Nemea’s Callimacheanism with Soerink 2015, 3–6 on the ways in which a Callimachean, pastoral world is destroyed by epic poetics. Heslin 2016, 111–12 is relatively dismissive of the *Culex*’s importance; see also Soerink 2014b, 67.} Book 5 of the poem in particular engages with that amorphous and tricky ‘genre’ the epyllion.\footnote{For a sceptical view of epyllion as genre, see Trimble 2012. Heslin 2016, 91 is more positive.} The Nemean books clearly play with the structure of the *Culex* and in particular with the notion of converting playful epyllion into large-scale epic: Opheltes, the tiny child who receives the ludicrously overblown funeral, clearly mimics the gnat who receives the remarkable funeral monument from the shepherd; Statius’ snake brings a true sense of epic scale to the pastoral environment while its destruction by the seven up-scales the mock-epic clash between shepherd and serpent in the *Culex*. We might be tempted to overlook this particular connection in such a densely allusive environment were it not for the explicit mention of the pseudo-Virgilian poem in the *Silvae*, but that early reception of both poems makes for a significant shift in the way in which the poet invites us to read his poem.

Any comparison at the beginning of the *Silvae* between his epic poetry and the *Culex* must be one which Statius made with his tongue firmly in his cheek. We have already suggested that Statius was not being serious in his attribution of the *Culex* to Virgil and Statius’ attitude to his own poetry varies enormously from self-deprecation to utter confidence. Moreover, although the pseudo-Virgilian text is an important touchstone for the *Thebaid*’s Nemean books in particular, the scale and tone of the two poems is too markedly different for a sustained comparison to be taken too seriously. Rather, it seems we should read the preface to *Silvae* 1 as saying that, ‘if these poems are my *Eclogues*, then the *Thebaid* was my *Culex*.’

However, this jocular position statement does contain some more serious undertones. There are a number of important conclusions we can draw from this brief, early exploration of poetic identity. To begin with, the *Thebaid* is constantly reassessing its own identity at a generic level. The poem is consistently fraught with the tension between the extravagant and unrestrained poetics of full-scale,
martial epic and the finer and more subtle dynamics of poetry which we might label, for want of a better term, ‘Callimachean’.43

The ludic qualities of the Culex, its lightness, its small scale, its careful construction, can be seen as complimentary to a sufficient degree that Statius was tendentiously willing to label it ‘Virgilian’. Yet the comparison between Thebaid and Culex, however frivolous, also reveals a deeper anxiety in the poet about his own status and the criticism his poems receive:

lusimus, Octaui, gracili modulante Thalia
atque ut araneoli tenuem formauimus orsum.
lusimus: haec propter culicis sint carmina docta,
omnis et historiae per ludum consonet ordo
notitiaque ducum uoces. licet inuidus adsit:
quisquis erit culpae iocos musamque paratus,
pondere uel culicis leuior famaque feretur.

[Virg.] Culex 1–7

We have played, Octavius, while slender Thalia beat time, and like a little spider I have shaped my fine-spun task. We have played; let this song of the gnat be erudite, such that the whole structure is playfully consistent with tradition and the known voices of the leaders. Let a hostile critic be present: may anyone who is ready to blame my jokes and my Muse be held lighter in weight and reputation even than the gnat.

Despite the childish and flippant overtones of re-labelling his poem a Culex, Statius is invoking a model which associates its jokey playfulness with the slender and fine-spun qualities appropriate to a poem which kicks off a poetic career.44 Moreover, the opening of the Culex is also heavily invested in the process of reception and criticism of a new poem; it imagines hostile criticism and the discourse of blame being attached to it. The poet posing as Virgil comes up with a

43 The exact meaning of this term ‘Callimachean’ is one which I leave largely unexplored, but could easily be substituted with ‘neoteric’ or ‘Alexandrian’. Statius’ work combines specific allusion to Callimachean texts with more general poetic self-positioning. There is a tension here: Callimachus’ aesthetics were largely processed through Roman poetry written before the accession of Octavian to sole power in the late 30s BC. As such, this Roman Callimacheanism largely filters out the interaction between the Alexandrian poet and his Ptolemaic benefactors and moreover adopts a particular position on scale of poetic work which may not have precisely been Callimachus’ own. See Acosta-Hughes & Stephens 2012, 204–269, esp. 212–245. Statius’ own position may have shifted back towards a more ‘authentic’ Callimacheanism given the political realities of writing under Domitian compared to writing in the late Republic. Cf. Rebggiani 2018, 213–19.

44 Culex 1–12 itself re-works Virgil Eclogue 6.1–12 which in turn becomes a key intertext for the Thebaid in book 11. See below, ch. 4.5.
simple solution ('my critics are even more lightweight than my gnat') which is seemingly unavailable to the poet of the *Thebaid*.

Instead, the poet makes a complex generic position statement which suggests a deep-seated anxiety about the poem’s own status. The preface to the *Silvae* therefore provides two problems around poetic identity: firstly, the poem has clear issues with framing its own identity in terms of genre. Categories of genre in the *Thebaid* seem so fluid, contingent and arbitrary that the poem’s status as ‘epic’ is constantly in question. Secondly, the poet himself is so insecure about his own position that he is prepared to align himself in the *Thebaid* with a pseud-epigraphic version of Virgil. The gnat symbolizes the inability of the epic poet to assert his own identity in the literary world.

**Limits of Theory: Selves Ancient and Modern**

Already it will be obvious that I am using terms such as ‘self’, ‘identity’ and even ‘character’ as though they were interchangeable, so here I make a tentative attempt at defining subject and terminology. Rather than construct my own definition of ‘self’, we can begin with that established by A.A. Long:

> ‘Self is an especially difficult concept to analyse because, like consciousness, it is what each of us has when we are awake, and extends beyond waking consciousness into our dreams. We can never get sufficiently distant from our particular selves to ask exactly what our selfhood (or anyone else’s) consists in because, by asking the question, we already embody an answer. Perhaps the clearest approach to the concept of selfhood is to take it as a name for one’s individual and temporal identity from two distinct but necessarily overlapping perspectives – one objective and the other subjective. I am (or have) a unique human body of determinate age, ethnicity, parentage, and gender; these are objective facts about who (or what) I am and over which I have no control. But I am a unique centre of agency and consciousness, with a particular intentionality, temperament, and range of attitudes, beliefs, likes, and dislikes. I call this second aspect of selfhood subjective, not because it is strictly private or interior, or completely voluntary, or detachable from my bodily and objective identity, but because my subjectivity is at least to some extent up to me, and to that extent represents what I choose to identify with and what other persons typically take me to be.’

This combination of objective and subjective is of central importance to many recent studies of ancient ideas of self, particularly those of Roman thought in the 1st century AD. The crucial difference between ancient and modern conceptions of the self was construed by Descartes, who, with his famous statement "cogito..."
**ergo sum**, first explicitly posited a truly self-conscious ego, an ‘I’ with a reflective consciousness, a subject with an interior existence. Some scholars have seen the seeds of this sort of radical reflexivity in earlier, classical and Hellenistic thought, not only in St. Augustine’s consistent desire to search inside himself, but also, and more pertinently for our purposes, in the Stoic notion of *prohairesis* which was developed and made fundamental to the concept of the self by Epictetus in particular. Thus Charles Taylor comments:

> ‘The singling out of this power of choice or assent [*prohairesis*] is one source of the developing notion of the will, and there is already an important change in moral outlook in making this the central human faculty. What is morally crucial about us is not just the universal nature or rational principle which we share with others, as with Plato or Aristotle, but now this power of assent, which is essentially in each case mine.’

This notion of a shift in Stoic thought towards a more individualist and subjective conception of the self is not uncontroversial; Christopher Gill has drawn a distinction between what he terms ‘objective-participant’ and ‘subjective-individualist’ conceptions of personality in the ancient world, and argues against a movement in Roman thought towards more subjective conceptions of the self. Instead he describes what he terms the ‘structured self’, a combination in Stoic and Epicurean philosophy of holistic, ethical and naturalistic ideas which result in a novel concept of personality, but one which is very much at the objective end of the spectrum. When it comes to the possibility of subjective selfhood in the Roman world, Gill is dismissive:

> ‘I am highly sceptical about this idea. It seems to me much more plausible that Hellenistic-Roman thought represents a continuation of earlier Greek thinking in this respect. … Scholarly accounts [which suggest a shift towards subjective concepts of personality] are informed by certain prevalent modern ways of thinking about selfhood and personality. More precisely, the assumption is that if, as is sometimes supposed, there is a new or heightened awareness of the concept of self in this period, this will take a subjective-individualist form.’

Two things are worth noting in this analysis, however; Gill does not dismiss the notion of an increased philosophical and literary interest in selfhood in the 1st century (indeed, he goes on to explore the self in Virgil, Seneca, Epictetus and

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46 Taylor 1989, 137. See also Long 1996; and 2006.
47 Gill 1996. For application of Gill’s ideas in Greek tragedy, see Thumiger 2007, esp. 3–57; for a summary of how this analysis of subject affects gender in Roman imperial epic, see Pyy 2014, 17–22.
Plutarch).\(^{49}\) Instead he emphasises that the subjective self is a long way in the future. On Gill’s way of looking at ancient notions of self, it seems that, when an ancient viewer looked at the Delphic maxim γνῶθι σεαυτόν, he would have understood something rather different from that which we as modern viewers would think. I am prepared, however, to rescue Long’s notion of a subjective element of selfhood, at least in so far as it pertains to the exterior performance of identity and as it relates to the objective identity. Those subjective elements of personality, intentionality, temperament, belief, and so on, do exist in the classical world. The difference is that 1st century AD Greeks and Romans would articulate and comprehend these qualities (which are for us subjective) through entirely objective means.\(^{50}\) Ancient writers would have been, it seems to me, quite happy to infer an individual’s intentionality, temperament and attitudes from external manifestations of self, that is, appearance, genealogy and especially behaviour. As far as our readings of Flavian epic are concerned, we may leave aside for one moment self-conscious reflection and even Epictetus’ prohairesis. This comprehension of the subjective through modes which are entirely objective fits neatly with the increasing recognition of exemplarity as a defining feature of the way in which Roman authors perform characterisation. In this mode of reading, character becomes essentially imitative (as ‘character’ is built up from many recognisable stereotypes and exempla) and imitable (as ‘character’ becomes in turn an ethical example to follow or avoid):

‘what possibilities might open up for texts, however, if we read characterisation as a mode of communication, a process of becoming over the course of the work, if we track the pieces as they fit together, and tease apart the elements of composition – that is, if we regard characters themselves as functional elements of composition? ... Therefore character, like genres, can be established through reference to literary models. A character synthesises many different sources to create a whole. The composite character, like the codes of genre, has its own logic and consistency that the audience’s familiarity validates.’\(^{51}\)

The role that exemplarity plays in Roman modes of characterisation ties these ways of reading self together rather neatly. Whilst Gill is rightly sceptical about the relevance of Cartesian subjectivity in Roman conceptions of identity, we need not throw baby out with bath water and ignore the increasing interest in selfhood in the 1st century. We will demonstrate that this is a central interest of Statius in


\(^{50}\) See below, esp. chs. 1 and 3.

\(^{51}\) Seo 2013, 2, 4.
his *Thebaid*. Moreover, I am prepared to countenance modern ways of thinking about identity and selfhood in order to aid our understanding of what is happening in the *Thebaid*. There is good reason for this: while we should undermine the relevance of the individualistic, free-thinking, autonomous Cartesian *cogito* to the ancient world, we can see a parallel process happening in the post-modern world as the independent *ego* becomes increasingly undermined in modern thought on selfhood. Thus Slavoj Žižek begins *The Ticklish Subject*:

‘A spectre is haunting Western academia … the spectre of the Cartesian subject. All academic powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: the New Age obscurantist (who wants to supersede the ‘Cartesian paradigm’ towards a new holistic approach) and the postmodern deconstructionist (for whom the Cartesian subject is a discursive fiction, an effect of decentred textual mechanisms); the Habermasian theorist of communication (who insists on a shift from Cartesian monological subjectivity to discursive inter-subjectivity) and the Heideggerian proponent of the thought of Being (who stresses the need to ‘traverse’ the horizon of modern subjectivity culminating in current ravaging nihilism); the cognitive scientist (who endeavours to prove empirically that there is no unique sense of the Self, just a pandemonium of competing forces) and the Deep Ecologist (who blames Cartesian mechanist materialism for providing the philosophical foundation for the ruthless exploitation of nature); the critical (post-)Marxist (who insists that the illusory freedom of the bourgeois thinking subject is rooted in class division) and the feminist (who emphasises that the allegedly sexless *cogito* is in fact a male patriarchal formation).’52

It strikes me that Žižek’s postmodern deconstructionist and Habermasian communication theorist would find a great deal in common with modern readers of ancient identity who privilege objective and exemplary models of selfhood in readings of classical literature. Yet his haunting spectre might prove to be helpful for classicists who want new ways to explore ideas of selfhood without the handicap of (extreme) subjectivity. Žižek’s work sees the erosion in 21st-century thought of the self that is truly self-sufficient, independent and free to do as it wills, but reasserts the Cartesian self as an empty space to be filled by the process of subjectivisation, where the subject is given an identity and where that identity is changed by the self. Descartes’ vision of a radically subjective self was especially undermined by post-structuralist thought, which sees selfhood as an effect of the structure of discourse where competing discourses intersect and speak through the subject; the decentred subject is little more than something determined and impelled by these discourses:

in post-structuralism, the subject is usually reduced to so-called subjectivation, he is con-
ceived as an effect of a fundamentally non-subjective process: the subject is always caught
in, traversed by the pre-subjective process (of ‘writing’, of ‘desire’ and so on), and the em-
phasis is on individuals’ different modes of ‘experiencing’, ‘living’ their positions as ‘sub-
jects’, ‘actors’, ‘agents’ of the historical process.’\textsuperscript{53}

This is a process which runs parallel to the experience of selfhood in the ancient
world and is even more emphatically the case in the Roman literary world of the
1st century AD where authors lacked the intellectual machinery to construct iden-
tity in subjective ways. Selves are always construed through objective terms such
as (to repeat Long’s list) age, ethnicity, parentage, gender and especially through
social position and social status. Like the post-structuralist self, it becomes little
more than a puppet, therefore, for the discourses which construct it. Žižek’s phi-
losophy uses the process of Cartesian doubt, the process by which Descartes him-
self arrived at his famous \textit{cogito}, to bridge the gap between existence in an objec-
tive world (the world of nature) and performance as a subjective individual (the
world of culture). Cartesian doubt becomes Žižek’s answer to the question posed
by the German Idealists, particularly Kant and Heidegger, as to how we transform
ourselves from beings immersed in nature and objectivity to being supported by
culture and subjectivity, the state which Žižek terms \textit{logos}. It is my contention
that, whilst hampered by its entirely objectivist baggage, the \textit{Thebaid} does some-
thing similar by looking at the ways in which his overdetermined characters at-
tempt, and frequently fail, to enter new fields of culture and subjectivity within
the poem. Moreover, Statius maps this process of (failed or self-negating) subject
formation onto his own status as (highly belated) epic poet. As much as it is a
narrative about Thebes, his poem is also a narration of his attempt to find his own
place in a crowded Greco-Roman literary landscape. I do not wish to employ this
post-modern, Lacanian, Marxist philosophy in anything like an absolutist way,
but rather see it as something ‘good to think with’, providing parallels for the
psychology and journey towards self-awareness undertaken by Statius’ charac-
ters and by the poet himself.\textsuperscript{54}

To continue with modern parallels for a moment, I would like to unpack some
of the processes which Žižek identifies in his own multiple, complex and often
difficult accounts of subject formation. For him, Descartes’ withdrawal into him-
self and systematic cutting off of himself from the external world is an act of mad-
ness where the world is only experienced as loss and absolute negativity. Žižek

\textsuperscript{53} Žižek 1989, 174.

\textsuperscript{54} I am aware that the application of post-modern theory to classical texts is an act which some
readers can find off-putting, see e.g. Fontaine 2017, for a potent example.
consistently reconstructs the subjective self through constant and obsessive re-reading of two important passages he found in Hegel and by using Schelling’s conception of the subject to inform his own radical reading of Hegelian identity formation.\footnote{See Žižek 2012, 379–86. Žižek’s project is, of course, much bigger, aiming to re-read Lacanian psychoanalysis through Hegelian idealism (and rejecting the Kantian) and Marxist dialectic. For Žižek’s re-reading of Lacan, particularly through Hegelian dialectic and his Logic, see J. Butler et al. 2000; Kay 2003; Sharpe 2004; and R. Butler 2005.} While the campaign against global capitalism is, for obvious reasons, of lesser interest to this project (although the political implications of this mode of identity formation do have important parallels in ancient texts, not least in the parallels one can draw between his narrative of concrete universalism and ancient accounts of the individual’s role in state formation), I would like to give a brief summary of Žižek’s theorisation of the Hegelian subject before working out why this might be important for a classicist reading Flavian epic.

Žižek’s book *The Ticklish Subject* takes three themes which he finds in Hegel, the ‘Night of the World’, the concept of ‘abstract negativity’ and the ‘pre-synthetic imagination’, and uses these to create his own model of the subject. The first part of *The Ticklish Subject*, entitled ‘the Night of the World’, provides perhaps Žižek’s most comprehensive account of his psychoanalytically reconfigured Hegelian subject. The work explores the ‘focus on transcendental imagination’ which resulted in Heidegger’s famous *Kehre*, his turn away from the concept of subjectivity. We see combined a dizzying array of concepts which allows a reassertion of the ‘radicality of the Cartesian subject’ and a development of the notion of radical negativity within subjectivity.\footnote{Žižek 1999/2008, 3–141, quoting xxv; see also Sinnerbrink 2008, 2–6.} Žižek begins by exploring Kant’s account of cognition:

‘Žižek’s point of departure is to show that the fundamental ambiguity in Kant’s account of imagination lies in its relationship with the discursive understanding. In Kant’s considered account of cognition, we begin with the diversity of pure intuition; this diversity is synthesized by the pure imagination, and the resulting pure synthesis is then unified by means of concepts supplied by the understanding. The question thus arises: Is “pure synthesis” the work of the *imagination*, with understanding intervening only after the imagination has done its work? Or is “pure synthesis” the work of the *understanding*, such that the imagination is merely a lower level application of the synthetic power of the understanding at a precognitive level?’\footnote{Sinnerbrink 2008, 3, with my italics, reading Žižek 1999/2008, 29, reading Kant 1988, 84.}
On this reading, Žižek then synthesised two passages found in Hegel; the first is ‘the Night of the World’ where Hegel describes the unconscious production of violent and destructive images which forms the basis of self-conscious subjectivity.58 The pre-ontological subject is located in this pre-rational, unconscious interiority. The pure, dark realm of phantasmagorical representation is where the natural being traumatically enters the world of the social and cultural subject. Žižek meanwhile ties Hegel’s frightening vision both to Cartesian withdrawal from external stimulus and Schelling’s related concepts of the subject as ‘pure night of the Self’, ‘infinite lack of Being’ and the ‘violent gesture of contraction’ which underpins Hegel’s account of madness as the cutting of all links with external reality.59 This process of withdrawal is specifically the madness encapsulated in Hegel’s ‘night of the world’. Once reality has been experienced through this ‘night of the world’, as an absolute negativity or void, one is able to construct a symbolic universe:

‘Hegel explicitly posits this ‘night of the world’ as pre-ontological: the symbolic order, the universe of the Word, logos, emerges only when this inwardness of the pure self “must also enter into existence” … This, finally, brings us to madness as a philosophical notion inherent to the very concept of subjectivity. When Hegel determines madness as withdrawal from the actual world ... he all too quickly conceives of this withdrawal as a ‘regression’ to the level of the ‘animal soul’ still embedded in its natural surroundings.’60

In concert with the ‘Night of the World’, Žižek also regularly invokes the ‘Tarrying with the Negative’ passage from the preface to Hegel’s later Phenomenology of Spirit.61 Here Hegel explores the tremendous power of the negative and gives it the capacity to attain an independent existence of its own. Hegel posits the

58 Hegel 1974, 204, quoted in Verene 1985, 7–8: ‘The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity— an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful […]’. It is a passage Žižek frequently returns to: 1992, 50–52; 1994, 145; 1996, 78; 1997, 8–10; 1999, 29–30; 2006, 44; and 2014, 151, 183.
59 Sinnerbrink 2008, 6: ‘This Hegelian-Schellingian moment of radical negativity and symbolic reconstruction will remain a consistent feature not only of Žižek’s account of subjectivity but also, as we shall see, of his analysis of the historico-political experience of revolutionary violence.’
60 Žižek 1999/2008, 35–6, quoting Hegel 1974, 204.
61 On these two passages, see also Kay 2003, 22–4.
finitude of the subject, a creative negativity which both makes possible and delimits autonomous subjectivity.\textsuperscript{62}

In this passage, experiences of death, negativity, absence and, in Hegel’s terms, ‘utter dismemberment’ construct the subject. Subjectivity is thus established through negative self-relation.\textsuperscript{63} This primordial repression is what must occur before the subject may make its traumatic passage from the Hegelian ‘Night of the World’ (a space which finds its psychoanalytic counterpart in the Lacanian Real) to the ‘spiritual daylight of the present’.\textsuperscript{64} From this empty space, however, devoid of all content, Žižek locates the self; subjectivity is constructed out of this void therefore.\textsuperscript{65} Furthermore, the gap between nature and the beings immersed within it is the subject and, for him, the subject is the vanishing mediator between nature and culture. The subject is, in a fundamental way, also always constituted by a loss, by an expulsion of the basis of reality from which it is made. Furthermore, this basis of reality from which the subject comes must always remain outside the subject itself. The subject must, therefore, externalise itself in order to remain a subject.

The subject has a perspective on reality which cannot be understood in itself, but can only be mirrored in reality: ‘in the (verbal) sign, I – as it were – find myself

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\item \textsuperscript{62} Hegel 1977, 19, with my italics: ‘Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast to what is dead requires the greatest strength. Lacking strength, Beauty hates the Understanding for asking of her what it cannot do. But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then, having done with it, turn away and pass on to something else; on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical with what we earlier called the Subject […]’. On Hegelian negativity, see Žižek 2012, 378: ‘there is no substantial One, but Nothingness itself; every One comes second, emerges through the self-relating of this Nothingness.’
\item \textsuperscript{63} See Sinnerbrink 2008, 6–7.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Žižek 2012, 27–33 also identifies as crucial Hegel’s concept of the negative linking substance and subject. See Hegel 1977, 21: ‘The disparity which exists in consciousness between the I and the substance which is its object is the distinction between them, the negative in general. This can be regarded as the defect of both, though it is their soul, or that which moves them. This is why some of the ancients conceived the void as the principle of motion, for they rightly saw the moving principle as the negative, though they did not yet grasp that the negative is the self. Now, although this negative appears first as a disparity between the I and its object, it is just as much a disparity of the substance with itself. Thus what seems to happen outside of it, to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing, and substance shows itself to be essentially subject.’
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outside myself. I posit my unity outside myself, in a signifier which represents me."66 In Lacanian terms, selfhood is both Real and Symbolic: although we exist in nature as our bodies, we are more than that; we are able to relate to our bodies through the medium of language. It is with language that we will fill the void of the subject and it is this process that he labels subjectivisation. Unlike the post-structuralist concept of selfhood, Žižek’s filling of the void of the subject with language is a two-way process; seemingly concrete and objective ways of constituting self, such as age, family, gender, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic position and so on, can be narrated by the subjective self into a new construction of identity.

I have, more or less, elided the other dominant model in Žižek’s conception of subjectivity, that of Lacanian psychoanalysis.67 However, we should see Žižek picking up the unspoken but undeniable Hegelian aspects of Lacan’s writing and running them hard:

‘Taken in conjunction, these two excerpts [the ‘Night of the World’ and ‘Tarrying with the Negative’ passages] represent two ways of approaching the conundrum of the real: as a lack in the logic of our being (‘Tarrying with the Negative’) and as the traumatic horror of the drive (‘the night of the world’). So when Žižek asks himself what Hegel and Lacan have in common, the short answer is as follows: “for both of them, the ‘free’ subject, integrated into the symbolic network of mutual recognition, is the result of a process in which traumatic cuts, ‘repressions’, and the power struggle intervene, not something primordially given.” That is, both envisage the subject as an effect of lack and/or as the resistant kernel of the real, around which symbolisation turns. What unites them is the ‘coincidence of the real’, expressed as a ‘coincidence of lack’ and a ‘coincidence of trauma’.68

Finally, this way of construing subjectivity has powerful implications for historical and political experience. Žižek’s unorthodox reading of Hegel is that the transition from abstract to concrete universality cannot be achieved without a passage through madness, violence and terror.69 He takes this notion as the basis for his

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66 Žižek 1996, 43. This process of subjectivisation can be usefully compared to the processes of subject formation which we will encounter in the *Thebaid*, especially for Polynices (see ch.1 *pessim*), but also Oedipus (sections 3.1–3.4), Creon (sections 2.3 and 2.5), Theseus (section 3.5), and is implicit in character formation for generally (for Eteocles, see section 2.3).


68 Kay 2003, 23–4.

69 Žižek 2006. For Hegel’s analysis of the Terror in post-revolutionary France as a necessary step towards the modern state, see Hegel 1977, 355–63. The passage through violence as implicit in state-formation can also be usefully compared to the process which Thebes undergoes throughout the poem, although it will never be clear whether Theseus actually constructs a stable, rational state following his defeat of Creon (see sections 2.3 and 3.5).
idea of ‘individualism’ through secondary identification, where an individual asserts her autonomy by breaking associations with her primary, ‘organic’ community (e.g. family, local community) and identifying with a secondary, ‘artificial’ community (e.g. profession, social role, nation, etc.). His conclusion is that the only way to pass from abstract to concrete universality is to assert fully this power of radical negativity. The political dimension of this is formidable: the journey through the abstract negativity of violence and conflict is the only way to arrive at the historically ‘right’ conclusion of a stable, rational, democratic state. Furthermore, this sets up another tension in the individual’s experience of ethical life and morality – the immersion of the individual in the concrete, social world versus the abstract individual’s moral opposition to the concrete universe: ‘The moral individual, acting on behalf of a larger universality, acts so as to challenge and undermine the inherited determinate ethical mores of his/her community (Socrates versus the Greek polis; Christ versus the Jewish people).’ This also finds its dialectical opposite when the moral subject clings onto her moral convictions despite the needs of the ethical community; so Evil can be created from this passage through violence as well as good.

So what does this re-booting of subjective identity have to do with Flavian poetry? After all, if Gill is in any way correct, Statius cannot possibly be writing or thinking in terms which have any bearing on Žižek’s radical appropriation of Hegel. The answer comes in the difference between the mechanics and the content of the poet’s thought. We can map this process of subjectivisation onto an objective framework and observe identity as the poet would have, that is through its external, objective, social and cultural manifestations. Here we should invoke sociological theory of selfhood, such as that of Anthony Giddens. His theory of reflexivity, ‘the process whereby self-identity is constituted by the reflexive ordering of self-narratives’ and his connection of the reflexive project of the self with the notion of shame are both helpful here. Giddens is an economist and social theorist whose work on the self in social analysis in the 1990s can have powerful applications in the objective world of classical Roman identity formation. Reflexivity is a self-defining process which depends on observing and reflecting upon social information about potential trajectories in life. The interaction between individual and the cultural world they inhabit constitutes what people do and how they do it. Although the reading of cultural signs feels very unstable and

71 See Žižek 1999/2008, 98 n.10. This process of evil affecting the wider community is particularly important for our understanding of tyrannical figures in Statius’ poem. See below, ch.2.
72 Giddens 1991, 244.
postmodern, it is a practice which goes beyond the subjective in that it is deeply rooted in the institutions of social existence. More pertinently, perhaps, it is a process of identity formation which fits elegantly with the objective model of selfhood which we have seen to be prevalent in the ancient world.

In addition to viewing subjects through objective, social, cultural models, Statius regularly invokes the notion of the sublime as a category for comprehending identity formation. Simply put, Statius (as a Classical, pre-Cartesian poet) lacks the intellectual machinery to articulate identity formation in anything like the (Cartesian, Hegelian, Lacanian) terms which Žižek uses. Instead, Statius has recourse to a species of aesthetic experience which has been the focus of much recent scholarship on classical literature, namely the sublime. 73 The sublime is the focus of Anne Lagière’s major new study of the *Thebaid* and we will see the language of sublimity in play at crucial moments throughout the poem; 74 it is active during Polynices’ first moments of self-definition in his exilic journey from Thebes to Argos; the language of sublimity also underpins key moments for Statius’ tyrannical leaders, Eteocles, Jupiter and Creon; the sublime is also in operation when Oedipus summons the Fury Tisiphone from the Underworld to infect his sons with madness; sublimity is also an important mode for understanding the Athenian king Theseus and the way in which he brings resolution to conflict at Thebes; finally, the sublime is also an important feature for the poet’s projection of his own identity within the poem. Žižek himself states that the sublime happens whenever:

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74 See Lagière 2017, whose thesis is heavily based on Longinus’ ancient concept of sublimity; see 31–73 for her much fuller history of the sublime and its influence on Statius. Although her readings can be ‘overly schematic’ (so Gervais 2020), they remain extremely useful throughout this study. For a modern take on the sublime, see Žižek 1989, 131–6; 1998/2008, 42–8; and Kay 2003, 53–4.
Introduction

‘a positive, material object [is] elevated to the status of [an] impossible Thing.’\textsuperscript{75}

More importantly, we need to understand that sublime as something which happens to us is:

‘a particular kind of subjective experience ... any experience in which we encounter an object which exceeds our everyday categories of comprehension.’\textsuperscript{76}

Indeed, sublimity is notoriously difficult to define and covers language, mind, natural phenomena and aesthetic experience. For James Porter, it is:

‘defined most broadly as a sense of absolute structural impossibility and of total deadlock, the sublime produces profound mental or spiritual disruption, be this momentary or lasting – it is like a shock of the Real. Only, the Real one experiences is that of the structure of belief and thought that underpin one’s sense of reality, in all their fragile coherence.’\textsuperscript{77}

In classical literature, it is an experience most familiar to us from its description in Longinus’ treatise, \textit{Peri hupsous}. Although we cannot say with absolute certainty that Statius was aware of this work, it is now dated with increasing confidence to the middle of the 1st century AD,\textsuperscript{78} and sublimity was clearly an idea which did much to inform Roman literature of that period. Indeed, Lagière positively dates the work to the 50s AD and asserts a literary relationship between Longinus, Seneca and Lucan.\textsuperscript{79} Sublimity is something associated ideas of liberation (so Longinus’ assertion that the true sublime naturally elevates us, \textit{φύσει γάρ πως ὑπὸ τἀληθοῦς υψους ἐπαίρεται τε ἡμῶν ἡ ψυχή, de Sub. 7.2})\textsuperscript{80} and with tyranny, violence and totalitarianism; so Edmund Burke asserts: ‘terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime.’\textsuperscript{81} Longinus’ work of literary theory is a rhetorical manual built around quotation of great works of literature. Through a series of case studies, Longinus illustrates the ways in which great writers transport, elevate and uplift an

75 Žižek 1989, 71. For broader definition and understanding, see Porter 2016, 5–17; and Lagière 2017, 31–54.
76 Day 2013, 30.
77 Porter 2016, 5. Difficulty of definition has long been a defining trait. Lagière 2017, 31 begins with Boileau’s elegant, late-17th-century explanation: ‘un je ne sais quoi qu’on peut beaucoup mieux sentir que dire.’
78 See Day 2013, 12 and n.25; and Porter 2016, 4 and n.6. Advocates for a mid to late 1st century date include Russell 1964, xxii–xxx; Häussler 1995; and Innes 2002, 259.
80 On this and related passages, see Lagière 2017, 44–5.
81 Burke 1990, 54.
audience. Following publication of translations of Longinus’ work in the 17th century, Burke was the most important of a number of English writers in the 18th century who resurrected and theorised about the sublime. Burke creatively read (and misread) both Longinus and Lucretius in constructing his own appreciation of the sublime: ‘a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror.’ Longinus shows a similar sense of pleasure mixed with terror in his analysis of a passage of Homer’s *Iliad* where Hector’s terrified opponents are described in a simile as sailors caught in a storm:

Similarly Homer in his descriptions of tempests always picks out the most terrific circumstances. [...] Now let us turn to Homer. One passage will suffice to show the contrast:

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82 Burke 1990, 123.

83 On this passage in Longinus, see Porter 2016, 148–55.
the words accurately reflecting the anxiety of the sailors’ minds, and the diction being stamped, as it were, with the peculiar terror of the situation.

Both Longinus and Burke identify language as the ultimate source of sublimity; it is Homer’s unwillingness to dismiss the possibility of danger too quickly, says Longinus, but to force us as audience to face the possibility of death many times, which creates the conditions for sublimity. However, it is his abuse of language, crushing words together (τῇ δὲ τοῦ ἔπους συνθλίψει), which transforms our experience into something sublime. At the end of the 18th century, Immanuel Kant’s analysis of the sublime concretises the thinking of Longinus and Burke by describing the sublime as the experience of any incomprehensibly great object which confounds our imagination, terrifying objects which might include: ‘threatening cliffs, thunderclouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightning ... volcanoes with their all-destroying violence, hurricanes with the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean set into a rage.’ Kant is at pains to point out that these objects are not sublime in themselves, but it is our experience of them which creates the effect and, moreover, that this terror is an uplifting occurrence: ‘sublimity is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of being superior to nature within us and thus also to nature outside us.’ In her study of the sublime in Statius, Lagière defines poetic sublimity thus:

‘L’ὕψος caractérise donc l’expression d’un écrivain genial, enthousiaste et téméraire, qui se hisse à de dangereuses hauteurs, porté par le πάθος. Il est la qualité d’une expansion grandiose, vertigineuse, surhumaine qui donne à voir l’extraordinaire, provoquant chez l’auditoire la stupeur, l’admiration, mais aussi un ravissement qui l’élève.’

Like many Roman writers in the 1st century AD, Statius is expressing an increasing interest in the question of subject, self and identity. Indeed, I would go much further and claim that the *Thebaid* is inextricably and obsessively bound up in questions of selfhood. What Statius cannot do is express his thinking about identity in terms which are properly interior, that is, subjective in a strong sense. Instead, the poet, as a result of the necessary limitations placed upon any pre-Cartesian writer, thinks through problems and issues of subjectivity through

84 Kant 2003, 144. Porter 2016, 51–4 provides a much more comprehensive list of markers of sublimity; the storm in *Thebaid* 1 shows the majority of these. Comprehending the vastness of creation is central to analyses of the sublime in Lucretian poetry, see Hardie 2009, 65–228; Day 2013, 42–8; and Porter 2016, 445–54.
85 Kant 2003, 147.
86 Lagière 2017, 54.
objective terminology (where I gently invoke Giddens’ theory of reflexivity) and aesthetic experience (the sublime). In terms which are overtly and strongly objective, he is able to discuss ideas around Long’s ‘soft’ definition of subjectivity, which we discussed above: ‘I call this second aspect of selfhood subjective [...] because my subjectivity is at least to some extent up to me.’87 We can invoke Žižek’s ideas on subjectivisation if we are prepared to explore them through a 1st century, objective lens. As we shall see, the arrival at subject through radical negativity seems remarkably appropriate and apposite when we explore the ways in which Oedipus, Polynices and Theseus construct identities from themselves within the text of the poem. In each character we can trace ancient parallels with the ‘Night of the World’, the passage through madness, the subject’s self-constitution through loss and the ethical problems inherent in reaching concrete universality. The passage through violence and its consequent impact upon the wider community is crucial for our understanding of the way in which the concept of tyrannical rule operates within this poem. The ethical dimension is also foregrounded through the twin failures of the Theban half-brothers, Oedipus and Polynices, who are also father and son and fail to achieve a ‘right’ identity within their secondary, social universes. The brutal morality of their Athenian counterpart again suggests that this creed of radical negativity in subject formation is especially suitable for understanding identity in the Statian universe.

Furthermore, these intradiegetic dramatisations of subjectivity symbolise the multi-faceted nature of the poet’s own selfhood. Each character in the *Thebaid* is, at least in part, a contemplation of the problems of individualisation in the face of the twin oppressive forces of literary inheritance and exemplarity. The poem repeatedly asks the question of how to form characters which are in any real sense individual and stages the dramatic loss of independence and literary control necessitated by the poet’s subject-matter and literary belatedness. This absence of individuality is arguably most visible when dealing with characters who threaten to become little more than stereotypes or perfunctory enactions of an exemplary norm. Finally the poem stages the subjectivisation of the poet himself (with the danger of blurring the basic distinctions between the historical Statius and his epic persona), his own symbolic passage through madness and his own ultimate emergence as an individuated, creative subject.

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87 Long 2006, 265–6; see above, xxix–xxx.
The Thing Itself

With these preliminary considerations in mind, we can now embark on our search for selves in the *Thebaid*. Chapter 1 pursues an investigation of Polynices both for his particular sense of identity and as a wider test case for Statius’ interest in selfhood. A central theoretical move will be to apply Žižek’s notions of identity formation to Polynices whilst maintaining an objective perspective on that character. The invocation of the sublime will be key to this process and Polynices’ passage through a storm on his way to Argos will form a crucial element in his sense of self. The storm is a sublime, metaphysical event which represents Polynices’ symbolic birth in the social universe at Argos and the beginning of his search for an identity separate from his identical twin brother. Polynices’ stay in Argos is a beginning for him, but it also represents a series of journeys not taken as he eschews possible new identities in favour of an obsessive return to Thebes and his twin. The Argive campaign completely unpicks anything Argive in Polynices’ identity. Only in the final moments of reunification with his brother does the absence of identity in Polynices transform itself momentarily into double-ness. Ultimately, Polynices is never able to resolve himself into a stable, cultural subject. His conflict with his brother will continue in the afterlife and Thebes will continue its path through violence.

In Chapter 2, we explore the role of the tyrant within the poem and the tyrant’s relationship with his exemplary models. The use of *exempla* has become increasingly important in modern scholarship’s understanding of characterisation in Roman imperial literature, but renders characters flat and, at times, inconsistent. We see the intertwined forces of exemplarity and intertextuality brought to bear upon the characters of Eteocles, Jupiter and Creon to the point where they are no longer able to fulfil the roles allotted to them in the structure of the narrative. Tyranny results in a peculiar sense of powerlessness for all three characters who are, meanwhile, opposed in ways which also highlight mythological epic’s inability to fit comfortably within the discourse of 1st-century AD Roman history and politics. Language itself becomes disrupted as the poet resorts to tropes and metaphors which might seem at first to be deeply unsuitable for their tyrannical subjects.

Having panned out to view social and political leadership in the poem, we focus again in Chapter 3 on two peripheral yet influential characters within the poem, Oedipus and Theseus. The poem’s concerns about identity and status are magnified by Oedipus, who mimics Polynices’ problems with absence of self with problems of exemplarity. Oedipus possesses such a superfluity of identity that his own sense of self is effectively erased. Instead, selfhood is transplanted symbolically onto the Fury Tisiphone whom he summons to enact his ‘curse’ upon
his progeny. When Oedipus re-appears following the deaths of his sons, he remains ‘caught between two deaths’ and remains an inchoate subject not yet physically dead, but sent by Creon into the spiritual and cultural death of exile in the wilderness. By contrast, Theseus is able to provide a stable identity for himself but struggles to impose a political solution upon Thebes. The passage through violence and madness which identity formation requires underpins the disquieting force of the Athenian king’s power, which often borders on the tyrannical and has a profoundly destructive impact upon the societies he controls.

Chapter 4 focuses more tightly on Statius again and finds violent metaphors for the poet’s interaction with his predecessors in the funeral pyres of book 6, the waters of the river Langia in book 4 and in the construction and destruction of Amphion’s walls throughout. The figure of Hypsipyle is also an important parallel for Statius’ own poetic process and identity. Amphion is a key mythic touchstone for Statius which sets up his relationship with Propertius’ first book of poetry. Set against these aggressive poetics is the poet’s own attitude of deference and self-deprecation, visible in his apostrophe to the Argive warriors Hopleus and Dymas and in the sphragis which completes the poem. Both the sphragis and Statius’ apostrophe to Eteocles and Polynices also suggest Virgil’s Eclogues as another poetic model text. The sphragis itself and the multiple ‘endings’ which the poem offers suggest a radical split between poet and poem, one which offers a future for the Thebaid. Statius the poet seems to be an individual as much subject to the disquieting, sublime effects of his poem as his protagonists.

In a final chapter teasingly described as ‘afterword’, we explore Dante’s reception and re-writing of Statius’ identity in the Commedia. We reveal Dante as a thorough and careful reader of Statius who uses Flavian poetics to enrich his own self-presentation. In particular, Statius’ warning to the Thebaid not to follow in the Aeneid’s footsteps too closely is repeatedly re-worked as an exemplar for Dante’s own poetic affiliations. The freshly Christianised Statius offers an alternative poetic model for Dante’s Christian vernacular poetry. For Dante, belatedness becomes a positive value rather than a source of insecurity. For Dante’s Statius, a new and powerful poetic identity is constructed which re-writes the poet of the Thebaid.