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Amphion's Worthless Walls:
Capaneus and the Defeat of Poetry in Statius' *Thebaid*

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Near the end of his *Ars Poetica*, Horace includes a famous description of poetry's social value: "Orpheus, who was a holy man and interpreter of the Gods, deterred the men of the forests from killing… This is why he was said to tame tigers and rabid lions." Turning to a similar figure, the son of Zeus and Antiope, he continues: "This too is why Amphion, the founder of the city of Thebes, was said to move rocks where he wished by the sound of the lyre and coaxing prayers."[1] In this well-known moment, the poet popularized what would become a commonplace in the history of literary theory: the belief that poetry bears with it a civilizing power. Both Orpheus and Amphion, in Horace's depiction, spark the transition from wildness to civilization, from savage discord to harmonious humanity. Equipped with lyres and rhetorical facility, the pair brings about concord, order and peace. Poetry, as they use it, becomes something of inestimable social value.

Written some one hundred years after Horace's *Ars Poetica*, Statius' *Thebaid* engages significantly with this trope, in both implicit and explicit ways. Concerning itself with the infamously gruesome final chapter of Thebes's history, the epic focuses on Amphion, the erector of the city's famous walls. Throughout the work, the founder's Horatian resonances are very much evident; once again, he is conceived as a figure of civilization and order. In the context of a violent war, he represents a gentle and humane alternative.

And yet, in Statius's unrelentingly bellicose universe, this alternative is also fiercely rejected. In fact, the most brutish of the epic's warriors, Capaneus, openly mocks it in an episode to which I will return. Here as elsewhere, Amphion, and all that he stands for, is derided as effeminate, unwarlike, and idle. Ultimately, violence overtakes the humane ethos he represents; it is the bestial lust for blood, rather than the gentle, civilizing impulse, that ultimately reigns supreme. In many of the epic's episodes, but in particular those featuring Capaneus, Statius depicts the defeat of an Amphion or Orpheus figure. He undoes the vision of lyre-induced concord, so famously outlined by Horace in 19 BCE.

Before turning to Capaneus, who will most explicitly bring about Amphion's defeat, I would like to consider a crucial reference to the wall-builder in Book 2. Tydeus, who will become one of the Seven against Thebes, has been sent by Polyneices to remind Etiocles that he must give up his rule. On the terms of the brothers' agreement, it is now time to hand over control of the city. Etiocles, vehemently refusing, provokes a fiery response from Tydeus: "…You *will* surrender! / You will surrender *power*! If iron walls / encircled you, or if Amphion sang / a second song and mounded triple ramparts, / not fire or sword could save you!... Our armies will defeat you!" (2.452-459).[2] Introducing a notion that will reappear, Tydeus portrays Amphion's civilizing force as utterly powerless in the face of martial might. When confronted with the fury of fraternal strife—a force that lies at the *Thebaid*'s core—Amphion is tragically ineffectual. As Tydeus would have it, the musician/poet's constructive power is shattered in the face of inherently destructive civil war. At this moment and throughout the epic, the sunny Horatian vision is powerfully torn asunder.

In the *Thebaid*'s portrayal of Amphion's defeat, no character is more central than Capaneus, the most alarmingly brutish of the Seven. More than any other figure, he represents

the savagery against which Horace's harmonious vision is measured. The warrior's subversion of Amphion throughout the epic first appears in a significant way toward the end of Book 6, as he participates in the Nemean games. In the midst of a fight with Alcidamas, a young and comparatively small Spartan, Capaneus unleashes a terrifying fury: "No lion or speared tiger ever raged / as he did as he pushed Alcidamus / backward until the youth lay on the ground. / His teeth made awful noises as he spun / and multiplied his blows…" (6.786-790). In what will become a reoccurring use of animal imagery, Capaneus is compared to wild predators, and, by extension, to the inhumane creatures that preceded an Amphion or Orpheus figure. Indeed, the warrior comes to resemble what Horace calls the murderous "men of the forests"[3] and what George Puttenham labels "the very brute beasts of the field."[4] Throughout the fight, Capaneus is an embodiment of brute rage, the kind of bestial discord that precedes a lyre-induced peace.

His opponent, by contrast, exemplifies a more gentle and civilized alternative. Whereas Capaneus, "hurried in with everything" during the match (768), Alcidamus "dodged some blows and ducked others" (770). While the Argive acts upon a primal urge, the Spartan employs careful consideration and acquired skill. Taking these two approaches into account, one can detect an opposition between civilized and savage modes of fighting. What is more, when Capaneus insists on destroying his opponent, he invokes what could be thought of as a kind of anti-Amphion or anti-civilization sentiment: "Let me alone! Let me destroy those cheeks / with which that sissy curries minons! I'll / turn them to bloody pulp…" (6.819-821). The idea of a "sissy currying minions," an attractive persuader, is not very different from Amphion or Orpheus, figures who draw in others with their beautiful music and poetic skill. For Capaneus, it is an angering vision, one that serves as a complete inversion of his brutish individualism. Where he acts on his primal urges without regard for community, Eunaeus gains people's favor; while Capaneus acts upon an unrestrained lust for blood, the young Spartan embodies a more civilized alternative. Such a conflict, moreover, is firmly resolved as Capaneus scores his ultimate victory. As in the epic's scenes of actual warfare, it is the force of barbarity, rather than humanity, that so violently comes out on top.

In one such depiction of warfare, Capaneus's slaying of Eunaeus in Book 7, this pattern powerfully manifests itself. At the episode's outset, Statius takes pains to stress the vulnerability of the young Theban: "…Whom can / you terrify? The cover of your shield / is vulnerable and crowned with wreathes of pale / Nysaean ivy; your javelin is vine wood, / wound with white flounces; hair obscures your shoulders; / soft down is on your cheeks" (7.652-657). Just as in the fight at the Nemean games, Capaneus' opponent is portrayed as smaller and possessing much less physical strength. Moreover, he is also associated with the Amphion myth; imploring the Argive forces to restrain themselves, he exclaims, "Stones rolled here of their own accord, so spare them" (7.665).

In addition, Capaneus is once again associated with bestial violence: "He's like a lion in a cave who wakes / to first wrath in the morning; when he sees / a deer or hornless bull, he roars for joy; / intent upon his prey, he scorns the wounds /of hunters and their spears. So Capaneus / exalted that the conflict was unequal…" (7.670-675). All civilized behavioral convention—most importantly here the aversion to unequal conflicts—Capaneus resolutely eschews. In this scene as before, the Argive rejects humane practices in favor of unabashed savagery. And, once again, it is he who decisively wins.

Capaneus' most explicit defeat of Amphion and all that he stands for, however, comes near the end of Book 10, as the warrior attacks the walls of Thebes. His previous acts of violence—the wrestling match with Alcidamus and his slaying of Eunaeus—anticipate this

moment in several important ways. In all cases, the object of Capaneus' destruction, whether it is either of the two young men or the Theban walls, is described as inherently vulnerable and weak. Ultimately, these examples each serve as effeminized victims of the warrior's savagely masculine might. Indeed, we see this pattern very clearly in the climax of Book 10, as Capaneus lets out a defiant exclamation: "Are these the worthless walls Amphion built- / the walls that followed his unwarlike chants / according to the ancient Theban fable / told shamelessly for simpletons? How hard / a task to ruin walls built by a lyre?" (10.875-879). Insulting at once the Theban walls, the *fabula* that lies behind them, and the primordial lyre, Capaneus utterly negates Horace's sunny vision, for Amphion, and all that he stands for, is derided as irritatingly feminine and weak. Furthermore, by calling the myth of construction a "fable," he levels against poetry the familiar accusation of falsehood. In this sense, there seems to be a kind of grand homology between his anti-poetic sentiment and his denial of the Gods' existence.

With all of this spite revealed—the opposition to poetry, femininity, civilization, and peace—Capaneus destroys the walls as thoroughly as he destroyed Eunaeus: "He… with hand and foot / fiercely destroys the mortar work and layers / of masonry that block him. Stone supports / slip under trembling houses. Bridges crumble. / He redeploys the pieces he dislodges, / hurls broken fragments down on homes and temples / and breaks its own high walls to wreck the city" (10.877-882). In the face of such destruction, the dream of poetical peace is lost irretrievably. The promise of Horace's Amphion, at this pivotal moment, is utterly undone.

In the fierce world of the *Thebaid,* poetry, and its civilizing power, is repeatedly shown to be an impotent force. The Amphion figure, beyond being ignored, is actively defeated in the severe Statian universe. As Capaneus' victories make clear, the epic's world is one in which Horace's "men of the forests" and Puttenham's "rude and savage peoples" ~~actively~~ destroy the agents of peace. Just as Alcidamas, Eunaus, and the walls of Thebes remain completely helpless in front of Capaneus, so does the cause of civilization stand no chance against the forces of bloodlust and strife. The social function of poetry, so influentially illustrated by Horace in 19 BCE, becomes tragically irrelevant.

Notes

1. Horace, "Ars Poetica" *Oxford World's Classics: Classical Literary Criticism,* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press), 108.

2. Statius, P. Papinius. *The Thebaid: Seven against Thebes*. Trans. Charles Stanley Ross. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004).

3. Ibid, 108.

4. George Puttenham, "The Art of English Poesy" in *Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism,* ed. Gavin Alexander, (London: Penguin Books), 60-61.

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