

Translation: On the Thebaid

I take up again, with great respect, that knowledge deserving of scrutiny and that inexhaustible vein of intellect found in those poets who, under the alluring cover of a poetic fiction, have inserted a set of moral precepts for practical use. For when Horace testifies that "poets seek to instruct or delight, or say what is both pleasing and useful in life,"¹ they are found to be no more delightful and entertaining through their literal meaning and narrative skill than they are instructive and serviceable, for the building of habits of life, through the hidden revealing of their allegories. Wherefore, "if little can be matched with great,"² the compositions of poets seem not uncommonly to invite comparison with a nut. Just as there are two parts to a nut, the shell and the kernel, so there are two parts to poetic compositions, the literal and the allegorical meaning. As the kernel is hidden under the shell, so the allegorical interpretation is hidden under the literal meaning; as the shell must be cracked to get the kernel, so the literal must be broken for the allegories to be discovered; as the shell is without taste and it is the kernel which provides the tasty flavor, so it is not the literal but the allegorical which is savored on the palate of the understanding. A child is happy to play with the whole nut, but a wise adult breaks it open to get the taste; in the same way, as a child you can be satisfied with the literal meaning not broken or crushed by subtle explanation, but as a man you must break the literal and extract the kernel from it if you are to be refreshed by the taste. By these and many other analogies the poems of those, both Greeks and Romans, whose highest aim was to leave out nothing, simple or elaborate, of practical value, can be proved worthy of study. Among these, Papinius Surculus,³ a man of admirable activity, has preeminently distinguished himself, for in his composing of the *Thebaid* he is the faithful emulator of Virgil's *Aeneid*. In order to lay bare the covering of this work, the narrative order may first be shown in its true sequence.

The ruler of Thebes was Laius.⁴ He had a wife Jocasta. To her was born Oedipus, who, when he grew up, slew his father and married his mother. From this incestuous union are born two daughters and two sons, Eteocles

and Polynices. Their father blinds himself in his grief. The sons dispute the kingdom, and the rule is divided by the year. As the eldest born, Eteocles rules first, and Polynices goes into exile. He comes to the Greeks and⁵ marries the daughter of the king of Greece, Adrastus. When the year is ended he tries to regain the kingdom from his brother, who refuses. Seven kings of Greece pledge vengeance.⁶ They set out for Thebes,⁷ but they grow thirsty on the way⁸ and are guided to a stream by Hypsipyle.⁹ Archemorus is killed by a serpent; the Greeks console Lycurgus,¹⁰ and bury Archemorus with all due honor. Then¹¹ they reach Thebes; they fight, and all except Adrastus are slain. Finally,¹² the brothers meet in single combat and destroy each other. Creon¹³ rises up as the new ruler. He refuses to allow the kings to be buried. The wives of the kings beseech Theseus¹⁴ for aid. Theseus fights with Creon, and Creon is overcome. The kings are given their burial. Thebes has been left shattered, but is now free.

Now that the narrative order has been run through in sequence, the kernel can be extracted from the husk. Thebes is pronounced in Greek like *theosbe*, that is, the goodness of God.¹⁵ This is the soul of man, which the goodness of God created in its own image and likeness, that is, immortal, invisible, capable of comprehending all knowledge.¹⁶ It is well called a city, for, like the inhabitants of a city, valor, prudence, justice, temperance,¹⁷ and other virtues dwell and abide in it by inherited right. In this city which is the soul of man the ruler is Laius, that is, sacred light, for Laius is *lux ayos*—*ayos* being interpreted in Greek like *sanctus* in Latin.¹⁸ Thus Laius ruled in Thebes, that is, sacred light in the soul of man, which is adorned with the perception of all knowledge to the exclusion of the shadows of ignorance. Furthermore, he had a wife named Jocasta, that is, pure joy.¹⁹ For the mind of man is made joyful by the sacred light which it possesses, but possesses in purity, that is, separate from the defilement of pride. Jocasta as the wife of Laius is well named, for as her husband rules so she like a true wife is subject to him.²⁰ So Laius was wedded to Jocasta in joyful union. To her Oedipus was born. The union was joyful, but its offspring ill-starred. Oedipus being born is licentiousness. The name Oedipus is taken from *edo*,²¹ a truly licentious beast, whence it is said, "More playful than the tender kid."²² Just as joy, pure and at first undefiled²³ by any vanity of the things of this world, sinks to the defilement of licentiousness, so Jocasta gave birth to Oedipus. When he grows up, that is, the soul of man asserting its strength, he kills his father, that is, puts out the sacred light which in its munificence had provided the very occasion for his birth. For his wife he

takes his own mother in marriage. From this incestuous union are produced what have neither manliness nor yet the appearance of manliness, namely, the two daughters. Other creatures are produced having the appearance of manliness, but not manliness itself, namely, the two sons, one of them called Eteocles and the other Polynices. *Ethos*²⁴ in Greek is the word for *mos*, "habit, morals," in Latin, whence the moral science of ethics; *ocleos*²⁵ is destruction, whereby Eteocles is destruction of morals, that is, greed, whereby morals are destroyed, for it is the origin and root of all evils.²⁶ *Polis*²⁷ in Greek is called *multum*, "many," in Latin, and *nichos*²⁸ is *uictor*, "conqueror," whereby Caesar is called *chere anichos*;²⁹ thus Polynices conquering many in this world is lust, to which many yield. As these sons grow up, that is, greed and lust in the soul of man, their father blinds himself in his grief, that is the licentious mind tortures itself, horror-stricken at its sin. The sons as they dispute about the rule pull the soul two ways, for "there is no loyalty between sharers in tyranny."³⁰ The rule is divided by the year, and this is agreed to because "every kingdom divided in itself shall be made desolate."³¹ The first year, as the eldest born, that is, the root of all evils, Eteocles rules; and Polynices, so long as the greedy easily suppresses the lustful, goes into exile. He makes his way to the Greeks. Very clearly this signifies the habits of those living in lust, who, when their substance is all wasted,³² flee to worldly wisdom, so that secular knowledge may compensate for the abandoning of lust. It follows why he marries the daughter of Adrastus, king of Greece. This king of Greece is philosophy, to which all worldly wisdom is subject. With this the name Adrastus is perfectly consonant, for *adrios*³³ in Greek is *profunditas*, "depth," in Latin, whereby the Adriatic Sea is so called because it is deep. By this well chosen name, Adrastus, is meant philosophy, whose depth cannot be gauged by any philosopher's plumb-line. His daughter is Argia, that is, foreknowledge. *Argeos*³⁴ in Greek is *providentia* in Latin, whereby the Greeks are called *Argi*, that is, the foreseeing ones; from this the herdsman of Jove³⁵ is called Argus, that is, foreseeing, as the poet implied when he declares, "Argus had a head set round with a hundred eyes,"³⁶ head standing for the mind as the highest part of a man just as the real head does for its body. Thus he marries Argia, the daughter of Adrastus, that is, foreknowledge the daughter of philosophy, and at the end of the year, emboldened by worldly cunning, he seeks to regain the rule from his brother. But the latter refuses, and is very clearly using words of greed when he says, "I hold it and shall go on holding it for a long time."³⁷

Seven kings of Greece pledge vengeance. These seven kings are the seven

liberal arts, who are well called kings, for they are the guide and supports for all branches of learning, and they are subject to Adrastus, that is, philosophy. They set out for Thebes, but on the way they grow thirsty. It is no wonder thirst comes to those who lack the wellspring of faith: to drink of worldly knowledge does not lessen thirst, but increase it. So they thirst, but as they do they are led to a stream by Hypsipyle. Isis was once the chief goddess in Egypt, and *philos* is love,³⁹ whence Hypsipyle is the love of Isis, that is, idolatry, which leads to its stream all who strain after worldly knowledge. But it is fatal to yield to this, for Archemorus is slain by a serpent. In fact, Archemorus can be called the foster child of idolatry, that is, essentially dead:³⁹ "He that believeth not is condemned already."⁴⁰ Nor is it without significance that he is slain by a serpent, for clearly all idolatry is destroyed by our relentless foe.⁴¹ Nor is the fact that the Greeks console Lycurgus to be passed over in silence, for worldly knowledge consoles those who die in their sins. From this it follows why they bury Archemorus with all honor, for the followers of idolatry, who as they sleep in death are enveloped in the praise of men and the vainglory of earth, are at least in the vulgar view buried with pomp and circumstance. Then they reach Thebes ready to fight, and do fight against Eteocles, that is, greed, because, for those who grasp at philosophy as at vanity, their greed on every count becomes worthless. They fight, but have no success as the outcome of the fight, for all are killed. Here is shown the depth of man's blindness, which often picks out from the bad what is even worse, and from the worthless what is even more worthless, as when they esteem the vain knowledge of the arts less than the greater vanity of greed. But there is point to what was appended to this: all died except Adrastus. For philosophy, though it may perish for the greedy, is not in itself destroyed.

Finally the brothers, that is, greed and lust, meet in single combat and destroy each other. The harshness of greed and the riotousness of lust do not suffer in the same way or at the same time; but as these vices are destroyed, so in the mind there uprises pride, well named as Creon, that is, for *cremens*,⁴² one who curbs all things. Observe that when each vice comes to an end, so pride harshly usurps power over the spirit (*anima*), as the mind (*animus*) swells with inward arrogance at its awareness of what has ended. Thus in the poem, after the death of Eteocles and Polynices, Creon uprises ready to assume command. He refuses to allow the burial of the kings, that is, keeps from concealment those worldly branches of knowledge which, together with the faithful handmaidens of its error, pride with a remarkable

intensity esteems to be a thirst-quenching spring.⁴³ These wives of the kings, that is, human feelings, which had formerly been subject to these kings, beseech Theseus, that is, God, for Theseus is for *theos sams*.⁴⁴ Theseus fights with Creon, as God teaches that pride is conquered by humility: Creon conquered stands for pride unable to resist humility. The kings are buried, for every occasion for pride is blocked by the arrival of humility. By such a struggle with vice was Thebes, that is, the soul of man, left shattered; but it is freed when the grace of the goodness of God comes to its aid.—The end.

1. *Art poetica* 333–35.
2. Virgil *Georgics* 4.176.
3. For Papinius "Sursulus" Statius, see introduction.
4. *Thebaid*, book 1.
5. In book 2.
6. In book 3.
7. In book 4.
8. In book 5.
9. The nurse of Archemorus, "beginner of doom" (also named Opheltis by Statius, books 4, 5), the infant whom Hypsipyle neglects for this task.
10. The father of Archemorus, in book 6.
11. In books 7, 9, 10.
12. In book 11.
13. The brother of Jocasta.
14. Ruler of Athens, in book 12.
15. For *θεοσέβεια*, "awe of God," with "the goodness" supplied from the next sentence.
16. Compare Gen. 1:26, "man in our image, after our likeness," and I Tim. 1:17, "immortal, invisible, the only wise God."
17. That is, the traditional cardinal virtues, as outlined in Cicero (*De officiis* 3.10), and taken over by Ambrose (*De officiis ministrorum*) and Isidore (*Etymologiae* 2.24.5–6).
18. Latin *lux*, "light," *sanctus*, "sacred," and Greek *ἅγιος*, "sacred."
19. Latin *iocunditatem castam*.
20. Compare Eph. 5:22, Col. 3:18, similarly I Pet. 3:3, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands."
21. Latin *baedus*, "young goat."
22. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 13.790.
23. Compare James 1:27: "Pure religion and undefiled."
24. For *ἕθος*.
25. Compare *ἐχλέω*, "molest"?

26. I Tim. 6:10 "For greed is the root of all evil."
27. For πᾶλις.
28. For νίκος.
29. For ἀ-νίκος, "unconquered," and χεῖρ, "violence"?
30. Latin *nulla fides regni sociis*, from Lucan, *Pharsalia* 1.92, but Statius himself (*Thebaid* 1.130) has adapted this for his *sociisque comes discordia regnis*, "discord that attends on partnered rule," in the same context.
31. Matth. 12:25, Luke 11:17.
32. Compare Luke 15:13, of the prodigal son who "wasted his substance with riotous living."
33. For ἀδρός, "fully grown"?
34. Compare ἀργός, "bright, gleaming," or Ἀργεῖος, Latin *Argus*, *Argivus*, "Greek"?
35. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1.675–677.
36. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1.624.
37. Statius *Thebaid* 2.429.
38. For φίλος.
39. For Greek ἀρχέ, "first, basic," and Latin *mors*, "death."
40. John 3:18.
41. That is, the devil.
42. For Latin *cremans*, "consuming," or *premens*, "oppressive"?
43. With "quenching" supplied.
44. For Greek θεός, "god," and Latin *suus*, "his own," or possibly for *servus*, "slave, servant"?