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**Amphiarus, Pluto, and Poetics in Statius' *Thebaid* 8**

The confrontation between Pluto and Amphiarus commencing Book Eight of Statius' *Thebaid* is not found in other narratives of Amphiarus' life. Vessey suggests that Statius innovates in his staging of this scene (1973, 71). Such innovation invites metapoetical analysis; the exigencies of the epic tradition apparently did not demand this particular confrontation. Taking my cue from Hardie's (1993) arguments on the prevalence of impersonation in Roman epic and Henderson's (1991, 69) comments on a closeness between the poet and Amphiarus, I argue that Amphiarus arriving alive to Hell as a *vir* (7.750) with his *arma* (7.819), provides both a point of identification for the poet and the means for a further and simultaneous identification of the poet with Pluto. The identification with and specularization of the hero Amphiarus enable both a meditation on epic poetics and a purposefully ambiguous statement of Statius' conception of his place in the epic succession starting from Homer.

Through much of the *Thebaid*, Amphiarus provides a point of identification for the poet. Amphiarus and the poet share a title (*vates*), a fondness for delay (*mora*), and a similarly dim view of the prospects for the war. Both of them also capitulate to war. Surrendering to *virtus*, Amphiarus kills many men during his Book Seven *aristeia* and the poet, not eschewing narration of the manly work of slaughter, often offers commentary whose moralizing force is unclear (e.g. 7.705-711). In Book Eight this relationship becomes closer. Pluto accuses Amphiarus of having come to the underworld by means of a disallowed path (*limite non licito*, 8.84-85). This accusation, whose immediate referent is the scandal of Amphiarus' arrival to the underworld still alive, connects Amphiarus to the poet and poetics through its use of the word *limes*, a word Statius pointedly uses to designate his entire epic at 1.16. Statius also uses *limes* to describe the path the Thebans said would always open up before Tydeus in battle (9.182-83). This use of *limes* in Book Nine, when considered with its uses in Books One and Eight, further joins a heroic masculinity to the work the poet does. *Limes*, multivalent, designates the way to hell, the plot of the poem, and the bloody work of a warrior on the battlefield (from which Amphiarus has just come). Accordingly then, the reader of Book Eight should see in Amphiarus the poet confronting in Pluto a tradition, prior and deadly, and yet the source of vitality, when Amphiarus addresses Pluto as *cunctis finitor maxime rerum et sator* (8.91-3).

The angered Pluto provides another point of identification for the poet. Again, comparison between Books Eight and One enables a metapoetical reading. Just as Amphiarus "falls upon" (*incidit*, 8.1) the underworld and is "warm with war's sweat" as he does so (*belli sudore calens*, 8.7), so "a Pierian fever falls upon" Statius (*Pierius menti calor incidit*, 1.3), spurring him to compose. The arrival of Amphiarus accordingly may be read as similar to the inspiration that launches the *Thebaid*, especially since it provokes an "inspired" Pluto to send Tisiphone to the upper world to "write" the rest of the *Thebaid* (8.65-77). Furthermore, the fact that Amphiarus is a *vir* who has arrived with his *arma* is of manifest programmatic importance through its reference to the *Aeneid*. Is Statius/Pluto plagued by thoughts of the glorious antecedent *Aeneid*?

Below Earth, then, Statius encourages the reader to see in both the expiring Amphiaraus and Pluto an impersonation of the poet. This simultaneous inhabiting of two personae makes an admission of belatedness (cf. Hinds 1998, 91-98) that is offset by pretensions to a heroic masculinity and, indeed, to divinity.