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The War with God: Theomachy in Roman Imperial Poetry.

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Scholarly interest in Roman imperial poetry has exploded since the 1990s: monographs, companions, and commentaries on Lucan, Seneca, Statius, Silius Italicus, and others now compete regularly for shelf-space with those on Virgil and Ovid, and nicely complement the ongoing interest in imperial prose. This welcome renewal of activity has at least two causes: the maturation of Ovid studies, which has liberated this poet from the shadow cast by Virgil and so has invited the re-evaluation of other poets in the same tradition; and contemporary tastes, which find in the stylistic and thematic preoccupations of these poets a relevance and appeal to our own times. Pramit Chaudhuri's new book on theomachy in Roman epic is a product of its times, and a welcome one: in a world that poses challenges on a daily basis to the balance of power between god(s) and state, Chaudhuri's synoptic survey of the poetics of "war with god" has particular appeal.

Chaudhuri's book contains nine chapters, plus an Introduction and Epilogue. The writing is clear and generally jargon-free (though the recent fashion for the concept of literary sublimity is in evidence; Chaudhuri defines what he calls "the theomachic sublime" at pp. 13-14, and the theme recurs in several subsequent chapters). The organization is straightforward, moving along a chronological axis, and I here provide brief comments on each chapter.

The Introduction sets out the organization of the book and locates its theme in the context of contemporary Roman religious ideas. For Chaudhuri, the "theomach" is a distinct type of hero: in the early imperial period, "the representation of heroism was ... defined less by generic conventions and more by an individual will to power that brought the hero into conflict with the gods, who still remained the clearest symbol of authority in the Roman world" (p. 13). In an increasingly authoritarian Rome, where divinization of the emperor came to be the norm, the sort of heroism modeled by the "theomach" invites reflection on the relationship between gods and mortals.

Chapter One is essentially background and summary, reviewing prominent theomachic figures in Greek epic and tragedy: Diomedes and Achilles (Homer); Capaneus (Aeschylus); Ajax (Sophocles); and Pentheus (Euripides). There is little new here, but the survey bolsters Chaudhuri's argument for the centrality of theomachy in ancient heroic myth and its literary treatment. The only real surprise is the omission of Hesiod's (or Aeschylus') Prometheus, excluded on the grounds that his "Titanic nature ... distinguishes him from the mortal antagonists of the divine" (p. 6) as examined in the book. True; but Prometheus' strong mythical association with humans suggests nonetheless that at least a brief comparison would have been worthwhile.

Chapter Two is likewise preparatory, considering theomachic themes and figures in Lucretius and Virgil. Evidence of Philip Hardie's readings of both poets is prominent throughout this chapter. Chaudhuri's discussion of Lucretius' depiction of Epicurus as a type of "theomach" is appealing, if brief; in his discussion of the *Aeneid*, Chaudhuri depicts a post-Iliadic Diomedes who was once a "theomach" but who has now learned his lesson, and Chaudhuri finds in Mezentius a would-be "theomach" who cannot quite live (or die) up to his reputation as *contemptor diuum*. These two instances of the "theomach manqué," suggests Chaudhuri, are evidence of the countervailing centrality of *pietas* for Virgil.

With Chapter Three, Chaudhuri moves out of summary/survey mode and slows down the discussion. The focus is on three episodes in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which characters pose a challenge to religious belief: Lycaon's test of Jupiter (Book 1), Pentheus' rejection of Bacchus (Book 3), and Hercules' fight with Achelous (Book 9). The tales of the Pierids, Arachne, and Niobe are also considered. Chaudhuri observes the importance of *experientia* in Ovidian theomachic narratives (pp. 86-88), and closes with a brief contextualizing conclusion on the deification of Caesar and Augustus.

The focus on Hercules in the discussion of Ovid paves the way for Chapter Four, on Seneca's *Hercules Furens*. The madness of Hercules lends itself to the rhetoric of sublimity (pp. 136-44); the other focus of the chapter is the idea that philosophy is itself a form of theomachy, at least as Seneca depicts it. This reading is engaging, if somewhat predictable.

Chapter Five finds a richer vein of unexplored material in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. The very concept of historical epic as epic without a divine apparatus puts into relief the theomachic character of the poem: "who is fighting whom, and who, if anyone, counts as divine for the purposes of this poem—the Olympian gods, Caesar, the emperors, the republicans, or even the narrator himself?" (p. 157). Strongly

influenced throughout this chapter by Day's 2013 book on Lucan and the sublime, Chaudhuri offers an accessible discussion on the many ironies inherent in a poem without gods. Predictability, however, looms ever larger.

Chapter Six has the character of "a proem in the middle": while Chapters Seven and Eight are devoted, respectively, to Silius Italicus and Statius, this preliminary chapter sets up both discussions in their Flavian context. Chaudhuri focuses on two episode types, or "case studies," central to Flavian epic: the *mache parapotamios* (battle between a mortal and a divine river); and the conflict over interpretation of omens. One practical reason for grouping the two poets together in this discussion is the virtual contemporaneity of the composition of the respective epics of each poet: thus Chaudhuri deftly avoids bogging himself down in lengthy debates about who influenced whom, and considers instead general thematic developments. Perhaps because of this chapter's more complex structure, it is (to this reader, at least) perhaps the most challenging and thought-provoking in the book; the reading of Homer's Achilles and Scamander, especially the simile at *Il.* 21.257-64, is enlightening in itself, and helps to bring out the significance of both the Scipio-Trebia (Silius) and Hippomedon-Ismenus (Statius) episodes. (Chaudhuri's discussion of Homeric similes could be further enriched by a reading of the first chapter in S. Wofford, *The Choice of Achilles: The Ideology of Figure in the Epic* [1992], surprisingly absent from the bibliography.)

Chapter Seven turns to the *Punica*, with Hannibal as its focus. The poetics of sublimity are fully present here, and to good effect: Chaudhuri aptly develops the "sustained trope of verticality" (p. 244) in Silius' poem, and notes its use to suggest a metapoetic "surpassing" of Virgil (p. 236). His analysis of Hannibal's imperial aspirations might well be subtitled "The Barbarian at the Gates."

At long last, Chapter Eight brings us to Statius: I say "at long last" because Capaneus has been a lurking presence in this book from its earliest pages. Chaudhuri successfully demonstrates how Statius uses the figure of Capaneus to mount a sustained theological debate in the *Thebaid*, and in the process to illustrate how both the epic world and epic itself have changed.

Chapter Nine is something of a miscellany, bringing together episodes involving impiety that do not quite fit into the earlier chapters. The main interest here lies in the truism that responses to authoritarianism and the excesses of political power are to be found throughout the literature of the period covered by this study, and are not confined to the limits of a single genre. Finally, a brief Epilogue surveys the reception of the theme of theomachy, and so pays tribute to one of Chaudhuri's advisors, David Quint.

I now turn to two stylistic observations: For reasons that elude this reviewer, Chaudhuri has settled on the term “theomach” to describe the characters who are his focus. But it is ugly to read, and even uglier to say—why not just transliterate the Greek and use *theomachos*? And Chaudhuri is inordinately fond of using contractions in what is otherwise formal expository prose. Thus, in a 10-page excerpt chosen at random (pp. 136–45) I noted expressions like “but it’s the dimension of height in particular that’s so inherently connotative” at least ten times. Where was the copy-editor?

The format of Chaudhuri’s book is both appealing and risky: appealing, because readers interested in, e.g., Lucan, need not read the chapter on Silius, or vice versa; I can easily imagine assigning individual chapters to students in a seminar on imperial poetry. Its riskiness lies in the predictability to which I have already alluded. Once the thesis is presented, the rest is execution; and the execution is generally static. The quality manifests itself in some chapters more than in others; nonetheless, given the heftiness of the book (328 large pages of text, plus indices, appendices, etc.), the reader cannot be blamed for wondering whether the chapter on Seneca adds very much, or whether the catch-all in Chapter Nine might not have worked better as a stand-alone article.

All in all, however, this is a worthwhile and smart book. Chaudhuri has done an excellent job of laying out his argument and pursuing it along a literary-historical course. This monograph has well earned its place on that ever-burgeoning shelf of books on Roman imperial poetry.

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