ARCTOS

Acta Philologica Fennica

VOL. XLVIII

HELSINKI 2014

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IN SEARCH OF PEER SUPPORT: CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON SISTERHOOD IN ROMAN IMPERIAL EPIC

Elina Pyy

Introduction

The significance of familial relationships in the Roman politics has been widely discussed in numerous studies concerning the Roman late Republic and the Principate. It has been shown that among the political elite, in particular, the connections and allegiances provided by family were of immeasurable value. Without undermining the importance of marriages in forming political unions, the bonds of blood often carried the most lasting significance in the politically unstable environment.[1] During the civil war period in particular, familial relations played a considerable role in power struggles between the *optimates* and the *populares*, and between the triumvirs.[2]

[1] J. P. Hallett, *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family*, Princeton 1984, 214, 224–6. Hallett emphasises the volatile and temporary nature of marriages, and argues that the stories of loyal and trustworthy wives in the Roman historiography are, at least partially, unrealistic illusions and attempts to shape reality through representation (see App. *BC* 4,39–40; Vell. 2,67,2; Dio 47,7,4–5). See also Valerius Maximus' exemplary stories on spousal love, where loyalty is attributed mostly to husbands, not wives (Val. Max. 4,6; 6,7).

[2] See, e.g., J. Martin, "Familie, Verwandtschaft und Staat in der römischen Republik", in J. Spielvogel (ed.), *Res Publica reperta. Zur Verfassung und Gesellschaft der römischen Republik und des frühen Prinzipats, Festschrift für Jochen Bleicken zum 75. Geburtstag*, Stuttgart 2002, 13–24; R. A. Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*, London 1994; S. Dixon, "A Family Business. Women's Role in Patronage and Politics at Rome 80–44 B.C.", *C&M* 34 (1983) 91–111; S. Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, London 1988; J. P. Hallett, "Matriot Games? Cornelia, Mother of the Gracchi, and the forging of family-oriented political values", in F. McHardy – E. Marshall (eds.), *Women's Influence on Classical Civilization*, London 2004, 26–40; T. Hillard, "Republican Politics, Women, and the Evidence", *Helios* 16 (1989) 165–82.

Parent-child relationships were, of course, extremely important in Roman politics and public life. Not only fathers, who wielded *patriapotestas* over their adult children, but mothers, too, often held major *auctoritas* in the lives of their children and could significantly advance or hinder their sons' political aspirations.[3] Nevertheless, parents were certainly not the only relatives that were in a position to influence the public life and the political career of their sons. In effect, mutually beneficial relationships between brothers and sisters are a characteristic feature of the historiography of the late Republic and the early Principate.[4] Clodia Metelli, for instance, was well-known for her close relationship with her brother, P. Clodius Pulcher, whose subversive politics she was rumoured to have actively endorsed in the 60's BC.[5]

A more flattering image is accorded to Octavia, who is usually not only depicted as a flawlessly virtuous woman, but also praised for offering immeasurable aid and support to her brother during the difficult years of the 30's BC.[6] It appears that in good or bad, blood was indeed thicker than water in the Roman political machinations. The men of the elite benefitted from their sisters' social connections, and the sisters were assessed by the reputation of their brothers. What is particularly intriguing is that the tensions and the aggravations that often characterise brotherly relationships both in Roman recorded history and in the legendary stories, are mostly absent from the literary depictions of Roman sister-brother relationships – presumably because the gender difference eliminated the threat of direct competition between sisters and brothers.[7]

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[3] Hallett 1984 (above n. 1), 243–60; Dixon 1988 (above n. 2), 168–208.

[4] A.-C. Harders, *Suavissima Soror. Untersuchungen zu den Bruder-Schwester-Beziehungen in der römischen Republik*, München 2008 (see 51–60, 163–312 in particular).

[5] Cic. *Att*. 2,12,2; Cic. *Cael*. 20,50; 32,78; 50. See M. B. Skinner, "Clodia Metelli", *TAPhA* 11 (1983) 273–87; M. B. Skinner, *Clodia Metelli. The Tribune's Sister*, Oxford 2011 (1–19 in particular); J. L. Butrica, "Clodius the Pulcher in Catullus and Cicero", *CQ* 52 (2002) 507–16; Harders (above n. 4), 215–48. Skinner (cit. 230) proposes that Clodia's bad reputation, based strongly on Cicero's public defamation of her, was due to the fact that she openly took her brother's side in the political rivalries, regardless of the tension between P. Clodius Pulcher and Q. Metellus Celer. On Clodia's role as an intermediary between her brother and his adversaries, see Cic. *Att.* 2,9,1; 2,14,1.

[6] Plut. *Ant*. 31,2–3; 35,1–3; 52,2. Octavia's role as a mediator between her husband and her brother was at its most significant in 37 BC, when the treaty of Tarentum was formed. Plut. *Ant*. 35,1–4, Dio 48,54, App. *BC* 5,93–5. See Harders (above n. 4), 281–8; Bauman (above n. 2), 93–7.

[7] See, e.g., Harders (above n. 4), 71–86.

The value and significance of sibling relationships are reflected not only in the historiographic sources of the late Republic and the Principate but in Roman poetry, too. In particular, in epic poetry of the early Principate, the sisters of the protagonists are often given a personal character and a voice of their own. Nor are they merely supplementary to the depiction of their brothers, but agents in their own right, who actively contribute to the development of the narrative.

What is particularly interesting is that instead of only depicting relationships between sisters and brothers, the Roman epic poets thoroughly describe relationships between two sisters. The predominatly male viewpoint that marks sibling relationships in Roman historiography is complemented in epic with familial relationships between women. The sisterhood of Dido and Anna in the *Aeneid* is one of the most elaborate depictions of an intimate human relationship in the whole of Roman literature. Ovid's version of the myth of Procne and Philomela, for its part, can be read as a story about a strong sisterly bond and the female opposition to male violence and domination.[8] As for Flavian epic, Statius' two pairs of sisters in the *Thebaid* – Argia and Deipyle, Antigone and Ismene – are deliberately contrasted with the incendiary brotherly relationship between Polynices and Eteocles.[9] It appears that in Roman imperial epic, pairs of sisters enable the poets to discuss the multiple issues of familial relationships from a female perspective that is rare in most genres of Roman literature.

[8] The recurring rape theme and the discourses of power in the *Metamorphoses* have been widely discussed in postmodern feminist studies; the case of Procne and Philomela is often used as an example. See, e.g., L. C. Curran, "Rape and Rape Victims in the *Metamorphoses*", in J. Peradotto – J. P. Sullivan (eds.), *Women in the Ancient World. The Arethusa Papers,* Albany 1984, 265–86; M. J. Cutter, "Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in the Color Purple", *Melus* 25 (2000) 161–80; E. Marder, "Disarticulate Voices: Feminism and Philomela", *Hypatia* 7 (1992) 148–66; A. Richlin, "Reading Ovid's Rapes", in A. Richlin (ed.), *Pornography and Representation in Ancient Greece and Rome*, Oxford, 158–79; C. Segal, "Philomela's Web and the Pleasures of the Text: Reader and Violence in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid", *Arion* 5 (1994) 9–41; B. E. Stirrup, "Techniques of Rape: Variety of Wit in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*", *G&R* 24 (1977) 170–84.

[9] See, e.g., F. Bessone, "Voce femminile e tradizione elegiaca nella Tebaide di Stazio", in A. Aloni – E. Berardi – G. Besso – S. Cecchin (eds.), *I sette a Tebe. Dal mito alla letteratura. Atti del seminario Internazionale, Torino 21–22 febbraio 2001*, Bologna 2002, 18–218; R. Lesueur, "Les femmes dans la Thébaide de Stace", in M. Woronoff (ed.), *L'univers épique. Rencontres avec l'antiquité classique* II, Paris 1992, 230–242; A. La Penna, "Tipi e modelli femminili nella poesia dell'epoca dei Flavi (Stazio, Silio Italico, Valerio Flacco)", in *Atti del congresso di studi Vespasianei*, Rieti 1981, 223–51; D. Vessey, *Statius and the* Thebaid, Cambridge 1973.

From the historian's perspective, the most intriguing matter about these epic representations of sisterly relationships is how they reflect the family values and ideas of contemporary Roman society. It is crucial to notice that chronologically, Virgil and Statius' epics are more than a century apart, and that during these hundred years Roman society went through considerable changes in the political, economic and ideological fields. It is only natural to presume that to some extent, the structural changes of society affected family life as well. This can be observed, for instance, in the Augustan legislation concerning marriage, reproduction and sexual morals that was in a sense a direct reaction to the social phenomena of the late Republic.[10]

The Flavian emperors appear to have had similar concerns about the Romans' family life as did Augustus – this is likewise reflected in the legislation of the era. In the field of family politics, the most important singular act was doubtless Domitian's renewal of *lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis*.[11] This act conveys both a message that the Augustan moral legislation had been quite inefficient, and a message that this particular aspect of it was considered important enough to be reestablished.

Nevertheless, the Flavian dynasty appears to have had no more success in their attempts to stabilise Roman family life than Augustus had. Low reproductivity and high divorce rates are matters that – despite the relative peace and prosperity among the Roman elite – are often associated with the end of the first century CE.[12] These matters are, of course, very difficult to examine let alone prove due to the lack of statistics that would offer reliable numbers about the Roman family life.

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[10] For further analysis of the family values and sexual morals during the Augustan period, see P. Csillag, *The Augustan Laws on Family Relations,* Budapest 1976; G. Rizzelli, *Le donne nell'esperienza giuridica di Roma antica: il controllo dei comportamenti sessuali. Una raccolta di testi,* Lecce 2000, 41–7; Dixon 1992, 78–79. As for the family values in the Flavian period, see A. Agoustakis, "*Per hunc utero quem linquis nostro*: Mothers in Flavian epic", in L. Hackworth Petersen – P. Salzman-Mitchell (eds.), *Mothering and Motherhood in Ancient Greece and Rome*, Austin 2012, 205–24; A. J. Boyle, "Reading Flavian Rome", in A. J. Boyle – W. J. Dominik (eds.), *Flavian Rome. Culture, Image, Text*, Leiden – Boston 2003, 1–67 (see 16); C. Newlands, "Mothers is Statius' Poetry: Sorrows and Surrogates", *Helios* 33 (2006) 203–28.

[11] Boyle (above n. 10) 16.

[12] See Boyle (above n. 10), 24–7, Newlands (above n. 10) 221.

It has been argued that the decreasing birthrates, in effect, led to a degradation in the reputation of motherhood in the Flavian age.[13] In contrast with the preceding Julio-Claudian period, motherhood had no significant part in the public art or politics of the Flavian emperors.[14] Carole Newlands suggests that the authoritative role of a Roman mother that had risen to unprecedented heights during the late Republic and the Julio-Claudian era, visibly declined during the late first century.[15] The hypothesis is rather daring and impossible to discuss in depth in the limits of this paper. Newlands' argument is based mainly on the negative representation of motherhood in the poetry of the Flavian period, particularly in Statius.[16] Obviously, the limited amount of source material can be misleading for various reasons, and I emphasise that no definitive conclusions about familial dynamics during the Flavian era will be made in this paper.

Nevertheless, Newlands' reading of Statius is particularly interesting considering the scope of my study, since I will be examining epic as my primary source material, and Statius as one of the most prominent authors of the genre. The representation of motherhood in Roman epic can be compared to the representations of other familial relationships in the genre – those between women in particular. Therefore, ideas concerning motherhood and its putative decline might be useful and enlightening when studying family dynamics in the epic depictions of sisterhood.

The *Aeneid*: Dido and Anna

Before digging deeper in Flavian epic's family dynamics, it is necessary to examine its background by studying its Virgilian and Ovidian models more closely. The most famous representation of a sisterly relationship in Roman epic is doubtlessly that of Dido and Anna in the *Aeneid*. Surprisingly, it has not been one of the most popular topics in the studies of Virgil's epic; most of the earlier studies

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[13] Newlands (above n. 10), 221.

[14] Newlands (above n. 10), 203.

[15] Newlands (above n. 10), 204–5, 221; compare, for instance, with the representation of maternal authority in Augustan epic: e.g. A. Brazouski, "Amata and her Maternal Right", *Helios* 18 (1991) 129–36; J. W. Zarker, "Vergil's Trojan and Italian *Matres*", *Vergilius* 24 (1978) 15–24.

[16] Thus also L. Micozzi, "*Pathos* e figure materne nella *Tebaide* di Stazio", *Maia* 50 (1998) 95–121. Recent discussion on the subject can be found in Agoustakis (above n. 10).

focusing on the subject are brief and somewhat outdated.[17] Nevertheless, they do make some perceptive points about Virgil's technique in depicting emotional and psychological overtones in his narrative. What is important is that in these studies – the articles of Swallow, Barrett and West, for instance – Anna is treated as a significant character in her own right.

Anna is present throughout Dido's story in book four of the *Aeneid*. Her first significant act is to convince Dido of what she is all too willing to believe – that falling in love with Aeneas and forgetting her vows of chastity would not violate her pact with the gods but rather bring happiness and success to both Dido and her people.[18] The episode makes evident Anna's strong influence on Dido and the confidential relationship between the two: After Anna has finished her speech it is stated that *His dictis incensum animum inflammavit amore / spemque dedit dubiae menti solvitque pudorem*.[19] Moreover, the very fact that Dido opens up to Anna so freely speaks for the confidential nature of their relationship. In effect, the first time Anna is mentioned, she is characterised as *unanima* in relation to Dido; the sharer of her mind.[20]

The second time Anna appears in a crucial role is upon Aeneas' departure from Carthage. The heartbroken queen begs her sister to go and talk to the man, in order to delay his departure. Anna appears to have a special connection with Aeneas, or so Dido believes, stating that *solam nam perfidus ille / te colere, arcanos etiam tibi credere sensus*.[21] For one reason or another, Dido seems to think that Anna may wield some power over Aeneas that she herself does not.

Barrett considers this passage to be an implication that Anna, too, might have been having an affair with Aeneas – or at least that this is what Dido assumes.[22] It is worthwhile noting that there actually was an earlier tradition according to which Anna, not Dido, had a romantic relationship with Aeneas. Servius mentions this alternative tradition, stating that Varro favoured this version of the

[17] See, e.g., E. Swallow, "Anna Soror", *The Classical Weekly* (1951) 14–50; A. Barrett, "Anna's Conduct in the *Aeneid* 4", *Vergilius* 16 (1970) 21–5; G. West, "Vergil's helpful sisters: Anna and Iuturna in the Aeneid", *Vergilius* 25 (1979) 10–19.

[18] Verg. *Aen*. 4,31–53.

[19] Verg. *Aen.* 4,54–55.

[20] Verg. *Aen*. 4,8.

[21] Verg. *Aen*. 4,421–22.

[22] Barrett (above n. 17), 23.

story.[23] As Barrett argues, Virgil's allusion to the alternative version of the myth is most likely deliberate, and the probable reason is that it deepens the psychological portrait of Dido – having a mental breakdown, she suspects her own sister of treachery and unfaithfulness.[24]

However, what is more interesting than the putative love triangle is the elaborate choice of words that the poet uses to convey a vivid psychological picture of the relationship between the two sisters. Dido is pathetic and selfish; she does not care for anything but her own pain and does not mind putting Anna in an uncomfortable position. Moreover, she blatantly exploits Anna's worry and affection; *miserere sororis* implies that Dido does not command Anna as a queen but begs her as a sister.[25]

And Anna obeys, albeit reluctantly: ironically *she* is now depicted as *miserrima soror* as she carries messages back and forth (*fertque refertque*) between Dido and Aeneas.[26] The unbalanced power dynamics of their relationship are evident in the episode. Even though Dido is the queen, Anna appears to be the adult. Whereas Dido is needy, she is supportive; when Dido is weak, she must stay strong.

As Dido sinks deeper in despair, she breaks the bond of trust and confidentiality between herself and Anna. When the queen has premonitions of her death, Virgil explicitly states that she does not mention these visions to anyone – *non ipsi effata sorori*.[27] Instead, she deliberately conceals her suicidal plans and deceives Anna into thinking that she is trying to cure her hopeless love by means of magic. Dido's choice of words, *gratare sorori*, is a striking echo of *miserere sorori* only thirty-two lines earlier.[28] Once again, Dido expects Anna to do whatever it occurs to her in her madness to ask; and once again, Anna does. The poet states that *non tamen Anna novis praetexere funera sacris / germanam credit, nec tantos mente furores / concipit aut graviora timet quam morte Sychaei*.[29]

These lines imply that Dido has gone through a breakdown before, at the time of her husband's death, and that Anna took care of her then. Presumably, it is

[23] Serv. *Aen*. 4,682; 5,4.

[24] Barrett (above n. 17), 23–4.

[25] Verg. *Aen*. 4,435.

[26] Verg. *Aen*. 4,437–38.

[27] Verg. *Aen*. 4,456.

[28] Verg. *Aen*. 4,478.

[29] Verg. *Aen*. 4,500–502.

the very memory of this earlier incident that keeps Anna on the alert and makes her yield to her sister's every need. The social dynamics between Anna and Dido are determined by Dido's character that is *varium et mutabile*, and by Anna's fear that her sister will go overboard.[30] What establishes the irony is that Anna is worried, but not worried enough. Her caring and help is supposed to ease Dido's pain but instead she ends up aiding her sister in carrying out her suicidal schemes. In the end, Dido is unpredictable even to the person closest to her.

Anna's cup of bitterness overflows in a tumultuous rush of grief when she hears Dido's dying wail and storms into the room to find her sister severely wounded. Anna, who is usually characterised as a rational, practical and unemotional character, is anything but in her last speech to Dido.[31] Virgil's tendency to introduce a hint of dramatic, tragic pathos in his epic can be clearly observed in this speech:

> *"hoc illud, germana, fuit? me fraude petebas? / - - comitemne sororem / sprevisti moriens? Eadem me ad fata vocasses; / idem ambas ferro dolor atque eadem hora tulisset. / his etiam struxi manibus patriosque vocavi / voce deos, sic te ut posita, crudelis, abessem? / exstinxti te meque, soror, populumque patresque / Sidonios urbemque tuam."*[32]

What is more remarkable than Anna's emotional turmoil, however, is the bitter and accusatory tone of her speech. Although she is grief-stricken by the loss of her beloved sister, she also bitterly blames Dido for deceiving her, for leaving her alone and for destroying their city and their people. It seems as if at the moment of Dido's death, Anna is freed from her paralysing fear that something bad might happen to her sister. Now, the worst *has* happened to Dido, and in a state of shock, Anna's resentment of Dido bursts forth.

That, however, does not mean that she did not dearly love Dido until the end. Virgil captures the incongruity of a close sibling relationship when Anna climbs the pyre and cradles her sister's body in her embrace. After letting out her bitterness and her grudge, she lovingly wipes Dido's blood away and kisses her goodbye.[33] Despite Dido's deception, and despite the hopeless situation in which

[30] For further discussion, see Swallow (above n. 17), 149; West (above n. 17), 18.

[31] See, e.g., Swallow (above n. 17), 147–9; West (above n. 17), 18.

[32] Verg. *Aen*. 4,675; 4,677–83.

[33] Verg. *Aen.* 4,683–85.

she has left her, Anna cannot help but miss the sister she has lost. In a sense, Dido's death removes the underlying tensions and restores the power balance in their relationship. In the end, Anna gets the last word, but it is not one of bitterness and blame but of sincere longing.

The *Metamorphoses*: Procne and Philomela

Sisterly devotion in challenging circumstances is a central topic in book six of the *Metamorphoses*, too, where Ovid relates the myth about Procne and Philomela. In the gory and macabre story, the poet simultaneously discusses various moral and philosophical themes: Most importantly, the crossing of natural and divine laws, the excessive use of violence to justify one's aspirations, and the power of speech.[34] The strong influence of Hellenistic poetry – Apollonius of Rhodes and Callimachus, in particular – can be observed in Ovid's version of this Greek myth.[35] The poet puts considerable emphasis on the grotesque, sensual, emotional and erotic elements; moreover, the pathos and passion expressed in familial rela-

[34] The breaking of *ius* and *fas* is an omnipresent theme in the story; it is most elaborately expressed in Philomela's accusations to Tereus; *omnia turbasti*, she cries, referring to Tereus' treachery towards her father and to his position as her own brother-in-law (6,537). Later, the distortion of all things natural is most aptly shown in Procne's Medea-like resolution to kill her own child. The power of speech, too, is repetitively brought to discussion; see, e.g. the episode where Tereus cuts Philomela's tongue off after she threatens to tell of his actions (6,549–62). Later, when Procne reads the woven message sent to her by Philomela, she, in turn, is muted by outrage: *et (mirum potuisse) silet: dolor ora repressit, / verbaque quaerenti satis indignantia linguae/defuerunt* (6,583–85).

[35] Hellenistic poetry was a crucial model that influenced to some extent all the poets of the Augustan period. As Fowler points out, the depiction of personal passions and the particulars of life were among the most important and influential characteristics of the Hellenistic aestheticts. The heightened expressions of emotion, and their physical expressions, as well as the emphasised tendency towards pathos, eroticism and the grotesque – themes that are central to the visual arts of the Hellenistic period – can be found in the works of Apollonius, Callimachus and Theocritus. B. H. Fowler, *The Hellenistic Aesthetic*, Madison 1989 (see, e.g., 3–4, 32, 79, 85, 97). These themes are clearly reflected in Augustan poetry; the elaborate use of Hellenistic elements is very typical to Ovid's love elegies and to the *Metamorphoses*, in particular. In the *Amores*, Ovid explicitly names Callimachus as his third most important poetic model, after Homer and Hesiod (Ov. *am*. 1,15). For further discussion of Ovid's relationship to Hellenistic models, Callimachus in particular, see R. Armstrong, *Ovid and His Love Poetry*, London 2005, 19–20.

tionships – something that is characteristic of the *Metamorphoses* as a whole – is conspicuous in the story about Procne and Philomela.

For this paper, the most intriguing themes of the story are the conflicting loyalties in different familial relationships, and their breaking. These issues, in effect, characterise the tale from the beginning to the end. Firstly, Tereus breaks his bonds of loyalty with his father-in-law Pandion by abducting, raping and savagely abusing his daughter Philomela. Simultaneously, he betrays his wife Procne by violating her beloved sister and lying about her fate. When captive Philomela finally manages to send a word to her sister, Procne instantly turns against her husband, claiming that *scelus est pietas in coniuge Tereo*.[36] The breaking of familial bonds climaxes in the final episode of the story, where vengeful Procne slaughters her son Itys, and the sisters offer the child as a meal to the father.

After all, the only familial relationship that stays strong throughout the story is that between the two sisters. Moreover, a continuous fear of damaging that special relationship is an intrinsic element of the story. During the course of events where she is abducted, raped and finally saved, Philomela repeatedly expresses her concern that by being violated by Tereus she has been untrue to her sister. *paelex ego facta sororis, / tu geminus coniunx, hostis mihi debita Procne*, she cries to the rapist.[37] And when Procne comes to her salvation, at first Philomela feels ashamed. Ovid relates that *non attollere contra / sustinet haec oculos paelex sibi visa sororis*.[38]

But Philomela underestimates Procne's sisterly devotion. Ultimately, it is a feeling strong enough to overcome even her motherly love and make her take her son's life. Ovid deliberately contrasts Procne's affections for Itys and Philomela when he depicts her decision-making:

> *sed simul ex nimia mentem pietate labare / sensit, ab hoc iterum est ad vultus versa sororis / inque vicem spectans ambos "cur admovet" inquit / "alter blanditias, rapta silet altera lingua? / quam vocat hic matrem, cur non vocat illa sororem? - -"*.[39]

[36] Ov. *met*. 6,635.

[37] Ov. *met*. 6,537–38.

[38] Ov. *met*. 6,605–06.

[39] Ov. *met*. 6,629–33.

The bond of loyalty between the sisters, thus overrules all other familial bonds, including that between mother and child.[40] Procne's devotion to Philomela makes her carry out her destructive schemes that finally end up with the destruction of both the family and the dynasty. In this aspect, she resembles Virgil's Anna. Although Procne, unlike Anna, is well aware of her actions' destructive results from the beginning, the two women are alike in the respect that they are both willing to do whatever it takes to restore to their miserable sister some dignity and peace of mind – no matter what it means to their other familial relationships or to the continuance of the family line. Due to the strong influence of Hellenistic literary techniques and aesthetic ideals, the story of Procne and Philomela has even more pathos and passion than that of Anna and Dido. However, the basic idea – the unbreakable bond of trust between two sisters – appears to be the same in both poems.

The representation of sisterly devotion in these two stories within Augustan epic, therefore, seems rather consistent: In a turbulent and violent world, peer support from a sibling of the same age and gender appears precious and indispensable. There are tensions in the sisterly relationships, too – guilt, fear and bitterness – but in the end, these are not severe enough to come between the sisters. In her moment of despair, Dido calls upon Anna alone.[41] And when Philomela finds a way to convey her cry for help, she, though ashamed and afraid, sends a word to Procne and no one else.[42] In their hour of misery and humiliation, the heroines of Augustan epic find solace in their sisters' embrace.

The *Punica*: Dido and Anna

In some aspects, the situation is remarkably different in the epics of the Flavian period. A valuable point of comparison is Silius Italicus' *Punica*, where the poet relates the fate of Anna after Dido's death. Intertextual elements play a strong role in Silius' version of the story – as Dietrich notices, Silius takes various details directly from the *Aeneid*.[43] The episode as a whole is a respectful nod towards his

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[40] Lateiner briefly analyses Procne's motherhood and her cruel behaviour towards her son in his article about complex mother-figures in the *Metamorphoses*; D. Lateiner, "*Procul este parentes*: Mothers in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*", *Helios* 33 (2006) 189–201 (see 194–5 in particular).

[41] Verg. *Aen*. 4,634–36.

[42] Ov. *met*. 6,572–79.

[43] See J. S. Dietrich, "Rewriting Dido: Flavian Responses to Aeneid 4", *Prudentia* 36 (2004)

poetic predecessor. Nevertheless, when we examine the social dynamics between the sisters in Silius' account a little more closely, and compare it with Virgil's, notable differences can be observed.

In the *Punica*, Anna is first introduced as Anna Perenna, a river nymph whose cult was honoured in ancient Latium.[44] In book eight, Juno sends her to boost Hannibal's morale in the war, and in this context, the poet relates her background.[45]

According to Silius', after Dido's death, the throne of Carthage was seized by African prince Iarbas, and *tepido fugit Anna rogo*.[46] After years of wandering in exile, Anna finally strays to the coast of Italy. By chance, she encounters Aeneas, now the king of the Latins, who recognizes the exile and invites her to stay at his home.

However, as soon as Anna begins to feel comfortable among the *Aeneadae*, the story takes a grim turn. In a dream, Dido's ghost appears to Anna, warning her about Lavinia's jealousy and urging her to leave the palace immediately. Panic-stricken, Anna rushes into the dead of the night and throws herself in the Numicus river close by. According to Silius' version, she is taken among the crowd of water nymphs, and thereafter honoured as a divinity.[47]

One of the most remarkable differences between the versions of Silius and Virgil is Anna's tangible loneliness in the *Punica*. Dido's death has cast Anna into a life of danger and uncertainty; she lives on the mercy of strangers' and is uncertain of what each new day will bring.[48] Silius emphasises Anna's lack of control by describing her as *donec iactatam laceris, miserabile*.[49] Thus, the poet deepens the psychological portrait of Anna by representing how helpless she is without Dido's protection. When Dido was alive, Anna was always taking care of her; now that she is dead, Anna realises that she, too, depended upon Dido. The unbalanced social dynamics between the sisters, clearly observable in the *Aeneid*, are thereby called to question by Silius.

1–30 (see 2–7).

[44] On Anna Perenna, see also Ov. *fasti* 3.

[45] Sil. *Pun*. 8,25–38.

[46] Sil. *Pun*. 8,55.

[47] The whole story covers the beginning of Book 8 from 8,50 to 8,201.

[48] On Anna's constant otherness, see A. Agoustakis, *Motherhood and the Other. Fashioning Female Power in Flavian Epic*, Oxford 2010, 140–2.

[49] Sil. *Pun*. 8,67.

Moreover, the guilt that Anna feels over Dido's death does not seem to grow weaker as the years pass. The beloved sister now exists only in her memories, but they are excruciating and constantly present. Twice in the *Punica* Anna expresses her wish to have died together with Dido[50] – and, when she relates her story to Aeneas, she claims that she actually thrice tried to throw herself on the same sword with her sister.[51] As every reader of Virgil knows, no such thing happens in the *Aeneid* – why is Silius emphasising a detail that is contradictory to Virgil's version? Is he deliberately altering the tradition? Or does he wish to convey an impression that Anna is either deliberately or unconsciously misleading Aeneas?

The second option appears more plausible considering Silius' detailed faithfulness to Virgil's story in other aspects. If he, as a well-versed poet and admirer of Virgil, breaks away from the Virgilian tradition, there should be a good reason for it. The reason, I propose, is to be found in Anna's confused state of mind, constantly haunted by guilt and self-accusations. These feelings appear to guide all her actions. When she speaks of Dido's crazed behavior after Aeneas' departure, Aeneas asks: *sed cur - - tempore tali / incustodito saevire dedistis amori?*.[52] Whereas the tone of Aeneas' question is calm and neutral, the same cannot be said about Anna's answer. Silius states that *contra sic infit, volvens vix murmur anhelum / inter singultus labrisque trementibus Anna*.[53] Remarkably, it is

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[50] Sil. *Pun*. 8,65–6; 8,82–3.

[51] Sil. *Pun*. 8,155–56: *ter diro fueram conata incumbere ferro, / ter cecidi exanimae membris revoluta sororis.* The emphasis put on the sword itself as the means of suicide seems significant. Right before expressing her desire to throw herself on it, Anna describes Dido's death stating that '*haec dicens ensem media in praecordia adegit, / ensem Dardanii quaesitum in pignus amoris*' (Sil. *Pun*. 8,148–49). This is a clear allusion to the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas' sword is described as *ensemque - - Dardanium, non hos quaesitum munus in usus* (Verg. *Aen*. 4,646–77). It carries with it strong symbolic overtones, standing for Aeneas' Trojanness, manliness and virility. Therefore, Dido's suicide by the means of this particular sword appears as a terrifying distortion of her relationship with Aeneas (See P. Hardie, *Rumour and Renown: Representations of* Fama *in Western Literature*, Cambridge 2012, 97; E. Pyy, *Feminam et arma cano: Gender and Roman Identity in War-Centred Epic of the Early Principate*, Academic dissertation, University of Helsinki 2014, 272, 284). In the *Punica*, Silius follows this tradition; he also mentions the sword in the beginning of his epic, when he depicts Dido's statue in her temple (*ante pedes ensis Phrygius iacet*, Sil. *Pun*. 1,91).

[52] Sil. *Pun.* 8,112–13.

[53] Sil. *Pun*. 8,114–15.

not the memory of Dido's death that makes Anna break into tears, but her own inability to protect her sister.

Furthermore, her explanation is focused on apologising for her own actions. Anna answers that when Dido committed suicide, she herself was carrying out piacular rites to turn around a bad omen. In a dream, she had seen Sychaeus from the underworld claiming Dido as his own. After waking up she, afraid of her sister's life, went to purify herself in a running stream. Alas, in the meantime, Dido actually took her own life.[54]

When Anna relates the finding of Dido, she stresses her own despair and misery. She refers to herself as *infelix* – an articulate allusion to Virgilian Dido – and to her manner of moving as *lymphatus*, 'frenzied' or 'crazed'.[55] Nevertheless, when her story has won Aeneas' sympathy, Silius states that *iamque omnes luctus omnesque e pectore curas / dispulerat, Phrygiis nec iam amplius advena tectis illa videbatur.*[56] It appears that Anna's misery is not so much due to Dido's death, which by now has become a tragic but an irreversible event of the past, but to her own harrowing feelings of guilt. As the ending of the story reveals, it is not Aeneas but herself that Anna is trying to convince, and, for a moment, it looks like she succeeds.

However, Anna's guilt comes back to her in a dream, and this time, in the most powerful form of all – that of her dead sister. In the night, Dido's ghost appears to Anna, with a face of grief and sorrow,[57] blaming her:

> *"his, soror, in tectis longae indulgere quieti, / heu nimium secura, potes? Nec, quae tibi fraudes / tendantur, quae circumstent discrimina, cernis? / ac nondum nostro infaustos generique soloque / Laomedonteae noscis telluris alumnos? / dum caelum rapida stellas vertigine volvet, / lunaque fraterno lustrabit lumine terras, / pax nulla Aeneadas inter Tyriosque manebit."*[58]

[54] Sil. *Pun*. 8,119–49.

[55] Sil. *Pun*. 8,152; 8,153. Compare also with Virgil's depiction of Amata's emotional turmoil in Book 7: *tum vero infelix ingentibus excita monstris / immensam sine more furit lymphata per urbem* (Verg. *Aen.* 7,376–77).

[56] Sil. *Pun*. 8,162–64.

[57] *Tristi cum Dido aegerrima vultu / has visa* (Sil. *Pun*. 8,166–67).

[58] Sil. *Pun*. 8,168–75.

In his account of Anna's dream, Silius reverses the situation that is familiar to the reader from the end of *Aeneid* IV, replacing Anna's bitter speech to dying Dido with Dido's accusative speech to sleeping Anna. In this insightful intertextual play, Dido's ghost becomes a reminder of what constantly haunts Anna: The fear that she might have betrayed her sister's trust. Indeed, if she did not when she failed to protect Dido from suicide, she certainly has now, befriending Aeneas and staying under his roof. This realisation is enough to drive tormented Anna out of her bed and make her drown herself in the river. With this desperate act, Anna hopes to finally fulfill her promise to die with her sister, and sets herself free from loneliness and guilt.

Silius' account of the relationship between Anna and Dido, therefore, is much grimmer and gloomier than Virgil's. Codependence and guilt associated with a close sibling relationship are strongly stressed and, in the end, become the defining characteristics of the Carthaginians' sisterhood. Instead of the security and comfort of a peer relationship, Silius stresses the anxiety caused by its loss. Without Dido, Anna is completely alone in the world. If she was not utterly happy with her difficult and demanding sister, she is certainly lost without her.

The *Thebaid*: Ismene and Antigone

Keeping in mind the differences between Silius and Virgil, it is intriguing to compare the representation of sisterhood in the *Punica* with an epic of Silius' coeval Statius. The sensitive depiction of female characters in the *Thebaid* has been discussed by scholars before – as Lesueur, Bessone and Micozzi notice, Statius paints vivid pictures of daughters, wives and mothers in the midst of epic warfare.[59] Statius' epic is particularly rich in sisters: There are two pairs of sisters in significant roles in the *Thebaid*, the Argive princesses Argia and Deipyle, and the Theban princesses Antigone and Ismene. Of these pairs, the relationship between

[59] Lesueur (above n. 9); Bessone (above n. 9); Micozzi (above n. 16), 95–121. Statius' ability and tendency to include female voices in his poetry has been noted also by Newlands, La Penna and Malamud: Newlands (above n. 10); La Penna (above n. 9); M. Malamud, "Happy Birthday, Dead Lucan: (P)raising the Dead in *Silvae* 2.7", in A. J. Boyle (ed.), *Roman Literature and Ideology: Ramus Essays for J.P. Sullivan*, Berwick 1995, 169–98 (see 188). See also G. Mazzoli, "Giocasta in prima linea", in A. Aloni – E. Berardi – G. Besso – S. Cecchin (eds.), *I sette a Tebe. Dal mito alla letteratura. Atti del seminario Internazionale, Torino 21–22 febbraio 2001*, Bologna 2002, 155–68.

Antigone and Ismene is more elaborately depicted, and I will be focusing on it, using, however, the Argives as a point of comparison.

Throughout the *Thebaid*, Antigone and Ismene are represented as a sort of antithesis to their quarreling brothers. At first sight, they appear as the only sane and virtuous persons in the deeply disturbed royal family of Thebes – in this matter, Statius clearly relies on the model of Euripides and Seneca.[60] Statius' Oedipus is a grotesque version of a Roman *paterfamilias*; delusional and furious, he addresses the Furies and begs destruction for his sons and his household.[61] As for Jocasta, in her attempts to reconcile her sons, she appears more like a demented bacchant than a caring mother, and ends up distorting the role of a respectable Roman *matrona*.[62] Eteocles and Polynices, for their part, embody relentless anger and selfish greed, the horrors of the fraternal strife.

Compared to the other members of their family, Antigone and Ismene admittedly seem immaculate. They are deeply devoted to their perverted family and strive to make peace within it. They follow Jocasta on her failed visit to the enemy camp; Antigone even makes a plea of her own (more convincing than that of her mother's) before the final duel.[63] Moreover, Antigone is represented as loyally standing by Oedipus' side, guarding his steps and sharing his cares, while Ismene is the one to lament Jocasta's suicide by taking her own life.[64] The characterisation of the Theban sisters as the antithesis of their wicked brothers, and as the *melior sexus*[65] is, therefore, to some extent justifiable.[66] The phenomenon is the most

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[60] In the *Phoenissae* of Euripides and in the *Phoenissae* of Seneca, Antigone is consistently depicted as more virtuous than her father, mother and brothers. See, e.g., Sen. *Phoen*. 80–81, 309–11. For further discussion of the family dynamics in the *Thebaid*, see, e.g., F. Delarue, *Stace, poète épique. Originalité et cohérence*, Louvain – Paris 2000, 209–14.

[61] Stat. *Theb*. 1,46–87. For a thorough discussion of Oedipus as an antithesis of a Roman *paterfamilias*, see N. W. Bernstein, *In the Image of the Ancestors. Narratives of Kinship in Flavian Epic*, Toronto 2008, 85–94.

[62] Stat. *Theb*. 7,470–527; 11,315–53. Agoustakis (above n. 48), 62–66; R. T. Ganiban, *Statius and Virgil. The Thebaid and the reinterpretation of the Aeneid*, Cambridge 2007, 164–5; Bernstein (above n. 61), 88–90.

[63] Stat. *Theb*. 11,354–87.

[64] See e.g. Stat. *Theb*. 11,627–33, 11,642–47.

[65] Stat. *Theb*. 7,479.

[66] For these kinds of readings of the women in the *Thebaid*, see, e.g., Lesueur (above n. 9); La Penna (above n. 9); Vessey (above n. 9).

evidently present in the episode where the princesses hide in the palace worrying about the war:

> *Interea thalami secreta in parte sorores, / par aliud morum miserique innoxia proles / Oedipodae, varias miscent sermone querelas. / nec mala quae iuxta, sed longa ab origine fati,/haec matris taedas, oculos ast illa paternos, / altera regnantem, profugum gemit altera fratrem, / bella ambae. - - nutat utroque timor. Quemnam hoc certamine victum, / quem vicisse velint?*[67]

It is important to notice, however, that this familial devotion tells us little about their sisterhood. In effect, it appears that Antigone and Ismene's relationship with *each other* is the one that most severely suffers from their excessive devotion to the other members of their family. For Antigone, her relationship with the men of her family – Polynices and Oedipus in particular – is the most defining characteristic of her personality.[68] Ismene, for her part, is only ever her mother's minion, and never appears as an independent character in her own right. The depiction of the relationship between the sisters is left tenuous and unsatisfactory. In effect, the episode above is the only one in the whole epic where Antigone and Ismene are depicted as having a conversation with each other.

This is somewhat puzzling considering Statius' literary models in his version of the Theban story. As mentioned above, the two main models of the Flavian poet are Euripides and Seneca, and neither of them, in their *Phoenissae*, really discusses the relationship between Antigone and Ismene. Indeed Ismene does not appear at all in their plays[69] – it is Antigone alone who takes on the duties of the obedient daughter, supporting her mother and guarding her father's steps. It seems that neither Euripides nor Seneca is particularly interested in the sisterly relationship – they only need one princess, and Antigone's fearless character seems to be enough. Therefore, Statius' choice to include Ismene in his epic as a character in her own right seems important – it is a deliberate choice that enables the poet to scrutinise the relationship between the two sisters. In effect, that is the

[67] Stat. *Theb.* 8,607–15.

[68] This is the defining characteristic of Antigone in the tragedies of Euripides and Seneca as well (see, e.g., Sen. *Phoen*. 1–4, 51–79). Both of the playwrights also depict the bond between Jocasta and Antigone as particularly strong (Sen. *Phoen*. 403–26, Eur. *Phoen*. 1264–82).

[69] Ismene is not mentioned by name in these tragedies; however, both Euripides and Seneca make evident that there are two daughters in the family. Eur. *Phoen*. 616–17, Sen. *Phoen*. 551.

only likely reason for having Ismene around. From a narratological perspective, her actions are not highly significant – she only exists in regard to Antigone, to make the depiction of a sisterly relationship possible.

Examined against this background, the tenuous and superficial relationship between the Theban princesses is all the more confusing. It is crucial to notice that if Statius had wanted to depict their relationship as complicated, yet loving and caring, there was a model for that, too. Whereas Euripides and Seneca overlook Antigone and Ismene's sisterhood in their tragedies, Sophocles, on the contrary, puts a considerable emphasis on it. In his *Antigone*, Sophocles depicts sisterly love as overwhelming and consuming. In the beginning of the play, Antigone asks Ismene's help in the forbidden burial of Polynices – when she refuses, Antigone is clearly offended and holds a grugde until her death.[70] Ismene, however, soon comes around and is consumed by guilt. When Antigone is caught in the act, she is heartbroken and tries to take responsibility.[71] Sophocles' play is a masterful depiction of a conflicted sibling relationship where the feelings of bitterness, anger and affection are confused. Despite the guilt and the grudge, it is clear that Ismene and Antigone love each other and find solace in each other's company.[72]

Why does Statius so clearly refuse this literary model in his depiction of the Theban sisters? Obviously, the Flavian poet considers it important to include the sisterly relationship in his epic, otherwise he would have followed the example of Euripides and Seneca and left Ismene out altogether. However, his depiction of Antigone and Ismene has none of the love, anger and passion that characterises their relationship in Sophocles' play. On the contrary, the lack of emotion, either positive or negative, is what marks their coexistence in the *Thebaid* throughout. We can only conclude that this is how Statius wants it to be – for narratological or ideological purposes, the poet *wants* to underline the estranged relationship between the two sisters in the royal family of Thebes.

This impression is strengthened by Statius' use of intertextual elements. What is particularly telling is how the poet, immediately after depicting Antigone and Ismene's fearful wait in their chambers, utilises an Ovidian metaphor, recalling Procne and Philomela. He speaks of the Theban princesses stating that:

[70] See Soph. *Ant*. 21–97, 538–55.

[71] Soph. *Ant*. 490, 526–37.

[72] Clear tokens of affection and loneliness can be found in Soph. *Ant*. 1, 38–39, 49, 58–59, 96–97, 526–27, 543–45, 566.

> *Sic Pandioniae repetunt ubi fida volucres / hospitia atque larem bruma pulsante relictum, / stantque super nidos ueterisque exordia fati / annarrant tectis: it truncum ac flebile murmur; / verba putant, voxque illa tamen non dissona verbis.*[73]

At first sight, the purpose of the allusion seems obscure. *Pandioniae* clearly refers to nightingales, the birds that Procne and Philomela were turned into. The birds' speech-like utterance represents another theme crucial to Ovid's version of the story – the power of speech.[74] The literary allusion, therefore, is clear, but its purpose ambiguous. Even after a careful reading, Antigone and Ismene appear little like Procne and Philomela in the *Metamorphoses*. They are a pair of royal sisters who suffer from injustice and distorted familial relations, but that is as far as the resemblances go. Antigone and Ismene do not stand up against the injustice they experience, nor do they seek control over their own lives. Furthermore, the strong sisterly bond that is the defining characteristic of Procne and Philomela's tale is absent from the Theban princesses' story. While Ovid's heroines are ready to sacrifice all the other familial relationships for each other, Antigone and Ismene do exactly the opposite – they define themselves through their relationships with their father and mother, and even with their worthless brothers. Therefore, I suggest that the Ovidian allusion should be read as the poet's ironic observation of how *unlike* their literary paragons the daughters of Oedipus really are.

Moreover, Procne and Philomela are not the only literary models that Statius contrasts with the Theban sisters. After mentioning the nightingales, the poet depicts Ismene confiding in Antigone about her recent dream. In her sleep, she has seen her forthcoming wedding with her betrothed Atys – a matter that greatly disturbs the chaste maiden's mind. What is more worrying, however, is that the dream had a grim turn: suddenly, a flame emerged between the bride and the groom, and Atys' mother appeared, frantically crying and demanding her son back.[75] Ismene is worried about what the dream might mean; she worries about the war and is concerned for their house and family.[76]

The episode bears striking, and hardly accidental, resemblance to a passage in *Aeneid* IV. When Dido tells Anna about her feelings for Aeneas, she first

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[73] Stat. *Theb*. 8,616–20.

[74] This is a repetitive topic in Ovid's version of the myth: see n. 34 above.

[75] Stat. *Theb*. 8,632.

[76] Stat. *Theb*. 8,633–635.

disguises them in a mention about strange dreams: *quae me suspensam insomnia terrent! / quis novus hic nostris successit sedibus hospes*.[77] Statius emphasises the allusion by stressing Ismene's chaste shame about the erotic elements in her dream. The princess states that *ecce ego, quae thalamos, nec si pax alta maneret / tractatem sensu, (pudet, heu!) conubia vidi / nocte, soror*.[78] This is an explicit allusion to Dido's struggling with her vows of chastity. Dido strives to conceal her excruciating desire for Aeneas from her sister, and emphasises her own *pudicitia*, claiming that she would rather die than break the laws of chastity.[79] While Dido's speech appears to be mere verbiage, Ismene actually seems sincere – however, that is not the most relevant issue concerning the topic of this paper.

What is, instead, is Antigone's reaction to her sister's outburst. Evidently, it is as difficult for Ismene to confide in her sister about her fears as it is for Dido to utter aloud her secret feelings. These confessions, thus, can be understood as the ultimate expressions of trust. And Anna proves to be trustworthy: She perceptively sees through Dido's pretence of chastity but is tactful enough to pretend otherwise. She notices her sister's genuine suffering, and is able to say all the right things, emphasising the beneficial sides of the union with Aeneas. Dido's lovesick mind could not hope for a better affirmation than the one she gets from Anna.

In the *Thebaid*, Statius completely reverses the situation, denying Antigone any chance of rising to the role of Anna. After Ismene has finished her story, the poet briefly states that *talia nectebant*, before proceeding to depict the bringing of Atys' body.[80] It remains ambiguous what *talia nectebant* refers to; does Antigone actually answer, and if she does, how? Is her response so indifferent that there is no need to relate it? Or is Ismene's speech cut off by the turmoil in the palace? In either case, the lack of a response seriously undermines the depth and intimateness of the sisterly relationship.

Moreover, when Ismene is left grieving by the side of her dying fiancé, there is no mention of Antigone supporting her in the difficult task. It is Jocasta

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[77] Verg. *Aen*. 4,9–10.

[78] Stat. *Theb*. 8,625–7. She goes on to emphasise that when she looked at her fiancé in the wedding chamber, it happened *non sponte*, "not of my will". Stat. *Theb*. 8,630. For further discussion, see L. Micozzi, "Eros e pudor nella Tebaide di Stazio: lettura dell'episodio di Atys e Ismene (*Theb*. VIII 554–565)", *Incontri triestini di filologia classica* 1 (2001–2002) 259–82; see also Agoustakis (above n. 48), 72–5.

[79] Verg. *Aen*. 4,24–7.

[80] Stat. *Theb*. 8,636.

who brings her reluctant daughter to the dying warrior – along with her, Statius mentions a group of *famulae* who accompany the royal women.[81] After Atys has died, Ismene is left alone with him.[82] Antigone disappears from the scene immediately after Ismene's recollection of her dream. No sisterly support comparable to that of Anna and Dido can be observed between the Theban princesses.

By his elaborate use of intertextual elements, Statius, therefore, contrasts the sibling relationship between Ismene and Antigone with its parallels in Augustan epic: First, with Procne and Philomela, and then, with Dido and Anna. These literary allusions underline the message that is already obvious by his refusal of the Sophoclean model in his depiction of the Theban sisters. Ultimately, the pair of royal sisters becomes, not the antithesis of the Theban corrupted familial relationships but yet another manifestation of them.

This impression is strenghtened by the depiction of the Argive princesses, Argia and Deipyle, whose relationship remains equally tenuous. Moreover, even more than that between Antigone and Ismene, it appears to be unbalanced. Argia, wife of Polynices, has an active and visible role in the epic – she is the trusted ally of her husband and her father, and has a crucial role in the beginning of the war. Deipyle, on the contrary, is very passive and invisible, she is constantly overshadowed by her sister whenever they appear together.[83] Whereas Argia boldly addresses the men of her family and argues her case, Deipyle never speaks once in the whole epic.[84]

What seems even more significant is that we never hear the two sisters having a conversation with each other. The closest Statius gets is in book two, when Deipyle tries to stop her husband Tydeus from volunteering as an envoy – the poet states that *sed iussa patris tutique regressus / legato iustaeque preces vicere sororis*.[85] However, since he does not specify the content of Argia's pleas, the passage does not greatly enlighten the nature of their relationship. In three other episodes, where the Argive sisters appear together – the banquet at

81 Stat. *Theb*. 8,641–47.

82 Stat. *Theb.* 8,653–54.

83 The impression that Deipyle is overshadowed by her sister is strengthened by the recurring reassurances that she is not. In their first appearance, Deipyle is depicted as *nec formae laude secunda* (Stat. *Theb.* 2,203). In book twelve, when the grieving women hurry for Thebes, Statius states that *proxima Lernaeo Calydonidas agmine mixtas / Tydeos exsequiis trahit haud cessura sorori / Deipyle* - - . Stat. *Theb.* 12,117–19.

84 For Argia's speeches, see e.g. Stat. *Theb.* 2,334–52; 3,687–710.

85 Stat. *Theb*. 2,373–74.

the palace, their ill-omened double wedding, and the Argive women's march to Thebes – they do not have any contact with each other.[86] Argia and Deipyle are depicted as obeying and respecting their father, as fearing the war and as grieving for their husbands, but never as doing anything for each other. As in the case of the Theban princesses, it seems that their close and confidential relationships with the other members of their family overshadow and impede their relationship with each other.

In the end, the closest thing to sisterly solidarity there is in the *Thebaid* can be perceived between Antigone and Argia, the two princesses of the enemy cities. In their encounter in book twelve, they are both strongly defined by their relationship with Polynices – Argia as his wife and Antigone as his sister; they both look for the prince's body in the battlefield. A strong bond of loyalty immediately emerges between the two women. Together they wash and burn the body, lament by its side and volunteer to be punished for doing so. The sister-like nature of their relationship is emphasised when the poet compares Argia and Antigone to Phaëthon's sisters, the mythical mourners turned into poplars by their weeping.[87]

The solidarity between Argia and Antigone has often been interpreted as the ultimate expression of *pietas* in the corrupted world of war.[88] In a sense, this reading is justifiable – undeniably, these characters represent the ability to reach across the battle lines and see the humanity in the opposing side. Nevertheless, the affectionate encounter between Antigone and Argia inevitably brings to mind their (and everyone else's) basic shortcoming in the *Thebaid*: the inability to maintain and cherish functional relationships within the birth family. Argia and Antigone's bonding highlights the absence of their sisters, and emphasises the princesses' inability to create a similar connection with them.[89] The downfall of familial relationships in Statius' epic is complete when genuine sisterly cooperation can only exist between those who are not, actually, sisters.

[86] Stat. *Theb*. 1,533–39, 2,230–43.

[87] Stat. *Theb*. 12,413–15.

[88] Thus, e.g., La Penna (above n. 9), 231; Leuseur (above n. 9), *passim*; H. V. Lovatt, "The female gaze in Flavian epic: looking out from the walls in Valerius Flaccus and Statius", in R. R. Nauta – H.-J. Van Dam – J. J. L. Smolenaars (eds.), *Flavian Poetry*, Leiden 2006, 59–78.

[89] The situation is very similar in the case of Polynices and Tydeus – their close, brotherly relationship appears as a substitute for the relationship that Polynices is lacking with his actual brother. I suggest that the strong bond between Polynices and Tydeus is, actually, a narrative tool that emphasises the estranged relationship between the Theban brothers – just like in the case of Antigone and Argia. See, e.g., Stat. *Theb*. 2,112–13; 2,363–66.

Conclusion

From these episodes within Roman epic, we can observe that the upsides and downsides of a sibling relationship are repetitive themes in the genre. Noticeably, the Roman epic poets' representations of sisterhood are in a constant dialogue with each other. Ovid varies Virgilian themes in his version of the Procne and Philomela story. Silius, for his part, deliberately rewrites Virgil's tale about Dido and Anna, giving the story a melancholic, desperate twist. Statius takes the use of intertextual elements the furthest when he aptly contrasts the tenuous relationship of the Theban sisters with that of their Ovidian and Virgilian paragons. All in all, one can perceive an ongoing discourse concerning sisterhood and its problems running through the imperial epic tradition. In a sense, this is hardly surprising, considering the significance of *fraternas acies* as a recurring theme in the genre.[90] Sisterhood provides a point of comparison for the poets, when discussing the struggles between brothers and other familial conflicts. What is noteworthy is that the sisterly relationships in Roman epic seldom emerge as a positive polar opposite to the fraternal hatred. Like brotherly relationships, they can appear as an arena for highly negative feelings, as in the *Punica*, or as a relatively indifferent matter, as in the *Thebaid*.

What is common to all episodes discussed in this paper is that in them, a sibling relationship functions as a substitute for parental protection. The women of these poems do not get the support they need from their mothers and fathers because their parents are deceased, absent, or simply incapable of parental love and caring. In the absence of parental protection, the anxious women turn to their sisters. The seeking of peer support within the family is an omnipresent feature in Augustan and Flavian epic.

What changes, instead, is a response to that need. In the Augustan epics, the women who seek help and companionship from their sisters usually get more than is healthy for them. Anna and Procne are prepared to undertake outrageous acts to help their suffering sisters. No rite of black magic is too daring for Anna, no violent deed too abhorrent for Procne. They sacrifice other familial relation

[90] Compare, for instance, with the *Pharsalia*, where Lucan depicts the civil war between Caesar and Pompey as *cognatas acies*. Luc. *Phar*. 1,4. For further discussion of the intertextuality between Statius and Lucan in this matter, see R. T. Ganiban, "Crime in Lucan and Statius", in P. Asso (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Lucan*, Leiden 2011, 327–44 (see 328–33). Ganiban suggests that Statius deliberately narrows Lucan's *cognatas acies* to *fraternas acies* in order to emphasise the criminality of his topic.

ships in order to save or avenge their sisters – ultimately, this leads to the destruction of the whole family and the household.

In Flavian epic, instead, sisterly support is lacking. What marks the story of Anna in the *Punica* is a constant feeling of loneliness and insecurity. The similar feeling is conveyed by Statius' depiction of Ismene's futile turning to Antigone in her moment of anxiety and fear. The sisters of Flavian epic have an aching need for peer support, but in their hour of need, they never get it from their closest family members. The intimacy that characterises the Augustan epics' representations of sisterhood is mostly absent from Flavian poetry. In the epics of Statius and Silius, the sisterly relationship appears as a *locus* for strongly negative feelings – guilt, anxiety and indifference.

This appears in a particularly intriguing light when analysed against the putative downfall of motherhood in Flavian poetry, argued by Newlands and briefly discussed above. In the end, is seems that it is not only mother-child relationships that grow weak and futile in the poetry of the period, but the same applies to the sibling relationships. Compared to the epics of the Augustan era, the representation of familial relationships seems just as important, maybe even more accentuated in the epics of the 80's and the 90's – however, the Flavian versions express very little trust in the support and the consolation offered by family in the turmoil of a violent world. Based on these sporadic episodes from a few of the most significant literary works of the period, little can, of course, be concluded about the overall change or continuity of family dynamics during the first century of the Principate – however, what appears indisputable is that the literary construction of family dynamics went through a transition during the Flavian era. In the epic representations of sisterhood from this period, we can perceive a longing for safety and security that is never fulfilled – a harrowing feeling of insecurity and fear that could, perhaps, be observed as a reflection of the atmosphere in the intellectual, literary circles of the late first century.

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