

VIRTUE'S CLAIM TO FAME (STATIUS, *THEBAID* 10.610–80)*

ABSTRACT

This note argues that the appearance of Virtus at the outset of Menoeceus' sacrifice in Statius' Thebaid (10.610–80) is modelled on Virgil's Fama (Aen. 4.173–97).

Keywords: Menoeceus; Fama; Virtus; intertextuality; Virgil; Statius

Just like the rumours she personifies, Virgil's Fama in *Aen.* 4.173–97 is a pervasive figure that has many ramifications in art and literature.¹ In Statius' *Thebaid*, scholars have identified many recreations of the Virgilian monster: beside the two main appearances of the goddess in Books 2 and 3 (2.201–13, 3.425–31),² the figure of Pavor in Book 7 has also been convincingly interpreted as an avatar of Fama (7.105–31).³ However, there is one more incarnation of Virgil's Fama in the *Thebaid* that has not been fully recognized so far: Virtus, the personification of moral virtue and courage, as she appears in the episode of Menoeceus' sacrifice (10.610–80).⁴ Therefore, in this note I offer a close reading of the passage which highlights the inter- and intratextual hints of Fama's presence and further reflects on the metapoetic implications of casting Virtus in Fama's role.

Fama's influence looms large at the outset of Menoeceus' sacrifice. After Tiresias reveals the oracle demanding Menoeceus' death (10.610–15), Fama appears in person to spread the news through the city (*iam Fama sacratam | uocem amplexa uolat, clamantque oracula Thebae*, 10.626–7).⁵ At this point, Statius introduces Virtus into the narrative with the task of carrying the oracle beyond the city walls and onto the battlefield where Menoeceus is fighting. Thus, Virtus' intervention appears as an

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¹ On Fama and rumours, see P.R. Hardie, *Rumour and Renown. Representations of Fama in Western Literature* (Cambridge, 2012); G. Guastella, *Word of Mouth. Fama and its Personifications in Art and Literature from Ancient Rome to the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2017).

² On Fama in Statius, see H. Snijder, *P. Papinius Statius, Thebaid. Book III* (Amsterdam, 1968), 179–81; Hardie (n. 1), 201–7; K. Gervais, *Statius, Thebaid 2* (Oxford, 2017), 140–5.

³ On Pavor, see J.J.L. Smolenaars, *Statius Thebaid VII. A Commentary* (Leiden / New York / Cologne, 1994), 55–66; S. Clément-Tarantino, 'Fama ou la renommée du genre. Recherches sur la représentation de la tradition dans l'*Énéide*' (Diss., Université Charles de Gaulle – Lille III, 2006), 671–3; Hardie (n. 1), 207–14; S. Clément-Tarantino, 'Les personifications de la peur dans l'épopée latine, de Virgile à Stace', in S. Coin-Longeray and D. Vallat (edd.), *Peurs antiques* (Saint-Étienne, 2015), 91–107.

⁴ Although critics record the Virgilian intertext among a list of parallels for the scene, they do not elaborate on this particular connection and emphasize only the similarities of Virtus with Eris, Allecto or the Dirae; see R.D. Williams, *P. Papini Stati Thebaidos liber decimus* (Leiden, 1972), 106–13; D.C. Feeney, *The Gods in Epic. Poets and Critics of the Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 1991), 382–5; E. Fantham, 'The ambiguity of Virtus in Lucan's *Civil War* and Statius' *Thebaid*', *Arachnion* 3 (1995) (<https://www.telemachos.hu-berlin.de/arachne/num3/fantham.html>).

⁵ On this passage, see Williams (n. 4), 105–6. The chiasmic arrangement of the sentence with its emphasis on words and speech suggests that Statius is playing with the etymology of Fama as spoken word; see R. Maltby, *A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies* (Leeds, 1991), 222 s.v. *Fama*.

immediate extension of Fama's action. Statius draws attention to the change in divine messengers by interrupting the narrative with an address to the Muse in which he pointedly asks who took over (*quis ... addiderit?*, 10.628–9).⁶ The poet then ironically invokes Clio (*memor incipe Clio*, 10.630), the Muse of history and past events, to vouch for the new twist that he is introducing into the story of Menoeceus' sacrifice.⁷ Moreover, the naming of Clio at this specific point in the epic also reminds the reader of Fama, which is the Latin equivalent of the name of the Muse⁸ and has previously been assigned the task of remembering the past (*Fama prior ... cui meminisse*, 4.32–3). Therefore, although Statius introduces a new personification, he is also asking his reader to keep Fama in mind while reading the episode.

The association of Virtus with Fama is prolonged in the description of her arrival, a passage suffused with references to other disruptive figures. The place of Virtus next to Jupiter's throne (*diua Iouis solio iuxta comes*, *Theb.* 10.632) aligns her with Virgil's Dirae (*hae Iouis ad solium*, *Aen.* 12.849).⁹ However, when she happily hops down to earth (*caelestibus ... desiluit gauisa plagis*, *Theb.* 10.635–6), the movement recalls Fama's leap onto Thebes in Book 2 (*Thebas | insilit*, 2.208–9), which in turns replicates Fama's perching atop cities in the *Aeneid* (*sedet custos aut summi culmine tecti | turribus aut altis*, 4.186–7).¹⁰ The happiness of Virtus on this occasion contrasts with her previously sulky mood as she stood in Mars's palace (*tristissima Virtus*, *Theb.* 7.51)¹¹ and recalls Fama's traditional delight in bringing fake news to men (*gaudens*, *Aen.* 4.190; *gaudens defertur in urbem*, Val. Fl. 2.135). As she approaches Menoeceus, Virtus displays another Fam-ous Virgilian characteristic: her feet walk the earth while her head touches the sky (*iamque premit terras, nec uultus ab aethere longe*, *Theb.* 10.638; cf. *ingrediturque solo et caput inter nubila condit*, *Aen.* 4.177).¹² Finally, just like Fama in *Argonautica* Book 2 (Val. Fl. 2.141), Virtus shifts shapes and takes the appearance of Tiresias' daughter Manto (*Theb.* 10.639–45).¹³ While the description of the transformation recalls Allecto's impersonation of the priestess Calybe in *Aen.* 7.415–19,¹⁴ the etymological pun on Manto's name (*prouida Manto*,

⁶ On this invocation, see Williams (n. 4), 106; Feeney (n. 4), 382; S. Georgacopoulou, *Aux frontières du récit épique. L'emploi de l'apostrophe du narrateur dans la Thébaïde de Stace* (Brussels, 2005), 177–80.

⁷ Georgacopoulou (n. 6), 178–9.

⁸ From κλέω, 'to make famous' (LSJ s.v.); see Maltby (n. 5), 135 s.v. *Clio*; Georgacopoulou (n. 6), 178.

⁹ Fantham (n. 4); R.T. Ganiban, *Statius and Virgil. The Thebaid and the Reinterpretation of the Aeneid* (Cambridge, 2007), 143–4.

¹⁰ Gervais (n. 2), 143–4 on *Theb.* 2.208–9.

¹¹ On the previous appearances of Virtus in the epic, see Feeney (n. 4), 383.

¹² Williams (n. 4), 108; this feature also aligns Virtus with Homer's Eris (*Il.* 4.442–3); see Feeney (n. 4), 383.

¹³ The disguise of Virtus as Manto establishes a parallel with the scene of Laius' appearance as Tiresias in *Theb.* 2.97–124. In both cases the purpose of the disguise is to seem more believable (*neu falsa uideri | noctis imago*, 2.94–5; *responsis ut plena fides*, 10.640) and the transformation involves shedding some original characteristics while retaining others (2.95–100, 10.641–5). Both Laius and Virtus reveal their identity as they leave after their speech (2.120–3, 10.678–9). Further, the motivations of Virtus for the transformation is deception (*fraude*, 10.640), which is not a very Virtu-ous thing to do; on deception in the Menoeceus episode, see D.W.T.C. Vessey, *Statius & the Thebaid* (Cambridge, 1973), 120; Feeney (n. 4), 383–4; Ganiban (n. 9), 141; M. Tomcik, 'Speaking fake news in Flavian epic', in C. Forstall and B. Verhelst (edd.), *Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Representation of Direct Speech in Greek and Latin Epic* (Leiden and Boston, forthcoming).

¹⁴ For this intertext, see Fantham (n. 4). On the transformation of Virtus and the crossdressing simile, including discussion of the paradoxical femininity of Vir-tus, see Williams (n. 4), 108–10;

Theb. 10.639) draws attention to the new identity that Virtus is assuming. Indeed, the name Manto derives from the Greek verb μαντεύομαι, ‘to divine, to prophesy’.¹⁵ Therefore, in this scene, Tiresias’ daughter is but a mouthpiece of the oracle, the ‘foreseeing prophecy’ in person. So, by transforming herself into Manto, Virtus is not merely impersonating a character, she is embodying the sacred utterance, the *oracula*, which had already been appropriated by Fama at the outset of the episode (*Fama sacratam uocem amplexa*, 10.626–7).

Having adopted some of Fama’s features, Virtus also conforms to her new role when she reports Tiresias’ words: instead of repeating the oracle accurately, she astutely distorts the wording of the prophecy. Originally, the prophecy stated that only the youngest descendant of the Earthborn men must die to save the city (*cadat generis quicumque nouissimus extat | uiperei*, 10.613–14). However, in her retelling of the oracle, Virtus makes it sound as if any descendant of the Earthborn men could fulfil the prophecy (*terrigenam ... poscunt*, 10.668), thus generating a rivalry between Menoeceus and his brother Haemon (*accelera, ne proximus occupet Haemon*, 10.671).¹⁶ Sparking fraternal rivalry through the transmission of false information is a task more often associated with Fama, as in *Theb.* 2.205–13, than with Virtus. Ironically, Virtus adduces Fama’s authority to back the distorted information she has given (*Fama canit monitus*, 10.669). This reminder of Fama’s appearance at the very beginning of the episode reads as a hint at the role Virtus is playing, especially in connection with her self-reflexive comment in line 664 (*non haec tibi debita uirtus*, 10.664): ‘This is not Virtue, it’s Fama speaking.’¹⁷

Allusions to Fama continue in the lines following the speech of Virtus. The initial effect of her words again resembles Allecto’s intervention in *Aeneid* Book 7: both Turnus and Menoeceus hesitate (*cunctantem*, *Aen.* 7.449; *cunctantis*, *Theb.* 10.672) and the goddesses leave a trace of their passage in the men’s hearts (*fixit sub pectore*, *Aen.* 7.457; *seseque in corde reliquit*, *Theb.* 10.673), inflaming them with love of battle or death (*saeuit amor ferri*, *Aen.* 7.461; *letique inuasit amorem*, *Theb.* 10.677).¹⁸ However, the thunderbolt simile that is used to illustrate the striking effect of her speech brings the image of Fama back to the reader’s mind (*Theb.* 10.674–5).¹⁹ Indeed, the speed of Virgil’s Fama is meant to recall Lucretius’ description of a thunderbolt, and both have similar incendiary properties.²⁰ That the simile should display precisely these two characteristics undoubtedly refers to the Virgilian model (*non ... uelocius*,

Feeney (n. 4), 383–5; D. Agri, ‘Allegorical bodies. (Trans)Gendering Virtus in Statius’ *Thebaid* 10 and Silius Italicus’ *Punica* 15’, in A. Surtees and J. Dyer (edd.), *Gender Diversity in the Ancient World* (Edinburgh, 2020), 131–42, at 132–7.

¹⁵ LSJ s.v.; see J.J. O’Hara, *True Names. Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay* (Ann Arbor, 2017²), 224 on Verg. *Aen.* 10.199 *fatidicae Mantus*.

¹⁶ On fraternal rivalry in this episode, see Ganiban (n. 9), 139–41. The common origin of Menoeceus and his brother has previously been highlighted by a bilingual etymological pun on Haemon’s name (*Haemon ... consanguinei*, *Theb.* 10.653–4); see O’Hara (n. 15), 265 on Verg. *G.* 1.491–2. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for inviting me to include this pun.

¹⁷ This pun aligns with Statius’ witty comment on Menoeceus’ courage on the battlefield prior to the arrival of Virtue (*necdum aderat Virtus*, *Theb.* 10.657); see Feeney (n. 4), 385.

¹⁸ Fantham (n. 4).

¹⁹ The simile also connects Menoeceus and Capaneus: while the former’s death is caused by a metaphorical thunderbolt, the latter is literally struck down by lightning; see Ganiban (n. 9), 144. On Menoeceus and Capaneus, see Fantham (n. 4); A.J. Heinrich, ‘*Longa retro series*. Sacrifice and repetition in Statius’ Menoeceus episode’, *Arethusa* 32 (1999), 165–95, at 186–90.

²⁰ On Fama’s associations with lightning, see Clément-Tarantino (n. 3 [2006]), 194–6; Hardie (n. 1), 82–3; L.M. Fratantuono and R. Alden Smith, *Virgil, Aeneid 4. Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Leiden and Boston, 2022), 337 on *Aen.* 4.175 *mobilitate uiget uirisque adquirit*

Aen. 4.174; *incendit animum*, 4.197; *haud citius*, *Theb.* 10.674; *infestas ... flammis*, 10.675). In addition, the reference to Fama's ability to bridge earth and sky is repeated when Virtus departs (*et subitam a terris in nubila crescere Manto*, *Theb.* 10.679; cf. *ingrediturque solo et caput inter nubila condit*, *Aen.* 4.177). This time the allusion is framed by Menoeceus' perception of the incongruity (*notauit*, *Theb.* 10.678; *obstipuit*, 10.680), as if to highlight the intertextual connection for the reader. The young man's acknowledgement of the divine nature of Virtus further underlines her ambiguous role in the passage, as he is uncertain about the true identity of the goddess (*'dium quaecumque uocasti'*, 10.680).

The numerous allusions to Fama in this passage make her a prime model for Statius' characterization of Virtus in *Thebaid* Book 10. Not only is Virtus described in terms reminiscent of the Virgilian monster, she also takes over Fama's narrative role in forwarding distorted information outside the city walls. Acknowledging Fama's influence in the passage allows us to connect the fury-like aspects of Virtus, since Virgil's Fama is both modelled on Homer's Eris and intratextually related to Allecto and the Dirae.²¹ Moreover, the substitution of Virtus for Fama reads as a metaphor for Statius' reworking of Menoeceus' sacrifice. Indeed, on a metapoetic level Fama represents the literary tradition.²² While previous versions present Menoeceus' self-sacrifice as an exemplary act of virtue, Statius turns it into a debased *deuotio* motivated by furious love of glory and fraternal rivalry.²³ Thus, by replacing Fama with a perverted Virtus, Statius signals that he is not following the traditional story of Menoeceus' virtuous sacrifice, but instead introduces a new and corrupted version of the myth.

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eundo; cf. *Lucr.* 6.340–2 *sumere debet | mobilitatem etiam atque etiam, quae crescit eundo | et ualidas auget uiris*.

²¹ On Eris as a model for Virgil's Fama, see Clément-Tarantino (n. 3 [2006]), 196–8; Hardie (n. 1), 87; on Allecto, the Dirae and Fama, see Hardie (n. 1), 101–2.

²² On Fama as a metapoetic figuration of the literary tradition, see Clément-Tarantino (n. 3 [2015]); Hardie (n. 1), 107–12.

²³ For a comparison of Menoeceus' sacrifice with Livy's account of P. Decius Mus's *deuotio* (*Livy* 8.9.10), see Vessey (n. 13), 121–2. On Statius' reworking of Menoeceus' sacrifice, see Heinrich (n. 19), 165–95; Ganiban (n. 9), 137–44; J.-M. Hulls, *The Search for the Self in Statius' Thebaid. Identity, Intertext and the Sublime* (Berlin and Boston, 2021), 98–101. Agri (n. 14), 137 reads the moral devaluation of Virtus as an effect of the Civil Wars. For a positive reading of Menoeceus' self-sacrifice, see S. Rebeggiani, *The Fragility of Power. Statius, Domitian and the Politics of the Thebaid* (Oxford, 2018), 253–61.