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The beautiful face of war: Refreshing epic and reworking Homer in Flavian poetry

“War is beautiful because it establishes man’s dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages, and many others...”.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, quoted by Walter Benjamin.<sup>1</sup>

When Statius narrates the first full day of warfare, the real beginning, the march-out of the *Thebaid* in book 8, he points out the beauty of war (Stat. *Theb.* 8.402-5):

pulcher adhuc belli vultus: stant vertice conii,  
plena armenta viris, nulli sine praeside currus,  
arma loco, splendent clipei pharetraeque decorae  
cingulaque et nondum deforme cruoribus aurum.

Beautiful still is the face of war: the helmet-peaks stand straight, the horses are complete with men, no chariot is without a guide, arms are in their place, shields shine, quivers and belts are fine, and gold is not yet dulled by blood.

He was not the only observer in the ancient world to see this beauty, as Sappho fr. 16 shows:

οἱ μὲν ἰππήων στρότον, οἱ δὲ πέσδων,  
οἱ δὲ νάων φαῖσ' ἐπ[ί] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν  
ἔμμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν' ὄτ-  
τω τις ἔραται·

Some say thronging cavalry, some say foot soldiers,

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<sup>1</sup> Marinetti 1912 quoted by Benjamin 1969,241-2.

others call a fleet the most beautiful of  
sights the dark earth offers, but I say it's what-  
ever you love best.

Sappho is making an argument about different types of beauty: we all have our own opinions, whether about erotic beauty, or different types of military beauty, or the relationship between the two. This argument must surely also be generic as well as gendered: Sappho has chosen not to write about the glory of military success, but about erotic desire. The workings of Sappho's argument, the use of Helen as an example, the nature of her erotic desire have all received a good deal of attention: the idea of cavalry, foot soldiers and fleets as beautiful has received much less.<sup>2</sup> Similarly when people are interested in the aesthetics of war, they usually think about the aesthetics of violence, which is not exactly the same thing.<sup>3</sup> The horror of war is never entirely absent, as we will see, but there is a beauty of order, power and potential which exists primarily at the beginning of war and is intensified by the horror to come.<sup>4</sup> The aftermath of battles and the horrors of 'thanatourism' have received some attention, with a focus on viewing battlefields.<sup>5</sup> What of the other end of war, its beginning as an encapsulation of the strength, potential and power of individual humans and human societies? My recent book explores the active beauty of the hero, especially compared to a horse as he enthusiastically gallops to war.<sup>6</sup> Faces are important, but there is an impersonal beauty to the march-out, from the perspective of a distant viewer. Another key concept when thinking about the aesthetics of war (and the aesthetics of epic battle in particular) is the sublime:<sup>7</sup> positive and negative, beauty

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance Pelliccia 1992; Fredricksmeier 2001; Zellner 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Chariotis 2005, 189-213. His chapter "Aesthetics of War" is primarily about the Hellenistic aesthetic and how that relates to representations of war in art and historiography, especially realism, violence and sudden reversals of fortune.

<sup>4</sup> My colleague Richard Rawles suggests an analogy with ballet: a lifetime of physical training, a large number of people working together, discipline and physical beauty.

<sup>5</sup> Lovatt 1999, Pagán 2000, Manolaraki 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Lovatt 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Epic as sublime genre: "In generic terms, the totalising, panoptic aspirations of epic exhibit affinities with the sublime's superhuman impulses" (Day 2013, 13).

and destruction, overwhelming force and terror, all contribute to the fundamental ambivalence of the sublime.<sup>8</sup> But the beauty of war is not reducible to the sublime.

Many questions underlie this chapter: to what extent is the beauty of war a generic construct? Does epic treat war more as a spectacle than, say, historiography? How and why is war beautiful? What is it about war that makes it beautiful? These questions are much more effectively addressed at the beginning of war than in its complex and muddled aftermath. This paper tackles the question of genre by, on the one hand, going back to the code model of epic, the *Iliad*, and, on the other, comparing Flavian epic with other Flavian literature. It focuses on three main areas: first, how does Statius refresh the idea of epic by going back to Homer?<sup>9</sup> Secondly, how does Statius' approach to the topos of the march-out compare to the approaches of Valerius and Silius? Thirdly, how does the image of fresh, new, beautiful war compare with images of war in other genres, focusing on the Flavian period? The chapter aims to enrich our appreciation of the ways in which ancient writers approached the idea of war as beautiful.

#### Homer and the march-out

A topos of epic poetry (and, more recently, epic film) is the march-out scene. As the two armies prepare to join battle, each army musters and marches out to the battlefield, ready to fight and as yet undamaged. The *Iliad* is foundational for defining this "theme of armies marching out to battle".<sup>10</sup> There are three main passages that contribute to the Iliadic march-out, spread across books two to four: at 2.445-87 the troops muster; Athene inspires the Achaeans; in a series of similes the troops are

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<sup>8</sup> My reading of the sublime is indebted to Day 2013, which is an excellent introduction to theories of the sublime, and focuses on epic as a genre.

<sup>9</sup> On Statius and Homer, see Juhnke 1972, who gathered much data; Smolenaars 1991 has many excellent observations on Statian intertextuality; Mc Nelis 2007 and Mc Nelis 2004 has argued that Statius sets a Callimachean tendency against a non-Callimachean aesthetic, on the way pointing out the depth and detail of Statius' engagement with Homer, for instance in the catalogue of book 7. I have discussed elsewhere in Lovatt 2005 the games of *Thebaid* 6. I am inspired by Frisby 2013 which examines the *Thebaid* as a rich reading of Homer and argues that Statius takes the epic figure of substitution to such an extreme that it becomes a comment on the nature of epic itself. On Statius and Greek literature see Augoustakis 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Kirk 1985, 380.

compared to a forest fire, a flock of birds, a meadow full of flowers, a swarm of insects, a herd of goats; Agamemnon orders them, himself compared to an ox; the poet calls on the muse and the catalogue of ships begins. At 3.1-14 the catalogue is over and the two armies face each other. The noise of the Trojans is compared to the clamour of cranes, in contrast to the silence of the Achaeans. The dust raised by their feet is compared to mist on the mountain. Finally at 4.422-55 the armies clash and the actual battle begins: the Danaans' feet sound like waves crashing onto the shore, while the Trojans bleat like a flock of sheep; gods and personifications drive them on, culminating with the figure of Eris who grows enormous, into the sky; the clash of shields and spears creates a huge sound; the shock of meeting is like the shock of two rivers in flood crashing into each other. These three passages work together to create a powerful image of the enormity of the conflict in the *Iliad*.<sup>11</sup>

These passages have ~~been~~ long been seen as powerful and memorable:<sup>12</sup> but what makes them have such a strong impact? The density of imagery is one factor: the cluster of seven images leading up to the catalogue, along with the catalogue itself, constitutes the most powerful and detailed description of the greatness of both the Achaean army and the *Iliad* itself.<sup>13</sup> Scott argues that the similes used here all evoke more intense versions in the same simile families, and that the main impression is of the weak leadership of Agamemnon.<sup>14</sup> According to Scott, the imagery “presents a consistent poetic background of the more lyrical and peaceful qualities of nature”: I

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<sup>11</sup> Kirk 1985, 264 points out the close connection between this passage and the beginning of book 3: “The repetitions and overlapping imagery serve to link the elaborate scenes of preparation with the actual advance of each army”. Similarly he points to the striking correspondence with the “first elaborate march-out” at 4.422-56. See Kirk 1985, 376-85 on this section.

<sup>12</sup> From the scholiasts onwards these passages have made a great impression: Kirk (1985, 163) points out that “AbT rightly drew attention to the grandeur of conception and language” in the passage of book 2. (163) Of the book ~~four~~ 4 images, and the whole sequence, he says: “The effect of these repeated images of the noise and surge of waves and torrents is to give an unforgettable impression of the size and power and serried ranks of the Achaeans in particular, almost like a force of nature itself; and incidentally to suggest how earlier scenes ... lead in the end to the vast clash of arms which is now to follow”.

<sup>13</sup> “Never again will the power of the largest expeditionary force in Greek legend be made so explicit with the names of heroes from all parts of the Greek world joined in the panoramic display ... a moment of order from which the maelstrom of the *Iliad* will be generated” (Scott 2005, 28).

<sup>14</sup> Scott 2005.

am not so convinced that pastoral implies weakness. These similes function as a prelude to later more intense images. Further, the imagery of agriculture creates a strong contrast between ordered productivity and the destruction to come. Several images evoke the natural sublime, the awe-inspiring power of natural forces, which overwhelms the viewer and creates a strong sense of smallness in the face of the universe: the forest fire, mountain mist, crashing waves and clashing floods all invoke in different ways Kant's "dynamical sublime".<sup>15</sup> The forest fire image is particularly interesting because it uses a negative and terrifying image to describe a positive visual glory (Hom. *Il.* 2.455-8):

Ἦύτε πῦρ ἀΐδηλον ἐπιφλέγει ἄσπετον ὕλην  
οὔρεος ἐν κορυφῆς, ἕκαθεν δέ τε φαίνεται ἀγῆ,  
ὡς τῶν ἐρχομένων ἀπὸ χαλκοῦ θεσπεσίῳ  
αἴγλη παμφανόωσα δι' αἰθέρος οὐρανὸν ἴκε.

As obliterating fire lights up a vast forest along the crests of a mountain, and the flare shows far off, so as they marched from the magnificent bronze the gleam went dazzling all about through the upper air to the heavens. (Trans. Lattimore)

The fire is destructive, far-distant, and associated with mountain peaks. Its brightness is like the gleam of the weapons going upwards to heaven. Similarly, the awe-inspiring destructive power of the sea is harnessed through waves which build and repeatedly strike the shore to describe the beat of an enormous number of feet (Hom. *Il.* 4.422-8). Other images fit into the category of Kant's "mathematical sublime":<sup>16</sup> the numbers are too great for the mind to grasp. The sky full of migrating birds, fields full of leaves and flowers, insects swarming: all evoke uncountable numbers. Herds of goats and sheep further imply prosperity, and the tone of these images is one of natural order and the order of prosperous human endeavour. Agamemnon's wealth and power are also awe-inspiring. In effect, these scenes are what epic is all about: size, power and force. The force of the multitudes becomes the force of epic poetry.

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<sup>15</sup> Day 2013, 52-5 on the Kantian sublime.

<sup>16</sup> Day 2013, 54.

The beauty of the march-out scene, then, lies in the enormous numbers of people, ordered, equipped and facing imminent destruction.

The epigraph from Marinetti is interesting partly because it seems to pick up on some of the Homeric images: war “enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns” which refers to fire and flowers; “geometrical formation flights” might refer to migrating birds as well as fighter planes; the technology of the day, gleaming bronze in place of tanks and guns, farming in place of factories; sounds (waves, fire) and smells (flowers, goats) as well as distant views. The Homeric poems already possess a keen sense of the paradoxical beauty of war.

### Statius and Homer

The main focus of this paper is a passage in book 8 of the *Thebaid* in which Statius offers a new re-beginning of his poem. At *Thebaid* 8.342-427 the second day of fighting begins. On the previous day and in the previous book, the Argive army had finally arrived at Thebes; Jocasta’s desperate attempt to stop the fighting was interrupted and overwhelmed by the infuriation of the tigers of Bacchus. Book 8 begins with the aftermath of Amphiaraus’ living *katabasis*. Finally there is a sequence which represents the first formal joining of battle in the poem: each side marches out, the Thebans from the seven gates, all named (353-7), the Argives, led by Thiodamas and still lamenting Amphiaraus. Statius signals a new beginning with a new invocation.

Our passage has much in common with the Homeric march-out sequence, both in structure and detail. It begins with an invocation, in which Statius asks Apollo for a greater lyre, signifying a more epic (and, I would argue, more Homeric) mode (Stat. *Theb.* 8.373-4):

sed iam bella vocant: alias nova suggere vires,  
Calliope, maiorque chelyn mihi tendat Apollo.

But now wars call: pile up other strength for new things, Calliope, and may a greater Apollo  
make taut my lyre for me.

Our first Homeric passage ([Il. 2.445-87](#)) begins with Athene inspiring troops with the aegis and driving them to war; later at *Il.* 4.439-45 Ares and various personifications culminating with Eris continue Athene's work. Statius' passage is fundamentally based on the book four passage, but brings in elements from the passages in books two and three. The personifications Death, the Furies and the Fates take over the battlefield, culminating in Mars, who expels from the mind reasons for holding back in battle. Homer's series of similes lurks in metaphor form: at 390 the horses burn (*flamantur*) to attack (cf. image of forest fire at *Il.* 2.455-8); the dust/weather connection at *Il.* 3.10-14 operates in *niveoque rigant sola putria nimbo* ('they spatter the dusty soil with a snowy cloud', 391). The clash at 398-9:

iam clipeus clipeis, umbone repellitur umbo,  
ense minax ensis, pede pes et cuspide cuspis...

Now shield on shield, boss pushes against boss, sword threatens sword, foot against foot, spear against spear ...

with its emphasis on shield and boss draws on (among other passages) Hom. *Il.* 4.446-9:

Οἱ δ' ὅτε δῆ ῥ' ἐς χῶρον ἓνα ξυνιόντες ἴκοντο,  
σύν ῥ' ἔβαλον ῥινούς, σὺν δ' ἔγχεα καὶ μένε' ἀνδρῶν  
χαλκεοθωρήκων· ἀτὰρ ἀσπίδες ὀμφαλόεσσαι  
ἔπληντ' ἀλλήλησι, πολὺς δ' ὄρυμαγδὸς ὀρώρει.

Now as these advancing came to one place and encountered, they clashed their shields together and their spears, and the strength of armoured men in bronze, and the shields massive in the middle clashed against each other, and the sound grew huge of the fighting.

This, the most Statian of mannered passages, with its heavily patterned and repetitive polyptota is in fact the most Homeric part, which suggests that stylistic oppositions between the "primitive and original best" and the "mannered latecomer" are artificial. The emphasis on shining at 401 (*nitent*) and 404 (*splendent*) recalls the gleam reaching to the heavens at Hom. *Il.* 2.457-8 and the shining armour at 4.431-2. The

passage in *Iliad* 4 finishes with the huge sound arising from battle compared to the clash of two torrents. In a series of weather images, Statius compares the *fragor* of battle with the crash of a snowstorm on Rhodope, the boom of Jupiter's thunder and noise of hail on the Syrtes (407-11). The mass of missiles (javelins, rocks, arrows) at 412-21 continues the storm theme (*nubila*, 413; *pluunt, fulgura* 417) which comes to a climax at 413-7 with a reworking of the Homeric image of the two rivers in flood crashing into each other as two winds clashing (*alterno turbine*, 424), although the surprise ending on *sereno* (417) changes this into a battle between storm and calm.

Resonances of other Homeric material underline the Homeric connections in this section of the *Thebaid*. Juhnke points out the similarity between Tisiphone at 8.344-7 inspiring the Thebans with the trumpet and Eris at *Iliad* 11.5-14 in which her cry stimulates desire for battle, including a repetition of 2.453-4 at 11.13-14.<sup>17</sup> He also notes the detailed echo in the highly mannered lines 398-9 of *Iliad* 13.130-5:

φράξαντες δόρυ δουρί, σάκος σάκει προθελύμῳ·  
 ἄσπις ἄρ' ἄσπιδ' ἔρειδε, κόρυς κόρυν, ἀνέρα δ' ἀνήρ·  
 ψαῦον δ' ἰππόκομοι κόρυθες λαμπροῖσι φάλοισι  
 νευόντων, ὡς πικνοὶ ἐφέστασαν ἀλλήλοισιν·  
 ἔγχεα δ' ἐπτύσσοντο θρασειῶν ἀπὸ χειρῶν  
 σειόμεν'· οἱ δ' ἰθὺς φρόνεον, μέμασαν δὲ μάχεσθαι.

locking spear by spear, shield against shield at the base, so buckler leaned on buckler, helmet on helmet, man against man, and the horse-hair crests along the horns of their shining helmets touched as they bent their heads, so dense were they formed on each other, and the spears shaken from their daring hands made a jagged battle line.

Juhnke meticulously compares the lines in Statius with other imitations of the Homeric lines in Ennius, Furius, *Aeneid* 10 and Silius 4 and 9; Statius and Homer have more elements in common than any of the other versions with either.<sup>18</sup> The density of the engagement is also a key theme in the Statian passage.

<sup>17</sup> Juhnke 1972, 126.

<sup>18</sup> Enn. *Ann.* 584 Sk.; Bib. *poet.* 10 Morel; Verg. *A.* 10.361; Sil. 4.352-3; 9.322-5 (see below). Statius and Homer are the only texts to include a spear, and to use two different shield-related pairs (σάκος and ἄσπις; *clipeus* and *umbo*). *Pes pede* enters the tradition with Ennius, perhaps inspired by Tyrt. 8.31 (καὶ πόδα πὰρ ποδὶ θείει καὶ ἐπ' ἄσπιδος ἄσπιδ' ἐρείσας) and *viro vir* with Furius Bibaculus (picking up on

There are, of course, many differences of tone and emphasis. There is a darker tone in the *Thebaid*. The image of Death flying over the battlefield and causing a sort of night to fall, then made psychological as Mars removes the love of light from the fighters, and literal as the densely packed weapons obscure the sun, can be contrasted with the predominance of light in the Homeric passages. In Homer there is clear differentiation between the bleating Trojans and the glittering Achaeans, while in Statius all the fighters are, as appropriate in this more than civil war, one undifferentiated mass. However, there is a real sense that Statius is going back to the *Iliad* here to make a claim for his own battle as the most epic of Roman literature.

Let us come back to the four lines with which we started and the 'beautiful face of war' (Stat. *Theb.* 8.402-5):

pulcher adhuc belli vultus: stant vertice conii,  
plena armenta viris, nulli sine praeside currus,  
arma loco, splendent clipei pharetraeque decorae  
cingulaeque et nondum deforme cruoribus aurum.

Beautiful still is the face of war: the helmet-peaks stand straight, the horses are complete with men, no chariot is without a guide, arms are in their place, shields shine, quivers and belts are fine, and gold is not yet dulled by blood.

Statius seems to use the explicit statement of the beauty of war to offset the darkness. The descriptions of the different aspects of troops begin positive, but soon become a negative evocation of the destruction that will soon occur. The double negative in *nulli sine praeside currus* ('no chariot without its guide', 403) brings out the double vision here: the beauty of war is a veneer through which we can already see the imminent chaos, disorder and death. As the forest fire encapsulates both brilliance and destruction, so the splendour of the shields (and their honour: *decorae*, 404) quickly changes into *nondum deforme cruoribus aurum* ('gold not yet deformed by gore', 405).

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Hom. *Il.* 16.215: ἀσπίς ἄρ' ἀσπίδ' ἔρειδε, κόρυς κόρυιν, ἀνέρα δ' ἀνήρ); these are the two that are picked up in Verg. *A.* 10. *Mucro mucrone* in Furius seems likely to have inspired *ense ensis* in Statius, which is in turn picked up by Silius (or vice versa).

We can see this when we compare Statius' build-up to war with those of the *Aeneid* and other Flavian epicists. All three poets mix Homer with Virgil, and Lucan is another important influence. By examining various passages in the *Aeneid*, Lucan book 7 (the battle of Pharsalia), Valerius Flaccus book 6 (the war between Perses and Aeetes, inserted into the Argonautic narrative) and Silius Italicus book 9, I explore how these various marches and clashes compare to those in Homer and Statius.

### Virgilian and Homeric beginnings

There is no equivalent march-out and joining of formal battle scene in Virgil, but elements of the march-out persist in the framing of the catalogue in book 7. When the Italians respond to the death of Silvia's stag (7.511-30), Allecto blows a pastoral horn, the farmers and the Trojans flock for an 'unagricultural struggle' (*non certamine agresti*, 523). Virgil reflects on the pastoral tone of the imagery in Homer's mustering by making it literally pastoral and underlining the cut-off point between normal farming life and war (Verg. A. 7.523-30):

derexere acies. non iam certamine agresti  
stipitibus duris agitur sudibusue praeustis,  
sed ferro ancipiti decernunt atraque late  
horrescit strictis seges ensibus, aeraque fulgent  
sole lacessita et lucem sub nubila iactant:  
fluctus uti primo coepit cum albescere vento,  
paulatim sese tollit mare et altius undas  
erigit, inde imo consurgit ad aethera fundo.

The lines are drawn; this is no country battle with sturdy clubs or burned-out firebrands; they fight with two-edged steel, a horrid harvest of unsheathed swords that bristle far and wide, and arms of brass that glisten when the sun strikes and they fling their light beneath the clouds: as when a wave, beneath the wind's first breath, begins to whiten; slow by slow, the sea will lift its combers higher until, at last, it climbs to heaven from its lowest depths. (Trans. Mandelbaum)

The pastoral imagery creeps into the battle (*seges*), but otherwise it bears a strong resemblance to the Homeric material. The shining bronze which challenges the sun and throws its light up to the clouds re-works *Il.* 2.457-8 while the simile takes a

different line on the waves at 4.422-6. The emphasis is not on the power of the army itself, but on the power of the war, as emotions and momentum build. But this is emphatically not a march-out, a formal joining of battle: Latinus resists. Against his will the allies gather for the catalogue. The invocation (Verg. A. 7.641-6) evokes other Homeric moments:

Pandite nunc Helicon, deae, cantusque movete,  
qui bello exciti reges, quae quemque secutae  
*complerint campos acies, quibus Itala iam tum  
floruerint terra alma viris, quibus arserit armis.*  
et meministis enim, divae, et memorare potestis;  
ad nos vix tenuis famae perlabitur aura.

O goddesses, now open Helicon and guide my song: what kings were spurred to war; what squadrons filled the plains behind each chieftain; what men graced lovely Italy even then; what arms set her ablaze. For goddesses, you can remember and retell; the slender breath of that fame can scarcely reach to us. (Mandelbaum)

The metaphors of the Italian earth first flowering with men then burning with arms evokes two of the Homeric similes from the cluster that introduces the catalogue. When Evander's troops leave Pallanteum with Pallas in their midst, there is something of a march-out, with dust, shining armour and the beautiful face of Pallas. But Aeneas' absence in book 8 means that formal battle cannot be joined: book 9 consists of siege, sortie, and Turnus' single-handed invasion of the walls. Only in book 10, with the arrival of Aeneas, his fiery shield at 10.260-75, is there a sense of battle properly started: but the fact of Aeneas' arrival by boat completely changes the workings of the battle. Instead of a charge there is a disembarkation. Even in book 11 the next day of battle begins with the ambush planned by Turnus and Camilla, while battle in book 12 is again unplanned, in response to the breaking of the truce (reworking *Iliad* 4, but without the formal context of battle). It is as if Virgil holds back from committing himself to a fully Iliadic confrontation, even as he reworks the initiatory gestures of the *Iliad* into his own climax.

In *Thebaid* 7, Statius comments on, and arguably corrects, Virgil's re-working of Homer. Bacchus' tigers are clearly modelled on Silvia's stag, but Tisiphone

enrages the tigers, who are responsible for their own deaths. Statius inverts the structures of violator and violated: the tame becomes wild, and the invading force is unjustly attacked. When the Argive forces respond, breaking up Tydeus' impassioned call to war, which in itself inverts Diomedes' response to Agamemnon in the Epipoleis, they respond in manifest disorder (Stat. *Theb.* 7.615-31):

saevus iam clamor et irae  
hinc atque inde calent; nullo venit ordine bellum,  
confusique duces vulgo, et neglecta regentum  
imperia; una equites mixti peditumque catervae  
et rapidi currus; premit indigesta ruentes  
copia, nec sese vacat ostentare nec hostem  
noscere. sic subitis Thebana Argivaeque pubes  
confluxere globis; retro vexilla tubaeque  
post tergum et litui bellum invenere secuti.  
tantus ab exiguo crudescit sanguine Mavors!  
ventus uti primas struit intra nubila vires,  
lenis adhuc, frondesque et aperta cacumina gestat,  
mox rapuit nemus et montes patefecit opacos.  
nunc age, Pieriae, non vos longinqua, sorores,  
consulimus, vestras acies vestramque referte  
Aoniam; vidistis enim, dum Marte propinquo  
horrent Tyrrhenos Heliconia plectra tumultus.

Now there is a savage shouting and angers here and there grow hot; war comes in no order, the leaders are mixed with the herd, and the commands of those in charge are ignored; the cavalry are mixed together with squadrons of footsoldiers and swift chariots; the heaped up supply of men itself presses them in as they rush, neither is there space to show themselves nor to recognise the enemy. So the Theban and Argive youth clashed in sudden clumps; the banners and the trumpets are behind their backs and the war-horns following them find war. How great a war grows red with blood from such a small beginning! Just as a wind builds its first strength within the clouds, still gentle, and carries along the leaves and open treetops, soon it has seized the grove and laid open the dark mountains. Now come, Pierian sisters, we consult you not about distant deeds, tell of your own columns and your own Aonia; for you have seen it, while with war too close the Heliconian lyre shudders at Tyrrhenian tumult.

Juhnke considers 615-27 as an inversion of Verg. A. 7.505-30. While Virgil has taken the imagery of the Homeric march-out and destabilised it by making it part of the plan of the forces of chaos, Statius separates the two parts again. His Virgilian beginning of war puts the emphasis on disorder in book 7, culminating in Hades' *pereant aedum discrimina rerum* ('let all the distinctions of matter perish', *Theb.* 8.37). Smolenaars suggests that the choice of the relatively rare *indigesta in premit indigesta ruentes / copia* (619-20) may echo Ovid's description of chaos at *Metamorphoses* 1.7 (*chaos, rudis indigesta moles*), lending weight to the cosmic implications of the military disorder in this passage. Order is at least superficially restored with our second beginning, this time an Iliadic beginning, a march-out with its sponsoring deities, and glittering armour.

I explore this response to Virgil's use of Homer further through the way Statius has reworked the image at 7.625-7 from A. 7.528-30, which itself transforms *Il.* 4.422-8. In the *Iliad* this image forms the climax of the march-out: the army as waves crashing repetitively onto the shore, with the noise explicitly compared to the beat of marching feet. In the *Aeneid* this becomes a single wave gradually growing up to heaven under the impetus of the wind, like the figure of Eris, a symbol of the war gradually taking hold. Statius moves the focus from wave to wind, from sea to land; the storm is now in the trees not at sea, so the Homeric aspects of the Virgilian simile have been effaced.<sup>19</sup> This movement from sea to land or land to sea is a feature of Virgil's engagement with Homer: his chariot race becomes a ship race, his march-out a disembarkation. With his chariot race, Statius presents himself as going back to Homer: and the race is strongly evoked in the passage of book 8 which I have identified as his Homeric beginning. The horses at *Theb.* 8.393-8, desperate for battle, evoke the horses desperate to race at 6.392-401:

stant uno margine clausi,  
 spesque audaxque una metus et fiducia pallens.  
 nil fixum cordi: pugnant exire paventque,  
 concurrunt summos animosum frigus in artus.  
 qui dominis, idem ardor equis; face lumina surgunt,  
 ora sonant morsu, spumisque et sanguine ferrum  
 uritur, impulsi nequeunt obsistere postes

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<sup>19</sup> Smolenaars 1994, 272-7.

claustraque, compressae transfumat anhelitus irae.  
stare adeo miserum est, pereunt vestigia mille  
ante fugam, absentemque ferit gravis ungula campum.

They stand shut in by one line,  
hope and bold fear together with pale confidence.  
Nothing is fixed in their hearts: they fight to get out and they panic,  
a spirited shiver runs down from the top through their limbs.  
The same fire surges through masters and horses; eyes flash with fire,  
mouths sound with bits, and the iron burns with blood and  
foam, the battered posts are unable to stand in the way  
and the bolts, the gasp of anger held in check smokes across.  
To stand is so wretched that a thousand steps perish  
before the flight, and the heavy hoof strikes the absent field.

[Theb.](#) 6.401 and 7.392 both echo the famous dactylic line from Virgil's mini-march-out in [Aeneid](#) book 8: *quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum* ('the hoof shakes the dusty field with four-footed sound', 8.596). Both passages comment on the tension between narrative momentum and delay: the foreshadowing and holding back of the war, the starting and the re-starting, the imitating and re-imitating. Intensity is generated by desire to begin, the desire to be Homer again. Statius' two beginnings, in book 7 and book 8, can thus be seen as a Virgilian beginning and a Homeric beginning. The poem goes gradually deeper, towards the roots of epic, eventually trumping the *Aeneid* with the *Iliad*.

#### A Lucanian flavour

Homer is not the only predecessor at play in our focusing passage from [Thebaid](#) book 8: if Statius competes with Virgil to appropriate Homer, the main text which leads Statius away from Homer is Lucan. We have seen Juhnke's analysis of 398-9 as fundamentally Homeric: but might they not also evoke lines 6-7 of Lucan's proem?

infestisque obvia signis  
signa, pares aquilas et pila minantia pilis. (Luc. 1.6-7)

standards meet hostile  
standards, matched eagles and javelins threatening javelins.

It is a key moment for the definition of civil war as national suicide, battle between like things, through the figure of polyptoton, emphasising similarity in difference. As Caesar and Pompey's troops approach for the battle of Pharsalia, they glitter hyperbolically ([Luc. 7.214-5](#)):

miles, ut adverso Phoebi radiatus ab ictu  
descendens totos perfudit lumine colles

The soldier descending, struck by the opposite rays  
of the sun pours light through all the hills

*Theb.* 8.395-7, in which Statius' armies rush forward and he focuses on the space between them, might evoke *Luc.* 7.460-6:

ut rapido cursu fati suprema morantem  
consumpsere locum, parva tellure dirempti,  
quo sua pila cadant aut quam sibi fata minentur  
inde manum, spectant. vultus, quo noscere possent  
facturi quae monstra forent, videre parentum  
frontibus adversis fraternaue comminus arma,  
nec libuit mutare locum.

When they had consumed the ground which was delaying the final moment of fate with a swift run, were kept apart by a small space, each was watching to see where his own javelin would fall and which hand from there the fates threatened for him. Faces, through which they could know what horrors they were about to commit, of parents they saw with brows opposing and brotherly arms close at hand, but they did not want to shift their ground.

This passage links our Statian moments in books 7 and 8: in book 7 there is no space to recognise the enemy (*noscere*, 621); in book 8 they advance and watch the space shrink, leading into the equal weapons against each other. Madness and *vitae prodiga virtus* ('Courage wasteful of life') start the battle, and the ensuing *fragor* ('crash') is

like the *fragor* which echoes around the mountains surrounding Pharsalia in  
gigantomachic hyperbole (Luc. 7.477-84):

tunc aethera tendit  
extremique fragor convexa inrumpit Olympi,  
unde procul nubes, quo nulla tonitrua durant.  
exceptit resonis clamorem vallibus Haemus  
Peliacisque dedit rursus geminare cavernis;  
Pindus agit fremitus, Pangaeaque saxa resultant,  
Oetaeaeque gemunt rupes, vocesque furoris  
expavere sui tota tellure relatas.

then the uproar mounted skyward and assailed the dome of farthest Olympus--Olympus,  
from which the clouds keep far away, and whither no thunders reach. The Balkan took up  
the noise in its echoing valleys and gave it to the caves of Pelium to repeat; Pindus roared,  
the Pangaeian rocks echoed, and the cliffs of Oeta bellowed, till the armies were terrified  
by the sound of their own madness repeated from all the earth. (Trans. Duff)

Following this come the missiles: javelins controlled by Fortuna. In Statius: *casus agit virtutis opus* ('chance does virtue's work', 421); in Lucan: *rapit omnia casus, / atque incerta facit quos volt fortuna nocentes* ('chance seizes all things, and uncertain fortune makes guilty those she wants to', 7.487-8). Statius' weapons go one stage further than Lucan's. Lucan's create night; those of Statius create night and do not leave enough room for themselves:

ferro subtexitur aether  
noxque super campos telis conserta pependit. (Luc. 7.519-20)

The aether is covered by iron  
and night made by interlacing weapons hangs over the fields

excludere diem telis, stant ferrea caelo  
nubila, nec iaculis artatus sufficit aer. (Stat.*Theb.* 8.412-3)

They shut out the day with weapons, iron clouds stand

in the sky, nor is the narrowed air sufficient for the javelins.

None of these echoes are close, more situational than verbal: but cumulatively it seems probable to me that Statius was imparting a Lucanian flavour to his Homeric re-start. Lucan has very little that is Homeric: but we can see how Statius is melding the two together.

#### Valerius Flaccus and Silius Italicus: the battle to be epic?

A different approach can be seen in Valerius Flaccus, who does have a march-out in his mini-*Iliad* of book 6. After the invocation of 33-41, the catalogue of the outlandish barbarian forces of Perses at 42-170 culminates with the key Iliadic simile (V.Fl. 6.163-70):

nec tot ab extremo fluctus agit aequare nec sic  
fratribus adversa Boreas respondet ab unda,  
aut is apud fluvios clamor volucrum, aethera quantus  
tunc lituum concentus adit lymphataque miscet  
milia, quot foliis, quot floribus incipit annus.  
ipse rotis gemit ictus ager tremibundaque pulsu  
nutat humus, quatit ut saevo cum fulmine Phlegram  
Iuppiter atque imis Typhona reverberat arvis.

Boreas drives not so many billows from the ocean's bounds, nor so answers his brothers from opposing waves: not so loud is the clamour of birds about the rivers, as is then the blare of trumpets that ascends to heaven, filling with frenzy the mingled myriads, numerous as leaves or flowers in the opening year. The plain itself groans beneath the beat of wheels, and the ground trembles and quakes at the shock, as when Jupiter strikes Phlegra with his angry brand and hurls back Typhon to the deepest recesses of the earth. (Trans. Mozley)

Here the wave simile begins this tour de force of miniature recapitulation, followed by other elements from the initial cluster in *Iliad 2*: clamour of birds, sound ascending to heaven, multitudinous troops like leaves or flowers, topped off with Jupiter's gigantomachic thunder. This passage may also have been in Statius' mind: he too has Boreas, and finishes our passage with the figure of Jupiter starting a storm, doubly

appropriate since Jupiter has generated Staius' war in order to destroy humanity.<sup>20</sup> Staius and Valerius have focused on different parts of the Homeric imagery. This seems likely to be a deliberate strategy of avoidance on behalf of the later author. It is also interesting that Valerius avoids the beautiful face of war: his troops do not glitter, and they move straight into death, blood and arms destroyed on the battlefield. Instead, we see the beauty of war through Medea's fascination with the beautiful figure of Jason, as she watches this mini-*Iliad* which has been put on by Juno particularly for her benefit. While Staius gradually moves towards the Iliadic climax of battle, Valerius' interpolated war must get straight down to business.

Silius has many more opportunities for march-out scenes, but the structure of his poem often follows historiography rather than epic. Ticinus and Trasimene avoid the Homeric tropes; at Trebia, the Carthaginians are in historical mode, Romans epic. (Sil. 4.514-24):

erumpunt, cunctisque prior volat aggere aperto  
degener haud Gracchis consul. quatit aura comantis  
cassidis Auruncae cristas, umeroque refulget  
sanguinei patrium saguli decus. agmina magno  
respectans clamore vocat, quaque obvia densos  
artat turba globos rumpens iter aequore fertur,  
ut torrens celsi praeceps e vertice Pindi  
cum sonitu ruit in campos magnoque fragore  
avulsum montis voluit latus: obvia passim  
armenta immanesque ferae silvaeque trahuntur,  
spumea saxosis clamat convallibus unda

They burst out, and the consul flies before all when the rampart lay open, no unworthy heir of the Gracchi. The breeze shakes the horse-hair crest of his Auruncan helmet, and glory shines back from the blood-red cloak of his fathers on his shoulder. Looking back on the ranks he summons them with a shout and wherever a densely packed mass narrowed his way in a

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<sup>20</sup> Arguably it is even more appropriate in the other direction, since Valerius' reference to earthquake might evoke the earthquake which has just happened in *Thebaid* 7; particularly replacing the beat of feet with the beat of wheels - Amphiaraus is famous for his chariot-racing and driving. But that would call for a much later dating of Valerius - possible, but very much against the grain of current orthodoxy which sees Valerius as Vespasianic. See Stover 2008.

crowd breaking in his way is borne on the pain, just as a torrent rushes headlong from the peak of high Pindus with a roar into the plains and tearing away the side of the mountain rolls it down with a great crash: everywhere the cattle in its path are dragged away and the huge beasts and the woods, and the foamy water sounds in the rocky valleys.

Note that the Homeric resonances have been transferred from the armies as a whole onto the figure of the single heroic commander.

In the build up to Cannae, as Silius prepares for his catalogue, the magnitude of the army is brought out, but with no Homeric similes (Sil. 8.352-3):

non alias maiore virum, maiore sub armis  
agmine cornipedum concussa est Itala tellus.

Never was the soil of Italy trampled by a greater concourse of men or by a larger body of cavalry in arms.

Later there is an explicit comparison to the Trojan war, but it is set before a passage of omens rather than a reflection on the grandeur of the massed troops (Sil. 8.617-21):

Ignosset quamvis avido committere pugnam  
Varroni, quicumque simul tot tela videret.  
tantis agminibus Rhoeteo litore quondam  
fervere, cum magnae Troiam invasere Mycenae,  
mille rates vidit Leandrius Hellespontus.

Any man who had seen so great an army mustered might have pardoned Varro's eagerness to fight a battle. In ancient times when great Mycenae attacked Troy, Leander's Hellespont saw a thousand ships swarm with as huge a host on the shore of Rhoeteum.

Finally when the two sides meet, Silius pulls out all the epic stops (Sil. 9.278-86):

Iamque propinquabant acies, agilique virorum  
discursu mixtoque simul calefacta per ora  
cornipedum hinnitu et multum strepitantibus armis  
errabat caecum turbata per agmina murmur.

sic, ubi prima movent pelago certamina venti,  
inclusam rabiem ac sparsuras astra procellas  
parturit unda freti fundoque emota minacis  
expirat per saxa sonos atque acta cavernis  
torquet anhelantem spumanti vertice pontum.

And now the two armies closed; and the rapid movement of men, together with the neighing of hot-breathing horses and the loud clashing of weapons, sent a dull roaring noise through the moving ranks. So, when the winds begin a battle on the deep, the sea is big with pent-up fury and storms that will soon drench the stars; then, churned up from the bottom, it breathes out sounds of menace through the rocks; and, driven from its caves, torments the restless water with its foaming eddies.

The hot-breathed horses recall Statius' chariot race moment and the storm winds the climax of the Statian passage (*Theb.* 8.423-7). This passage evokes Statius rather than Homer. At 9.304-25 the description of the beginning of battle continues in similarity to Statius: at 9.304, the shouts going up to heaven are as loud as Jupiter demanding fresh thunderbolts during the gigantomachy (cf. the importance of Jupiter at *Thebaid* 8.409-10). The cloud of missiles (*nimbus telorum*, 310-11) evokes Statius' iron cloud (*stant ferrea caelo / nubila*, 412-3). The densely packed fighting at 315-6 recalls the densely packed weapons at *Thebaid* 8.419-20. All this culminates in an expanded version of Statius' clash of polyptota (8.398-9) including the sequence shield-sword-foot (Sil. 9.304-325):

galea horrida flictu  
adversae ardescit galeae, clipeusque fatiscit  
impulsu clipei, atque ensis contunditur ense.  
pes pede, virque viro teritur,

Helmet, clashing fiercely against helmet of a foe, flashed fire; shield striking shield fell to pieces; and sword broke against sword. Foot pressed against foot, and man against man.

Silius expands each phrase with vivid verbs (*ardescit, fatiscit, contunditur, teritur*), literally surpassing Statius. In neither Valerius or Silius is there any mention of the

beauty of war, and Statius' close engagement with the Homeric sublimity of enormous armies is not repeated.

### Tacitean spectacles

To what extent are these march-out scenes purely epic? Comparison with historiography and Tacitus in particular as a partly Flavian author reveals some similarities. There is something of the idea of the beautiful face of war in the introduction to the battle of Mons Graupius at Tacitus *Agricola* 29-35. The muster of the British forces is described before Calgacus' famous speech (Tac. *Agr.* 29.3-5):

nam Britanni nihil fracti pugnae prioris eventu et ultionem et servitium expectantes, tandemque docti commune periculum concordia propulsandum, legationibus et foederibus omnium civitatum vires exciverant. iamque super triginta milia armatorum aspiciebantur adfluebat omnis iuventus et quibus cruda ac viridis senectus, clari bello et sua quisque decora gestantes ...

For the Britons, not at all broken by the outcome of the previous battle and waiting only for revenge and slavery, at last having learnt that a common danger must be pushed away with the help of agreement, had gathered together through embassies and treaties the strength of all their states. And now over thirty thousand armed men were on display; all the raw youth and those in a green old age were flowing towards battle, men famous in war and each wearing their own decorations ...

The vast force is to be looked at and the emphasis is on the variety of ages involved. Further, at the end of the speech we have the motifs of shouting and glittering, though the former is marked as a barbarian trait (Tac. *Agr.* 33.1):

Excepere orationem alacres, ut barbaris moris, fremitu cantuque et clamoribus dissonis. iamque agmina et armorum fulgores audentissimi cuiusque procurso ...

They received the speech keenly, as is the barbarian custom, with raging, song and cacophonous shouting. And now the columns and the glittering of arms and the boldest men in their dash forward ...

These brief panoramic overviews do form a sort of muster and march-out, but they are dwarfed in comparison with the enormous speeches that they introduce (Calgacus

from 30-32; Agricola from 33-34).<sup>21</sup> The description of forces at the siege of Placentia (*Hist.* 2.22) includes the glittering of weapons (*fulgentes armis virisque campi*, ‘the fields glittering with arms and men’). However, the use of the tag *armis virisque* may well evoke epic.<sup>22</sup> There is much more research to be done on this, but the fact that Lucan avoids the trope of the march-out and Silius reserves it for the epic sublimity of Cannae suggests that there is something fundamentally epic in its generic associations.

#### Faces and the beautiful face of war

Sappho fr. 16 sets military beauty against human beauty in the face of Anaktoria. It is therefore no surprise that actual faces play an important role in constructing the beautiful face of war. Lucan emphasises the theme of recognising the faces of the enemy (Luc. 7.463). For Statius this ties into the theme of the universal destructiveness of war, embodied by the beautiful face of Parthenopaeus, whose death is emblematic of the whole poem as we see in the repetition of *Arcada, Arcada, Arcada* at *Thebaid* 12.805-7. In Statius’ catalogue Parthenopaeus is described by his face, most beautiful in the army ([Stat.Theb. 4.251-2 and 265](#)):

pulchrior haud ulli triste ad discrimen ituro  
Vultus et egregiae tanta indulgentia formae;  
(...)  
igneus ante omnes auro micat, igneus ostro ...

Not more beautiful is the face of any man about to go out  
to the grim struggle and there is such sympathy inspired by outstanding beauty  
(...)  
fiery with gold before all he flashes, fiery with purple

Similarly, in Virgil’s mini-march-out at 8.587-96, the focus is squarely on Pallas, as beloved, beautiful, object of the gaze (Verg. A. 8.587-96):

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<sup>21</sup> The battle between Pharasmenes and Orodes at 6.34-5 is exemplary and spectacular according to Ash 1999, but the drama of the different opposing types of fighters and different ethnicities is displayed in battle rather than in a march-out. See also Ash 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Ash 2002, 269-70

Commented [M1]: the??

ipse agmine Pallas  
it medio chlamyde et pictis conspectus in armis,  
qualis ubi Oceani perfusus Lucifer unda,  
quem Venus ante alios astrorum diligit ignis,  
extulit os sacrum caelo tenebrasque resolvit.  
stant pavidae in muris matres oculisque sequuntur  
pulveream nubem et fulgentis aere catervas.  
olli per dumos, qua proxima meta viarum,  
armati tendunt; it clamor, et agmine facto  
quadripedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum.

Pallas himself goes  
in the middle of the column, conspicuous in cloak and painted weapons,  
just as when Lucifer drenched by the waves of Ocean,  
whom Venus loves before all other fires of the stars,  
raises his sacred face to the sky and undoes the shadows.  
The mothers stand terrified on the walls and follow with their eyes  
the dusty cloud and the squadrons gleaming with bronze.  
The armed men head through the thickets, where the road  
turns nearest; a shout goes up, a column is made,  
and the hooves shake the crumbling plain with a four-footed sound.

Pallas is not just an erotic object, in the comparison to the morning star, but also has a face that blazes and goes up to heaven; dust, shout and gleaming bronze recapitulate Homeric imagery, and instead of conveying the beat of feet in an image, Virgil uses the dactylic rhythm to its full extent. Here the beautiful face of war is segregated from the destruction to come, except in the minds of the terrified mothers.

### Conclusions

The beautiful face of war in Latin epic is summed up in the physical beauty of the hero. We can see how important this topos is in the reception of epic in Flavian personal poetry. Parthenopaeus is used as an emblem of Latin epic at Martial 10.4. At 9.56 he is used in a parody of the beautiful epic boy:<sup>23</sup> Spendophoros is going to war,

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<sup>23</sup> Statius is the only source who mentions Parthenopaeus with a spear, so “it seems probable he has influenced Martial in this respect” (Henriksen 1999, 35).

but he is too beautiful for it. His wounds should rather be the wounds of love. His naked face, helmet removed, becomes the ultimate vision of heroic nudity; his beautiful face and body sum up a version of war so glamorous as to be entirely unrealistic (Mart. 9.56):

Spendophoros Libycas domini petit armiger urbis:  
    quae puero dones tela, Cupido, para,  
illa quibus iuvenes figis mollesque puellas:  
    sit tamen in tenera levis et hasta manu,  
loricam clypeumque tibi galeamque remitto;         5  
    tutus ut invadat proelia, nudus eat:  
*non iaculo, non ense fuit laesusve sagitta,*  
    *casside dum liber Parthenopaeus erat.*  
quisquis ab hoc fuerit fixus morietur amore.  
    O felix, si quem tam bona fata manent!         10  
dum puer es, redeas, dum vultu lubricus, et te  
    non Libye faciat, sed tua Roma virum.

Spendophoros is going to Libya's cities as his lord's armour-bearer: Cupid, prepare shafts to give the boy, those with which you pierce youths and soft girls: But make sure there is also a smooth spear in his tender hand. Never mind about a breast-plate, shield, and helmet; and so that he will enter the battlefield safe, let him be nude: Parthenopaeus was not wounded by a javelin, a sword, or an arrow, as long as he was free of a metal helmet. Whoever is pierced by this one, will die of love. O happy one, who has such a good fate in store! Return while you are a boy, while your face is smooth; and do not let Libya, but your Roma make you a man.

Martial's *reductio ad absurdum* shows how crucial this moment is in the reception of the *Thebaid*. Despite the grimness of Statius' war narratives, it is the aestheticisation of the hero which steals the show. The beautiful face of war is at the centre of contemporary images of Statius' epic.

What does this exploration of the beautiful face of war tell us about genre in the Flavian period? Homer is very important in Statius' conception of what epic battle should be like, and Homeric grandeur has connotations of an original glory of epic, before it was tarnished by contamination from tragedy, by the Roman obsession with civil war, even if Statius deliberately mixes Homer with Lucan to tarnish it even as he uses it. The double-edged nature of sublimity is already present in the *Iliad*, glory

interwoven with terror. Statius is particularly interested in this Homeric topos, that is used in one miniature recapitulation by Valerius Flaccus, but does not feature in Silius, where Statius himself seems to form the touchstone. Statius uses multiple beginnings just as he uses multiple epic endings. It is striking that the beginnings occur in roughly reverse chronology: Lucan in the first word of the proem, Ovid's Theban history in the paths not taken elsewhere in the proem; Virgil's beginning of war in book 7; the *Iliad*'s march-out in book 8. The *Thebaid* is gradually going back into the serious territory of Homeric epic (just as the *Aeneid* sets *Odyssey* and Apollonius before *Iliad*). The extreme repetitions of epic are thematised by the multiple weapons against weapons; yet the Homeric material gives impetus and energy to the epic battle, a noise going up to the stars, sublime in its magnitude.

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