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CIRRHAEI IN LIMINE TEMPLI/CONSTITIT  
(THEB. 1, 641-642).  
A RITUAL READING OF THE  
COROEBUS EPISODE IN STATIUS' THEBAID

TIM NOENS

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to offer an alternative approach to the story of Apollo and Coroebus, narrated by king Adrastus, in the first book of Statius' *Thebaid*. Further building on a recent tendency in Flavian scholarship, this analysis will read the tale as if Statius, from the start, presents the narrative through the character of Adrastus: as a (part of a) ritual. Relying on the anthropological theories of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, it will be argued that a religious pattern underlies the king's story, which contains a dynamic of consecutive rites. More specifically, the narrative will be considered as a threefold repetition of an abstract scheme in which a condition of fertility is followed by a death/disruption that must be resolved by an act of reconciliation/sacrifice.

Forsitan, o iuvenes, quae sint ea sacra quibusque  
praecipuum causis Phoebi obtestemur honorem  
rex ait, exquirant animi, non inscia suasit  
relligio, magnis exercita cladibus olim  
plebs Argiva litant; animos advertite, pandam.<sup>1</sup>

*Theb.* 1, 557-561

WITH these words king Adrastus introduces the story of Apollo and the hero Coroebus (*Theb.* 1, 557-668) near the end of the first book of Statius' *Thebaid*. He recounts this old tale to Polynices and Tydeus who have reached Argos after their forced exile from respectively Thebes and Calydon. The king mentions to the exiles how Phoebus tried to take revenge on Argos twice because of several insults. Each time the Argive youngster Coroebus managed to avert the danger and finally succeeded at restoring the virtuous ties with the god. After Apollo and Coroebus decided to bury the hatchet, peace returned to Argos. In the wake of these events the city became dedicated to the god.

<sup>1</sup> All Latin citations are derived from J. H. Mozley (ed.), *P. P. Statius. Thebais*, London 1928.





The tale of Adrastus is much debated and recent critics all acknowledge its important value in the large network of Statius' epic.<sup>1</sup> Although there are varying perspectives in the approach to the episode,<sup>2</sup> most interpreters analyse the story of Coroebus as a representation of the opposition between the positive character (of *pietas*) of the Argive youngster and the cruelty and murderousness of Apollo (*nefas*). Hill, for example, speaks of the "salvation [which] can be achieved only by the most vigorous acts of personal piety and [that] the only true source of moral strength is man himself, certainly not Jupiter or Apollo".<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Vessey writes about Coroebus as "an embodiment, or *figura*, of *pietas*", whereas Phoebus is described as savage and rude or "terrible, cruel et rancunier" as Delarue says.<sup>4</sup> The ferocious behaviour of Apollo in Adrastus' narrative is considered as a prediction of the brutality of the gods in the sequel of the epic and especially of Jupiter who will almost indifferently seek the destruction of Argos and Thebes.<sup>5</sup>

Phoebus' excessive violence also gives rise to another question which Ganiban formulates as follows: "Why do the Argives so proudly celebrate Apollo as their protector (1.552-5, 694-5) when, in Adrastus' inset narrative, the god is depicted as exceedingly violent and thoroughly indifferent to the suffering of the Argives?"<sup>6</sup> The common answer points at the naivety of Adrastus. Throughout the entire epic he tries to be a good king and he aims to realize his ideal of *pietas*, but the horrible actions of the Theban brothers and his other companions prohibit its concretization and eventu-

<sup>1</sup> D. Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid*, London 1973, pp. 101-102 points out, as one of the first critics, the importance of the Coroebus episode: "The episode has often been used as evidence that the *Thebaid* is devoid of unity; Legras went so far as to class it among 'épisodes très inutiles'. In fact the myth is symbolically related to the main themes of the whole *Thebaid*, and deserves careful attention".

<sup>2</sup> R. T. Ganiban, *Statius and Virgil. The Thebaid and the Reinterpretation of the Aeneid*, Cambridge 2007, p. 10 offers an overview of the several approaches.

<sup>3</sup> D. E. Hill, 'Statius' *Thebaid*: a Glimmer of Light in a Sea of Darkness', in A. J. Boyle (ed.), *The Imperial Muse. Ramus Essays on Roman Literature of the Empire II. Flavian Epicist to Claudian*, Victoria 1990, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Vessey, *cit.* p. 106; F. Delarue, *Stace poète épique. Originalité et cohérence*, Leuven-Paris 2000, p. 318; W. J. Dominik, *The Mythic Voice of Statius. Power and Politics in the Thebaid*, Leyden-New York-Cologne 1994, pp. 69-70 shares this opinion: "Apollo's action in rewarding the *pietas* of Coroebus stresses the heroic nature of the hero's attempted self-sacrifice (...). Apollo is indeed (...) *saeuus* ('cruel', 9.657) and *inmeritusque coli* ('unworthy of being worshipped', 657)".

<sup>5</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the cruelty of the gods in the *Thebaid* and the connection to the Coroebus episode, see Vessey, *cit.* pp. 106-110; F. Ahl, 'Statius' *Thebaid*: A Reconsideration', *Aufstieg und Niedergang II*, 32.5, 1986, p. 2834 f.

<sup>6</sup> Ganiban, *cit.* p. 10; Dominik, *cit.* pp. 66-67 and Ahl, *cit.* p. 2856 share this wonder.





ally cause his irreversible fail. This ignorance and foolish belief already becomes clear in the imbedded tale in the first book and gives his speech a certain irony.<sup>1</sup>

This article, however, does not aim to focus on the (traditional) opposition between *pietas* and *nefas*.<sup>2</sup> This analysis seeks to approach the Coroebus episode from an alternative perspective that has recently received much attention as it functions as an important theme of Statius' epic: rituality. In *Ritual and Religion in Flavian epic*, A. Augoustakis (ed.) points out the religious layering of the *Thebaid* and studies the poet's recurrent use of "cults and rituals (e.g. divination), religious activities (e.g. *katabasis*, necromancy) and ritual metaphors (the role of the *uates*-seer-prophet and his identification with poetry)".<sup>3</sup> The volume's aim to understand the function and role of ritual and religion, which seem to be key issues in the epic,<sup>4</sup> helps to comprehend the "very disturbing nexus" between (imperial) writing and religion in the *Thebaid*, "with [its] religious vision of humans attempting to carry on their lives within inherited forms which no longer have the meaning they once had".<sup>5</sup>

That also Adrastus' story has such a religious and probably complex ground, can be supposed by phrases as *sint ea sacra, praecipuum (...) obtestemur honorem* and *plebs Argiva litant* which introduce the narrative and create,

<sup>1</sup> In the same way Adrastus considers the arrival of Polynices and Tydeus in Argos, who are respectively dressed in the fleece of a lion and a boar, as the completion of an oracle of Apollo (*Theb.* 1, 395-399), which forecasted the marriage of the king's daughters with these two animals. Naively Adrastus is happy with his new sons-in-law and he does not see the cruelty and bestiality of the prediction. For a more extensive discussion of the ignorance of the Argive king, see Vessey, *cit.* pp. 101-107; 135-141; Delarue, *cit.* pp. 106-111; 329-333.

<sup>2</sup> During the course of the epic, *pietas* gradually loses its force and the world becomes dominated by infernal and *nefanda* powers. For a more extensive discussion of the domination of the hellish *nefas*, see Ganiban and Ahl, *cit.*

<sup>3</sup> A. Augoustakis (ed.), *Ritual and Religion in Flavian Epic*, Oxford 2013, p. 3. This volume was the result of a conference on the subject, held at the university of Illinois in 2010. It applies to recent tendencies in scholarship, which have paid much attention to the "intersection between religion, ritual, and literature". The standard survey on the topic is written by D. Feeney, *Literature and Religion at Rome. Culture, Contexts and Beliefs*, Cambridge 1998. While the sacred aspects of canonical works as Vergil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Fasti* have been relatively well-studied, Augoustakis has noticed a gap in research on literary representations of ritual in Flavian epic.

<sup>4</sup> F. Bessone, 'Religion and Power in the *Thebaid*', in Augoustakis, *cit.* pp. 145-146 considers religion as one of the *Thebaid*'s main topics and sees a strong relationship between theological and poetic forms: Statius' "literary discourse" is strongly connected to "political and religious discourse" (...) through "complex cultural, ideological, and aesthetic mediations".

<sup>5</sup> D. Feeney, 'The History of Roman Religion in Roman Historiography and Epic', in J. Rüpke (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Religion*, Malden 2007, p. 135.





from the start, a sacred atmosphere.<sup>1</sup> It will be argued that a religious pattern underlies the king's story, which contains a dynamic of consecutive rites. More specifically, the old tale will be considered as a threefold repetition of a ritual scheme in which each time small variations and differences emerge.

This ritual perspective will be based on the anthropological ideas of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. Their structuralist theories will serve as a reading strategy which positions the inset narrative in a broader sacred frame. From this point of view the wonder about the annual celebration of Apollo and the traditional opposition between virtue and cruelty will be complicated and other tensions will be taken into account. However, before reading the text in detail, it is necessary to outline the central topics of van Gennep's and Turner's approaches.

#### ARNOLD VAN GENNEP AND VICTOR TURNER

Arnold van Gennep's research mainly focused on what he called *rites de passage*. These sacred ceremonies accompany and constitute the progression of one socio-cultural state to the next and enable individuals or groups to pass important moments in their lives, such as birth, social puberty, adulthood, betrothal, marriage and death.<sup>2</sup> Generally, *rites de passage* have three stages: (1) the preliminal or separation stage in which an individual or group is released from his/her original position; (2) the liminal or transition stage in which a ritual subject prepares himself for his new social function and ex-

<sup>1</sup> The religious atmosphere is also emphasized by the inter-textual relation between Adrastus' introduction of the narrative, as fully cited at the beginning of this article, on the one hand, and the death of Priam and the tale of Evander in respectively the second and eighth book of Vergil's *Aeneid* on the other hand: *forsitan et Priami fuerint quae fata requires* (*Aen.* 2, 506) (cf. *Theb.*: *forsitan (...) exquirant*); *hanc tanti numinis aram / vana superstitione veterumque ignara deorum / imposuit: saevis, hospes Troiane, periclis / servati facimus meritosque novamus honores* (*Aen.* 8, 186-189) (cf. *Theb.*: *honorem; non inscia suasit / religio; magnis exercita cladis olim / plebs Argiva litant*). The first phrase forms the start of Aeneas' tragic story of Priam's death, which he recounts to Dido. The hero describes how the brutal Greek warrior Pyrrhus has entered the temple of Jupiter during the Trojan war where he has cruelly slaughtered the old king. The death of human beings, accomplished in a sacred atmosphere, is an important aspect of the Coroebus episode, as will become clear in my further analysis. In the eighth book of Vergil's epic, Aeneas arrives in the Arcadian forests where he meets Evander. The king invites him to participate in an annually repeated ritual and tells an old and sacred tale that concerns a battle between Hercules and the monster Cacus. Through verbal echoes, Statius formally alludes to this Vergilian passage and evokes a resemblance to Adrastus' narrative, recounted to the exiles Polynices and Tydeus. Furthermore, also in the Argive king's story, a ravaging monster will appear. For other inter-textual relations with the *Aeneid*, see A. Keith, 'Medusa, Python and Poine', in Augoustakis, *cit.* pp. 304-306.

<sup>2</sup> A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, ed. by M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (trad.), Chicago 1969, pp. 3-4.





periences a certain transformation; (3) the postliminal or incorporation stage that enables individuals or groups to integrate into their new socio-cultural state, back into civilisation.<sup>1</sup>

Victor Turner further built on van Gennep's work<sup>2</sup> and his attention was particularly directed to the second liminal phase. During this period, the ritual participants have no well defined state, since they belong neither to their previous position nor to the next. Their condition can be described as "betwixt and between" and they stay in a social and often spatial exile in which the normal socio-hierarchical structures are temporarily subverted.<sup>3</sup> This "antistructure" offers them the possibility to contemplate about several aspects of society and gradually modify in order to be finally "reborn" in a new socio-cultural position.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the ritual subjects are often confronted with a monster during the liminal phase. On the one hand, this horror functions as a test and by slaying the monster they prove that they have the capacities which are necessary to successfully handle the next state. On the other hand, the beast serves as a sacred symbol and encourages his adversaries to meditate about their culture and society.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the liminal period, which precedes the social rebirth, is often symbolised as a time of pregnancy and the condition of the sacred participants is paralleled with the one of a child in his mother's womb.<sup>6</sup> Hence, they are often associated with darkness and the earth, which refers both to the shady stay in the uterus near the intestines and to the cycle of seasons with its annual repetition of fertility.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Van Gennep, *cit.* pp. 10-11. He adds: "These three subcategories are not developed to the same extent by all peoples or in every ceremonial pattern. Rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies, rites of incorporation at marriages. Transition rites may play an important part, for instance, in pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation".

<sup>2</sup> Turner based his research on the early work of van Gennep who already published in 1909 his first ideas about the *rites de passage*.

<sup>3</sup> V. W. Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*', in V. W. Turner (ed.), *The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca-New York 1967, pp. 96-97. The liminal *persona* or "threshold people" are at once "no longer classified and not yet classified" and they stay between the common social borders. Because of this ambivalence they slip into a "sacred poverty": they have no status, possessions, clothes, rank, kingship, ... or anything else to express themselves socially, since the indeterminacy of the transition does not allow them to occupy such positions.

<sup>4</sup> V. W. Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*, Ithaca-New York 1969, pp. 94-131.

<sup>5</sup> According to Turner, 'Betwixt and Between', *cit.* p. 105 "monsters are manufactured precisely to teach neophytes to distinguish clearly between the different factors of reality, as it is conceived in their culture". The beast is not just a way to frighten. The monster consists of a combination of several twisting social elements which are contemplated during the liminal period.

<sup>6</sup> Van Gennep, *cit.* pp. 91-92. Turner, *The Ritual Process, cit.* p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> Van Gennep, *cit.* pp. 65-70.





Although the important value of Turner's approach is generally acknowledged, some of his ideas have been contested. Several scholars have argued that Turner's theory is "too rigid"<sup>1</sup> and that he simplifies rituals into a script of society<sup>2</sup> without taking the creative power of sacred practices into account.<sup>3</sup> Also, the question arises if Turner's ideas of liminality, which are only based on research of the African Ndembu tribe, might be generalized and projected on our western and other societies.<sup>4</sup> An explanation for the criticism is that the definition of some of Turner's key concepts, for example, liminality ("threshold"), is not sufficiently demarcated. Consequently, these terms are too vaguely used and widely applicable.<sup>5</sup> However, this article does not have an anthropological aim and does not seek to offer alternative or more specific definitions. Hence, Turner's idea of the threshold, the *limen*, will rather be explained from the Latin text and approached from the meaning the concept has in Statius' Coroebus episode.

#### A THREEFOLD PATTERN

Before concretely looking at some text fragments, the broader structure of Adrastus' story will be considered from an anthropological perspective. Generally, it will be argued that the tale is embedded in a sacred context and reveals a sequence of *rites de passage*. Several characters slip into a period of transition in which they try to remove themselves from their old socio-cultural position in order to uptake their new one. However, through their sacred practices they enter a field of tension between four fundamental orders which gradually step forward and seem to determine Adrastus' story: the opposition between heaven and earth and the contrast between rituality/mythology and the social order. The ritual participants fluctuate

<sup>1</sup> M. Deflem, 'Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion. A Discussion of Victor Turner's Processual Symbolic Analysis', *Journ. Scientific Study Rel.* 30/1, 1991, pp. 18-20 offers an extensive overview of scholarly criticism on Turner.

<sup>2</sup> D. Weber, 'From Limen to Border: A Meditation on the Legacy of Victor Turner for American Cultural Studies', *Am. Quart.* 47/3, 1995, p. 531.

<sup>3</sup> F. de Boeck and R. Devisch, 'Ndembu, Luunda and Yaka Divination Compared. From Representation and Social Engineering to Embodiment and Worldmaking', *Journ. Rel. Africa* 24, 2, 1994, 98-102.

<sup>4</sup> Deflem, *cit.* p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Turner sometimes describes concepts and gives them properties without exactly defining what he means. In his famous article about the betwixt and between condition of liminal *personae*, for example, Turner, 'Betwixt and Between', *cit.* p. 93 just considers the liminal period as an "interstructural situation" or a "margin" without clarifying what he understands as a structure/interstructure, where these margins start and what they are or when this liminality occurs. A similar phenomenon is found in Turner, *The Ritual Process*, *cit.* p. 95 which speaks of liminal *personae* as "threshold people". It is, however, not clear in which situations ritual subjects are standing on the *limen* or what this position means.



between the poles of these two precarious systems and try to take position. Sometimes their actions encroach one of the orders and cause an imbalance amongst or within the systems. The fragile harmony is broken and the disorder subverts the sacred subjects' ritual process. For this reason the balance must be restored and they have to attempt to re-stabilize the four fundamental orders.

Although the confrontation of these fundamental orders within the sacred context is rather complex (*infra*), the Coroebus episode can be read as a threefold repetition of an abstract pattern: a condition of fertility is followed by death/disruption which must be resolved by a reconciliation/sacrifice. These three elements are interlaced by several religious practices.

	Fertility	Death/disruption	Reconciliation/Sacrifice
Part 1	X (mythology: pregnancy of Leto, chased by the Python: <i>rite de passage</i> )	Apollo slays the Python as a transition test: <i>rite de passage</i>	The rape of Crotopus' daughter
Part 2	The girl leaves society and gives birth to Linus: <i>rite de passage</i>	Linus is lacerated by a troop of savage dogs	Crotopus sacrifices his daughter
Part 3	Apollo summons a monster, conceived in the bed of the Fury's. The monster kills first-born children.	Coroebus slays the monster as a transition test: <i>rite de passage</i>	Apollo strikes Argos with a plague and requires funerary offerings. Coroebus presents himself as a sacrifice in the god's temple and his life is spared.

Each part starts with an expression of fertility. Twice a female gives birth to a child (Apollo and Diana, and Linus).<sup>1</sup> In the third part, however, Apollo's monster murders newborn babies, which is the result of a distorted fertility

<sup>1</sup> It has to be remarked that the first part is incomplete. Adrastus' narrative starts with the battle between Apollo and the Python and the god's birth is not mentioned. However, from a mythological background the pregnancy and problematic parturition of Leto can be fitted into the scheme.



process (*infra*), and there is an inversion of the beginning of the previous parts. After the condition of fertility, a death follows and in this way one of the systems that are mentioned above is disrupted. The decease of the Python, Linus and Phoebus' monster causes an imbalance and slightly leads Argos into a crisis. Finally, a reconciliation of the fundamental orders is necessary and, in accordance with the key thoughts of Roman religion, a sacrifice is imposed twice.<sup>1</sup> From this point of view the rape of Crotopus' daughter can be paralleled with her death and with the confrontation between Coroebus and Apollo in the temple.

In what follows, the king's narrative will be read from this pattern and the several analogous situations and parts will be confronted. Although the same elements always return, it will be maintained that each time small variations and differences emerge.

#### PART 1. (LETO), THE PYTHON AND APOLLO'S *PIACULA CAEDIS*

The story of Adrastus starts with the battle between Apollo and the Python, a huge snake which squeezes Delphi with her tortuous body. The god fires a lot of arrows at her and after a hard struggle he finally slays the beast. According to mythology, Phoebus goes to the temple of Delphi after his notorious victory where he erects his famous oracle.

From an anthropological perspective the fight can be seen as a part of a *rite de passage* and, more specifically, of a transition rite. Through the combat the god gradually sows his wild oats to transform into a full heavenly god – a state he reaches when he appropriates the Delphic sanctuary. His confrontation with the monster functions as a sacred reflective test through which Apollo as a ritual subject starts to contemplate about the planned social modifications and proves that he will be able to successfully accomplish his next celestial state. Not coincidentally a serpent is generally associated with the earth<sup>2</sup> and also in Statius' epic the snake is explicitly described as (*Theb.* 1, 563) *terrigenam*, born out of earth. In this way the origin of the horror is sharply contrasted with the celestial position Phoebus desires. Through the slaying of the Python Apollo thus ultimately releases himself from the earth and shows that he deserves his place between the stars.

Although the death of the Python is necessary for the purpose of the god's transition, the decease disturbs the fragile harmony between heaven

<sup>1</sup> Van Gennep, *cit.* p. 90 points out the importance of sacrifices in Roman religion. For a more extensive discussion of the role of sacrifices in *rites de passage*, see *infra*.

<sup>2</sup> D. Slifer, *Kokopelli. The Magic, Mirth and Mischief of an Ancient Symbol*, Layton 2007, p. 111.





and earth.<sup>1</sup> The snake, which is not only earthborn, but is also remarkably depicted as a (*Theb.* 1, 562) *caerulei monstri*, a blue-celestial monster, seems to be presented as an important nexus in this balance. She incorporates the tension between the two fundamental orders. By slaying her, Phoebus causes disorder within one of the most precarious systems and his wish to achieve a heavenly state requires an encroachment of the primordial principles of earth (the opposite pole).

The god realizes that he has to re-stabilize the balance and the only solution he has, is to subjugate himself to the earthly laws. Therefore, he decides to visit Argos where he brutally rapes Crotopus' daughter (*Theb.* 1, 569-574):

nova deinde piacula caedis  
perquirens nostri tecta haud opulenta Crotopi  
attigit, huic primis et pubem ineuntibus annis  
mira decore pios servabat nata penates  
intemerata toris, felix, si Delia numquam  
furta nec occultum Phoebosociasset amorem

From a ritual perspective, his action has to be considered as twofold. First of all, the assault on the girl (*occultum (...) amorem*) is presented as a *nova (...) piacula caedis*, a reconciliation for murder. Apollo has to reconcile the death of the Python and, more specifically, the earth's loss. Hence, he must comply with the requirements of the earth which is, as argued in the discussion of Turner's theory, an expression of fertility. Therefore, to satisfy the earth's main demands, he approaches the king's daughter sexually, which has to be understood as a sort of expiation and as an attempt to restore the fertility/earthly process.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The tension between heaven and earth is one of the main topics of Statius' *Thebaid*. Through the conflict of Jupiter and Dis these two fundamental orders collide during the entire epic. For a more extensive discussion of the conflict between the heavenly ruler and his earthly brother, see Ganiban, *cit.* pp. 176-185; D. Hershkowitz, *The Madness of Epic. Reading Insanity from Homer to Statius*, Oxford 1998, pp. 264-271.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars have considered Apollo's rape of Crotopus' daughter as an example of the god's *nefas* (Ganiban, *cit.* p. 11) and as the start of destruction in the story. Dominik, *cit.* p. 67 maintains: "The actual punishments [i.e. the monster from hell and Apollo's requirement for funerary offerings later in the story] dispensed by Apollo far exceed the bounds of natural justice. None of the events would have taken place if it had not been for Apollo's rape of Crotopus' daughter in the first instance. His disastrous intervention in the life of Psamathe precipitates her execution, the death of their child and the numerous deaths of innocent citizens". I, however, rather agree with N. Dee, 'Wasted Water', in Augoustakis, *cit.* pp. 191-192 who puts forward that the "chain of causality goes back a step further: the stage is set for the rape and the succeeding events only because of Apollo's (...) attempt to expiate his guild [i.e. slaying of the Python]". Apollo's atrocity, which predicts the cruelty of





Secondly, next to the conciliation of the earth, the assault functions as a continuation of Apollo's *rite de passage* which is still not completed. Van Genneep argues that transition rites concerning a coming of age have a "sexual nature [that] is not to be denied and [these rites] are said to make the individual a man or a woman".<sup>1</sup> Hence, Phoebus' disgrace of Crotopus' daughter is an attempt to leave his youth behind and to enter adulthood as a full god. Through the rape his masculinity is confirmed and from this moment he can physically be considered a man. The sacred context of his practices is also implied by the description of the girl who acts in a religious sphere just before she is assaulted: the king's daughter excels because of her *mira decore* and diligently serves the *pios (...) penates*, the household gods. In this way she appears as a paragon of piety and she attends the virtuous ties between the royal household and the gods.

In summary, the first part of Adrastus' narrative is embedded in a sacred context in which Apollo fluctuates between heaven and earth through ritual practices. Although murdering the earthly Python is necessary in order to uptake his celestial position, Phoebus disturbs the precarious balance between two fundamental orders. Hence, he has to subdue himself to the earthly laws and the rape of the girl can be understood as a ritual reconciliation of the earth's fertility and, furthermore, as the recognition of his masculinity.

As indicated in the scheme mentioned above, the abstract pattern of fertility-death-reconciliation is not complete in this part. However, when the mythological background is taken into account, Leto's parturition can be seen as an expression of fertility. It is remarkable that already in this story the tension between heaven and earth is established. When Leto was pregnant with the godly twins, fathered by Jupiter, Juno sent the Python, the earthborn snake, after her. The beast chased Apollo's mother around the world and tried to deny her a place to give birth.

The goddess seemed to have a distorted relationship with the earth and was not able to finish her fertility process. She had to pay her sexual intercourse with Jupiter, the god of heaven, with a bar on parturition, required by Juno, who is the deity responsible for marriage and maternity (and thus for the earth). In other words, Leto's fertility process was caused by the tension between two connected gods who both defend the interests of an op-

the gods in the sequel of the epic, is in other words not the result of a total arbitrariness, but is connected to his quest for reconciliation. His attempt to expiate himself paradoxically forms the bridge between his encroachment of the earth during his *rite de passage* and his savage assault on the girl.

<sup>1</sup> Van Genneep, *cit.* p. 67.





posite pole of the precarious system. Ultimately, Delos, a floating island, offered itself and permitted her to be in labour on its grounds. In this way the ties with the earth were reconciled once more and Apollo and Diana could finally be born.

PART 2. THE SEPARATION OF CROTOPUS' DAUGHTER,  
LINUS' DEATH AND THE KING'S SACRIFICE

Phoebus' *piacula caedis* has some serious consequences for Crotopus' daughter and the second part starts with her pregnancy. While she was explicitly depicted as a virgin before the god's assault (*Theb.* 1, 573: *intemerata toris*), she is now presented as the victim of a (*Theb.* 1, 578-579) *coactis / (...) thalamis*, a forced bridal bed. This reference to a wedding night points at the irrevocable loss of her purity and, in parallel with Apollo who attains his masculinity, the girl experiences a physical change because of her deflowering. For this reason she decides to leave Argos and, just like Leto who roamed around the world, the king's daughter flees into the (*Theb.* 1, 579) *avia rura*, an unexplored area.

This exclusion from society is in accordance with the anthropological theory of van Gennep who defines a first pregnancy, connected with the loss of virginity, as one of those critical moments in life which has to be accompanied by *rites de passage*. Traditionally, a girl is isolated from her family and community, since she finds herself both physically and socially in an abnormal situation. She is considered as impure and can be a danger for society.<sup>1</sup> In her antistructural environment she reflects about and negotiates her new identity, because not only does her body change, but she also reaches a new state culturally: she becomes a woman/mother.<sup>2</sup> This ritual pattern in which a pregnant girl chooses a period of separation comes forward at the beginning of the (mythological) first and second part of the Coroebus episode.<sup>3</sup>

After the childbirth Crotopus' daughter decides to leave her little Linus behind and she entrusts him to a shepherd who has to take care of him (*Theb.* 1, 580-581: *natum saepta inter ovilia furtim / montivago pecoris custodi mandat alendum*). The existence of the boy is not known in Argos and he cannot be legally recognized. Therefore, he has to make do with a humble stay, which is not a worthy cradle for someone of such a high lineage (*Theb.* 1,

<sup>1</sup> J.J. Lennon, *Pollution and Religion in Ancient Rome*, Cambridge 2014, p. 55 considers pregnancy and childbirth as import factors of pollution and danger in ancient Rome.

<sup>2</sup> Van Gennep, *cit.* pp. 18-24.

<sup>3</sup> In the case of Leto, the temporary wandering has an additional dimension and can be considered as an expression of the disturbed relationship with the earth's fertility (*supra*).





582: *non (...) digna (...) generis cunabula tanti*). Although Statius points out that the child even has to share his abode with the cattle (*Theb.* 1, 586: *pectori commune solum*), from a mythological background a great future has to be expected. In parallel with the myths of Oedipus, Romulus and Remus, Paris etc., in which young men, deserted as babies, accomplish notorious deeds,<sup>1</sup> Linus would soon transcend his simple residence and become one of the famous sons of a god.<sup>2</sup>

Fate (*Theb.* 1, 586: *fata*), however, has other plans and she does not even adjudge him the shepherd's modest (*Theb.* 1, 587) *larem*, house (*Theb.* 1, 587-590):<sup>3</sup>

viridi nam caespite terrae  
proiectum temere et patulo caelum ore trahentem  
dira canum rabies, morsu depasta cruento,  
dissicit.

Crotopus' grandson becomes the victim of a troop of savage dogs, who mercilessly shred him with their *morsu (...) cruento*, their blood stained jaws. Instead of a glorious life, the little boy does not survive the attack and passes away prematurely. Remarkably, just like the Python was ambiguously described as a *caerulei* and *terrigenam* monster, before his decease Linus is explicitly connected with heaven on the one hand (*patulo caelum ore trahentem*) and earth on the other hand (*viridi nam caespite terrae / proiectum temere*). In this way he seems to be presented as an incorporation of the tension between the two fundamental orders and as a second important nexus in the precarious system. Hence, his death functions as a parallel with the demise of the snake and as a repetition of the previous distort on the balance. A newborn child that does not survive his first hours points at a disturbed fertility process and is the result of the encroachment of the earthly laws which are broken since the slaying of the serpent.

Although Linus' death refers to an expression of a problematic fertility and parallels the demise of the Python, his decease may not be seen as a strict repetition of the actions in the first part of Adrastus' narrative and

<sup>2</sup> This pattern does not only occur in classical myths, but can, for example, also be found in the tales of Mozes and Sargon.

<sup>3</sup> A great future can also be expected because of the association with his namesake. Crotopus' grandson shares his name with another son of Apollo, begot with the Muse Calliope. He is considered as the inventor of the melody and the rhythm and a Greek dirge of lamentation, the *linos*, is named after him. He was the teacher of Orpheus and Hercules. The last one ultimately murdered him with his own lyre, because Linus reproved the hero for making some mistakes.

<sup>4</sup> The use of the term *larem*, that originally refers to the household gods, also evokes the sacred atmosphere that interlaces the entire Coroebus episode.





some slight variations have to be taken into account. First of all, this time it is not a monster that has been killed, but a child that is mangled by a troop of savage beasts. This regrettable event preludes the arrival of Phoebus' monster in the third part which devours Argos' babies (*infra*).

Secondly, while previously Apollo's *rite de passage* has demanded a distortion of the earth, the demise of Crotopus' grandson now threatens the god's ritual process. Since the birth of the little Linus can be seen as the product of his *piacula caedis*, the expiation for the murder, and, accordingly, as the acknowledgment of his ritual transition, the child's death subverts his reconciliation with earth's fertility and even undermines his sacred passage to the state of a full heavenly god.

The encroachment of Apollo's ritual process seems to continue when the terrible news of Linus' demise reaches Argos. Overwhelmed with grief the child's mother addresses her father and confesses him everything. The king, however, has no mercy and furiously commands the execution of his daughter (*Theb.* 1, 590-595). This cruel deed can be explained from the perspective of the second fundamental balance which was mentioned above: the opposition between rituality / mythology and the social order. Before the assault on Crotopus' daughter, this system was stable and Statius previously depicted the girl as serving the *pios (...) penates*, the virtuous ties between the household and the gods. However, the rape has ended this fragile harmony and despite the ritual necessity of the sexual practice, this deed collapses with the primordial laws of social order and, more specifically, of family honour.

According to Mary Douglas, women are seen as the symbolic "doors" to a certain group or community. A marriage, for example, is not just a joyful moment in the life of two people, but this connection also completes the integration of the husband into a new family. However, through the rape the doors are harshly kicked open and someone has invaded Crotopus' family without permission.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the girl becomes a threat for her own relatives and in extension for the Argive society as a whole because of her social position as the king's daughter. In this way her death is required for the welfare of Argos' community. Her execution can be understood as a sacrifice, aimed to the protection of the royal family, and as a reconciliation of the social order.

<sup>1</sup> M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, New York 1966, pp. 155-156 argues that women are seen as the access to a social group. For this reason forbidden sexual practices, such as a rape or incest, have serious consequences. Women are not only physically and mentally damaged, but sexual violence disturbs society, because the entry to the socio-hierarchical order is brutally opened. Although they are victims, the women are often considered as a threat to society and, hence, they are banned or punished.





In summary, the second part of Adrastus' narrative corresponds to the abstract pattern of fertility-death-reconciliation. The parturition of Crotopus' daughter is followed by the decease of her child which can be seen as the disruption of the balance between heaven and earth. When the terrible news becomes known in Argos and Linus' mother confesses everything, her execution can be clarified by the tension of another fragile system: the contrast between rituality and the social order. The community was disturbed by Phoebus' assault and for this reason a sacrifice is required.

However, although the girl's death functions as a reconciliation of the social laws, her demise collides with Apollo's ritual process. Just like the life of her son, her existence and deflowering function as the acknowledgment of the god's sacred transition and his propitiation with the earth's fertility. In this way, Crotopus' execution of his daughter does not only undermine Apollo's recognition as a full heavenly god. Beside for the encroachment of the ritual transition, the Argives are now also responsible for the disturbance of the earthly laws. The consequences of this encroachment will become clear in the third part of the Coroebus episode.

#### PART 3. APOLLO'S MONSTER, THE ARGIVES' BRAVERY AND THE SACRIFICE OF COROEBUS

After the death of Linus and Crotopus' daughter, Staius returns to Apollo who is (*Theb.* 1, 596) *sero memor thalami*, too late he remembers his bridal bed. The same term was used to describe Phoebus' rape of the girl and refers to the ritual loss of their virginity. Too late the god recollects the sexual intercourse with her and realizes that he cannot inhibit the distortion of his sacred process anymore. In vengeance for this dislocated sacred transition Phoebus decides to punish the city and he sends a terrible monster to Argos (*Theb.* 1, 597-600):

paras monstrum infandis Acheronte sub imo  
conceptum Eumenidum thalamis, cui virginis ora  
pectoraque; aeternum stridens a vertice surgit  
et ferrugineam frontem discriminat anguis.

The arrival of the horror expresses the god's disturbed religious process and, more specifically, the distorted fertility, caused by the execution of Crotopus' daughter. Therefore, the atrocious creature seems to be associated with the earth and to allude to the events which have been accountable for the disorder. First of all, the beast is derived from the underworld (*Acheronte sub imo*) and even procreated in the *Eumenidum thalamis*, the bridal bed of





the Furies.<sup>1</sup> Just like Linus, the horror is a firstborn child and can be seen as the product of a bridal deflowering. Not coincidentally the monster has the face and breast of a virgin (*virginis ora / pectoraque*) which points at the virginal condition of the girl (and Phoebus) before the rape. Lastly, the continuously hissing snake (*anguis*) on its head refers to the earthborn Python as a symbol of fertility and to the original start of the imbalance between heaven and earth.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the beginning of the second part where Crotopus' daughter gives birth to Linus, the third part thus shows a perversion of the condition of fertility, which parallels the Python's chase of Leto. Just like the huge serpent tried to hinder the parturition of Apollo's mother, Phoebus' monster requires an expiation of the Argives because of their assault on the primordial laws of earth and horribly denies children to Argos in revenge (*Theb.* 1, 601-604):

haec tum dira lues nocturno squalida passu  
inlabi thalamis, animasque a stirpe recentes  
abripere altricum gremiis morsuque cruento  
devesci et multum patrio pinguescere luctu.

The beast creeps into the bridal beds (*thalamis*) and snatches away *animasque* (...) *recentes* from the lap and breast of their nurse. The horror attacks firstborn children – the products of a deflowering – and lacerates them with its *morsuque cruento*, blood stained jaws. Statius has used the same words to describe the cruelty of the dogs who killed Linus in the second part of Adrastus' narrative. In both cases the death of (a) first-born child(ren) is the result of a disturbed fertility process and affects the parents (*patrio* (...) *luctu*) who have been responsible for the disruption.

At this point Coroebus steps forward. The young hero and some of his friends cannot longer bear the misery and they decide to free Argos from the horror. Contrary to the dogs who stayed unpunished, the monster has to be stopped and they try to attack the beast while it is committing a bloody

<sup>1</sup> Statius' use of *Eumenides* instead of *Erinyes* is remarkable in this context. His choice seems to refer to the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus in which the *Erinyes* become *Eumenides* and take beneficently care of a social function in Athens. In the *Thebaid*, however, there is an inversion and their child disturbs the social order.

<sup>2</sup> Keith, *cit.* pp. 311-312 strongly connects the monster to Crotopus' daughter. She considers the monster as a type of a demon, well-known in classical antiquity, that arises "from the souls of women who die before marriage or childbirth, in childbed, or shortly after the death of their own child and, as restless spirits, are responsible for the death of infants and women in childbed". Although Keith disregards in this way the relation between the monster and other actors/events in the story, she also emphasizes the role of a disrupted fertility.





raid (*Theb.* 1, 608-609): *illa novos ibat populata penates / portarum in bivio*. Although this action clearly shows Coroebus' virtue and bravery, his deeds are also remarkable from an anthropological perspective.

Just like the fight between Apollo and the Python, the confrontation with the monster can be seen as a part of a *rite de passage* and, more specifically, of an initiation rite. Although many subtypes exist, van Gennep argues that an initiation rite often accompanies the religious transition from childhood to social puberty.<sup>1</sup> In such a period of transformation, in which a boy turns into a man, a group of young ritual participants (*Theb.* 1, 606: *lectis iuvenum*) leaves society and slips into an antistructure in which they sow their wild oats and prepare themselves, often by slaying a monster, for their adulthood.<sup>2</sup>

The Argive youngsters meet the beast when it has just ravaged (*populata*) the *novos* (...) *penates*. These words do not only point at a house, but also contain the religious connotation of household gods. In this last meaning they refer to Crotopus' daughter who has been described in the same metrical position as serving the *pios* (...) *penates*. While before the rape the girl diligently took care of the honourable relationship between the household and the gods, now these ties are torn by Phoebus' beast. The devouring creature expresses the sharp conflict between the mythological and social interest, i.e. the broken harmony between respectively Apollo, who acts ritually, and Argos' community, which has to defend its social order.

Furthermore, Statius depicts the horror as standing *portarum in bivio*, in the crossroad of the door. The poet seems to describe a threshold and introduce his own concept of Turner's so-called liminality. Just as how the Python and Linus function as import nexuses in the system of two fundamental orders, the monster explicitly stays in the doorstep which forms a point where two paths encounter: one way to the inside and a second to the outside. On the one hand, the creature is conceived in the bridal bed of the Furies and has an earthly origin (inside). On the other hand, it is evoked by Apollo and thus connected with the heaven (outside). The beast equally belongs and does not belong to the two worlds which have been in battle during the whole of Adrastus' narrative and continuously lost their precarious balance. Hitherto, several times one pole has been (temporary) restored which irrevocably led to the distort on the other or to the encroachment of the second opposition between rituality and society. It will be the challenge to reconcile the four orders and to re-find the equilibrium.

However, by slaying the monster, Coroebus and his friends do not succeed at re-balancing the systems and they even outrage Apollo, since they

<sup>1</sup> Van Gennep, *cit.* pp. 65-74.

<sup>2</sup> Turner, 'Betwixt and Between', *cit.* p. 105.





have caused another encroachment of the earthly laws. In vengeance the god strikes Argos with a plague (*Theb.* 1, 630: *pestifera arma*) and again he seems to desire an expiation (*Theb.* 1, 636-637): *auctor Paeon rursus iubet ire cruento / inferias monstro iuvenes*. Phoebus demands the sacrifice of the Argive youngsters as a funerary offering (*inferias*) for the decease of his beast. From an anthropological perspective this can be considered as a sacred practice which is often accomplished in classical *rites de passage*.<sup>1</sup>

According to Ken Dowden, who compares several initiation myths “which gain their shape from association with rituals”,<sup>2</sup> a sacrifice can be seen as one of the main characteristics of ancient initiation rites. In several myths, such as the stories about Iphigenia, Io, Lykaon etc., which can be read from a religious background, an offering is required and completes the termination of boy- or maidenhood. Furthermore, the death of the girls or boys is mostly presented as a reconciliation of a deity who is in anger because of the murder of an animal/ creature which was dedicated to him.<sup>3</sup> From this pattern – the decease of a god’s beast, followed by the demand of a sacrifice – Phoebus’ terrible behaviour in Adrastus’ narrative can be explained and the Argive youngsters seem to approach the end of their transition.

Not coincidentally Coroebus goes to the temple of Delphi – the place where the disruption of the systems started – and he seeks the confrontation with the *sacerrima*. He voluntarily presents himself as a sacrifice to Apollo. Not only will this complete his own *rite de passage*, this encounter has also to be understood as a repetition of the conversation between Crotopus and his daughter. However, while the girl’s sacrifice disturbed Phoebus’ ritual process, Coroebus is depicted as standing on the doorstep of the temple (*Theb.* 1, 641-642): *Cirrhæi in limine templi / constitit*. Just like the Python, Linus and explicitly the monster, the young hero stays on a point where two paths meet. Contrary to previous actions of reconciliation which each time, beside the temporary propitiation of one fundamental order, re-

<sup>1</sup> Van Gennep, *cit.* p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> K. Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology*, New York-London 1992, p. 102. He arbitrarily compares several myths which can be read in his opinion from an initiatory background. F. Graf, ‘Initiation with a troubled history’, in D. B. Dodd - C. A. Faraone (eds.), *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives. New Critical Perspectives*, New York-London 2003, p. 15 tries to work more systematically and he distinguishes three subgroups in the category of initiation myths: “The first subgroup contains myths that are etiologies for still existing rites that we, too, would call initiatory. The second subgroup concerns myths that are still paired with a ritual whose initiatory character, however, has been transformed into something else. In the third subgroup are myths that, in the ancient documentation, are not connected with rituals at all but that are being read by modern scholars as having an initiatory background”. Dowden, *cit.* seems to belong to the last group.

<sup>3</sup> Dowden, *cit.* pp. 102-118.





sult in the encroachment of another, he positions himself in the doorway. By restraining himself from the continuous tensions between the systems, he wants to re-stabilize the whole equilibrium.

Hence, the Argive youngster says that he attends (*Theb.* 1, 643) *non missus*, (...) *tuos supplexve penates*, he is not sent or he does not visit Apollo's *penates*, household, as a supplicant.<sup>1</sup> The true reason of his arrival he formulates as follows (*Theb.* 1, 648-655):

quodsi monstra efferata magnis  
 cara adeo superis, iacturaque vilior orbi  
 mors hominum et saevo tanta inclementia caelo est,  
 quid meruere Argi? me, me, divum optime, solum  
 obiecisse caput fatis praestabat, an illud  
 lene magis cordi, quod desolata domorum  
 tecta vides, ignique datis cultoribus omnis  
 lucet ager?

First, Coroebus wonders if the life of the monster was really so precious (*cara adeo*) that the decease of men is of lesser worth (*iacturaque vilior*) to the gods (*superis*). Then, he asks rhetorically if the *inclementia* of the *caelo* is really that big?<sup>2</sup> And what did Argos exactly do wrong to deserve these punishments? Does the god enjoy the destruction of the city and would he like to continue his ravaging? This last exclamation refers to the disruption of the social order. Finally, the young hero says that only he has to be considered responsible and that he is willing to die (*Theb.* 1, 656-651). Contrary to Crotopus' daughter, Coroebus wants to sacrifice himself voluntarily and aims to function as a peace offering for the insults of his town. However, Apollo is touched by his words and because of a (*Theb.* 1, 662) *reverentia caedis*, a respect for the murder, he decides to spare the youngster's life.

Phoebus seems to understand that it would be a terrible mistake to kill the only human who completely understands the precarious situation of the twisting systems. Coroebus realizes that a voluntary sacrifice is the only solution he has from the perspective of the rituality/mythology which

<sup>1</sup> In the same metrical position the last term has already appeared twice in Adrastus' narrative: the poet has used the word in the characterization of the girl just before the rape and in the description of the monster, while it was ravaging the Argive households. However, whereas in these previous occurrences the god or his creature frequented Argos' households, there is now an inversion and Phoebus' house is attended by an Argive youngster.

<sup>2</sup> In the last book of Statius' epic, in which the Argive women visit the *ara Clementiae*, it becomes clear that *clementia* does not belong to heaven, but it is rather a human virtue. Coroebus' question also refers to the prologue of Vergil's *Aeneid* (1, 11): *Tantaene animis caelestibus irae*.





has been disturbed by the girl's socially required demise. His voluntary death would form the acknowledgment of Apollo's sacred passage to the state of a full heavenly god and, accordingly, of his reconciliation of the earth's fertility. Therefore, Phoebus' *reverentia caedis* does not only indicate the recognition of the hero's own wish to receive revenge, but these terms also alludes to the *piacula caedis* which was demanded after the decease of the Python.<sup>1</sup> The confrontation between Coroebus and the god seems to be presented as the final return to harmony of the balance between heaven and earth which was originally disrupted by Phoebus' slaying of the huge snake.<sup>2</sup>

Since he finds his ritual process ultimately confirmed, Apollo decides to let the youngster live and to accomplish the re-stabilizing of the fundamental orders. Through the survival of Coroebus the god does not re-assault the social order and therefore, no further reconciliation is required. The repetition of consecutive revenges is broken and the oppositions between heaven and earth and between rituality and society can be considered in balance.

Coroebus has ended the conflict and Statius depicts him as ready to depart from the temple (*Theb.* 1, 665-666): *at tu stupefacti a limine Phoebi / exoratus abis*. After the conciliation of the different tensions, the young hero leaves (*abis*) the ambiguity of the *limine*, the threshold, behind to return to the rather one-dimensional Argive society. There, he will achieve a new socio-cultural position as the result of the successful completion of his *rite de passage*.

In summary, the third part of Adrastus' narrative can be explained from the abstract pattern of fertility-death-reconciliation. However, the devouring of the monster has rather to be considered as a perversion of the normal fertility process and expresses the disruption of the earthly laws. Coroebus cannot bear the misery any longer and as an initiatory subject he decides to slay the creature that is explicitly described as standing on the doorstep between two worlds. Ultimately, the Argive hero finds himself on the point where several paths encounter, the *limen*, and he succeeds at reconciling the

<sup>1</sup> Ganiban, *cit.* pp. 12-13 discusses the several meanings of (*reverentia*) *caedis* and distinguishes four possible explanations: "the potential slaughter of Coroebus; Coroebus' slaughter of Apollo's monster; Apollo's earlier slaying of the Python [o]r even Apollo's general tendency to violence".

<sup>2</sup> The connection between Apollo's respect for the murder and his reconciliation of the slaying of the Python is also implied, since the term *caedis* appears twice in the same metrical position. Furthermore, the *reverentia caedis* is depicted as detaining the (*Theb.* 1, 662-663) *ardentem (...) / Letoiden*, the burning son of Leto. This designation of the god is remarkable in this context and refers to the start of the imbalance between heaven and earth. Not coincidentally the temple of Delphi functions as setting twice.





different fundamental orders. For this reason he is spared by Apollo and the repetition of re-encroachment is finally broken.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has developed an alternative approach to the Coroebus episode at the end of the first book of the *Thebaid*. Corresponding to the way Statius presents the story from the start through the character of Adrastus, the tale has been read from a ritual point of view. The inset narrative is embedded in a religious context and reveals a dynamic of consecutive rites. More specifically, the story has been considered as a threefold repetition of the abstract sacred pattern in which a condition of fertility is followed by a death/disruption that must be resolved by an act of reconciliation/sacrifice.

The elements of this scheme seem to be repeated during the narrative and are generated by the continuous tension between four fundamental orders: heaven vs. earth and rituality/mythology vs. social order. The balance amongst and within these two systems is disrupted by the deceases of the Python, Linus and the monster that are presented as liminal figures and equally belong and do not belong to two worlds. Apollo and the Argives alternately attempt to reconcile the harmony, but while restoring one order they encroach another one. Only when Coroebus finds himself at the end on the threshold, the *limen*, and in this way fluctuates between the different poles, he succeeds at re-finding the equilibrium. Since Apollo considers the hero's offer to voluntarily sacrifice himself as the acknowledgment of his ritual process and re-stabilizing of the earth's fertility, he decides to spare the Argive youngster and in this way does not re-assault the interests of the social order.

This ritual perspective complicates scholarship's traditional approach which analyses the story as an opposition between *pietas* and *nefas*. The cruel events in the narrative (e.g. Apollo's rape, Crotopus' demand to sacrifice his daughter...) are not just arbitrary, but are generated in a context of social and sacred tensions. In this way, Adrastus' story seems to apply to tendencies in the entire epic in which socio-cultural (i.e. political and religious) crises and paradoxes continuously appear.<sup>1</sup> Because of the instability that these crises and paradoxes cause, numerous characters feel lost and try to restore the harmony through ritual and sacred purification. However,

<sup>1</sup> Bessone, *cit.* sets out the start for research on a repetition of religious disruptions in the *Thebaid*. Another important survey is F. Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Vergil*, Cambridge 1998 in which he analyzes Statius' epic from the anthropological theory of R. Girard and considers the work as a succession of mimetic rivalries and sacred crises of violence.





whereas the equilibrium is finally re-found in the Coroebus episode, most of the sacred practices in the sequel of the epic are in vain and “meaningless” (without positive effect), and ultimately, only violence remains.<sup>1</sup> The *Thebaid* puts into question “epic teleology and traditional theology” and doubts the “undisputed faith in a transcendent divinity” and the traditional religious order.<sup>2</sup>

In parallel, the ritual analysis also throws a new light on Ganiban’s question which wonders why the Argives annually honour Phoebus’ savagery (*supra*). The tragedy of Adrastus’ story is not caused by the ignorance of a king who would not realize the irony of his practices, but is rather created by the impossibility to safeguard the stability he memorializes. The sacred celebration is a ritual that seeks to commemorate the reconciliation of heaven and earth, and mythology and society. Through the repetition of the story the Argives reaffirm the stable balance, which has been achieved in dialogue with the god, and the precarious laws of each order are re-acknowledged every year. Although the narrative thus can be considered as a (*Theb.* 1, 559-560) *non inscia (...) / relligio*, it will not succeed at keeping the relations within and amongst the systems stable.

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<sup>1</sup> Dee, *cit.* p. 185 points out the recurrent failure of purification rites and argues that Cadmus’ descendants are not able to free themselves from pollution: “Purification, therefore, constantly reveals itself to be an act of futility; it is incapable of accomplishing either meaningful or lasting change”. Oedipus, for example, uses many terms in his prologue that are closely associated to lustration. His atonement, however, “helps persuade Jupiter to carry out Oedipus’ curse and destroy the *exitiale genus*, which itself will be a tremendous source of sacrilege and pollution for Thebes and Argos”.

<sup>2</sup> Bessone, *cit.* p. 161.



