

Cambridge University Press

0521847427 - Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the Thebaid

Helen Lovatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

nil fixum cordi: pugnant exire paudentque,
 concurrat 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,
 claustraque compressae transfumat anhelitus irae.
 stare adeo miserum est, pereunt uestigia mille
 ante fugam, absentemque ferit grauis ungula campum.
 circumstant fidi, nexusque et torta iubarum
 expediunt firmantque animos et plurima monstrant.
 insonuit contra Tyrrhenum murmur, et omnes
 exsiluere loco. quae tantum carbasa ponto,
 quae bello sic tela uolant, quae nubila caelo?
 amnibus hibernis minor est, minor impetus igni,
 tardius astra cadunt, glomerantur tardius imbres,
 tardius e summo decurrunt flumina monte.

(Thebaid 6.394–409)

Nothing is fixed in their hearts: they fight to get out and they fear,
 a spirited shiver runs through to the tips of their limbs.
 In the masters, in the horses, the same burning; their eyes shoot flame,
 their mouths sound with biting, the iron is burnt with foam
 and blood, the posts cannot stand in their way as they push
 against them, breath of compressed anger smokes across the bolts.
 To stand is so wretched that a thousand footsteps perish
 before their flight, the heavy hoof is striking the absent plain.
 The faithful stand around, sorting out reins and the twisted
 crests, strengthening spirits and offering much advice.
 The trumpet blast sounded opposite, and all
 leapt out from their places; what sail on the sea,
 what weapon in war flies so fast, what cloud in the sky?
 The force of the winter floods is less, the force of fire is less,
 more slowly fall the stars, the rain storms gather more slowly,
 more slowly from the mountain-top torrents run down.

Cambridge University Press

0521847427 - Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the Thebaid

Helen Lovatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STATIUS AND EPIC GAMES

Start at the beginning, *in medias res*, in the middle of the beginning, in this case with the beginning of Statius' first event, the chariot race: the reader is drawn into the fever-pitch excitement of the racehorses straining to explode from the gates, just as the viewer shares the tension waiting for the starting gun to fire. All polarities become paradoxes: master and horse are in one state of mixed excitement and terror; cold mixes with fire; metal burns; breath becomes smoke. The horses and their riders already race the course in their minds, as if caught up in an endless repetition of the act before it even happens. The gun fires; the handkerchief falls; the trumpet blasts: the speed and force of the chariots bursting out, the thunder of horses' hooves, becomes a flood of thundering images, thumping the message home.

We too will play out our own set of games, each chapter an event, each event a chapter. The line between audience and competitors will not necessarily be clear: you are watching me; we are watching Statius; we are watching Statius watch his competitors and their audience; those competitors are watching each other. Will you compete by reading – making a judgement and running your interpretations against mine? It should prove a game worth playing, a spectacle worth watching; perhaps we will be in luck – and catch a spectacular shipwreck, or a controversial verdict or two: no disqualifications, I trust.

This is a book about Statius and about epic games.¹ It rereads Statius and the *Thebaid* through a reading of the games in book 6 and their interaction with the rest of the poem.² It rereads epic games from the vantage point of Statius, looking back over all his epic predecessors (and interacting with his contemporaries).³

¹ Work on Statius' epic games has generally followed two lines: the relationship between Statius' games and those of Homer and Virgil, and the relationship between Statius' games and Roman games. Legras (1905) deals with both, as does Von Stosch (1968) (the only monograph on the subject); Kytzler (1968) concentrates on Virgil and Homer, as does Juhnke (1972); Thuillier (1996b) studies Statius as evidence for historical games. Venini (1961a) introduces a new element with her investigation of foreshadowing, elaborated by Vessey (1970): the relationship between the games and the rest of the poem.

² The title of the book refers to the title of Michael Putnam's chapter on the games in *Aeneid* 5 'Game and Reality': he reads Virgil's games as a light-hearted version of the serious events to come, primarily the sacrifice of Palinurus (Putnam (1965) 64–104).

³ Silius Italicus also wrote a set of games, in *Punica* 16; Juhnke (1972) 229–67 analyses both sets of games. Throughout the book I have attempted to give a sense of the similarities and differences, but I explore the relationship fully elsewhere. Scholarship

Cambridge University Press

0521847427 - Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the *Thebaid*

Helen Lovatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

It is a book about both intratextuality and intertextuality. Each chapter comes in two halves: the first half is mainly intertextual; each reads one event in the games in detail, looking at the relationships with previous versions; the second half is intratextual, taking a theme from the event and tracing it through the rest of the *Thebaid*. Starting from close reading of a small part of one poem, we move out towards wider interpretation of the whole poem, a sense of the poem's interaction with its genre and predecessors,⁴ a new perspective on that genre and on wider issues in Greek and Roman culture.⁵ The poetics of athletics meets the poetics of gigantomachy; games are played on and through bodies and audiences; the tripartite power structure of *editor* (producer of the games), audience and spectacle forms one frame for the discussion; the construction of masculinity, ethnicity and poetic identity another. Anyone interested in Statius, epic games, the epic genre in any of its incarnations, ancient or otherwise, anyone interested in representations of sport and the history of games, will find something to watch.⁶

In this introduction, I present Roman ideas about games, examining the ludic through the multifaceted concept of *ludus*. It is also a prelude, a *pompa*, bringing in the characters who will watch

has generally placed the publication of the *Punica* after the publication of the *Thebaid*, though acknowledging that the process of composition would have overlapped and that reciprocal influence is probable. See Wistrand (1956); Venini (1970a) xv–xvi; Juhnke (1972) 12–13; Dewar (1991) xxxi–xxxv; Smolenaars (1994) xvii–xviii.

⁴ Hardie (1993) shows that Statius is a reader and critic of Virgil, as well as a successor. Cf. Hinds (1998) on Statius and 'secondariness'.

⁵ The foundation of my work is an attempt to read and understand the text under consideration: I chose the themes from what I found interesting, disconcerting and difficult in the text. There will be a running dialogue between close reading and broad theory, in which each changes the other. I mean to combine discovery of what is there already in the text with new ideas and new readings of it.

⁶ Apology has characterised scholarship on Statius: each generation of apologists creates a defence for studying Statius which becomes the object of attack for the next generation. So the label of 'episodic epic' which started as an apology became a means of criticising and marginalising Statius' *Thebaid*, effectively repudiated by Vessey (Vessey (1970); Vessey (1973); Brown (1994) 6). Vessey's apology centred around the concepts of 'mannerism' and 'baroque epic': Ahl has laid bare the persistent rhetoric of marginalisation in these concepts too (Ahl (1986) 2809–10). It is no empty rhetorical stance, then, when I refuse to apologise for working on Statius. Statius can and should be central to our understanding of ancient epic, and critical work on the *Thebaid* can start from the position that the aim is elaboration and enrichment of understanding, not justification of the poem itself. The extent to which I am indebted to previous work on Statius is clear from the whole text, though it will not be possible to acknowledge these debts in full.

Cambridge University Press

0521847427 - Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the Thebaid

Helen Lovatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STATIUS AND EPIC GAMES

throughout, under the auspices of the Olympian gods watching from their box. Exploration of the poetics of epic games will begin by examining games as ‘prelude’, and the imagery of games in Statian *recusatio*. Finally, I want to provide background for the events to come (think of it as the thirty days’ training, presided over by the *hellanodikai*). What was the system of spectacle in Rome? What are the fundamental dynamics of intertextuality in Statius’ games? How does the programme of a set of epic games conjure up a different world?

Concepts of games

In this section, I briefly examine the concepts associated with the Latin noun *ludus* (game) and verb *ludo* (I play); how similar are Roman concepts of games to our own? How do epic poets in particular refer to their games? The *TLL* gives us a baseline for the concept: a *ludus* is fundamentally in opposition to whatever is *serius* (‘serious’), and to *labor* (‘work’). This fits in very well with our ideas about games, encapsulated in the phrase ‘just a game’. Essentially, a game is always something which is set against some sort of reality (though it might be asked whose reality). This study is concerned with the different realities against which Statius sets his games.

Playing is also used of spending one’s time idly or frivolously, even wasting one’s efforts; there is a hint of disapproval in the way the concept is transferred to other ideas, which suggests that a game in the Roman mind is not only ‘just a game’, something to be dismissed as unimportant, but even something slightly immoral. To play with someone is not only to tease, but also to ridicule, make mock of, and even to trick or deceive. To act towards someone with less than perfect seriousness is to wound their dignity and even, perhaps, to damage the truth. If anything, the Roman attitude towards games is even more derogatory than our own. It is not surprising, then, that epic games have generally been despised as ‘mere decoration’, and have often been neglected.

Cambridge University Press

0521847427 - Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the Thebaid

Helen Lovatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

The *ludus* is the activity of a child or an animal, not an adult. The difference between boyhood and manhood for Parthenopaeus, for instance, is the difference between games and war. The problems of defining the reality of adult masculinity will recur, most importantly in chapter 5. Of speaking, *ludus* refers to whatever is said without seriousness, to jokes and jests. It is even used of writing poetry which is less than totally serious. The game of poetry and poetry as games will be an important theme throughout this book: the chapter on the wrestling, for instance, reads the match as a metaphor for intertextual competition; the chariot race also evokes ideas about the chariot of song.

The concept also contains ideas of practice and learning: the noun *ludus*, in a way which is completely foreign to the English word ‘game’, came to refer to schools for children (*ludus litterarum*) and even places of training, like the gladiatorial school.⁷ The game in this sense is equated with practice in opposition to doing something for real. The idea of fun or recreation does not always seem to come into it. This crucial difference between practice and reality is the key moment in the discus.

Ludi in the plural, like our ‘games’, is used primarily to refer to ‘a set or festival of public games’ (*OLD*), often with an epithet (e.g. *Ludi Romani*, or, for instance, ‘Olympic Games’). Although this word is used more strictly for Roman contests held in the circus or theatre (*circenses* or *scaenici*) in opposition to, for instance, gladiatorial *munera*, it was also used to describe festivals of Greek games, including athletics and musical competitions. For instance, Domitian’s Capitoline games, at which Statius competed unsuccessfully, are usually referred to as *Ludi Capitolini*.⁸ Isidore, writing about the origin of the word, offers a useful retrospective summary:

⁷ For McDonnell (2003) 243, Plautus’ use of *ludus* to mean school (*Rudens* 43) is linguistic borrowing from the Greek σχολή, which naturally refers to both ‘leisure’ and ‘school’. Statius’ use of *ludus* to describe his games could be a self-consciously Greek borrowing, like *Silvae*, used to mean ‘material’, from the Greek ὕλη, another of McDonnell’s examples.

⁸ Plautus refers to *ludos Olympios* in the *Stichus* (306); other references to the Olympic Games as *ludi*: Plautus *Casina* 759–63; Cicero *De oratore* 3.127; *De natura deorum* 2.6; Pliny *Naturalis historia* 4.15; 7.205; Servius on *Georgics* 3.19 (though he also uses the word *agon*); Velleius Paterculus 1.8.1 (also *ludicrum*); Livy 27.35.3 and 28.7.14 refers to them as a *ludicrum*.

Cambridge University Press

0521847427 - Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the Thebaid

Helen Lovatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STATIUS AND EPIC GAMES

‘a *ludus* can be athletic, in the circus, gladiatorial, or in the theatre’ (*ludus autem aut gymnicus est, aut circensis, aut gladiatorius, aut scaenicus*, Isidore *Origines* 18.16.3). Thus *ludi*, and Statius’ games as *ludi*, combine two aspects of games: they are a public spectacle, a show put on for the entertainment of the audience, and the spectacle itself is sport, a sort of game. They are games and a game, ludic both for audience and competitors.

So much for Roman concepts of *ludi* in general; next, to consider the way that epic poets talk about their games. When Statius refers to his games, he has a variety of names for them. Virgil refers to his games throughout as either *ludi* (‘games’, *Aeneid* 5.113, 605) or *certamina* (‘contests’, *Aeneid* 5.545, 695), Silius as *ludi* (‘games’, 16.579), *certamina* (‘contests’, 16.312, 457, 527) or *spectacula* (‘spectacles’, 16.531, 557). Silius’ gladiatorial fights are spectacles, and Statius too uses this word of the boxing match (*et erecto timeat spectacula uoto*, ‘and each man fears the spectacle with tense prayers’, 6.759). These events in particular are spectacular because of their danger: the pleasure of watching games is like the pleasure of reading epic.⁹ Statius alone calls his spectacle ‘a game’ (*ludus*).¹⁰ But what does this imply? *Ludus* has a quite different range of meaning from *ludi*.¹¹ Perhaps the point is that this is both a moment of play for the epic poet, a *display* less serious than the war to come, and also a preparation, a training for heroes and readers in the realities of epic and war. Alternatively, since the second reference is followed (6.5–14) by descriptions of the founding of the other three sets of games on the Greek *periodos* (Olympic, Pythian and Isthmian), perhaps the singular use of *ludus* distinguishes the games from Roman-style festivals and points to their alien status, in a similar way to Livy’s description of them as a *ludicrum* (a show, public games). The phrase *Graium ex more decus*, used of Statius’ games at the beginning of book 6, (‘a traditional Greek celebration’, 6.5) certainly emphasises the Greek context and heritage. The interplay between Greek and Roman is

⁹ In a forthcoming project on *The Epic Gaze*, I shall investigate in more detail the spectacle of epic battle and death, and the particular ways in which epic views its heroes and events.

¹⁰ At the beginning of the Nemean excursus (4.729) and at the beginning of the book of games (6.3).

¹¹ Virgil uses *ludi* to refer to Greek-style athletic games at *Georgics* 2.381 and at *Aeneid* 5.113.

Cambridge University Press

0521847427 - Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the Thebaid

Helen Lovatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

a particularly fraught Statian issue, and one which will continually return to haunt us, taking centre stage in the boxing. Later on in the games, Statius also uses *ludus* in the singular to refer to one particular event, when Phlegyas of Pisa is preparing for the discus: *hic semper | amori ludus erat* ('This game was always his love', *Thebaid* 6.673–4). The discus is almost the emblem of Greek athletics, part of the pentathlon, and this event in particular is more of a sport than a contest. This is Phlegyas' hobby, in the same way that Tydeus wrestles in his leisure time (*sic otia Martis | degere*, 'thus he spent his leisure from war', *Thebaid* 6.830–31).

The relationship between games and war is particularly important in Statius, who frequently and characteristically describes his games as naked or unarmed battles.¹² Neither Virgil nor Silius uses this term. The most commonly used word for Greek games is *certamina*, which blurs the boundary between contest and fight. But Statius takes this further. When Jupiter is chastising Mars for allowing this huge delay, he underscores the god of war's failure by ironically describing the discus and boxing in warlike terms: *sonat orbe recusso | discus et Oebalii coeunt in proelia caestus* ('The discus sounds with its sphere reverberating and Spartan boxers join battle', 7.20–21). Jupiter brings out the distance between games and war by underlining the similarities: this is the best we can manage, he seems to suggest. I asked you to overthrow the world and only the sphere of the discus is crashing about us; the only battles you can manage are boxing matches.

This lexical survey of the way that Roman epic poets refer to their games brings out the different meanings and functions of epic games. Epic games work against the reality of epic war, but the representation of epic games as games is not uncomplicated. Reality intrudes on the games, and the games become reality. In particular, Statius represents his games as work. He describes them as *labor*, and they can also be an *opus*.¹³ Just as poetry can be a game in contrast to the reality of Roman or modern political life, while the body of a poet's writings in Latin as in English can be 'works' (*opera*), so athletics were and are both work and play. The interplay between games and their various realities works both ways: games

¹² *Thebaid* 6.18, 249; 7.91.¹³ *labor*: 6.469, 503, 796, 924–5; *opus*: 6.643, 668.

Cambridge University Press

0521847427 - Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the Thebaid

Helen Lovatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STATIUS AND EPIC GAMES

are always in opposition to and read against war, work, the world, the body; spectators watch competitors; readers read texts. On the other hand, games represent and articulate the realities from which they are marked off; spectators identify with competitors; the circus becomes the cosmos; the reader is within the text.

Prelude

Poetry, as we have seen above, can be ‘just a game’. In this section, I explore the poetics of playing and look at the way that Statius suggests that his games are a prelude to serious epic, just as the *Siluae* are a prelude to writing in a serious genre, and as mythological epic is a prelude to writing the serious historical and panegyric epic of Domitian’s great deeds.¹⁴ I want to begin with an example of poetic games from Statius’ contemporary, Martial.¹⁵ In the proem to his *Apophoreta*, Martial refuses to write a *Thebaid*: *uis scribam Thebas Troiamue malasue Mycenae?* | ‘*lude*’ *inquis* ‘*nucibus*’: *perdere nolo nuces*. (‘You want me to write about Thebes, Troy or Mycenaean tragedies? “Play with nuts!” you say, but I refuse to waste my nuts.’ Martial 14.1.11–12.) Martial’s interlocutor exhorts him to gamble with nuts rather than writing trifles in the Catullan fashion: don’t write nuts, *play* with them. Martial then claims that playing is serious business: he doesn’t want to risk losing his trifles. This is set against the background of epic as serious poetry while epigram is play. Perhaps to write an epic is to gamble for stakes too high: writing epic, for Martial, is deep play.

The Virgilian *Culex* uses playing of writing less serious poetry: *lusimus, Octavi, gracili modulante Thalia* (‘We have played, Octavius, with slender Thalia directing’, *Culex* 1). Statius, in his prose preface to *Siluae* 1, uses the *Culex* as an equivalent of the *Siluae*, a game played before serious poetry: *quid enim [. . .] quoque auctoritatis editionis onerari, quo adhuc pro Thebaide meo timeo?*

¹⁴ Ruurd Nauta in an excellent paper on ‘The *Recusatio* in Flavian Poetry’, Groningen Colloquium on Flavian Poetry, 2003, covered much of this material, but the emphasis on poetry as a game is my own addition.

¹⁵ For this Martial moment, I thank Sarah Culpeper Stroup in her paper ‘Invaluable Collections: The Illusion of Poetic Presence in Martial’s *Xenia* and *Apophoreta*’ at the Groningen Colloquium on Flavian Poetry, 2003.

Cambridge University Press

0521847427 - Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the Thebaid

Helen Lovatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

sed et Culicem legimus et Batrachomachiam etiam agnoscimus, nec quisquam est inlustrium poetarum qui non aliquid operibus suis stilo remissiore praeluserit. ('For why [should they too] be weighed down with the authority of publication, when I am still afraid on behalf of my *Thebaid*? But we read the *Culex* too, and we even recognise the *Batrachomachia*, and there isn't a single one of the famous poets who didn't make some sort of foreplay for his greater works with a more relaxed pen.' Statius *Siluae* 1. *Preface*. 5–9.) This makes the Virgilian and Homeric model for the poetic career override reality, suggesting that lighter genres are inevitably earlier than heavier ones, even though in this very passage he represents the *Thebaid* as already published. The same word (*praeludo*) is used in the proem of the *Achilleid* in Statius' bid to postpone indefinitely the imperial requirement to write an epic in Domitian's praise (*Achilleid* 1.14–20):

at tu, quem longe primum stupet Itala uirtus
Graiaque, cui geminae florent uatumque ducumque
certatim laurus (olim dolet altera uinci),
da ueniam ac trepidum patere hoc sudare parumper
pulueri: te longo necdum fidente paratu
molimur magnusque tibi praeludit Achilles.

But you, who first above all stupefied both the Italian and Greek heroes, for whom the twin wreaths of poet and leader flourish in rivalry (already one regrets being conquered), pardon me and allow me in my fear to sweat in this dust for a little longer: I am not yet confident in my preparations to work on you and great Achilles is a prelude to you.

The *Achilleid* is a prelude to an epic on Domitian, a game played before the real work of historical epic and panegyric. Statius brings out the idea of writing as a game with the imagery of sweating in the dust, which refers to the beginning of our epic games, where the games literally 'foresweat' the war (*praesudare*, 6.4). In *Siluae* 4.4, the poet also uses an image from the beginning of *Thebaid* 6, the image of the ship training for the real sea (6.19–24), in a *recusatio* for not writing about Domitian: *fluctus an sueta minores | nosse ratis nondum Ioniis credenda periclis?* ('Should my ship, accustomed to knowing lesser waves, not yet be trusted to the dangers of the Ionian?' *Siluae* 4.4.99–100.) The *Siluae* are games

Cambridge University Press

0521847427 - Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the Thebaid

Helen Lovatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STATIUS AND EPIC GAMES

to epic's war; mythological epic is equally a game in comparison to the true labour of historical panegyric. Statius always leaves the real writing until later; through the mask of 'just a game' he hides the seriousness of playing.

A very brief history of Roman games

I want now to move to background and historical games. The origins of Roman *ludi* are a prime site for legend and tendentious narrative.¹⁶ Virgil creates a role for Aeneas, Ovid for Romulus.¹⁷ The first *Consualia* is distinguished by its association with the rape of the Sabines.¹⁸ Both ancient and modern historians bring their own agendas to stories told about the history of Roman games.¹⁹ However, what concerns me here is the clear distinction made between the traditional Roman *ludi*, both *scaenici* and *circenses*, and Greek *agones*.²⁰ The first are always lent the full weight of tradition, presented as originating at the very beginning of the development of Rome, and linked closely to religious festivals. *Ludi* were festivals organised by the state using public money (although the presiding official might supplement this from his own funds), lasting a number of days, performing a religious function and including a number of different types of events. *Ludi scaenici* were dramatic performances and took place in the theatre; *ludi circenses* were primarily chariot racing, which took place in the circus. On the other hand, Greek athletic games are presented as a revolutionary novelty, first occurring in 186 BC, held by M. Fulvius Nobilior as part of the votive games after his victory in the Aetolian war.²¹ To start with, they took place as part of other festivals, staged in various different places as a spectacle of the other.²² Later, quadrennial festivals in the style of the Olympics began to be founded in the

¹⁶ See Thuillier (1996a) 37–59; Wiedemann (1992) 1–3 for the relationship between *ludi* and *munera*; Balsdon (1969); Harris (1972).

¹⁷ *Fasti* 2.359–80. ¹⁸ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 2.30–31.

¹⁹ See Thuillier (1996a) 37–8 on the moral agenda of Roman historians. Thuillier himself has an agenda: to rescue the history of Roman sport from the tyranny of hellenocentrism and to give the Etruscans their proper place in the history of Rome, following his earlier work on Etruscan athletics: Thuillier (1985).

²⁰ For a clear and useful discussion of this, see Caldelli (1993) 1–52.

²¹ See Livy 39.22.2 with Thuillier (1996a) 46–7. ²² See below, pp. 47–54.