

Staius and Stesichorus*

P. J. FINGLASS

IN 1976 a papyrus of Stesichorus was published at Lille, containing part of a previously unknown poem about the myth of Polynices and Eteocles.¹ The text in question is quite long—almost 130 lines—and a stichometric numeral in the margin allows us to identify that lines 176 to 303 of the poem are preserved. Lines 176 to 200 are highly fragmentary, but from line 201 much of the text is basically complete. That complete portion begins with a speech from the mother of Oedipus' sons, begging them to put aside fratricidal strife and thus avoid Tiresias' prophecy of doom—this prophecy was evidently delivered shortly before the fragment begins. Her sons agree to do so, and cast lots to decide who is to take the kingdom, and who Oedipus' possessions. The lot decides that Eteocles is to have the kingdom,² and Polynices gathers the possessions that he is owed, and departs—but not before Tiresias delivers a further, highly fragmentary, speech, which prophesies Polynices' arrival in Argos and wedding to Adrastus' daughter. The fragment breaks off after a description of Polynices' journey, leaving him stranded at Cleonae on the fringes of the Argolid—at least until some future papyrus find allows him to continue on his way.

The first edition of the fragment, in 1976, was flawed; the outstanding reedition of the papyrus in the following year by Peter Parsons has been the foundation for all subsequent work.³ Parsons' reedition is accompanied by a commentary which seeks not just to recover Stesichorus' text, but to situate it within Greek and Latin literature. And it was he who pointed out that the journey which concludes our fragment parallels the trip taken by Polynices in Staius' *Thebaid*. Let us first examine the Stesichorean journey:

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¹ MEILLIER 1976.

² For this incident see FINGLASS 2013a.

³ PARSONS 1977. For an account of work subsequent to Parsons see FINGLASS 2014c; for Stesichorus' narrative technique in the poem see FINGLASS 2015, 87-92.

ὥς φάτ[ο Τειρεσίας ὀ]νυμάκλυτος, αἴψα δ' α[---
 δόμῳ [υ-υ
 ὤχετ[υ-υ-υ-] το φίλῳ Πολυνείκει [---
 Θηβαῖ [υ-υ-]

... ομ[υ-υ], ν̄ ςτεῖχεν μέγα τεῖχος υ-υ 295
 [υ-υ-υ-]... αὐτῶι
 [υ-υ-υ-] πποῖς τ' ἴσαν ἄκρο[υ υ-
 ἄνδρε [υ-υ-υ-
 πομπ[υ-υ-υ-] δ' ἴκοντο Ἴσθμὸν
 ποντιο [υ-υ-υ- 300
 κραι [υ-υ-υ] υχαις

αὐτὰ[ρ υ-υ-υ-^ϙ] ἄστεα καλὰ Κορίνθου
 ρίμφα δ' [εὐκτιμένας] Κλεωνὰς ἦνθον

293 ἔπο]ντο Page 295 ἐρχομεν . . . ἀμείψας Parsons 296] .. ἄμ' vel] .. ἐπ' Parsons 297 πολλα[ίς ἀμιόνοις] θ' ἴπποῖς 300 πόντιου [ἀμφιάλον Parsons: ποντίου [Ἐννοσίδα West

Thus spoke Tiresias of the famous name, and immediately ... the palace ... he left ... for dear Polynices ... Thebes ... travelling along the road he went on his way, crossing over the great wall ... with many mules and horses they came to the tip [of] ... men ... they came to the Isthmus ... fine cities of Corinth, and swiftly arrived at well founded Cleonae ...

Stes. fr. 97.294-303 F.⁴

Here is the corresponding passage in Statius:⁵

tunc sedet Inachias urbes Danaëiaque arva

⁴ Fragments of Stesichorus are cited from FINGLASS 2014b.

⁵ Translation from SHACKLETON BAILEY 2003.

et caligantes abrupto sole Mycenae 325
 ferre iter impavidum, seu praevia ducit Erinys,
 seu fors illa viae, sive hac immota vocabat
 Atropos. Ogygiis ululata furoribus antra
 deserit et pingues Baccheo sanguine colles.
 inde plagam, qua molle sedens in plana Cithaeron 330
 porrigitur lassumque inclinat ad aequora montem,
 praeterit. hinc arte scopuloso in limite pendens
 infames Scirone petras Scyllaeaque rura
 purpureo regnata seni mitemque Corinthon
 linquit et in mediis audit duo litora campis. 335

Then he decides to take his way boldly to the cities of Inachus and Danaë's fields and Mycenae darkened with sun cut short. Does a guiding Fury lead him on, or is it the chance of the road, or was inexorable Atropos summoning him that way? He leaves the glades where Ogygian madness howls and hills fat with Bacchic gore. Thence he passes the tract where Cithaeron stretches out, gently sinking into the flat, and inclines his weary steep to the sea. From here the rocky path is high and narrow. He leaves Sciron's ill-famed cliffs and Scylla's fields where the purple ancient ruled and gentle⁶ Corinth; and in mid land he hears two shores.

Stat. *Theb.* 1.324-35

So in Stesichorus, lines 294-98 will describe Polynices' journey from Thebes until he reaches the Isthmus (299), followed by Corinth (302), and Cleonae (303) near Argos. Statius' Polynices travels from Thebes (328-29), past Cithaeron (330-32) and the Isthmus via Megara (332-34), to Corinth (334-35); the next geographical reference puts him near Lerna in the Argolid (380-89).⁷

Nobody to my knowledge has made anything of the parallel drawn by Parsons. Yet if the archaic Greek epic *Thebaid* had survived, and contained a passage like what we find in Stesichorus, and if the passage occurred almost exactly the same distance into that poem as Statius'

⁶ Or 'wealthy', if we emend transmitted *mitem* to *ditem*.

⁷ For the route from Corinth to Argos in antiquity see MARCHAND 2009, especially the map on p. 110 showing how Cleonae was on the way.

passage does into his, then scholars would certainly be making something of it, noting how, in Parsons' words,⁸ 'Staius...describes the same journey [as Stesichorus], though in more melodramatic circumstances'; how he takes the relatively plain Stesichorean narrative and turns it into something much more colourful, with its Erinyes and references to mythological events, including great sinners such as Pentheus (by implication), Sciron, and Scylla (two of whom were themselves involved in terrible intrafamilial conflicts), emphasising the fateful nature of the journey which will ultimately lead to such great bloodshed. Staius has his Polynices encounter a storm on the way, which substantially delays the narrative. Stesichorus, on the other hand, brings him to Cleonae, at least, with much greater dispatch. It seems unlikely that the poet substantially delayed the warrior's arrival at Argos, and if that is correct then Staius' dramatic storm—one of only a couple of Staiian passages which Shackleton Bailey says 'once read are not forgotten'⁹—comes as more of a surprise to anyone familiar with the Stesichorean narrative. Just because the parallel is not with an epic text but with a lyric text—albeit a lyric text with a particular connexion to epic¹⁰—we should not automatically discount or ignore the possibility that Staius did indeed know Stesichorus' passage, and that some of Staius' audience had the Stesichorean passage as part of their mental furniture as they read the Roman poet's verse.

Nor is this the only similarity between Staius' and Stesichorus' accounts of the build-up to the war of the Seven. As Parsons points out, the use of the lot is attested in both these poets,¹¹ although in Staius it determines which brother is to rule first, in Stesichorus which is to have the kingdom and which Oedipus' possessions. Other ancient writers give different versions: so in Pherecydes and Sophocles, Eteocles drives Polynices out by force; in Hellanicus, the brothers agree that Eteocles should get the kingdom, while Polynices takes the property and goes into exile; and in Euripides, Eteocles rules first because he is the elder, but agrees to cede power to Polynices after a year, and subsequently the pair are to rule in alternative years.¹² The imagery of the lot is prominent in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, and Laura Swift has recently argued

⁸ PARSONS 1977, 33-34.

⁹ SHACKLETON BAILEY 2003, 3-4.

¹⁰ See WEST 2015.

¹¹ PARSONS 1977, 20-21; so also MARINIS 2015, 354 n. 63.

¹² Pher. fr. 96 EGM; Soph. OC 1295-98, 1330; Hellan. fr. 98 EGM; Eur. *Phoen.* 69-76.

that this is because of Stesichorean influence;¹³ it would be bold indeed to say that the same influence could not have worked on Statius too, especially since the close juxtaposition of lot and journey is found in both.

The use of the lot in Stesichorus is suggested by the mother of Polynices and Eteocles, as a means of heading off the dire prophecy just uttered by Tiresias; Statius' poem, by contrast, has Tisiphone, prompted by Oedipus' curse, arise from the underworld to stimulate the brothers into dividing their inheritance in the same way. The Queen's impassioned desire in Stesichorus' poem to avoid Tiresias' prophecy suggests that a curse by Oedipus is not at issue, because she would scarcely have neglected to mention it. So when Ganiban remarks that Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* is 'the only Greek version in which [Oedipus'] curse does not give birth to the expedition', he has forgotten Stesichorus.¹⁴ The efforts of Stesichorus' Queen to head off the conflict are to an extent paralleled by those of Statius' Jocasta, although hers occur at a later stage in the poem;¹⁵ who knows what connexions we could find if we had more of Stesichorus' work.¹⁶

We must be careful, in the course of our investigations, not to assume too much about Stesichorus' Queen. A recent author in the monumental *Brill's Companion to Statius* remarks that 'Jocasta's role in the battle between her sons goes back to Stesichorus but is best examined in the tragedies of Euripides and Seneca. The differences between the Greek and Latin *Phoenissae* as well as Statius' treatment are well attested in the scholarship....'¹⁷ Here, alas, the promising focus on Stesichorus proves

¹³ SWIFT 2015, 132-138.

¹⁴ GANIBAN 2007, 26-27 n. 10.

¹⁵ Stat. *Theb.* 11.315-53. See McNELIS 2007, 147 with n. 77; AUGOUSTAKIS 2010, 62-68; SIMMS 2014; and VOIGT 2015; Stesichorus is compared by AUGOUSTAKIS (p. 62 n. 68) and by SIMMS (p. 172: 'Quite likely Jocasta's attempts to forestall or deter the mutual fratricide of her sons does not so much depart from the tradition of Homer and Sophocles as return to an innovation explored by Stesichorus'), but not by McNELIS or by VOIGT, even though her article appears in a journal itself published in Lille. VOIGT's account of scenes in literature where a mother intervenes ahead of a conflict (pp. 11-12) ought to have cited another Stesichorean fragment, fr. 17 F, where Callirhoe, mother of the monstrous Geryon, begs him not to fight Heracles and exposes her breast to him.

¹⁶ So as AUGOUSTAKIS 2016, xviii n. 8 suggests, with reference to Tydeus' cannibalism during the conflict before the city, 'Stesichorus' version of the Theban cycle may have included the cannibalism scene, since *PMGF* 222b possibly narrated the saga up to the fratricide..., and at least up to Polynices' journey to Argos.'

¹⁷ DIETRICH 2015, 310-311.

all too short; moreover, there is an implied, groundless, assumption that Stesichorus' Queen is called Jocasta. This assumption recurs in Smolenaars' discussion of whether Statius depicts Jocasta as dead or alive at *Thebaid* 1.72: 'Jocasta's attempt, absent in Aeschylus' *Septem*, first occurs – as far as we can tell – in the Lille papyrus discovered in 1976 (*P.Lille* 76; fr. 222b *PMGF*). This lyric version of the Oedipus legend is ascribed by most scholars to Stesichorus (640–555).¹⁸ The fragment contains a dialogue between the seer Teiresias, who foretells the fratricide, and Jocasta, who wants to prevent it. In any case, this storyline presupposes that Jocasta, unlike in Homer and *OT*, lives on after the anagnorisis and after Oedipus' self-blinding. This drastic change in the treatment of the Theban legend is first staged by Euripides in his *Phoinissai*, and later also by Seneca in his *Phoenissae*.¹⁹ But we are not told the name of the Queen in what survives of Stesichorus' text. Long before Sophocles' play became the canonical telling of the myth, forever associating Oedipus with Jocasta, the Theban king was associated with several different women—Epicaste, Euryganeia, Eurycleia, Astymedusa. Stesichorus' Queen might have had any of these names, or another one entirely. More importantly than the name, there is no evidence for Oedipus producing children with his mother until Pherecydes in the fifth century, and no evidence for the survival of Oedipus' mother after the discovery of her incest before Euripides.²⁰ It is not impossible that both these features are Stesichorean, but that is unlikely; certainly, such a position has to be argued for, not merely asserted as if the mother of Oedipus' children is always Oedipus' own mother. This is likely to have been an area where Stesichorus' treatment of the myth was quite different from what we find in Statius.

Could Statius have read Stesichorus? Had he even heard of him? The answer to both questions is 'yes'. The last person who we can say for sure

¹⁸ For the date of Stesichorus' poetic activity, which I would place somewhere between 610 and 540, see FINGLASS 2014a, 1-6. Smolenaars' phrase 'by most scholars' is unhelpful; if he knows scholars who do not believe that the fragment is by Stesichorus (and I know of none), he should name them.

¹⁹ SMOLENAARS 2008, 222. It is possible, however, that Jocasta lived on after Oedipus' blinding in Euripides' *Oedipus* too; on this play, which may predate *Phoenician Women*, see FINGLASS 2017a, which cites earlier literature. (I should have pointed this out at FINGLASS 2014c, 365.)

²⁰ Pher. fr. 95 *EGM*. See FINGLASS 2014c, 364-366; FINGLASS 2017b, Introduction section §3.

was familiar with his poetry was Athenaeus in the late second or early third century, so well after Statius' time.²¹ And of the eight papyri that we possess, one (the Lille papyrus, from the Fayum) is Ptolemaic, while the other seven, all from Oxyrhynchus, include four from the first century, two from the second, and one from the second or third.²² If Stesichorus was so accessible in such an unremarkable town in Egypt, readers at Rome will have had no trouble getting hold of his works. The *Tabula Iliaca Capitolina*, a calcite tablet sculpted shortly before the turn of the eras, and discovered ten miles to the south-east of Rome, proclaims that it depicts 'the Sack of Troy according to Stesichorus', and accompanies that claim with a pretty elegiac couplet alluding to the language of the opening of that very poem. This suggests interest in and familiarity with Stesichorus on the part of its maker and intended viewers, in a period shortly before Statius' lifetime.²³

Moreover, Statius refers directly to Stesichorus in the *Silvae*, in a list of Greek poets mostly from the Archaic period that his father taught at his school in Naples:²⁴

hinc tibi uota patrum credi generosaque pubes
 te monitore regi, mores et facta priorum
 discere, quis casus Troiae, quam tardus Vlives,
 quantus equum pugnasque uirum decurrere uersu
 Maeonides quantumque pios ditarit agrestes
 Ascraeus Siculusque senex, qua lege recurat
 Pindaricae uox flexa lyrae volucrumque precator
 Ibycus et tetricis Alcman cantatus Amyclis
Stesichorusque ferox saltusque ingressa uiriles
 non formidata temeraria Chalcide Sappho,
 quosque alios dignata chelys. tu pandere docti
 carmina Battiaedae latebrasque Lycophronis atri
 Sophronaque implicitum tenuisque arcana Corinnae.

Stat. *Silv.* 5.3.146-58 = Stes. test. Tb50 Ercoles

²¹ See FINGLASS and KELLY 2015a, 1.

²² For an account of the papyri see FINGLASS 2014a, 73-76.

²³ The *Tabula* is Stes. fr. 105 F; for its significance for Stesichorus see FINGLASS 2014d; DAVIES and FINGLASS 2014, 428-436; BESCHI 2016; FINGLASS 2017c.

²⁴ Translated by SHACKLETON BAILEY 2015. For this passage see also HULLS 2014, 197-198.

Hence parents' hopes were entrusted to you and noble youth governed by your guidance, as they learned the manners and deeds of men gone by: the fate of Troy, Ulysses' tardiness, Maeonides' power to pass in verse through heroes' horses and combats, what riches the old man of Ascra and the old man of Sicily gave honest farmers, what law governs the recurring voice of Pindar's winding harp, and Ibycus, who prayed to birds, and Alcman, sung in austere Amyclae, and bold Stesichorus and rash Sappho, who feared not Leucas but took the manly leap, and others by the lyre approved. You were skilled to expound the songs of Battus' son, the lurking places of dark Lycophron, Sophron's mazes, and the secrets of subtle Corinna.

Among these brief vignettes of Greek poets from the Archaic to the Hellenistic periods Statius refers to *Stesichorus ferox*, 'Stesichorus the fierce', and we may wonder exactly what that means. Other ancient criticism of Stesichorus tended to refer to his Homeric nature,²⁵ or to his sweetness, as explored in a recent paper by Richard Hunter;²⁶ Statius' use of this term deserves comment. And comment it finds, in the detailed commentary on the testimonia to Stesichorus published by Marco Ercoles in 2013. He notes that the only other poet who receives this epithet from Statius is Ennius, when he says *cedet Musa rudis ferocis Enni*, 'Let the rough Muse of ferocious Ennius give way' (*Silv.* 2.775), an expression which, according to Newlands, 'assimilates the epic poet to the military hero in spirited style.'²⁷ Quintilian's famous description of Stesichorus as *maxima bella et clarissimos canentem duces et epici carminis onera lyra sustinentem*, 'singing of great wars and famous leaders and sustaining on his lyre the weight of epic song',²⁸ associates him too with wars and battles; Statius' description of him as *ferox* seems to point in the same direction. If so, it may be a clue that Statius did indeed know Stesichorus' poem, since specifically military accounts are not prominent among his surviving poetry; only the *Sack of Troy* would count, and even that begins in a surprisingly unmilitaristic fashion.²⁹

²⁵ See KELLY 2015; CAREY 2015.

²⁶ HUNTER 2015.

²⁷ NEWLANDS 2011, 241; she additionally notes that only Statius uses *ferox* to describe a poet.

²⁸ Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.61 = Stes. Tb42 Ercoles.

²⁹ See FINGLASS 2013b.

No doubt there is more to be said on the association of these two poets, both of which have languished for too long in the shadow of slightly earlier, more famous poets whose work they transformed in innovative ways; but Statian scholars are more likely than I to be able to say it. Stesichorus and all the rich poetry of the Archaic period, so often still neglected simply because it is fragmentary, continues to offer students of Latin literature great opportunities to discover intriguing poetic connexions between texts centuries apart.

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Στάτιος και Στησίχορος

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Περίληψη

ΣΤΟ ΠΑΡΟΝ άρθρο συγκρίνονται δύο διαφορετικές περιγραφές της πορείας του ταξιδιού του Πολυνείκη από το Άργος στη Θήβα: η μία απαντά στο απόσπασμα 97 του Στησιχόρου (από τον πάπυρο της Λίλλης), ενώ η άλλη στο πρώτο βιβλίο της *Θηβαΐδας* του Στατίου. Η σύγκριση (η οποία επιχειρήθηκε για πρώτη φορά το 1977 από τον Peter Parsons στην κλασική μελέτη του για τον εν λόγω στησιχόρειο πάπυρο) συμβάλλει στην ανάδειξη των διαφορετικών στόχων των δύο ποιητών κατά την αφήγηση της μοιραίας αυτής πορείας.

