

P. Papinius Statius

*Thebaid* and *Achilleid*



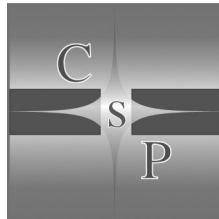
P. Papinius Statius

Volume II

*Thebaid and Achilleid*

Translated by

A. L. Ritchie and J. B. Hall  
in collaboration with M. J. Edwards



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## Introduction to the Translation

Since the early decades of the twentieth century there have appeared four translations into English of the whole of the *Thebaid* and one of a part of the poem; the *Achilleid* has been translated into English just twice. Two of the translations of the *Thebaid* are in verse, the older being an ambitious attempt by J. B. Poynton (Oxford, 1971-1975) to render the epic into Spenserian stanza form, the younger a version by A. D. Melville (Oxford, 1992) into heroic verse. Book 9 of the *Thebaid* has a prose translation from M. Dewar (Oxford, 1991). Two of the *Thebaid* and both of the *Achilleid* translations are in the Loeb Classical Library, the translators being J. H. Mozley (1928) and D. R. Shackleton Bailey (2003). The earlier of these Loeb translators was very properly taken to task for inaccuracies by L. Håkanson (Lund, 1973). The later has been accused of excessive boldness in his dealings with the text, and objections to his translation are a necessary consequence. We applaud his boldness, the more cordially since we are much bolder than he in what we do to the text in our search for the author.

Our translation of the *Thebaid* and *Achilleid* has one primary objective, and that is to represent in English prose as far as we can what we believe to be the uppermost meaning of Statius' Latin. It is a prose translation because only in prose is there the possibility of such verbal manoeuvre as is necessary to catch the subtleties of the original, whether it rises to the heights of grand epic or descends to the human level of the colloquial. We study, for instance, to follow the characterisation imparted by the author, and attempt to distinguish between the brusqueness of Tydeus and the dignified utterance of Adrastus. Statius' insights into the psychology of his *dramatis personae*, above all, demand the flexibility of English prose. So too do his delicate portraits of individuals and the depiction of the scenes against which they act out his story. But the prose must be as natural as possible: we have been at pains to avoid what JBH was brought up to call 'Wardour Street' parlance and ALR 'talking forsoothly'. Nobody ever spoke like that in the history of our language, and translationese is the death of sincerity of style. We may add that we have not adopted the newfangled ways of rendering Greek proper names, regarding these as unattractive to the beholder. Polynices will thus not be transformed into 'Poluneikes', and his brother will be Eteocles, as he always used to be.

We have a secondary purpose also in providing a translation, and that is to obviate the need to write critical notes on the lines where we print conjectures, ours or those of others. The others have in some cases set down their arguments on paper and published them, but our noble precursors Gronovius, Heinsius, Bentley and Markland often do no more than record their suggestions, with or without a commendatory *scribe* or *lege* or *recte*. That indeed was all they needed to do since they could count on a readership which knew Latin intimately and was not only receptive to change but positively eager to welcome it, if it was good. Today change is so far unwelcome in many quarters that even the slightest alteration of a text comes in for protest, and large-scale alteration is met with incredulity. It is as though there were a conspiracy to agree in the comfortable belief that emendation has had its day and the texts of the Latin poets are now as good as they possibly can be. We, however, believe that our great predecessors, the giants on whose shoulders we stand, would have been the first to acknowledge that, while they themselves had indeed done much, there was still much to be done.

We may sum up like this. Because we do not see that five pages of commendation are better than five lines, if the conjecture is right, we have decided to skip even the five lines and let the translation speak for us. If the translation is true to the text and both are true to the precise sense required by the context, we consider that we have done enough to prove our case.

Finally, we must acknowledge that, while we have (obviously) looked at the other English translations, it has always been in order to see whether they offered a different interpretation of words from the one we were contemplating, and we may honestly say that we have never deliberately taken any form of words from them; coincidences, therefore, are to be ascribed to chance and a shared feeling that such and such was the *mot juste* for a particular Latin word.

ALR  
JBH  
MJE



## P. PAPINIUS STATIUS

### THEBAID

#### BOOK ONE

OF BROTHERS' battle-lines, of alternating kingship fought out in impious hatred, and the guilt of Thebes, the passion of the Muses has come upon my mind to unfold the tale. Whence, goddesses, do you bid me set out? Shall I sing of the first beginnings of a dread race, the abduction from Sidon, the inexorable conditions of Agenor's pact and Cadmus scouring the ocean? A long retrospect, were I to tell of the trembling husbandman of hidden warriors sowing conflict in accursed furrows and to follow closely the song [10] by which Amphion bade mountains come to make the Tyrian walls, the source of Bacchus' grievous anger against his kinsfolk's ramparts, what the work of savage Juno, against whom the wretched Athamas took up his bow, and why his mother who was destined to fall together with Palaemon felt no fear of the mighty Ionian sea.

And now indeed for the present I shall let the groans and the good fortunes of Cadmus pass by: let the path of my poem be the tormented house of Oedipus, since not yet could I venture to breathe of Italian standards, of triumphs in the north, of the Rhine twice driven under the yoke, of Hister twice driven to terms, [20] of the Dacians hurled down from the height of their confederacy, or of war against Jove warded off when you were scarcely yet of a man's years, and of you, O additional ornament to the glory of Latium, whom Rome, now that you have succeeded to the new dynasty begun by your seasoned father, desires to be hers for eternity. Although a narrower path drives all the stars, and the shining region of the firmament which knows nothing of Pleiades and Boreas and the shattering thunderbolt petitions you, and although the bridle of the fire-footed stallions himself sets on your hair the loftily radiant circlet, or Jove surrenders to you an equal share of his great heaven, [30] may you remain content with the rule of mankind, with might over sea and land, and give up the stars. The time will be when, fortified by Pierian inspiration, I will sing your deeds: now I strain

my lyre enough to recall Aonian arms, a sceptre destructive to two tyrants, madness not ended after death, flames warring in the discord of the pyre, corpses of kings lacking burial and cities depopulated by deaths on both sides at that time when dark Dirce grew red with Lernaean blood and Thetis shuddered at Ismenos, accustomed before to wash dry banks, [40] now flowing with heaps of native dead.

Which of the heroes, Clio, will you give me first? Tydeus immoderate in his wrath, or the sudden engulfing of the laurelled priest? There presses also raging Hippomedon with slaughter driving on the hostile stream, the lamentable warfare of the rash Arcadian, and Capaneus to be sung of with profound horror.

Now Oedipus, having ransacked his wicked eyes with guilty hand, had plunged his condemned shame in night eternal and in long death sustained his life. Giving himself up to the darkness and in the recess of a sunken room [50] clinging to a dwelling unseen by the rays of heaven, the savage daylight of the mind yet flits about him with constant wings, and in his heart the curses visited on crime. Then his empty sockets, the raw and wretched punishment for his life, he shows to the sky and with bloody hands beats the empty ground and with dread voice makes this prayer: ‘You gods who govern guilty souls and Tartarus too small for its punishments, and you, Styx, black with shadowy depths, whom I see, and Tisiphone, accustomed much to be invoked by me, give your nod and be favourable to my perverse prayers: [60] if I have done any deed well, if when I fell from my mother you nursed me in your bosom and strengthened me when my feet were pierced with wounds, if I sought the Cirrhaean pools lying between the two horns of the ridge, when I could have lived content with my supposed father Polybus, and in the narrows where the road to Phocis meets two others grappled with the aged king and split the head of a trembling old man, while seeking my father, if with your preceding guidance I ingeniously solved the riddle of the hostile Sphinx, if in joy I entered upon the sweet madness of a deplorable union with my mother [70] and often claimed incestuous nights and begot sons for you, as yourself you know, and then eager to punish myself voluntarily pressed on to my clawing fingers and left my eyes in sight of my wretched mother – hearken to me, if what I pray is merited and is what you yourself would urge upon a madman. Me their father, bereft of sight and kingdom, those whom I begot, on whatever bed, did not attempt to guide or with their words to divert

me in my grief but rather, imagine it! in their pride – O the anguish of it! – and kings at a stroke because of my death they trample on my blindness and loathe their father's groans. Am I a thing of ill omen to them also? and does the father of the gods look upon these things with indifference? [80] Do you at least be present here as due avenger, and set punishment in train for all my descendants. Put on the diadem steeped in gore which I snatched off with bloody nails and, incited by a father's prayers, march between the brothers: let the bonds of clan be severed by the sword. Grant, queen of the abyss of Tartarus, that I see the awful deed which I desire, and the minds of the young men will not be slow to follow. Only come in fitting shape and you will recognise them for sons of mine.'

As he uttered these words the cruel goddess turned on him her stern gaze – she chanced to be sitting beside the unlovely Cocytus and with the tresses of her head unloosed [90] she had allowed the snakes to lap the sulphurous waters. At once, swifter than Jove's fire and shooting stars, she leapt up from the gloomy river-bank. The ghostly throng parts in fear of their mistress's approach; and through the shades and fields darkened with the swarm of souls she makes for the lintel of Taenarum's gate through which there is no return.

Daylight sensed her presence, night advancing with pitchy cloud affrighted the horses of light, and far off lofty Atlas shuddered and cast heaven from his wavering neck. [100] Rising from the vale of Malea she forthwith hastens on the familiar route to Thebes: for along no roads does she more swiftly go and return, nor does she prefer her birthplace Tartarus. Her features were shadowed by a hundred rearing vipers forming the smaller cluster on her frightful head; in her receding eyes there sits an iron light within, like Phoebe travailing red amid the clouds by means of Atracian magic; her skin is stretched, suffused with poison, and it swells with gore; in her dark mouth is a fiery vapour whereby come long thirst, plagues and famine and a single death to mankind; a ghastly cloak is stiff on her back [110] and its dark knots come together on her breast: these accoutrements Atropos and Proserpine herself renew. In anger then she shakes both her hands: the one flashes with funereal fire, the other lashes the thin air with a living water-snake.

When she halted where vast Cithaeron with its sheer citadel meets the sky, she redoubled the savage hisses of her green hair as a sign to

the land, upon which the whole shore of the Achaean sea afar and the kingdom of Pelops echoes back. Parnassus half way to heaven and icy Eurotas heard, and the clamour struck the side of Oeta making its ridges shake, [120] and Isthmus scarcely withstood the twofold waves. Even his mother snatched from the reins her own Palaemon as he ranged on the dolphin's curving back, and pressed him to her breast.

And lo! when dropping headlong she [Tisiphone] first alighted on the Cadmean roof and steeped the house in her familiar murk, the feelings deep within the brothers' hearts at once were convulsed, inherited madness came upon their minds, and envy which is jealous of prosperity, and fear which is the father of hatred; then a ruthless love of dominion, broken pledges, ambition that will not suffer a lower rank, the keener pleasure of standing alone in the highest place, [130] and discord which keeps company with a shared kingdom. Just as when a farmer attempts by setting them to the plough to unite bullocks chosen from the unbroken herd they, whose towering necks have not yet bent to knotty shoulders over many a ploughshare, rebelliously pull in different directions and with equal strength unloose the harness and churn up the furrows with their separate courses: not otherwise does two-headed discord embitter the ungoverned brothers. It was agreed under conditions of alternate years to exchange sovereignty for exile. Thus by an ill-spirited law [140] they require Fortune to change sides so that under their rash agreement the new heir would for ever harass the one wielding the sceptre. This was the affection between the brothers, this the sole impediment to conflict and one not destined to last until a second king.

And not yet did panelled ceilings shine, gilded with solid metal, nor halls raised high with mountains of Greek marble, offering ample room for throngs of clients; there were no spearmen keeping watch over the troubled sleep of kings nor sentinels groaning at the changing of the guard, nor was care taken to put gemstones into the wine [150] and to pollute gold with food: it was naked power which armed the brothers, and their strife is over a pauper kingdom. And while they wrangle over which of them should plough the dusty acres of tiny Dirce or exult in the Tyrian exile's lowly throne, there perished law human and divine, goodness and decency in life and death.

How far do you take your anger, poor wretches? What if the object of your great crime were the two bounds of heaven, which the Sun looks upon when he leaves the eastern gate and when he sets in the Iberian haven, and those far-off lands he touches with slanting light, lands [160] chilled by snowy Boreas or warmed by the fire of Notus in the south? What if the riches of Phrygia and Tyre were gathered together into one? A place of ill omen and citadels accursed were enough for your hatred, and with your monstrous madness what you bought was to sit in Oedipus' place.

Now the honour due to Polynices, having been postponed, was deprived of the allotted fulfilment. What then, tyrant, was that day like for you when, alone in your empty court, you looked upon all authority as yours and all men inferior and nowhere anyone to stand up as an equal! Already murmurings are creeping among the people of Echion and the commons are quietly [170] parting company from their prince and, as the way of the people is, the prince to come is the one beloved. And one of them, whose chief purpose was to cause harm with base poison and never to bear on a willing neck the imposition of leaders, said, 'Is this the lot that the harsh Fates have brought on the affairs of Ogygia, so often to change those whom we have to fear and to subject our uncertain necks to an alternating yoke? They take turns to change the fate of the people and by their actions they make Fortune redundant. Shall I for ever be assigned to serve exiles one after another? Are you, mighty father of gods and lands, resolved to bestow this inclination on relatives? [180] Or does the ancient omen for Thebes still continue from that time when Cadmus, bidden to search in the Carpathian sea for the burden vainly pleading with the Sidonian bull, in his exile found a kingdom among the Hyantean fields, and from the yawning of the fruitful earth sent down the battle-lines of brothers as an augury to his furthest descendants? You see how power with lofty brow makes harsh threats, rising up more tyrannically in the absence of his fellow. What menaces he carries in his aspect, with what great disdain he oppresses everything! Will this man ever be a private citizen? But he used to be kindly disposed to a petitioner, [190] courteous in his address and more lenient in his justice. What wonder? He was not alone. We are a worthless crowd open to every chance, prepared for any master whatever. As cold Boreas on this side and cloudy Eurus on that drag at the sails, and the fortune of the ship wavers between

them – alas for a harsh fate hanging in the balance between doubt and fear and not to be tolerated by any peoples – the one gives orders, the other makes threats.’

But at Jove’s command, up in the halls of whirling heaven, there had assembled together in the inner sky the order of gods chosen for council. From here all things are at an equal distance, [200] the eastern and western houses and land and sea spread out beneath all the light of day. High in the midst of the gods he himself proceeds, his features calm yet making all things tremble, and takes his place on his starry throne. The dwellers in heaven do not immediately venture to sit, until the father himself with tranquil hand bids them to do so. Then a host of wandering demigods, rivers akin to the clouds on high, and winds restraining through fear their suppressed murmurings, fill the golden palace. Its vaults quake before the commingled majesty of the gods, [210] the columns shine with a brighter radiance and the doors glow with an unearthly light. When silence was ordered and the affrighted world was hushed, from on high he begins. Heavy and immutable weight attends his sacred words and the Fates wait upon his voice.

‘The sins of the earth I deplore, and mortal nature unconquerable by the Dirae. For how long shall I be driven to punishing the guilty? I am weary of venting my rage with the flashing thunderbolt: from long ago the labouring arms of the Cyclopes grow tired and the fires are failing the Aeolian anvils. I had indeed tolerated the Sun’s horses bolting with the wrong driver [220] and heaven scorched by errant wheels, and the world contaminated by Phaethon’s ashes. It achieved nothing, nor did it that you with your mighty spear, brother, let the sea spread wide over forbidden ground. Now I myself am descending to punish twin houses of whose blood I myself am the originator. The one blood-line branches off to Persean Argos, the other flows from its source to Aonian Thebes. The disposition planted in them all persists: who could not know of the deaths caused by Cadmus and the warring array of the Eumenides so often called up from the deepest abodes, the destructive revels of matrons [230] and their wild roving in the groves, and crimes against the gods which must not be spoken of? Scarcely in the space of a complete day and night could I recount their habits and their profane inclination. Why, this unnatural heir has even sought to climb into his father’s bed and pollute the womb of his innocent mother, returning by his outrageous deed to his

own origins. But he has paid an everlasting penalty to the gods above and has cast away the light of day and no longer enjoys our heavenly air: but his sons – a crime without precedent – trampled on his eyes as they fell. Even now are your prayers fulfilled, [240] you accursed old man: your blindness has deserved, has deserved to hope for Jove as your avenger. New conflicts will I thrust upon the guilty kingdom and tear up by the roots the entire deadly race. Let me have for the seeds of war Adrastus as father-in-law and a marriage joined by the ill will of the gods above. This people too am I resolved to harry with punishment, for false Tantalus and the wrong done at the cruel table have not died away from my inmost heart.’

Thus the almighty father, but Juno, wounded by his words, turning over in her angry heart an unlooked-for pain, [250] made this reply to him: ‘Are you bidding me, you most just of gods, me to engage in warfare? You know how I always aid with warriors and wealth the citadels built by the Cyclopes and mighty Phoroneus’ sceptre famed in story, for all that you shamelessly there overwhelm in sleep and death the guardian of the Pharian heifer, and enter as a shower of gold the defended towers. Your liaisons in disguise I forgive: the city I hate is that which you go into without disguise, where you sound the thunder which is the shared sign of our high union and hurl the bolt which belongs to me. Let Thebes pay for its deeds: why choose Argos as the enemy? [260] No, if there is such great discord in our lawful marriage, rather destroy with arms both Samos and ancient Mycenae, and raze Sparta to the ground. Why is your own wife’s altar anywhere warmed and cheered by the blood of sacrifice or by a mass of eastern incense? Mareotic Coptos smokes more prosperously with prayers, and the wailing river of the brass-resounding Nile. But if the races are paying for the ancient crimes of their forefathers, and if as a relief for your concerns this decision to review time’s old age has come late in the day, at what point, I ask, is it enough to blot out the earth’s mad deeds and amend the ages past? [270] Begin immediately from that ancient settlement which Alpheos glides by with sea-bound waters, returning to his Sicilian love far away. Here the Arcadians set up shrines to you on unhallowed ground – and you are not ashamed – and there is the war chariot of Oenomaus and horses more fit for a stable beneath Getic Haemus, and even now unburied the severed heads and mangled remains of the suitors lie stiff. Yet here you welcome the honour of a temple, and pleasing to you is guilty Ida and Crete which speaks falsely about your death.

Why, I ask, do you begrudge me to make my dwelling in the land of Tantalus? [280] Turn aside the tumult of war and have pity on your own people. Far and wide you have wicked kingdoms which would more deservedly suffer pernicious sons-in-law.'

Juno had finished her mixture of reproaches and entreaties. But he was not troubled at her words, although they were bitter from her emotion, and made this reply: 'For my part I did not imagine that you would tolerate with approval whatever I might determine, however justly, against your own Argos, and I am not unaware that – given the opportunity – Bacchus and Dione would venture to speak at length on behalf of Thebes, but respect for my authority prevents them. [290] Furthermore I call to witness the dread waters, my brother's river Styx, an oath which will stand and may not be revoked, that there will be nothing which will turn me from my decrees. Therefore, child of Cyllene, swiftly on wing outstrip the winds that carry you through the liquid air, glide into the dark kingdom and say to your uncle: Let aged Laius raise himself to the upper air, Laius killed by a wound from his son, whom in accordance with the law of deepest Erebus the further bank of Lethe has not yet received. Let him carry these my orders to his grim grandson. His brother, dependent on the help and puffed up by the hospitality of Argos, [300] he the unnatural one must – as he instinctively longs to – keep far away from his court, denying him the alternate honour of kingship. From this will spring the causes of anger; the rest I will lead on in due order.'

The grandson of Atlas obeys the father's words and thereupon speedily binds his ankles with winged sandals and covers his hair and tempers the heat of the stars with a hat. Then in his right hand he set the wand with which he had been accustomed to drive away or again induce pleasant sleep, and to go down into black Tartarus and bring bloodless shades to life. Down he leapt, and shivered as he was caught up by thin air. [310] Without delay he takes lofty flight swiftly through the void and traces on the clouds an immense curve.

Meanwhile, the son of Oedipus, long a wandering exile from his ancestral lands, is roaming unperceived the desert places of Aonia. Every minute he nurses in his mind the kingdom overdue to him and groans that the long year is standing still with sluggish constellations. One recurrent preoccupation absorbs the hero day and night, whether



he is ever to see his brother humbly abdicate from the throne and himself master of Thebes and its resources: for this day he would be eager to barter a lifetime. [320] At one moment he is complaining that the time wasted in exile seems to move slowly, but then the haughtiness of a ruler exalts him and in his pride he imagines himself enthroned and his brother already cast down: uneasy hope draws his thoughts on and from his prolonged yearning he drinks delight. He then resolves to make his fearless way towards the Inachian cities and the fields of Danaus and Mycenae plunged into darkness when the sun was snatched away, be it that the Erinys precedes and leads him or that he takes that route by chance or that unswerving Atropos summoned him in this direction. He leaves behind the hollows which knew the howling of Ogygian frenzies and the hills rich with blood shed in honour of Bacchus. [330] Next he passes the region where Cithaeron, gently subsiding, extends down to the plane and inclines his weary head to the sea. From here, clinging fast to the rocky path, he leaves the cliffs made infamous by Sciron, and the countryside of Scylla ruled by the old man with the purple lock, and mild Corinth, and in the midst of fields he hears the sound of two coastlines.

And now, rising above the horizon of retiring Phoebus, borne up over the world silent far and wide, Titanis had rarefied the chill air with her dewy chariot: now beasts and birds are still, now sleep steals over grievous cares [340] and stoops forward from the sky, bringing welcome forgetfulness of the toils of life. But the clouds gave no promise that light would return to the reddened sky, nor in the lessening shadows did prolonged twilight gleam with reflected Phoebus: black night, darker immediately above the earth and shot through by no ray of light, veiled the heavens. Now the doors of cold Aeolia are shaken and resound, and an approaching storm threatens with raucous voice. Winds raging in opposite directions meet in conflict and tear at the axis, wrenching out the pivot, [350] while each seizes upon the sky for itself; but Auster with massive force intensifies the darkness, whirling the blackness in coils, and pours down rain which harsh Boreas with his dry breath first freezes to ice. In addition, tearing lightning flickers and with its sudden fire the battered air is split. Already Nemea, already the high peaks of Arcadia bordering the groves of Taenarum, are awash. There rushes Inachus in broken spate and Erasinus swelling up into ice-cold waves. Rivers which were previously dusty channels crossed on foot were contained by no barrier of levees, [360] and from its depths

Lerna overflowed its marsh and foamed with its old poison. Every grove is shattered, ancient branches in the woods are torn away by the storm, and the summer grounds of shady Lycaeus, seen by no sun throughout their lifetime, were laid bare.

But he [Polynices], now amazed at the boulders taking flight from the broken ridges, now keeping his ears open to guard against cloud-born streams from the mountains, and the homes of shepherds and beasts everywhere snatched away by the mad whirlwind, distracted and uncertain of his way, with undiminished vigour eats up the long miles through the rugged and thorny terrain: on every side fear assails him, on every side his brother. [370] And just as a mariner, caught on a wintry sea, to whom neither the slow-moving Wain nor the moon shows the way with kindly light, amid the tumult of sky and sea stands destitute of strategy, and at every moment expects reefs submerged in treacherous shallows or foaming rocks with jagged peaks to dash upon the high prow, so the Cadmeian hero makes haste to cover the recesses of the groves, thrusting through the fearsome lairs of wild beasts with his huge shield, and with his upper body bending low he breaks down the thickets – the surly force of his resentment gives the spur to his determination [380] – until there shone out from Inachian roofs, conquering the darkness, pouring light on to the walls beneath, the height of Larisa. Urged on by every hope he flies towards it, keeping on the one side to his left the temple of Juno at lofty Prosymna and on the other side the dark pools of the Lernaean lake branded by the fire of Hercules, and at last passes through the opened gates. At once he sees the entrance to the palace: here, his limbs numbed by rain and wind, he throws himself down and, propped against the doorposts of the unknown court, summons fitful sleep to his hard couch.

[390] There the king Adrastus ruled the people, from the mid-course of his tranquil life verging on old age, well-endowed with ancestors and tracing his line from Jove through the blood of both parents. He was without issue of the stronger sex but was rich in female progeny, with two daughters to pledge their support. To him Phoebus sang that there were approaching under the guidance of Fate two sons-in-law – a dreadful portent to tell but soon the truth of it was proved – a bristling boar and a tawny lion. Pondering it, neither does the father himself understand it, nor you, Amphiaras, well-versed in the

future, for its author Apollo forbids. [400] Only the anxiety settling in the parent's heart grows heavier.

But see, Olenian Tydeus leaving through Fate ancient Calydon – his consciousness of the horror of a brother's blood drives him on – is then tramping the same wilderness beneath the stormy night and, deploring the like winds and rain, his back coated with ice and his face and hair dripping with water, he comes up into the one shelter of which the earlier guest sprawled on the cold ground occupied a part. But at this point Fortune brought down bloodthirsty rage on both of them: not enduring to ward off the night beneath a shared roof, [410] they move little by little through exchanges of words to insults and threats. Next, when bandied words had enough swelled their anger, each of them then rose to his full height, stripped his shoulders and provoked fisticuffs. The one taller in his stance, ranging up with long limbs, and at the same time fresh in years, but courage bears Tydeus up to no less strength, and a greater valour, spread throughout his frame, was dominant in his small body. Now straining against one another they redouble about faces and hollow temples blows thick and fast, like missiles or Riphaean hailstones, [420] and flexing their knees they pound receding flanks. Just as when his five-year period comes round for the Pisaean Thunderer and the dust is hot with the raw sweat of the competitors, while on this hand the rivalry of the spectators spurs the young lads on and their excluded mothers await the prize-giving, so they, fired by hatred and inflamed not by any desire for glory, assail one another, and the hooked hand probes far into the face and enters deep into the recesses of the eye-sockets.

Perhaps, so great was the force of their anger, they would even have unsheathed the swords girded to their sides, and you would have fallen victim, young Theban, [430] to an enemy's weapons – and better so – to be mourned by your brother, had not the king, wondering at the unusual commotion in the shadows of night and the grunts panting from deep in the chest, bent his steps – old age sobered by grave anxieties now hovered over him with poorer sleep. Progressing with many a torch through his lofty halls, the bolts unfastened, on the threshold before him he sees a sight fearful to tell, faces torn and cheeks foul with streaming blood.

‘What is the reason for this madness, young strangers – for no citizen of mine would dare to go so far as this brawling [440] – what your

implacable desire to disturb the tranquil silence of night with your hatred? Is the day indeed so short, and is it painful to allow peace and sleep into your hearts for a little while? But tell me, pray, from whom you are descended, where you are travelling to, and what is your quarrel? For your great anger proves that you are not base-born, and through the shedding of blood great signs of a proud lineage are manifest.'

Scarcely had he uttered these words when with confused outcry and sidelong glances they begin together: 'O most gentle king of the Achaeans – what need is there of words? – you see for yourself faces streaming with blood –' [450] This utterance was at random and confused with agitated words of bitter speech, and then beginning first in order Tydeus goes on: 'Wishing for solace for my sad misfortune, I left the wealth of monster-bearing Calydon and the fields of Achelous. This vast night overwhelms me, as you see, in your dominions. Why does this fellow prevent me from warding off the open sky with a shelter? Is it because he was the first to make his way by chance to this entrance? They say that the two-formed Centaurs stable together and the Cyclopes settle down together in Etna. Even for ravening monsters there are natural laws and their own code of conduct: [460] for us to share a bed on the ground – but what am I doing? Either you, whoever you are, will go away today rejoicing in these spoils or, if my strength is not worn and dulled by welling grief, you will learn that I am born of the line of mighty Oeneus and that I am no degenerate descendant of my forefather Mars.'

'I too am not lacking in spirit and noble birth –' returns the other, but his mind is conscious of Fate and he hesitates to reveal his father. Then kindly Adrastus says: 'No, come now, set aside the threatening words which night and your unlooked-for courage or anger have prompted, and enter my palace. [470] Now let your right hands come together in pledge of your souls. Not in vain nor in the absence of the gods have these things come about: perhaps love to come has even sent these quarrels on ahead so that remembering them may be a pleasure.' And it was not with empty words that the old man spoke prophecy, for they say that from their comradeship through wounds grew a loyalty as great as that with which Theseus shared extreme dangers with bold Pirithous, or Orestes, out of his mind, escaped raging Megaera with Pylades in front of him. Even then, their fierce

hearts already yielding to the king's soothing words, like the sea when it subsides after being fought over by the winds [480] and like the breeze which has long wearied the sails and yet lingers as it dies, they obediently entered the palace.

Here for the first time he has a chance to cast his eyes over the garb of the heroes, and their mighty weapons. On the back of the one he sees a flayed lion skin, on either side shaggy with uncombed mane, in the fashion of that great one which in the Teumesian vale the son of Amphytryon destroyed in his young manhood and put on before his battle with the Cleonaeon monster. On the other side spoils fearsome with bristles and curving tusks, the pride of Calydon, struggle to drape Tydeus across his broad shoulders. [490] The old man is stunned and rooted to the spot by the portentous omen, recognising the divine oracles of Phoebus and the admonitions vouchsafed in the sonorous grotto. As he looks on he seals his cold lips together and a joyful shiver ran through his limbs: he realised that these men, guided by the manifest will of the gods, would be those who prophetic Apollo had with woven riddles revealed were destined as sons-in-law in the deceptive guise of wild beasts.

Then stretching out his hands to the stars, he speaks thus: 'O Night, you who enfold the labours of earth and heaven and despatch the fiery stars along their manifold courses, [500] granting refreshment to the spirit until the next Titan pour into weary creatures their awaking to action, you in your bounty of your own accord do bring me the assurance I sought in perplexed uncertainty, and lay bare the origins of an ancient predestination: may you be present at the work and confirm the omens you have given. This house will for ever through the measured rounds of the years offer you due honour and worship. Black bulls chosen for their strength will be sacrificed to you, goddess, and Vulcan's fire sprinkled with fresh milk will consume the lustral entrails. Hail, ancient truth of the tripods and their dark grottoes! [510] O Fortune, I have found the gods.'

So saying, and joining hands with both, he proceeds to an inner room of the palace. On the greying altars fire still clung to the sleeping ashes and the offerings of the warm sacrifice. He gives the order to stoke up the hearths and set out the banquet afresh: the servants vie with one another in their haste to obey his commands. The echoing palace rings with every kind of commotion: some are decking

couches of fine purple rustling with gold thread and plumping the cushions up high, others are polishing smooth the tables and setting them in order. [520] Others again set about overcoming the darkness of the shadowy night and stretch chains for the gilded lamps. For this group the task is to cook on metal skewers the bloodless flesh of slain beasts, for that to heap in baskets corn ground with the quern. Adrastus is rejoiced at his house bustling with dutiful service.

And now he himself, reclining on his ivory couch, was resplendent on its proud cushions. In another place lie the young men, their wounds washed and dried; at the same time they look at one another's faces disfigured with bruises and forgive one another. Then the aged king orders Acaste to be summoned [530] – the nurse of his daughters and also their most trusty chaperone selected to keep their virginity intact for lawful union – and whispers into her discreet ear.

There was no delay in carrying out his orders and both girls immediately emerged from the women's quarters. A wonder to see, they have faces equal to those of Pallas resounding with arms and quiver-bearing Diana, but without the capacity to inspire terror. Then the unfamiliar sight of men's faces caused maidenly confusion: paleness and blushing alike coursed over their bright cheeks, and their eyes turned modestly to their revered father. When hunger was sated by the rounds of dishes, [540] the son of Iasus, according to custom, called for the servants to bring that cup, finely wrought with figures and gleaming with gold, from which Danaus and old Phoroneus were accustomed to pour libation to the gods. Its engraving includes representations of great deeds: winged Perseus holds the snaky-haired Gorgon with severed neck and at any moment, so it seems, leaps up into the wafting breeze; she almost moves her heavy eyes and lolling head and even turns pale in the living gold. On this side the Phrygian hunter is lifted high on golden wings, while Gargara falls away and Troy recedes as he rises; [550] his comrades stand in sorrow, and his hounds in vain weary their yelping mouths and chase after his shadow and bay at the clouds. From this he pours out the wine in a stream and invokes all the gods in order, Phoebus before the rest. At the altars the whole company of guests and household, garlanded with reverent circlets, call on Phoebus with acclamation, for it is his feast day and for him there glow on the smoking altars fires renewed with heaps of incense.

‘Perhaps, young men,’ says the king, ‘your minds seek to know what this ceremony is and for what reasons we proclaim the particular honour of Phoebus. No uninformed religious feeling has prompted it: [560] the sacrifice is made by the people of Argos once harassed by terrible calamities. Lend me your attention, and I will explain. After the god smote the writhing coils of the dark monster, earth-born Python surrounding Delphi with seven hellish circles and crushing ancient oaks with its scales, while it sprawled by the Castalian spring and gaped with its triple-tongued mouth, thirsting to nourish its black venom and, having exhausted his weapons in a multitude of wounds, left it scarcely yet uncoiled over a hundred acres of the Cirrhaean plain, he then, seeking fresh expiation for the killing, [570] came to the frugal dwelling of our own Crotopus. For him a daughter, in the first years approaching womanhood, remarkable for her beauty and with untouched virginity, kept his god-fearing house. Happy if she had never become entangled in the deceits of the Delian and the furtive passion of Phoebus! For having suffered the lust of the god by the waters of the Nemean river, when Cynthia had twice five times resumed her orb with face at the full, she brought forth a lovely grandson for Latona and, being afraid of punishment, for her father would not have granted pardon even for a forced coupling, she chose the remote countryside [580] and among the fenced-in sheepfolds she secretly commits her child to a mountain-wandering shepherd to bring up. No cradle worthy of so great a lineage did the vegetation offer you, child, but a grassy bed, and your home was woven from twigs of oak: enclosed deep in the bark of the wild arbutus your limbs are warm and the hollow pipe encourages gentle sleep, and you share the ground with the animals. But Fate did not allow even this home, for as he lay heedlessly on the green earth’s grass and drank in the air with open mouth a vile pack of mad dogs dismembered him and devoured him with their bloody jaws. [590] But when this news reached the horrified ears of his mother, her father and her shame and fear were driven from her mind: instinctively in her distraction she fills the house with wild lamentations and baring her breast she runs to her father and makes her confession. He is not moved and commands the unspeakable, that she suffer black death as she wishes. Too late in remembering the union, Phoebus, you make ready as a solace for her sad death a monster conceived deep beneath Acheron in the unholy lairs of the Eumenides which has the features and breast of a maiden; from its head there rises an ever-hissing snake [600] which divides its dusky forehead. This vile pest then, foul in its

nightly progress, slid into bedrooms and from the laps of their nurses  
 snatched souls newly born and devoured them with bloody jaws and  
 grew mightily fat on the parents' grief. Coroebus, outstanding in  
 arms and courage, did not tolerate this and volunteered himself along  
 with a chosen band of youths who were first in strength and ready to  
 increase their reputations at the risk of their lives. She, having robbed  
 a fresh house, was going on her way where at the gates two paths  
 meet. At her side dangled the bodies of two infants [610] and her  
 hooked talons now skewer their vitals and her iron nails grow warm  
 in their little hearts. With a ring of warriors pressing in on every side  
 the young man faced up to her and buried his great sword deep in her  
 grisly breast and, probing with shining blade life's deepest hiding-  
 places, he at last restored his monster to infernal Jove. It is a treat to  
 go and see at close quarters the eyes leaden in death, the disgusting  
 discharge from her belly, and guts polluted with clotted gore where  
 our little ones were swallowed up. The Inachian people are appalled,  
 [620] and after their tears their great joy is still pale. After this they  
 pulp the lifeless limbs with stout poles, an empty comfort for their  
 sorrow, and stamp jagged millstones down on the face: their power to  
 do it cannot sate their anger. That creature even the birds flitting  
 about with their nightly clamour shrank from unfed, and fierce  
 ravening hounds, they say, and the mouths of trembling wolves  
 gaped on her and remained dry. Made more ruthless by the fate of his  
 slain avenger, the Delian rises up against the wretched people and,  
 taking up his position in the shade at the top of twin-peaked  
 Parnassus, with his hostile bow the unmerciful god rains arrows of  
 pestilence, [630] and burns up under a covering shroud of vapours  
 the fields and the high halls of the Cyclopes. Sweet lives die away,  
 Death with his sword cuts the Sisters' threads and bears off to the  
 underworld in his grasp the city he has taken. On our leader's asking  
 what is the cause, why there is a baneful fire from heaven and why  
 Sirius reigns throughout the year, that same instigator Paeon orders  
 that in turn the young men who had achieved its slaughter should go  
 as a sacrifice to the bloody monster. O blessed in spirit and destined  
 worthily to enjoy long life down the ages, you do not ignobly conceal  
 your patriotic arms [640] or tremble to go to meet a certain death.  
 Face to face on the threshold of the Cirrhaean temple he took his  
 stand and with these words he provokes the anger of the god.

"Not sent by anyone nor as a suppliant, Thymbraean, do I approach  
 your shrine: my love of country and consciousness of valour have



driven me on this path. It is I, Phoebus, who quelled in death your deadly scourge, I whom you seek, unmerciful one, with black clouds and the daylight made foul and dark pestilence from the baleful sky. But if ravening monsters are so dear to the great gods above, and the death of men is cheaper than any loss, [650] and there is such great lack of mercy in cruel heaven, what has Argos done to deserve this? It were better that I, O best of gods, I alone should offer my life to the Fates. Or is it more to your liking, cruel one, that you look on the desolated roofs of houses and that every field mourns, its ploughmen consigned to the fire? But why do I delay with words your weapons and your violence? The shades are waiting and I make my final prayer. It is enough: I have deserved your refusal to pardon me. Bring then your quiver and draw your sounding bow and send down to death a noble spirit, but while I die dispel that mass of cloud [660] which hovers pale over Inachian Argos.”

‘A just lot has regard for the deserving. The shame of slaughter checked Leto’s fiery son; he yields, and on the hero he lavishes the mournful honour of life. The deadly clouds flee from our sky while you, absolved, leave the threshold of the astounded Phoebus. Hence annually a solemn feast celebrates again this appointed sacrifice, and honour renewed appeases Phoebus’ shrines. These are the altars you are by chance observing.

‘Of what lineage are you? Although, if the babble which reached my ears some time ago is to be relied on, [670] Oeneus of Calydon is your [Tydeus’] father and rule over the house of Porthaon belongs to you, do you [Polynices] reveal who you are who come to Argos, since now it is the hour for talk of various matters.’

On the instant the Ismenian hero bent down towards the ground his sad countenance and without a word took a sideways glance at the injured Tydeus. He then broke his long silence: ‘Not during these honours paid to the gods should I be asked by you whence my lineage, what my country, what sequence of ancient bloodline flows down to me: in the midst of the rituals I am ashamed to make confession. But if concern to identify an unfortunate man is pressing, [680] Cadmus is the source of my ancestry, my land is Mavortian Thebes, but my mother is Jocasta.’ Then Adrastus, moved by consideration for his guest – for he recognised him – said, ‘Why do you conceal what is well known? We know it, and Rumour does not

turn her course so far away from Mycenae. Of the reign, the madness and the gouged-out eyes anyone even who shivers under Arctic suns is aware, and he who drinks the Ganges or enters the black ocean in the west, and anyone whom the Syrtes leave stranded on a shifting shore. Do not persist in your lamentations and rehearse to yourself the misfortunes of your ancestors: in our bloodline also has right conduct gone much astray, [690] but the fault does not stand in posterity's way. Do you only be unlike them, and by propitious fortune deserve to redeem your family. But now with backward-leaning pole the icy waggoner of the Hyperborean Bear is faint. Pour wine on the hearths, and let us with prayers sing again and again of the saviour of our fathers, the son of Leto.

‘O father Phoebus, whether the Patarean thickets of Lycia give you exercise on the snowy ridges, or whether it is your delight to plunge your golden hair into the virgin dew of Castalia, or whether as Thymbraean you visit Troy where willingly, we are told, [700] you set your unrewarded shoulders to Phrygian millstones, or whether you take pleasure in Lato's Cynthus which strikes the Aegean with its shadow, and in making for Delos now firmly fixed in the sea, to you by the gift of your heavenly father have fallen arrows and a bow to be bent from afar against fierce foes, and to have for ever a flowering over your cheeks; you are skilled in foreknowing the unjust workings of the Parcae and the fate that lies beyond, and those things which will be pleasing to high Jove, to which peoples the year will bring death and which peoples will have war, and what sceptres the comets will change; you make the Phrygian subject to your lyre, in honour of your mother [710] you stretch earth-born Tityos on the sands of Styx; at you triumphant with your quiver the green Python and the Theban mother shuddered; for you avenging Megaera grimly oppresses with her everlasting surveillance starving Phlegyas as he lies under overhanging rocks, and urges him on to unholy feasting, but the disgust united with it overcomes his hunger: O may you be present, remembering our hospitality, and with your favour cherish Juno's fields, whether it is better for you to be called rosy Titan in the fashion of the Achaemenian people, or Osiris the grain-bearer, or him who deep in the rocky Persian cave [720] wrenches at the reluctantly following horns – Mithras.

## BOOK TWO

MEANWHILE the winged son of Maia returns from the cold shades in fulfilment of the orders of mighty Jove. On all sides sluggish clouds impede his progress and the turbid air envelops him, nor do the Zephyrs speed his progress: the foul breath of the silent realm is still. On the one side the Styx flowing round in its nine streams imprisons him, on the other his way is blocked by torrents of fire. Behind him follows old Laius, a trembling shade, still slow because of his wound – for the impious sword thrust by his kinsman had passed beyond its hilt and through his ribcage [10] and prompted the first wrath of the Furies – yet on he goes and steadies his steps with the aid of a stick. Then barren groves and shade-filled fields and dusky groves are astounded and the earth itself is amazed to have laid itself open for a return journey, nor was there absent from the dead, even though now deprived of life, the cankerous blight of envy. One there before the others, who had always had a malicious disposition even in the world above – hence also a painful end to his existence – to crow over misfortune and to be afflicted at prosperity, says: ‘Go on, lucky man, to whatever end you are called, [20] whether by the command of Jove, or whether a more powerful Erinyes has driven you to meet the light of day, or whether a Thessalian witch in her frenzy bids you emerge from your hidden sepulchre, destined – alas! – to see the pleasant sky and the sun you left behind, the green earth and the springs’ clear streams, but destined to return with increased sorrow into this darkness.’

When Cerberus stretching unseen on the threshold became aware of them and rose up with jaws gaping on all his heads, savage even to folk coming in, immediately his black necks swelled out menacingly, immediately he would have torn their bones apart and scattered them on the ground [30] had not the god with his wand of Lethe soothed him in his bristling and with threefold sleep overtaken his leaden eyes.

There is a place called by the Inachian people Taenarum, where foaming Malea’s fearful head rises into the air, affording no view of its summit. The peak stands high, looking serenely down on winds and rain, and only to weary stars does it offer a resting-place. *There*

*the exhausted winds have set their couches and there is rest for the thunderbolts. Enveloping clouds have taken possession of the middle slopes of the mountain, and no beating of swift wings reaches the topmost crags, [40] nor are they buffeted by roaring thunder.* But when the day is declining, a huge shadow casts its long silhouette over the sea and floats on the midmost deep. In a recessed inlet Taenarum curves its shoreline tightly, rising boldly from the waves outside. Thither to harbour Neptune conducts his horses wearied by the Aegean sea: in front their hooves paw at the sand while fishy tails relax in the water. In this place, it is said, a secret path ushers the pallid shades and enriches with dead the empty halls of black Jove. [50] If the Arcadian countrymen are speaking the truth, howling is heard there and the groaning of the damned, and the fields are alive with a dark agitation. Often have the cries and beatings of the Eumenides been heard until midday, and the baying of the triform doorman of death drives the farmers from their fields.

From here the winged deity still wreathed in dusky shadow leaps out into the upper world, shakes off from his face the infernal clouds, and with breaths of living air composes his countenance. From there by way of Arcturus and the silence of the moon at her height he passes over fields and peoples. Sleep, driving the horses of night, [60] met him and rose up in awe to honour the divinity, turning aside from his straight path through the heavens. Beneath the god flies the shade, recognising the stars untimely seized away from him and the place of his own birth; and now he looks down on the heights of Cirrha, and Phocis desecrated by his own corpse. They reached Thebes. Close on his son's threshold Laius let out a groan and hesitated to enter the familiar house. But when he saw his own yoke-pole leaning against the tall columns and his chariot still stained with blood, in his consternation he almost turned back, neither the high commands of the Thunderer [70] nor the emanations of the Arcadian wand being able to restrain him.

By chance it was then the day marked by the well-known bolt of the Thunderer, when your prematurely interrupted gestation transferred you, baby Euhius, to your father. That occasion had induced the Tyrian folk to vie with one another in drawing out a sleepless night in merriment. Sprawling everywhere about the houses and the fields amid garlands and empty wine-cups, they breathed out the vapour of the god as dawn approached. Then was heard many a boxwood pipe

and cymbals drowning with their clashing the beat of bull-skin drums. Cithaeron himself also celebrating had driven sober matrons through distant groves [80] under the influence of overpowering Bacchus. Just so do the Bistonians in frenzied gatherings hold their carousals on Rhodope or in the valleys in the midst of Ossa. To them a beast still half-alive, forced away from the jaws of a lion, is a treat, and to find in new milk an antidote for the blood is a luxury, but if ever the pernicious smell of Ogygian Iacchus breathes on them, then it is a fine thing to hurl rocks and wine-cups violently about and by spilling the innocent blood of their companions to start the day afresh and again set out the festal board.

That was the night when the winged Cyllenian glided through the silent air [90] to the couch of the Echionian king, high on which he had sprawled his huge frame supported on Assyrian bed-coverings. Poor mortal hearts, knowing nothing of their own fate! He seizes upon the feast, he enjoys his repose. Then the old man does what he is bidden and, so that he may not seem an unreal apparition of the night, he dons the blind features of the aged seer Tiresias, and his voice and his well-known woollen fillets. His own hair remained, and the white beard combed down on his chin, and his distinctive pallor, but an assumed fillet runs through his hair and, entwined with grey-green olive, [100] the dignity of the chaplet is apparent. Then he seemed to touch his [Eteocles'] breast with his wand and to utter these fateful words: 'This is no time for you to sleep, you idle man, who lie in the depth of night, unconcerned about your brother: for a long time have mighty deeds summoned you, slug-a-bed, and the weighty preparation of affairs. But you, as if the master of a ship, with the south winds already raising the great Ionian sea, beneath the dark clouds should lie idle, unmindful of the tackle and the rudder that turns the waters, you do nothing. Even now – Rumour knows it – he prides himself on his recent marriage and is equipping the forces with which to seize the kingdom and with which to deny it, [110] and plans for himself an old age in your own court. Adrastus, destined by augury to be his father-in-law, and Argos as his dowry, put heart into him, and Tydeus, stained by the blood of his brother, has found favour with him in a life-long bond of friendship. Hence arrogance, and your brother's promise that you will long be an exile. The father of the gods himself out of pity sends me to you from the depths: keep hold on Thebes, drive away your brother who is blinded by lust for kingship and will make bold to do the same to you, and do not allow

him, greedy for his brother's destruction, any longer to feel confidence in the treachery he has initiated, nor to import Mycenae to lord it over Cadmus.'

[120] He finished speaking, and as he departed – for the horses of the light now scatter the pale stars – he tore from his head the fronds and woollen fillets, revealing himself as his [Eteocles'] grandfather, and leaned over the couch of his terrible grandson; thereupon he bares his throat gaping with its fatal wound and spatters the sleeper with a flow of blood from the gash. His repose shattered, he springs up and is startled from his bed, filled with horror, and shaking off the imaginary blood he shudders at his grandfather and at the same time looks about for his brother. Just as a tiger, when hearing the sound of hunters, has bristled its striped back and shaken off lazy sleep, is eager for the fight; [130] it opens its jaws wide and unsheathes its claws, then charges into the companies and in its bloody mouth carries off a man still breathing as food for its cubs: so, inflamed with rage, is the ruler avid for battle with his absent brother.

And now Aurora rising from her Mygdonian couch had driven the cold darkness on from high in the heavens, shaking out her dewy hair, her face blushing red at the pursuing sun – from him roseate Lucifer averts his fires lingering in the clouds and with reluctant horse leaves the heavens no longer his, until the blazing father make full his orb [140] and forbid even his sister her beams – when the aged son of Talaus and without long delay the heroes of Dirce and of Achelous alike made haste to rise from their beds. Upon them, exhausted after fighting and their endurance of the storm, had Sleep poured down from the whole of his horn: but little rest was brought to the soul of the Inachian king as he turns over in his mind the gods, and the hospitality undertaken, and ponders what destiny he may be inviting through the sons-in-law he has found.

After meeting together in an inner room of the court and shaking hands with one another, and sitting down in a place [150] suitable for sharing and discussing their private concerns, first Adrastus, while the others are hesitant, addresses them in these terms: 'Noble young men, whom an auspicious night has brought into my realm, not without divine guidance, and whose steps my own Apollo himself has directed right into this palace through rain united with lightning and the unseasonable Thunderer, I could not imagine it unknown to