ON THE THEBAID
The *Super Thebaiden*, or exposition of Statius’s *Thebaid* as a moral allegory, is included by Helm in his edition of the works of Fulgentius the mythographer, though he accepts the work into the Fulgentius canon only with strong reservations. The version below follows Helm’s text (pp. 180–86), the only modern edition, based on a single copy (now Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. Fonds Latin 3012), in a hand of the thirteenth century. Publius Papinius Statius (ca. 40–96 A.D.), the leading heroic poet of the Latin silver age, achieved with his poem a popularity in the Middle Ages second only to Virgil and Ovid. Whoever wrote the exposition was appreciative of what Fulgentius had done with Virgil’s *Aeneid*; and Statius’s twelve-book epic as an avowed imitation of Virgil provided an obvious choice for the extension of Fulgentian methods. One recalls the meeting of Virgil, Statius, and Dante in *Purgatorio* 22, and the claim of Statius that he owed his position solely to Virgil, “Through thee I was a poet, through thee a Christian.”

In this short exposition or commentary on the *Thebaid*, the general approach, details of technique, and not a little of the phrasing are in line with Fulgentius on Virgil, and the work has been commonly ascribed to that writer. But a few features make the attribution suspect, and it seems safer to speak of an imitator or pseudo-Fulgentius as its author. The work is not found among the Carolingian manuscripts of Fulgentius, which keep the mythographer distinct from his namesake and likely contemporary, Fulgentius, the bishop-saint of Ruspe who died in 532–33; our one manuscript of *On the Thebaid* ascribes the work to the bishop. Two references are made in it to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a work only beginning in Carolingian times to achieve its popularity as a mine of mythological lore and allegory. The cognomen Surculus by which Statius is identified in the opening paragraph—probably due to confusion with the namesake Statius Ursulus Tolosensis, the first-century rhetorician of Toulouse mentioned by Jerome—is not apparently applied elsewhere to the Statius of the *Thebaid*, as either Surculus or Sursulus, before the tenth century;¹ Chaucer shows the same confusion
in his reference to Statius in the *House of Fame*, (3) 1460, "The Tholosen that highte Stace," and similarly Dante, *Purgatorio* 21.89. The bits of Greek used for the etymologies of personal names also suggest an age no longer possessing the fairly exact acquaintance with the language which Fulgentius reveals in his *Mythologies* and *Content of Virgil*; his quotations in the original from writers such as Homer and Euripides are not repeated. Helm directs suspicion particularly (p.xv) at the artificial word *anichos* (ἀνίκος), "un-conqueror," presumably meaning "invincible," clumsily and parenthetically applied to Caesar. The name of Hypsipyle first appears as Ibsiphile, but is simplified to Isiphile when it needs to be etymologized as Isis and *philos*, "love." Similarly *ayos* and *adrios* seem to be carelessly transliterated from ἀγιος and ἀδριος, and an unclear explanation is given of the name Argia. The smattering of Greek reminds us, in fact, more of what is found in the imitation of Fulgentius on Virgil by Bernard Sylvestris in the twelfth century; and, as indicated in the general introduction, above, a twelfth- or thirteenth-century date for *On the Thebaid* has been proposed. The seven kings who march on Thebes are equated with the seven liberal arts: while these are of ancient origin, the view taken of them as under the nominal leadership of philosophy, with the implication that philosophy is no longer a separate systematic discipline, strikes one as more medieval than antique. The Bible allusions are New Testament, where Fulgentius on Virgil and in his *Ages of the World* prefers the Old; and one misses from the exposition his characteristic pose of humility, parade of classical authorities, touches of humor, and the apparatus of invocation and of a dialogue with departed shades.

The interpretation itself conforms closely to the Fulgentian pattern. A high-flown preliminary justification of the search for moral allegory is provided, called an admiring continuation (*non sine grandi ammirazione retratto*) and mentioning the *Aeneid*. The campaign of the Seven against Thebes, first summarized baldly as Fulgentius did with book 1 of the *Aeneid*, is turned into a *psychomachia* or spiritual warfare for the soul of man; only those details and names which permit of such an allegory are extracted (Statius's book 8, the reception of Amphiaratus in the lower world and the death of Tydeus, is left out entirely). Thebes itself is the soul, inhabited by virtues and ruled by Laius who is sacred light, extinguished by his son Oedipus who is licentiousness, with his queen Jocasta as pure joy defiled by Oedipus's birth. The sons of Oedipus are greed and lust, and Creon who supplants them is oppressive pride. The kings, the seven liberal
arts or worldly wisdom, are doomed to extinction. The nurse Hypsipyle is idolatry, abandoning her charge Archemorus or death. The royal widows are human feelings making their appeal to Theseus or God, who liberates Thebes, the soul, by overcoming pride with humility. The opening paragraph or prologue explains that the inner meaning of an author and its moral applications are what count, the rest being only husk.


