4. **LE ROMAN DE THÈBES**

The love interest in the *Roman de Thèbes*¹ is divided among the couples Laius and Jocasta, Oedipus and Jocasta, Polynices and Argia, Tydeus and Deipyle, Parthenopeus and Antigone, Atys and Ismene, Etioles and Salemandre, Lycurgus and Eurydice and Daire le Roux and his wife. These last two couples may in fact be discounted for the purposes of this study, since there is in their case no mention of a love relationship.

No mention is made in the *Thebaid*² of the relationship between Laius and Jocasta, and they do not appear together in the *Roman de Thèbes*; we simply see the effect upon Jocasta of her husband's death. In Constans's text Jocasta's first and only thought is for her position and her future; as a widow and without a child, she is left completely defenceless (220-4). She is nevertheless described as being *dolente* as well as *corroçose* (219). An interesting variant occurs in the manuscript S, which adds the lines:

Ainz se demente molt forment  
Plore et sospire tendrement  
Lasse dolente qe ferrai  
De mon seignor qe perdu ai

an addition which is very much in keeping with the character of Jocasta as portrayed in the *Roman de Thèbes*.

Oedipus and Jocasta, too, are not really considered as a couple in the *Thebaid*. Book I, lines 69-70 refer briefly to their marriage having been a happy one, but when Statius's epic opens Oedipus has already plucked out his eyes, and there remains only the pervading sense of guilt. Only Jocasta appears, and there is no further mention of Oedipus until he emerges to mourn for his dead sons. The French poet, however, gives the whole story of their meeting and marriage, and this is presented mainly with reference to Jocasta. Naturally she mourns her late husband, and although in the spirit of courtliness she agrees to welcome Oedipus to her house, she reminds her people that as her husband has so recently been killed she is not joyful (349-54). However once she has met Oedipus and satisfied herself that he fulfills the requisite conditions for marriage with her: he is of high rank, handsome and gentlemanly (363-6), she is delighted with the prospect of marriage, and strongly attracted to Oedipus. When feudal women were widowed it was essential for the welfare of the fief that they should marry again. It is thus
perfectly natural that Jocasta should wish to remarry, and her initial hesitation in welcoming the conqueror of the Sphinx removes any feeling of impropriety; moreover her second marriage is justified by the wishes of her people.

Oedipus has little to say in the matter. He seems quite content to marry the queen and become ruler of Thebes, and indeed was in no position to suggest marriage himself. Little is said about the years during which they were married, beyond the fact that they were happy and had four children (451-2). As becomes clear from this work, while Statius was more interested in the marriage relationship, the French author is concerned with pre-marital situations. The discovery of the incest is of course mentioned, but in the Roman de Thèbes it is dismissed in a few lines; both Oedipus and Jocasta are fully conscious of their guilt, and their references to it have Christian overtones: damné (490), pechié (500). This is quite different from the situation in the Thebaid, where the feeling of guilt is dominant. One of the reasons for the difference seems to be the presentation of the character of Jocasta, and here Professor Adler has already shown some of the points of contrast between the Thebaid and the Roman de Thèbes. In the latter, Jocasta is held up as a kind of example to follow. She is a woman whose courtship has followed regular lines, who has been happily married, and who inspires respect from society and affection in her children. She is the respectable matrona which the young girls will later become, a woman to be emulated except, of course, in the nature of her marriage. Thus all her actions are presented in a different light from that of the Thebaid: the incestuous nature of her marriage is kept in the background, and justification is found for the way in which she ‘offers’ Salemandre to Eteocles in return for Daire’s freedom. Her mission to the camp of Polynices is a festive occasion, quite unlike the account in the Thebaid where we see a trembling old woman failing in her attempt to bring peace and scurrying ignominiously back to the city. Or again, Jocasta in the Thebaid, trying to make Eteocles stop fighting:

ibat

Scissa comam voltusque et pectore nuda cruento,
Non sexus decorisve memor: (XI, 316-18)

bears no resemblance to the dignified Jocasta of the Roman de Thèbes. However Adler has described Oedipus and Jocasta as a ‘courtly couple’. Certainly they are polite and observe propriety, but they are showing courtliness rather than behaving according to any courtly code, for there is in this relationship no trace of courtly love.

We turn next to the two couples Polynices and Argia and Tydeus and Deipyle. Argia and Deipyle are to a certain extent considered together, both in the Thebaid and in the Roman de Thèbes. When Polynices and Tydeus meet the daughters of Adrastus, the Thebaid makes a passing reference to the beauty of the girls and concentrates on their modesty (I, 533-9). The Roman de Thèbes also mentions
their modesty and blushing, but adds:

En la chambre vindrent les fées;
Car monstre voleient lor cors
As chevaliers qui sont de fors. (940-2),

a note which is quite foreign to the *Thebaid*. The *Roman de Thèbes* adds a long and fairly conventional description of the beauty of the girls, and Hoepffner has noted the originality of lines 971-2:

Mieux vaut lor ris et lor baisiers
Que ne fait Londres ne Peitiers;

Again, the French author adds an erotic element which is absent from the *Thebaid*. Hoepffner has also said that the girls have no voice in the matter of their marriage. This is not really significant for the discussion of the treatment of the love theme in this work, since Argia and Deipyle are not consulted in the *Thebaid* either, and the French author does not treat them as main characters.

The account of the wedding in the *Thebaid* includes a mention of the fatal omen of marriage and a reference to the girls' reactions to marriage (II, 230-5, 256-67). The *Roman de Thèbes* ignores both these points, and the whole episode is dismissed in a few lines (1075-1100). This is perhaps further evidence of the poet's lack of interest in the marriage state, for after the description of the ceremony the fortunes of these couples in the *Roman de Thèbes* diverge markedly from their fortunes in the *Thebaid*. Perhaps the only constant factor is the similarity of viewpoint: in both works the theme of love is seen from the woman's side.

Deipyle, in the *Thebaid*, is represented as a kind of appendage to Argia; she is mentioned only three times more. She would have kept Tydeus back from the mission to Thebes (II, 371-4), Tydeus, in battle, spares a thought for her (VIII, 590-91), and she sets out with her sister to go to Thebes (XII, 117-21); she had heard of Tydeus's atrocity in gnawing the head of his enemy, but had forgiven him. In the *Roman de Thèbes* Deipyle is also mentioned three times: she weeps when Tydeus sets out for Thebes, but Tydeus 'd'ico n'ot cure' (1229). She expresses grief when Tydeus returns wounded after the ambush, but in fact Polynices seems to be more deeply affected, and it is he who looks after Tydeus; and finally, Deipyle is mentioned at the end of the work as mourning her husband. To summarise, the treatment of the couple Deipyle-Tydeus conforms to what one might expect in an early *chanson de geste*, where the woman's role is minimal and she usually has little or no influence over events.

The case of Argia and Polynices is completely different. In the *Roman de Thèbes* Argia, after her wedding, is not individualized at all, and is only mentioned at the end, with her sister, as mourning her husband. However in the *Thebaid* Argia is one of the main women characters. She realizes that Polynices is yearning to go to Thebes, and is prepared to give up her own happiness and let him go: she even goes to her father and begs him to declare war for Polynices's sake (III,
678-710). After the disaster at Thebes it is again Argia who takes action: she sets out at the head of the Argive women to go to Thebes (XII, 111-16), and when the other women, learning of Creon's prohibition, wonder how they can bury or burn their dead, Argia takes it upon herself to defy this law and sees that the shade of her husband is given rest. She sets out with her former guardian, although the country is unfamiliar (XII, 177 ff.) and together with Antigone, whom she meets on the battlefield, sets the body of Polynices on the funeral pyre. When they are discovered she has no thought for her safety but vies with Antigone in taking the blame for what they have done, and is eager to meet her death and rejoin Polynices (XII, 452-63). Here again it is the woman who plays the leading part in the love situation, but this does not imply that Argia's love is one-sided. After his marriage Polynices feels how hard it is to tear himself away from Argos; he realises his responsibility to his wife, and even when he is on the point of setting out, the sight of Argia can put Thebes out of his mind (IV, 89-92). Argia appears to him in his dream of imminent disaster (XI, 140-50), yet, strangely, he does not mention her when he tells Adrastus that not even the pleas of his mother, sisters or father would break his resolve to meet Eteocles in single combat (XI, 170-3). When Polynices is with his wife he reveals a different facet of his character; the scene in Argos where Argia speaks of his longing to go to Thebes (II, 332-62) is one of the few times in the whole epic where the grim seriousness lifts for a moment and Polynices speaks 'breve tandem/risit' (II, 352-3). It seems strange that the author of the Roman de Thèbes should have chosen deliberately to omit such material.

The relationship between Antigone and Parthenopeus is an addition of the French poet. It is difficult to agree with Salverda de Grave's statement: 'Stace a fourni le canevas, rien de plus?' when he is writing of the additions made in the Roman de Thèbes by its author, to the material taken directly from Statius. It seems evident that the episode of Antigone and Parthenopeus was elaborated by the French author from données already furnished by Statius in the text of the Thebaïd, and that the French author used in this elaboration, and also to a certain extent in the elaboration of the relationship between Ismene and Atys, material which he took from the character and situation of Argia.

In the first place, certain indications in the text of the Thebaïd invite the elaboration of a relationship between Antigone and Parthenopeus. There are three separate descriptions of Parthenopeus, in which Statius stresses his beauty, attractiveness, and prowess (IV, 248-74, VI, 569-73, IX, 683-711). Antigone in the Thebaïd has no lover. She is, however, described as affectionate, devoted and emotional: all qualities which, by a simple transposition, could be called into play in a love relationship.

Thus both Parthenopeus and Antigone are 'ready for love' in the same sense as are the lovers in Piramus et Tisbé and Narcissus; they are of suitable age, of equal beauty and social rank, and responsive. Furthermore, in the Thebaïd we have a
mother — son relationship between Parthenopeus and Atalanta, and a relationship between father and daughter in the case of Oedipus and Antigone. It would then be quite natural to create a relationship between the two young people. So in elaborating a love situation between Parthenopeus and Antigone the French author had to look no further than Statius’s text for his inspiration; it is not a case of pure invention, but rather of sensitive adaptation. Moreover in the *Thebaid* Argia is a perfect wife, and one of the main women characters. Similarly in the *Roman de Thèbes* Antigone takes on a greater importance than the other women characters and, in a particular situation, acts as a model of conduct, as does Argia in the context of marriage:

Two other points support this. When Argia meets Antigone on the battlefield she says, speaking of Polynices:

Non hic amissos, quamquam vagus exsul, honores,
Non gentile solum, carae non pectora matris,
Te cupit unam noctesque diesque locutus
Antigonem; ego cura minor facilisque relinqui. (XII, 394-7)

This again contributes to the idea of Antigone as someone who inspires affection. The second point concerns lines 6432-6 of the *Roman de Thèbes* where Ismene, mourning Atys, mentions that he had a sister of whom he often spoke. In the preceding lines she had spoken of Atys’s father and mother and their grief. This seems to be a direct reference to Argia’s speech lamenting Polynices, *Thebaid* XII, 322-48:

nullasne tuorum
Movisti lacrimas? ubi mater, ubi inclyta fama
Antigone? (XII, 330-2)

In Ismene’s same speech, lines 6417-20, she says:

Beaus sire douz, tu me diseies
Qu’après le siege m’en menreies;
Quant la guerre fust afinee,
M’en menasses en ta contree:

Compare Argia’s speech quoted above, lines 325-8:

venit
Ad Thebas Argia tuas; age, moenibus induc
Et patrios ostende lares et mutua redde
Hospitia.

In each case the resemblance seems too striking to be coincidental.

To return to Parthenopeus and Antigone, their first meeting, line 3887 ff. is highly indicative of their relationship. Significantly, Antigone is mentioned first, and she is immediately attracted to Parthenopeus. He in his turn is attracted to her, and his behaviour is in accordance with courtly standards. He asks who she is and where she is going, and in the following lines the emphasis is on his social graces; he makes good conversation, he tries his best to *servir* (3912), he is conscious of
what he is doing, ‘pas ne s’oblige’ (3919), and finally he asks her to be his amie (3920). Rather sharply, Antigone reminds him of the conventions that should govern their behaviour, and then states or implies the conditions necessary for a suitable relationship (3921-40). These are: no unseemly haste, such as Parthenopeus had shown; respect for her position: she is not a bergiere or femme legiere (3927-8); equal social standing, equal attractiveness and social graces; marriage implied as the goal of the relationship, the need for a mediator between the interested parties, for the consent of relatives and, essentially, for the willingness of the lovers to enter into the relationship. In contrast to this, if Antigone did not concern herself with the suitability of the relationship, and indicated immediately to Parthenopeus her willingness to love him, he would think her folie (3932). So folie is here equated with transgressing against the norm of accepted behaviour. Given the character of Antigone, the implication is that the concept of love which she is putting forward here is good and desirable.

Accordingly, the consent of Jocasta and Polynices is obtained, and Antigone and Parthenopeus are now amis. This implies a greater freedom; Parthenopeus may now take Antigone’s hand, and in the council Antigone naturally inclines towards the Greeks because Parthenopeus is with them. Antigone gives Parthenopeus her sleeve as a favour to wear, and he sends her a horse he captures in battle; in her reply she is able to give expression to her love:

Il a mei et m’amor tote. (4398)

Naturally, too, Antigone will be afraid for Parthenopeus in the battle. It may seem strange that when he dies he does not think of her, nor are we given her lament for him. This is probably because the author has taken this particular situation as far as it interests him, and as Ismene has a lament for Atys the poet may have had no wish to duplicate the situation. In the variant of manuscript A Antigone is shown dying of love nine days later.

For the relationship between Atys and Ismene, the basis is given in Book VIII of the Thebaid, lines 554-60: Atys had been betrothed from childhood to Ismene, he was noble, and they were pleasing to each other. Ismene adds later that she had caught sight of him once, when the betrothal pledges were exchanged. Miss Grout has noted that: ‘Atys fights for Eteocles because he is engaged to his sister’; this too is indicated in the Thebaid:

soceros nec tristibus actis
Aversatus erat; (VIII, 556-7)

The story of Ismene and Atys follows similar lines in the Thebaid and in the Roman de Thèbes. Ismene in the Roman de Thèbes has a dream in which she sees Atys’s mother weeping and asking her to give her back her son (6203-10); the difference is that Ismene does not dream that she was married to Atys, as she does in the Thebaid (VIII, 622-35). Again, as in the Thebaid, Atys’s last thought when he is dying is of Ismene, but the Roman de Thèbes does not give the realistic
detail of Ismene's selfconsciousness at lamenting Atys in front of other people and only feeling free to abandon herself to her grief when she is alone with him.

In this case also the French author has made substantial adaptations to the text: Ismene sees Atys often; she gave him a favour to wear in battle, and speaks about him to her sister (4461 ff., 6197 ff.). The second passage is interesting in that it shows a marked difference from the equivalent passage in the *Thebaid* (VIII, 607 ff.), where Antigone and Ismene are speaking of their family and lamenting their fortunes, while in the French they are talking only about their lovers. Hoepffner has remarked of the passage beginning in line 4461: 'si elle (Ismene) a exprimé ses sentiments avec une franchise qui est encore celle des belles païennes de la chanson de geste, tout en y mêlant des réminiscences d'Ovide, c'est à sa soeur qu'elle fait cet aveu, et non pas à l'homme qu'elle aime'. It is not surprising that Ismene does not tell Atys of her love, since in the poem they are not shown together until Atys is dying; moreover Antigone is here fulfilling the role of the *confidente*, a long-established Classical convention. Hoepffner sees the influence of Ovid in lines 4465-70:

Ja ne seie fille de rei,
Se por s'amor ne me desrei!
O face bien o jo foloie,
Coucherai mei o lui, ço crei.
Car fous n'esprent si en rosei
Com fait l'amor que est en mei.

but the connection seems rather tenuous, and indeed the critical edition of *Thèbes* is remarkable for its lack of Ovidian influence in relation to the love theme. The second appendix to this chapter, pages 96-9, shows that certain manuscripts of the *Roman de Thebes* show more Ovidian influence than others.

In relation to the lament of Ismene on the death of Atys, Hoepffner has said: 'l'ampleur de la scène permet de mesurer l'importance que le poète entend accorder au rôle de la femme'. This may be true, but Statius gave to Argia an even longer lament for Polynices (XII, 322-48). Also, the funeral lament was an extremely popular genre in the twelfth century: Branch IV of the *Roman d'Alexandre* contains several examples. Ismene is not the only one to lament Atys, although in the *Thebaid* Antigone and Argia were alone in mourning Polynices; we have also the lament made by Atys's knights, lines 6313-56, which merits a more detailed examination.

Atys is addressed in the same manner as a young girl would address her *ami* (sections thirteen and fourteen of the glossary):

Ates, sire, douce jovente,
Bèle chiére, fresche, rovente,
Biaus sire... (6313-15)

The knights praise his generosity, his kindness, which caused them to be *joios*
(6327), his wisdom, and add:

Qui te servi n’en repentié: 

Tu avelies un gent pareil,
Proce et sem, qu’est mout sauvage
Envers home de ton aage, 

(6333)

(6338-40)

The vocabulary used offers a striking similarity to the vocabulary of courtly love, and the qualities of Atys that are praised could all be summed up in the word jovens. Atys appears as a kind of representative of jovens: he is young in spirit as well as in age, and he has that quality of giving, of himself as well as of his possessions which seems to lie at the root of that concept. Ismene again picks up the idea of youth in her lament, and in a densely-constructed monologue passes from the regret for lost youth and the thought of decay to her own personal sorrow, then widening the sphere of the lament to include Atys’s family, and ending with a curse upon the man who killed him. Finally, to conclude the section on Ismene and Atys, it is interesting that where Statius refers to them as betrothed, this is rendered in the French by amis (3847). Can one then take the term ami or amie to mean betrothed?

This would seem to be disproved immediately by the relationship between Etiocles and Salemandre. This episode is, more than the Antigone-Parthenopeus relationship, the invention of the poet, as in the Thebaid there is nothing significant to connect Etiocles with the theme of love, and Salemandre, like her father Daire le Roux, is as far as we know a pure invention of the French author. The episode may have been added to cater for a growing interest in love stories among the public, or perhaps to show Etiocles in a slightly more favourable light. Statius tended to favour Polynices, so the mellowing of Etiocles’s character may be, in the words of Professor Adler, a consolation philosophiae.

There is in this relationship a suggestion of an element of courtly love. Again, it is dangerous to try to read too much into this, and it may be that the similarity is purely fortuitous, and that what may appear courtly to a later reader was at the time written without reference to the concept of courtly love; yet there are similarities.

Etiocles had been in love with Salemandre for some time, but she is described as being ‘trop dure’ and ‘trop eschive’ (8460-2); she is therefore to some extent inaccessible. In this relationship there is no thought of marriage, and their love is kept discreet. Etiocles’s love definitely enhances his social qualities; not only does he pardon a man whom he considers a traitor, but he feels pity and tenderness for the weeping Salemandre and fights the more valiantly that she may admire his prowess, and she, seeing this, is the more disposed to love him (9096-8). Etiocles has done a certain amount of love-service, both in being patient and in pardoning Salemandre’s father, and Salemandre, in return, grants him her physical love.

Although it is not directly concerned with the theme of love in this work, the
episode of Hypsipyle (2156 ff.) serves to cast a certain amount of light upon the way in which the author treated relationships between men and women. The episode follows essentially the same lines as in the Thebaid, but again the differences are significant. Hypsipyle is no longer a woman of a certain age who has twin sons of at least twenty years of age, but a beautiful young girl. Perhaps the French author took this from Adrastus, who mistakes her for Diana and addresses her:

\[
\text{Diva potens nemorum – nam te vultusque pudorque} \\
\text{Mortali de stirpe negant –,} \\
\text{(Thebaid IV, 746-7)}
\]

In the Roman de Thèbes we are in the atmosphere of courtliness, and Hypsipyle is addressed by the Argives as dameisèle (2171), bèle (2285) and douce amie (2179). In spite of the fact that the story is the same as in the Thebaid, the atmosphere is subtly different: a nuance of chevalerie hangs over the killing of the serpent and the Argives’ intercession with Lycurgus. Again, perhaps, it is a consolatio, a relief to find chivalrous behaviour in the midst of so much bloodshed. It is well known that the French author suppressed to a very great extent the mythological allusions of Statius, and this is a case in point; the serpent is not referred to as Jupiter’s creature, but rather as a horrible monster shattering the spell of the garden idyll.

Certain aspects which affect the treatment of the theme of love, and which appear in Piramus et Tisbé and Narcissus take up very little space in the Roman de Thèbes. Religion is quite absent from the love relationships portrayed here, although it is present in the background of the work as a whole. Homosexuality does not appear here, I feel, although Adler alludes to it in this context.\(^\text{12}\) It seems that, for example, the devotion of Polynices to Tydeus, the love of Atys’s knights for their leader and Polynices’s feelings for Atys have more connection with compaignonnage than with homosexuality.

There are here fewer explicit comments on the part of the author than in Narcissus, and as the love interest in Thèbes is peripheral rather than central, the moralising tone of the prologue and conclusion need not apply to the love theme. It is however interesting that the author’s:

\[
\text{Prenez en cure,} \\
\text{Par dreit errez et par mesure;} \\
\text{Ne faciez rien contre nature,} \\
\text{Que ne vengiez a fin si dure.} \\
\text{(10227-30)}
\]

in making a firm distinction between the natural and the unnatural and recommending mesure, represents a similar attitude to that adopted by the author of Narcissus: a reflection, probably, of the humanistic atmosphere of the middle of the twelfth century.

Finally, the Roman de Thèbes should be situated against the background of some of the literary trends and influences current at the time of its writing. Hoepffner\(^\text{13}\)
and Salverda de Grave have pointed out that it bears many resemblances to the *chançons de geste*; yet the influence of women and of love is greater and more pervasive than in the early epic, whether simply because of the many references, even in the midst of battles, to the *amis* of the knights or because of the love stories which contribute to the whole. Yet the *Roman de Thèbes* is not a courtly work. It may show certain elements of courtly love, but these elements are incidental, and it seems rather that the poet is holding up for emulation the kind of love which exists between Antigone and Parthenopeus. What one does find is an atmosphere of courtliness, which consists mainly in courteous behaviour and chivalrous conduct.

In the case of the *Roman de Thèbes*, it is difficult to attribute with any certainty the ideas on love to outside influence. The author has followed his source very closely and found most of his material in the text he was adapting. There is not so much invented love interest as might be thought, and it was left to the author of the *Roman d'Éneas* to be the first to invent and depict a full-length love-story on the canvas supplied by his classical source.

Nowhere is the dependence of the author of the *Roman de Thèbes* on Statius more obvious than in the absence of Ovidian influence. Faral has shown that the author was conversant with the works of Ovid, yet in the scenes of love interest, where one would surely have expected to find Ovid's influence, it is absent.

It does appear that the *Roman de Thèbes* is one of the first, if not the first of the *romans antiques*. It seems definitely to have been written before the great vogue for interpreting and describing love in the manner of Ovid, and before the spread into Northern France of a wide interest in courtly love. In the *Roman de Thèbes* we find a love interest influenced by the *chançons de geste*, still fairly incidental, close to its source, and yet flavoured by the life and social code of the mid-twelfth century.

**NOTES**

4. ibid., p. 259.
5. E. Hoepffner, 'Le *Roman de Thèbes*', *Revue des cours et conférences*, 34, no. 2 (1933), 490-7 (p. 493).
6. ibid., p. 494.
8. If *Thèbes* was written prior to the *Enéas*, then this appears to be the first reference in medieval French literature to a woman giving her knight a token to wear in battle.
10 E. Hoepffner, op. cit., p. 495.
11 ibid., p. 495.
12 A. Adler, op. cit. p. 267.
17 Below, p. 69.