This article offers a thorough study of Virgil’s interaction with the myth of Eteocles and Polynices’ war for the throne of Thebes, as represented especially in Athenian tragedy. It demonstrates that allusions to the Theban myth are crucial to the *Aeneid*’s construction of a set of tensions and oppositions that play an important role in Virgil’s reflection on the historical experience of Rome, especially in connection with the transition from Republic to Empire. In particular, interaction with Theban stories allows Virgil to explore: (1) the dichotomy between similarity and foreignness in the depiction of Rome’s enemies; (2) the tension in differing attitudes towards the state as reflected in antithetical character types—namely, the selfless youth who sacrifices himself for the community and the would-be tyrant prepared to go to any lengths to achieve sole power; and, finally, (3) the dichotomy between opposing notions of time defined by teleology, on the one hand, and circularity and repetition on the other, the two representing the differing temporalities of epic and tragedy, respectively.

1. THE SEVEN IN THE UNDERWORLD

During his underworld journey, Aeneas, like Odysseus, encounters heroes from the Trojan War. Unlike the Greek hero, however, he also meets characters from the other great epic battle of myth, the war for Thebes. In the area reserved for the glorious in war, Aeneas is approached by three of the seven Argive heroes who led the expedition against Thebes, namely Tydeus, Parthenopaeus, and Adrastus:

iamque arua tenebant
ultima, quae bello clari secreta frequentant.
hic illi occurrit Tydeus, hic inclutus armis
Parthenopaeus et Adrasti pallentis imago;
Aen. 6.477–80

And they were soon in the most distant of these fields, the place set apart
for brave warriors. Here Tydeus came to meet him, and Parthenopaeus,
famous for his feats of arms, and the pale phantom of Adrastus.¹

Aeneas’ underworld encounters with Trojan heroes look back to his own past, but
they also prefigure the war to come in Latium. The underworld journey is preceded
by the Sibyl’s prophecy that a new Trojan war is about to begin, with the Latin
engagement with the Trojan War, and given its prominent position at the beginning
of the section on the glorious in war, Aeneas’ rendezvous with the Argive chiefs
seems likewise programmatic.² It encourages readers to explore an alternative
model for Virgil’s war books, one differing in important respects from the main
referent of that segment of the poem, the *Iliad*.

Critics of the *Aeneid* have not heeded Virgil’s programmatic gesture. Although
recently greater attention has been paid to the presence of Theban myth in the
*Aeneid*, scholars have tended to concentrate on aspects of the Theban saga other than
the fratricidal strife of Eteocles and Polynices, which remains in need of a thorough
investigation. It is this omission in the scholarship that I seek to address in what
follows.³ Specifically, I aim to show that the *Aeneid* interacts with narratives of
the fight for Thebes in various ways and on different levels, and that this interaction
is crucial to the poem’s literary, political, and cultural agenda. Given the potential
extension of the argument, I shall confine myself to a specific segment of Theban
mythology—the war between Eteocles and Polynices—and shall analyze the war
for Thebes as an alternative model for the Iliadic section of the *Aeneid* only (I con-
centrate on books 7–12 and on an important section of book 6).

My argument extends beyond the scope of Virgil’s poem in two respects,
however—in its consideration of pre-Virgilian literature and (occasionally) of
the influence of Virgil on later poetic treatments of the Theban myth in epic. First,
I argue that the *Aeneid* builds upon earlier experiments in reading the history of
Rome through the lens of Theban myth. Attention to pre-Virgilian receptions of

¹. Translations of the *Aeneid* are taken from West 1990. Other translations are my own.
². The wives of two other of the Seven against Thebes (Eriphyle and Evadne) are introduced
³. The relevance of Theban narratives for the *Aeneid* is noted by Hardie 1990 in a seminal
paper. Mac Görán 2018 focuses on echoes from Sophocles’ Theban plays; Weber 2002 and Mac
Górán 2013 discuss the relevance of Euripides’ *Bacchae* as a model for the *Aeneid*. For echoes from
Roman plays on Theban subjects in the *Aeneid* see Fernandelli 2002: 164–65; Bocioclini Palagi 2007;
Mac Görán 2013: 131–33. On Virgil’s Carthage and its complex relationship with tragic Thebes see
Giusti 2018: 133, 143–47. Besides the aforementioned passage from book 6, there are other explicit
references to Theban stories in Virgil’s poem, such as the reference to Pentheus in Dido’s dream
(*Aen.* 4.469–70); on this passage’s epic and tragic models see Fernandelli 2002: 164–81.
the Theban saga in Roman literature is therefore crucial to understanding Virgil’s own creative reworking of the material. Second, I show that the *Aeneid*’s engagement with the story of Thebes lays the ground for the work of later epicists. Such poets as Ovid, Lucan, and Statius all bring Thebes to the center of their narratives, and do so in ways that sustain a constant dialogue with the *Aeneid* and its innovative reception of Theban myth.4

Even if one limits oneself to the story of Eteocles and Polynices, the number of sources to be considered is still massive, even taking into account the fragmentary nature of many of these. Apart from the cyclic *Thebaid*, there must have been countless epic retellings of the Theban myth spanning the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic periods. At Rome, the most popular of these was that of the controversial Antimachus of Colophon.5 The story also was told in the lyric poems of Stesichorus (*PMGF* 222b). And numerous tragic adaptations of the material are known in the fifth century, in addition to the two complete plays that survive (Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes* and Euripides’ *Phoenissae*).6 For Rome, we lack valuable evidence from Republican tragedy—only scant fragments remain of Accius’ *Phoenissae*—though useful indications of the reception of the myth in Roman literary culture are found in other kinds of works treating historical themes, whether dramatic (praetextae) or historiographical.7 In addition, the relevance of material evidence of various kinds (vases, paintings, sculpture) should not be underestimated.8 Virgil’s relation with these materials is complex and involves different modalities of reception: at certain times direct intertextual links are detectable; at others, it seems safer to speak of Virgil’s engagement with the story of Thebes lays the ground for the work of later epicists. Such poets as Ovid, Lucan, and Statius all bring Thebes to the center of their narratives, and do so in ways that sustain a constant dialogue with the *Aeneid* and its innovative reception of Theban myth.4

4. See Hardie 1990 on Ovid’s staging of his Theban history as an “anti-*Aeneid.*” On Virgil’s epic successors and their tendency to explore (and explode) themes, narrative sequences, and intertextual dynamics anticipated by the *Aeneid* see Hardie 1993.

5. Fragments of the cyclic *Thebaid* are edited by Davies 1988 and Bernabé 1996, with extensive commentary and bibliography in Davies 2014. Antimachus’ fragments are edited by Matthews 1996, with commentary. For Antimachus’ reputation in Rome see Catullus 95, likely influenced by Callimachus’ criticism of Antimachus at fr. 398 Pfeiffer; Quintilian 10.1.53 is more positive. The emperor Hadrian was, according to Dio 69.4.6, a great fan.

6. Extensive references to the war of the Theban brothers are also found in tragedies dealing with the aftermath of the play: Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* and his *Antigone*; Euripides’ *Suppliants*. Lost afterward plays by the three major tragedians include Aeschylus’ *Women of Argos* (*TrGF* 3 F16–18), *Eleusinians* (*TrGF* 3 F53a–54), and *Epigoni* (*TrGF* 3 F55–56); Sophocles’ *Epigoni* (*TrGF* 4 F185–90), *Alcmene* (*TrGF* 4 F108–110), and *Eriphyle* (*TrGF* 4 F21a–h); Euripides’ *Antigone* (*TrGF* 5 F157–78). Other lost plays dealt with Oedipus and his father Laius: see Wright 2019: 307 index s.v. “Thebes and Theban myths.”


8. An excellent survey is offered by Krauskopf (*LIMC* VII.1 730–48 s.v. “Septem”). See also the *LIMC* entries on the individual heroes and Strazzulla 2000. For the possible influence of iconographic traditions on Virgil’s reception of Theban myth in the *Aeneid* see La Penna 1994: 130–33 and below, section 2.
reception of a motif, character, scene, or theme that is peculiar to the narrative of Thebes. Concerning the latter set of cases, the connection may be with a text no longer extant. My own analysis relies heavily on Aeschylus’ and Euripides’ plays. It suggests that Virgil was influenced particularly by tragic versions of the Theban myth, and that this kind of interaction allowed him to introduce into his epic plot themes and dynamics typical of the world of tragedy. That said, particular aspects of the myth as an epic subject appear already in the cyclic *Thebaid*. They are developed and amplified in tragedy. Hence, we cannot in principle rule out the possibility that Virgil was also influenced by the epic cycle, whether directly or indirectly.

What in the myth of Eteocles and Polynices appealed to Virgil’s imagination? What advantage did tragic and epic accounts of the war for Thebes afford over the Homeric epics? What sort of questions or concerns might this alternative model have helped Virgil to articulate? A quick look at the two surviving Attic tragedies on the Theban war—Aeschylus’ *Septem* and Euripides’ *Phoenissae*—will help to answer these questions. In my analysis, I single out three areas which allow Virgil to explore important tensions in the myth. These are: (1) the dichotomy between similarity and foreignness in the depiction of the city’s enemies; (2) the tension in differing attitudes towards the state as reflected in antithetical character types in the play—namely, the selfless youth who sacrifices himself for the community and the would-be tyrant prepared to go to any lengths to achieve sole power; and, finally, (3) the dichotomy between opposing notions of time defined by teleology, on the one hand, and circularity and repetition on the other, the two representing the differing temporalities of epic and tragedy, respectively.

The war for Thebes differs from the Homeric narrative of the Trojan War in a number of important respects. First, the Theban narrative replaces Homer’s complex sympathy for both Trojans and Greeks with a strong polarization of the two armies and a black-and-white characterization of the Argives as the assaulting party. Aeschylus in particular emphasizes this polarization, which seems to have been an original feature of Theban epics. In his *Septem*, the prospect of the two brothers’ duel does not arise until halfway through the play, and the dramatic tension of the play’s first half revolves around the fear of foreign invasion gripping the city. The entire story is dramatized from the Theban point of view: the women in the chorus are terrified by the thought of the advancing enemy, while Eteocles is portrayed as organizing the city’s defenses soundly and reasonably (Aesch. *Sept.* 1–652). Moreover, the legitimacy of Polynices’ claim is downplayed. Aeschylus enhances the atmosphere of terror by drawing the Thebans and the Argives into sharper contrast: the former are moderate, patriotic, and favored by the gods, while the latter come off as arrogant, hubristic, and impious, associated even with underworld creatures such as the Giants.9 What is more, the Argive Seven are depicted as culturally

9. For Aeschylus’ downplaying of Polynices’ claims see Hutchinson 1985: 142–43. Positive depiction of the Thebans: Aesch. *Sept.* 407–16, 472–80; unlike the Argives, the Thebans are not boastful (409–410, 554), and they enjoy divine favor (450, 511–20, 625). For the Seven Argives’ hubristic characterization see especially the messenger speech (*Sept.* 375–652). Particularly relevant
incompatible with the Thebans: they speak a foreign language; the neigh of their horses is described as a “barbarian tune.” 10 Nothing similar is found in Homer: Greeks and Trojans are not presented in any way as culturally incompatible, nor is the poem’s theology so clear-cut. Aeschylus’ polarizing narrative betrays the influence of post-Persian Wars ideology: in 467 BCE the idea of a city threatened by a foreign invasion will still have been very much alive in the audience’s mind. 11 Yet there are clear indications that already in its archaic epic versions the story of Thebes differed radically from Homeric narratives in that it portrayed the war in more stark, black-and-white terms, with a decisive negative characterization of the Argives and a manifestly pro-Theban theology. 12 A similar characterization of the Argives is retained by Euripides in his Phoenissae, but is given less emphasis and less space. 13

The idea of a polarized conflict is not the only peculiar feature of the war’s portrayal in tragedy. The narrative element of the hero who turns his weapons against his fatherland and family also is not found in the Iliad. It is Euripides who devotes space chiefly to this theme, abandoning the heavy focalization of the Theban perspective that one finds in Aeschylus in order to explore an interesting set of moral dilemmas. On the one hand, Phoenissae makes Polynices the sympathetic figure. Yet, though he occupies the just side, he is blind to the moral to the Seven’s impious characterization are the ekphraseis of their shields, especially those of Hippomedon (491–96), Capaneus (432–34), and Parthenopaeus (539–44). Capaneus is compared to a Giant at Sept. 424.


11. For the idea that Aeschylus’ Septem reflects the ideological climate and, to an extent, the historical experience of the Persian Wars see Sheppard 1913; Podlecki 1966: 31; Rosenbloom 1993: 188–90; Torrance 2007: 88–91. For a survey of historicizing readings of the play see Podlecki 1966: 27–41.

12. Cf. Davies 2014: 70 on the cyclic Thebaid: “Though no less Greek than the Thebans, the seven chieftains seem to have been presented as monsters of a totally un-Homeric kind.” The cyclic Thebaid contained the account of Tydeus’ cannibalistic assault on his opponent Melanippus, which cost the Argive hero access to immortality. Both elements of the incident (cannibalism, immortality easily achieved on the battlefield) are unthinkable in Homer: see Reinhardt 1960: 15; Griffin 1977: 42, 46; Davies 2014: 81. Capaneus was established as contemptor diuum long before tragedy, almost certainly in the cyclic Thebaid, where the detail of his death by Zeus’ thunderbolt is also likely to have featured. The figure of the blasphemous hero has no equivalent in Homer, and the Homeric Zeus is unlikely to use his thunderbolt directly against humans: see Reinhardt 1960: 15; Fraenkel 1964: 285; Davies 2014: 72. For divine hostility to the Argive expedition against Thebes see Davies 2014: 71–72. Reinhardt (1960: 14–15) contrasts Homer’s complex sympathy for Greek and Trojans with the cyclic Thebaid’s black-and-white presentation of the Seven and the Thebans. This characterization of the two sides of the war may go back to the myth’s origins: see Burkert 1981: 29–48.

implications of his expedition against his fatherland. On the other hand, the play portrays Eteocles as a tyrant, yet one waging a war that is morally and politically legitimate (i.e., in defending the fatherland against foreign attack).  

The actions of both brothers are morally questionable in Euripides: each will to go to any lengths to achieve power; each places his personal interest above that of the community; moreover, their duel is irrelevant to Thebes’ survival. In this respect, their behavior is strongly contrasted with that of another character, Menoeceus, whose self-sacrifice brings about the city’s salvation. As Menoeceus certainly did not feature in the cyclic *Thebaid*, by introducing him, Euripides weaves into the myth a tragic element that has no epic parallel: the theme of ritualized self-sacrifice as a means of averting a fatal threat to the city.

Moreover, Euripides’ play emphasizes another interesting detail crucial for Virgil’s reception of the myth, namely the idea of a curse laid upon the city of Thebes at the time of its foundation. According to the myth, after killing a snake sacred to Ares, Cadmus was ordered to sow the monster’s teeth, from which sprang armed warriors, the Spartoi (Sown-Men), who immediately began fighting one another. By highlighting the similarity between this primordial fight among brothers and the fraternal strife of Eteocles and Polynices in the first stasimon, Euripides conveys the idea that the city founded in fraternal violence perishes by the same. Moreover, even upon the double death of the brothers, the sense lingers that Thebes has in no way been freed from the curse, for soon a new army will gather at the city’s gates. The theme of epic warfare thus is recast in a particularly tragic mode, as the closed, teleological narrative form of Homer is replaced with the recursive, circular notion of time typical of the tragic stage, in which the past is bound to repeat itself.

These various ways in which tragic treatments of the Theban myth differ from the Homeric war narrative—the polarization of the combatants; the morally ambiguous concept of heroism; the contemplation of a circular as opposed to a teleological notion of time—all have particular relevance for thinking about Rome, especially in the context of the city’s own fraught history with civil war and the ensuing transition from Republic to Empire. In what follows I will attempt to show that Virgil turns to Theban mythology, and to Theban tragedy specifically, in order to rearticulate these

14. Changes to the characterization of the two brothers in Euripides: Mastronarde 1994: 27–28, 225–26, 270–71, 293, 346–47. For the legitimacy of Polynices’ claim in Euripides see *Phoen.* 433, 469–96. For the impiety of Polynices’ attack on his fatherland, see *Phoen.* 568–83, 611–13. For Eteocles’ characterization in Euripides see *Phoen.* 499–525, in which Eteocles states that he would do anything to possess tyranny, the “greatest of gods” (506) and that “if someone must commit injustice, it is best to do so for the sake of tyranny, being god-fearing in all else” (524–25). Cf. also *Phoen.* 528–67. Euripides’ downplaying of Eteocles’ military ability: *Phoen.* 690–783.

15. Irrelevance of the brothers’ duel: Mastronarde 1994: 28–29. A particularly helpful examination of how the contrasting forces of personal ambition and public interest, devotion to one’s family and to the state, play out in Euripides’ *Phoenissae* is Rawson 1970.

critical tensions in the *Aeneid*. More generally, this paper reflects on the role of tragedy within Virgil’s poem and, I hope, will contribute to our understanding of that question by highlighting ways in which the *Aeneid*’s tragic texture is critical to its cultural and political agenda.\(^{17}\) I do not see tragedy as primarily a means to give voice to the suffering of the individuals crushed by the forces of history, nor do I conceive of a superficial, panegyric, epic meaning that is subverted by an underlying tragic content. Rather, I see tragedy as a language—a set of scenes, motifs and references—which allows the poet to bring into confrontation contrasting attitudes and ideas, while at the same time refraining from providing an easy solution to these tensions.

Let us proceed in order. In section 2, I consider two closely related scenes from book 6 and 7 of the *Aeneid* that allude to the war of Eteocles and Polynices, followed in section 3 by Virgil’s allusions to the story of the Spartoi. Sections 4 and 5 examine Virgil’s use of the Theban myth as an alternative paradigm to configure the war for Latium in books 7 to 12 of the *Aeneid*, with a concluding section to discuss the wider cultural, historical and ideological implications of Virgil’s reception of the Theban saga.

2. *SOCER ET GENER*

Besides providing the encounter with Adrastus and his comrades, the war for Thebes is relevant for another scene in Aeneas’ underworld journey, namely Anchises’ encounter with the souls of Caesar and Pompey (*Aen. 6.826–35*). In the so-called parade of heroes, Caesar and Pompey are closely associated by their similar appearance (*6.826 paribus . . . in armis*). They are *concordes* before coming to the light (6.827), almost as Romulus and Remus are harmonious after death in the prophecy of book 1 (1.292). Also like Romulus and Remus, Caesar and Pompey are related—here *socer* and *gener* as Virgil describes them (“father-in-law,” “son-in-law”: 6.830–31)—and are destined for mortal combat on a grand scale. Like other spirits in the parade, the two Romans are depicted as if performing a crucial scene from their future life. Anchises describes the moment in which Caesar will descend into Italy to meet Pompey in war (*aggeribus . . . Alpinis atque arce Monoeci descen-dens*, 6.830–31); the latter is conspicuously described as arrayed with the people of the East (*instructus Eois*). Although these lines anticipate a (future) historical moment, the events are only imagined by Anchises. As it turns out, the Alpine route described is not that taken by Caesar in 50–49 BCE, nor is it what contemporary audiences of the poem might have expected. Anchises’ description serves rather to characterize

\(^{17}\) The role of tragedy in the *Aeneid* is a large topic: see Hardie 1997, with bibliography at 325–26; recent surveys in Panoussi 2009: 5; Ambühl 2015: 24–27. I am particularly influenced by Hardie 1997, which builds upon Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1981: 29–48.
Caesar’s approach implicitly as an invasion. Later in the speech, Anchises seems to step into the historical moment he has just evoked, imploring the two not to enter this accursed war, and begging his descendant Caesar to be the first to drop his weapons and show mercy (parce, 6.834). As noted by Horsfall, this cannot be a reference to clementia Caesaris, which applies only after hostilities have ceased. The plea to disarm only makes sense at the time of Caesar’s descent into Italy, in the picture Anchises has just evoked. Anchises addresses Caesar as “my blood” (sanguis meus, 6.835)—Caesar is, strictly speaking, a descendant of Anchises—but he also refers to both Caesar and Pompey with the familiar pueri (6.832), which suggests that Anchises casts himself as a father figure to both.

This scene, depicting an elderly ancestor’s stepping into the (imagined) conflict to prevent the fratricidal bloodshed of his kin, is reminiscent of Jocasta’s plea to Polynices and Eteocles as depicted in Euripides’ Phoenissae (301–354), a well-known tragic encounter with a long history of reception in Roman sources. I will examine some important Roman receptions of this scene in a moment, but first, let us confirm that the comparison of Caesar and Pompey to the Theban brothers is attested before the Aeneid. The earliest evidence comes from a letter of Cicero (Att. 7.11) in which Caesar’s war is compared with the invasion of Hannibal, and in which Cicero describes Caesar’s intentions by citing the (in)famous passage from the Phoenissae in which Eteocles claims that everything should be attempted in order to achieve sole power. A second piece of evidence comes from De officiis 3.82, in which Cicero refers to Pompey as one prepared to go to any length to achieve power, adding that Caesar was fond of quoting other lines by the Euripidean Eteocles. The analogy between Caesar and Pompey and the Theban brothers is natural: in Roman culture fratricide and civil war are typically associated. Yet Caesar has another connection to Theban mythology. Not only is the dictator credited with having written an Oedipus, a play that his adoptive son Octavian made sure to keep hidden, but he also is said to have dreamt of sleeping with his mother. The dream was interpreted to him as prefiguring his world conquest, in the sense that the earth is mother to all. Yet the anecdote suggests important resonances between author and protagonist of Caesar’s Oedipus, the latter being a man who became king in his motherland literally by sleeping with his mother. Finally, the comparison appears to have proven popular well after Cicero and Virgil, for it is found again in Lucan and is presupposed by Statius.
Most crucially, Virgil was preceded by a substantial tradition of adapting the tragic encounter between Jocasta and her children in historical-legendary episodes in Roman literature, with the strife of the brothers replaced, as in the Aeneid, by a war between socer and gener. Ennius did not write tragedies on Thebes, but his engagement with the myth of Eteocles and Polynices is discernible in the only surviving fragment from his Sabinae, a praetexta treating the legend of Rome’s abduction of the Sabine women and the ensuing war:

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cum spolia generis detraxeritis, quam, <patres>,
inscriptionem dabitis?
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Enn. Sabinae fr. I Ribbeck

When you have stripped spoils from your sons-in-law, fathers, what dedicatory inscription will you add?

Here the Sabine soldiers are addressed by a Sabine woman (perhaps Hersilia, Romulus’ wife) who uses the very words used by Jocasta to dissuade Euripides’ Polynices from attacking Thebes. The words and situation are the same, but the fight that Hersilia seeks to prevent pits socer against gener.

Replays of this tragic encounter appear elsewhere in the literary tradition, as part of a general tendency to connect scenes and motifs from the Theban myth with the early history of Rome. The pathetic scene in the Ennian fragment just mentioned is found in Livy also. There the Sabine women throw themselves in the midst of the fighting armies, entreating their parents to stop the war and spare their husbands, who now also have become their parents’ sons-in-law (generi). They beg the warring parties instead to turn their weapons against themselves:

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si adfinitatis inter uos, si conubii piget, in nos uertite iras; nos causa belli, nos uulnerum ac caedium uiris ac parentibus sumus. . .
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Liv. 1.13.3

If you dislike the kinship between you, if you dislike our marriages, turn your anger against us: we are the reason for the war, we the cause for the wounds and deaths of fathers and husbands. . .

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25. Echoes of Theban stories have been identified in the traditions about the strife of the two Alban kings Amulius and Numitor, as well as in Livy’s narrative of the kingdom of Tarquinius Superbus: see Liv. 1.49.1, 2.6; Ogilvie 1965: 47, 197; Scapini 2018: 304–308.

The desperate plea here for new-formed kin to cease from hostilities is analogous to that of Jocasta’s entreaty, but Euripides’ Theban queen addresses her children before the war has begun: she does not rush between the warring lines, nor does she invite her children to turn their weapons against her. However, as La Penna shows, both details appear in later Roman versions of the war for Thebes. In Seneca’s *Phoenissae*, Jocasta rushes into the battlefield before her two children begin to fight and begs them to turn their weapons against her. A passage in Petronius implies similarly that such a scene was typical of Roman narratives of the war for Thebes. And Propertius imagines himself fighting his rival in a replay of the duel of Eteocles and Polynices, with the girl intervening in place of Jocasta. It seems likely that the two details, though not represented in Euripides, were found in some version of the Theban narrative, whether literary or iconographical, and that their surfacing in Roman literature and historiography reflects a general indebtedness to Theban myth.

Virgil’s depiction of Anchises’ encounter with Caesar and Pompey creatively reconfigures this tragic scene. Like Jocasta, Anchises addresses his descendants who are about to enter war. Caesar and Pompey are assimilated to the brothers Romulus and Remus, but they are in fact *socer* and *gener*, like the Romans and Sabines. Very much like Jocasta’s intervention, Anchises’ attempt at mediation is unsuccessful: Caesar and Pompey will fight. Like Eteocles and Polynices, moreover, they also both will be dead by the end of the war. And, as in the case of Oedipus’ children, their death will not bring about a lasting cessation of hostilities. Even Caesar’s alleged Oedipal dreams may be relevant here. Although the word *patria* is etymologically connected to *pater*, the personification Patria is imagined as female: *uiscera* is a common euphemism for female genitals and *uis* is commonly used to refer to the sexual act (especially, but not only, to denote rape). Thus, there is substantial sexual innuendo in *uertite ualidas uires in uiscera patriae*: in ancient writing (and in oral performance) there is no telling between *Patria* and *patria* and the metaphor used by Virgil clearly implies personification (only persons can have *uiscera*). There is also a poignant recollection of the imagery suggested by Livy (*in nos uertite iras*). Caesar and Pompey indeed are turning their weapons against their metaphorical mother (Patria). Virgil’s reception of this topical encounter

27. She does, however, rush onto the battlefield to try and prevent her children’s duel at the end of the play (*Phoen.* 1264–82), but she arrives too late to stop the fight.
29. For possible iconographical parallels see La Penna 1994: 130–32. Theban echoes are visible on the occasion of a later threat to Rome, in the story of Coriolanus (Liv. 2.40.1–11; Dion. Hal. 8.44–54; Plut. *Cor.* 33–36). Once again, an army of Italians led by a Roman is involved. Once again, a mother walks to meet her son, begging him to abandon his plan. This time the role of Jocasta is played by Coriolanus’ mother Veturia. For Theban echoes in Livy’s, Dionysius’, and Plutarch’s versions of the Coriolanus story see Ogilvie 1965: 334; La Penna 2000: 248–49; Scapini 2018: 309–314.
30. Caesar was murdered after the end of the conflict, but the idea that the war brings about the death of both leaders is an exaggeration found elsewhere: cf. Luc. 6.810–11.
31. For a personification of Patria see, e.g., Luc. 1.183–92, discussed below. For the sexual connotations of *uiscera* and *uis* see Adams 1982: 95, 198–99.
did not escape the *Aeneid*'s early readers, for when Lucan describes the scene envisioned by Anchises here (i.e., Caesar's descent into Italy), Caesar is addressed by Patria in the guise of a disheveled old woman whose description calls to mind Jocasta. To her pleas, Caesar responds with words that echo Polynices' final speech to Jocasta in Euripides. Moreover, Statius restores the Virgilian scene to its Theban context (the addressees are Eteocles and Polynices) yet retains something of the Anchises episode in employing a male rather than female ancestor: it is the elderly Laius, not Jocasta, who addresses Eteocles and Polynices—and in the very words used by Virgil's Anchises (*Theb. 4.401–404*; cf. Virg. *Aen. 6.834–35*).

Allusions to Caesar and Pompey, coupled with references to the Theban war, surface again in another programmatic passage from the *Aeneid*, the speech of Juno in book 7. There Juno presents the war in Latium as the reward for the union of *socr* and *gener* (7.317–18). This sentence has commonly been taken to allude to the civil war of Caesar and Pompey (cf. 6.830–31), whose motivation was traced back to Pompey's marriage with Julia and her subsequent death. Juno goes on to summon Allecto and spurs the Fury to action by granting the goddess the power to arm for battle like-minded brothers (*7.335 tu potes unanimos armare in proelia fratres*). *Proelia* suggests war rather than enmity resolved by a one-off confrontation (as in the case of Romulus and Remus), and large-scale conflict is precisely what Juno wishes to create in Latium. The reference to fraternal war fashions the war in Latium as a kind of civil war, implying that Aeneas and Turnus are effectively brothers. The most suitable precedent for fraternal enmity leading to a large-scale conflict is that of Eteocles and Polynices. The idea of brothers who are *unanimi* and then clash reminds us of Caesar and Pompey, *concordes* before birth but enemies in life. In general, the coupling of allusions to Caesar and Pompey qua *socr* and *gener* with the idea of fraternal war recalls the encounter of book 6, but also the tradition of using Thebes to evoke moments in the history of Rome's wars with the peoples of Italy.

Indeed, allusion to the fight for Thebes in these two closely related scenes creates a telescopic effect, making the war between Trojans and Latins the first in a long series of conflicts opposing *socr* and *gener*. Latinus and Aeneas will be followed first by Romulus and Titus Tatius, later by Caesar and Pompey. Alluding to the war with the Sabines and to future Roman civil wars is hardly reassuring at this stage. Are these not "peoples destined for eternal peace" (*aeterna gentis in pace*...)

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33. Horsfall 2000: 220, with further references.


futuras, Aen. 12.504)? Virgil’s allusive language in book 7 looks ahead to future instances of the conflict initiated by Juno. In fact, it makes civil war and war with the Latins part of a shared history of fraternal war extending down to the time of Virgil (Caesar and Pompey) and replicating in Italy the fratricidal fight of the Theban brothers. This idea is connected to another important aspect of Theban myth, to which I now turn.

3. INFINITE WARS: THE EARTH-BORN BROTHERS

The idea of an endless succession of quasi-fratricidal wars is a crucial aspect of the tragic Thebes. As suggested in section 1, Euripides’ Phoenissae emphasizes this claustrophobic dimension of time by drawing attention to the parallelism assimilating Eteocles and Polynices to the Spartoi. But the curse of fratricidal strife extends forward in time as well. The theme of failed closure is a topical component of the myth of Thebes and distinguishes it from the Trojan cycle. Later versions of the story appear to have made of the funeral pyre of Eteocles and Polynices a symbol of their lasting enmity. With the two bodies placed together by accident on the same pyre, the flame is depicted as splitting into two tongues: not even in death can the twins’ hatred be extinguished.37

Allusions to the war for Thebes explored in section 2 inscribe the events of the Aeneid into this circular notion of time: the ideas of closure and teleology suggested by the prophecy of book 1 come to be challenged by pointed reminders that the war in Latium is just the first in a series of conflicts fought amongst kin. Echoes of the myth of the Spartoi—among the most iconic symbols of the recursive history of Thebes—strengthen the temporal implications of the allusions. In the Georgics, Virgil insists on the peacefulness of the Italian landscape. Italy is not a place where one encounters dragons or crops of armed heroes:38

haec loca non tauri spirantes naribus ignem
inuertere satis immanis dentibus hydri,
nec galeis densisque uirum seges horruit hastis;
G. 2.140–42

These lands were not plowed by fire-breathing bulls with the sown teeth of a monstrous snake, nor did crops bristle with packed spears and helmets.

37. The image is found for the first time in Callimachus 105 Pfeiffer (=105 Harder); cf. Ov. Trist. 5.5.33–39; Stat. Theb. 12.429–46.
38. Virgil’s reference here is to the Colchian (not the Theban) Sown-Men. The two episodes are sometimes twinned in antiquity (see, e.g., Hor. Carm. 4.4.63–64), and Roman authors tend to regard both as mythical analogues of civil war (on the Colchian Sown-Men as a symbol of civil war see Ov. Ep. 6.32–37). But it is the Theban incident that particularly interested Virgil, for this episode features the idea of initial fratricide later replicated by civil war. This provided a match for the idea of Rome as a city whose foundation through fratricide (Romulus and Remus) was replicated by later episodes of civil war.
In contrast, in *Aeneid* 7 we are introduced to the Italian landscape at an earlier stage that is far from peaceful. When Iulus kills a sacred deer, the seemingly idyllic landscape turns into a scene for war, and Virgil relishes deconstructing the above-mentioned sentiment in the *Georgics* when, in describing the advancing of the Latin peasants, he conjures up the image of the crop of swords:

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sed ferro ancipiti decernunt atraque late
horrescit strictis seges ensibus...   
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*Aen.* 7.525–26

But they fought with two-edged steel, and a dark crop of drawn swords sprouted all over the field. . .

The allusion to the *Georgics* evokes the myth of the Spartoi,39 and it is clear that Virgil is particularly interested in conjuring up the Theban Sown-Men, for a number of later passages seem to suggest that descendants of the Theban Spartoi may be found in Latium. Towards the middle of book 12, Aeneas kills a sequence of four enemies—Talos, Cethegus, Tanais, and Onites:

```
ille Talon Tanaimque neci fortemque Cethegum,
tris uno congressu, et maestum mittit Oniten,
nomen Echionium matrisque genus Peridiae;
```

*Aen.* 12.513–15

Aeneas sent Talos, Tanais and brave Cethegus to their deaths, all three in one encounter, then the gloomy Onites, who bore a name linked with Echion of Thebes and whose mother was Peridia.

Onites’ description is surprising: he is characterized as *nomen Echionium*. How will the ancient reader have understood such an epithet? The most famous Echion of myth is the early primogenitor of the Thebans, a survivor of the Spartoi. From Echion descends one of the (two) royal houses of Thebes—the line of Pentheus, Creon, Jocasta, Menoeceus, and Haemon. For Lucan, the adjective is an epithet for Thebes (*Echioniae Thebae*), and *Echionius* is found as a synonym for “Theban” in poets after Virgil.40 A passage in Horace is particularly relevant, for he attaches the adjective *Echonia* to Thebes precisely to evoke the episode of the Sown-Men.41 Tarrant understands *Echionius* as “Theban,” specifying that the adjective qualifies the name, not the character.42 One is tempted to think that

41. Hor. *Carm.* 4.4.64. In this passage, Horace has Hannibal praise Rome’s resilience by comparison with a set of mythical monsters which were hard to kill and were able to “be born again” after being struck down: the Hydra, whose heads grew after being severed, and the serpent slain by Cadmus, from whose teeth the Sown-Men were generated after the monster’s death.
42. Tarrant 2012: 223.
Virgil is making a point about the name, not the character—the name is Theban, while the hero’s origin is not—but it remains unclear what might be Theban about the name Onites, as well as why Virgil would want to invoke the name’s ethnic connotations for this otherwise unknown character. In the other cases in which Virgil does this, the hero invariably is from a place from which his name also comes.43

Ancient commentators were also puzzled by Onites. Donatus considers Onites either a gentilicum or a patronymic, and takes Echionius as the name of the hero. Servius rightly dismisses this explanation, arguing that Onites is a personal name, that the adjective Echionius comes from the Theban hero Echion, and that, since in Virgil nomen occasionally stands for “glory,” nomen Echionium is approximately equivalent to “Theban glory.”44 One need not gloss nomen as gloria, but Servius appears to be right essentially, for nomen Echionium surely characterizes Onites as a Theban, and does so by evoking the myth of the Spartoi.

Turnus and certain of his allies have Greek origins, but none has the remotest connection to Thebes or Boeotia.45 The extraordinary Theban identity of Onites reflects a specific strategy. Virgil is fond of using the identities of otherwise unknown and never-to-be-mentioned-again heroes for historical or literary allusion, or to color his battle narratives ideologically. One is reminded of the confrontation of Osiris and Thymbraeus, described just a few lines before the Onites passage (Aen. 12.458); Reed convincingly analyzes it as a miniature version of the battle of Actium and of the Aeneid’s conflict itself.46 In a similar fashion, the presence of this Theban hero associates the war between Trojans and Latins with the fraternal war located at the very beginning of Theban history, the fratricidal fight of the Spartoi. Italy is not as idyllic as it had seemed in the Georgics. That the Latins and Trojans at war are like the Spartoi of Greek myth is a dire omen for the city to be founded from their union. Even before the age of Romulus and Remus, Aeneas’ heroic achievement will be made possible only by fraternal war, and renewed again far ahead in the future by further bouts of civil war, precisely as the strife of Eteocles and Polynices renews the primordial conflict of the Spartoi.

One last significant allusion to the myth of the Spartoi occurs toward the end of book 12, just lines after the appearance of Onites. As Aeneas is about to

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44. Serv. ad Aen. 12.514. Against Donatus, Servius notes that the ending -tes is incompatible with a patronymic; Servius also condemns the reading nomine Chionium (unde male quidam legunt ‘nomine Chionium’), possibly an attempt to make sense of Virgil’s unusual reference to the Theban hero. Servius 12.514 takes nomen to mean the same as genus, arguing that Echion was the father of Onites, Peridia his mother. For Conington and Nettleship 1884: 3.450 Virgil wants to mark Onites as a descendant of Theban Echion.

45. On the Greek origins of Turnus and his allies see section 4 in this essay.

46. Both Thymbraeus and Osiris, like Onites, are nowhere else mentioned in the poem; see Reed 1998. Quint (2018: 153–54) shows that Virgil uses references to otherwise unknown descendants of Homeric heroes to alert readers to the relevance of specific Homeric passages to his narrative.
approach Turnus in his final duel, Virgil conjures up the image of the crop of swords a final time:

\[
\text{circum hos utrimque phalanges} \\
\text{stant densae strictisque seges mucronibus horret} \\
\text{ferrea. . .}
\]

*Aen.* 12.662–64

All around them on every side stand the battalions of the enemy in serried ranks. Their drawn swords are a crop of steel bristling in the fields.

As we shall see in greater detail in section 5, the duel between Turnus and Aeneas in many ways is cast as a struggle between brothers: the scene echoes Ennius’ account of Romulus’ killing of Remus. Coupled with Romulus and Remus and with the fight of the Spartoi, the death of Turnus becomes the primordial sacrifice to set in motion an endless chain of violence. By connecting Turnus and Aeneas with the Spartoi, on the one hand, and with Romulus and Remus, on the other, Virgil suggests an analogy that will impress itself upon the imagination of later epic poets. Both Thebes and Rome were born of a fraternal war renewed subsequently by later generations: the wars of Caesar and Pompey repeat the strife of Aeneas and Turnus just as that of Eteocles and Polynices renews the clash of the Spartoi.47

Theban myth suggests a circular notion of time, whereby Rome is fated to endure civil war always. This runs counter to the panegyric vision of Jupiter’s prophecy in book 1, which heralds a time of lasting peace and an end to internal strife under Augustus, and it is relevant that in Jupiter’s prophecy the vision of the Augustan age is expressed via the image of brotherly harmony:

\[
\text{aspera tum positis mitescent saecula bellis:} \\
\text{cana Fides et Vesta, Remo cum fratre Quirinus} \\
\text{iura dabunt;}
\]

*Aen.* 1.291–93

Then wars will be laid aside and the years of bitterness will be over. Silver-haired Truth and Vesta, and Romulus Quirinus with his brother Remus, will sit dispensing justice;

The twins are reconciled in this end-of-times scenario. Yet this would-be reconciliation clashes violently with the Theban allusions of the poem’s second half. If Turnus and Aeneas, and Romulus and Remus, in some significant sense are like the Spartoi, there is little hope that Rome’s fraught history of fraternal war will come to an end.

Virgil’s epic successors are well aware of Eteocles and Polynices’ potential as a symbol of the endlessness of Roman civil wars and of the continuity between Rome’s fights with the peoples of Italy and its civil conflicts. Lucan associates

47. For the influence of this idea on Statius and Lucan see Rebeggiani 2018: 176–81. For the notion that civil war is a repetition of Rome’s ancestral fratricide (Romulus and Remus) see Hor. *Epod.* 7.17–20 with Mankin 1995: 150–52.
Caesar and Pompey with Romulus and Remus (1.93–95), but he also likens them to Eteocles and Polynices. As Caesar descends into Italy, the bonfire that announces the end of the Feriae Latinae splits into two tongues, evoking the pyre of the Theban brothers (1.549–52). The location of the omen is important. The Feriae Latinae reaffirmed the alliance of the Latin peoples. The war of Caesar and Pompey is the endless war of the Theban brothers, but it also extends the recursive series of wars, inaugurated by Aeneas’ conflict with Turnus, among the peoples of Latium.

4. THE ENEMY AT THE GATES: BROTHERS AND BARBARIANS

Scholars have long drawn attention to Virgil’s ambiguous use of Homeric models in Aeneid 7 to 12. In book 6, the Sibyl characterizes the war in Latium as a replay of that for Troy, with the Latins in the role of the Greeks and Turnus as alius Achilles (Aen. 6.83–94). The Sibyl’s words are deliberately ambiguous. Turnus is not a second Achilles (alter Achilles); he is a different (alius) Achilles, defeated in the end. The second half of the Aeneid sees the Trojans transition gradually from their initial role as Homeric Trojans (besieged and eventually defeated) to their new role as victorious Greeks. As suggested by the discussion of books 6 and 7 above, the Trojan War is not the only epic battle used by Virgil as a subtext for the Latin war. Virgil’s engagement with Homeric models in the second half of the poem is complicated by the presence of a second paradigm, namely the tragic model of the Argive attack on Thebes. And just as the Trojan War is used ambiguously, so with the Theban narrative, as identification with Thebes in the poem is transferred from one side to the other.

In order to recreate the Trojan War in Latium, Virgil must identify the Latins with the Greeks. Yet he goes further: he connects Turnus and his allies repeatedly, not just with Greece in general, but with Argos specifically. In the Aeneid, the adjective Argiuus typically is used as synecdoche for “Greek,” but for Turnus it retains its literal meaning, since the Latin hero is of the royal house of Argos—a genealogical detail that appears nowhere else and is probably an invention of the poet.

49. On Iliadic models in the Aeneid see Anderson 1957; Gransden 1984. Knauer 1964 is still unsurpassed for the abundance of parallels collected. For the effects of Homeric intertexts in Virgil see Barchiesi 2015; for Virgil’s ambiguous use of Homeric models see Quint 1989 and, in greater detail, Quint 2018, esp. 150–90.
51. Things are, of course, more complicated: within the general trend that sees a gradual transformation of Trojans into Homeric Greeks Virgil uses a number of Homeric intertexts to blur the distinction between the two sides and link them both alternatively to Greek and Trojan characters in Homer. See Quint 2018: 150–90. This is in parallel with a complex construction of ethnics and a play on ethnic markers which tend to complicate and blur ethnic boundaries between Trojans and Italians, as well as their relative position on the Greek/barbarian spectrum. See Reed 2007, esp. 44–147.
52. Through Danae back to Inachus, the father of Io: Aen. 7.371–72, 410; see Horsfall 2000: 256, 281. On Argiuus as a synonym for Greek see, e.g., Aen. 1.40, 2.254, 5.672, etc.
Turnus’ soldiers thus are legitimately described as *Argiu na pubes*, “Argive youth” (7.794), and it is fitting that the Latin forces seek to enlist the aid of the Argive Diomedes, whose father Tydeus was among the seven chiefs leading the expedition against Thebes (8.9–17, 11.225–30). Virgil strengthens this identification with the Argives at Thebes by engaging with tragic depictions of the latter in his catalog of Italic troops in book 7. The passage evokes iconic descriptions of the seven Argive chiefs’ armor in the messenger speech in both Aeschylus and Euripides. Virgil’s catalog begins with Mezentius, whose armor is not described, but then comes to Aventinus:

post hos insignem palma per gramina currum
uctoresque ostentat equos satus Hercule pulchro
pulcher Auentinus, clipeoque insigne paternum
centum anguis cinctamque gerit serpentibus Hydram;
*Aen.* 7.655–58

Behind them, driving over the grassland and displaying his victorious horses and his chariot which proudly bore the palm of victory, came Aventinus, son of Hercules, fair son of a fair father, and on his shield he carried his father’s blazon, the Hydra and its snakes, the hundred snakes encircling it.

The image on the shield of this son of Hercules, which details one of the famous labors, probably is meant to present Aventinus as a worthy successor to the semi-divine hero, one ready to slay monsters (and monstrous enemies) as his father did. Yet a different reading of the ekphrasis emerges once we recognize the allusion to the description of the shield of Adrastus in Euripides’ *Phoenissae*. There the Hydra, an Argive monster, is depicted in the act of snatching Theban victims from the walls, precisely what Adrastus is to do in the coming battle. Readers know, however, that the Hydra was killed by Hercules, a Theban hero. Thus, Euripides’ ekphrasis foreshadows Adrastus’ defeat. The intertext adds an element of irony to Virgil’s picture, for if Aventinus styles himself as a new Hercules, in light of Euripides’ text, one wonders whether he does not represent the Hydra instead, the native (Argive) monster to be conquered by the poem’s own Hercules (Aeneas).

Aeschylus’ description of the seven Argives is evoked again in the ekphrasis of Turnus’ armor, beginning with the hero’s helmet:

cui triplici crinita iuba galea alta Chimaeram
sustinet Aetnaeos efflantem fauciuss ignis;
tam magis illa fremens et tristibus effera flammiss
quam magis effuso crudescunt sanguine pugnae.
*Aen.* 7.785–88

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53. For the positive associations of the ekphrasis, unlike that of Turnus’ helmet, see Horsfall 2000: 432 ad *Aen.* 7.658.

On the towering top of his triple plumed helmet there stood a Chimaera breathing from its throat a fire like Etna’s, and the fiercer and bloodier the battle, the more savagely she roared and belched the deadly flames.

The image of fire-breathing Chimaera is inspired by the shield of Hippomedon in the *Septem*, which bears a similar depiction of the giant Typhoeus. It even makes a learned genealogical reference, for the Chimaera was believed to be the offspring of none other than Typhoeus.\(^55\) The effect of the ekphrasis is the same in both Aeschylus and Virgil: Turnus and Hippomedon are presented as monstrous and hubristic creatures, with clear associations to the underworld.\(^56\)

Two more heroes in Virgil’s catalog merit discussion, namely Catillus and Coras, twins from the Latin city of Tibur. While Virgil does not describe their armor, they are instead compared to Centaurs (7.670–77). The simile aligns closely with the images on Turnus’ helmet, for Centaurs are the prototypical hubristic and uncivilized monsters. Virgil also characterizes the twins as *Argiuia iuuentus* (“Argive youth,” 7.672), a reference not to a generic Greek origin, but to Catillus and Coras’ descent, in a legend attested both by Pliny (*HN* 16.237) and by Solinus (2.8), from the Argive Amphiaraus, one of the Seven.

Another ally of Turnus also appears to have been modeled on one of the Argive Seven. Mezentius is not Virgil’s invention, but the poet clearly has radicalized this hero’s characterization as *contemptor diuum* (“despiser of the gods”),\(^57\) thus likening him to the blasphemous hero par excellence of Greek mythology, the Argive Capaneus.\(^58\) There is no Iliadic counterpart for the type of the arrogant blasphemer: this characterization of Capaneus is a peculiarity of the Theban epic tradition, which was retained and emphasized by tragedians.\(^59\) Fittingly, when Mezentius famously declares at *Aen.* 10.773 that he worships his spear as a god, he appropriates the words of Aeschylus’ *Parthenopaeus* (*Sept.* 529–32).\(^60\)

57. Macrobius explains Virgil’s *contemptor diuum* by quoting a passage from Cato in which Mezentius orders the Latins to offer him the firstfruits of their harvest/vintage, otherwise usually offered to the gods (Macrobr. *Sat.* 3.5.9–11). The incident, which is connected to the Roman festival of the Vinalia, is mentioned with different details by other sources (Plin. *HN* 14.88; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.64–65; Ov. *Fast.* 4.879–900; Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 45; see further Di Fazio 2005: 52–55), in which, however, Mezentius’ command is not configured as a religious transgression. Scholars doubt Macrobius’ interpretation of the passage from Cato (Musti 1987: 153; Di Fazio 2005: 59–60), and, even if Macrobius is right, one recorded religious infraction seems hardly enough to support the argument that Virgil’s blasphemous characterization of Mezentius (see Dumézil 1976: 258) belongs to the tradition about this hero. On Virgil’s Mezentius see La Penna 1980 and 1981, partly summarized in La Penna 1987.
58. Virgil models Capaneus on the tragic archetype of the blasphemous hero, of which Capaneus is the prototype and Apollonius’ *Idas* a later incarnation: see Thome 1979: 97–100; Davies 2014: 72. Statius’ Capaneus is in turn modeled on Virgil’s Mezentius: see Vessey 1973: 71; Ganiban 2007: 60, 146.
The unfolding of events in books 8 and 9, furthermore, variously suggests that the war in Latium is also in some significant way a version of the war for Thebes. Once introduced, Virgil’s Latin troops advance against the Trojan camp. As in Aeschylus’ Septem, the catalog of heroes is followed by a siege narrative. Virgil quite clearly characterizes the Trojan camp at the mouth of the Tiber as a city, with citizens protected within its walls. There is a complex interplay with Homeric models here: allusions to the Trojan assault on the Greek camp are combined with the idea that the Trojan camp is a new Troy, threatened again by a Greek foe.61 But iconic moments in the siege of Thebes also are evoked, such as Capaneus’ famous attempt to burn the city by scaling its walls with a torch.62 The Virgilian counterpart to the Argive hero, Mezentius, is introduced shaking a torch of his own and threatening to burn the Trojan camp (Aen. 9.521–22). The synecdoche pinus, used for Mezentius’ firebrand in this passage, evokes the Giant’s use of an entire tree as his weapon. The picture is strongly suggestive of Capanues: the torch is a common element in the iconography of the hero, who also is commonly described as a Giant.63 In Aeschylus, the hero’s shield is decorated with an image resembling Virgil’s Mezentius: a man shaking a torch and menacing to attack the city walls, with the inscription “I will burn the city” (Sept. 433–35).

In the Aeneid, catalog and siege are separated by the account of Aeneas’ journey up the Tiber in book 8. The ekphrasis of Aeneas’ shield in book 8, however, has multiple points of contact with the siege of the Trojan camp recounted in book 9, and can help us to contextualize the Theban allusions in books 7 and 9. Upon the shield are featured the She-wolf and the twins; the rape of the Sabines and the ensuing war; Mettius Fufetius; Porsenna and the attempted return of the Tarquins; the Gallic sack of 390 BCE and its aftermath; Catiline and Cato; and, finally, the battle of Actium and Augustus’ triumph (Aen. 8.630–728). The series is selective, but as Stephen Harrison has convincingly shown all the episodes involve a major threat to the city of Rome.64 Notably, the Battle of Actium is aligned by the sequence of episodes with threats posed by Rome’s barbarian assailants, such as the Gallic invaders of 390 BCE. Antony and Cleopatra’s army is also presented as a barbaric horde—a picture enhanced by fifth-century paradigms of the Greeks’ victory against Persia.65 Book 9 would mark, then, the first time in which a prototype of Rome (i.e., the Trojan camp) is attacked by a foreign army.

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63. For Mezentius as a Giant in this scene see Hardie 1994: 171. For Capaneus as a giant see Aes. Sept. 424; Eur. Phoen. 1130–33 (a Giant on Capaneus’ shield). For the torch in the iconography of Capaneus see LIMC V.1 954, nos. 12a–13.

64. Harrison 1997: 75 and passim.

The siege of the camp exemplifies just the type of situation depicted in multiple instances on the shield. It is therefore quite natural for Virgil to turn to Theban tragedy to recreate the polarized representation of Roman enemies on Aeneas’ shield in his narrative of the Latin attack on the Trojan camp.

I have argued in section 1 that the war for Thebes is characterized by a twofold dimension: it is a polarized contest as long as one concentrates on the Argive army, but assumes the form of fraternal war also if it is Polynices’ cause that is focalized. In this section of the Aeneid, Virgil emphasizes polarization. The catalog scene of book 7 and the siege of book 9 both convey the sense of a mortal threat to the future Rome by channeling the image of the impious, barbarian enemy of the Theban saga. Turnus is more Tydeus than Polynices, and Mezentius is quite clearly a new Capanes. The idea is reinforced by allusions to other barbarian attacks against Rome. For instance, the legend of Hannibal’s advance against Rome seems to have colored Virgil’s description of Turnus’ advance against the Trojan camp in book 9.66

In Theban tragedies, the endangered city is saved by acts of extreme heroism. In Aeschylus’ Septem, Eteocles’ decision to fight his brother, though not explicitly styled as an Opfertod, is still indispensable for the city’s survival. In Euripides, it is Menoeceus’ self-sacrifice that saves the city. In Roman history, the role is transferred to the Sabine women. There is no ready parallel in Aeneid 9, but the tragic expedition of Euryalus and Nisus is noteworthy in this respect, especially for its combination of Homeric and Theban mythical thematic elements. The scene’s epilogue is constructed around a typically Roman idea that has no parallel in the Homeric Doloneia: the idea of heroic self-sacrifice, or deuotio.67 After Euryalus has been captured, Nisus ponders whether he should throw himself onto the enemy’s swords, a familiar final act for the deuotus (an sese medios moriturus in enes | inferat, Aen. 9.400–401) and precisely that which the Trojan youth does go on to perform later (9.438). Yet the theme of self-sacrifice is combined with a topical scene from Theban myth as well, as Nisus appropriates the words and gesture of Livy’s Sabine women, inviting the Rutulians to turn their weapons against himself: in me conuertite ferrum (9.427). Interestingly, Seneca later echoes the scene (and perhaps also Livy’s account of the Sabine episode) in his treatment of Jocasta’s plea to Polynices in the Phoenissae (443–44), and La Penna is right that both Livy and Virgil depend upon a similar version of the war for Thebes.68 Like Eteocles, Nisus goes on to die himself in a duel that also results in the death of his opponent (9.441–45).

Of course, annalistic sources contained many episodes of self-sacrifice on the battlefield for use by the poets, but in Aeneid 9 Virgil gives his own a tragic spin, playing up the tension between obligations to family and to state. The contrast provides a further connection with Euripides’ Phoenissae, as the Menoeceus episode

66. Horsfall 1974; Hardie 1994: 30, 110, 138; see Rebeggiani 2013 for other allusions to foreign attacks against Rome in the second half of the Aeneid.
in the play debates the same confrontation of values: with Creon urging flight, Menoeceus defies his father in order to give up his life for his country (Phoen. 962–1018). The parallel illuminates the odd detail in Euryalus’ mother’s decision to follow her son to Latium. Her tragic lament upon the death of the youth connects directly with the intimations of Opfertod:

\[
\text{figite me, si qua est pietas, in me omnia tela}
\]

\[
\text{conicite, o Rutuli, me primam absumite ferro;}
\]

\[
Aen. 9.493–94
\]

Strike me, you Rutulians, if you have any human feelings! Throw all your spears at me! Let me be the first to die.

The lament appropriates the words both of Seneca’s Jocasta and of the Sabine women in inviting the enemy to turn their weapons against her. 69 The effect is ironic: a desperate attempt to prevent death is recast as a post-eventum suicidal desire. It is too late for her to play Jocasta.

5. FIGHTING FOR THE (OTHER) CITY

Just as Virgil reverses the direction of his Homeric allusions, so the poet similarly reworks the Theban material. In book 9, the Trojans continue to play their Homeric role; they are besieged by the Latins and near to being overcome. But the tide of battle changes with Aeneas’ return. The siege is broken, and the death of Pallas launches Aeneas on the revenge mission that is to transform him gradually into a new Achilles. The process culminates in book 12: formerly besieged, the Trojans now have become the besiegers. This reversal is accompanied by a similar inversion in reference to the Theban myth: Laurentum, now under siege, becomes a new Thebes, while Aeneas and his comrades assume the role of its Argive assailants.

The poet plants the seeds of this transformation earlier in the narrative. In book 7, Laurentum is established as a possible Latin analogue for Thebes, with emphasis especially upon the character of Queen Amata. Her cult of Bacchus, complete with traditional oreibasia, notably links the two cities. 70 Yet, once the war begins, the queen plays the role of the Latin Jocasta rather well. When she thinks, mistakenly, that Turnus has been killed by Aeneas, she blames herself for the war and chooses a most tragic death (hanging) befitting her Theban literary pedigree. Jocasta dies by hanging in Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex (as in the Odyssey), whereas Euripides’ Jocasta kills herself with the sword after witnessing Eteocles’ and Polynices’ death. 71

69. La Penna 1994: 127. See also Hardie 1993: 49.
This Theban characterization of Amata, and more generally of Laurentum as a place where Bacchic rites such as those of Euripides’ Thebes in *Bacchae* are performed, lays the foundation for the possible identification of Laurentum with Thebes later in the war narrative of books 10 to 12. At this point Virgil transfers a certain type of imagery from the one side to the other. Working in a tradition in which the Argive Seven are associated with the impious giants, in books 7 and 9 Virgil connects Aeneas’ (Argive) enemies with the giants. But in book 10, following Pallas’ death, Aeneas himself is likened to the giant Aegeon depicted in the act of fighting Jupiter; the simile connects him to the fire-breathing monsters seen earlier on Turnus’ helmet.72

This process reaches its climax in book 12 where, immediately upon dispatching the seemingly Theban Echion, Aeneas moves to attack the city of Laurentum:

> ne qua meis esto dictis mora, Iuppiter haec stat,  
> neu quis ob inceptum subitum mihi segnior ito.  
> urbem hodie, causam belli, regna ipsa Latini,  
> ni frenum accipere et uicti parere fatentur,  
> eruam et aequa solo fumantia culmina ponam.  
> scilicet exspectem libeat dum proelia Turno  
> nostra pati rursusque uelit concurrere uictus?  
> hoc caput, o ciues, haec belli summa nefandi.  
> ferte faces propere foedusque reposcite flammis.  

*Aen.* 12.565–73

There must be no delay in carrying out my commands. Jupiter is on our side. No man must go to work half-heartedly, because my plan is new to him. The city is the cause of this war. It is the very kingdom of Latinus, and if they do not this day agree to submit to the yoke, to accept defeat and to obey, I shall root it out and level its smoking roofs to the ground. Am I to wait until Turnus thinks fit to stand up to me in battle and consents to meet the man who has already defeated him? O my fellow citizens, this city is the head and heart of this wicked war. Bring your torches now and we shall claim our treaty with fire.

It makes little sense that Aeneas claims the city of Laurentum as the reason for the war, given that the contest with Turnus is not for possession of the city, nor is the city responsible for Turnus’ refusal to meet in a duel.73 There is no Homeric equivalent for this speech: Virgil is drawing on the Theban myth, in which possession of Thebes is precisely the prize for which Eteocles and Polynices fight. The threat to

72. The simile comparing Aeneas to the monster Aegeon at war with Jupiter is at *Aen.* 10.565–70; see Harrison 1991: 215 ad loc. Hardie 1986: 154–56 highlights Aegeon’s similarity with Cacus and with the Chimaera represented on Turnus’ helmet.

destroy the city (12.569), requital for the broken treaty (12.573), invocation of
gods to witness the necessity of war (12.581)—all would fit a speech scripted
for Polynices.74 A typical siege scene then follows (12.574–92).

Evoking the Theban war helps Virgil bring into focus some of the moral issues
connected to the character of Polynices in Attic drama. Aeneas, like Euripides’
Polynices, is clearly right: he has been attacked treacherously, and the Latins have
broken their pact. But is this enough to justify the destruction of Laurentum?75

Such is the dilemma implied by the picture of Caesar in Aeneid 6. If Caesar has been
wronged, might invading one’s homeland constitute a legitimate response? As in
that context, the invocation of the figure of Polynices for Aeneas in book 12 conveys
the idea that the he is behaving like a barbarian. Aeneas’ speech contains distinctive
echoes of Livy’s Hannibal pondering his assault on Rome, suggesting that he now
has become the barbaric invader, effectively reversing the network of imagery and
associations of book 9.76

Transforming Aeneas into a new Polynices, if only briefly, is a momentous gesture
because it throws into relief a surprising development in the characterization of
Turnus. As suggested in section 1, the fight for Thebes brings into confrontation two
types of behavior: on the one hand, the selfish behavior of the two brothers, and, on
the other, the selfless behavior of Menoeceus. For Virgil the final confrontation
between Aeneas and Turnus is cast in light of similar tensions. For just as Aeneas
assumes the traits of Polynices, so Turnus becomes the self-sacrificing youth. In book
12, as extreme danger befalls Laurentum, acts of extraordinary heroism are to be
expected on the Latin side. Homeric models for the action are still conspicuous (espe-
cially Hector and Achilles’ duel in the Iliad). Yet certain elements in Turnus and
Aeneas’ final confrontation have no parallel in Homer, one notably being the character-
ization of Turnus’ duel with Aeneas as a deuotio or ritual self-sacrifice. Several scholars
have drawn attention to the language of Turnus’ response to Drances in Aeneid 11:77

uobis animam hanc soceroque Latino
Turnus ego, haud ulli ueterum uirtute secundus,
deuoui.

Aen. 11.440–42

To all of you, and to Latinus, father of my bride, I, Turnus, second in cour-
age to none of all who have gone before me, have offered up my life.

75. Tarrant (2012: 232–33) is surely right that Virgil’s sympathy in this passage is with the
besieged.
76. For Aen. 12.572 Tarrant (2012: 237) compares Livian references to Rome or Italy as seen
from the point of view of the Carthaginians: Liv. 26.7.3, 27.20.6. At 12.565 Aeneas’ words echo a line
from Ennius’ Annales (232 Skutsch) attributed to Hannibal by Otto Skutsch (1985: 412–13). The leg-
end of Hannibal’s assault on Rome, associated with Turnus’ attack against the Trojan camp in book 9
(see Horsfall 1974), is here evoked in connection with Aeneas.
Turnus’ deuotio is discussed by Leigh 1993: 90–91 and passim.
Juturna thwarts the duel, characterizing her brother’s resolution to fight Aeneas in terms of a *deuotio* (12.229–37). As a result of her intervention, Turnus finds himself chasing a false image of Aeneas until the latter comes to decide upon attacking the city. Informed by the Latin hero Saces that it is Aeneas now who is acting in the role of Capaneus and threatening to tear down the city’s ramparts (12.653–64), Turnus resolves to face him, and, tellingly, the language of the scene evokes that of typical scenes of *deuotio*. The Rutulian hero is in a state of ecstasy as he anticipates death (12.676–80) and rushes into the middle of the enemy lines (*perque hostis, per tela ruit*). Virgil clearly echoes the idea of *deuotio* at 12.694–95: “It is better that I should be the one man who atones for this treaty for all of you, and settles the matter with the sword.” The allusions to Theban mythology in the scene of Turnus’ sacrifice were noted by Statius, who reverses the relationship between Turnus and Menoeceus in his version of the Theban hero’s self-sacrifice: Statius’ Menoeceus is modeled both on Virgil’s Turnus and on traditional accounts of Roman *deuotiones*.

As in the case of Menoeceus, in the run-up to Aeneas and Turnus’ duel the theme of self-sacrifice is coupled with a renunciation of familial ties, something emphasized especially in the Latin hero’s exchange with his sister (12.632–49). The end of Turnus’ speech is particularly relevant:

> uos o mihi, Manes,
> 
> este boni, quoniam superis auersa uoluntas.
> 
> sancta ad uos anima atque istius inscia culpae
> 
> descendam magnorum haud umquam indignus auorum.

*Aen.* 12.646–49

Be gracious to me, you gods of the underworld, since the gods above have turned their faces from me. My spirit will come down to you unstained, knowing nothing of dishonor and worthy of my great ancestors to the end.

Turnus’ rejection of his sister’s request and his refusal to flee evoke the response of Euripides’ Menoeceus as he rejects his father’s plea to flee (cf. *Phoen.* 991–1005). Turnus’ decision to face Aeneas is effectively a resolution to die, and hence he prays to the Manes, as we might expect of a *deuotus*, in preparation to descend to them as a sacred soul. There has been an important anticipation of the scene in Turnus’ conversation with Amata and Latinus at the beginning of book 12, in

80. On Turnus and Menoeceus see Ganiban 2007: 142–43. Statius’ depiction of Menoeceus’ self-sacrifice has many points of contact with Livy’s account of the older Decius’ *deuotio*: cf. Stat. *Theb.* 10.756–69 and Liv. 8.9.10; see Vessey 1971: 239. The self-sacrifice of the younger Decius at Sentinum was the subject of Accius’ praetexta *Decius*. Jocelyn (2000: 348) noted that, among Greek models, Menoeceus’ sacrifice in Euripides’ *Phoenissae* provided a possible tragic antecedent for Decius’ self-sacrifice in Accius’ play. It is possible that Livy, Virgil, and Statius are influenced by Accius’ experiment in reading Roman *deuotiones* through the tragic lens of Menoeceus’ self-sacrifice.
which the latter attempts to prevent the Rutulian hero from a duel with Aeneas by reminding him of his elderly father (12.43–45). There Latinus is presented as a father figure; he is called *pater* by Turnus (12.50), while Amata is called *mater* (12.74). The intertext with Priam and Hecuba’s supplication to Hector in *Iliad* 22 only strengthens the characterization of Latinus and Amata as parental figures.  

But Latinus’ offer of mediation is rejected, and Turnus confirms his willingness to stake his life for the preservation of the community: he alone will refute the common crime (12.16).  

The Theban palimpsest reverberates onto our perception of the final confrontation between Turnus and Aeneas. Virgil reminds us that the duel is in some significant way fratricidal. Philip Hardie has drawn attention to how Aeneas and Turnus’ similarity is highlighted in the episode. The two heroes are compared to beasts fighting one another, precisely as Eteocles and Polynices are in Euripides (*Aen*. 12.715–22; cf. Eur. *Phoen*. 1380–81). There is also the echo of Romulus’ killing of Remus in Aeneas’ final blow. The slaying of Turnus becomes a personal act of revenge for Aeneas. Yet Turnus continues to be characterized as a *deutos*. At the moment of death, Virgil again evokes the language of an assault against a city, comparing Aeneas’ decisive strike to the missiles striking a besieged city’s walls. The synecdochic element emphasizes the concept of heroic self-sacrifice: Turnus is the one for the many, and has become the city for which his life is offered.

6. CONCLUSIONS: CONFLICTING POINTS OF VIEW

I hope to have demonstrated that it is worth following Virgil’s suggestion in book 6: we must be alert to allusions to the other great conflict of Greek myth, the war for Thebes. Before concluding, I would like to reflect on the cumulative effect of Virgil’s reception of motifs, scenes, characters, and intertexts from this rich tradition. As outlined in section 1, I see Virgil’s creative appropriation of Theban materials as an active element in articulating a tension between contrasting positions in three relevant areas.  

First, Theban references bring into confrontation two conceptions of time. On the one hand, passages such as Jupiter’s prophecy in book 1 convey a strong teleological stance (*Aen*. 1.257–96). According to Jupiter’s vision, history will not repeat itself endlessly: Rome is head towards a future of lasting peace under Augustus. Yet, on the other hand, Theban allusions in the latter part of the poem tell a different story. Reference to the Spartoi as models for the Latin-Trojan war suggests a rather different interpretation of Roman history. According to this vision, the city, marred

82. Pascal 1990: 256. On the meaning of this much-discussed line see Tarrant 2012: 90.
85. *Aen*. 12.921–22; Tarrant (2012: 328) suggests that the imagery reminds audiences of the sacrificial nature of Turnus’ death: he is figuratively dying for the city.
by primordial fratricide, will never escape the curse of internal war. The vision of future reconciliation in Jupiter’s prophecy (Romulus and Remus reigning peacefully together) stands in stark contrast to the scene of violent requital in Turnus and Aeneas’ final duel. The two perspectives, placed at opposing ends of Virgil’s poem, confront each other through this tragic model, but readers do not receive a decisive authorial gesture as to which of the two prevails.

This unresolved tension between teleological and circular notions of time is, of course, crucial to the political challenges of the transition from Republic to Empire. The hope that the Principate will bring about the end of fraternal strife coexists with the terror that Rome will never escape its curse. To a certain extent, meditation on such tension is a peculiar trait of the Augustan age—a time of transition combining wild optimism with pessimism, despair, and fatalism. Unsurprisingly, the darker perspective conveyed by the story of Thebes appealed to later authors such as Lucan and Statius. The former saw in the Principate a failure to deliver upon the promise of the return to the Golden Age made by Virgil’s Jupiter. The latter witnessed a violent return of civil war in 69 CE.

Second, the tragic story of Thebes allows Virgil to appropriate a tension between similarity and polarization. This, as we have seen in section 1, constitutes a key aspect of tragic versions of the war for Thebes. Virgil uses Theban intertexts both to enhance the sense of difference between Latins and Trojans and to underscore their similarity. Allusions to Theban myth strengthen the impression that the war in Latium is a civil war of sorts, a confrontation between peoples that in some significant sense are alike. Allusions to the Spartoi, the theme of fraternal war embraced by Juno’s dialogue with Allecto in book 7, and hints at episodes of civil war in Roman history all point in this direction. At the same time, Theban intertexts allow Virgil also to create an image of war as waged between culturally incompatible peoples, and to cast the Latins (and later, to a lesser extent, the Trojans) in the role of the impious and potentially barbarous assailants of Theban myth. This is an effect of Virgil’s extensive allusion to the “catalogs” of Argive forces appearing in Aeschylus and Euripides, as well as of his construction of Mezentius as a new Cephalus. When the tables are turned in book 12, however, Laurentum is made into a new Thebes, and Turnus embodies the heroism of Menoeceus as Aeneas becomes the barbaric assailant.

This construction of a war against a set of peoples presented as both foreign and familiar has important cultural implications for the Romans. On one level, an inconsistent view of the Latins such as one finds in Virgil resonates with the profound ambiguity in how the peoples of Italy are characterized in Roman sources across time. Sometimes they are portrayed as sharing an affinity with Rome, whereas at other times they are made into figures of barbarism, incompatible with the Roman

86. For the idea of an ancestral curse forcing Rome to lapse always into fratricide/civil war see, e.g., Hor. Epod. 7.17–20 with Mankin 1995: 150–52. On the opposition between teleology and lack of closure (as reflected in the two halves of the Aeneid) and on their ideological relevance see Quint 1989.
cultural project. In this respect, the poem’s point of view remains deliberately unresolved, as through the model of Thebes the Latins can be made at once both familiar and foreign, both proto-Romans and barbarians. Perhaps such ambivalence suggests that the unity of the Italian peoples under Roman rule is essentially fraught and imperfect. If Italians and Romans belong to the same family, then their future harmony under Augustus would be inevitable. But such unity can at best be only nominal and fragile. Virgil appears to know that at times of stress the Italians are capable of reverting to their former role as barbarians and enemies of Rome, as one saw, for instance, during the Social War.

On a second level of analysis, Virgil’s use of the tragic story of Thebes to present the war in Latium both as a civil conflict and as defense against a foreign foe resonates with other contemporary Roman reflections in which the tensions captured by the poet of the Aeneid are equally alive. If civil war is understood as a perversion of normal familial and political bonds in such contexts, one finds that it is at times also recast as war with a foreign adversary. This picture perhaps is most familiar from such panegyric passages as the ekphrasis of Aeneas’ shield, in which the battle of Actium is redescribed as a clash between East and West, between Rome and Egypt. Yet strategies of representation of this kind are widely evidenced in Republican sources. While at times the aim apparently is to avoid the scandal of internecine conflict, that captures only a partial truth. For in the Roman imagination the city’s final destruction tends to be linked with the threat of a foreign invasion. Barbarizing the enemy evokes the sense of emergency and mortal threat typical of many narratives of Rome’s darkest hour.

Like other Roman authors, Virgil is fond of interpreting the civil war of the 30s BCE through an apocalyptic lens. He reads Augustus’ victory as the deliverance from barbaric forces intent on annihilating Rome. This perspective coexists with—and confronts—others that acknowledge the deep affinities between the

88. Cairns discusses the complementary process by which the Trojans, and particularly Aeneas, are both Italianized and presented as effeminate easterners. He also shows that Turnus is alternatively presented as an alien and a true Italian: see Cairns 1989: 109–128. The process is studied in greater depth by Reed 2007 (especially 44–147, with 55–72 specifically on Turnus). Reed is also crucial for the idea that intertexts and literary models are central to Virgil’s ambiguous construction of ethnicities.
89. On the Aeneid’s reflection on Rome’s problematic relationship with Italians (and on allusions to the Social War) see Barchiesi 2008.
90. For instance, Cicero makes the most of Catiline’s involvement with Gauls in order to style him as a barbarian intent upon conquering Rome. Cicero’s insistence on Catiline’s plan of burning down the city and settling Gauls amid the ashes evokes the fateful descent of the Senones Gauls in 390 BCE, which brought about the first destruction of Rome. On Catiline, the Gauls, and the fire of Rome see Cic. Cat. 3.19–22, 4.12–13; Stockton 1970: 126; Williams 2001: 177–78; cf. also Cic. Cat. 4.21–22, where Cicero implicitly compares Catiline to Hannibal, Perseus, and other foreign enemies of Rome. Cicero adopts a similar strategy to present Antony as a barbarian ready to destroy Rome in the Philippics: see Phil. 5.37, 7.3, 13.37.
91. See Williams 2001: 170–82, who discusses the connection between fears of a Gallic invasion and the prospect of Rome’s final destruction.
belligerents, highlighting the sense of scandal inherent in civil war. The tragic story of Thebes, which combines the themes of fraternal war and polarized conflict, provides Virgil with a set of scenes, images, and references to recreate this tension within the narrative texture of his epic. On the one hand, Theban allusions assist Virgil in creating a narrative counterpart, in books 7 to 9, to the polarizing picture of the Battle of Actium. On the other hand, through the concept of fraternal war Theban myth allows Virgil to recuperate, within the mythological narrative of the poem, the elements of civil strife erased by a simple, panegyrical version of Actium such as the one on Aeneas’ shield.

Virgil’s reversal of his Theban allusions conveys a tragic view of history that may strike us as congenial to the poet’s mind. In books 7 to 9 Virgil assimilates the Trojan camp with Thebes, whereas in book 12 Theban allusions shift the identification with Thebes to the city of Laurentum. In a similar fashion the barbaric and impious elements typical of tragic characterizations of the Seven, initially attached to the Latins, are transferred to the Trojans in the latter part of the poem, just as the acts of extreme heroism and the echoes of deuotio, attributed to Trojan heroes in book 9, are given to Turnus in book 12. Such flexibility/ambiguity in characterizing the poem’s final conflicts undermines Aeneas’ moral superiority. For when the Trojan hero steps into the role of Polynices, the exiled prince prepared to go to any length to achieve his goals, he assumes also that hero’s moral complications. The ambiguous use of Theban models in this way erases distinctions and implies equivalence, resulting in a “tragic” view of history.92 Both Antony and Augustus had acted as barbarians; both also had shown heroism worthy of Rome. The reality of Roman civil war thus belongs to the world of tragedy, where clear moral superiority is roundly denied to all.

Finally, Theban intertexts allow Virgil to juxtapose and contrast two modes of behavior with regards to the state: the self-sacrifice of Menoeceus and the brothers’ obsession with personal power. Particularly relevant in this regard is Virgil’s experiment in viewing Aeneas through the lens of the figure of Polynices in book 12. Combining these antithetical models facilitates reflection on the role of individual actors during Rome’s long season of civil war. Are Caesar and Pompey to be remembered as Eteocles and Polynices, as one finds in Cicero, for instance, or was Pompey some kind of Menoeceus figure, the hero who gave up his life for the state? What of Augustus? Is he to be remembered similarly as the selfless youth ready to stake his life for his community or as one prepared to go to all lengths to retain power? Virgil’s poem provides no conclusive answer to these questions, and so post-Virgilian authors rely on the potential of Theban myth for inscribing similar dichotomies into the narrative framework of their own epics, a potentiality first intuited by Virgil.

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92. On Virgil’s ambiguous use of Homeric models to erase distinctions and evoke civil war see Quint 2018: 156–57.


