Helen Lovatt

Burning up, melting down, collapsing in: fire imagery, narrative articulation, funerals, and the incestuous poetics of Statius' *Thebaid*.

Abstract (200 words)

This chapter explores fire imagery in Statius' *Thebaid*, its relationship to ritual and narrative articulation. Fire is often involved in Roman ritual, associated with catastrophic destruction alongside purification and release. The *Thebaid*'s complex narrative structure and temporality inspires much recent work (Simms, Chinn); lament and burial have also long shaped the poem's interpretation. I argue that one key tension of the *Thebaid*'s poetics is encapsulated in fire imagery: that between inward-pulling collapse (the burnt-out pyre) and unstoppable destruction and contagion (*urbs caota* and forest fire). These motifs draw on two important structural points in Virgil's *Aeneid*: the burning of Troy and the pyre of Dido, as well as their reworkings in Ovid, Lucan and Valerius Flaccus. This approach relocates the issue of closure in the *Thebaid* from the external *deus ex machina* figure of Theseus to the interior of the poem, focusing on: the contamination of beginnings and endings; the all-consuming pyre and grief for Opheltes; the contagion of Capaneus' fiery destruction; and the battle and lament narratives of book 12, as seen through imagery of fires building up and dying down. The chapter suggests that the incestuous subject matter of Thebes tends to collapse the *Thebaid* in on itself.

Bio (10 lines)

Helen Lovatt is Professor of Classics at the University of Nottingham and has published widely on Flavian epic and its reception, especially Statius. Major works include: *Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the Thebaid* (Cambridge, 2005), *The Epic Gaze: Vision, Gender and Narrative in Ancient Epic* (Cambridge, 2013) and a cultural history of the Argonaut myth, *In Search of the Argonauts* (London, 2021). Her current work focuses on *The Power of Sadness in Virgil's* Aeneid, and further work on the Argonaut tradition, *Argonauts Crossing*.

Introduction

Fire imagery is complex, polyvalent and powerful, and frequently intersects with ritual and contexts of narrative articulation, including closure.[1] Its relationship to the poetics of release and binding is not straightforward, but fire often stands for, or involves, a release of energy or an unbinding of materials or structures. The two central images of this chapter, funeral pyres and fires of destruction as part of *urbs capta* imagery, show fire acting to mark endings, consume material and cleanse pollution. If we take up the challenge posed by Rupke in this volume, to think of ritual as a resonant event, an act of communication imbued with both risk and potential reward, an event that poses questions as well as offering a sense of emotional belonging, fire intersects in many ways with these ideas about ritual.[2] In the tortuous world of Statius' *Thebaid*, rituals are often problematic, asking questions, as Rupke observes, and narrative structures rarely work as expected.[3] This paper builds on existing work on funerals, lament, and closure in the *Thebaid* to explore how fire imagery contributes to the complexity of the poem's narrative articulation, ritual scenes and their relationships to the Theban poetics of incest and politics of resistance.[4]

The phrase 'Burn it down' is a controversial gesture in activism.[5] It implies that in order to create meaningful political change it is necessary to radically erase existing

[1] Many thanks to Angeliki Roumpou for organising the conference and the volume, so effectively and warmly, to Laila Dell'Anno for comments on an earlier draft, and to Tommaso Spinelli for sharing a pre-publication draft of his forthcoming book. The classic article by Knox 1950 on fire imagery in *Aeneid* 2 links fire to imagery of both destruction and renewal in the form of the serpent's ability to shed its skin.

[2] Rupke this volume.

[3] Ten out of fifteen papers in Augoustakis 2013 focus on the *Thebaid*, with three more comparing it to other Flavian works, and the vast majority focus on the ineffectiveness of both ritual and divine apparatus in the poem, including Tuttle 2013, Hubert 2013, Gibson 2013, Parkes 2013, Dee 2013, Bernstein 2013, Ganiban 2013. In contrast, Bessone 2013 argues that Theseus and the *Ara Clementiae* provide sufficient reconstruction to balance out the negativity elsewhere in the poem. Keith 2013 argues that monstrous hybridity of the monsters at the beginning of the *Thebaid* shape the poetics of the rest of the poem.

[4] A recent flourish of work on Statius gives much to think about: Spinelli (forthcoming) chapter 2 discusses Statius' use of Ovidian conflagration imagery along with flood imagery to energise and problematise his narrative beginning; Chinn 2022 and Econimo 2021 both discuss visuality, with a focus on narrative structure; Agri 2022, 128-59 discusses fear as a structuring and causal element of the *Thebaid*'s psychology; Marinis and Papaioannou 2021 investigates various aspects of tragic narrative in the *Thebaid*; Hulls 2021 reconsiders Oedipus, Theseus and the poetics of the *Thebaid*; Simms 2020 explores the temporality of narrative in the *Thebaid* and shows effectively how the end falls into the beginning; Rebeggianni 2018 looks at Statius' relationship to Neronian culture, including Nero's use of solar imagery; Bessone 2011 argues that the combination of Theseus' clemency and Argia's heroism provide positive closure for the *Thebaid*.

[5] An editorial in *Eidolon* discussed the significance of the phrase; see Zuckerberg / Scullin, et al. 2019, April 29. A series of discussions, initiated by Dan–el Padilla Peralta (Poser 2021, Feb. 2), discussed the necessity of making sweeping structural reform in order to move away from the inherent eurocentrism

structures. Conflagration and arson were also images and realities of political unrest in ancient Rome, as Virginia Closs has well explored.[6] Closs argues that the *Aeneid* exploits the imagery of fire in fundamentally ambiguous ways: the epic 'strikes a delicate balance between suggesting the ultimate necessity of violence and destruction to resolve certain conflicts, and insistently exposing the human cost and inherent risks of employing such forces.'[7] Fire imagery in the *Thebaid* has been treated intermittently elsewhere: for instance, Spinelli discusses the Ovidian, cosmic resonances of the Phaethon image for understanding paternal relationships in the *Thebaid*.[8] The centrality of the fire–water dichotomy in Ovid's two destructions of the universe, as beginning and recurring imagery of narrative structure, underscores the Ovidian side of Statius' incestuous poetics.[9] Newlands points out the way that fire divides Atys and Ismene in their central episode of failed love.[10]

This chapter will explore the relationships between fire, ritual and narrative articulation in four sections: the failed or refused funerals that bring the ends of epic into middles and beginnings (anti–funerals); two particular fiery images in the funeral of Opheltes, and their connection to fire out of control and *urbs capta* imagery; the way that Statius' funeral pyres expand into the texts around them, with a case study of Capaneus (ante–funerals); and finally the narrative pattern of battle that begins with burning desire and ends with fire dying down, with a particular focus on book 12. Overall, I argue that one tendency of the *Thebaid* is for the narrative to collapse into its middle, in both parts and wholes, just as the Theban *mythos* always comes back to its origins in the story of Oedipus. Attempts to differentiate, order and control are thwarted by contamination, contagion and excessiveness, and one of the main vectors of these structural effects is the image of fire.

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of Classics and its history of being used to support white supremacist ideology. Key interventions included: Hanink 2021, Feb. 11; further discussion and clarification in the detailed blog post by Kennedy / Planudes 2021.

[6] Closs 2020, 45–66 on the *Aeneid*; Closs focuses mainly on the Neronian fire of 64 and its reception. For Flavian Rome (141–172), she examines Statius *Silvae* 2.7, Martial's *Epigrams* and the *Octavia*. This leaves a significant gap to explore similar themes in Flavian epic.

[7] Closs 2020, 66.

[8] Spinelli 2021, 104–107 argues that Statius' Jupiter displays a compulsion to repeat intergenerational trauma from previous epic and previous periods of Roman history.

[9] Spinelli forthcoming further explores the narrative articulation via Ovidian imagery of destruction by fire and flood in the early books of the *Thebaid*.

[10] Newlands 2016, 150: 'Fire is a powerful image for the transgression of familial bonds social *mores*.'

Anti–funerals: Failed, refused, faked and negated burial and the structure of the Thebaid

Achilles' refusal to bury Hector stands for the whole of the destruction caused by the Trojan war. Lucan gives his anti–hero, Pompey, a partial, unsatisfactory burial, which allows him to roam free as a spirit and inspire Cato to perpetuate civil war. Statius does not just 'hammer home' foreshadowings of Creon's refusal of burial to the Argives and Polynices, but he multiplies this failed burial at least sevenfold, as each hero dies and is not sufficiently, promptly or appropriately buried. Parkes lists these 'problematic' or 'perverted' funerals in her discussion of the necromancy of book 4 as a failed or perverted *katabasis*.[11] This section shows how fire imagery, especially images of unreliable ritual, gives these anti–funerals structural significance as images of the working of Statius' epic poetry.

Hypsipyle's fake funeral for her father Thoas combines the two key Virgilian fire tropes of *urbs capta* and Dido's pyre, emphasising the emptiness of ritual in the *Thebaid*. Hypsipyle, as narrator of her own past griefs, and saviour of her father, has long been seen as a version of Aeneas. She also matches Dido in other aspects, as queen welcoming the Argonauts. This sometimes operates in paradoxical ways, such as when the Lemnian women swear an oath to bind each other to their plan and seal it with human sacrifice of a child, evoking imagery of witchcraft, such as that which Dido uses as cover for her suicide (*Theb.* 5.152–163). This ritual avoids fire, focusing rather on blood and darkness. Hypsipyle represents herself as terrified by it, and compares herself to a deer pursued by wolves (5.165–169), also suggesting Dido, but Dido as victim of Venus and, inadvertently, Aeneas (*Aen.* 4.68–73).[12] Hypsipyle's smuggling of Thoas out of Lemnos particularly evokes Aeneas' rescue of Anchises (*Theb.* 236–264). Bacchus provides them with a path of flame as they leave (*mitis iter longae clarauit limite flammae*, 'the gentle god brightened the way with a path of long flame', *Theb.* 5.286), in contrast to Aeneas who creeps through darkness, and is shocked into running by Anchises' sight of 'burning shields and flashing bronze' (*ardentis clipeos atque aera micantia*, *Aen.* 2.734). The light of dawn brings

[11] Parkes 2013, 167–168. For Parkes, only the final burials at the very end of the poem are unproblematic.

[12] There is a slight verbal echo, with the repetition of *cerua* in the same metrical location at *Theb.* 5.165 (*Aen.* 4.69). On Hypsipyle as unreliable narrator and doublet of both Dido and Aeneas, see Nugent 1996, with 61–62 on the oath and Hypsipyle's agency; 64 on *urbs capta* and repetitions of *Aen.* 2.

realisation and horror for the Lemnian women, leading to shame–faced, half–hearted funerals (*festinis ignibus urunt*, 'they burn in hurried fire', *Theb.* 5.301). In Hypsipyle's description of the bereaved city, it becomes an *urbs capta* without fire, but drenched in blood.

Hypsipyle builds her fake pyre in the innermost recesses of the palace (5.313), burns emblems for and belongings of Thoas, allowing a bloodied sword to stand in for a real killing, and prays to turn away the omen of this ritual from her father. So Dido builds a pyre supposedly intended to burn her memories of Aeneas (639–640), in the inner part of the house, transgressively (*interiora domus inrumpit limina*, 'she breaks through the inner thresholds into the house', *Aen.* 4.645), carries Aeneas' abandoned sword (646–647) and burns *exuuiae* ('spoils/reminders', 651). Dido's pyre stands as a synecdochic image for the ultimate destruction of Carthage by Roman forces, a mirror image of the destruction of Troy, and forms one of the ending points of the tetradic structure of the *Aeneid*, in apposition to the flaming figure of Augustus/Apollo watching the triumph on the shield of Aeneas at the end of book 8, and the soul of Turnus sent into the cold by *feruidus* ('burning', 'boiling', *Aen.* 12.951) Aeneas.[13] The importance of fire imagery in the Lemnian episode may partly relate to the island's sacred connection with Hephaestus/Vulcan. The myth of the Lemnian women has also been associated with a ritual in which new fire returns to the island, marking a new beginning.[14] Hypsipyle's fake funeral, too, articulates the epyllion of *Thebaid* 5, as Heslin has shown, in a way that is fundamentally different from Dido.[15] The fire cleanses her of responsibility in the eyes of the other Lemnians, and moves her from imitating Aeneas (as Valerius presents her heroism) to imitating Dido.

Heslin argues that Statius' Hypsipyle epyllion is fundamentally a rebuke to Valerius' *Argonautica* for not being innovative enough, and that it takes Virgil's revivifying of the sack of Troy and interweaves it with Catullus' encapsulation of both Argo, Theseus and the Troy narrative in poem 64.[16] 'Statius takes the Argo–story, the *Thebaid*'s rival as the standard topic for collective epic at Rome, and turns it

[13] The complex intertextual relationship with Valerius' Lemnian episode can also be illuminated through the mutual reflections of fire imagery. For instance, there are multiple resonances of Valerius' Cyzicus episode, and both texts play with the limits of Apollonius' Lemnian episode, and how Apollonius covers up the Lemnian crime. On the relationship between the two episodes, see Clare 2004 and Gibson 2004. On the Argonaut myth and Statius, see Parkes 2009, Parkes 2014a, Parkes 2014b.
[14] The classic article is Burkert 1970.
[15] See Heslin 2018, 108.
[16] See Heslin 2018, 118–120.

inside out'.[17] Hypsipyle's pyre plays with interiority differently: in the heart of the story, the wood between the worlds, the innermost palace, is an absence, an empty pyre. Where Dido's pyre should not contain a body, but does, Hypsipyle's should contain a body, but does not. Where Valerius turns her into a hero, Statius makes her fundamentally unstable. The absence of Thoas' body casts Hypsipyle as innocent for the Argives, but guilty for the Lemnians, in breaking their oath. The fake ritual calls into question her subsequent narratives. The episode combines the pyre of Dido and the burning of Troy to focus in on intrafamilial violence, unreliable ritual and unresolvable interpretation. Like the wider *Thebaid*, the Lemnian epyllion threatens to collapse in on itself.[18]

The young hero Atys is brought dying into Thebes, so that he can violate his betrothed with death in marriage, but she only gets to close his eyes, not enact a ritual cleansing. In Ismene's dream, the transition to marriage becomes instead a transition to death: *subitusque intercidit ignis* ('A sudden fire split us apart', 8.631). The fire blurs the boundaries between the different rituals (wedding, funeral) and seems almost to blur the boundary between dream and reality: *turbata repente omnia*, ('suddenly all was upturned' 630–631) in the dream, becomes *subito cum pigra tumultu / expauit domus* ('when the sluggish house panicked with sudden turbulence', 646–647).[19]

The Parthenopaeus episode of book 9 begins with ritual which evokes death, based in water, but referring also to fire, and ends with a substitute and incomplete death ritual. Atalanta dreams primarily of tree destruction, especially her trophy–tree, but also of 'well–known images and likenesses of herself burnt up' (*effigiesque suas simulacraque nota cremari*, *Theb.* 9.582). At 9.887 Parthenopaeus himself refers back to Atalanta's dream, as if it were happening simultaneously, creating ring composition

[17] Heslin 2018, 120.

[18] The incestuous elements are less prominent, although her emotional reunion after many years with her sons, who she thought might be dead, does perhaps evoke Jocasta's reunion with Oedipus, and the confusion of family relationships is certainly seen in her usurpation of motherhood from Eurydice. Laila Dell'Anno (pers. comm.) points out that the potential echo in *Thoantis* [line ref.] of the corpse she should have carried (that of Thoas) the earlier Lemnian slaughter, and its connection to the *Iliad*'s emphasis on her son Thoas (*Iliad* 5.650-52) so that the replication and interweaving goes beyond the *Thebaid* to pull in Trojan myth and *Argonautica* as well.

[19] Laila Dell'Anno points out (pers. comm.) that there is a similar blurring between sleep and death at the moment of Opheltes' death 5.539-40: *fugit ilicet artus / somnus et in solam patuerunt lumina mortem* ('sleep flees suddenly from his limbs, and his eyes lie open only in death). The fire imagery is incorporated through the snake, which has fiery eyes, poison and burns the grass (5.508: *livida* ***fax*** *oculis*, 'livid flame in the eyes'; 5.522: *sicci nocens furit* ***igne*** *veneni* 'it rages, harmful with the fire of its dry poison'; 5.527: *percussae* ***calidis*** *afflatibus herbae*, 'the turf struck dead by heated exhalations'). The connection between snakes and fire imagery is well-established; see Knox 1950.

through self–aware characters. He sends her a lock of hair to burn instead of himself. His final instruction to Atalanta is as follows: 'But these weapons, unfortunate in their first campaign, burn them or hang them up as an accusation to ungrateful Diana' (*haec autem primis arma infelicia castris / **ure**, uel ingratae crimen suspende Dianae*.' *Theb*. 9.906–907). Just as Amphiaraus fails in his *katabasis*, and Parkes emphasises the importance of the semi–permeable boundary between the underworld and the world of the living in the *Thebaid*, so Parthenopaeus fails in his transition to manhood, the incomplete initiation matching the incomplete burial.[20] These few examples show how funeral ritual, and other rituals associated with fire (often alongside or in apposition to water), do not provide secure transition, in spatial, temporal, spiritual or narrative terms in Statius' *Thebaid*. The collapse of the battlefield itself at the transition between books 7 and 8, the intrusion of war into domestic space in the Atys and Ismene episode, and the failed cleansing of Atalanta, which forms a ring with Parthenopaeus' imagined funeral as he dies, all push towards simultaneity, the collapse inwards of narrative structure itself.

It's over before it's begun: Incestuous poetics and the funeral of Opheltes

The funeral of the baby Opheltes in *Thebaid* 6 encapsulates beginning, middle and end, exemplifying the way that Statius' *Thebaid* falls into itself, just as the relationships of the Theban royal family are pushed too close and confused with each other through incest. The proem of the *Thebaid* begins with *fraternas acies* ('brotherly battle–lines', *Theb*. 1.1) inspired by the fire of the Muses (*Pierius menti calor incidit*, 'the Pierian heat falls on my mind', *Theb*. 1.3), and Statius outlines his project in this way: *limes mihi carminis esto / Oedipodae confusa domus* ('let the boundary of my song be the mixed–up house of Oedipus', *Theb*. 1.17). The Nemean episode has for a while now been seen as emblematic of the *Thebaid*'s poetics: by looking at this again through fire, ritual and narrative articulation, we can see in further detail how this works.[21] In the middle of the poem, Statius draws on imagery of both opening and closing, so that we are encouraged to read every part of the poem

[20] Parkes 2013, 174.
[21] Brown 1994; Soerink 2014.

as simultaneously beginning, middle and end.[22] The opening lines of book 6 emphasise the funeral and games as emblems and initiations of war, through imagery of sweat and fire: *quo Martia bellis / praesudare paret seseque accendere uirtus* ('through which martial virtue prepares to fore–sweat and sets itself alight', *Theb.* 6.3–4).[23] Where the *Iliad*'s funeral of Patroclus and games in book 23 fashion the end of the poem as substitute for the end of the war, and the funeral as funeral for Achilles, the funeral of Opheltes, also known as Archemorus ('beginning of grief'), stands in for the funerals of all the war dead, ending the war before it is begun.

The description of Opheltes' pyre and its building begins with a reminder that all of this will be burnt: *tristibus interea ramis teneraque cupresso / damnatus flammae torus et puerile feretrum / texitur* ('Meanwhile the couch condemned to the flame and the boyish bier are woven from sad branches and tender cypress', *Theb.* 6.54–56); decorated with *floribus morituris* ('flowers about to die', 58), the pyre building is described in exhaustive detail, recreating the ritual of building it. *Muneraque in cineres* ('gifts for ashes', 73) emphasise the conspicuous destruction of wealth and resources. The Argive army build the pyre as atonement both for the death of Opheltes and the killing of the sacred snake that caused his death, as an attempt to ward off their own imminent destruction: *cumulare pyram, quae crimina caesi / anguis et infausti cremet atra piacula belli* ('heap up the pyre, to burn up the crime of the slaughtered snake and the black offerings for an ill–omened war', *Theb.* 6.86–87). The building of the pyre itself threatens to be another act of sacrilege, giving previously untouched trees (93–95) as 'food for final flames' (100, *flammis alimenta supremis*). The Argive army also participate in the funeral rituals, not just cutting down the grove to build the pyre, and marching around it (*stantes inclinant puluere flammas*, 'they sway the standing flames with their dust', *Theb.* 6.216), circling three times, and crashing their weapons four times, beating their shields four times, but also adding their own items to the flames, as if attempting to avert their own inevitable deaths, or pre–mourning their own deaths.

Their own priest, presumably Amphiaraus, sets up an alternative, competing or additional fire to read omens for the war (*Theb.* 6.220–226):

[22] The idea of foreshadowing runs throughout the work of Vessey: Vessey 1970a; Vessey 1970b; Vessey 1973. Vessey's work is developed by Simms 2020.
[23] On games as microcosm of the poem, see Lovatt 2005.

semianimas alter pecudes spirantiaque ignis
accipit armenta; hic luctus abolere nouique
funeris auspicium uates, quamquam omina sentit
uera, iubet: dextri gyro et uibrantibus hastis
hac redeunt, raptumque suis libamen ab armis
quisquis iacit, seu frena libet seu cingula flammis
mergere seu iaculum summae seu cassidis umbram.

Another fire receives half–dead herd animals and breathing
Cattle; this the prophet orders to erase grief and omen
Of fresh death, although he recognises the omens
As true: they return in a right–hand circle past this one,
Brandishing spears, and each man throws an offering seized
From his own weapons, whether he offers reins, or a belt to the flames,
Or whether he chooses to sink a javelin or the shade of his high helm.

The funeral pyre of Opheltes leads to another fire, which itself foreshadows further pyres. The sacrificial offerings of their own *exuviae* (reminders of themselves) put the Argives in a liminal state between life and death. The two rituals become one, with the men marching fluidly from one circle into another, from clashing their weapons to brandishing them, the repeated *seu* clauses emphasising the deliberate repeated actions aimed at deflecting the ill omen that they are creating.
The excessiveness of all aspects of this funeral makes it a potentially dangerous ritual rather than a protective one. The Argives stand guard around the flames partly to stop the excessive grief of the parents from leading to their suicide (202–203):

iam face subiecta primis in frondibus ignis
exclamat; labor insanos arcere parentes.

Now the torch has crept up and fire shouts out
from the first leaves; it is hard work to keep back the maddened parents.

The fire is personified while the humans require additional effort, as if keeping them from loading themselves as further fuel for the flames; their cries of grief are matched by the noise of the flames. Their excessive grief is further layered on in the gross consumption of wealth in the flames: *ditantur flammae; non umquam opulentior illis / ante cinis:* ('the flames are enriched; not ever before was anything more

luxurious than those ashes', 206–207). The 'crackling' of fire (*crepitant*) becomes the cracking of gemstones; the flames flow in liquid silver (*liquescit* / *argentum*), brought out by the enjambement. Instead of clothes absorbing sweat from their human wearers, these clothes sweat gold. The fuel is made fat (*pinguescunt*) with exotic, expensive incense, and the whole becomes a bizarre banquet, moving from incense to honey and saffron, to wine, blood and milk.

Fire also features in the imagery used to describe this excessiveness.[24] Two striking similes emphasise the dangerous tendency of fire to grow out of control, destroying landscapes both natural and human. The Argive destruction of the wooded landscape to build the pyre is first compared to a forest fire and then to a captured city (*Theb.* 6.107–117):

> dat gemitum tellus: non sic euersa feruntur
> Ismara cum fracto Boreas caput extulit antro,
> non grassante Noto citius nocturna peregit
> flamma nemus. linquunt flentes dilecta locorum
> otia cana Pales Siluanaque arbiter umbrae
> semideumque pecus, migrantibus aggemit illis
> silua, nec amplexae dimittunt robora Nymphae.
> ut cum possessas auidis uictoribus arces
> dux raptare dedit, uix signa audita, nec urbem
> inuenias; ducunt sternuntque abiguntque feruntque
> inmodici, minor ille fragor quo bella gerebant.
>
> The land gives a groan: not so much is overturned Ismara
> Carried away when Boreas raises his head from his broken cave,
> Not more quickly with the South wind rioting does nocturnal flame
> Drive through the grove. Pales and Silvanus, judge of the shade,
> and the half–god herd, weeping, leave the places chosen
> for long–aged leisure, the woodland heaps up groans as they
> move on, nor do the Nymphs' embraces let go the oaks.
> As when a leader gives captured citadels to greedy victors
> To snatch, scarcely when the sign is heard, you would find
> No city left; they take, they raze, they drive away, they carry off
> Immoderate; the crash is less than in the war itself.

[24] On the structural importance and complexity of Statius' visual imagery, see Chinn 2022, for instance 48-52 on Statius' retreating gaze and the visual sequencing of the prologue to catalogue in *Thebaid* 4. On ekphrasis in the *Thebaid*, see also Econimo 2021.

The destruction and desolation caused by the tree–felling in order to build the pyres is as complete as that caused by natural destruction (storm and forest fire, the Ovidian cosmic duo of water and fire, again) and the devastation of war (the looting of a city). This reverses *Aeneid* 2, in which the gods' destruction of Troy is compared to farmers felling an ancient ash tree (624–631). The multiple images of destruction contaminate each other and escalate in volume and intensity. The uprooted trees implicit in the storm simile make perfect sense given the context of tree–felling: this develops naturally into the forest fire image, since lightning strikes can cause wildfires, which are spread by the same strong winds (this time warm instead of cold). The misery of the woodland gods evicted from their territory and destroyed by the trees' destruction combines with the storm and fire imagery to evoke the people of a captured city. The completeness of destruction is emphasised by the very plain *nec urbem* ('no city') last in the line (115), and the string of third person verbs highlights the responsibility of the fighters for the destruction, while the enormous crash circles back towards the thunder of the starting imagery. Where epic similes usually compare human situations and actions to the natural world, here Statius reverses the flow, by comparing storm to war, and thus returning to the original comparison in which the Argive army are responsible for destroying the landscape. The images grow out of control, multiplying, contaminating each other, building energy and leading back to their own origin, all nevertheless focusing on the speed and completeness of destruction. The energy generated by the fiery clearance metapoetically anticipates the re-starting of the epic narrative in book 7, just as Ovid's Phaethontic firestorm recapitulates the initiatory power of Virgil's sea storm.[25] However, the immensity of the funeral also foreshadows the total destruction of both Thebes and the Argive army, as the ritual fire metaphorically blows out of control into the complete destruction of wildfire and the *urbs capta*.

The incommensurability of grief is at the root of the excessiveness and uncontainability of Opheltes' funeral. Despite, or because of, his tiny size, his loss is immeasurably awful for his parents and for the Argive army, for whom he represents their own deaths as well as the whole destructive war. It is impossible for the ritual to measure up. The ability of ritual to confer significance through social participation

[25] On Ovid's flood and fire as structuring the opening books of the *Thebaid*, see Spinelli forthcoming.

leads to a forest fire of grief, that spreads and contaminates. Opheltes' death stands in for, foreshadows, echoes and causes the deaths to come, encompassing the entire war in his miniature frame.

Ante–funerals: untimeliness, narrative articulation, fire and weird ritual

'Foreshadowing' is a well–established aspect of Statius' Theban narrative. Andrew McClellan refers to the frequent proleptic reference to Creon's refusal of burial to the Argives as 'bludgeoning narrative anticipation'.[26] McClellan also shows how funeral rites are often evoked in imagery well beyond the bounds of the ritual itself, showing how Statius' poetry has a tendency to blur one aspect into another, collapsing narrative units together.[27] An example of this is the cremation of Capaneus. As we approach his climactic *aristeia*, imagery of thunderbolts and fire in the veins contaminate other situations and characters. Menoeceus in particular functions as an *alter ego* of Capaneus, his virtuous twin.[28]

The death of Capaneus is a clear articulating moment: the hero climbs the walls, threatening to use Jupiter's thunderbolt to renew his attack and relight his torch: *'his' ait 'in Thebas, his iam decet ignibus uti, / hinc renouare faces lassamque accendere quercum'* ('These', he said, 'against Thebes, these fires, now, ought to be used, I ought to renew my torch here and light up my exhausted oak.' *Theb.* 10.925–926). The narrative pauses on his burning body (*ardenti corpore*, 931), moving down from crest to shield to limbs. The men below are terrified by his fiery body, and the book finishes on the thought that he almost needed a second thunderbolt (*potuit fulmen sperare secundum*, 'he could have hoped for a second thunderbolt', 939). His falling body bridges the gap into the next book, where the thunderbolt is still consuming him and he is still breathing his last and falling terrifyingly towards the earth (*Theb.* 11.1–4). The imagery of marking the walls (*signauit muros ultricis semita flammae*, 'he marked the walls with a path of avenging flame', 4), fragmenting the city (*lacerae complexus fragmina turris*, 'embracing pieces of torn–up tower', 9) and

[26] McClellan 2019, 203. 'Statius, as narrator or through the voices of his characters, repeatedly refers to Creon's looming ban to the point of obsession'; McClellan 2019, 204.
[27] McClellan 2019, 215–220 discusses the anti–funerals as anticipations of Creon's refusal of burial. But this is to limit the temporal and thematic play and point it towards a culmination in the figures of Creon and Theseus that underestimates the way the *Thebaid* blurs both backwards and forwards.
[28] On Menoeceus as Capaneus' double see Heinrich 1999, 186.

contaminating the fields (*hostiliaque urit / arua et anhelantem caelesti sulphure campum*, 'he burns the hostile fields and the gasping plain with heavenly sulphur', 16–17) emphasises collapse.[29] The dizzying play of perspectives is multiplied by the similes, which compare his dead body first to Enceladus, happily viewed by the gods, pressed down by Aetna, exhausted after the gigantomachic battle at Phlegra (11.7–8), and second to Tityos, tortured by vultures tearing his innards, who themselves are horrified by the scale of his body as they emerge (11.12–15). The fire becomes both the cosmic destruction of a volcano and the internal fire of pain.[30] In a typically Statian inversion, the fields of Thebes are buried by Capaneus, rather than Capaneus being buried by the fields of Thebes.[31]

Throughout book 10, characters are frequently hit by metaphorical thunderbolts, anticipating the fiery destruction of Capaneus, showing how the fire of his death contaminates the wider narrative. Menoeceus is described with a powerful thunderbolt image as Virtus inspires him to commit suicide by throwing himself off the walls of Thebes (*Theb.* 10.674–675):

> fulminis haud citius radiis afflata cupressus
> combibit infestas et stirpe et uertice flammas
>
> No more quickly does a cypress, blown away by rays of a thunderbolt,
> Drink up the hostile flames to both root and to peak

The swiftness of the flames is compared to the movement of light by the image of rays, and to forest fire blown by wind in the participle *afflata*, while *combibit* combines imagery of drinking and the integration of bodily functions. The roots and peak of the tree evoke the completeness of Menoeceus' possession by divine powers, while the hostile flames enclose the tree from tip to tip.[32] The concluding phrase of

[29] See Sacerdoti 2018, 174-6 on the language of collapse, in relation to Statius' treatment of the eruption of Vesuvius.
[30] On the potential importance of Vesuvius in Statius' poetics of trauma and renewal, see Sacerdoti 2018.
[31] There is a clear connection to the figure of Prometheus in Valerius' *Argonautica*, the positive *exemplum* of Jupiter's mercy exercised by Hercules on his way to *apotheosis*. In a future article, I will discuss the deep and complex relationship between *Thebaid* and Valerius' *Argonautica* further.
[32] The close relationship between fire and water imagery extends the contagion of Statius' poetics still further: in a sense it is arbitrary to attempt to separate out the fire elements of Statius' chemistry of destruction, and liquid imagery is also important in ritual contexts and at limits/moments of narrative

the inspiration scene, as Menoeceus internalises the praise of those around him to solidify his suicidal determination, comes back to fire: *ignibus implet honestis* ('fills him with honourable fires', *Theb.* 10.685). It is as if Statius attempts to control the contagion of fire imagery with the adjective *honestis*, emphasising the respectability of Menoeceus' self–destructive impulse. The effect of the paradoxical valorisation is equally to ironise Menoeceus' desire for glory. Menoeceus and Capaneus contaminate each other, creating admirable villains and appalling heroes, so that both sides of the battle collapse together.

Earlier in book 10, thunderbolt imagery thematises revelation, involving viewers and readers in the *Thebaid*'s complex of fiery intoxication. Creon is hit by the realisation that Menoeceus is the subject of Tiresias' prophecy at 10.618 (*grandem subiti cum fulminis ictum,* 'hit by the great blow of a sudden thunderbolt'), joining in proleptically with the divine destruction of his son, which will then lead to his own killing by Theseus. Similarly, the Theban Amphion prefigures the futility of achievement in Statius' Theban war, as with Capaneus and Menoeceus, when he realises that his capture and killing of Hopleus and Dymas does not measure up to the wider destruction caused by the night raid (*Theb.* 10.467–472):

> non longum caede recenti
> laetatus uidet innumeris feruere cateruis
> tellurem atque una gentem expirare ruina.
> qui tremor inicitur caeli de lampade tactis,
> hic fixit iuuenem, pariterque horrore sub uno
> uox, acies sanguisque perit
>
> Not long did he rejoice at the fresh slaughter,
> He sees the earth boiling with innumberable squadrons
> And a whole people gasping their last in one destruction.
> A trembling falls on him, like those touched by light from the sky,
> Now it nails the young man, and his voice fails, equally under
> One shuddering, with his gaze and blood

articulation, purification and closure (rivers, blood), but this chapter does not have space to fully immerse itself in the interconnection of different elemental imagery. The Lucretian play of *ignis* and *lignis* makes a strong case for starting with fire in atomising poetic elements.

This doubled moment of realisation, in which the Argive victory is compromised by the loss of Hopleus and Dymas, and the Theban success in killing Hopleus and Dymas is dwarfed by the mass slaughter of the night raid, forms the closural moment of this episode.[33] It emphasises the balanced contagious nature of mutual destruction, and replicates the overall structure of the war, in which initial Theban victory is revoked by Theban defeat at the hands of Theseus.

The transition between Menoeceus' suicide and Capaneus' *aristeia* focuses on the lament of Eurydice, mother of Menoeceus, who connects the disorder of incest with the untimeliness of Menoeceus' death (10.796–797; 10.809–810):

> non ego monstrifero coitu reuoluta nouaui
> pignora …
> sponte en ultroque peremptus
> inrumpis maestas Fatis nolentibus umbras.
>
> I did not renew in monster–bearing miscegenation
> pledges returning back …
> see, of your own accord, and destroyed by your wish
> you break in to the sad shades with the Fates unwilling.

Menoeceus in Eurydice's lament is both similar to and different from Polynices and Eteocles, out of time and out of place, disturbing the order of things. His death is against fate, like that of Dido, disruptive like that of Amphiaraus.
After Capaneus' death, fire, ritual and untimeliness are combined in the portrayal of Eteocles' attempt to propitiate Jupiter in gratitude for the thunderbolt (acting as transitional motif between the activities of the two Furies and the two brothers). As soon as Eteocles finishes his prayer, the fire embodies the destruction and violation of underworld powers in the *Thebaid* (11.226–227):

> dixerat: ast illi niger ignis in ora genasque
> prosiluit raptumque comis diadema cremauit.
>
> He had spoken: but black fire jumped forward into his face
> And cheeks, snatched and burnt the diadem from his hair.

[33] On the importance of tragic *anagnorisis* in Flaivan epic, see Cowan 2021.

Eteocles continues the disrupted ritual, like Hercules dying on Mount Oeta (11.234–238):

> qualis ubi implicitum Tirynthius ossibus ignem
> sensit et Oetaeas membris accedere uestes,
> uota incepta tamen libataque tura ferebat
> durus adhuc patiensque mali; mox grande coactus
> ingemuit, uictorque furit per uiscera Nessus.
>
> Just as when the Tirynthian feels the fire woven inside
> His bones and accepted the Oetean robes on his limbs,
> Nevertheless he continues the initiated prayers, the incense offered,
> Hard still and suffering pain; soon forced by greater pain
> He groaned, and Nessus rages victorious through his entrails.

The messenger emphasises untimeliness as he interrupts (11.242–243):

> 'rumpe pios cultus intempestiuaque, rector,
> sacra deum:'
>
> 'Break dutiful worship, ruler, and untimely
> Rites of the gods:'

Eteocles is attempting to close the Capaneus episode, to shape the interpretation as favourable to his own cause, thinking that he is communicating with Jupiter, but his ritual is diverted by Tisiphone to Dis, and he is actually beginning the next battle, inevitably leading to his own journey downwards to Hades in contrast to Hercules' apotheosis. The fire in the bones continues imagery from Capaneus' death, and Eteocles' interrupted rites are broken like the course of Menoeceus' life. Imagery of contamination, matter and practice out of place and time, is combined with the intensity and uncontrollable nature of fire.

Capaneus' death therefore echoes backwards and forwards in the text, the climactic Argive *aristeia*, infecting other moments, often themselves transitional between scenes and characters, with the fire of divine destruction. This one example of the impressionistic blurring of Statius' poetry is particularly focused on fire, but it also brings out the way that untimeliness, or temporal disturbance, is one important

characteristic of Statius' problematic rituals, denying them the power to bring closure and cohesion.

Burning up and dying down: books 10–12

The imagery of desire for fighting (and its waning) associates fire with narrative articulation.[34] At the beginnings of episodes and undertakings, Statius' fighters light up. For instance, as Capaneus finally gets into his *aristeia*, he is fiery and contaminated by fire (*Theb*. 10.842–844):

> longeque timendus
> multifidam quercum flagranti lumine uibrat;
> arma rubent una clipeoque incenditur ignis.
>
> Terrifying from afar
> He brandishes a many–forked oak blazing with light;
> His weapons grow red along with his shield fire is lit up.

The relationships between words in 844 blurs in the process of reading: we cannot tell clearly whether the arms and the shield are together, or Capaneus and the flame, or whether Capaneus will be the subject of *incenditur*, but then *ignis* turns up to bring it all together. This evokes the way fire spreads and takes over. Fire here acts as an image both for poetic intensity and inspiration, as well as battlefield violence and madness. The multiple nature of the torch, and its widespread terror–inducing effects, thematise the workings of Statian poetry and narrative.

It is not just Capaneus, with his fiery end, who embodies the poetics of fire. Similar imagery of burning to fight occurs at the beginning of other *aristeia* episodes: the transition back to the battlefield after Diana makes Parthenopaeus inviolable: *tunc uero exserto circumuolat igneus arcu, / nec se mente regit* ('then indeed he flies around fiery with his bow, nor does his mind control him, 9.736–737); after Thiodamas' speech, the Argives burn to join him (*talia uociferans noctem exturbat, euntque / non secus accensi proceres quam si omnibus idem / corde deus: flagrant*

[34] Hershkowitz 1994 shows how Statian narrative uses imagery of sexual arousal, climax and exhaustion to convey the waves of intensity and boredom that characterise the narrative of the *Thebaid*. This chapter argues that fire imagery matches and mixes in with those patterns, becoming part of the *Theban* complex of misdirected energy and fertility.

comitare et iungere casus, 'uttering such things, he threw the night into confusion, and they go afire no differently than if the god were the same for all in their hearts: they burn to accompany him and join the chance', 10.219–221); in the transition to Capaneus' *aristeia*, Adrastus and Polynices encourage the Argives (*sic ait; ardentes alacer succendit Adrastus* / *Argolicusque gener*, 'So he spoke; keen Adrastus and his Argive son–in–law lit up the burning men', 10.487–488). One fire word might be unremarkable, but *igneus* is strong, and the imagery of flying around (*circumuolat*) also evokes wildfire. In the other examples, Statius doubles and reinforces the fire imagery.

Creon's encounter with Eteocles, part of the sequence playing with delay and intense haste in book 11, in which he urges him into the fratricidal battle, forms a bridge between book 10 and 12, and continues the density of fire imagery.[35] Creon's grief for Menoeceus causes him to push Eteocles into battle and is presented in repeatedly fiery terms. He arrives burning: *sed ardens* / *ecce aderat luctu* ('but burning in grief, look, he was present', 11.262–263); Menoeceus burns him: *urit fera corda Menoeceus* ('Menoeceus burns his wild heart', 264); Creon accuses Eteocles of being like a plague from heaven, combining imagery of plague–bearing star, thunderbolt and contagion: *urbem … ceu caelo deiecta lues inimicaue tellus* / *hausisti* ('you have drained the city … like a plague sent down from the sky or a hostile land', 273–275); he intensifies the accusation by focusing on the unburied Thebans: *hos ignis egentes* / *fert humus*, ('the ground bears these [Thebans] lacking fire', 276–277); he finishes the goading speech by describing Polynices as burning to kill him: *in te ardens frater* ('your brother burning against you', 295); finally Creon's wrath is boiling: *miseraque exaestuat ira* ('he boils over with wretched anger', 297). All this fire imagery leads up to a key snake image, in which Eteocles holds back his violent impulse against Creon, like a snake drinking its own venom (*Theb.* 11.308–314):

> sic iurgia paulum
> distulit atque ensem, quem iam dabat ira, repressit.
> ictus ut incerto pastoris uulnere serpens
> erigitur gyro longumque e corpore toto
> uirus in ore legit; paulum si deuius hostis
> torsit iter, cecidere minae tumefactaque frustra

[35] On the theme of *mora* (delay) in the *Thebaid* and the way that book 12 speeds up the narrative and produces a compressed recapitulation of *Aeneid* 12, see Gervais 2017b.

colla sedent, irasque sui bibit ipse ueneni.

So he put off insults
A little and re–sheathed the sword, which his anger was now providing.
As when a serpent struck by a glancing wound from a shepherd
Rises up in a coil and collects long poison from his whole body
In his mouth; if the enemy twists his path a little
Out of the way, the threats fall down, the neck swollen
In vain settles, and the snake itself drinks the angers of its own poison.

The political opponent goading a young man into a fatal duel evokes Drances and Turnus in the *Aeneid*, but the snake image echoes Virgil's use of snake imagery in *Aeneid* 2, combining the description of Aeneas' mad dash to arms and his deception of Androgeos (*Aen.* 2.378–381) with Pyrrhus' rejuvenation and violence (*Aen.* 2.471–475).[36] By combining these images of destruction, drawing on the Virgilian *urbs capta*, Eteocles becomes the destroyer of his own city as well as the tyrant and the degenerate son. This image, further, creates a complex synergy between the final showdown of both *Aeneid* and *Thebaid*, and the initial destruction of the fall of Troy, making the *Aeneid* as Theban exemplar mimic the collapsible nature of Statian poetics. Rather than just abridging to speed up, intensify and polarise the final confrontation in book 12, as Gervais has persuasively shown, Statius also blurs the *Aeneid* into itself, stretching the poem's final duel over several books, and simultaneously condensing the *Aeneid* into different moments of truth. The snake image which describes Eteocles' anger encapsulates in miniature the pattern of swelling and subsiding, emphasised by Hershkowitz, and also apparent in the fire imagery of the final books. In book 12, in contrast, darkness dominates, fires struggle or are absent; the Theban burials do not have the hyperbolic firepower of Opheltes' funeral, and we subsequently see them dying down. The energy and force of the poem, its *calor* ('heat', *Theb.* 1.3) is sinking into smouldering embers. At the same time imagery of liquid decomposition grows stronger. Polynices relights Eteocles' pyre, and the final burials offer one last blaze of destruction, yet Statius' self–

[36] Verbal echoes include *repressit* at the end of the line (*Aen.* 2.378; *Theb.* 11.309); swelling: *tumentem* (*Aen.* 2.381); *tumidum* (*Aen.* 2.472); *tumefacta* (*Theb.* 11.313); *colla* (*Theb.* 11.314; *Aen.* 2.381); similar ideas include fleeing back (*refugit*, *Aen.* 2.380; *Theb.* 11.312–313); the snake rising up (*arduus*, *Aen.* 2.475; *serpens erigitur gyro* (*Theb.* 11.310–311); the poisonous nature of the snake (*uirus, ueneni*; *Theb.* 11.312, 314; hinted at in *mala gramina pastus*, *Aen.* 2.471; *nitens … caerula*, 2.380–1).

confessed incapacity to fully portray this grief and ritual is borne out by the relatively brief treatment.

The funeral of Menoeceus is restrained in comparison to the disproportionate excess of the funeral of Opheltes. Its main impact is to act as a contrast with Creon's refusal of burial to the Argives. The 'mountains are bereaved' of woods (*montibus orbatis*, 12.51), and the Theban pyres symbolise the destruction of both sides caused by the war: *ardent excisae uiscera gentis* / *molibus exstructis* ('the entrails cut out from the race are burning on built up piles', 12.53–54). The effort of building the pyres does not compensate for the deep hurts caused by the war. Meanwhile, the Argive ghosts protest their lack of burial: *nuda cohors uetitumque gemens circumuolat ignem*. ('The naked cohort flies around lamenting forbidden fire', 12.56). The phrase *circumuolat ignem* closely echoes *circumuolat igneus*, at the beginning of Parthenopaeus' *aristeia* (9.736). Although Menoeceus' pyre is not to be *uilem* ('common', 61), Creon makes it stand out by heaping it with military trophies, which do not fairly reflect the nature of his death (not unlike the irony of the enormous funeral for tiny Opheltes). A further reference to Hercules on Oeta (66–67, echoing 11.234–238) suggests apotheosis, but with high cognitive dissonance. The Tirynthian might be joyful that the stars are demanding him, but he is also in overwhelming pain, lying on the burning mountain (*in accensa iacuit Tirynthius Oeta*, 67). Creon responds by sacrificing live victims, like an Achilles or an Aeneas at the peak of their transgressive grief (68–70), and the height of the flames might evoke the fire and snake imagery of *Aeneid* 2 (*hic arduus ignis* / *palpitat*, 'here the high fire convulses').[37] The connection back to Eteocles before the fratricide blurs the two tyrants together and foreshadows Creon's destruction, as well as bringing out the wrongness of the ritual. Creon blames Menoeceus' *ardor laudis* ('fire for praise', 72–73) for his death. The process of lamentation increases Creon's violence: *accensaque iterat uiolentius ira* ('and on fire with anger he begins again more violently', 12.93), emphasising the iterative, cumulative destruction of the Theban cycle of vengeance.[38] The attempt to generate poetic energy for the second war through fiery anger results in refusal of fire, allowing the liquid processes of decomposition to provide a different sort of contagion.

[37] *Arduus* is used of both snakes and flames in *Aen*. 2.328 and 475; see Knox 1950, 386–387: *palpito* often refers to repetitive movement in the agonies of death, cf. *Theb*. 8.439, 9.756.
[38] On cyclical or tragic causality in the *Thebaid*, see Marinis 2021 and Parkes 2021.

Argia's *aristeia*, her quest to bury Polynices, takes place across a landscape characterised by the failure of fire, blood–soaked and dark. After she splits from the other women, leaving them to go on to Athens, and supplicate Theseus, the next scene begins with darkness falling: the sun's burning chariot is hidden beneath the waves (228–9), but Argia does not register the night, and continues on (12.230–236). Not only does she lose her way in the dark, but the flame of the torch keeps failing: *et errantem comitis solacia flammae / destituunt gelidaeque facem uicere tenebrae!* ('And as she wanders the comfort of companion flame fails and cold shadows conquer the torch', 241–242). Her companion Menoetes points out the dying watch–fires: *cernis ut ingentes murorum porrigat umbras / campus et e speculis moriens intermicet ignis*? ('Do you see how the plain stretches out the huge shadows of the walls and the dying fire from the watch–towers flickers?' 251–252). His words outline their approach towards Thebes, but also create an otherworldly atmosphere in which time and space are distorted, and fire is overcome by darkness. Argia and the poem keep going by relighting the tired torch (*reficit spiramina fessi / ignis*, 'she rekindles the breath of tired fire', 268–269). The image comparing Argia to Ceres searching for Persephone (270–277) is lit by the fires of Aetna, and Enceladus gives fiery assistance, which the Stygian gloom attempts to suppress. The sequence in which Juno persuades Cynthia/Selene to provide light in order for Argia to find Polynices continues the emphasis on darkness and the failure of fire. When Argia finally catches sight of Polynices' cloak, it is 'drenched in blood' (*suffusaque sanguine*, 314). At the moment of Antigone's arrival on the scene, she is 'another groan and another torch' (*ecce alios gemitus aliamque … facem*, 349–350). As Argia and Antigone exchange laments, two speeches, and the section itself, end with fire: *Polynicis ad ignes* ('Polynices to the fires', 379); *accenso flebitis igne* ('You will weep when the fire is lit', 408). Meanwhile the next lines feature the Ismenos running with blood (*haud procul Ismeni monstrabant murmura ripas, / qua turbatus adhuc et sanguine decolor ibat*, 'not far away the murmurs made clear the banks of the Ismenos, where it flowed, stirred up still and discoloured by blood', 409–410). Fire and water, burning and cleansing, articulate the scenes. The comparison of Polynices to Phaethon, *Phaethonta sorores / fumantem lauere Pado* ('the sisters wash Phaethon's smoking body in the Padus', 413–414) equally brings together fire and water, cleansing and cremation. The sisters succeed in washing Polynices' body, but they struggle to find the heat to burn him (12.417–419):

ignem miserae post ultima quaerunt
oscula; sed gelidae circum exanimesque fauillae
putribus in foueis, atque omnia busta quiescunt.

they wretchedly seek fire after the final
kisses; but the embers around them are cold and lifeless
in the crumbling diggings, and all the pyres lie peaceful.

When they do succeed in bringing a fire back to life, it is famously the pyre of Eteocles, and becomes another illustration of the undying intra–familial violence that marks the house of Oedipus. The flames pour out, divided and double (431–432), becoming a second killing of the brothers in Antigone's anguished exclamation (437). Antigone too ends her speech of lament with fire: *saeuos mediae ueniemus in ignes*, 'we will come into the middle of the savage flames' (446). Like Opheltes' parents before them, and Evadne in the final scene, they threaten to break the boundaries between pyre and mourners, throwing themselves also onto the flames. The next section begins with the violence of the pyre infecting the Theban landscape: *uix ea, cum subitus campos tremor altaque tecta / impulit adiuuitque rogi discordis hiatus* ('She had scarcely said these things, when a sudden trembling attacked the plains and the high buildings and increases the chasm in the discordant pyre', 447–448). The lack of closure through burial is physically manifest in the abyss created between the flames and in the landscape, reminding readers of Amphiaraus' anti–funeral at the beginning of the war. Reignition threatens to throw us back into the centre of the epic, and into the underworld itself.

The counterpoint narrative of the alternative quest in which the other Argive women seek Theseus' help in enabling the burial of their husbands provides some balance: but it is notable that the *Ara Clementiae* is shaped by absence and negatives: it receives neither fire nor blood (*non turea flamma nec altus / accipitur sanguis*, 'no flame with incense, no deep blood is received', 487–488). The final scene of funeral pyres, the climax of book 12 and the very last scene of the narrative also shows the contamination and redoubling of book 12, where the women too are drawn into the Theban vortex of destruction. The epic of lament threatens to be a whole new venture, unbounded itself. The lamenting women are described in military language, taking on

Bacchic frenzy, shaking the stars with noise of lament, just like the noise of battle (*Theb.* 12.797–809):[39]

> non ego, centena si quis mea pectora laxet
> uoce deus, **tot busta** simul uulgique ducumque,
> **tot** pariter **gemitus** dignis conatibus aequem:
> **turbine quo sese caris instrauerit audax**
> **ignibus Euadne fulmenque in pectore magno**
> **quaesierit**; quo more iacens super oscula saeui
> corporis infelix excuset Tydea coniunx;
> ut saeuos narret uigiles Argia sorori;
> Arcada quo planctu genetrix Erymanthia clamet,
> Arcada, consumpto seruantem sanguine uultus,
> Arcada, quem geminae pariter fleuere cohortes.
> **uix nouus ista furor ueniensque implesset Apollo,**
> et mea iam longo meruit ratis aequore portum.
>
> Not I, even if some god loosened my hundred–fold chest
> with voice, could I equal so many pyres together of people
> and leaders, so many groans equal in worthy striving:
> in what whirlwind bold Evadne threw herself
> on the dear flames and sought out the thunderbolt
> in the great chest; in what way the tragic wife
> lying on top of the savage body excused the Tydean kisses;
> how Argia tells the tale of the savage guards to her sister;
> Arcadian, with what wailing the Erymanthian mother laments;
> Arcadian, preserving your appearance, with the blood drained out;
> Arcadian, whom equally the twin cohorts weep.
> Scarcely would a new madness and Apollo coming have sufficed for those things,
> And my ship has now long deserved harbour from that sea.

This mourning scene recapitulates in miniature the epic, which has just been recapitulated through the battle in *Thebaid* 12. As Evadne emulates Capaneus, by creating her own fiery death to match his, so Deipyle executes her own cannibalisation through grief, replicating Tydeus' gaping mouth in her kisses. The

[39] A recent intervention on this passage is Panoussi 2019, 103–113, who argues that women's ritual lament brings cohesiveness and a promise of reconciliation in the face of male violence. For me the blurring between the men and women, lament and death itself, including the self–immolation of Evadne, suggests rather a multiplication and continuation of grief, and the way the traumas of war echo down the generations.

voice of Atalanta becomes the voice of the poet, and implicates anyone reading aloud in that new overwhelming madness, the fire of Apollo, which inspires this ongoing epic of grief. The overwhelming excess of mourning is divided into pyres and laments, and the final image sets the fires of Apollo in apposition to the sea of poetry. The contagion of fire is seen in the way lament spreads to both sides, while the women join or recuperate the men; Parthenopaeus' beauty and his effect on both sides of the war, continue his portrayal from book 9. It is not clear that these pyres (or laments) cleanse: rather the fire and the grief threatens to spread into the future (foreshadowing the next war, that of the *Epigonoi*).[40] As readers, we remain held at the moment of lament, with the ritual invocation of the dead Arcadian, not released from grief.

Conclusion

Elaine Fantham argued that the *Thebaid* was particularly characterised by lament.[41] McClellan takes her argument further by showing how Creon's refusal of burial echoes backwards through the poem, frequently mentioned and foreshadowed, so much so that he finds it overdone, almost oppressive. More than this, the *Thebaid* is structured not just by a series of deaths but also by a series of problematic, refused, incomplete or unsatisfying funerals. I have argued that Statius creates a sense of endlessness by an oversupply of endings, creating his particular refraction of Lucan's split voice of civil war.[42] The Theseus episode's effectiveness as closural device is still being debated.[43] The *Thebaid* is also determinedly inward–looking, prophecies

[40] Voigt 2016 argues that Statius offers a utopian female alternative to male epic, in which grief gives women agency. This is similar to the approach of Dietrich 1999. It does not sufficiently take into account the ways in which the women are implicated in the men's war, and even instigate it. The absence of Eriphyle, not perhaps surprising since Amphiaraus is already in the underworld, could be designed to avoid evoking the further tragic intergenerational destruction (Alcmaeon's killing of his mother and his subsequent death), or to elide it. This story also complicates the representation of Argia, whose complicity is greater in Statius, where she, not Polynices, offers the necklace to Eriphyle in return for Amphiaraus' participation.

[41] See Fantham 1999.

[42] Lovatt 1999.

[43] Recent work on Theseus: Spinelli forthcoming, chapters 2 and 3, argues that Theseus reestablishes boudnaries, but also that he is bound up with Oedipus; Chinn 2022, 120-58 on the shield of Theseus, argues that '[t]he shields both problematize Theseus as an epic closural figure (via the Callimachean poetic "debate") and problematize the Thebaid's status within the epic genre (via the river Ismenos as a visual metapoetic metaphor).' (295) Hulls 2021, 151-63 attempts to go beyond a binary reading of Theseus; Simms 2020, 143-60, on the ambiguity and unexpectedness of Theseus; Rebeggiani 2018, 84-92 balances the identification of Theseus against the lack of golden age confidence in Statius' final

folding into themselves and endings blurred into beginnings.[44] The incestuous poetics of the *Thebaid* intensify the more than civil war into an inwardly retreating infinite *mise–en–abime*. In this literary universe neither [repeats of] the fall of Troy nor the death of Dido are allowed to be productive.[45] The recursive and iterative mode rules instead, and even those that try to break free from the pull of Thebes, such as Polynices in book 1, and the Argive women in book 12, end up sucked back in. It is no surprise, then, that fiery rituals in the *Thebaid* do not straightforwardly cleanse or provide space for renewal or reinvention. Instead, fire spawns further destruction, threatens to be (or actually is) out of control. Even building the pyre of Opheltes is an act of desecration, and the more the Argives attempt to control the ominous situation through ritual practice, the more they multiply and intensify the malevolent symbolism.

The tendency towards collapse and disintegration, along with the destabilisation of ritual practice, and the blurring of narrative divisions and thematic ideas, fundamentally setting epic teleology on fire, all of this suggests a dark political vision. The poetics of incest and the inward turn of the *Thebaid* in particular have implications for Statius' understanding of and relation to power. As a professional poet of Greek heritage, Statius stands at a distance from Roman senatorial concerns about imperial power, but he is significantly more disempowered than his contemporaries, Valerius Flaccus, Silius Italicus and Martial. The inward turn of the *Thebaid* brings out the way power reproduces itself, self–perpetuating, self–regarding.[46] Ritual can encode, create, and enable successful communication and community formation across power differentials (imperial, divine).[47] The collapse inwards, instability and perversion surrounding ritual in the *Thebaid* reflects a profound feeling of exclusion and alienation. But the *Thebaid* is not entirely a 'No–

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lines, presenting Theseus as a potentially optimistic protreptic model for Domitian, within a fundamentally pessimistic model of Roman religion and politics. Bessone 2011, 128-99 argues that closure is created across the masculine of Theseus and the feminine of Argia.

[44] Simms 2020, 24-29 shows how Statius' proem focuses on the myth's ending; Dalton 2020 shows how Statius scatters the limbs of the *Aeneid*'s opening throughout his epic.

[45] 'Time and again Statius highlights the perverted blurring of misery and violence as scenes of grieving everywhere spill over into violent acts, confrontations, and open warfare.' McClellan 2019, 232.

[46] Cf. McClellan 2019, 214: 'Political reality too often actualized Lucan's 'tragic' vatic conception of the principate as an endless cycle of repeated self–evisceration.'

[47] For a successful ritual action as part of 'ritualisation' and generally for the process of ritual communication, see Rüpke's contribution in this volume.

epic'.[48] There is a joy in darkly skewering the cognitive dissonances in a world overwhelmed by disempowerment.[49] The *Thebaid* hints towards modes of resistance and resilience, possibly even recuperation and rebuilding, but never fully commits to them or gives them straightforward traction. This ambivalence allows for the darkness of burning it down, while keeping alight the spark needed to re–emerge.

[48] The works of Octavia Butler and her struggle to write readable, enjoyable books, while still remaining committed to her vision of how the world works, have strongly influenced my thoughts about politics, activism and literature. On 'Yes–novels' and 'No–novels' in Octavia Butler's working notes and archive materials, see George 2020 and Canavan 2016. On speculative fiction and activism, see Maree Brown 2017.

[49] One might compare the too little too late, too much destruction not enough redemption, ending of Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy, which questions whether totalitarian power can ever be overturned, and whether humanity's hierarchical nature will inevitably encode existential threats to human race and planet. Collins' protagonist goes one further than Statius' traumatised lamenting heroines by using her final, closural arrow shot to kill off the wrong president, not the Eteocles/Creon figure, but the Theseus figure. In this way she brings her more than civil war to a close with a double defeat not unlike that of the *Thebaid*.