The Cambridge Classical Journal (2026), 1–16
doi:10.1017/S175027052610030X

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nefas Unleashed: Reading Sophocles in Statius' *Thebaid*

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The text of Sophocles' *Antigone* is cited from Dawe's (1979) Teubner edition, and the excerpts of Herodotus are taken from Rosén's (1987) text; for Statius' *Thebaid*, I use the text of Hall, Ritchie and Edwards (2007) with some modifications. All translations are my own, unless noted otherwise.

(Received 4 October 2025 UTC; revised 19 July 2026 UTC; accepted 28 August 2026 UTC)

Abstract

The intertextual relationship between Flavian poetry and Greek literature has been of increasing scholarly interest in recent years.[1] Statius, specifically, adopted and reworked several themes which are central to Greek drama, not to mention the influence the latter exerted on his character sketching, descriptions, motifs and poetic art in general.[2]

Introduction

This article adds to the existing scholarship on the intertextuality between the *Thebaid* and Sophoclean drama. It explores how Statius engages with Sophocles' versions of the myths of Oenomaus and Lycurgus, which offer depictions of archetypal offenders and, thus, are thematically relevant to the poem's narrative. More specifically, their stories exemplify characters who transgressed social and religious norms and, as such, accord with various aspects of the *Thebaid*, an epic obsessed with problematic

[1] Material, ideas, verbal and stylistic features from Homer, Greek tragedy and Hellenistic literature have been traced in virtually every work of the period. See, for example, the edited volumes by Augoustakis (2014) and Papaioannou and Marinis (2021), the latter specifically exploring aspects of intertextuality between Flavian poetry and tragedy, both Greek and Roman. On the influence of Homer on Statius, see Juhnke (1972) and Cannizzaro (2023). The Homeric theme of theomachy and the change it underwent in Latin epic, with special reference to Silius and Statius, is explored in Ripoll (2006) and more recently in Chaudhuri (2014) 195–297. Smolenaars (1991) examines the adoption of Homeric motifs in Statius and Valerius. McNelis (2007) is important for the discussion on the impact and transformation of Callimachean poetics in the *Thebaid*.

[2] Much progress has been made since Vessey's (1973) 69 claim that, while Statius 'utilised' Euripides, '[n]o certain interrelation has ever been traced between the *Thebaid* and the surviving dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles.' See, for example, Reussner (1921), Heslin (2005) 195–8, Soerink (2014) (Euripides); Heslin (2008), Hulls (2014) 202–12 (Sophocles and Euripides); Marinis (2015) and (2021) (Aeschylus and Euripides); Arampapaslis (2022) (Aeschylus).

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kingship,[3] excessive anger,[4] extreme violence, the outrageous disregard for proper burial,[5] the breaking of moral rules and *nefas* in general.[6] It further argues that the thematic relevance of these two myths for Statius' epic renders the references in *Theb*. 1.274—8 (Juno's description of Oenomaus' impious crimes) and *Theb*. 4.386 (the queen bacchant's reminder of Lycurgus' punishment) part of Statius' proleptic strategy, leading the reader to anticipate through multiple, albeit different, nexuses Tydeus' cannibalism (*Theb*. 8.751–61) and the theomachy and punishment of Capaneus (*Theb*. 10.899–906). At the same time, these excerpts also function as a point of comparison to assess the gravity of the offences committed by the two Statian heroes. My analysis, showing that the references in *Theb*. 1.274—8 and 4.386 operate in a twofold way, offers a new perspective on the mechanisms at work behind Statius' rich and complex intertextuality and narrative technique.

Sophoclean innovations: the myth of Oenomaus

The myth of Oenomaus, king of Pisa in Elis, was a popular source of inspiration for ancient poets. The story goes that Oenomaus learned by prophecy that he would be killed by the person who married his daughter, Hippodamia (Apollod. *Epit*. 2.4; *FGrH* I fr. 37). To avoid this fate, he promised her as bride to whoever would manage to beat him in a chariot race (Apollod. *Epit*. 2.5). Many suitors made the attempt, but each and every one failed, until Pelops succeeded by means of trickery and treason, killing Oenomaus and marrying Hippodamia (Apollod. *Epit*. 2.7–8; Ap. Rhod. *Argon*. 1.752–8).[7]

What is special about Sophocles' treatment of the myth is that it is the earliest-known adaptation in which the bodies of the dead suitors are desecrated by Oenomaus after their defeat and subsequent death (F473a Radt):[8]

> ἰδίως τὸν Ἀνταῖόν φησι τῶν ξένων τῶν ἡττωμένων τοῖς κρανίοις ἐρέφειν τὸν τοῦ Ποσειδῶνος ναόν· τοῦτο γὰρ ἱστοροῦσι Διομήδην τὸν Θρᾷκα ποιεῖν, Βακχυλίδης δὲ Εὔηνον ἐπὶ τῶν Μαρπίσσης μνηστήρων, οἱ δὲ Οἰνόμαον, ὡς Σοφοκλῆς.
>
> Schol. Pind. *Isth*. 4.92a (Drachmann 1927, p. 236)

> He says specifically that Antaeus roofed the temple of Poseidon with the skulls of defeated foreigners. For they narrate that Diomedes of Thrace did this, while

[3]Dominik (1990); Dominik (1994) 76–98; Ganiban (2007) 176–206; Hulls (2021) 47–120. On the *Thebaid*'s tyrannical figures as reflections of the emperor Domitian, see Dominik (1994) 135–56; contra Rebegianni (2018) 38–92, who argues that Nero 'the tyrant' and his oppressive regime lie behind the epic's characters and actions. Agri (2022) 69–81 offers a valuable case study of Statius' Creon as representative of the tyrant's excessive fear, which leads to his feminisation.

[4]The role of anger throughout the *Thebaid* is discussed *passim* in Hershkowitz (1998) 247–60. Vessey (1973) 57–60 noted that Statius, influenced by Stoic theory on emotions, makes *ira* the driving force of the characters' actions. More recently, Agri (2022) 128–59 has shown fear, along with *invidia, odium* and *ira*, as equally influential in shaping the epic's narrative.

[5]On the denial of funeral rights and the perversion of proper burial in the *Thebaid*, see McClellan (2019) 203–40.

[6]On the *nefas* permeating the *Thebaid*, which contrasts with and invalidates the theme of *pietas* that dominates the *Aeneid*'s narrative, see e.g. Ganiban (2007).

[7]On the variants of the myth of Oenomaus and their sources, see Sommerstein and Talboy (2012) 76–86.

[8]Sommerstein and Talboy (2012) 77.

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> Bacchylides claims that Evenos did this to the suitors of Marpessa, others, like Sophocles, that it was Oenomaus.

The passage argues that the Sophoclean version included the gruesome detail of Oenomaus roofing a god's temple with the suitors' skulls.[9] Yet, according to Radt F473, there was even greater brutality in Sophocles' play:

> Σκυθιστὶ χειρόμακτρον ἐκκεκαρμένος
> With the head flayed into a towel, according to the Scythian custom

Scholars propose that this verse was uttered by Pelops upon his arrival at the house of Oenomaus while contemplating the suitors' severed heads that decorated the building.[10] It has also been argued that Sophocles refers to a Scythian war custom which was well known to Greeks at least since the time of Herodotus (Hdt. 4.64.2).[11] The word χειρόμακτρον, which is employed by both Sophocles and Herodotus to describe the use of the scalp as a towel, may suggest the former's familiarity with the historian's account.

What seems more certain, however, is that the tragedian expected his audience to recall the information concerning the Scythian custom, since the verse (F473) would be meaningless otherwise.[12] By portraying Oenomaus as practising the custom of the Scythians, Sophocles sketches him as a savage individual whose behaviour does

[9]Sommerstein and Talboy (2012) 100, based on F473a, suggest that Sophocles emulates other myths including the suitors' decapitation and the use of their heads as decoration. The scholia on Lycophron, which probably draw from those on Pindar, go a step further, claiming that Oenomaus was planning to build a temple with the suitors' skulls:

> Μόλπιδος οὖν πέτραν, ὡς ἔφην, τὴν Ἦλιν λέγει, ὅπου ὁ Οἰνόμαος μετὰ τῶν μνηστήρων τῆς θυγατρὸς αὐτοῦ Ἱπποδαμείας ἠγωνίζετο καὶ νικῶν αὐτοὺς καὶ ἀναιρῶν ἐκ τῶν κρανίων ἐκείνων ναὸν ἔμελλε κατασκευάσειν ὥσπερ καὶ Ανταῖος καὶ Εὔηνος, καὶ Φόρβας καὶ Διομήδης ὁ Θρᾷξ καὶ Κύκνος ὁ ὑφ' Ἡρακλέους ἀναιρεθείς. Tzetz. Ad Lycoph. *Alex*. 159–60 (Müller 1811, p. 422–3)
>
> So, as I said, he calls Elis 'the Rock of Molpis', where Oenomaus competed with the suitors of his daughter Hippodamia and, after defeating and killing them, he was going to build a temple with their skulls, just as Antaeus, and Evenos, and Phorbas, and Diomedes of Thrace, and Cycnos, who was killed by Hercules, did.

[10]Sommerstein and Talboy (2012) 100.

[11] ἀποδείρει δὲ αὐτὴν τρόπῳ τοιῷδε· περιταμὼν κύκλῳ περὶ τὰ ὦτα καὶ λαβόμενος τῆς κεφαλῆς ἐκσείει, μετὰ δὲ σαρκίσας βοὸς πλευρῇ δέψει τῇσι χερσί, ὀργάσας δὲ αὐτὸ ἄτε χειρόμακτρον ἔκτηται, ἐκ δὲ χαλινῶν τοῦ ἵππου, τὸν αὐτὸς ἐλαύνει, ἐκ τούτου ἐξάπτει καὶ ἀγάλλεται. Hdt. 4.64.2

> He flays it (i.e. the head) in such manner; making a circular incision around the ears and holding the skin, he shakes it off the head; he then scrapes out the flesh using the rib of an ox, and works the skin with his hands until it is tender; after he has softened it, he holds it as a towel, ties it to the bridles of the horse he rides, and exults in it.

The connection of F473 with the Herodotean passage has already been noted and discussed in Sommerstein and Talboy (2012) 100–1.

[12]Sommerstein and Talboy (2012) 101; whether the spectators knew of this barbaric habit through Herodotus or some other source, including oral narratives, cannot be answered conclusively. See also Chiasson (2025) 556–7.

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not befit civilised Greece.[13] Thus, his figure is assimilated with that of a barbarian, emerging as an 'internal other' in the eyes of the Athenian audience.[14]

The gruesomeness of Oenomaus' actions is alluded to in *Thebaid* 1.274—8 as part of the speech of Juno, who lists a number of Jupiter's problematic cult places in an effort to convince him to spare Argos:[15]

> ... illic Mauortius axis
> Oenomai Geticoque pecus stabulare sub Haemo
> dignius abruptis etiamnum inhumata procorum
> reliquiis trunca ora rigent; tamen hic tibi templi
> gratus honos; ...
> ... there, the war chariot of
> Oenomaus, and steeds worthier of being stabled under the Getic Haemus;
> even today, the suitors' unburied, disfigured faces
> remain stiff, detached from the rest of their bodies; however, a temple there is a
> pleasant honour for you...

The *abruptis reliquiis* alludes to the suitors' decapitated bodies,[16] and thus the phrase *trunca ... ora* seems superfluous unless it means something different than simply 'heads cut off'. The word *os* usually translates as 'mouth', and it is used metonymically to denote not only the head but also the face,[17] whereas the adjective *truncus* literally means 'maimed, mutilated, mangled'.[18] Hence, the collocation *trunca...ora* seems to imply some type of trauma which disfigured the suitors' faces like those described in Verg. *Aen*. 6.497 (*truncus* referring to the shearing of Deiphobus' nostrils) and *Theb*. 4.107 (used for Achelous' wound after Hercules broke his horn; see also Ov. *Met*. 9.1–2 and *Her*. 9.140). Taking into account these passages, lines 4.276–7 can be construed as recalling the Sophoclean image of the suitors' heads being cut off and deprived of their facial skin, an action that certainly causes disfigurement.[19]

The thematic link with Sophocles' version of Oenomaus' tale is further supported by Juno's accusation in lines 277–8. Her claim that the suitors' *trunca ora* still (*etiamnum*) remain unburied (*inhumata*),[20] in conjunction with her reference to a temple that,

[13]Despite the ancient authors' ambivalent views concerning the Scythians, the popular Graeco-Roman opinion was that they were savages who sometimes practised cannibalism (*FGrH* 70 F42; Plin. *HN* 6.53), and were often assimilated with wild beasts (Sen. *De Ira* 2.15; Amm. Marc. 22.8.42; Joseph. *Ap.* 2.8.37). See also Isaac (2004) 205–9.

[14]The phrase succinctly describes a minor ethnic group which is perceived simultaneously as part of a larger, dominant ethnicity with specific cultural and religious customs, and as a separate ethnic community due to cultural habits that differentiate its members from the norm. Gordon (2015) 39, from whom I borrow the phrase, uses it to describe the Greeks' view of the Arcadians in the context of the mythological connections between Arcadia and werewolves.

[15]On this passage, see Briguglio (2017) 308–10.

[16]Briguglio (2017) 310.

[17]For *os* translating as 'face', see *OLD os* 6.

[18]*OLD truncus* 1 and *L&S truncus* 1.

[19]Contra Parkes (2012) 154, who interprets 1.274–7 as referring to the suitors' bodies which were 'unburied and torn apart by the horses'.

[20]In the case of Hippodamia's suitors, denial of burial rights would have been considered a disproportionate punishment in the eyes of a Roman, and it could not be sanctioned by the gods, according to

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despite Oenomaus' barbarity, is considered a great honour by the father of gods, recalls the Schol. Pind. *Isth.* 4.92a, which states that Sophocles' tragedy mentioned the use of the suitors' heads as building material for a temple. Although Juno does not name either the location of this temple or the kingdom of Oenomaus, scholars recognise that she refers to Olympia – the goddess lumps together Arcadia and Oenomaus' realm (Pisa) as two of Jupiter's problematic cult places (*ab sedibus illis*), and describes them collectively as lands where the river Alpheos runs (1.271-2: *...fluctiuaga qua praeterlabitur unda | Sicanios longe relegens Alpheos amores*, 'where the waters driven about by the waves glide, and Alpheus chases from afar his Sicilian loves').[21] Besides the geographical proximity of ancient Pisa to Olympia that allows for such an interpretation,[22] the link is strengthened if we consider that Pindar often does not distinguish between the two cities (e.g. Pind. *Ol.* 2.3; 4.11; 8.9).

To sum up, Sophocles is the earliest-known author before Statius who explicitly referred to the disfigurement of the suitors' faces and the use of their heads as building material for a temple. Even if Statius had access to another intermediary work as his source, the other similarities between the Sophoclean version of Oenomaus' myth and *Theb.* 1.274—8 highlighted in this analysis affirm the thematic connection.

Sophoclean innovations: the myth of Lycurgus

The story of Lycurgus, king of the Edonians in Thrace, also offered rich material for dramatic treatment, comprising yet another example of a theomach who is deservedly punished by the gods. According to the main version of the myth, Lycurgus, an arrogant ruler, pursued Dionysus and imprisoned the Bacchants and the Satyrs. After the god's followers were miraculously freed, Lycurgus was driven mad by Dionysus and killed his own son, Dryas. Subsequently, a famine hit the region of the Edonians who, responding to an oracle, bound Lycurgus and exposed him in the wilderness. The god then punished him by having him dismembered by horses (Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.5).[23] In another variant, Lycurgus planned to suppress Dionysus' worship, waging war against the god and his followers. While retreating from a battle, the Thracian king was entangled in a vine and died, falling off a cliff; according to a slightly different

Roman religious views. For instances in which Roman culture justified the denial of burial, see Kyle (1998) 131–3.

[21] Briguglio (2017) 307.

[22] According to the version preserved in Paus. 5.20.6, the house of Oenomaus was located close to the temple of Zeus at Olympia: (ἣν δὲ καλοῦσιν Οἰνομάου κίονα οἱ Ἠλεῖοι καλοῦσιν, ἔστι μὲν πρὸς τὸ ἱερὸν τοῦ Διὸς ἰόντι ἀπὸ τοῦ μεγάλου βωμοῦ...οὗτος ὁ κίων ἐν οἰκίᾳ τοῦ Οἰνομάου, καθὰ λέγουσιν, εἱστήκει, 'what the Eleans call Oenomaus' column, is located in the direction of the temple of Zeus while walking from the great altar ... this column once stood, as they say, at the house of Oenomaus'). In conjunction with the spatial proximity of Zeus' sanctuary to the pillar of Oenomaus in Altis, the god's sacred grove, Juno's reprimand alludes to Sophocles' treatment of the myth, which narrated, as we have already seen, that Oenomaus roofed a god's temple with the suitors' severed heads (F473a). Briguglio (2017) 308 underlines the connection between the myth of Oenomaus and the etiology of the Olympic games, which reinforces my point.

[23] Apollodorus' account of Lycurgus' story combines elements from multiple sources, including dramatic representations and epic narratives. See Bednarek (2021) 30–1, who also offers a detailed discussion of other variants of the myth and related stories, pp. 28–111.

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version, he was starved to death after he was bound and thrown into a cave by his enemies.[24]

Sophocles' treatment of the myth seems to have partially followed the latter account, to which he alludes in the fourth *stasimon* of *Antigone* (955–65):[25]

ζεύχθη δ᾽ ὀξύχολος παῖς ὁ Δρύαντος, 955
᾽Ηδωνῶν βασιλεύς, κερτομίοις
ὀργαῖς, ἐκ Διονύσου
πετρώδει κατάφαρκτος ἐν δεσμῷ.
οὕτω τᾶς μανίας δεινὸν ἀποστάζει
ἀνθηρόν τε μένος. κεῖνος ἐπέγνω μανίαις 960
ψαύων τὸν θεὸν ἐν κερτομίοις γλώσσαις.
παύεσκε μὲν γὰρ ἐνθέους
γυναῖκας εὔιόν τε πῦρ,
φιλαύλους τ᾽ ἠρέθιζε Μούσας. 965
The hot-tempered son of Dryas,
the king of Edonians, was tamed for his taunting anger,
confined by Dionysus in a rocky prison.
Thus, the dangerous and exuberant fury of his madness distilled away.
That man recognised too late
the god, assailing him in his folly with abusive language.
For he kept hindering the divinely inspired women and the fire of Bacchus
and angered the Muses who were fond of the flute.

The excerpt narrates that Lycurgus scorned the divinity of Dionysus and mocked his followers. His behaviour caused the wrath of the god, who subsequently imprisoned him. Attention is immediately drawn to the cryptic phrase πετρώδει … ἐν δεσμῷ. From the *scholia uetera* on Sophocles we learn that with πετρώδης δεσμός the poet actually meant the vine:[26]

τῷ στερεῷ δεσμῷ τῆς ἀμπέλου 958
The firm bond of the vine

τὸν δεσμόν δε τῆς ἀμπέλου πετρώδη εἶπεν ἀντὶ τοῦ τὸν ἰσχυρόν 955
He called the bond of the vine 'rocky' instead of 'strong'
Schol. uetera in Soph. *Ant.* (Xenis 2021, p. 161–2)

This suggestion is further supported by archaeological evidence depicting Lycurgus' entrapment by the vine, a scene which scholars consider Sophocles' innovation.[27] Despite the fact that literary and pictorial representations of the Sophoclean version of

[24]This variant is found in the *Scholia* on Sophocles' *Antigone* (Dindorf (1852) 321).
[25]On this passage, see Griffith (1999) 289–91.
[26]Already noted in Bednarek (2021) 53, who further observes that the phrase was often interpreted as referring to the cave in which Lycurgus was imprisoned, according to certain versions of the myth. See also Griffith (1999) 289.
[27]Bednarek (2021) 53 and n. 56 citing the relevant scholarship.

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Lycurgus' myth are attested in the years of the *res publica*, as evidenced from Naevius' plays (F18 and F34 Manuwald) as well as *LIMC Lykourgos* I 78, they proliferate during the imperial period (*LIMC Lykourgos* I 35, 41–3, 51, 70–80), affirming its increasing popularity at the time.[28] The story of Lycurgus, a mortal refusing to recognise the divine nature of Dionysus, served as another famous example of a theomach who is eventually punished for his insolence, with the violent aspects of the myth drawing the interest of several authors, Statius included.[29]

The scene of Lycurgus' capture by the vine is vividly described in *Thebaid* 4.386 when the queen of the Bacchants complains to Dionysus for not aiding Thebes, reminding him of the punishment he reserved for his past enemies, specifically Lycurgus:

> pampineumque iubes nemus inreptare Lycurgo
> you ordered the vine-forest to crawl upon Lycurgus

The verse describes Bacchus' weaponisation of nature in the course of punishing his enemy, a motif in Dionysiac legend and imagery (*Hom. Hymn Dion.* 7.38–41; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.36; Ov. *Met.* 3.664–7; *LIMC Dionysus* 792), whereby the god uses his divine powers to take over a ship with creeping vines and/or ivy, scaring his enemies away. Given that in our passage the bacchant talks about some form of retribution for an offence against the god, the image conjured up is that of the Edonian king being trapped by the plant in order to be subjected to punishment, which reproduces the version of Lycurgus' capture as narrated in the *Antigone*.

Intertextuality and prolepsis

The details in *Theb.* 1.274—8 and *Theb.* 4.386 which suggest Statius' engagement specifically with the Sophoclean treatments of the myths of Oenomaus and Lycurgus are hard to ignore. The reasons behind Statius' choice, however, deserve a closer look, and can be attributed to the thematic preoccupations of the *Thebaid*. Even though there are several links both outside and within the narrative of the *Thebaid* connecting Oenomaus with Tydeus and Lycurgus with Capaneus, I argue in this section that these thematic correspondences consolidate the analogy in pairs, in order to prefigure the criminal and impious conduct of Statius' heroes, namely the decapitation and cannibalisation of Melanippus by Tydeus (*Theb.* 8.751–61), and Capaneus' theomachy and subsequent punishment (*Theb.* 10.899–903). At the same time, the figures of Oenomaus and Lycurgus serve as negative *exempla* to which the two characters of the *Thebaid* can be compared retrospectively, proving that the crimes of the *Thebaid* surpass even those of the worst offenders of Sophoclean tragedy.

[28] *LIMC Lykourgos* I 34 and 78 date back to the first century BCE, but the former depicts a slightly altered version of the myth which narrated that Lycurgus attacked the nymph Ambrosia, who was subsequently transformed into a vine and bound him (see also Nonnus *Dion.* 21.30–2).

[29] For example, Accius (F374–75 Schultheiß) may refer to Lycurgus' dismemberment by horses; Naevius (F18 and F34 Manuwald), Nonnus *Dion.* 21.30–2, the T*bilisi hymn* (Page *GLP* I 129.49–50) and Lucian *DDeor.* 22.1 either refer or allude to his binding by the vine.

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Oenomaus and Tydeus: familial, ethnic and thematic links

Although the myth of Oenomaus is not related at all to the Theban cycle, there are genealogical and ethnic ties which align his figure with Tydeus, prompting the reader to anticipate the latter's impious acts in *Theb*. 8.751–61. According to some traditions, both characters are descendants of Aeolus[30], and there is also a particular link between Oenomaus and Evenos, Tydeus' uncle (Apollod. *Bibl*. 1.7.7; 1.7.10) – the latter married Alcippe, the other daughter of the Pisatan king (Plut. *Mor*. 315e = Ps.-Plut. *Parallela Minora* 40), and did to the suitors of his offspring, Marpessa, exactly what Oenomaus did to those of Hippodamia (Schol. Pind. *Isth*. 4.92a; Schol. Hom. *Il*. 9.557). These ancestral affinities lead Statius' reader to expect Tydeus to perpetrate offences of similar nature as those committed by Oenomaus since, in Greek myth, genealogical connections often indicate a tendency that runs through the bloodline.

Ethnic nexuses also strengthen the analogy between the two characters. Tydeus is a native of the city of Calydon in Aetolia (Stat. *Theb*. 1.669–70), and Statius often refers to his provenance (1.401, 1.453, 2.476: Calydonian; 2.372, 6.835, 8.580, 8.690, 8.737: Aetolian), thus informing its importance in the hero's portrayal. Located in mid-western Greece, Aetolia was closely linked with Elis,[31] and the inhabitants of both regions were delineated as the 'other' among the Greeks.[32] It is this 'otherness' that reflects and is affirmed by, in the most emphatic manner, the cruel deeds of Oenomaus, guiding readers to expect an analogous crime to be committed by Tydeus, whom Statius also introduces as a foreigner (Stat. *Theb*. 1.407: *prior hospes*; 1.439: *externi iuuenes*),[33] as the 'other', compared with his Argive host.[34]

One should not fail to notice that a tenuous connection between Tydeus and Oenomaus occurs also intra-narratively. At the very end of Juno's speech, having described the impious acts of Oenomaus, the goddess exhorts Jupiter to spare Argos and justifies her view by mentioning other kingdoms which are worthier of punishment (*Theb*. 1.281–2: *sunt inpia late | regna tibi melius generos passura nocentes*, 'there are

[30]According to the myth on the origin of the Olympic games preserved in Eusebius *Chron*. 69, Oenomaus was the son of Aethlius and Calyce, thus a grandson of Aeolus on his mother's side and a nephew of Perieres (Apollod. *Bibl*. 1.7.3), whose son, Pisus (Paus. 5.17.9), was the founder of Pisa (Paus. 6.22.2). Tydeus also traces his origin back to Aeolus through his father (Apollod. *Bibl*. 1.7.3–10), Oeneus (Hom. *Il*. 5.810; Soph. *OC* 1315; Hyg. *Fab*. 69 and 70; Apollod. *Bibl*. 1.8.5).

[31]Herodotus (8.73) claims that Elis was populated by Aetolians, and Pausanias (5.1.3) talks about people who immigrated specifically from Calydon. In both regions Doric was the dominant dialect, proving the existence of an ethnic link between the Eleans and the Aetolians that explains their alliance in historical times to which Polybius refers (Polyb. 4.5.3; 4.36.6).

[32]Aetolians were widely viewed as savages (e.g. Thuc. 3.94.4–5; Polyb. 30.11; Cic. *Rep*. 3.9.15; Livy *Epit*. 34.24.3–4), while the Eleans were considered barbarians (Ath. 8.350a). According to Eust. *Il*. p.279, 34 and Hesychius (Hsch. *sv* βαρβαρόφωνοι), the Eleans were called 'βαρβαρόφωνοι' by other Greeks, while in *Cratylus*, Plato frequently uses the word 'ξενικά' (=foreign, strange) to describe verbal forms in Doric dialect (e.g. 401b), which was spoken in Elis and Aetolia.

[33]In 1.407 Statius describes Polynices as *prior hospes*, thus making Tydeus also a *hospes*; in 1.439 he refers to both Tydeus and Polynices as *externi* (*OLD externus* 3: 'Foreign or involving foreigners, coming from abroad, alien. b (masc. as sb.) a foreigner').

[34]This reading is compatible with the Graeco-Roman view of the Theban war as a symbol of conflict between the Greek/Roman and the barbarian/foreign/other, on which, see Rebeggiani (2018) 35–7 and his analysis in 253–61.

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impious kingdoms on all sides | for you, which will better suffer injurious sons-in-law). Juno clearly alludes to Polynices and Tydeus, foreshadowing their offences in the upcoming war.[35]

Thematically, the myth of Oenomaus exemplifies aspects of problematic kingship, a core concept in the *Thebaid*.[36] His actions are indicative of the tyrant's megalomania, treachery, brutality and love of violence.[37] Upon learning of the oracle predicting his death at the hands of his future son-in-law (Diod. Sic. 4.71.2–3), Oenomaus resolves to avoid it by any means necessary. His attitude sketches him as someone who believes he possesses the power to circumvent divine mandates, aptly recalling *par excellence* the tyrannical figures of the *Thebaid*, who dismiss or manipulate omens and oracles when they contradict their personal interests.[38] His treacherous character is exposed when he betroths his daughter to anyone who succeeds against him in a chariot race (Diod. Sic. 4.71.3) – he obviously knows that it would be impossible for anyone to overcome him since the steeds of his chariot were a divine gift from Mars (Apollod. *Epit*. 2.5) and 'swifter than the wind' (Hyg. *Fab*. 84). In the *Thebaid*, perfidy goes hand in hand with the Theban throne as Oedipus' accusation against Creon suggests (11.677–8: *…modo perfida regna | fortunaeque locum nostrae, miserande, subisti*), and as we infer from Eteocles' characterisation (3.1: *Aoniae moderator perfidus aulae*; 11.569: *perfide*).[39]

Oenomaus' tyrannical features to which Statius refers explicitly, and thus considered even more relevant for the narrative, are his unprecedented inclination towards violence as well as his brutality (6.349–50: ***crudelibus*** *ambo* | ***exuuiis*** *diroque inbuti sanguine currus*; 7.415–16: *nocte ferunt tacita,* ***saeuo*** *decurrere* ***campo*** | *Oenomaum sua Pisa refert*).[40] Both lead to the commission of *impietas* (4.243–4: ***infando*** *de* ***more*** *et fractis durat ab usque | axibus Oenomai*) since Oenomaus does not stop at defeating his daughter's suitors or even killing them.[41] Instead, he abuses their bodies in a barbarous manner by decapitating them, skinning their faces and using their skulls as decoration (cf. F473, and F473a Radt). The act of desecrating a body is, in and of itself, impious,

[35]Briguglio (2017) 313.

[36]See n. 3.

[37]Hulls (2021) 55 enumerates the tyrannical features that Statius' characters exhibit. See also Dominik (1994) 149 for Domitian's unflattering portrayal in Dio Cassius and its similarity with Statius' sketching of Eteocles as tyrant.

[38]In book 4, Eteocles resorts to necromancy, claiming that divine signs (4.374–7) are not sufficient for revealing the gods' will (4.409–13), and, despite Laius' ominous prophecy, he proceeds with the war, declaring his cause 'just' (7.378: *meritas ultro iurastis in iras*) and implying that the gods are propitious (7.380–1). Similarly, Creon rejects Tiresias' validity at 10.695–6 upon realising that the gods demand the sacrifice of his son.

[39]Eteocles' treachery is revealed as soon as he breaks the deal with Polynices to alternate reigns and fully manifests itself later in the narrative, notably when he sets an ambush to an unsuspecting Tydeus (2.482–90: *fraudisque … insidiis … artes*), who visited Thebes as a legate and, therefore, he was not to be harmed (as per sacred law).

[40]The *Thebaid*'s characters also do not fall short of this expectation for tyrants. Statius calls Eteocles *saeuus* (1.165, 11.393) and emphasises further his propensity for raw violence (2.466: *…uiolente*; 3.215: *crudelem*), which is unveiled as soon as he wakes up from the ominous dream and fantasises about fighting his brother who, oddly enough, is absent (2.128–33). Upon ascending the throne, Creon also undergoes a full transformation, adopting the same ferociousness (11.661: *…saeuis imbutus moribus aulae*; 11.677: *iamne uacat saeuire, Creon?*) which characterised Eteocles, affirming the inextricable connection between political power, treachery and violence.

[41]On the possible meanings of *infando more,* see Parkes (2012) 154.

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but Oenomaus fosters the *impietas* of his deeds by refusing funeral rights to the suitors (*Theb*. 1.276–7: *inhumata procorum … ora*). His action is instantly recalled in the reader's mind when Creon issues his very first edict, prohibiting the burial of the Argive warriors (11.662–4). Finally, the collection of the suitors' heads is emblematic of a tyrant, as McClellan has noted.[42]

Cruelty and enjoyment of violence are also the quintessential characteristics of Tydeus. From the *Thebaid*'s opening, Statius refers to Tydeus' proclivity to anger (*inmodicus irae*, 1.41) which, uncontrollable as it is, seeds and fuels his *furor* in subsequent scenes.[43] His madness, in turn, triggers violence, effectuated through the sheer use of force that Tydeus exhibits both in his duel with Polynices (1.390–446) and in the scene of his death. His savagery and ferociousness, often underscored through similes and links with wild animals (wild boar: 1.397 with 1.489–90; bull: 3.330–5; lion: 2.675–81, 8.593–5; tiger: 8.474; eagle: 8.675; wolf: 8.691),[44] phenomenalise in the extermination of the fifty Thebans who ambushed him (2.496–681), but the climactic moment remains the cannibalisation scene, which fully reveals his bestial nature.[45] The episode is much anticipated given the analogy between Tydeus and Oenomaus which also prefigures the former's *impietas*.[46] Indeed, in book 8.751–61, Statius describes the heinous crime of the Aetolian:[47]

> erigitur Tydeus uultuque occurrit et amens
> laetitiaque iraque, ut singultantia uidit
> ora trahique oculos seseque agnouit in illo,
> imperat abscisum porgi, laeuaque receptum
> spectat atrox hostile caput, gliscitque tepentis
> lumina torua uidens et adhuc dubitantia figi.
> …
> atque illum effracti perfusum tabe cerebri
> aspicit et uiuo scelerantem sanguine fauces
> Tydeus rises, turns his gaze to him, and mad
> with delight and anger as he saw the gasping
> face and the dragging eyes and recognised himself in it,
> orders the severed head to be brought to him and, upon receiving it with his left
> hand, he fiercely gazes the enemy's head and swells,
> contemplating the piercing eyes which, even now, hesitate to become fixed.
> …

[42]McClellan (2019) 191, who cautiously traces Venus' description of Oenomaus' crimes in Val. Flacc. 7.277–8 back to Sophocles.

[43]Hershkowitz (1998) 252–60. Braund and Gilbert (2003) 275–7 argue that cannibalism is the phenomenilization of *ira* in its extreme.

[44]On animal similes in the *Thebaid* and their connection to a character's *ira* see Braund and Gilbert (2003) 261–8 who successfully argue that the ethical tone of epic anger depends on the context, further affirming that the excess of the emotion is more than often a negative feature.

[45]Augoustakis (2016) 345. McClellan (2019) 80 describes the scene as 'a microcosm of the thematic thrust of Statius' whole poem'. On excerpts in earlier books which hint at Tydeus' cannibalism and dehumanization in the narrative's future see McClellan (2019) 86–7.

[46]On Tydeus' *nefas* see Ganiban (2007) 123–7.

[47]On this passage see Augoustakis (2016) 344–52.

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> And she [i.e. Athena] looks at him, drenched with the gore of the fractured skull, and polluting his throat with the living blood.

Tydeus contemplates the face (*ora*) of his fatally wounded enemy, Melanippus, and rejoices (*amens laetitia*) with the severed head (*abscisum … caput*) as he is about to cannibalise it. The head obviously becomes disfigured by its subsequent crushing (*effracti*), which is also inferred from the description of grey matter (*tabe cerebri*) and blood (*uiuo … sanguine*) dripping all over Tydeus' mouth.[48] These lines are evocative of Oenomaus' deeds described in *Thebaid* 1.274–8, referring to the suitors' *trunca ora* and their decapitated bodies (*abrumptis reliquiis*) – in book 8, however, the verbal description is in a way reversed and, instead of decapitated bodies, Statius presents us with a severed head.

Lines 8.751–61 also corroborate Tydeus' characterisation as the 'other' among the Argives, offering another similarity with the Sophoclean figure of Oenomaus, whose adoption of the Scythian custom (F473 Radt) sketches him as a barbarian. Apart from the cannibalism itself, which certain Scythian tribes allegedly practised,[49] the scene's battle context recalls their war habit of drinking the blood of the first victim (Hdt. 4.64.1). The conceptual link of Tydeus with the Scythians and, by extension, Oenomaus becomes even stronger if we consider that Tydeus is often assimilated with wild animals, including the lion and the wolf, which were both used as *comparanda* also for the Scythians' way of life (Sen. *De Ira* 2.15), and that in 8.760–1 Tydeus fulfils the will of Dis who wished for a fighter to munch on his enemy's head like a rabid beast (8.71–2: *…sit qui rabidarum more ferarum | mandat atrox hostile caput*).

In book 1, Statius' allusion to the abuse of Hippodamia's suitors as part of Juno's argument to dissuade Jupiter from destroying Argos implicitly sketches Oenomaus' crime as a *nefas* worse than those perpetrated by any Argive – at least up to the time of the *concilium deorum*. But with Tydeus' cannibalisation of Melanippus' head in book 8, it loses its characterisation as the *nefas par excellence*. If the scalping of the suitors' heads, which recalls the custom of the Scythians, and the denial of burial rights are barbaric and impious, Tydeus' deed appears even more savage in the eyes of the reader, a greater *nefas*, as it adds to the acts perpetrated by Oenomaus (decapitation, disfigurement, abuse of the dead) the crime of consuming human flesh, and blood.[50]

The impiety of Tydeus' conduct is further emphasised in the narrative as the outrage extends to both camps and the divine realm.[51] Athena's shield crest, the Gorgon, covers the eyes of the goddess with her snake hair to prevent her from contemplating the disgusting sight (*Theb.* 8.762–4), in a compelling inversion of its purpose,[52] while the deity does not join the other Olympians before she purifies herself (8.765–6).

[48] On parallels for lines 8.760–1 in Latin literature, see Augoustakis (2016) 350–1.

[49] See n. 13.

[50] Ganiban (2007) 146: 'Just as Tydeus had perpetrated perhaps the most terrible crime against another human (i.e. cannibalism), Capaneus commits the ultimate crime against the *superi* (i.e. a one-on-one challenge to the king of the gods)'. Augoustakis (2016) 345, citing Braund and Gilbert (2003) 277, notes that it is not Tydeus' actions, including his request to decapitate his enemy and fetch him his head, that stirred the gods' anger. It is the act of cannibalism that causes their outrage and underscores the scene's *nefas*. See also Ripoll (1998) 329–31 and 336–9 for Tydeus' actions as tragic *nefas*.

[51] On divine reactions to Tydeus' cannibalism, see McClellan (2019) 81–3.

[52] McNelis (2007) 58.

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Even Mars, the most savage of all the gods (9.4), refuses to watch, and turns his horrified horses away from the battle (9.6–7). Both the Thebans and the Argives are flabbergasted at the sight (9.1–4).[53]

Lycurgus and Capaneus: anger, madness and theomachy

The thematic relevance of Lycurgus' myth to the *Thebaid* is more straightforward as it directly connects the tyrant's anger with madness and the resulting *impietas*, which manifests itself in the form of theomachy. In the *Antigone*, Lycurgus' irascibility is foregrounded from the beginning (Soph. *Ant.* 955: ὀξύχολος). The whole passage is interspersed with words emphasising his wrath (957: ὀργαῖς; 960: μένος) and its transformation into madness (959–60: ...τᾶς μανίας δεινὸν ἀποστάζει | ἀνθηρόν τε μένος; 960: μανίαις), which is the cause of his abusive attitude towards Dionysus (960–1). Capaneus' brief description in the *Antigone* also focuses on the same characteristics (135–7: ...ὃς τότε μαινομένᾳ ξὺν ὁρμᾷ | βακχεύων ἐπέπνει | ῥιπαῖς ἐχθίστων ἀνέμων; 'who then, raging with mad zeal, was breathing gusts of the most hostile winds'), thus offering a conceptual comparison between the two characters.[54]

In the *Thebaid*, excessive anger, another tyrannical feature, is the source of the ensuing *furor* that infects primarily autocratic figures, and subsequently everyone around them.[55] There are several examples illustrating the transformation of wrath into madness, and its repercussions, such as the episode involving Thiodamas in 10.286–93, as well as the encounter between Tydeus and Polynices in book 1.[56] But the most striking example remains Capaneus, who is characterised by a notable tendency to *ira* which mirrors his 'status as the man of anger'[57] in the poem. Statius insists on Capaneus' wrath (*Theb.* 3.602–603: *diu tuto superum contemptor ... modo suaserit* ***ira***; 6.749: *...et stimulis iam languida colla* ***tumescunt***; 6.823: *at hunc socii* ***tumidum***; 6.831–2: *et armiferas laxare adsueuerat* ***iras*** | *ingentes*), which does not transform into madness until book 10 (10.486: *et horrendi stricto mucrone* ***furores***; 10.32: ***insanis*** *Capaneus ... in armis*; 10.830: *maior ab Aoniis poscenda* ***amentia*** *lucis*; 11.1–2: *Postquam magnanimus* ***furias*** *uirtutis iniquae* | *consumpsit Capaneus*), leading to the climactic scene of his attack against the Olympians, and his *impietas*. Statius' sketching of Capaneus recalls Lycurgus' proclivity to anger and his subsequent descent into *furor*, which becomes the driving force of his hubristic behaviour (Soph. *Ant.* 960–1: κεῖνος ἐπέγνω **μανίαις** | ψαύων τὸν θεὸν...). And just as Lycurgus angered the Muses with his scornful attitude (Soph. *Ant.* 965: φιλαύλους τ' **ἠρέθιζε** Μούσας), Capaneus also becomes the target of divine indignation because of his blasphemy (*Theb.* 10.884–6: *pater aequus utrisque* | *aspicit ingentes ardentum comminus* ***iras*** | *seque obstare uidet*).

[53] Augoustakis (2016) 344.

[54] On Soph. *Ant.* 135–7, see Griffith (1999) 150–1.

[55] As Hershkowitz (1998) 248 successfully argues: 'As this madness grows and spreads, so does the scope and action of the epic: the fraternal discord escalates into full-scale war as the conflict-causing (and conflict-caused) madness, once a family affair, draws an ever-increasing number of participants and an ever-widening landscape into the mass disruptions and destruction it produces, engulfing armies and cities and entangling heaven and underworld.'

[56] Hershkowitz (1998) 251–3.

[57] Leigh (2006) 238. See also Vessey (1973) 123, who characterises Capaneus as 'the man whom *furor* has enslaved'.

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There is, however, another circumstantial link between Capaneus and Lycurgus in *Theb*. 10.899–903:[58]

> ‘nullane pro trepidis’, clamabat, ‘numina Thebis
> statis? ubi infandae segnes telluris alumni
> Bacchus et alcides? piget instigare minores.
> tu potius uenias, quis enim concurrere nobis
> dignior? en cineres Semelaeaque busta tenentur!
>
> ‘Are any of you gods going to fight’, he shouted, ‘for
> the city of Thebes in its peril? Where are the lazy offspring of this impious land,
> Bacchus and Hercules? It vexes me to dare someone inferior:
> better you come out (for who is a worthier enemy to engage
> with me?): See! Semele’s ashes and tomb are seized!’

Capaneus deplores the lack of divine intervention on behalf of Thebes and in his manic rant challenges Bacchus. This is not surprising since the latter is the protector deity of Thebes and, as such, deserves special focus from the attacker. The focus on Dionysus ties Capaneus with other notorious theomachs, including Lycurgus, who also disrespected the god and questioned his divine nature. And Bacchus is specifically the deity, among all the Olympians, whose voice is heard in direct speech (10.888–9),[59] just before Capaneus makes his verbal attack:

> ‘nunc ubi saeua manus meaque heu cunabula flammae?
> fulmen, io ubi fulmen?’ ait.
>
> ‘Where is your fierce hand now, and, ah!, the flames that were my cradle?
> Your lightning-bolt, alas!, where is your lightning bolt?’ he said.

Given that Bacchus is a constant target of such behaviour in Greco-Roman literature, and all his enemies are harshly punished for their insolence, the reader forms the expectation of both Capaneus’ theomachy and its subsequent punishment. But his aggression seems to centre around not only the god himself but also his family: Bacchus (the child), Semele (the mother) and Jupiter (the father). In the reader’s eyes, his *nefas* spirals to unprecedented limits. Capaneus, who was sketched in earlier books as an ‘atheist’ questioning the power of divination and sacrifice (*Theb*. 3.616–18), denying the existence of gods (*Theb*. 3.661)[60] and recognising himself as a *superum contemptor* (*Theb*. 3.602; 9.550), has managed to stir the anger of all the Olympian gods (*Theb*. 10.884–6) and not just the wrath of some minor deities, like Lycurgus did with the

[58] On this passage’ see Williams (1972) 132.

[59] Pontiggia (2018) 169 claims that here Bacchus evokes the story of Semele in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which is also affirmed by the reference in *Theb*. 10.903.

[60] On Capaneus’ atheistic/Epicurean worldview, see Chaudhuri (2014) 260–77, from whom I adopted the characterisation of Capaneus.

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Muses (Soph. *Ant*. 965). His hubris culminates when he ends up mocking Jupiter himself and, by extension, all the Olympians, thus challenging the whole divine order in *Theb*. 10.904–6:

> nunc age nunc totis in me conitere flammis,
> Iuppiter! an pauidas tonitru turbare puellas 905
> fortior et soceri turres excindere Cadmi?
> Now, now come, strive against me with all your fires,
> Jupiter! Or are you braver in disturbing scared little girls with your thunder
> and destroying the citadels of your kinsman Cadmus?

Capaneus' conduct is placed only next to that of the Giants by the father of gods (*Theb*. 10.909–10: *quaenam spes hominum tumidae post proelia Phlegrae? | tune etiam feriendus?*, 'What hope is there for mortals after the battles of boastful Phlegra? Must you be struck also?'), underscoring the extraordinariness of his crime, and foreshadowing his upcoming death at the hands of Jupiter himself.[61] Indeed, in 10.927–8, Jupiter strikes the hero with his lightning (*talia dicentem toto Ioue fulmen adactum | corripuit*) in an impressive weaponisation of the forces of nature, which were also exploited by Dionysus in order to make Lycurgus yield. The fact that Capaneus had asked for the strongest thunderbolts that Jupiter can hurl (10.904), and not those that killed Semele (10.903–6), as well as the god's 'response' *toto Ioue* confirm his assimilation with the Giants, and the magnitude of his theomachy.[62]

The points of similarity between the situation of Lycurgus and that of Capaneus invite comparison between the two, inviting the reader to anticipate the futility of the latter's endeavours and the severity of his punishment. Statius' Sophoclean Lycurgus thus serves to articulate Capaneus' ultimate criminality, far exceeding the wickedness of Lycurgus.

Conclusions

Juno's description of Oenomaus' crimes in *Theb*. 1.274—8 and the queen Bacchant's reminder of Lycurgus' punishment in *Theb*. 4.386 include or allude to certain details which scholars have long considered Sophocles' innovations, as can be inferred from F473 and F473a (Radt), and the fourth *stasimon* of the *Antigone* (955–965), respectively. Although not related to the Theban myth, both Lycurgus' theomachy as well as Oenomaus' abuse of the dead have strong thematic connections to the *Thebaid*'s narrative. The former is particularly relevant in the case of Capaneus' threats against the Olympians (*Theb*. 10.899–906), while the latter fits with Tydeus' cannibalisation of Melanippus (*Theb*. 8.751–61), thus forming an analogy in pairs between these Statian heroes and the two mythological kings. The thematic analogy, as well as other nexuses between each pair, give the excerpts in *Theb*. 1.274—8 and 4.386 a proleptic function: the barbarous and violent acts of Oenomaus foreshadow the gruesomeness of Tydeus'

[61] On Capaneus as a Giant-like figure. see Chaudhuri (2014) 226–7 and 286–8; Pontiggia (2018) 168, and n. 1 on the same page.
[62] Cf. Pontiggia (2018) 170–1.

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conduct, whereas Lycurgus' blasphemous behaviour points forward to Capaneus' theomachy. At the same time, these mythological tyrants serve as negative examples with which the reader retrospectively compares the two Statian heroes, and assesses their crimes as worse than those perpetrated by earlier, notorious offenders. This article thus demonstrates the suggestive complexity of Statius' allusive incorporation of Greek tragedy in the *Thebaid*.

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Cite this article: Arampapaslis, K. (2026) '*Nefas* Unleashed: Reading Sophocles in Statius' *Thebaid*', *The Cambridge Classical Journal*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1017/S175027052610030X

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