The Thebaid of Statius ends with a pointed contrast between Athens and Thebes when the forces of Theseus and Creon meet in the final battle of the epic. A Roman reader might well have wondered which city his own was most like: fratricidal Thebes, wracked by civil war, or Athens, bringer of peace and cosmopolitan city of culture? This antithesis is, of course, framed from an Athenian standpoint, and the contrast with Thebes is particularly evocative of Athenian tragedy. As we will see, in the final book of the Thebaid the genre of tragedy epitomizes Athens in a specific, crucial way. This conception rests not merely on the plot of one play, although the Suppliant Women provides the basis for the action, and not just on the works of one playwright, in this case Euripides; Statius illustrates his conception of tragedy with examples from all three of the canonical playwrights, and particularly, since we are dealing with the house of Oedipus, from the work of Sophocles. This paper will argue that Statius emphasizes one particular aspect of tragedy, that distinctively Athenian genre, in order to turn Athens into both a positive and a negative paradigm for Rome.

It is well established that the final books of the Thebaid were heavily influenced by Euripides, particularly the Phoenician Women for the account of the assault on Thebes and Jocasta’s attempt at mediation, and to the Suppliant Women for the story in the final book of the epic of how the women of Argos successfully petition Theseus to intervene and to stop Creon from preventing the burial of their kin. In contrast, the influence of Sophocles has hardly been detected at all.

This seems a bit strange, given the fame, even in antiquity, of Sophocles’ Theban plays, which treated parts of the same chain of events as

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1 See Vessey 1973, index, s.v. “Euripides”; Vessey is keen to stress Statius’ originality, and so tends in fact to highlight the ways in which he diverged from Euripides. See also Smolenaars 1994, 214–7 and 410–3.
2 Vessey 1973, 69. The apparent absence of Sophoclean influence on Statius has been emphasized more recently by Holford-Strevens 2000a, 47f. and 2000b, 237.
Statius. As we will see, Statius in fact plays quite overtly on the fame of Sophocles’ Antigone, and from this it should emerge that Statius at the very least expects his audience to be familiar with the Sophoclean narrative in general terms. We will begin by looking at a few passages from the end of the *Thebaid* where Statius seems to give some hints in the direction of Sophocles. These occur just at the point where Statius is describing a version of events contrary to what is found in Sophocles, and so perhaps constitute an acknowledgment by the poet that the audience might have a different version of the story in mind. I hope this proves to be more than just an exercise in source-criticism, for I want to argue that the competition of Sophoclean and Euripidean models at the end of the *Thebaid* has important ramifications for how we interpret the epic.3

Our hunt for hints of Sophocles starts at the end of Book 11 of the *Thebaid*. Statius follows Euripides’ *Phoenician Women* quite closely here, and so Oedipus is still alive and resident in Thebes at the end of the war, in contrast to the version of events found in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, where Oedipus dies in exile soon after the beginning of hostilities. In the *Thebaid*, Creon, the new king of Thebes, sends Oedipus into exile after the deaths of Eteocles and Polynices, just as he does at the end of the *Phoenician Women*. Oedipus reacts angrily:

\[
\text{linquere tecta iubes? caelum terramque reliqui}
\]
\[
\text{sponte, atque ultricem crudelis in ora retorsi}
\]
\[
\text{non ullo cogente manum: quid tale iubere,}
\]
\[
\text{rex inimice, potes? fugio excedoque nefandis}
\]
\[
\text{sedibus; an refert quo funera longa measque}
\]
\[
\text{transportem tenebras? ne non gens cuncta precanti}
\]
\[
\text{concedat, patriae quantum miser incubo terrae?}
\]


Are you ordering me to leave the palace? I have left heaven and earth of my own free will, and have cruelly turned my avenging hand on my eyes, though no one compelled me. What can you, my king and enemy, command to equal that? I flee, and depart this unholy place; does it matter where I convey my blindness and my lingering death? [Should I fear] that not every nation will grant my prayer for as much of their native soil as my miserable body occupies?4

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3 The focus of Franchet d’Espérey (1999, 88 ff., 277 ff., 310 ff.), who discusses myth, legend and some tragical sources, is on the composition of the *Thebaid*.

4 All translations are my own.