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The *mise en scène* of Kingship and Power in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*: Ritual Performativity or *Goos*, Cledonomancy and Catharsis

Abstract

This contribution focuses on Eteocles' attempts to secure and assert his authority as king and military leader against the female chorus and both the semiotic and self-referential power struggle in the central scene regarding the description of the shields. The extensive pre-dramatic scene of the ecphrastic accumulation of visual signs is interpreted as a symbolic agonistic strife, the theatrical substitute of actual violence. Cledonomantic speech serves as a performative means to convey the oracular anticipation and enigmatic interpretation of the events. Moreover, the paper sheds some light on the mutual reciprocity and circular interaction of fatal entanglements in Thebes and its ruling family. Seen in a cultural perspective of a western Asian healing ritual, the description of the shields can be read as a *mise en abyme* and *mise en scène* of the entire play about mutual destruction and the resulting salvation of the polis.

Keywords: Aeschylus; Babylonian healing and purification ritual; cledonomancy; *choreia*; Dionysian palintropic harmony; *euphemia*; fear and lament; *mise en abyme*; power struggle with words and bodily regime; *Seven against Thebes*; supplication

Introduction: The King as Military Leader in a Situation of Crisis

Classical Greek tragedy preferably stages mythic kings of heroic times in dramatic situations that can be partially associated with Athenian political issues valid at the time of the actual performance. These kings are, in the perspective of Dionysian distortion (Brelich 1982; Bierl 2011), often highly problematic as they tend to be represented with a focus on tyrannical authority. We only recall Oedipus, Creon or Pentheus in famous tragedies like Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone* as well as Euripides' *Bacchae*.

In Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* Eteocles' behaviour as king is at the

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centre of interest.[1] His position is particularly questionable (Lesky 1961; von Fritz 1962; Golden 1964; Podlecki 1964; Cameron 1970; Brown 1977; Aloni 2002; Edmunds 2017), since he and his brother Polynices are under the curse of Oedipus. At first glance he seems to act like an enlightened rational ruler of contemporary Athens in 467 BCE, the horizon of the audience. By repressing all cosmic and religious interconnectedness Eteocles does not recognize the power of the gods and other irrational forces that transcend human control. In Thebes, the tragic location of the Other par excellence, functioning to some extent as the anti-Athens, where opposites collapse in mutual violence and self-destruction (Zeitlin 1986; Bierl 1991: 54-89, esp. 54-8; Seaford 2012: 102-4), Oedipus' sons are engaged in a fierce civil war. This situation is compatible with the quintessential Theban constellation of regressive circularity that characterizes even the city's mythic origin (Zeitlin 1986). After Oedipus' self-blinding and exile, both his sons agree to share the power in Thebes in peace. But soon the younger Eteocles expels the older Polynices by force, who raises the claim of the primogenital right to rule. With the Argive army, assembled by his step-father Adrastus, the 'Inescapable', a name bearing clear associations with Hades and Death, Eteocles' brother therefore fights against his own city. Polynices is about to lead the decisive strike to win back his kingdom, in his eyes a legitimate act. But stasis, civil war, especially between brothers, is regarded as the worst case for any civic rule. Two legitimate claims based on justice (*dike*) stand in a fierce clash. In Thebes, the place of autochthonous and regressive circularity, this difference of polar opposites must collapse into a catastrophe of mutual auto-destruction.

Eteocles, the ruling king in the city, allegedly acts in accord with the norms of a government that leads a legitimate war of defence. Protecting the fatherland, the mother soil, the city gods and their temples against illegitimate assailants, Eteocles focuses his entire energy on unity and cohesion to safeguard the city and to prevent the enemies from conquering it. Callinus' and Tyrtaeus' elegies as appeals to the male citizens in arms are famous examples of how to behave as men in a phalanx, bravely defending their city and families. Or we recall Troy under Hector, besieged by the Greek army.[2] In the situation of *stasis*, especially condensed into the

[1] The text is cited after Page 1972 (occasionally with slight changes); the translation is mainly taken from Smyth 1926; commentaries are: Lupas and Petre 1981; Hutchinson 1985; for further literature see the useful summary by Torrance 2007; among others Fraenkel 1957; Cameron 1970; Burnett 1973; Cingano 2002; Brown 1977; Thalmann 1978; Zeitlin 1982/2009; Judet de la Combe 1987; Wiles 1993; Aloni et al. 2002; Avezzù 2003: 68-78; Stehle 2005; Giordano-Zecharya 2006; Amendola 2006: 45-59; 2010; Trieschnigg 2016; Griffith 2017; Abbate 2017: 71-97.

[2] On the parallel of Thebes in *Septem* with Troy in the *Iliad*, see Ieranò 2002; Gruber

war between brothers, the attacker from the outside is seen, from the perspective of the defender inside, as an illegitimate perpetrator, breaching all norms of civilization. By attempting to burn down the walls and fighting his own people, the assailant is stylized as a primordial force, who betrays his homeland and offends the polis gods, trespassing the norms of Zeus' order and justice, *dike*, in complete *hybris*.

In this paper I will focus on Eteocles' attempts to secure and assert his military authority, first against the female Chorus haunted by panic (1-368), then in his reaction of how to counteract the threat of the attacking seven heroes chosen by lot in the central scene of the shields (369-652). Next to the initial dispute about words, attitudes and gestures between the emotional Chorus and the rational ruler in the first part of the play, I will explore the power struggle about symbols and signs in the ensuing long, iconic, self-referential and thus very pre-dramatic scene.[3] The Scout highlights the terror of the single Argive heroes by describing the emblems of their shields, whereas Eteocles reverts the semiotic potential against its own bearers. The common thread for analysing the king's behaviour is his concern about the special nature of signs. In the extreme situation the ruler wishes to control and regiment not only his subjects' language (Cameron 1970), but also all their extra-linguistic expressions, such as their utterances of the voice, their soundscape and body movements (Nooter 2017: 94-6). The king does not even refrain from checking the modes of ritual practice and the attitude towards the gods (Stehle 2005; Giordano-Zecharya 2006).

The Chorus and Personal Responsibility

In this play "full of war" (Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1021) the city is represented by a Chorus of young maidens. This fact gives the king's behaviour a specific and even more nuanced colouring on the range of gender and age difference. In the typical manner of tragedy the Chorus splits up in various overlapping voices and identities (Calame 2017: 93-124): at the same time, and in polyphony and intermediality, the Chorus can shift between its role as character, i.e. girls in Thebes during the attack, and its function, representing the community, i.e. Athens, and having a general, hermeneutic, affective or emotive, civic, performative and ritual voice (Bierl 2001: esp. 11-104 [Bierl 2009: 1-82]; Gruber 2009: 44-102, 500-28; Gagné and Hopman 2013: 1-28; Calame 2013; Calame 2017: 93-124; esp. on *Septem*, Trieschnigg 2009). It goes without saying that a maiden chorus is very differ-

2009: 179-85.

[3] On Attic tragedy, esp. Aeschylus, as pre-dramatic theatre, see Bierl 2010.

ent compared to a chorus of men, citizens, elders, slaves, foreigners or even ephebes, young warriors. In this particular situation of an imminent military threat they are seized by fear (Schnyder 1995: 66-72; Gruber 2009: 164-71; Visvardi 2015: 147-78), whereas men are summoned to behave bravely without any emotion (Gruber 2009: 172-88). Moreover the Chorus of young maidens incorporates the entire lyric tradition of the *partheneia* (Calame 1994-95). Yet despite its female character the Chorus is always open toward the male population of the polis of Thebes, mirrored in the city of Athens of 467 BCE, whose citizens sit in the audience, still remembering the traumatic experiences of the Persian attack in 480/79 BCE when Athens was captured and destroyed. The inner space of Thebes thus to some extent fuses with the rows in the cavea of the Athenian Theatre of Dionysus, bulwarking itself against the enemy from outside with a wall and the statues of gods that delimit the stage.

Aeschylus is known for being obscure and riddling.[4] He lays special emphasis on divine prophecy, on symbols, motifs that allude to a higher meaning or mysterious predetermination in mythic family constellations. Similar to the Atridae in *Oresteia*, also in this trilogy about the Labdacids – unfortunately in this case the first two plays, *Laius* and *Oedipus*, except for a few fragments, are not preserved – we pursue a long chain of hidden entanglements and open transgressions that partly determine the figures' actual doings in the last play, the *Seven*. Prophecies and curses work over generations and build a loose network of counterfactual motivation for the behaviour of the main agents.[5] Thus Laius' doings have a certain effect on Oedipus', and his total downfall, followed by the cursing of his sons, influences the next generation in *Seven*. At the same time, it is not simply fate – or in this case the Curse (*Ara*) and the Erinys – that drives men, as has been the critical opinion for a long time, but human beings are completely responsible for their actions too. They are not at the mercy of the gods, but act on their own, using free will (Del Corno 1998: esp. 53-6). As in Homer, the motivation for someone's actions has a double nature, a divine *and* a human component.

[4] See Aristoph. *Ran.* 924-32, 945-7; *schol. ad* Aesch. *PV* 610. In this regard he is similar to Heraclitus; Diogenes Laertius 9.6 reports that Timon of Phleius called Aeschylus the riddler (αἰνικτής) (DK A 1) and Cicero, *de fin.* 2.15 "the Dark" (Σκοτεινός); see also Lucretius 1.635-40; Strabo 14.25; on the similarity of thought between Heraclitus and Aeschylus see also Seaford (2012: 240-57), who explains it with reference to "monetisation", the increasing influence of money after its recent introduction. In a problematic manner Poli Palladini (2016: 175-216) argues for a "mystifying poetics" in *Sept.* through which Aeschylus confuses the spectators "so that they will not notice the logical fallacies in the interpretation" (201).

[5] On the counterfactual logic in *Oresteia*, see Käppel 1998.

Cledonomancy and *euphemia*: Eteocles vs the Chorus

Critics have connected the central scene of the allotment of the warriors comprising the description of their shields with cledonomancy, the divination through interpreting chance remarks, utterances, voices or random events, for many years (Cameron 1970; Zeitlin 1982/2009: 46-7/28-9).[6] This superstitious and uncanny concept – widened from the purely acoustic and linguistic level to the kinetic, visual and performative in general – is also behind the first part of the *Seven*, which, also due to the later alleged change at line 653 in Eteocles's behaviour,[7] is not so easy to understand (Stehle 2005). Κληδών, "the omen, the presage contained in a chance utterance" (*LSJ*) (from κλέω) – i.e., everything that has to do with speech and voice, also the invocation and name – is associated with a hidden foreboding meaning. Aeschylus applies this archaic concept for creating his enigmatic poetics in *Septem*, composing three larger dramatic arcs of suspense as carriers of higher wisdom. He places the scene of the shields at the exact centre. In order to avoid negative effects from the gods, uttering the taboo word, men invent the device of euphemism. And this applies, of course, also to the performative utterances and kinetics of the Chorus of the young maidens who shriek and scream in panic and sheer desperation, clinging to the statues of the city gods to supplicate for help in view of the announced attack. The king, on the contrary, does everything to silence inappropriate wailing and *goos*. As commander-in-chief he feels his responsibility for the well-being of the community and the city. Efficient defence consists in the manly and brave behaviour of closing the phalanx. Therefore Eteocles does everything to establish an efficient screen against the enemy. He is afraid of the fact that this uncontrolled female behaviour of panic, fear and terror could affect the warriors' readiness to defend the walls, triggering an overall panic in the city. According to military logic, fear, lament, quick, uncontrolled and fleeing movement toward the statues of the gods, crouching down in front of them, touching and imploring in desperation are seen to have a negative effect on military discipline, dissolving the ranks, the formation of the armed forces. *Goos*, the wild utterance of lament, is regarded as *dysphemia*, a negative language and inappropriate sound in respect to the gods, who instead demand *euphemia*, pious and devotional address in prayer.[8]

[6] On the concept, see Peradotto 1969: 2-10. On Eteocles' concern with the hermeneutics of signs, see Judet da la Combe 1987; Abbate 2017: 90-7.

[7] On overviews of this issue, see Conacher 1996: 69-70 and Stehle 2005: 102n7. See also Vidal-Naquet 1990: 271-8.

[8] For more discussion of *eu-* and *dysphemia*, see Stehle 2004 and Gödde 2011; on the relevance of this concept in the *Oresteia*, see Gödde 2011: 95-148; in *Agamemnon* Bierl

After all, the discrepancy between the king and the Chorus means a deep divide in matters of religion, prayer and the behaviour towards gods in general (Brown 1977 against Hutchinson 1985: 73 and Amendola 2006: 45-59; 2010; in general Torrance 2007: 51-3). Eteocles' martial attitude is deeply grounded in the political sphere and intellectual climate of Athens in 467 BCE, as he claims a supremacy of men over gods in matters of the city. In his few prayers he actually wishes the gods to be allies in the battle, *symmachoi* (266). He almost cynically envisions that gods will leave the sacked city after its capture (216-18), since there is nothing left that would make them stay.[9] On the contrary, the Chorus, oscillating in their perspective from girls to the entire population, regard the gods as the ultimate and highest beings in the universe, standing over human affairs (226-9). Therefore the maidens resort to constraining the gods by kneeling, by crowning and dressing the statues so that they achieve their goal of receiving protection from them. Their behaviour, in some respect, equals supplication. But instead of arriving as *hiketides* from outside to fall at the knees of a foreign king to plea for their life, protection and asylum from ensuing enemies, perhaps clinging to the holy altars in a shrine before, they supplicate and implore the statues (Hutchinson 1985: 74), leaving the king aside.[10] It is as if their *hiketeia*, their intense contact with the single statues of the city gods – they hectically run from one statue to the next and back again – would animate the divine images (Faraone 1992: 4-7, 13-28, 100-2; Steiner 2001: 112-17; against Johnston 2008). In Greek perception, statues can become almost alive, fusing with the god they represent (Versnel 1987; Gladigow 1990; Bremmer 2013: esp. 7-12). Thus, despite the leader's severe criticism of this dysphemic behaviour as well as his appeal to stop it and leave the statues, he ironically achieves his goal of the gods becoming *symmachoi*. It is as if they form and reinforce the defence line linked to them, backing up the wall, the towers and the gates that give shelter to the people inside the city. Moreover, while he is so keen to observe *euphemia*, he constantly uses

2017a (with emphasis on *goos* as *dysphemia*). On *goos* and lament, see Holst-Warhaft 1992; Dué 2006: esp. 8n21 (for further literature); and generally Alexiou 2002.

[9] Hutchinson (1985: xxxvi, 73) argues that Eteocles has trust in the gods as well. See also Amendola 2006; 2010.

[10] On ancient supplication, see Gould 1973; Naiden 2006. On the inscription of the ritual into the texture of Aeschylus' *Suppliants* totally based on it, see Gödde 2000. On the productive but unusual application of the ritual pattern, see Gruber 2009: 170. Gould (1973: 77-8, 97, 100) mentions only the contact with a sacred place, i.e. the altar or the hearth, but not with statues, if one intends to address someone through a god. Direct supplication of a god can only occur through another divine being, as it is the case in *Iliad* 1.498-527 when Thetis asks Zeus for help (see Gould 1973: 75-7).

dysphemia. He summons the wrong gods (Erinys and *Ara*, 70),[11] almost neglecting the Olympians besides mentioning Zeus (69), and evokes even the exodus of the polis gods after the capture (217-18); over and over again he insults and curses the maidens, who as a chorus closely connected with the gods fuse with the citizens and the polis religion.

To confirm this picture, it will be productive to have a closer look at the course of action in *Septem*.

First Part (1-368): A Struggle about the Right Behaviour Towards the Gods. Religious Pragmatism Against Popular Piety

At the very beginning, being confronted with the news of the further approaching attack of the Seven Champions, Eteocles as good ruler clearly manifests his military decisiveness to protect his city, deeply anchored in the Greek ideology of warfare and glory (1-9):

> Κάδμου πολῖται, χρὴ λέγειν τὰ καίρια
> ὅστις φυλάσσει πρᾶγος ἐν πρύμνῃ πόλεως
> οἴακα νωμῶν, βλέφαρα μὴ κοιμῶν ὕπνῳ.
> εἰ μὲν γὰρ εὖ πράξαιμεν, αἰτία θεοῦ·
> εἰ δ' αὖθ', ὃ μὴ γένοιτο, συμφορὰ τύχοι,
> Ἐτεοκλέης ἂν εἷς πολὺς κατὰ πτόλιν
> ὑμνοῖθ' ὑπ' ἀστῶν φροιμίοις πολυρρόθοις
> οἰμώγμασίν θ', ὧν Ζεὺς ἀλεξητήριος
> ἐπώνυμος γένοιτο Καδμείων πόλει.
>
> [Men of Cadmus's city, he who guards from the stern the concerns of the State and guides its helm with eyes untouched by sleep must speak to the point. For if we succeed, the responsibility is heaven's; [5] but if – may it not happen – disaster is our lot, Eteocles would be the one name shouted many times throughout the city in the citizens' resounding uproars and laments. From these evils may Zeus the Defender, upholding his name, shield the city of the Cadmeans!]

Eteocles addresses the citizens, that is the entire male population of Thebes – implying even the Chorus and thus the female population. The core message is in the very first line and functions like a motto of the play: the responsible leader "must speak the appropriate" – χρὴ λέγειν τὰ καίρια (1). It will become essential that the king is keenly aware of his speech and

[11] They are identified in Aesch. *Eum.* 417. In contrast, Amendola (2010: 30-1) argues that the ruler summoned also these negative demons as personifications in order not to forget a single god for reaching his goal, the protection of the city. The Erinyes in their apotropaic function would thus anticipate already their transformation to benevolent women (*Eumenides*) in the *Oresteia*.

sign-production. From the very beginning the king is eager to exert his power and to control his people. Determined to defend his city Eteocles is a mirror of a rather rational contemporary Athenian *strategos*, but he is poorly interconnected with the cosmos and rather pragmatic in regard to the gods.

As we see have seen, the king is totally focused on the well-being and survival of the city. His actions are also driven by the insight and fear that in case of total defeat he would lose his elevated position of power. Eteocles knows the way of thinking of the masses. In case of a successful campaign he knows that due to their traditional religiosity they would attribute it to the God in general, Zeus, and to the other Olympians. But if he failed as *strategos*, he knows he alone would be held responsible. He is sure that he would meet massive criticism and lamentation all over the city, weakening his authority. In the typical manner of tragedy Aeschylus likes to self-referentially dress Eteocles' potential failure in choral and musical forms: Eteocles' name alone would "hymnically resound in wailing songs by the citizens" (ὑμνοῖθ' ὑπ' ἀστῶν φροιμίοις πολυρρόθοις / οἰμώγμασίν θ', 6-7) as cause of the catastrophe. Due to his cledonomantic concern and playing with the etymology of his name "true fame", Eteocles tries to avoid a more drastic and realistic diction. As instantiation of *kleos* he still aims at praise in hymns and proems, but in view of the disaster they would paradoxically be linked with negative lament. The protest would hit him like a wave of anti-song, which in the form of *goos* the Chorus soon will intone in the parodos. Eteocles regards the people as potential danger for his position as king. Thus he envisages their reaction in case of capture as outright rebellion. Like Agamemnon in the *Iliad* he as king claims the special protection of Zeus, traditionally viewed as the king of the gods, in a rather secular and pragmatic manner. Thus he is eager to emphasize that Zeus the Defender should act according to his true name, and help to defend the city of Thebes as well as his position as steersman against the sea of negative voices. In Eteocles' both modern-sophistic and archaic-magic logic, calling Zeus by the name *Alexeterios*, he almost believes that he can force Zeus to make the protection true. But after the announcement of the actual assault Eteocles appeals to – besides addressees of rather traditional and popular religiosity, i.e. Zeus, Earth and "the gods that guard our city" – the Curse and the Erinys (69-70). The prayer to both these terrible gods comes close to *dysphemia* (Stehle 2005: 110-14). Only mentioning the possibility that the city might perish is dangerous. To pray that these chthonic forces should not extinguish the polis, "tearing it, in total destruction, out like a bush from the ground" (μή μοι πόλιν γε πρυμνόθεν πανώλεθρον / ἐκθαμνίσητε, 71-2), betrays and potentially disables his cledomomantic strategy, since merely by uttering the negative words they could come true. And indeed

this will be the outcome, at least for the royal household (cf. 1056, γένος ὠλέσατε πρυμνόθεν οὕτως). Through this early prayer, Eteocles shows that as descendant of the royal family he is firmly grounded in Thebes' ideology and mythic past that are constitutive of the city's precarious state of negative autochthony. In the riddling, earth-based utterance lies the truth. The gods should act like warriors and join the Theban forces, becoming the city's armed bulwark (γένεσθε δ' ἀλκή, 76; cf. ξυμμάχους εἶναι θεούς, 266).[12] He sees a common ground of interest (ξυνά, 76) between city and gods, and wishes to speak about this connection in the interest of the public (ξυνά): "for a State that prospers pays honours to its gods" (πόλις γὰρ εὖ πράσσουσα δαίμονας τίει, 77). This means that in his radical polis religion, gods and city are interdependent, the city guarantees the well-being of the gods. Thus they should also have the duty of joining the defence line. In the reverse conclusion he threatens not to honour the gods, if they will not fight with the troops. Therefore he also subscribes to "the saying that once a city is captured the gods abandon the city" (217-18). Just to utter this *logos* (218) is again an act of *dysphemia* (Stehle 2005: 115). However, on the other hand, he regards the appeal of the Chorus to the polis gods that they should never leave the city as ill-omened (219-25). Thus πειθαρχία, the rule of obedience, is for him the mantra and the mission of his political and strategic leadership, since it is "the mother of Success, the wife of Salvation" (πειθαρχία γάρ ἐστι τῆς εὐπραξίας / μήτηρ γυνὴ σωτῆρος· ὧδ' ἔχει λόγος, 224-5), citing again a popular saying. According to him even the gods must obey his orders. This tendency towards autarchy and autonomy from the divine, combined with the fear of losing control, comes close to totalitarian tyranny (Bierl 2017c).

From the very beginning of the play Eteocles prepares the men of Thebes for the military challenge. In his rational view it is a human, political responsibility to shield the city and its altars (10-20). Zeus or God, so to speak, also has some share in it (21-3), but now the seer foresees the attack as approaching through clear omens. This is why Eteocles calls the citizens to arms (24-38). The situation is immediately confirmed by the Scout, reporting about the terrible blood oath of the seven warriors and the allotment of the best warriors to the seven gates on the side of the Argive attackers (39-68, esp. 39-53). They address the oath to "Ares, Enyo and Fear who delights in blood" (45), sanctioning it with a bull-sacrifice in the shield (42-8). By touching the bloody victim with their hands (44) they receive

[12] Hutchinson (1985: 86) *ad loc.* believes "the chorus had prayed exactly this" in lines 130-4, 145-50, 214-15, 255. But this it is not the case since the girls invoked the gods that they should become their saviours and provide protection.

the energy of the animal and unite in ritual murder.[13] Moreover, satiating this terrible trinity of gods with blood, they activate them like the dead or bloodthirsty chthonic spirits. Ares is the central god of Thebes, who turns against his own city. In case they fail in their military action, the seven champions swear to give a libation to the city of Thebes with their blood (48), soaking the soil, i.e. *Ge*, the notorious grave for the blood of her own descendants.

On this basis, the Scout gives the advice, repeating the defence strategy of the king (62-4):

> σὺ δ' ὥστε ναὸς κεδνὸς οἰακοστρόφος
> φάρξαι πόλισμα πρὶν καταιγίσαι πνοὰς
> Ἄρεως· βοᾷ γὰρ κῦμα χερσαῖον στρατοῦ.
>
> [So you, like the careful helmsman of a ship, secure the city before Ares' blasts storm down upon it; for the wave of their army now crashes over the dry land.]

Throughout the play the approaching army is metaphorically envisaged as the acoustic impact of a wave in its natural power, but the oxymoron κῦμα χερσαῖον (64) makes clear that the army rushes like a noisy wave attacking from the land and hitting the walls of Thebes.

Since, according to tragic norms, the battle cannot be shown directly on the stage, its violence must be conveyed through words, voices and movement, and visualized in daringly synaesthetic scenes (Marinis 2012a). In the entire play Aeschylus does this, first, in the extensive passages (until line 757) anticipating the battle, then towards the end, in the part which reflects the result and its consequences (758-1004, with the later, inauthentic addition 1005-77). All culminates in the fight close to the seven gates, especially in the fatal outcome at the final one. Through the Scout's announcement about the Seven (39-68, esp. 55-68) and Eteocles' arrangements to deploy Theban combatants (282-6), the central scene of the counter-allotment of seven defenders is thus already prepared (369-652). But before the battle starts, we encounter long passages where the female Chorus is shown in fierce debates with the military commander (78-368, esp. 181-286). The king, trying to do his best to get the city ready for the attack, disputes with the maidens about the right behaviour, or the best practice, in such an extreme situation.

The Chorus, functioning mainly as the emotive voice, conveys *phobos* and *eleos*, the quintessential emotions of tragedy according to Aristot-

[13] On the magico-religious practice, see Guidorizzi 2002. On the oath-scene in general, see Torrance 2007: 48-51.

le, as explained in his *Poetics* (1449b24-8). The Chorus works like an inner, emotional focus that lets the spectator feel what is going on inside a city assaulted by the enemy. Playing the role of young maidens, the Chorus can convey terror in an authentic and credible manner. In the parodos (78-180) they envision the approaching army after the Scout's announcement. The horses are still far off, too distant to be heard, but the maidens can see the dust, the visual medium that transmits "its message . . . speechless, yet clear and true" (ἄναυδος σαφὴς ἔτυμος ἄγγελος, 82). Then, coming closer, it is mostly the acoustic elements, the imagined loud stamping of the hooves hitting the earth, that increases the terror, with the clash of the shields and the clatter of the spears. The sequence culminates in the synaesthetic expression "I see the noise" (κτύπον δέδορκα, 104) (Marinis 2012a; Trieschnigg 2016: 223). With their inner eyes, the girls still see the situation. They visualize the violence, supplementing the roaring sounds (Trieschnigg 2016: 220-30). This is what Greek theatre is about. By creating inner scenes of visual and audible scenarios, visualizing images and fantasizing about soundscapes, the actors or chorus members convey these impressions to the spectators so that they are united in terror. In anticipation of the mighty onslaught, overwhelmed by its acoustic and visual dynamic, still only sensed in their imagination, the maidens of the Chorus are terrified (cf., among other lines, θρεῦμαι φοβερὰ μεγάλ' ἄχη, 78; φόβῳ δ' οὐχ ὑπνώσσει κέαρ, 288),[14] and react by breaking out in loud wailing cries of sorrow (cf. αὔειν, λακάζειν, 186), in *goos* mixed with exaggerated invocations (*litai*) (ὀξυγόοις λιταῖσιν, 320). Fear often grows in anticipation or expectation of a future threat, and not only in response to a direct and present stimulus. In avoidance of the danger, they respond through flight and hectic motion (διαδρόμους φυγάς, 191), expressed in the dochmiac rhythms. Unsure if the gods will give shelter, and in total desperation, they fall in supplication at the feet of the statues of several polis gods, crouching and holding on to the images (98, 185). They thus ask the city gods if they do not also hear the noise of the approaching attackers (100). This situation is so drastic that the gods seem to have betrayed Thebes already (cf. πόλιν δορίπονον μὴ προδῶθ', 169). The supplication (cf. 110-11), the intense prostration, is the last resort, in view of threatening death or rape. They lament, couch, and kneel down as the sound of destruction comes closer, and in this ritual posture they appeal to the gods to hear them (171), and to help.

In his one-sided focus on successful military defence, Eteocles overreacts in a misogynistic way, calling the girls, as part of the female race, "in-

[14] On fear in *Sept.,* see Visvardi 2015: 147-78. Lomiento 2004 argues that the different colometric division of lines 78-150 as found in the manuscripts, avoiding metrical responsion, would emphasize the pathetic uproar.

tolerable things!" (θρέμματ' οὐκ ἀνασχετά, 181), "objects of hate for reasonable men" (σωφρόνων μισήματα, 186). He believes that the maidens' loud shrieks (186) and panic-struck movements of flight work against his endeavour to close ranks, and that they will inject cowardice in the male army (191-2). To live together with a group inside the fortified city, showing this acoustic and kinetic behaviour is a great danger. In the typical *hybris*-reaction of Theban kings – we can compare Eteocles' dysphemic and misogynist attitude with that of Creon or Pentheus in *Antigone* or *Bacchae* – he threatens all men and women with death by stoning if they do not obey (196-9).[15] According to the dominant gender-role expectations and ideology, women should not interfere in male business outside the house (200-2). Therefore the king recommends that they follow the "rule of obedience" (πειθαρχία, 224) and keep silent (232). After all, he regards the women's reaction as a rebellion against him and the city, as well as against his male interpretation of polis-religion.

The king views the female lament, the *goos*, and the ritual movement of supplication as a threat to his male authority. In his *hybris* he despises ritual and religion, especially performed by women: only men can defend the city, divine support is only a weak metaphor and empty gesture, for in reality the gods leave the city after its fall (ἀλλ' οὖν θεοὺ / τοὺς τῆς ἁλούσης πόλεος ἐκλείπειν λόγος, 217-18). The maidens represent the traditional worldview that the power of gods stands above that of men. The conflict is not between different modes of prayer and ritual attitudes towards the gods, between euphemic *euchai* and dysphemic *litai*, that is, one positive, normative and civic, the other negative, marginal and threatening. Giordano-Zecharya (2006), believing Eteocles' claims, thus argues that the public and controlled prayer linked with sacrifice creates a reciprocal relation with the gods and through exhortation aims at instilling courage, whereas the invocation by the women, using lament and supplication, expresses emotion and increases fear. I believe instead that Eteocles' use of ritual tends to pervert the civic religion by subordinating the gods to the polis, whereas the ritual practice of the women not only undermines the civil discourse, but also affirms the ties of the polis with the cosmos, and strengthens the traditional religiosity that aims at genuine protection by the gods. Women enjoy a certain independence in ritual affairs. In the extreme situation of danger the reaction of the female Chorus is not only problematic, but also to some extent defendable and natural. They completely trust in the true polis gods to become their saviours and protectors. To reach safety and healing in crisis is a central religious concern, especially in mystery cult, but also of the Aeschylean chorus in general (Gru-

[15] On the excessive punishment, see Torrance 2007: 98.

ber 2009: 92-8, 513-21). Through their intense lament, supplicatory attitude, and direct approach to the statues, the maidens seem to have activated the gods. The close contact, so to speak, animates the statues that represent the gods. They protect their polis not as *symmachoi*, actual combatants, but as higher beings who entertain a special relation to the territory of Thebes where they possess shrines and temples. Through a metonymic link the crowning and dressing of the statues (101) makes them alive, and closes the defence line. To adorn an image with garlands is a cultic activity to honour the gods, but it also stands for strengthening the wall that encircles the city. Adorning statues with robes magically helps to protect the virgins' body from male assault.[16] The girls animate the statues though contact, rituals and practices so that the gods represented by the images protect their city, becoming thus *symmachoi* only in a metaphorical sense. Of course the gods do not enter the battle in a direct way, as Eteocles would like to force them to do. Moreover, Eteocles appeals to the wrong gods.

As personification of war, Ares (Torrance 2007: 40-2) fights on both sides, and thus against his own city of Thebes (45, 53, 64, 115 vs. 105, 135). The *goos* is the appropriate reaction to the situation. In accordance with the earth of Thebes, which, trampled by the warriors, feels the concussions, trembles, quakes, roars and wails (στένει πόλισμα γῆθεν ὡς κυκλουμένων, 247; 329-30; cf. 899-901), the Chorus shake their body, dance in uncontrolled and hectic motion, and lament in horrible tones. Eteocles thus maltreats Earth, one of the central divine figures of Thebes. In the same way, despite his protestations to keep to *euphemia* and appropriate diction, he offends the gods and the Chorus who act on their side. By speaking badly about the women he becomes a function of *Ara*, Curse, and the Curse herself thus acts in him. The girls' supplicatory mode – they call themselves a ἱκέσιον λόχον (111) –, their *hiketeia*, makes them arrive (from "to come", ἱκνέομαι) not to altars or statues of a foreign city, where they can seek for asylum from persecutors, but to statues (βρέτη, 95; cf. 98, 185) placed inside their own city at the wall. Aeschylus plays with the practice of supplication, setting elements apart, reverting and re-contextualizing them. They flee, not from the pursuer, but from the king and his authority himself. In normal practice the supplicants must leave the altars and images to beg the king for help (Gödde 2000: 27-8). In this case Eteocles begs them to leave the statues as well (ἐκτὸς οὖσ' ἀγαλμάτων, 265), but they will not appeal to their king to become their saviour. Rather, he begs them to be silent

[16] On the fear of rape in a captured city, also as fear of the fulfilment of marriage rites, see Torrance 2007: 93-4. On "hymenaial flight" in combination with (self-)lament and supplication, see Seaford 2012: 159; on the theme in the *Suppl.*, see Gödde 2000: 219-34.

and to remain quiet (232, 250, 262) (Torrance 2007: 101-16), and in the end they always interact with the gods to become their real saviours. Instead of welcoming them inside the city, Eteocles would like to exile this dangerous and rebellious population. Girls as *hiketides* are often seen to be suffering perverted marriage rites, with threats of rape and violence to their body (Gödde 2000: 218). In *Septem* the girls foresee and envisage their abduction and rape after the imminent capture of the city (327-35). Polis and female body thus notionally fuse with each other. In the *goos* the girls lament their possible loss of virginity, and they bewail the imminent attack of the assailants upon their intact body (327-35). The supplication thus functions to provide protection for the polis and the female body. The lament, the intense expression of shrieking, extra-linguistic sound (ἔ ἔ ἔ ἔ 150, 158; ἔ ἔ, 327, 339; Nooter 2017: 95), together with words anticipating the worst scenario, as well as the kinetics, the hectic movement to avoid it through the approach toward the statues, are very forceful means to reach their goal, much more than pure rhetorical persuasion. Ironically, it will turn out that not the king, the male *strategos*, saved them, but the gods, whose statues were animated by this intense action. The supplicants are not pursued by other men, but Eteocles by the Erinys (699-700, 723, 791, 867, 887, 977, 988) and the Curse (655, 766, 833, 894, 945, 954). Therefore in his horrible lust of fusing with his brother in violence (Sforza 2007: 97-104, 131-3), Eteocles must fall, whereas the polis survives with the support of the gods.

All things considered, the entire fierce debate between the king and the Chorus is a fight about the regimen of sound and movement in the polis, as later reflected by Plato in his *Laws* (Books 2 and 7).[17] Choral performativity in *euphemia* and disciplined movement can affirm the male order, whereas *dysphemia*, *goos* and distorted body-language can dissolve it. In Eteocles' opinion everything serves as cledonomantic signs. Therefore also the natural, psychologically comprehensible reactions become omens foreboding the military outcome. In this strangely magico-primitive reaction, he tends to denigrate usual ritual practice, the mix of *goos* and supplication. By falling down and touching the knees of a mighty person or statue in the gesture of supplication, people, under pressure of threatening death, make themselves as modest, small and helpless as possible in order to trigger the positive reaction of mercy and help from the powerful figure standing upright. In lamentation mourning people, especially women, emit shrill sounds, tear their dresses apart, scratch their cheeks and beat their breasts, assimilating themselves with the bemoaned dead (Arist. fr. 101 Rose at Ath. 675a; Seaford 1994: 86-7). Eteocles thus regards supplication and lamentation as signs and foreboding omens of a real decay and the dissolution of

[17] See the contributions in Peponi 2013.

order, according to *similia similibus* and homoeopathic logic. The Chorus' reaction of prayer is not purely anti-civic, but is also performed according to the official voice that represents the community. It thus makes the audience aware of the fact that Eteocles disdains popular religion as well as traditional piety, and the practices of his people. Ironically, the king who sees in everything a deeper meaning fails to recognise the deepest truth of the gods, thus causing his own tragic downfall. Therefore he orders that the girls should either be silent or, once they have heard his prayers (κἀμῶν ἀκούσασ' εὐγμάτων, 267), that they should at least intone the *ololygmos*, "the victory song, the sacred cry of joy and goodwill, our Greek ritual of shouting in tribute, that brings courage to our friends and dissolves fear of the enemy" (ὀλολυγμὸν ἱερὸν εὐμενῆ παιώνισον, / Ἑλληνικὸν νόμισμα θυστάδος βοῆς, / θάρσος φίλοις, λύουσα πολεμίων φόβον, 267-70). Ironically, "[t]he *ololygmos* clearly is not only a nicely sounding cry of celebration and victory, but also the shrill cry of women who, in a crisis situation, performatively drown out the moment of danger".[18] "Especially just before the ritual slaughter of the sacrificial animal, an act normally accompanied by a chorus, such a cry" (θυστάδος βοῆς, 269) "emerges from the women in attendance" (Bierl 2017a: 170-1).[19] Tragedy tends to express the horrible deed with sacrificial metaphors. For example, Clytemnestra introduces her murders with this cry (Aesch. *Ag.* 587, 595; Bierl 2017a: 180). With the *ololygmos* the women could therefore anticipate the result of the tragic death of the brothers as sacrifice for the polis (Zeitlin 1982/2009: 161-8/115-19). This connotation is emphasized by the fact that Eteocles "vow[s] that, if things go well and the city is saved, the citizens shall redden the gods' altars with the blood of sheep and sacrifice bulls to the gods" (εὖ ξυντυχόντων καὶ πόλεως σεσωμένης / μήλοισιν αἱμάσσοντας ἑστίας θεῶν / ταυροκτονοῦντας θεοῖσιν ὧδ' ἐπεύχομαι, 274-6). The blood of sacrificial animals will turn into the blood of human beings that will soak the earth of Thebes.

Despite all promises given to the ruler to remain silent, the maidens cannot but lament in fear and panic during the first stasimon. Thus the Chorus introduces the song with the words (288-94):

μέλει, φόβῳ δ' οὐχ ὑπνώσσει κέαρ,
γείτονες δὲ καρδίας

[18] See Deubner 1941: 14 (the discharge of fearful tension); Burkert 1985: 74 (moment of crisis and decision). See also Gödde 2011: 98-116 ("fear of danger" and "joy over the happy outcomes that . . . should be virtually evoked during the simultaneous 'discharge' of feelings of fear") (100). For its nearness to a cry of lament, "howling", see Connelly 2014: 267.

[19] See Burkert 1983: 5, 12, 54 (on *ololyge*) and Burkert 1985: 72, 74.

μέριμναι ζωπυροῦσι τάρβος
τὸν ἀμφιτειχῆ ’ς λεών, δράκοντας ὥς τις τέκνων
ὑπερδέδοικεν λεχαίων δυσευνήτορας
πάντρομος πελειάς·

[I heed him, but through terror my heart finds no repose. Anxieties border upon my heart and kindle my fear of the army surrounding our walls, as a trembling dove fears for her children in the nest because of snakes that are dangerous bedfellows.]

In terror the girls foresee their capture and the lament of the entire polis (327-32):

ἔ ἔ, νέας τε καὶ παλαιὰς
ἱππηδὸν πλοκάμων, περιρ-
ρηγνυμένων φαρέων· βοᾷ
δ’ ἐκκενουμένα πόλις
λαΐδος ὀλλυμένας μειξοθρόου.
βαρείας τοι τύχας προταρβῶ.

[And grief, too, to let the women be led away captive – ah me! – young and old, dragged by the hair, like horses, with their cloaks torn off them. A city, emptied, shouts out as the human booty perishes with mingled cries. A heavy fate, indeed, my fear anticipates.]

As noted above, the Chorus visualize their abduction with their inner eyes. The enemies will drag the women away. In their anticipatory fear, the violence is acted out on their nude bodies, as they envision being raped. The city bemoans the brutal scene in a fusion of cries, that the girls also utter in great excitement, with the short emission of pure and shrill ἔ ἔ sounds. It becomes clear that the maidens are the inner affective focus, conveying the necessary *pathos*, *eleos*. and *phobos*. The female body and the city are assimilated and fused in images.

The description reflects the actual movement in the *goos*, where the wailing girls also dishevel their hair, tear off their dresses and beat their breasts. They compare themselves with animals; the pigeons (294) and horses (cf. 328) recall the animal metaphors in the famous Partheneion of Alcman (fr. 1 Davies). The pure violence visualized by the inner eyes, the drastic assault on the body and the territory of Thebes, mimetically produced together with dance and cries somehow works also as a negative foil, a scenario that the gods should not allow to come true. The words thus function like an appeal in the “rhetoric of supplication” (Gödde 2000: 177-214) to make the gods protect the city.

To sum up, the spectators view a conflict over two attitudes towards the gods and polis religion. It is a struggle between a male authoritarian king

propagating the sophistic 5th-century pure "will to power", which pragmatically ranks the city over the gods, and the female Chorus representing the people who act in harmony with the cosmos and the gods. As a ritual group the Chorus adhere to traditional religion and popular piety. Of course, as a female character, due to their extreme fear and distress, they perform typically female rites and practices. In dancing and singing the *goos*, in lamenting and intimately clinging to the statues that surround the inner space of Thebes, they make the gods come alive, to actively help defend the walls and save the city.

The Central Shield Scene (369-652) as a *mise en abyme*

After the first stasimon the Scout comes again, reporting now in detail about the allotment of the seven heroes equipped with their especially adorned shields. In the extensive scene of the ecphrastic accumulation of visual signs in seven speeches (369-652) nothing really happens in the sense of a dramatic plot. Thus it is essential to evaluate it in terms of pre-dramatic poetics (Bierl 2010). The scene is central, and carries meaning at a different level. Scholars tend to read it from a hermeneutic, semiotic and structuralist perspective, to elucidate Eteocles' interpretations of the symbols on the emblems of the shields, the symbolic meanings per se, and how they can be located between the self and the Other (Torrance 2007: 68).[20] I will combine these methods, and add the ritual and performative aspect. In a chain based on the principles of combination and variation, each attacker is presented with his shield as a carrier of meaning, whereas Eteocles places a hero against each one with a specific message to counteract and neutralize the magic power that he attributes to each emblem in his cledonomantic logic. I argue that the seven speeches and answers function as an agonistic duel about symbols, and thus as the theatrical substitute of actual violence that cannot be shown on stage. Eteocles interprets the signs, now especially visual signs, as blazons. In some cases textual inscriptions (433, 647-8) are added that through the actor's speech become also utterances, again as a code that hints at a higher meaning. In this case, the signs with their symbolic and semiotic potential are not viewed at random in their arbitrary character, but both parties, attributing to them an intentional meaning, apply them on purpose to influence the outcome. The ecphrastic speeches presenting the heroes and their shields embellished with a plethora of signs also serve as a performative means to foresee and antic-

[20] On the shield scene see Thalmann 1978: 105-35; Vidal-Naquet 1990; Zeitlin 1982/2009; Steiner 1994: 49-60; Torrance 2007: 68-91.

ipate the outcome, the *telos*, of the trilogy. Moreover, they present frames of interpretation for the audience. They are thus templates of hubristic behaviour, and Eteocles can again divine their deeper meaning. Whereas shields normally had only apotropaic ornaments or letters for identification (Berman 2007: 33-86; Torrance 2007: 68-70), here we encounter a magic-symbolic surplus, a means to convey the duel-combat on a metaphorical level. In the series, the allotted person attacks, and Eteocles reacts by choosing or having chosen already before the opponent, capping, reverting and counteracting the semiotic potential, to enact defence. It is again Eteocles who tries to control *hybris* and bad, foreboding signs, as well as to set his view against it. In the "neo-epic", almost "anti-epic" tragedy (Nagy 2000: 116), he acts as a *mantis* reading and interpreting signs, but in contrast to Calchas he ultimately fails (Nagy 2000).

Froma Zeitlin (1982/2009) has emphasised that the shield scene is meta-theatrical and works like a 'play within the play'. In a very schematic and basic manner it deals with the quintessential ingredients of theatre, two actors presenting radically opposing positions, here styled as a fight for life, with a chorus who add their emotional comment to the proto-dialogue. As in a model-play – setting up Melanippus as first opponent, Eteocles rightly says that "Ares will decide the outcome with a throw of the dice" (ἔργον δ' ἐν κύβοις Ἄρης κρινεῖ, 414) – it is a self-referential scene about what theatre is all about, i.e. reading signs and interpreting mimetic acting. It is about *semata* that convey fear, *phobos*, and about how a spectator becomes himself an actor in a cruel constellation. The emblem-scene also focuses on the particularly Theban and Dionysian nucleus, the logic of autochthony and regressive circularity. And it mirrors the situation that has been exposed up to this point, splitting it up in single pairs of enemies: the attack of the Seven and their Argive army against Thebes. It is a fight dominated by ambivalence and difference that collapses distinctions in mutual death. The scene revolves around a force that turns against itself, assuming primordial features. It reflects the Theban myth of the Spartoi as well, the men stemming from the primordial dragon sacred to Ares. This monster was killed by Cadmus and its teeth were sown into the earth from where men sprang up fighting against each other. Eteocles, allotting Spartoi against the Seven, to some extent resembles Cadmus who attempts to trick these Sown Men by making them turn against each other. At the same time, he is both a spectator and a player, having reserved the seventh position for himself (282-4). In the course of the events we see not only single scenes, but ones that we can combine to form a syntactic narrative, a story *in nuce* (Zeitlin 1982/2009: 171-218/123-52; Torrance 2007: 83-8) that mirrors the main situation, reflecting again numerous other constellations. The first three blazons describe the evolution from cosmic origin to a

naked man, who aims at burning down the city, up to a warrior who climbs over the fortification. The fourth pair consists in Hippomedon carrying Typhon as emblem and Hyperbius, who is the only Theban warrior who receives his own opposing blazon representing Zeus. Thus the war finds its model in the primordial fight between Typhon and Zeus. The next three assailants carry signs of a more complex development of mankind on their shields. The scene culminates in the last pair: Eteocles, who is trapped from the very beginning, from his first move in this model-play, must face his brother Polynices.

Moreover, I argue, following Walter Burkert (1981; 1992: 106-14), that the mythic tradition of the Seven found in the epic called *Thebais* can be linked to a Babylonian healing and purification ritual, described in a series of magical texts, the *Bit meseri*, enacted to drive out evil.[21] Apparently Aeschylus used this underlying concept of catharsis, integrating it into and transposing it to the tragedy about the same mythic background, *Seven Against Thebes*. According to Burkert the myth of the Seven does not reflect a historical event, that is, a war fought at a historically testified fortification of seven gates. Rather, seven is a sacred number that often figures in rituals and mythical narrations. The texts describe how Babylonian priests or magicians cured diseases by setting up figurines of seven attacking demons "with formidable wings", and against these, figurines of seven protective gods. Thus brothers-in-effigy fight against each other in a metaphorical battle between evil and good forces. In particular, a pair of twins made of plaster was set up at the head of the person to be cured, on the left and right. At the end of the ceremony the figures were destroyed. The meaning of this model-play is to work through violence on a symbolic level, and to exorcise the evil spirits. Transposed to tragedy, I venture to suggest that in the mutual and total self-annihilation of the brothers Eteocles and Polynices, a catharsis is established that will be used for the cohesion and the survival of the city as a whole. In the Dionysian logic, the house of the king has to be eliminated so that the polis can live, gaining cohesion from the cathartic act of violence.[22]

As previously stated, a battle cannot be shown on the classical Greek stage, but is normally brought before the onlookers' eyes through the narration of a messenger. Aeschylus, in this case, anticipates the violence of the actual combat, culminating in the very dramatic point when Eteocles,

[21] See the approving discussion by West 1997: 456-7. Some critics mentioned Burkert's theory: Cingano 2002: 30 (with a list of objections against it ibid. n12; esp. Vermeule 1987: 149n26); Catenacci 2004: 173; Torrance 2007: 58; Sforza 2007: 97-9. None of them, to my knowledge, has systematically applied it to explain the ritual function of *Septem*.

[22] Seaford (2012: 158-77) uses a similar approach.

the king, who prefers the polis over family and religion, decides to oppose his brother Polynices at the seventh gate (632-52 and consequences 653-860). The violence is conveyed via the ecphrasis and interpretation of blazons, i.e. signs on shields that have borne a potential for meta-poetic self-referentiality since the famous description of the Shield in *Iliad* 18.478-608.[23] Thus, seen in the cultural perspective of the Mesopotamian healing ritual, the central scene of the shields is not only meta-theatrical in the various senses explained above, but it is also self-referential in its mythic-ritual and performative meaning as well as in its intended cathartic effect. It can be read as a *mise en abyme*, "a text-within-text that functions as microcosm or mirror of the text itself" (Martin 2000: 63)[24] and a miniature *mise en scène* (cf. Zeitlin 1982/2009: 177-90/129-36) of the entire play about mutual destruction and the resulting salvation of the polis, incorporating also diachronic developments and going back to a possible non-Greek ritual background. The Mesopotamian healing ritual is in itself already a very schematic model-play working with substitute figurines of clay, but it is transferred to a much more complicated myth in the Greek context. It has a parallel in the Akkadian epic about Erra, the god of war and plague, who leads a group of seven terrifying champions threatening to destroy mankind. This text could also be used in magic incantation rituals to exorcise evil (Burkert 1992: 109-10). Aeschylus then transposes the ritual-myth complex to a drama. In its middle he sets a theatrical mirror-scene in narration and in dialogic capping, where the signs are envisaged in the spectators' inner eyes. The audience is thus exposed to this ritual-mythic mini-epos as *mimesis*. Through the *mise en abyme*, I argue, Aeschylus can convey the meaning of the play on the ritual, emotional and cognitive level. The spectators are not only engaged in the hermeneutical process to decipher signs and their semiotics, but also in the ritual and performative process that communicates the *pathos* and the cathartic meaning of the entire play.

Let us take a glance at this agonistic strife through signs in more detail. Tydeus (375-96), the first formidable attacker, is described as a dreadful acoustic and visual phenomenon. He cries in a frenzy of war, and bells attached to his shield emit the sound of fear, the emotion conveyed by the integrated voice of the people, the chorus. On the blazon of his shield he bears the symbols of stars and of the moon, the eye of night. This warfare with signs does not impress Eteocles, the apparently rational military lead-

[23] Coray 2016: 187-266, esp. 198-200.

[24] Dällenbach (1989: 43) defines a *mise en abyme* as "any internal mirror that reflects the whole of the narrative in simple, repeated, or 'specious' (or paradoxical) duplication". Catenacci (2004: 168-9) recognizes a *mise en abyme* in the single blazons relating to the warriors.

er: "I would not tremble before any mere ornaments on a man. Nor can signs and symbols wound and kill" (κόσμον μὲν ἀνδρὸς οὔτιν' ἂν τρέσαιμ' ἐγώ, / οὐδ' ἑλκοποιὰ γίγνεται τὰ σήματα, 397-8). As a mantic diviner who knows about the cledonomantic potential of signs he inverts the symbolic intention, reading it as threatening death for the bearer: "For should night fall on this man's eyes as he dies, then to its bearer this arrogant symbol would prove rightly and justly named" (404-5). He thus counteracts the war of signs with apparent rationality, opposing a different, hidden meaning. Looking at Capaneus' emblem, we proceed in a climax from night to a naked man bearing fire (422-36) that will be opposed by the fire-bearing thunderbolt of Zeus (437-51); Eteoclus (457-71), a variation on the name Eteocles (showing the mutual interdependence of the antagonists), bears the sign of a man climbing a ladder. Eteocles sets up the autochthon Megareus (472-80) to make him fall down as well as the tower. The gigantic Typhon on Hippomedon's blazon (486-500) – the "terrible, outrageous and lawless" (Hes. *Th.* 307) chthonic monster who, according to Hesiod (*Th.* 306-37) challenged Zeus' rule of order – will be reverted by the only counter-image of Hyperbius' shield on the Theban side: Zeus himself, who defeated the Typhon in a cataclysmic battle, and cast it down to Tartarus (501-20). This "antithetical grouping," similar to the central image on the pediment of a temple (Vidal-Naquet 1990: 289 and fig. 8 on 287), functions as another *mise en abyme*, locating the quintessential conflict at the centre of the seven episodes. In the Akkadian model of incantation songs, the evil spirits are winds, snakes and dragons, rising from chthonic realms, just like Typhon. Marduk, the highest god, stands against them and prevails in the end (Burkert 1992: 110). The Sphinx, the horrible symbol of Thebes' primordial past outdone and killed by Oedipus, again in an intellectual play about riddling signs that signify human existence, comes back into Thebes via Parthenopaius (526-49). Actor will be placed against him. He should be successful, since Sphinx is the anti-cultural symbol overcome already once (550-62). Amphiaraus, himself a seer, then functions as the embedded counterforce as good and just enemy opposing the bad intentions of his own group, the only attacker without hubristic signs (568-96). Corrupted by Polynices, Eriphyle – Adrastus' sister and Amphiaraus' wife – forces him to take part in the raid against his own better judgment. In the end he will be mystically received in the earth and venerated as a hero in a healing cult. Thus he is linked to the main functions of the episode and entire play, the mantic interpretation of signs, *sema* as sign and tomb, and catharsis through violence. Good and evil are on either side in a mutual self-destruction that creates purification for the surviving city. Eteocles therefore praises this just man. Despite this inversion, he is obliged to set up Lasthenes against Amphiaraus (597-625).

The scene culminates in the last and seventh pair of the brothers (631-52 vs. 653-76). With this pair, however, the situation suddenly changes. Whereas up to this point the military commander only announced how the six single attackers including their signs will be met in the future, now he himself is directly concerned (Del Corno 1998: esp. 41-3). The Scout only describes the hero at the seventh gate: it is Polynices. He "holds a shield, a perfect circle, newly-made, with a double symbol cleverly fastened on it: a woman modestly walking in the fore leads a man in arms made, it appears, of hammered gold. She claims to be Justice, as the lettering indicates, 'I will bring this man back and he will have his city and move freely in his father's halls'" (642-8). After this announcement the pattern of presenting a counter-measure remains, but the situation is totally different. We shift directly from narration to drama, from the unseen to the visible, from absence to the presence of a performance in the here and now, from the abstract future to the present. All of a sudden, the focus is on the king himself, who as son of Oedipus is totally determined to fight, and prepares himself to be armed. In the abstract struggle about signs the battle was still far away, but now it is imminent. And it will concern the royal family itself. To mark the break, the shield scene comes to an abrupt end with the description of Polynices' emblem. The Scout departs, but the old pattern of giving a direct reaction is maintained. Thus the scene glides into the next one (653-719), the *peripeteia*, in which Eteocles is seen preparing to meet his brother in the decisive duel. The Chorus abruptly change from a reactive to an active attitude, attempting to hold Eteocles' back.

The Third Part (653-1005): Fratricide or *Goos* Comes Full Circle

According to Eteocles (653-76), who notoriously respects the cledonomantic aspect of any word and utterance, names bear the true sense of their etymology; thus with a fitting name Polynices means "much conflict and quarrel" (658). He was never just, and thus appropriating Dike is simply *hybris*. Eteocles trusts in his conviction that the attackers are unjust, and sets himself up as opponent, but without any counteracting force, saying: "we shall know soon enough what the symbol on his shield will accomplish, whether the babbling letters shaped in gold on his shield, together with his mind's wanderings, will bring him back" (658-61). If Dike were with him, she would bear the "false name" (670). Therefore he needs no symbol on his shield either. Polynices will be literally brought back as corpse, yet Eteocles does not emphasize this hidden meaning any more. The *mantis* of signs abruptly transforms into a Homeric hero, totally fixated on battle to reach undying fame. Thus the trap materializes.

The Chorus desperately attempt to stop him, yet in vain (677-719). It is Eteocles' desire – *eros* (688), as the maidens of the Chorus analyse (686-8) – the lust for fusion in the typical brother constellation (Sforza 2007: 101) that will lead to his own death in the mutual blow of *miasma* (682), as well as to the destruction of the household and *genos*. On the one side, the curse of Oedipus, the *daemon*, drives things to the fatal end, but also Eteocles' own psychic constitution, his absolute ambition to rule as king, to fight even against his own brother without listening to any attempt at mediation. Trusting in the true sense of his name, he truly will achieve his glory (*Eteo-kles*; cf. 830). The *kleos aphthiton*, imperishable glory, is characteristic of any epic hero as he reaches this goal only in his death, falling in the epic duel (Nagy 2013: 31-2). Thus to make his name true he must die in battle, in the mutual blow, together with his brother. Therefore he seeks *eukleia* in death through all means (684-5), and the Chorus call both brothers in their total fusion <κλεινοί τ' ἐτεὸν> καὶ πολυνεικεῖς ("⟨really famous⟩ and much of strife", 830), since they combine their true signifiers, the lust for glory, quarrel and mutual death.

In the second stasimon (720-91), the Chorus, full of horror, draw once more the line of the trilogy from Laius to Oedipus and his sons, all driven by the same *eros* and frenzy. Now the girls legitimately fear that Erinys will fulfil the curse. Immediately afterwards the Scout reports the successful battle for the city but the catastrophic end of the brothers (792-821). Fear, terror and *goos* are still the Chorus' dominant ways of expression. They were right, and their activation of the polis gods to act as saviours of the community was successful. In clear reference to Eteocles' wrong and misguided attitude towards the gods, and with slight irony, they ask if they should rejoice, and intone now their song of victory, the *ololygmos* (πότερον χαίρω κἀπολολύξω, 825), as Eteocles had summoned them to do before (267). In light of the survival of the city, the cry could signify the victory, but looking at the extinction of the royal family the *ololygmos* turns out to be the wailing cry that accompanies and overshadows the tragic 'sacrifice' of the brothers.[25]

Dionysus and Palintropic Harmony

Eteocles could not silence the maidens completely in their fitting tonality of *goos*, and ironically they lament now in Dionysiac frenzy (as θυιάς, 836) about him as well as his brother. In this tragedy of total violence and destruction Dionysus, the god of tragedy, is the hidden player behind the

[25] See above nn18-19.

events (Marinis 2012b). Despite his Theban origin he was not addressed among the polis gods. Yet the god of the Other works as the active engine in the entire trilogy. His status as the paradoxical collapse of distinctions between categories and oppositions is perfectly suited to Thebes' characteristics as place of the Other, and of regressive circularity (Bierl 2017b: 102-6). The ecstatic force of madness always comes from the outside, while the inside refuses to accept his arrival. In the end the eruptive energy destroys the royal house that firmly opposed Dionysus. Yet the release of violence and mutual murder are also positive for the cohesion of the community (Seaford 1994: 235-75, 344-67; 2012: 75-113, 158-77). Previously, the assailants were associated with the Dionysian, but now the women inside the walls feel like maenads in their excessive lament. The Other is incorporated into the city, and as in the Babylonian healing ritual, where figurines of gypsum are destroyed, the mutual death of the twin-like brothers, whose opposed identities collapse and fuse in a blood-sacrifice for the Theban soil, has a cathartic quality for the polis. In their death they exorcise the evil spirits of Erinys and Curse, and guarantee the survival of the city. Eteocles had tried to silence the people and the women, the Other, already inside (238, 250, 262), but they prevailed. As inner emotional voice the Chorus display and convey the Dionysian *pathos*, thus assuming the metaphor of maenads who in ritual are temporarily set free to celebrate orgies outside, whereas in myth they are often associated with murder and death. In the face of the catastrophe, horror has seized them completely (esp. 720-91).

In the fierce struggle for the right tune and body-regimen Eteocles was proven wrong. Eteocles, so much concerned with the foreboding dimension of language and signs, did not pay attention to Apollo's open oracle, to the power of the curse and to the omen in their names. Thus the Chorus rightly state: "Indeed, in exact accordance with their name and as truly famous and 'men of much strife', they have perished through their impious intent" (829-31). Both brothers acted against the gods, whereas the Chorus acted in accordance with them. The girls' religious orthopraxy helped animate the statues and activate the gods. Through their voice and tune they have been the gods' agents inside the walls, to help the polis survive. Indeed, their rebellious behaviour could have been a warning for the king to change. As hidden Dionysian agents of *goos*, however, they already anticipated the terrible outcome. Now their maenadic quality becomes open. In a self-referential manner the maidens use musical terms to call the brothers' fall a δύσορνις ἅδε ξυναυλία δορός (839) (this song of the spear, sung to the flute, indeed born of an ill omen). The phrasing emblematizes the palintropic circularity of fatal entanglements in Thebes and its ruling family. The ξυναυλία is like a *palintropos harmonia*, a harmony turned backward or a backstretched connection (Heraclitus fr. DK [22 B] 51). The *au-*

los, the flute, is a specifically Dionysian instrument (Schlesier 1982; Bierl 1991: 83 with n121). Music and weapon are paradoxically brought together in a discordant harmony. The *syn*-sounding accord of clashing spears as ecstatic flutes is *dysornis*, with an inharmonious quality of a bird-song that means ill omen, since it is a wild *goos* and a "*melos* for the tomb" (835) sung in frenzy, accompanied by ecstatic flutes and fitting for the mad deed. It recalls Heraclitus' συνᾷδον διᾷδον ("what harmoniously sings together and discordantly sings asunder") in fr. 10 DK. It is the horrible dialectics of the circular and ecstatic entanglement in the house of the Labdacids that finds expression generation after generation. And it mirrors the terrible collapse of the self and the Other typical of Thebes, the tragic locality par excellence (Zeitlin 1986).

Myths about incest and fights among brothers and relatives reflect the lack of cultural differentiation, the ongoing tendency of regressive circularity in an excessive understanding of autochthony. With regard to the fatal catastrophe, for the Chorus "it is right, before their singing, to cry out the awful hymn of the Erinys (τὸν δυσκέλαδόν θ' ὕμνον Ἐρινύος) and thereafter sing the hated victory song of Hades (ἀχεῖν Ἀίδα τ' / ἐχθρὸν παιᾶν' ἐπιμέλπειν)" (866-70).[26] In their characteristic manner the Chorus project the quintessentially Dionysian constellation of song and dance: to give honour to Dionysus with festive *choreia* in tragedy, especially located in Thebes, turns into a perverted song of lament about death, revenge, curse and violence. The Chorus reflect again the Dionysian conflation of harmonious melody and its wailing distortion by summarizing the situation in Thebes as follows: "Curses have cried out their piercing mode of *nomos*" (ἐπηλάλαξαν / Ἀραὶ τὸν ὀξὺν νόμον, 952-3). In emphasizing palintropic conditions, where opposites stand closely and paradoxically together, Aeschylus resembles Heraclitus. It is less the total fusion of opposites than the close connection that makes them oscillate between the different states, turning (*tropan*) and changing again and again (*palin*) from one into the other in metabolic forms. Therefore Eteocles already announces that he will "set up the big turning point (τὸν μέγαν τρόπον) as himself against the enemies with the other six counter-rowers" (ἐγὼ δέ γ' ἄνδρας ἕξ ἐμοὶ σὺν ἑβδόμῳ / ἀντηρέτας ἐχθροῖσι τὸν μέγαν τρόπον / . . . τάξω, 282-4).[27] This notion of a turn is addressed by the Chorus in similar words:

[26] Lines 861-74 are usually regarded as inauthentic, a later interpolation fitting to 1005-78. See Hutchinson 1985: 190-1; some critics, cited in Lupas and Petre 1981: 263, defend it. The self-reference to a paradoxical musicality is typical of Aeschylus; see e.g. πρέπει λέγειν παιῶνα τόνδ' Ἐρινύων, *Ag.* 645 and Bierl 2017a: 181-2.

[27] Most critics understand τὸν μέγαν τρόπον (283) as an adverbial accusative "in great manner", "in proud fashion" (Smyth); in the sense of "one to one" (Rose); Page puts a "non intelligitur"; Hutchinson 1985: 89 *ad loc.* "[it] can hardly qualify either

ἐπεὶ δαίμων / λήματος ἂν τροπαίᾳ χρονίᾳ μεταλ-/λακτὸς ἴσως ἂν ἔλθοι θελεμωτέρῳ / πνεύματι ("for the divine spirit may change its purpose even after a long time and come on a gentler wind", 705-8; see παντρόπῳ φυγᾷ . . . τροπαῖον). Tragedy loves to speak about suffering in its own musical terms. Thus the closeness of death, lament and celebratory ecstasy in terms of song and sound resembles the paradoxical identity of Hades and Dionysus as stated by Heraclitus (ὡὐτὸς δὲ Ἀίδης καὶ Διόνυσος, fr. 15 DK).[28] The form of the semi-choral *threnos* (875-960) mirrors again the contents, the circularity, the contradictory sameness in palintropic harmony of mutual self-annihilation and reciprocal violence. This is underlined by the antiphonic reply to catchwords in double forms (like μέλεοι . . . / μέλεοι . . . μελέους, 878-80; στόνος, / στένουσι . . . στένει, 900-1), further parallel forms (like τετυμμένοι / τετυμμένοι, 889-90; ἰὼ ἰώ, 875, 881; αἰαῖ / αἰαῖ, 893-4; δι' ὧν / δι' ὧν 904-5; σιδηρόπληκτοι . . . / σιδηρόπληκτοι, 911-12), paradoxical expressions (in dual διήλλαχθε σὺν σιδάρῳ, 883-4, ⟨κοὐ⟩ διχόφρονι πότμῳ, 899, expressions with αὐτο- like αὐτόστονος αὐτοπήμων, 917, with ἀλλαλο- and and ὁμο- like ἀλλαλοφόνοις / χερσὶν ὁμοσπόροισιν, 931-2). Finally it culminates in an amoibaic semi-choric song of *threnos* (961-1004). In a stichic and hemistichic exchange parallel short units are given in direct juxtaposition and in symmetry of rhyme and meter. The Chorus, divided in two halves, sing for example (961-5):

– παιθεὶς ἔπαισας. – σὺ δ' ἔθανες κατακτανών.
– δορὶ δ' ἔκανες. – δορὶ δ' ἔθανες.
– μελεοπόνος. μελεοπαθὴς.
– πρόκεισαι. – κατέκτας.
– ἴτω γόος. – ἴτω δάκρυα. 965

[– You were struck as you struck. – You died as you killed.
– With a spear you killed – With a spear you died.
– Wretched in your deed. – Wretched in your suffering.
– You lie there. – You killed.
– Let lament flow! – Let tears flow!]

And later (993):

ὀλοὰ λέγειν. ὀλοὰ δ' ὁρᾶν.

[Destroyed to say. – Destroyed to see.]

This mirroring form of elements presented in close parallelism highlights

ἀντερήτας or τάξω." Therefore he suggests a lost line.

[28] Seaford (2012: 240-57) speaks about the "unity of opposites" and tries to explain the similarity between Heraclitus and Aeschylus on the basis of money and economics.

the paradoxical and palintropic harmony even more.[29] The performance of speech and song acts establishes, enacts and affirms the perverse mutual murder. The perlocutionary act is the total fusion of Eteocles and Polynices, both royal leaders, brothers and enemies (cf. 674-5) lying in their blood, who killed each other. And it increases the horror the audience feel about this deed. Tragedy displays *pathos* on an audible and visual level. Words, voices and purely extra-linguistic cries (see the numerous ἰὼ ἰὼ in the end, 994-1004) support what one sees, bodies in blood. The reaction is song and dance in *goos*, lament that flows like the tears that accompany it.

In contrast to the solution in harmony of the *Oresteia*, the trilogy about the Labdacids ends in the total dissolution of the royal *genos* through the mutual destruction of the brothers. The excessive violence to which the audience is exposed in *Septem* functions as catharsis, one of the main effects of tragedy according to Aristotle (*Po.* 1449b24-8; Ugolini 2016: 3-16; Ford 2016), making the survival of the city possible. This idea of tragic poets as political teachers of the people and as saviours of the city is particularly reflected in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (1009-10, 1054-6 and 1419, 1436, 1501, 1530; see Bierl 1991: 42). We see now again how the central description of the shields and their signs mirrors the entire play of the *Seven* and its tragic meaning. The scenes describing warriors bearing their shields with blazons and the counteracting practices, together with the emotional comments of the Chorus, revolve around the ritual meaning of self-annihilation in mutual, heroic death-by-duel. It culminates in the fratricide at the seventh gate, sacred to Apollo, whose oracles were not obeyed in the family of Laius. The Chorus convey the necessary *pathos*, the affective side, in view of the very abstract and hermeneutic negotiation of signs. The maidens are full of fear; they break out in lament, partially anticipating the brothers' deaths and the dissolution of order. At the climax they try to prevent Eteocles from his deed. But it is in vain, since he is driven by *eros* (686), *himeros* (692), a desire for fusion with his complementary other side in self-destruction. In tragedy performed in honour of Dionysus this drive is typically styled as a Dionysian *mania*. Thus we can find a net of Dionysian allusions and metaphors in *Septem* (Marinis 2012b). Very indicative is the fact that Erinys comes with the adjective *melanaigis* (699-700).[30] It is an epithet of Dionysus. The Suda reports that the daughters of Eleuther, the eponymous hero of Eleutherae, mocked the epiphany of Dionysus in a black goatskin and went mad. They could only be cured by introducing the cult of Dionysus Melanaigis. Eleutherae, located on the border between Boeotia and Attica is

[29] In a slightly different perspective, see also Seaford 2012: 225-39, esp. 227-30.

[30] See in a similar vein also Seaford 2012: 161-2. Against the Dionysian association are Hutchinson 1985: 157 and Centanni 1994.

the place from where the statue was brought by ephebes in an annual procession at the start of the City Dionysia, into the god's precinct close to the Theatre of Dionysus, where *Septem* was also performed. Sometimes the story of the ruse, *apate*, explaining the name of the Apatouria in an *aition*, is linked to Dionysus Melanaigis. Melanthus, the king of Athens, fought a duel with Xanthus, the king of the Boeotians over a territorial dispute. Melanthus called out that his opponent showed unfair behaviour since he brought a second fighter standing behind him. Sometimes he is associated with a phantom in black goatskin. By this ruse Melanthus made Xanthus turn around so that he could strike him in that moment.[31] The duel of kings of complementary and general name, Black and White, reminds one to some extent of the Theban brothers. Eteocles receives putative help from Dionysus. The god drives him to the terrible duel, but in this case both combatants must die, a cruel sacrifice for the god. Melanaigis makes the girls of Eleuther as well as Eteocles mad. It is a maenadic behaviour of frenzy that the Erinys, often associated with a maenad (Aesch. *Eum.* 500), transfers to the king. The daughters of Eleuther became mad and set "free". The girls of the Chorus are in Eteocles' eyes mad too, at least rebellious. That is what the first part of the play was about. In their sensitivity the girls regard the Argive attack as a Bacchic noise (84, 213) that drives even the cosmos to frenzy (αἰθὴρ ἐπιμαίνεται, 155). According to them Ares is *mainomenos*, mad (343), polluting piety (344). *Goos* consists of wild and ecstatic utterance and movement. Eteocles even calls it "this panicked flight in rushed movements here and there" (διαδρόμους φυγάς, 191),[32] as if they like maenads would be eager to move outside of the city to Polynices, but they are mainly focused on the inside as they must stay in the city. When they know about the catastrophe they call themselves θυιάς (836), as they sing their song to the grave in lament (835-8).[33] In the typical way of Theban kings and comparable to Pentheus, Eteocles wants to control the women and keep them in their subordinate role inside the house. However, he is impelled by the irrational *mania* that he desperately tries to suppress, by the Erinys and the Curse. Finally the women try to convince him to obey women (πιθοῦ γυναιξί, 712) who wish to hold him back for religious and cultic reasons. The deed equals a *miasma*, ritual pollution (682). Yet, totally fixed on his principle of πειθαρχία (224), on rule based on discipline and obedience, he cannot give in. In his endeavour to control the women he does

[31] On the sources (esp. Suda, *s.v.* μέλαν and Ἀπατούρια, *schol. ad* Aristoph. *Ach.* 146), see Halliday 1926.

[32] See also 280, with reference to Hesych. ποίφυγμα· σχῆμα ὀρχηστικόν, but some link it to sort of cry.

[33] See also: μαίνεται γόοισι φρήν, 967 ("My heart is mad with wailing").

not realize that he is already driven by the irrational forces in the first part of the play. Pursued by the Curse he constantly curses the women and the gods. Inside the city the Scout and Eteocles, but even the Chorus characterise the assailants from the outside as the Other,[34] primordial, impious and irrational forces with Dionysian potential. Tydeus' soundscape in attack, βρέμει (378, see 476), is reminiscent of *Bromios*. Hippomedon is full of a god in *enthousiasmos*, not Dionysus but Ares (ἔνθεος δ' Ἄρει, 497) and "raves for battle like a maenad" (βακχᾷ πρὸς ἀλκὴν θυιάς ὡς, 498).[35] The Sphinx on Parthenopaius' blazon is ὠμόσιτος (541), recalling the Bacchic *omophagia*. Finally Polynices shouts his paean in the cry of Iacchus (ἐπεξιακχάσας, 635). Once the duel with his brother is set, it becomes clear that Eteocles is driven by frenzy. But instead of regarding Dionysus, the god of *mania*, as the main source of causation, he makes the gods in general responsible for his madness (ὦ θεομανές τε καὶ θεῶν μέγα στύγος, 653). The Chorus appropriately associate Eteocles and his *genos* with the irrational (686-8, 692, 699, 756-7, 781, 935). In the first part of the play Eteocles tried to repress the Chorus' *goos*. We see now the link to the later developments. His efforts were in vain, for the predominant lamentations can be read as an anticipation of the tragic events that the Chorus cannot stop any more. *Goos* signifies the city in uproar. It can only be saved by the mutual death of the royal brothers. About this catastrophe the girls then lament again.

Conclusion

The central pre-dramatic and very iconic shield scene condenses the events to signs and images in a quintessentially theatrical manner, a *mise en scène* of a *mise en abyme* of signs hinting at a deeper sense. It mirrors the concern with the cledonomantic meaning of words and attitudes towards the gods and takes it to the forefront through the central position in the middle of the play. Most of all the scene prepares, anticipates and self-referentially reflects the decisive battle between the pairs of epic heroes, culminating in the mutual death of the brothers. In a narrative, very schematic and almost epic form the duels are transposed to a pre-dramatic drama. Being closer to the gods the Chorus is a better prophet and reader of signs, a μάντις . . . τῶν κακῶν (608), from the beginning. The girls visualize and act out the catastrophe, somehow putting forth what a poet, especially an epic *aoidos*, usually does. On the other hand, the king does everything to repress

[34] The Argive army is "of foreign tongue", ἑτεροφώνῳ στρατῷ (170, whereas the tune of the *ololygmos* they should intone is called Greek, Ἑλληνικὸν νόμισμα (269).

[35] On the partial overlap between Ares and Dionysus, see Lonnoy 1985; Bierl 1991: 154-7, esp. 156n135.

these utterances, but the *mania* has taken possession of him for too long. The underlying dramatic myth of the shield scene and the battle of the *Seven Against Thebes* in general probably revolves around a magic purification ritual where twin demons are symbolically destroyed for the well-being of the community. Myth expresses scenarios of duels in excessive violence, whereas ritual in positive terms performs this violent nucleus through substitute figurines. As stated before, the mutual death of the close brothers works like a *katharsis* for the polis. This topic is also openly addressed: to kill one's own brother brings *miasma*, and the purification for the survivor or even for both, in case they kill each other, seems impossible (ἀνδροῖν δ' ὁμαίμοιν θάνατος ὧδ' αὐτοκτόνος, / οὐκ ἔστι γῆρας τοῦδε τοῦ μιάσματος, 681-2), whereas normal bloodshed is καθάρσιον (680). In lines 738-9 the Chorus ask themselves: "who could bring purification, who could cleanse them from pollution?" (τίς ἂν καθαρμοὺς πόροι; / τίς ἄν σφε λούσειεν;). The solution to the dilemma is that the brothers will not need purification any more. The catharsis happens for the polis. The polluted brothers can save their city through their mutual extinction. That is why the burial will be an issue later. The logic of the hero cult presupposes giving a tomb to both.[36] Heroes can often possess negative traits (Nagy 2013: 45-6). Oedipus himself is a good example of how a questionable and polluted person can become the saviour of a city. To deny burial to Polynices will be a new pollution of the city and its new ruler Creon, as we know from Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Yet we do not know exactly how the end of the play looked. Up to line 1005 – the most probable end of *Septem* (Lupas and Petre 1981: 281-2; Hutchinson 1985: 209-11) – the brothers' cathartic role in their death seems obvious. To a large extent *pathos* is acted out in rituality and performativity. It is conveyed by the Chorus, who assumes a most emotive voice. The king leads a tragic fight for control over voices, gestures and signs. Entangled in a frenzied and one-sided hermeneutics, between utter rationality and an over-ambitious "will to power", king Eteocles attributes a magical power to signs, voices, images and words. The tragedy consists in the fact that due to his will to achieve total control the king neglects the deeper meanings of the tragic and mythic signs that are the basis of Aeschylus' tragedy, whereas the Chorus gain the upper hand. Their *goos* in the beginning activates the city gods, animating their statues, and anticipates the brothers' mutual death, full of *pathos*. The end of the male *genos*, the duelling kings' killing of each other, and their fusion into a blood libation into the soil entail catharsis for the sick city, and last but not least, catharsis for the audience from the excess of *pathos*.

[36] See also Seaford 2012: 163-6.

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