

PRAYER AND CURSE IN AESCHYLUS' *SEVEN AGAINST THEBES*

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SPEAKING IS DANGEROUSLY PERFORMATIVE in the world of Aeschylus. The prime example is *Oresteia*: Cassandra's prophecies and visions of the curse in *Agamemnon*, the raising of the dead in *Choephoroi*, the Furies' "Binding Song" in *Eumenides*.¹ Aeschylus' earlier *Seven against Thebes* also pivots on performative speech. As Helen Bacon has pointed out, Eteokles reinterprets the Argive shield emblems in the central scene so as to turn their omens against the bearers of the shields.² But performative speech calls for attention from the beginning of the play, in ways that have not been recognized, in prayer and violation of prayer, in *klēdōn* (speech as omen) and apotropaic prayer. Not only do Eteokles and the chorus both utter prayers, but Eteokles makes the efficacy of speech an issue by passing harsh judgment on the chorus' language in the presence of the gods, while the chorus tries more meekly to correct or cancel his. Critics have not devoted enough effort to investigating what is at stake here. Most accept Eteokles' view that the chorus is destroying the morale of Theban citizens with its hysterics—overreact though he may—and sympathize with his effort to silence it.³ It is more fruitful, I think, to examine the performative speech of both parties, Eteokles and the chorus, in light of Greek rules and norms for well-omened speech. I argue that performative speech early in the play reveals the working of the curse and offers new insight into the central conundrum of the play, Eteokles' sudden change of attitude when he hears that Polyneikes is at the seventh gate.

First, a brief description of the first part of *Seven* and interpretive approaches to it. The scene on stage represents the acropolis of Thebes, on which stand statues of the Theban gods. Probably they included the full complement mentioned by the chorus in lines 109–52, namely, Zeus, Athena,

1. For performative speech in *Agamemnon*, including prayer and curse, see Neustadt 1929, esp. 247–53; for the Erinyes' "Binding Song," see Faraone 1985 and Prins 1991.

2. Bacon 1964, 32; see also Sheppard 1913, Cameron 1970, Burnett 1973, and Hubbard 1992.

3. E.g., Cameron 1970, esp. 98–100; Adkins 1982, 39–44; Jackson 1988, 289–91; Hubbard 1992, esp. 305; Yaari 1995; Conacher 1996, 52–53; Sommerstein 1996, 111–12; Bona 1997. Zeitlin (1982, 145) identifies the women symbolically with the Furies. Gagarin (1976, 151) makes this same point about earlier scholarship; he emphasizes the narrowness of Eteokles' male, military perspective and argues that the chorus has an equally valid view; similar is Lupaş and Petre 1981, 40–41. Podlecki (1993, 64–72) is very critical of Eteokles. Foley (2001, 45–48) questions Eteokles' attitude but focuses primarily on the women's lament at the end of the play.

Poseidon, Ares, Aphrodite, Apollo, Artemis, and Hera.⁴ Outside the walls, the army of Polyneikes is camped, preparing to attack. In the prologue a spy reports to Eteokles the Argive army's plans. After the spy's exit, Eteokles prays, then exits. The chorus enters, dashing to the acropolis in distress to pray to the gods. After it has sung a series of songs, first astrophic, then strophic, Eteokles returns, angrily denouncing the chorus for disheartening the citizen soldiers. The chorus defends itself in an epirrhematic section, with Eteokles speaking to their singing. The exchanges accelerate to stichomythia before Eteokles silences the chorus and, after offering advice about how it should pray, departs again.

The argument between Eteokles and the chorus in the first episode over how and when to pray has long been labeled a problem because it seems isolated from the action of the rest of the play.⁵ Numerous scholars have therefore proposed that the relevance of the episode to later developments lies in its illumination of Eteokles' character.⁶ For most, Eteokles shows himself to be a practical and committed king of Thebes in the first episode, while in the second, the shield scene, he is suddenly transformed as he confronts the working of the curse.⁷ There are also those who think that Eteokles' violent reaction to the chorus in the first scene shows the audience that he is possessed by the curse before he realizes it, though theirs is a minority view.⁸ I agree that the first episode, along with the prologue, reveals something about Eteokles, but it is a specific quality of his speech. Only by examining Eteokles' and the chorus' utterances to and about the gods can we discover it.⁹

Let us begin with the chorus, since it is their pleas to the gods that so provoke Eteokles. Unlike the choruses in the majority of tragedies, the chorus of *Seven* consists of unmarried women of citizen class, the kind of young Theban women who would have performed the "maiden songs" of Pindar or the hymns of Korinna in reality.¹⁰ In coming to the acropolis in a homo-

4. Thalmann (1978, 88–89) and Wiles (1997, 198–200) reconstruct the stage set with statues of all eight gods, arranged in the order in which they are mentioned.

5. For the "episodic" nature of the play see, e.g., Jackson 1988, 287–88, with earlier bibliography.

6. Burnett (1973, 343–44) gives an account of the turn to Eteokles' character as explanatory for the structure of the play.

7. Different critics interpret Eteokles' transformation at 653 differently. Conacher (1996, 69–70) summarizes older views. Sommerstein (1996, 109–15), following earlier scholars, thinks that Eteokles exhibits the working of the curse by changing from a rational leader to a fanatic determined to kill his brother. Bacon (1964) and Jackson (1988) modify this idea. Burnett (1973) suggests that Eteokles solves the riddle of the curse when he hears that Polyneikes is at the seventh gate, Lenz (1981) that Eteokles moves from uncertainty to certainty about how the curse will manifest itself. Conacher (52–56), Brown (1977, also with good discussion of earlier views), and DeVito (1999) see Eteokles as remaining rational in the later scene and acting to save the city. Winnington-Ingram (1983, 34–40 and 48–54) argues for Eteokles' being both maddened and the city's protector after 653.

8. E.g., Caldwell 1973 and Garzya 1996.

9. Winnington-Ingram (1983, p. 28, n. 30) gives bibliography on Eteokles' religious attitude in the first part of the play, to which add Bona (1997) on the difference between Eteokles' and the chorus' views of religion, and Judet de la Combe (1988), who has the most interesting discussion; see esp. 216, where he contrasts the chorus' reliance on the past with Eteokles' view of the human-divine relationship as always up for renegotiation.

10. The chorus members refer to themselves (apparently) as "virgins" (110, 171). Since they call Eteokles "child of Oedipus" in 203 and 677 and hold their ground in dialogue with the king, Delcourt (1932, 26–28) argues that they must be older women attended by a silent group of young unmarried women. This

geneous group, perhaps with robes and crowns as gifts for the gods (l. 101), they evoke the choruses of public ritual, even though their spontaneous dash for the sacred site is no regular ritual performance. Since they are in the city's central sacred space, and given their competence and intention to perform formal prayer, their utterances must be measured against the "rules" for public prayer. Crucial to public ritual prayer was the maintaining of *euphēmia*.¹¹ *Euphēmia*, which means "speech of good omen," prescribes the only kind of utterance that the gods should hear within the ritual space of opened divine-human communication. It is often translated "silence" because it signifies that the audience watching the ritual should say nothing in order to avoid any chance of miscommunication. But those charged with prayer or song must speak words welcome to the gods and avoid any repellent to them. To help guide *euphēmia*, prayer had a standard tripartite structure, consisting of invocation, argument, and petition, to use J. M. Bremer's terms.¹² The argument offered the divinity a reason for granting the petition; the reasons could be quite various, though *da quia dedimus* and *da quia dedisti* are common forms.

The opposite of *euphēmia*, all that it is designed to suppress, is *dysphēmia* (ill-omened speech). The range of utterances falling into the latter category is not easy to determine fully, for it means identifying what was not said. Lament was clearly antithetical to *euphēmia*; many passages in classical sources contrast them. To give one example, Iphigeneia insists on proper ritual after she has accepted her own sacrifice in Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. At 1466–67 she tells her weeping mother that she does not allow tears, and she commands the chorus to sing a paean to Artemis with *euphēmia* while the army of the Argives observes euphemic silence. In her song to Artemis she says (1487–89), "O august august mother, I will not give you my tears; it is not fitting at the holy rites."¹³ Similarly taboo (as shown by comments about *dysphēmia* in literature and commands to watch one's language) are references to polluting realities such as death, cries of pain or grief, insulting language, and expectation of disaster.¹⁴

is conceivable, but there is no mention of silent participants, and "child of Oedipus" is used for thematic reasons. The evidence for the chorus' status is indirect: the women speak familiarly to Eteokles, and the herald addresses them respectfully (792, though a line is lost that would have specified their status more definitely).

11. For more extensive discussion of *euphēmia*, *dysphēmia*, and prayer in Greek tragedy, from which the next three paragraphs derive, see Stehle 2004. Mensching (1926) discusses the many forms of silence in religious context, primarily in later religious practices and more focused on the inward state than *euphēmia* is. I thank one of the anonymous readers for this and several other helpful references and comments. Lateiner (1997) emphasizes cultural variability in prayer and the need to understand local norms.

12. Bremer 1981, 196; see also Pulleyn 1997, 26–28.

13. Pl. (*Leg.* 800d) also asserts emphatically that lament at an altar is blasphemy; cf. Callim. *Hymn* 2.21–24. Aubriot-Sévin (1992, 143–45) considers the question and concludes (p. 145) that, although individuals who are intimate with the gods are sometimes depicted in literature as addressing them tearfully, this was acceptable only outside sacred places and religious ceremonies.

14. For these as *dysphēmia*, cf. Hes. *Op.* 735: *dysphēmos* tomb; Soph. *El.* 905: *ou dysphēmō* in the presence of a sign of Orestes; Eur. *Heracl.* 600: not wanting to *dysphēmein* the goddess (out of anger or grief); Pl. *Hp. mai.* 293a: linking of god and burial is *dysphēmos*; Zen. 4.95: "Lindians [are doing] the sacrifice," a phrase for those who perform sacrifices with *dysphēmia*; it comes from the Lindian practice of being abusive when they sacrifice to Herakles.

Nonverbal signs should be of good omen as well. In a sacrificial procession the victim should go willingly to the altar. Movement of the human chorus should likewise be orderly; this we can deduce from the meter of known cult hymns. Cult hymns are monostrophic or triadic; they repeat the same metrical pattern for stanza after stanza or triad after triad. The repeating stanzas kept the performers' movements steady; thus a chorus processing along a sacred way or dancing around an altar presented a predictable, pleasing orientation toward the god's location.¹⁵

Euphēmia along with its nonverbal corollaries of pleasing motion, music, and a beautiful visual scene constituted a human offering of *charis* to the gods.¹⁶ *Charis*, pleasure given or received, governs relations between humans and gods: it attracts the gods to prayer and celebration, honoring and delighting them, while suggesting that benefactions should be given in return.¹⁷ Prayer is not automatically performative but persuasive, so it must elicit the god's favor. An ancient audience, for whom *euphēmia* was an ingrained set of behaviors and sensitivities, must have noted whether the prayers offered by Eteokles and the chorus of *Seven* observed or violated it, whether they created *charis* or not.¹⁸

The parodos (entrance song) of the chorus falls into four sections, lines 78–108, 109–50, 151–65, and 166–80. Each has a different effect. In the first section (78–108), the young women enter singing in astrophic dochmiacs about their fright and enumerating the signs of the enemy's approach (dust, roar, clatter of weapons). The dochmiac, a very variable metrical foot, seldom appears outside drama and then only as an isolated foot embedded in other meters.¹⁹ It was not used for ritual song, presumably because it sounded both excited and unstable: as a result of resolutions it can produce runs of five or six short syllables in a row. Even dochmiacs usually form strophic pairs in tragedy, but here the chorus' initial song is not even strophic.²⁰ With their dochmiacs, the chorus members may have run on stage out of formation. More likely, they danced, but their dance, no doubt agitated, would have imitated distress.

In their verbal and visible panic the chorus members soon apostrophize the gods (87–88), but they do not sustain their appeal. The next moment they despair (93–94): "Who of gods or goddesses really will rescue, who really will defend [us]?" In the very presence of the statues the chorus members

15. No dramatic chorus achieves the regularity of ritual choral movement because of the ever-changing rhythm of its strophic pairs, though a chorus in tragedy can imitate ritual for the length of one strophic pair; see Stehle 2004.

16. For *charis* in relations between humans and gods, see Versnel 1981, 46–50; Race 1982; Furley 1995; Parker 1998.

17. One act of *charis* calls for another in return, so the word is sometimes translated as "reciprocity." Parker (1998, 108–9) makes the point that the word does not mean reciprocity, but because of Greek thinking about the way *charis* should function it comes to entail the idea of exchange.

18. Bacon (1994/5, esp. 13–18) describes the importance of choral song and dance in community life, including religious festivals. Henrichs 1994/5 focuses on Dionysiac ritual and tragic choral song.

19. Dale 1968, 104–19, esp. 110; West 1982, 108–15, and see 68–69 for iambic odes with interspersed dochmiacs in Pindar and Bacchylides.

20. Taplin (1977, 141–42) suggests that it was divided among individual chorus members. Lupaş and Petre (1981, 43) and Hutchinson (1985, ad 78–181) oppose the idea.

seem to doubt their efficacy. Their alternating ritual effort and panic is most vivid in lines 95–103:²¹

Should I fall at the feet of the ancestral statues of the divinities? Io, blessed ones firm-seated. It seems best to grasp the statues. Why are we hesitating, afflicted with groaning? Do you hear, or don't you hear, the clang of shields? When if not now will we drape them with robes and wreaths as entreaty? I see the clang, the rattle of more than one spear.

Twice the chorus women exhort each other to proceed to ritual action, first supplication then offering of gifts. Both times they are distracted from their act by fresh sounds from the army outside the walls. Their distraction each time is reflected in an iambic trimeter line (“Do you hear . . .” and “I see the clang . . .”). Each of the two lines may have been spoken by one chorus member rather than sung, which would effectively dramatize the effort to concentrate on ritual as an effort in the first place to maintain song.²² Repeatedly turning to the statues then away toward the walls, the chorus would dance its straining toward prayer. This religious disarray exhibits neither *euphēmia* nor trust in the gods. Distraction and despair prevail.

For an effective appeal to the gods the chorus members must focus emotionally and turn their power of concentration on making a persuasive case. At line 109 (the second segment) the chorus begins a prayer proper with a more sustained address, first to all the gods, then to individuals in turn. The young women create more recognizable prayer elements: they identify themselves (110); they give Zeus dignified epithets (116); and they single out a characteristic of each of the other gods and appeal to him or her to act on or with it (128–29, 130–31, etc.). In the first half of this song only Zeus is individually addressed, while vivid descriptions of the attack on Thebes still break in. The bridles of the horses “wail murder” (123). Yet they make an attempt at subordinating their fear: they subordinate lines 120–26, which picture the Argive horsemen and the seven commanders, to their address to Zeus with γάρ (“for”/“because”) and make it explanatory. In all of the first astrophic song no γάρ appears; indeed most of it consists of statements in asyndeton. Now there is a hint of intellectual control. Building control in the second half of the song, they address the next six gods one after another without distraction from the approaching enemy. Still, as Ares’ turn comes, the chorus cannot stifle a momentary wail of its own, *pheu, pheu* (135), before continuing with its invocation. Their concentration is increasing, but the chorus has not achieved euphemic style.

The young women still sing in dochmiacs, and this section is not yet strophic. The latter is a contentious issue. A strong break, where the chorus opens its series of apostrophes to the six gods after Zeus, marks what is in fact the mid-point of the segment (127). There is general parallelism in the two halves. But the responsion is disturbed in several places. Various

21. I follow the numbering of Page 1972 and Hutchinson 1985 and cite the text of the latter. The line numbers in West 1992 are sometimes slightly different.

22. Dale (1968, 86) takes these lines as a clear case of spoken interjections.

attempts have been made to restore it; the most recent, by M. L. West, involves changing the text significantly (or daggering it) in six places where there is no other definite reason to posit corruption.²³ Six such changes in twenty-eight printed lines seems excessive; perhaps it is better to see the deviations as deliberate. Giving the chorus a near miss at strophic form may be a remarkable theatrical effect, but it emphasizes the chorus' hard-won progression from astrophic to strophic stanzas.

The not-quite-strophic pattern is seconded by a lack of symmetry in the chorus' movement. At some point in the parodos the chorus members must supplicate the statues by approaching them, perhaps placing the wreaths or robes around them, for Eteokles later describes them as "falling at the feet of the statues" (185). There is no moment when they can do so except during this section, when they apostrophize the gods in turn. Since they would advance toward Zeus alone in the first half, while in the second they turn to each of six gods in a quick sequence, they must have different choreography in the two halves. The overall metrical parallelism then marks an advance from chaos in the first section, but the deviations in rhythm and movement would reinforce the impression that the chorus' control is incomplete. At any moment it could collapse.

And collapse it does, to all appearances, as the chorus begins a new pattern with cries of distress at another crescendo of noise from beyond the wall (150–57):

E, e, e, e! I hear the crash of wagons around the city. O lady Hera! The axle boxes of the weighted axles squeal. Dear Artemis! The upper air, shaken by the spear, dances madly. What is our city suffering? What will become of it? To what fate is god driving it?

23. West 1990, 102–8. He must find independent reasons to condemn the text as it stands; otherwise he is just imposing strophic form. I do not find his reasons compelling. The lines he emends are:

109 (108W), which has a very rare form of dochmiac and also ends with *brevis in longo*. West labels it "unacceptable." But Conomis (1964, 44 (c)2) shows that *brevis in longo* is common enough in dochmiacs when a pause follows and accepts the dochmiac along with a second example in Euripides. It is worth noting that this play includes examples of six other dochmiac forms that are rare in Aeschylus (Conomis nos. 4, 6, 9, 11, 18, and 25). I exclude no. 17, based on a dubious emendation.

116/7 (116/7W), which is dochmiac plus cretic and contains the vocative adjective *panteles*, unparalleled as an epithet of Zeus. However, 122 (123W) has cretic plus dochmiac, as does the "responding" line 144. The latter has one too many short syllables in the dochmiac, so West emends to create two dochmiacs in both. But see West (1982, 111) for cretics in dochmiac contexts and "abnormal" dochmiacs with an extra short. West acknowledges that *panteles* is not intrinsically unlikely.

131/2 (133/4W), where West rejects the idea that the chorus asks Poseidon to save the city "with his fish-spearing implement" (i.e., his trident) and rewrites to make the trident a generic attribute. But the chorus systematically asks each god to employ the attribute named either as grounds or as means for coming to the aid of Thebes. The image evoked is one of spearing men as they appear at the top of the walls.

135 (137/8W), where he rejects *pheu*, *pheu* as inappropriate to a prayer. That is true, but the chorus inserts cries into prayer repeatedly.

136/7 (137/8W), where he argues that Thebes could not be called "eponymous city of Kadmos" because it is not in fact named after him. But the acropolis is called the Kadmeia, and that is where the chorus is located as it calls on Ares, who is connected to Thebes through Kadmos; cf. Dawe 1982, ad 1.

144 (145W), where West admits having no other reason to emend except to create respension.

There are other minor emendations required and a text problem at 148/9 (147/8W). None of the reasons listed constitutes a compelling case for emendation apart from the wish to restore respension.

The appeals to the gods are reduced to exclamations as the chorus falls back into distracted fright. But then it stages a remarkable recovery. This short strophe is matched by an indubitable antistrophe. The latter also begins with “e, e, e, e,” but the repetition formalizes it, pulls the spontaneous cries into a rhythmic order. Although it is still using dochmiacs, the chorus has recovered by imposing the strophic form on both its song and its dance. And exclamations and descriptions of noise finally give way, allowing the antistrophe to close with a full prayer (164–65), “And you, blessed mistress [Athena] Onka [positioned] before the city, save the seven-gated seat.”²⁴

That prayer to Athena Onka propels the chorus into another strophic pair in which euphemic style is finally achieved.²⁵ The meter shifts to predominantly iambs and cretics; although dochmiacs constitute the last two lines, the change of rhythm at the beginning marks a change of emotional state.²⁶ Iambs may have been an old cult meter, since the invocation of the chorus of Eleusinian initiates to Demeter in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* is in iambs.²⁷ This is also the first section in which the singers do not allow any distracting gasps or references to the attack to break in. Now they use words like τέλειοι and τέλειαι (“accomplishing”), λυτήριοι (“delivering”), φιλοθύτων (“sacrifice-loving”), which imply efficaciousness and reciprocity.²⁸ In the strophe they offer an apotropaic prayer (on which see below), which ends by asking the gods to hear the “prayers with hands outstretched of the maidens,” a self-reflexive statement calling attention to their gestures—controlled by the dance—and doubling the double message of voice and body. They end with a prayer full of the language of love and caring in the antistrophe (174–80):

ιώ, φίλοι δαίμονες,
 λυτήριοι <τ’> ἀμφιβάντες πόλιν
 δειξάθ’ ὥς φιλοπόλεις
 μέλεσθέ θ’ ἱερῶν δημίων,
 μελόμενοι δ’ ἀρήξατε.
 φιλοθύτων δέ τοι πόλεος ὀργίων
 μνήστορες ἔστε μοι.

24. There is a textual problem in line 161, and in the text as it stands Athena Onka is not the subject until line 164. But 161–63 fits Athena. Hutchinson’s view (1985, ad 161f.) is not persuasive. Sommerstein (1989b, 436–37) argues that it refers (rather opaquely) to Ares. See West’s apparatus (1992 ad loc.) for possible emendations that would eliminate *su te* and attach 161–63 to 164–65.

25. Rutherford (1994/5, 122–23) comments on the modulation from dirge to paean in the kommos of *Choephoroi*, which could be seen as a parallel for a form of lament-prayer. But this is an imagined modulation, cast in a future-less-vivid construction, nor is it public ritual.

26. According to West’s scansion (1992, 66) three lines of iambs are followed in line 4 by a single dochmiac. Line 5 returns to iambic, but the strophe finishes up with three dochmiacs. Lupaş and Petre, who note the progressive calming of the chorus (1981, 63), remark (68) that if one thinks the chorus continues to calm itself one could analyze the dochmiac of line 4 plus the -u- at the beginning of 5 as iambic. This would give an iambic dimeter connected by a bridge and followed by another dimeter with syncopated iambs.

27. *Ran.* 385a–93, also with short (five-line) stanzas; see Dover 1993, ad 385a–94 [sic].

28. Judet de la Combe (1988, 214–15) writes well of this strophic pair that it contrasts ritual and spatial order with Argive violence, the legitimacy of the chorus’ speech with the “heterophony” (170), that is, dissonance, of the Argive army.

Io, dear divinities and salvific, by standing over the city show that you are city-loving, and have care for the public holy offerings and, caring, come to their aid. Truly be mindful, I ask, of the sacrifice-loving habits of the city.

The last sentence is an example of *da quia dedimus*. In calling the gods “dear” they may use popular language.²⁹ This euphemic prayer should finally count as a well-formed appeal, should bring the gods *charis* and dispose them to respond.

Let us imagine the scene on stage at the moment of the last strophic pair. The young women of the chorus, members of respected families, bring offerings for the gods. Though they begin by rushing in panic to the statues, they end by creating *charis*, singing prayers and dancing in the sacred space before the statues of the gods. They gain control of themselves so as to present the very image of the maiden chorus beloved of literary evocations and important in actual ritual in many Greek cities.³⁰ The audience has felt the tension as it watched them struggle to mold terror into religiously pleasing appeal to the gods and has seen them ultimately succeed. It is as though the chorus stands in for the city in rising to meet the crisis, their success an omen of the city’s survival.³¹ Indeed, they represent its chance of flourishing in the future through their potential for giving birth to the next generation and canceling the polluted, perverse reproduction of the house of Oedipus. The drama of their emergent pattern of choral harmony is therefore doubly riveting as representative of the city and of the new generation. The city viewed from the perspective of its communion with the gods seems at this moment to be revived.

It is fair to ask whether the brief fourteen lines of the last strophic pair are enough to persuade the gods on behalf of the city. What makes them effective, as I imagine the scene, is the chorus’ persistence in striving toward acceptable prayer. Each of the four sections that make up the parodos ends in a focused prayer, and the chorus gains by perceptible steps on its goal of cultic regularity of speech and movement. Attuned to ritual and watching this trajectory, audience members would be responsive to the moment when the chorus fully achieves euphemic utterance. Feeling relief and pleasure at the final strophic pair, they would project the same reaction onto the gods.

At this crucial moment, Eteokles bursts onto the scene. Judging by the way he challenges the performers, he enters before the chorus has clearly

29. Compare the Athenian prayer, “rain, rain, O dear Zeus . . .” (cited by M. Aur. *Med.* 5.7, quoted by Norden 1956, p. 156, n. 1); Ar. *Thesm.* 286; and Hipponax 32 W. Hutchinson (1985, ad 174) observes that the adjective is little used of the gods in tragedy; in comedy it may be used in address to images visible on stage. So here the chorus “call on their native gods, through their statues, with an unusual intimacy of tone.”

30. Cf. Stehle 1997, chap. 2, for both ritual choruses and imagery of the chorus of young women as representing peace; Calame 1994/5 on the relationship of the chorus of this play to ritual choruses.

31. There is a poignant evocation of the chorus of young women as image of the city in Euripides (*Tro.* 544–57). As the chorus sings its lament for Troy it describes the celebration that accompanied the placing of the wooden horse in the precinct of Athena: “the Libyan reed was sounding and Phrygian melodies and *parthenoi* were moving lightly with beating of their feet and singing a joyful cry . . . and at that moment I was dancing around the hall for the virgin mountain daughter of Zeus in choruses. But a bloody cry throughout the city gripped the foundations. . . .” The juxtaposition of “choruses” and “bloody” captures the shock of Troy’s *peripeteia*.

stopped singing and dancing: he interrupts the ritual. *Euphēmia* for the onlookers at religious ritual enjoins silence, and just by speaking in the presence of the ritual Eteokles risks corrupting it. He brings it to a halt, and what he says is shocking (181–86, 193–202):

You I ask, you insufferable cubs, is this best and a salvation for the city and heartening to the besieged army, for you, falling before the statues of the city-holding gods, to cry and screech, you objects of hatred to the moderate?

Things outside are strengthened as well as can be, but we are sacked from within by them (women). That's what you get if you live together with women. And if anyone will not obey my rule, man and woman and whatever is between, a capital vote will be devised against them, and he/she will not escape death by stoning by the people.

His *dysphēmia* shatters the chorus' state of opened communion with the gods. He calls the young women *θρέμματα* ("animal young") and depicts their utterance as cries and screeching. He replaces *charis* with invective, introducing hatred and death and hinting at the idea that the chorus is polluted. When he calls the young women *μισήματα* ("objects of hatred"), the word recalls *μιάσματα* ("pollutions").³² And when he indirectly threatens to stone them, punishment of scapegoats and traitors, he comes even closer to suggesting that they are polluting the sacred space.³³

In fact, Eteokles pollutes it. *Euphēmia* is meant precisely to keep the gods free from insulting language, death, violence, and pollution, but Eteokles, who ends by asking the women whether they are deaf (202), is deaf to his own enormous violation of *euphēmia*. In consequence, if the young women's performance provides an eloquent image of the city healing itself, the following scene graphically depicts Eteokles endangering the city. His intervention creates the reverse situation from what he thinks it is: he causes religious danger to the citizens and demoralizes a group that had been taking successful action of the sort open to them for the defense of Thebes. His violent misogyny here and the hint of a stage tyrant in lines 196–99 are not so much thematic in themselves as used to underline the transgressiveness of his speech.

What motivates Eteokles to speak so violently? He says that the women are demoralizing the citizens (and implies that they are alienating the gods), but his assertion does not accord with what the audience actually sees just before he enters. Moreover, as several scholars have pointed out, women had the role of aiding military efforts by their appeal to the gods.³⁴ Why does he not appreciate that they have become orderly? Eteokles appears to think that the women's praying in public at such a time is inherently dangerous, for in the ensuing argument he is opposed to their praying on the acropolis at all. On the other hand, before he departs at the end of the scene he asks the chorus to move away from the statues, listen to a prayer of his, and

32. Apollo uses the same word of the Furies at Aesch. *Eum.* 73.

33. See Bremmer 1983 on scapegoats and stoning; Fehling 1974, 59–68, esp. 63, on occasions.

34. Gagarin (1976, 152–56) points out that in tragedy women have the role of sacrificing in the city for victory; cf. also Podlecki 1993, 71.

assent with a ritual cry. The text of his appeal (271–78a) is so corrupt in its latter part that one can say little about it except that it takes the form of a vow of sacrifice and trophy if the battle is successful. Obviously, it suits him but not the women, who could hardly vow a trophy. Nonetheless, at its close he commends it to them as a model. Apparently, as both his rebuke and his dictation of a prayer to the chorus reveal, Eteokles believes that he has a far superior competence in communicating with the gods. He is unhappily not only deaf to his own *dysphēmia* but deluded about his ritual power.

Eteokles' mistaken self-perception is not new to the audience; both it and its source have been made clear in the prologue. In that character-establishing first scene he displays exactly the traits that we find in the first episode—awareness of the performative power of speech and attentiveness to protection of the city, combined with a startling obliviousness to *dysphēmia* in his own speech. After his harangue to the citizens and a report from the spy, Eteokles prays while alone on stage before he exits and the chorus enters (69–77):

ὦ Ζεῦ τε καὶ Γῇ καὶ πολιτισσοῦχοι θεοί,
 Ἄρά τ' Ἑρινὺς πατρὸς ἡ μεγασθενῆς,
 μή μοι πόλιν γε πρεμνόνθεν πανώλεθρον
 ἐκθαμνίσῃτε δηιάλων Ἑλλάδος.
 [κῶλβον ῥέοντα καὶ δόμους ἐφ'esτίους]
 ἐλευθέραν δὲ γῆν τε καὶ Κάδμου πόλιν
 ζεύγλῃσι δουλίαισι μήποτε σχεθεῖν,
 γένεσθε δ' ἀλκή.—ζυνά δ' ἐλπίζω λέγειν·
 πόλις γὰρ εὖ πράσσουσα δαίμονας τίει.

O Zeus and Earth and city-holding gods, and Curse, strong Erinys of my father, do not root out the city, at least, from the foundations, destroyed utterly, enemy-captured, from Greece. But never lay hold of the free land and city of Kadmos³⁵ with the yoke of slaves, and become a source of strength. I believe I say things of common interest [to us both], for a city that fares well honors the gods.

Eteokles is uttering a personal prayer, but he is king and speaks in the presence of the statues, toward which he may have gestured: his speech must therefore count as an appeal on behalf of the city. He begins normally with his invocation in line 69. G. O. Hutchinson points out that the phrase “city-holding gods” is the kind of inclusive formula that typically ends a series of invocations and remarks, “the following line is a surprise.”³⁶ It is more than a surprise: along with the gods, Eteokles calls on the curse, an existing Erinys. To see how transgressive this is, we must look at the difficult question of the relationship between prayer and curse—curse as manifested in public spoken curses, not written *defixiones*.³⁷

35. I omit line 73, which all modern editors bracket and Lupaş and Petre (1981, ad 69–77) reject. Judet de la Combe (1988, 217–24) argues for keeping it.

36. Hutchinson 1985, ad 69.

37. Public curses included conditional curses that were attached to laws and oaths to help enforce them, as well as curses pronounced on individuals and groups (e.g., Alkibiades, Plut. *Alc.* 22.5; the Akarnanians, Polyb. 9.40.6; Philip of Macedon, Livy 31.44); see Speyer 1969, cols. 1203–9, on these. For early *defixiones*, curses written on lead and buried, usually in graves, see Faraone 1991.

Prayer and curse are linked phenomena: some verbs extend their meaning from one to the other, including ἀράομαι and κατεύχομαι (while some, like καταράομαι, refer only to curses).³⁸ It can be argued that in the fifth century they are not clearly distinguished as speech acts but only in content and range (hostility to someone over whom the curser has authority in the case of curses) and in addressee (underworld gods or none at all in the case of curses).³⁹ The question is a large one that needs further study. But I limit myself to making an observation that is relevant to Eteokles' prayer. Curses can employ two strategies that remove them from the category of prayer: calling on an Erinyes and elaborating the language of destruction.

When cursing, one may "summon" an Erinyes: Phoenix' father calls on the Erinyes to see to it that no son born to Phoenix ever sits on his knees (*Il.* 9.454); Sophocles' Ajax calls on the Erinyes to see the fate to which the Atreidai have driven him (*Aj.* 835–44); Oedipus summons curses and "these goddesses"—the Erinyes whose grove he is near—against his sons (*OC* 1384–85 and 1389–90). Or the Erinyes may "hear" the curse, as she hears the curse of Meleager's mother (*Il.* 9.571–72). Each curse has its own Erinyes, for the Erinyes is a concretization of the power of the words.⁴⁰ Murder of kin also creates an Erinyes, so a curse pronounced by the one outraged is analogous to spilled blood that pollutes the murderer. The Erinyes who track the murderer Orestes in *Eumenides* describe themselves to Athena (417): "And we are called Curses in our home under the earth."

Once an Erinyes comes into being, she is implacable, as Phoenix (*Il.* 9.572) and Sophocles' Polyneikes (*OC* 1403) acknowledge. One therefore calls on an *existing* Erinyes only in order to waken her to pursuit of another, not to negotiate with her or establish exchange of *charis*. R. Vallois, in his important study of curses, remarks that he knows of no example of prayers or sacrifice designed to stop the course of a curse.⁴¹ Conversely, Klytaimestra rouses the Furies to stay hot on the trail of their victim (Aesch. *Eum.* 114–16). Alcaeus (129 LP) prays to the gods for help; then, in a sharp break marked by strophe break, by contrast of "us" and "the son of Hyrraios" (Pit-takos), and by change from second-person to third-person imperative, he

38. Watson 1991, 3–4; Corlu 1966, s.v. Watson thinks that there is a large overlap between prayers and curses. Vallois (1914, 261–66) has a good discussion of the various ways in which the relationship between curses and the gods could be conceived but considers them fundamentally independent. Polyb. (23.10.7) distinguishes between acts of calling the gods and curses.

39. See Vallois 1914, 254–55, for curses being directed at those over whom one has authority. He also observes (262) that the gods are not invoked or even mentioned in conditional legal or religious curses. Pulleyn (1997, p. 85, n. 51) has a list of curses in tragedy; only in special cases (e.g., Theseus calling on Poseidon, who granted him three curses [*Hipp.* 887–90]) are the Olympian gods named. Versnel (1991, 69–70 and passim) distinguishes curses on *defixiones* from prayers for revenge, both from a later period, by the attitude of submissiveness in the latter.

40. Geisser (2002, 242–52) has the most extensive survey of the relationship of curse and Erinyes. Watson (1991, p. 30, n. 133) has bibliography on Erinyes executing curses. Vallois (1914, 256–58) describes curses as resembling Erinyes but more "flexible and diverse" (i.e., a larger category). Speyer (1969, col. 1196) says that identification of the Erinyes with the curse is literary.

41. Vallois 1914, 264. Brown (1984, 264–65) points out that the Erinyes have no cult, with one exception that looks as though it was inspired by myth. As Sommerstein (1989a, 10) comments, "It is a waste of effort and resources to offer prayer and sacrifice to beings who are by their nature implacable." At Aesch. *Eum.* 106–9 Klytaimestra reminds the Erinyes that she has given them offerings, but she is an exception who identifies herself with a vengeful spirit (Ag. 1497–1504).

demands that the Erinyes pursue Pittakos. Pittakos has broken his oath, and his transgression creates an Erinyes that Alcaeus can arouse against him.⁴² But if one does not want to disturb them, one passes by the grove of the Eumenides in silence with averted face, according to the chorus of *Oedipus at Colonus* (127–33).

In addition, curses may use language that is as devastating as possible, intensifying and repeating words and expanding the circle of destruction around the victim. Public curses often use formulaic language that effectively encompasses all areas of the victim's activity and includes the victim's kin. Thus we repeatedly find such lines as: "may neither earth nor sea yield produce," "may wives not bear" (with many variants), and most often, "may he perish, himself and [his house and] his lineage" (ὄλλυσθαι [or ἐξώλης εἶναι] αὐτὸς καὶ [οἶκος καὶ] γένος), sometimes with the addition "from the roots" (πρόρριζος).⁴³ One early and well-known example will illustrate—the curse of the Amphiktyones against anyone who settled the plain of Kirrha near Delphi. Aeschines (*In Ctes.* 110–11) describes it: "and it is pronounced that neither the earth bear grain for them nor women give birth to children resembling their parents, but rather freaks, nor flocks produce offspring according to their nature, and that they get the worst of it in war and court cases and debates and be wiped out [ἐξώλεις εἶναι], themselves and their households and their lineages." Prayer, with its *euphēmia*, is designed to persuade the gods to be favorable; there is nothing automatic about its positive language. Yet negative language, *dysphēmia*, destroys prayer automatically.⁴⁴ Likewise, curses can use *dysphēmia* floridly to spread blight. The pious Plutarch indicates that even the conditional curse contained in an oath could be considered a form of *dysphēmia*.⁴⁵

In describing the imprecation just mentioned, Aeschines gives two clauses in direct quotation: "If anyone transgresses . . . let him be cursed [ἐναγής] in the eyes of Apollo, Artemis, Leto, and Athena Pronaia," and "May they never sacrifice permissibly [δσίως] to Apollo, Artemis, Leto, or Athena Pronaia and may [these gods] not accept their sacrifices." These two clauses reveal the relationship between the language of such curses and the gods: the words should so blight the victim that the gods find him or her an insufferable presence. In *Eumenides*, Apollo transfers the revulsion from Orestes to the Erinyes themselves. He calls them "hated by humans and gods" (73; cf. 644) and refers to them as polluted (195). Like *dysphēmia*, an Erinyes and her victim are repugnant to the Olympian gods.

42. I thank one of the anonymous readers for calling my attention to this poem. Prayer and curse are both found in it, as he/she points out, but they are separated (and performance could mark the change of addressee strongly). The two are complementary ways for Alcaeus to appeal to divine powers for justice.

43. Taken from Watson 1991, 30–38, esp. 33–34; cf. Geisser 2002, 223–24, with bibliography. Speyer (1969, cols. 1198–99) points out that the style of curse formulae has not been well studied.

44. In Eur. *Ion* 1189, during the celebration in the tent of Ion's finding his father, one of the slaves lets fall an ill-omened word (*blasphēmia*); Ion takes it as an omen and calls for fresh wine to be poured out for the libation and prayer.

45. In *Quaest. Rom.* 275D. Plutarch asks why the priest of Zeus is not allowed to swear. One explanation is that every oath ends with a curse on the transgressor, and a curse is *dysphēmos*.

With all this in mind—that an Eriny is implacable and makes her victim hateful to the gods, that one calls on an Eriny only to provoke her attack on another, that curse language is dysphemic—let us return to Eteokles' prayer. It should now be evident how self-defeating his words are. The Eriny does not belong in the company of the city-holding gods; her presence destroys any *charis* Eteokles' prayer might have had. On the contrary, mentioning her can only remind the gods (and the audience) that Eteokles is ἐναγής in their eyes, ritually outcast. That alone should make his prayer unacceptable. Nor is the Fury amenable to exchange, and offering her an apotropaic prayer intended to limit her destructive effects is horribly misguided. All Eteokles can accomplish is to draw her attention. And the next two lines suggest that he has done exactly that: in 71–72 he suddenly begins to use the language of curses.⁴⁶ In a run of words denoting total destruction, “from the foundations, destroyed utterly, root out, enemy-captured, from Greece,” he conjures up a picture of the utmost devastation possible. πανώλεθρον (“destroyed utterly”) is a variant on the ἐξώλης so common in curses. πρεμνόθεν (“from the stump”) and ἐκθαμνίσητε (“root out” or “destroy the flourishing of”⁴⁷) are like πρόρριζος (“from the roots”) and the attack on flourishing of all kinds found in curses. Negatives pile up. With the redundancy typical of curses, Eteokles expresses the notion “utterly” three times (πρεμνόθεν, παν- in πανώλεθρον, ἐκ- in ἐκθαμνίσητε), and perhaps one should count the genitive of separation “from Greece” as a fourth. The five heavy words threaten to overwhelm the negative at the beginning of line 70, as though in spite of himself Eteokles were pronouncing a curse on the city, for the dysphemic language of cursing works automatically. In addition to his *dysphēmia* and the inadequacy of his negative to control the weighty terms of destruction that follow, logically the invasion of curse language causes Eteokles to pray that the city be not utterly wiped out, a damning minimum of a prayer.

Eduard Fraenkel refers to lines 71–72 as an apotropaic prayer and would presumably explain its negative language as resulting from the need to ward off evil.⁴⁸ It is true that apotropaic prayers face an inherent contradiction in that one must name the thing to be averted even though speaking words of negative meaning may be dangerous. Prayers of this sort use different levels of explicitness, to judge from literary examples. Aeschylus provides an example of extreme euphemism. In *Agamemnon*, the chorus leader, spotting the herald and anxious about the state of affairs, manages an apotropaic formula that gives nothing away (498–502):

He, however, will either by speaking declare happiness—but the opposite word from this I reject; may there be something well added to the things that have well appeared.

46. Fraenkel (1950, 2:272–73, ad 535f.) points this out and adduces parallels, without commenting on the implications for Eteokles' prayer.

47. The word occurs only here in classical literature. For the interpretation “destroy the vegetative force of,” cf. Judet de la Combe 1988, 223.

48. Fraenkel 1950, 2:272–73, ad 535f. Geisser (2002, 199–201) attributes to Eteokles the view that he can negotiate with the Erinyes and, following Fraenkel, describes apotropaic prayers as mirroring curse language (201).

Whoever prays differently in this for our city, may he himself reap the fruit of his error of mind.

He is careful to turn away the threat Klytaimestra poses without giving it greater “reality” by naming what the prayer is for.⁴⁹

An apotropaic prayer can also name the problem directly in the interest of getting the gods to act. Nestor prays to Zeus when he sees defeat looming for the Greeks (*Il.* 15.372–76):

Father Zeus, if ever indeed anyone in fertile Argos burned fat thighbones of ox or sheep and prayed to return home, and you promised it with your nod, remember these things and ward off, Olympian, the pitiless day, nor let the Achaians be overcome this way by the Trojans!

Nestor’s language calls attention to the immediacy and dimension of the problem but does no more.⁵⁰ A paean to Asklepios adds an adjective to express the urgency of the request: “ward off hateful diseases!”⁵¹ The chorus’ apotropaic prayer in the final strophe of the parodos is likewise restrained in its description (169–70): “Do not betray the city [so that it will be] laboring under the spear to an army of foreign voice!” (On the chorus’ second such prayer [219–22] see below.) Unlike these examples, Eteokles’ speech suffers an excess typical of curses and foreign to apotropaic prayer.

But then, with “But never lay hold of . . .,” Eteokles reverts to normal prayer language suitable to the gods invoked in the first line of his prayer. He asks the gods to ward off danger, using a strong negative (“never”) and no elaboration of the threat. He ends with a reminder to the gods that reciprocity is in their self-interest as well as his—an idea, of course, that cannot apply to the Erinyes. It is as though Eteokles *does not know* that the Erinyes has obtruded into the middle of his prayer. He prays out of an urgent desire to save the city, but his very prayer risks drawing disaster down on all without his recognizing it.

As R. P. Winnington-Ingram points out, the audience already knows from the previous play that Eteokles is cursed.⁵² Having listened to Eteokles in the prologue, the audience understands how the curse is working in him and can supply the same paradigm to his intervention in the chorus’ prayer in the first episode: his *dysphēmia* is the Erinyes speaking through him without his hearing it. But whereas in the prologue Eteokles shows how dangerous to the city his own praying is, in the first episode he spreads the ill more widely by undoing the women’s ritual efforts to rescue the city from despair. His belief in his own power to solicit the gods’ help is perhaps part of the

49. Cf. also Aesch. *Pers.* 201–4, with Broadhead 1960 ad loc., and 216–19, for apotropaic ritual and euphemistic reference in connection with Atossa’s dream. Parker (1983, p. 220, n. 71) lists other passages in which apotropaic gods are mentioned.

50. Paeans in literature, especially battle paeans, can take on dark color: see Rutherford 1993. But in their literary use, especially in tragedy, ritual forms can be distorted to reflect the problematic of the action, as Eteokles’ prayer does.

51. *IG* ii² 4473.22, cited by Pulleyn 1997, 64.

52. Winnington-Ingram 1983, 25.

Erinyes' design and means that he inserts his ill-omened speech into all the city's sacred venues.

Eteokles continues to manifest the same symptoms, in a slightly different way, in his ensuing interchanges with the chorus. Even in ordinary conversation, especially under tense circumstances, an ill-omened, despairing or disparaging, statement can be taken as an inadvertent prediction, a *klēdōn*. Such statements are not violations of ritual *euphēmia* because they do not occur in prayers, but they count as dysphemic.⁵³ Eteokles is very conscious of the danger of making ill-omened statements in ordinary speech, as we know from the opening lines of the play. There he carefully surrounds a reference to the city's being defeated with apotropaic wish and prayer (4–9):

For if on the one hand we should fare well, the responsibility is the god's. But if on the other hand—may it not happen!—a disaster should occur, then throughout the city Eteokles would be much sung of by the citizens in wave on wave of preludes and groans. Against which things may Zeus Averter be as good as his name for the city of the Kadmeians!

Yet in his argument with the chorus, Eteokles repeatedly makes ill-omened statements in the presence of the gods' statues. I now return to the first episode and examine the most egregious passages as a final demonstration of Eteokles' inability to hear his own violations of the religious "rules" that he claims to enforce.

After Eteokles' assault, the women defend themselves, singing (primarily in dochmiacs again) first that they are afraid, then (211–15) that they came to the ancient statues, trusting in the gods, to pray so that they (the gods) might shield the city with their strength. The first line and a half of Eteokles' three-line reply is not very clear in its import, though it seems to disparage the gods' help in keeping the city safe.⁵⁴ But the last sentence (217–18) is unambiguous: "The gods of a captured city abandon it, so the story goes." This ominous statement so alarms the women that they issue a strong apotropaic prayer—one whose urgency is marked by a reference to defeat more vivid than anything they say in their parodos: they ask that the city not be overrun or "devoured by consuming fire." We must note that Eteokles does not react to it, for it would open his own provocative statement to scrutiny.

In the following exchanges, which shift to stichomythia at line 245, Eteokles tells the chorus over and over to be quiet. The more he demands it the more they speak of their fear, since for them not to pray is to invite disaster. At 251, they cease to answer him and turn back to the gods with spontaneous apotropaic prayers, while Eteokles turns abusive again (251–59):

53. Peradotto (1969, esp. 8–9) discusses the functioning of the *klēdōn*, which can be a positive or negative omen. In *Nic.* 13.3, Plutarch says that there was much opposition to the Sicilian expedition from the priests, but Alkibiades had other seers and adduced positive oracles. Fearing to speak with ill omen (*dysphēmein*), the priests hid the opposite indications. They must have feared uttering *klēdones*.

54. For discussion of the problems in 216–17, see Hutchinson 1985, ad 216–18. Lupaș and Petre (1981, ad 216–18) hesitate between οὐκοῦν negative in 217, which makes him say, "this [the battlement's keeping off enemy spears] will not be a matter of the gods' agency," and οὐκοῦν interrogative. The first seems right: Eteokles cannot be implying that protecting the city will be the work of the gods, for that is the chorus' view. Gagarin (1976, p. 214, n. 13) sees "skeptical irony" expressed as a question.

- Ch. O council of gods, don't betray the battlements!
 Et. Won't you bear these things in silence [all the way] to perdition?
 Ch. Gods of the city, may I not suffer slavery!
 Et. You yourself enslave yourself and me and the whole city.
 Ch. O all-powerful Zeus, turn the weaponry on the enemy!
 Et. O Zeus, what sort of race of women have you saddled me with!
 Ch. A wretched one, just like men whose city is captured.
 Et. Are you uttering ill-omened speech [παλινστομεῖς] again as you touch the statues?⁵⁵
 Ch. Yes, for fear snatches my tongue in my despair.

Every one of his first three rejoinders invites disaster. In line 252, he uses a colloquial style of curse that wishes destruction on the women. In 254, he utters a statement that can count as a *klēdōn* pointing to defeat. At 256, he “approaches blasphemy,” according to Winnington-Ingram, by mocking the chorus’ apostrophe to Zeus.⁵⁶ All three of his lines cancel the chorus’ immediately preceding prayer. One would have to say that Eteokles is actively soliciting disaster for the young women and by extension the city. Angry, finally, at his attitude, the chorus mentions a captured city for the first time, and Eteokles, unaware of the ruin running through his own words, accuses them of uttering bad omens. Yet he himself had mentioned a captured city, using the same words, just forty lines earlier (217–18, quoted above). Defeated, the chorus members agree that their words portend ill.⁵⁷ They can hear both his dysphemic words and their own, but he only hears theirs.

Having gained an advantage, Eteokles presses his case by asking for silence as a favor. This leads to one final exchange with another destructively performative statement (263–64):

- Ch. I am silent. I will suffer what is fated along with others.
 Et. I choose this statement from you in place of the others.

After all the prayers and defense of the gods that they have uttered, Eteokles accepts this despairing expectation of suffering as the statement he wishes to make predictive, a *klēdōn*.⁵⁸ It is shortly after this that he offers them his prayer as a model. The chorus never adds its ritual cry to his prayer or takes up his model of using prayer to offer exchange. But in its next song, the first stasimon, it does largely cease to petition the gods and instead envisions a captured city.⁵⁹ Insofar as the chorus does refer explicitly to a city being defeated, it does so because Eteokles has provoked it: its vivid apotropaic prayer (219–22, quoted above), its angry response to Eteokles’ mocking (257), and its song in the first stasimon all react to his dysphemic rebukes. Thus he spreads *dysphēmia* even more widely.

55. παλινστομεῖς is hapax and should mean “speak opposite,” but Pollux (2.109) records that a παλί-γλωττον person is a *dysphēmos* one. Similarly, Eteokles’ word must mean “you speak the opposite of rightly.”

56. Winnington-Ingram 1983, p. 28, n. 30; cf. Watson 1991, 46–47, on combining curse and abuse.

57. Delcourt (1932, 31) interestingly suggests that the women’s fright is partly because of the curse and that this is why Eteokles has trouble getting them to listen to him.

58. Winnington-Ingram (1983, 28) points out how ominous this remark is. He views silence (28–29) as an important theme pointing to Eteokles’ repression of the curse in silence.

59. Cf. Benardete 1967 on the chorus’ change of tone in the first stasimon in reaction to Eteokles.

The audience has now seen Eteokles destroy prayer three times in different ways: he infects his own prayer with the Erinyes in the prologue; he introduces *dysphēmia* and pollution into the chorus' ritual appeal on the acropolis; and in interchange with the young women he systematically caps their prayers with ill-wishing, ill-omened rejoinders. It is Eteokles' tragedy that his very commitment as leader to policing performative speech endangers the city: the more he attempts to pray and protect the city from ill omen, the more he alienates the gods. In *Eumenides*, the Erinyes describe the effect they have on their victim: "Not knowing it, he falls into mad harm; such darkness of pollution hovers over the man" (377–78). These lines describe Eteokles' condition: he is unknowingly a polluting presence.⁶⁰ The city, we see, cannot recover from the infection brought by the house of Oedipus as long as Eteokles remains at its head.

Recognizing Eteokles' condition helps us to understand what happens in the second episode. At this point the assault on the city is about to begin. Eteokles assigns a Theban warrior to oppose the Argive attacker at each gate of the city. His attentiveness to his opponents' shield devices and ominous language allows him to deflect the threat they express.⁶¹ He once reinterprets the meaning of a shield, once opposes a Theban shield to an Argive one, and otherwise sends out men whose character description trumps the opposition boast. In every case, Eteokles makes use of the attacker's assertions. But when he hears that Polyneikes is at the seventh gate, he seems suddenly to yield to the curse (653–55):

O god-maddened and great object of loathing to the gods, O our wholly lamentable lineage of Oedipus! O woe for me, the curses of the father are now indeed coming to fruition.

Eteokles speaks with such an abrupt and puzzling change of tone that it forms the major interpretive crux of the play.⁶² What causes him to recognize the working of the curse at this moment? What we know of Eteokles' acute attention to potential ill omen in others' speech suggests that we should examine the scout's report of Polyneikes' speech for performative language (631–41):

τὸν ἔβδομον δὴ τόνδ' ἐφ' ἐβδόμαις πύλαις
λέξω, τὸν αὐτοῦ σοῦ κασίγνητον, πόλει
οἷας ἀρᾶται καὶ κατεύχεται τύχας,
πύργοις ἐπεμβὰς ἀπικτηρυχθεὶς χθονί,
ἀλώσιμον παιῶν' ἐπεξιακχάσας,
σοὶ ξυμφέρεισθαι καὶ κτανὼν θανεῖν πέλας,
ἢ ζῶντ' ἀτιμαστῆρα τὸν τ' ἀνδρῆλάτην
φυγῆι τὸν αὐτὸν τόνδε τείσασθαι τρόπον.
τοιαῦτ' αὐτεῖ καὶ θεοὺς γενεθλίους

60. Curse and pollution are not intrinsically related, although they become intertwined: see Parker 1983, 5–11; cf. also Pl. *Leg.* 871b. On ill-omened words and similar phenomena producing a kind of pollution that one must avoid or be purified of, see Parker (219–24), who also remarks that evidence for purification from evil omens is scanty.

61. Bacon 1964, 32. Thalmann (1978, 107–23) analyzes the religious focus, and Zeitlin (1982, esp. 44–49) explores the semiotics of this scene.

62. See note 7 above and Geisser 2002, 202–32, on the curse in the latter part of the play.

καλεῖ πατρώιας γῆς ἐποπτήρας λιτῶν
τῶν ὧν γενέσθαι πάγχυ Πολυνείκους βία.

As for the seventh one at the seventh gate—your very brother—I will say what sort of misfortunes for the city he speaks-as-curses and prays for, [namely,] mounting on the towers and announced to the land, tossing about a paean celebrating capture, to meet up with you and killing [you] to be killed nearby, or to pay [you] back, still living, in this same fashion by exile, as the one who dishonored and exiled him. Such things he cries and calls on the birth/native [γενεθλίου] gods of his father's land to be overseers of his entreaties surely, the strong Polyneikes.

Polyneikes ἀρᾶται καὶ κατεύχεται. The first verb (after Homer) usually means “curse” and the second commonly “pray,” although each can extend to the other meaning.⁶³ The double verb recalls Eteokles' prayer with its inset curse in the prologue and alerts the audience to look for a similar phenomenon infecting Polyneikes' speech. κατεύχεται in its meaning “pray” must govern the infinitive construction that follows, and of course Polyneikes is not “cursing” himself to mount the towers and sing a victory paean. But when Polyneikes gets to the first main alternative of his petition (as reported by the scout), “to meet up with you and killing [you] to be killed nearby,” the curse breaks in. Polyneikes cannot have meant to say this. Greek speakers might use such a thought to express extreme hatred, but Polyneikes is praying for success.⁶⁴ His second alternative, to exile a “still living” Eteokles, shows that he is not praying for death for Eteokles at all costs. Indeed, to say, “May I win and kill my brother and be killed nearby, or else win and exile him as he exiled me,” makes no sense psychologically. If Polyneikes wanted to kill Eteokles, or at least exile him, and so gain the kingship, he would hardly want to die at the moment of victory. If his anger was so overwhelming that he did want to kill and die, he would not have added the second alternative. The combination is bathetic. We must take it as a sign of the Erinyes' working through his prayer. She even produces a jingle in κτανὼν θανεῖν (“killing, to be killed”) to call attention to its startling deviance, when the audience was expecting to hear something like “killing, to rule.” “Nearby” points up the equivalence that he bespeaks. The scout also says that Polyneikes invokes “the γενεθλίου gods of his father's land” (639–40), who are logically, in context, the gods of the city but more immediately evoke the births that brought on the curse.

The curse pollutes Polyneikes' prayer, for his desire to kill his kin (which the chorus later calls μῖασμα [“pollution”], 682) surely renders it abhorrent to the gods. This prayer is rhetorically parallel to Eteokles' prayer in the prologue: not only are both infected by dysphemetic language, but in each case the speaker includes in the middle of the prayer words that undermine,

63. Corlu (1966, 227–34) discusses κατεύχομαι, which first appears in Aeschylus; see esp. 232–33 for predominance of the meaning “pray” before Euripides. He distinguishes a different usage, “wish,” in which it never governs the simple infinitive and generally means a wish for ill; he cites as evidence *Sept.* 633, but wrongly, for the verb must govern ξυμψέρεσθαι and θανεῖν in 636 and so mean “pray.”

64. Hutchinson (1985, at 636) cites parallels, but they all amount to a desire to have revenge before the speaker dies. None is part of a prayer. Winnington-Ingram (1983, 50) notices the strangeness of the prayer but explains it away as hyperbolic.

to the point of negation, the speaker's request. As Eteokles asks that the city not be "utterly" wiped out, so Polyneikes asks to die in the flush of taking the city. It is significant that Polyneikes' is the only prayer, as opposed to boast, attributed to an Argive; it strengthens the similarity between the two brothers.

That Polyneikes' wish reproduces Oedipus' curse would, I believe, have been instantly clear to all, characters and audience. We do not know how Oedipus worded his curse, but the brothers' killing each other must have been recognizable as its meaning.⁶⁵ What devastates Eteokles, sensitive, as we know, to others' ill-omened speech, is hearing the Erinys assert the equivalence of the two brothers—which means that Eteokles cannot turn the omen against Polyneikes. He has been reversing the signs that each attacker presents, but Polyneikes' prayer asks to die near Eteokles (or else institute another round of endlessly alternating exiles). Any return utterance that Eteokles makes can logically only reproduce the symmetry of Polyneikes' speech.

In fact, Polyneikes forces Eteokles to pray to kill his brother. Eteokles has no other choice: his brother is not just at the seventh gate but is determined to seek him out. Eteokles cannot pray to avoid him without relinquishing his role as defender of the city, the very thing that he has relied on to distinguish him from the attacker. On the other hand, killing his brother will leave him so polluted that he must wish to die himself. On moral as well as logical grounds, therefore, his prayer in opposition must be identical to his brother's prayer. Faced with the fact that he can only counter Polyneikes' prayer by duplicating it, he perceives, for the first time, the Erinys inhabiting his own words. At that moment, as he realizes that his ability to pray on behalf of the city has been destroyed, a thwarted Eteokles confronts the triumph of the curse.⁶⁶ The first scene with the chorus, together with Eteokles' pattern of successfully reversing enemy statements, prepares the audience to recognize the source of his illumination when he recognizes himself in Polyneikes' speech.

This account of Eteokles' reaction when he hears his brother's speech complements Froma Zeitlin's analysis from a structuralist perspective of the collapse of difference between the brothers, the reassertion of "the subversive principle of 'no difference.'" She analyzes Eteokles' attempts to defend himself against it: his complete identification with the city and denial of family, his insistence on being one against many, and especially his desire to control language: "Thus . . . Eteokles' best defense against the curse of his father and on behalf of his own name is attention to language and

65. For the trilogy, of which this is the last play, and the question about how Oedipus' curse was presented in the second play, see Thalmann 1978, 9–26; Hutchinson 1985, xvii–xl; Roisman 1988; Sommerstein 1996, 121–30. Burnett (1973, 351–61) suggests that Eteokles' dream (710–11) was described in an earlier play and that Eteokles first connects dream and curse as meaning the same thing at 653.

66. The scout also describes at length Polyneikes' shield device of Justice leading him back. Eteokles tries to deny its message but ends with the helpless assertion that Justice would be "falsely named" were she to keep company with Polyneikes (670–71). He cannot reverse the meaning of the shield either. See Zeitlin 1982, 137–43, on the meaning of Justice in the confrontation of the brothers.

control of the discourse.”⁶⁷ This study shows how Aeschylus exposes the working of the curse precisely through Eteokles’ effort to control speech for the benefit of the city.

A final observation: by making the curse manifest itself through performative speech, Aeschylus solves a problem. He presents Eteokles as the legitimate king of Thebes and the morally responsible brother. Yet in Aeschylus’ plays a curse does not just drive a good person to death, but drives that person to do ill.⁶⁸ By using performative speech as the medium through which the Erinyes works, Aeschylus creates an Eteokles whom the audience sees from the beginning as both the admirable military leader and an accursed presence endangering the city.⁶⁹ Although Eteokles defends it, Thebes has no future until he exits through one of its gates.⁷⁰

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67. Zeitlin 1982, 28–49 passim, quotations from 28 and 40.

68. Garvie (1986, xxvii) makes this point and cites Rosenmeyer 1982, 295.

69. Cf. Zeitlin 1982, 28–29, on Eteokles’ double identity. As she says, “Eteokles . . . is always *both* the ruler of Thebes *and* the son of Oedipus”; cf. also Winnington-Ingram 1983, 51.

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