THE ARGUMENT OF *SEPTEM CONTRA THEBAS*

E. JACKSON

ON FIRST ACQUAINTANCE, the *Septem* is a thoroughly unsatisfying play. Not on account of its immediate texture—its diction and the form of individual scenes: it is full of fine speeches and dramatic exchanges, and contains a splendid symbolic construction in the shield scene. But instead of an overall movement of the drama, with each successive element building upon the last, the play in the first half at least seems to fall apart into a series of episodes: the initial statement of the Argive attack and Eteocles' preparations to meet it, the hysterical inrush of the chorus of Theban women, leading to their argument with Eteocles, and the shield scene. The shield scene itself creates a powerful momentum towards the climax of Eteocles' decision to meet his brother in battle. Dramatic continuity is maintained in the succeeding choral ode, which places that decision in the context of its history, broadening out the perspective in which the climax is seen. That choral ode, however, seems to anticipate a climax of action, to follow the climax of decision: the actual battle which decides the fate of the city. But when the next scene opens, the action is all over. There is nothing more but the final lament.[1]

The most intractable element here is the scene of Eteocles and the panic-stricken chorus of women. There is no obvious motivation for it in the opening section which precedes it, nor in the shield scene which follows. The shield scene by itself could be seen to follow thematically from the opening section—continuing to elaborate Eteocles' manner of meeting the Argive attack. But this isolates the chorus' scene still further, and makes it appear all the more dispensable.[2]

[1]On the question of the play's ending, I take the section from the herald's entrance on to be a non-Aeschylean addition, together with the passage 861–874 which introduces Antigone and Ismene. On this reading, Antigone and Ismene do not appear in the play at all; the antiphonal passages are given to the two halves of the divided chorus.

[2]These problems of structure, I should point out, are linked with a particular kind of response to the opening scene: one which takes the scene at its face value, and accepts Eteocles at his own valuation. This is by no means the only possible response to the scene. But one of the strongest traditions in the interpretation of the play has been to take Eteocles in precisely this way; and this reading still seems to me a natural one, which cannot be simply dismissed. Hence I think it is worthwhile to address the questions of coherence which arise from this kind of response.

The Chorus' scene is not of course free-floating in the play as a whole; A. L. Brown ("Eteocles and the Chorus in the *Seven against Thebes*," *Phoenix* 31 [1977] 300–318) has demonstrated the array of formal parallels which link it to the second dialogue between Eteocles and the Chorus, following Eteocles' crucial decision. But even so, the later scene provides only a retrospective and indirect justification for the earlier; and their pairing does not affect the questions of structure in the play's first half.

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Nor is the place of the chorus' scene the only problem. The episodic impression made by the whole first half of the play means that the spectator is not involved in the progress of the plot; consequently, when the crisis does come, its intensity is not felt to gain weight from the action which precedes it. For the audience to respond to the full force of Eteocles' choice they must be involved in the movement that leads up to it. The dramatic foundations which give rise to that involvement seem to go back no further than the beginning of the shield scene. Hence the crisis, in order to have its full value, seems to demand something of greater weight and coherence to precede it than the play in itself provides.

These problems have provoked various types of solution. Dawe suggests abandoning the search for structural unity altogether, in favour of the proposition that Aeschylus' first concern was the production of individual dramatic scenes.[3] Others meet the lack of foundation for the crisis by appealing to the trilogy of which *Septem* is a part and positing the curse theme of the latter half of the *Septem* as a facet of the over-arching motif of the trilogy as a whole.[4] It is surmised that the plot of the trilogy is a family curse operating over three generations, and the function of the *Septem* within the overall structure is to show the curse's final working out.

Plausible as this surmise is, if the object is to rescue the *Septem*—i.e., to reveal it as an aesthetically satisfying play in itself—I do not think the approach succeeds. Apart from the awkwardness in principle of explicating the known by the unknown, the theme of the curse is not enough. Certainly the drama of a curse working through successive generations has power. It invites awed contemplation in the same way as a grand spectacle: it produces the same interest and involvement as a great natural disaster, no more. To be meaningful, it must open up an exploration of human reactions; the curse then becomes a means, not an end.

If it is reasonable, from the evidence, to see the trilogy as the progress of a family curse, the issues raised by the curse's operation in the earlier plays are entirely a matter of speculation. We cannot therefore really interpret the *Septem* on the basis of the trilogy. Nor does this approach do anything to explain the apparent disjointedness of the play's first half.

In this paper I suggest a function for the chorus' scene to explain both its presence in the play in the first place, and its juxtaposition to the shield scene. This explanation, I think, gives a starting point from which to interpret the play, and to present it as having its own structural unity and significance. In following this aim, I do not intend to imply that the *Septem* must necessarily have been constructed as an organic unity. If more of the Labdacid trilogy had survived, the principle of searching for unity in this single play might emerge as a clear mistake. But, since we lack the larger

[3]R. D. Dawe, "Inconsistency of Plot and Character in Aeschylus," *PCPS* 189 (1963) 31–42.

[4]E.g., W. G. Thalmann, *Dramatic Art in Aeschylus' Seven against Thebes* (New Haven 1978); G. O. Hutchinson, ed., *Aeschylus: Septem contra Thebas* (Oxford 1985).

whole of which it is a part, I think it is justifiable to treat the play, as far as possible, as capable in itself of constituting a satisfying whole.

The entry of the chorus creates the first conflict in the play. The preceding section has presented Eteocles exhorting and disposing his forces to meet the enemy attack. Upon this orderly mobilization, the Chorus of women irrupt in panic, wailing, throwing themselves upon the images of the gods, and utterly dissipating the purposeful tension that has been built up. Eteocles immediately turns his force upon them, as a second enemy within the walls. He accuses them of spreading the mentality of defeat among the defenders, and his accusation is given point by the dramatic effect their entrance has actually had upon the atmosphere of the play. In the ensuing argument, it becomes clear that Eteocles and the Chorus hold conflicting views about how the danger facing the city is to be met. The Chorus argue that in so great a crisis the only safety for the city lies in the favour of the gods. They are the ultimate power; they can frustrate human ambitions on the point of success, and bring salvation out of the most unpromising circumstances. Man's power is negligible in comparison. There is no point in trusting in human defences when human power is completely dependent on that of the gods. Therefore the Chorus pursue the only course they see as meeting the gravity of the crisis: they acknowledge their condition of powerlessness, and appeal to the gods with all the force of desperation they can muster. They expect a miracle.

The Chorus' assertion of the gods as the only real power entails a denial of the value of human endeavour. Eteocles opposes to their argument the proposition that the gods work in the world through the normal processes of life—which, after all, are the processes the gods themselves have ordained. It is part of the divine order that men naturally defend themselves when attacked, and that the best-conducted force should win. Walls, not miracles, keep out the enemy; and is not the efficacy of walls derived from the gods?[5] In a world which the gods have ordered, and whose processes they use as

[5]My interpretation of Eteocles' argument depends heavily on 216–217, which I understand as follows: to begin with, I ascribe the whole passage 216–218 to Eteocles, as do most modern commentators. To give the first half of 216 to the Chorus would create a very sharp break in the formal pattern of the dialogue. I parse εὔχεσθε as imperative, and read it as Eteocles' correction of the Chorus. Whereas they have put forward an appeal to the gods in general terms—πόλεως ὕν' ὑπερέχοιεν ἀλκάν, 215–216—Eteocles instructs them to pray specifically that the walls keep out the enemy spear. τάδ' in 217 will then refer back to this prayer: "Will not that (i.e., the walls keeping out the enemy spear) be the gods' doing?"

The rest of the speech, 217–218, turns away from the subject of what the Chorus ought to pray for, to impress upon them the futility of their present form of appeal—running to clasp the sacred images as though the city had fallen already. I take the thought underlying the whole passage to run as follows: "Pray that the man-made defences succeed—that the walls keep out the enemy spear; if they do, will not that be the gods' doing? But, however that may be (ἀλλ' οὖν—whether or not you agree with me on that point), your behaviour now has no point whatever: the gods leave a captured city."

channels for the exercise of their power, it follows that men's well-being is best preserved by their using, to the best of their ability, the means with which they are naturally provided: in this case, their own strength and skill in defence. To cease to act in their own defence is to go against the order which the gods have laid down. For Eteocles, therefore, the right course is to take responsibility for the city's defence, as he has done, and as he continues to do once he has reached a *modus vivendi* with the Chorus. He expects the gods to work precisely through his selection of champions to fight at the gates. This intensifies the fateful ring of his inclusion of himself as the seventh champion—the note on which the scene ends.

The issue raised by this scene, then, is that of divine versus human power, and what balance we are to conceive between them. The Chorus give preponderant weight to the power of the gods, while Eteocles argues for the value of human power. This, I claim, is the principal conflict in the scene, rather than, say, male versus female, which I see as subsidiary to the religious issue.

At this point, one might ask which of the conflicting parties the play itself supports. Both have had defenders: the Chorus as exponents of true religious faith, Eteocles in virtue of his characterization as a responsible and clear-sighted leader. From the presentation so far, the play seems to me to incline rather to the side of Eteocles.

In the first place, there is the emphatic way in which he is built up, on the surface, as an exemplary leader. The immediately obvious way to read the opening section is to take Eteocles as a courageous general, responsible for his city, meeting a crisis for the city's survival steadfastly and rationally, and to feel sympathy when his constructive action is broken into by a band of hysterical women. On a more subtle reading, alert to possible undercurrents, one may feel that Eteocles' fine surface is undercut by his identity as the son of Oedipus–an identity largely, but not completely, suppressed at this point. But undercurrents are by definition subordinate in the total picture; while they can shake the security of Eteocles' apparent stature, they cannot overthrow it. Hence the way in which Eteocles has been presented seems to me to give his argument an endorsement, even if a doubtful one.

A facet of Eteocles that is not at all doubtful, however, is his hectoring treatment of the Chorus. This has often been taken as a fault in his character, and a means of re-directing our sympathies towards his victims. But aggressive dislike of women is almost a commonplace in Greek literature, and here, moreover, there is strong provocation. The Chorus' wild, helter-skelter rush through the city to sanctuary (διαδρόμους φυγάς, 191) is precisely what one would expect if the city were already taken and undergoing sack; thus it could hardly be better calculated to enrage the commander of the defence. Between the threat posed by the Chorus' behaviour and the typical Greek posture of animosity towards women, whether justified or not, there is scarcely room to find fault with Eteocles for the violence of his reaction.

Nor am I convinced by the other main argument which has been put forward on the Chorus' side: namely their powerful expression of religious faith. I think the Chorus have benefited here from the thought-habits of Christianity. To regard passive self-abandonment to the gods as a virtue is much more typical of Christian religious thought than Greek. For Christianity there is no such thing as too much faith: the concept is self-contradictory; but that may not be at all the case for ancient Greece.

Up to this point, then, the dramatic presentation seems to me to support Eteocles' position. In any case, no-one has actually maintained that Eteocles should abandon the defence in favour of prayer. The stance of faith alone is essentially unrealistic. Eteocles' comment at the start of the play (4–9) makes the point: if the defence fails, the fact that the gods are ultimately responsible will not prevent the whole people's execration from falling on him. At the same time, we would be mistaken to see Eteocles as disregarding the gods. On the contrary, the initial presentation of him culminates in his prayer, earnest and full of emotion, at 69 ff.—upon which comes the hysterical entry of the Chorus. That juxtaposition of Eteocles' approach to the gods with that of the Chorus is a statement in itself on Eteocles' behalf.

From the enemy within to the enemy without: after the conflict with the Chorus, we have the conflict with the Argives in the form of the shield scene. The battle is to take the form of a series of duels at each of the city gates. The scene at once anticipates and symbolically presents these duels, by a series of paired descriptions of the antagonists at each gate. For the first five gates, the pattern is the same: a claim of irresistible might on the part of the Argive champion is met by a counter-claim from Eteocles on behalf of the champion he has chosen for the defence. As the series progresses from the first gate to the fifth, there emerges in each pair of claims a common theme. The Argive champions each assert their own ferocity and power: they neither need nor desire the favour of the gods. Eteocles counterattacks by condemning their attitude as ὕβρις, re-interpreting their boasts to rebound on their own heads, and asserting against them an attitude of human, not superhuman, courage, coupled with reliance upon the gods. The pattern grows progressively more emphatic: from the animal savagery and ὑπέρφρον σῆμα of Tydeus, via Kapaneus' statement of the gods' irrelevance, to the culmination in Hippomedon, who by adopting Typhon as his blazon directly challenges Zeus, and Parthenopaeus, who elevates his own spear as a superior deity. Eteocles meets this escalation of ὕβρις with an authority which increases in parallel with it, as he shows each successive assailant to be armed, not with the expression of potency which he imagines, but with the symbol of his own destruction. Having gained this ascendancy, Eteocles asserts his own position in the persons of the Theban champions. They eschew boasting in favour of action. Their courage does not aspire to superhuman rage, but is governed by the modesty that befits them as men. They do not assert their self-sufficiency in despite of the gods; instead they ac-

knowledge the gods' superior power and claim their favour. They rely on a fusion of their own skill and strength and the support of the gods.

Thus the shield scene dramatizes a second opposition: should men seek to achieve their ends by exalting to the maximum their own strength, belittling the gods in the process, or should they use their own powers in full consciousness of their limitations, as subject to, and effective only with, the superior power of the gods? There is no doubt where our sympathies are expected to lie in this argument. Wisdom is knowing one's place: in the natural order, man is subservient to the gods. It is courting disaster to pretend otherwise.

But the opposition here is complementary to that in the preceding scene. There, passive dependence on the gods was set against the active use of one's own resources as part of an alliance of human with divine powers; now, this same confidence in the efficacy of human and divine cooperation is contrasted with an assertion of the sufficiency of human powers without regard for the gods. Eteocles, who participates in both arguments, stands for the position common to both. But his relative position changes: in the scene with the Chorus, where the women are for the gods, he is for the power of men, whereas in this scene the Argives are for man exclusively, while Eteocles consistently invokes the power of the gods.

The result is that Eteocles is framed by the two oppositions in which he participates: he is the mean between two extremes. At one pole we have total, passive dependence upon the gods, at the opposite pole, total reliance upon man, and between them is the mean—a balanced reliance upon both man and the gods together. These two scenes of conflict, which from the point of view of dramatic action seem hardly to relate to one another at all, emerge from the point of view of the argument as intimately linked: they are two halves of one whole. The argument is the structural principle of the play.

To characterize Eteocles' position as the mean in this way is to make a strong statement in his favour. The mean is no strange concept for Aeschylus: one has only to look at the *Oresteia* to find it used repeatedly to single out what is right and to be desired. Hence the structure of these scenes as the confrontation of a mean with each of two extremes must convey an emphatic endorsement of Eteocles. If his position emerges as the mean, we must be intended to take him as a right-thinking man, and—even more importantly—his principles as the right principles. Equally, we must be meant to reject not only the Argive position, but also that of the Chorus. There is, after all, such a thing as too much faith. Men's consciousness of their dependence on the gods becomes excessive precisely when it inhibits their capacity to act effectively on the human plane, just as human self-confidence becomes excessive at the point where it ceases to acknowledge the hegemony of the gods. The mean is the holding of both attitudes together in a proper balance.

Once the play is seen as an argument presented in dramatic form, one begins to appreciate Aeschylus' skill in constructing it—for instance, his choice of opponents for Eteocles. The Chorus, being women, are naturally helpless against a military attack, with no power to defend themselves; this makes them natural proponents of the case for casting oneself upon the gods. Aeschylus chooses a female Chorus, not to present the woman's point of view, but because he is presenting a particular point of view for which women are natural representatives. The male-female opposition serves as a carrier for the opposition of ideas.

The same point applies to the second half of the argument—the shield scene itself. The Argives are faced with the daunting task of assaulting a fortified city. For this they need all the morale-boosting that they can conjure up. It is natural that they should make much of their own power, both to frighten the enemy and to bolster their own will to attack. Again, the characters chosen to express the extreme of human self-confidence are those who would naturally be driven, in the dramatic situation, to adopt that position.

It is all the more natural for the Argives to behave as they do if they cannot appeal to the gods to favour their cause. This brings us to the sixth gate and its allotted attacker, the prophet Amphiaraus. Here, the pattern of the earlier duels no longer holds. The structure establishing Eteocles' position as the mean is completed with the fifth gate; now we turn from Eteocles' principles to his cause. Amphiaraus' function is to persuade the audience—or, more accurately, to cause them to persuade themselves—that Eteocles' cause is just. He does not say this explicitly: indeed, he says nothing about Eteocles' cause. Instead, he comprehensively condemns the cause of the Argives and Polyneices. Amphiaraus' standing in the play as a seer, close to the gods, and disengaged from the passions on either side, means that his is a judgment the audience must accept.[6] Polyneices' subsequent claim to have justice on his side is thus sabotaged in advance. Amphiaraus does not say that Eteocles is right, nor does it follow that if Polyneices' course is ungodly, that of his antagonist is just; nonetheless that is the inference one would most naturally make. Thus the audience is manoeuvred into a position of solidarity with Eteocles which has no secure foundation. Without any authoritative endorsement of Eteocles' cause, a bias has been created in his favour. Whether that bias is subsequently confirmed or not, the audience is now predisposed to accept both Eteocles' principles and his cause.

So far then, Eteocles has been characterized very forcefully as an upright man, to be admired and supported. In fact the whole argument of the last two scenes has only elaborated and made precise the attitude Eteocles demonstrated at the beginning of the play. His first words (1–9) explicitly stress

[6]Cf. Hutchinson's discussion of this point (above, n. 4, 133).

the necessity of both a divine and a human element for the defence to succeed. From there he proceeds to deploy his own forces as he thinks best, in the expectation that the gods will use their power through the dispositions he makes. The climax of his preparations is a direct plea to the gods (69–77). Whatever results from these preparations will be a fulfilment of the gods' purposes. This is how he arrives at the crux of the play.

The shield scene, by its series of pairings, from each of which Eteocles emerges as the stronger, generates a powerful momentum in his favour, but with the final pairing this momentum is abruptly reversed. Eteocles as the seventh champion is confronted by a face-to-face fight against his brother. Upon the deliberate building up of Eteocles' character so far, this *peripeteia*, however we might have anticipated it, comes with devastating force. The same verbal duels which made Eteocles' moral position ever more secure have simultaneously manoeuvred him more and more irresistibly towards committing one of the gravest moral crimes.

But he is not actually forced to fight Polyneices. He could refuse the contest, withdraw from his post at the seventh gate, and send a substitute; the Chorus urge this upon him. Yet he does not entertain the idea. He continues determinedly to follow his original course of action. So we arrive at the paradox of an upright man who insists upon violating one of the strongest religious taboos.

This paradox has given rise to a great many interpretations, often diametrically opposed. For many, it is a break in the play's structure, which Wilamowitz explained as Aeschylus' failure to fuse the two strands of his plot. Those who reject this view are no more agreed upon how to take Eteocles' choice. For Kitto[7] and Hutchinson,[8] for instance, his choice is clearly wrong, so grotesquely so that Kitto posits a major change, and Hutchinson at least a distortion, of character to explain it. Hutchinson sees that distortion as the operation of the curse. Otis[9] and Kirkwood,[10] however, regard Eteocles' decision as the right one, and his character as consistent. For Thalmann,[11] Eteocles has no choice at all, and not much substance as a character either. In this variety of interpretations two questions stand out: why does Eteocles refuse to attempt to escape, and why is his refusal accompanied and explained by an abrupt change of character at this point?

Eteocles himself provides answers to the first question, as Kirkwood points out (above, note 10, 13–15). His reasons for choosing to fight Polyneices are: (1) that this duel must take place as the fated realization of his father's curse, with the corollary that attempting to frustrate it can only

[7]H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*[3] (London 1961) 51.
[8]Hutchinson (above, n. 4) xxxviii.
[9]B. Otis, "The Unity of the *Seven against Thebes*," *GRBS* 3 (1960) 153–174.
[10]G. M. Kirkwood, "Eteocles *Oiakostrophos*," *Phoenix* 23 (1969) 9–25.
[11]Thalmann (above, n. 4) 146–148.

bring down worse calamities (657); and (2) that as a consequence all he can now salvage of his reputation is his honour as a warrior.

But if Aeschylus has gone to the trouble of constructing a structural argument which presents Eteocles' intellectual and moral position as a desirable mean, then the essential question is how that position bears on his behaviour at this crux. I think his principles are the decisive factor: they allow him no other course than the one he actually takes. The gods, in Eteocles' view, achieve their purposes precisely through men's performance of their roles in the world. He has performed his role as commander of the defence of Thebes, and it has led him straight into a fratricidal duel with Polyneices. How can he take this otherwise than as the will of the gods? This is the source of his conviction that any alternative course of action, such as the Chorus suggest, is futile. He could indeed seek to escape the duel, but only by abandoning the religious principles on which his character has been built. The progress of the play so far has consisted of the elaboration of Eteocles' religious attitude to the danger facing the city. It is this same religious attitude which makes it illogical and impossible for him to change his course.[12]

Eteocles' decision itself, then, cannot be evidence of a change of character —rather the reverse. Nor do I find anything inconsistent in what he actually says upon learning his fate. Many critics cite the passion of his response. But surely passion is to be expected in such a situation as Eteocles'. What is remarkable is not his passionate outburst, but that he so quickly brings it under control; and he remains in this state—bitter and despairing, but still lucid and master of himself—through the rest of the scene. He responds to the Chorus, not with incoherent rage, but with reasons. In comparison with the vivid descriptions of battle-fury among the Argives, Eteocles appears rational and self-possessed, albeit there is a strong sense of emotion held down. Kirkwood notes that he speaks throughout in iambics, against the lyric metres of the Chorus. Nothing here seems to me inconsistent with his character in the first part of the play.

What of the Chorus in all this? Their reaction is simple: horrified at the fratricide in prospect, they put all their effort into dissuading Eteocles from it. Like him, they maintain continuity with their earlier position. A Chorus who advocate total reliance on the gods will see here only a clear transgression of the moral law. Whatever doubt there may be in the situation as a

[12]Kirkwood's study (above, n. 10) of the imagery applied to Eteocles' leadership also points to the consistency of his choice. Kirkwood cites the scout's use of the helmsman metaphor immediately preceding Eteocles' decision, and the messenger's report of the city as "in fair weather, out of the storm," immediately following Eteocles' and Polyneices' fratricide. Thus Eteocles' action is framed by reminders of him as οἰακοστρόφος. I would add that both reminders come from figures who are bystanders in relation to the structural argument of the play—not from the chorus who are *parti pris*.

whole, there can be none on this point: such a transgression must be avoided at any price.

But there is no *a priori* presumption that they are right. Indeed, if we take into account the parallelism between their earlier dialogue and this one,[13] we might rather be led to treat their view with some wariness. This too has a bearing on the play's presentation of Eteocles, for most of the evidence for his change of character consists of what the Chorus urge against him. If they cannot be assumed *a priori* to be right, then their views of Eteocles can have no special privilege.

Furthermore, even if the course they urge is the right course—if Eteocles ought in spite of everything to withdraw—what they say must still be understood in the light of their purpose in saying it. They are not giving a dispassionate description of Eteocles' state of mind; far from it: they are trying to persuade him.[14] Their use of language is rhetorical, not objective. They seek to present his projected course to him in the worst possible light; hence they draw from it the most repellent implications for his character.

But this cannot be taken as a cynical rhetoric; the Chorus believe what they say. They are able to draw these implications for Eteocles because they do not differentiate decision from mental state. In their eyes, his making such a decision is tantamount to being ὀργὴν ὁμοῖος τῷ κάκιστ' αὐδωμένῳ. To contemplate fratricide at all is in itself to manifest a love of evil, an ὠμοδακὴς ἵμερος. There is no need for Eteocles to express hatred and bloodlust; that he is determined to fight his brother to the death is enough for them—and possibly for him too. Eteocles' own motivation is not necessarily simple. The speech (653–676) in which he accepts Polyneices' challenge expresses at a straightforward, surface level the reasons for his decision, but it also raises the possibility of less conscious and rational layers of personality at which, for instance, a brother and an enemy are the same thing. To consider only the surface meaning yields a simplistic and reductive reading. But it is even more simplistic and reductive to read the speech as a one-dimensional expression of lust for fratricide, as do Kitto and Herington.[15] Whatever layers of feeling are stirred by the challenge, he is still open to the full horror of the action he is committing himself to—witness his initial reaction at 653, and the terms in which he speaks of himself and his kin

[13]See above, n. 2.

[14]Winnington-Ingram (*Studies in Aeschylus* [Cambridge 1983] 33) rules out any privilege for what the Chorus say, but accepts them as reliable witnesses to Eteocles' state of mind. His argument seems to me to depend on taking them as objective observers, and ignoring their rhetorical purpose.

[15]"But the very first words that issue from the mouth of Eteocles as the Messenger leaves the scene (653 ff.) show that there is now no longer anything left in him that is capable of judging at all. Where there was once a responsible individual, the curse of Oedipus, the madness of the entire line, and the vengeance of Apollo have now taken over" (J. Herington, *Aeschylus* [New Haven 1986] 89).

thereafter. Since he shares the Chorus' judgment of the duel, he must also concur in their inferences about his own state, as he shows by the γάρ of 695. He is an object of condemnation to himself as much as to them; it is natural that he should accept their depiction of the man who does such deeds as a valid description of himself.

There is therefore no need of hypotheses such as the action of the curse to explain why Eteocles pursues his course. His reasoning is explanation enough. Nor is there much substance to the Chorus' charge of bloodlust, if it is taken to mean that Eteocles accepts the duel in an ungovernable access of passion.

But of course the curse must work on him; it is impossible that it should not. He can scarcely determine to fight his brother—and in such a way as to maintain his honour as a warrior—without calling up in himself the necessary attitudes of emotion and will. This necessity is what justifies the Chorus' charges. Eteocles has summoned the resolution to break one of the strongest taboos; he has crossed a barrier, and his state of mind cannot remain unchanged. Moreover, he must embrace the change. There is no point whatever in pursuing this course half-heartedly: that way he would only fall victim to Polyneices, and put Thebes the more at risk. Once having made his choice, he cannot but transform himself into the character the Chorus envisage. This degree of change in him is a necessary consequence of the situation, and something we may predict whether we see it take place or not.

Agamemnon is the obvious figure for comparison here. His decision to sacrifice his daughter makes him, too, a taboo-breaker, and subject to the same psychological process as Eteocles. In his case, the chorus actually describe in an analytic fashion how his decision affects his state of mind (*Agamemnon* 218–221):

> ἐπεὶ δ' ἀνάγκας ἔδυ λέπαδνον
> φρενὸς πνέων δυσσεβῆ τροπαίαν
> ἄναγνον, ἀνίερον, τόθεν
> τὸ παντότολμον φρονεῖν μετέγνω·

The chorus have just given an account, as it were from the inside, of Agamemnon's reaching his decision (*Ag.* 205–217). These lines start from the point when the decision is made, and take an external, objective stance. They can, I think, be seen to present Agamemnon's case as a paradigm of the psychological transformation which follows from the breaking of a major taboo. Hence, if this is a justifiable reading of the passage, it will serve as an analysis of Eteocles' case as well.

Firstly, though the act is impelled by necessity, that is not enough in itself. The yoke-strap has to be put on, i.e., the human agent has to recognize that the act is necessary, and concur in it. Necessity, I think, need not preclude choice, for the necessity is not absolute, but relative—as indeed are

most necessities which human beings actually have to deal with.[16] That is to say, the consequences of refusing the act at issue are too grave for refusal to be considered a realistic proposition. For whatever reasons, with whatever justification, both Agamemnon and Eteocles conclude that the unholy acts confronting them are necessary; having so concluded, they accept that they must commit those acts.

That acceptance itself involves a change in their conception[17] of the acts at issue: what previously they would not have conceived it possible they should do they now contemplate as practicable. This is the conceptual change of wind in *Ag.* 219. This change, whereby an impossibly wicked act becomes the object of practical planning, means that from now on—τόθεν—the psychological power of taboos is broken. The human agent has learnt the ability to think and feel differently about all forms of proscribed behaviour; he has been set free from social proscription, and there is now nothing he will not dare to contemplate (*Ag.* 221). This is what makes the taboo-breaker intolerable to his society. The process is presented in wholly human terms, without reference to any higher powers. It is the natural, psychological correlative to the working on a human character of an Erinys.

But in the case of Agamemnon, his newly criminal mentality is expressly pointed out; that is not so for Eteocles. What comes through in the *Septem* is rather the conflict within Eteocles—his continuing hatred of what he has to do, and what he has to become to do it. He accepts that he must become like Polyneices, and do so with a will; that does not preclude his simultaneously seeing his transformation for what it is, and abhorring it. All the entitlement he had to think well of himself is cut away; his perspective is narrowed down to focus on the only thing he can still salvage, namely his honour as a warrior—which, accordingly, he fastens on all the more. He can have no further concern for the city. His strategy is complete, and if it were not, how can he, an accursed man, continue to guide the community under the gods?

[16]K. J. Dover ("Some Neglected Aspects of Agamemnon's Dilemma," *JHS* 93 [1973] 58–69, at 65) has a good discussion of this point.

[17]It is common to take this change as a change of feeling, rather than conception. Brown, for instance, understands the sacrifice to be "passionately and impiously desired" by Agamemnon (above, n. 2, 314); Winnington-Ingram speaks of "the wind of his emotion" (above, n. 14, 96). But the actual words used in the passage—φρήν, φρονεῖν, μεταγιγνώσκειν—are surely not exclusively, or even primarily, words of feeling, but contain above all a strong conceptual element. In fact I do not want to separate conception and feeling at all here; the distinction seems to me a false one. What these words essentially convey is that thinking is itself a process which involves emotion. Conceiving of something previously considered impossible as not only possible, but practicable for oneself cannot be done without changing one's emotions towards it. But the element of conception is logically prior: the emotion follows from it. In any case, conception is the more dangerous element: there is no great harm in wishing to murder someone as long as the taboo holds, and one cannot actually conceive of doing it. The danger is in conceiving murder as a possible act for oneself; one may then need little or no emotion actually to commit it.

All he can claim to know now is that he must fight Polyneices. This creates in him above all an immense bitterness towards the powers which have brought him to this state. That note is sounded again and again through the dialogue (684, 690–691, 702), whereas his condemnation of his brother is expressed once, when he accepts the duel, and does not occur again.

The effect now of the structural argument of the first half of the play is to give the paradox an altogether sharper twist. Not only is a good man set on an extreme wrong,[18] but his determination is the logical consequence of an intellectual position of which we must approve. Eteocles' view of how the powers of men and gods combine accords with both religion and common sense; the play commends it to us as the desirable mean. But if we accept it, we are led straight to accepting Eteocles' ungodly decision. As Eteocles is manoeuvred by the unfolding situation into a trap, so is the audience. On the other hand, we cannot simply reject Eteocles' decision and continue as we were. If his principles are put in doubt, then so are all prescriptions of right conduct which depend on the concept of the mean. The mean is no longer a moral guideline. The play opens up a general dilemma: that according to the lights we have we may actually be right to do wrong, and, leading from that contradiction, that ultimately we have no secure basis on which we can know what is right. Nor can the problem be by-passed by appealing to pragmatism—never mind the theology, just live a good life. Living rightly according to one's common sense is exactly what Eteocles has done. This play has shown that common sense is in fact based upon theological principles, and that principles and action are interdependent. One cannot live rightly without knowing what is right. In the context of a religion which is not, like Christianity, founded upon a canonical source of divine revelation, the difficulty is especially pressing.

Some interpretations of Eteocles' choice seem at bottom like attempts to resolve the paradox: for instance, that the operation of the curse upon him unhinges his mind and transforms him into a man of blood; or that a sensitive reading of the first part of the play shows him never to have been a good man in the first place. Possibly this applies also to the *Opfertod* theory in its most straightforward form: that Eteocles' act is a noble sacrifice for the city, and thus not really a wicked act. But the paradox is essential to the play; it is a mistake, I think, to try to soften it at all.

None of this, however, is a dilemma for the Chorus. In entire consistency with their attitude throughout the play, they have no doubt that Eteocles should draw back. They try to persuade Eteocles to this in the second

[18]Lloyd-Jones (review of K. von Fritz, *Antike und moderne Tragödie*, in *Gnomon* 34 [1962] 742) gives full weight to the paradox, but states it slightly differently: Eteocles' act is "at the same time a duty and a crime." I do not think one is yet compelled to regard the act as a duty. That would imply an endorsement of Eteocles' decision, whereas I think the case is open at this point.

epirrhematic scene, which forms a pair with the dialogue between the same participants in the first half of the play. Given the Chorus' conviction of the disastrous wrongness of Eteocles' decision, and his determination to persist in it, one would expect as sharp an antagonism as was apparent in the earlier scene. But on this point the linked scenes contrast; the nature of the argument is quite different. The first scene is not so much a dialogue as an exchange of hostilities. The hysteria of the women and the danger it presents cause Eteocles brusquely to oppose them by asserting the exclusive competence of the male. The Chorus assert against him their continuing panic; and a conflict develops in which both sides do not so much reason with one another as retort against one another. The second scene begins as an inverted parallel of the first: this time, Eteocles is the source of danger in the eyes of the Chorus, and they respond with a dismay at least equal to his in the earlier scene. But the ensuing dialogue has quite another character. The Chorus earnestly seek to persuade Eteocles, using a series of arguments, to each of which he responds explaining why he cannot accept it. Thus, to withdraw from the battle and send a substitute, as the Chorus suggest (679–680), would mean not only failing to avert the enmity of the gods—for that is inevitable—but losing his honour in addition (683–685).[19] To buy time for the divine anger to calm down from its present eruption (705–708) is to misunderstand the course of that anger: to see its fury now as a temporary stage, whereas in fact it has erupted completely and finally (ἐξέζεσεν, 709, where the verbal prefix ἐξ- carries its full force). In the first scene, Eteocles and the Chorus are completely at loggerheads, to the extent that there seems to be no common ground on which to argue with each other. Here, although again neither side persuades the other, there is at least enough shared ground to enable them to engage in a genuine dialogue. The threat from outside divided them and set them against one another; but this deeper, internal threat seems at a basic level to draw them together. The contrast is explicitly brought out in the stichomythia which ends the scene. The Chorus begin the passage with a deliberate reminder of Eteocles' previous attitude towards them (712). Eteocles, who had thrust down their earlier utterances with demands for silence, now replies "Speak" (713). The contrast between the two parallel scenes makes the relative rapprochement between the participants particularly striking, and lends its weight against any easy or total condemnation of Eteocles.

Nevertheless, he is not persuaded, but goes on to bring pollution on himself and his city. For the Chorus, this means that hope is at an end. The stasimon which now follows is very different in tone from the first: panic fear and uncertainty, which at least imply that the issue is in doubt, are

[19]Kirkwood and Brown both argue against regarding Eteocles as irrational in this scene; Brown also makes a forceful case for Eteocles' determination to maintain his ἀρετή (above, n. 2, 312).

replaced by resignation. The Chorus' attitude to what is about to happen is profoundly changed. The first stasimon was predominantly a response to the present moment; since the immediate future was in doubt, what happened at any instant could affect it. Now, the present is made one with the past; instead of responding to what is impending with hope or fear, they incorporate it into a history. What is to come is no longer in doubt, for it is the consequence of what has taken place. Under the curse of his house, Eteocles has brought the gods' wrath upon the city as well as himself, and this practically guarantees its destruction. There is therefore no further place for prayer; the Chorus have now no expectation that the city will survive.

But their reasoned and resigned despair is confounded, for while Eteocles and Polyneices do indeed murder each other, the city is saved. One might expect this result to vindicate Eteocles' course; and in fact there is a hint of vindication in the messenger's rejoicing (792–798). For him the victory predominates, and it is expressed in terms which recall the part Eteocles played in achieving it. The mighty boasts have been laid low (cf. the shield scene, *passim*), the city is in fair weather after the storm (an implicit reminder of the skill of the helmsman; see above, note 12), the walls have proved secure (cf. Eteocles' words at 216). Yet very little time is given to rejoicing. The Chorus' reaction leads the messenger from the good news with which he entered to its obverse of reciprocal fratricide; and the rest of the play is given over to a ceremonial lament and meditation upon the end of the two brothers. At the same time, the very fullness and ceremoniousness of the lament testifies to Thebes' security—compare the makeshift and skeletal rites for Astyanax in the *Trojan Women*.

The Chorus has the last word, so far as we can tell; and their conclusion is of a piece with their previous convictions. They consistently hold that Eteocles made an evil choice, which places him on a par with Polyneices; and their lament treats the brothers as identical. This treatment has two effects. Firstly it continues to assert, even though the city has been saved, the criminality of Eteocles' act. The paradox whereby the city benefits from its ruler's deliberate choice to do wrong is maintained to the end. We are not allowed to call the evil act good on the grounds of its good result. Likewise the perpetrator of the act retains the accursed character he acquired by committing it. There is no lightening of the Chorus' condemnation of Eteocles. His loss of good character is real and final.

The second effect, however, is a symbolic repairing of the wrong done. The treatment of Eteocles and Polyneices as one—each in all respects the twin of the other—binds them together and restores the family unity which their duel tore apart. In their death they are completely kin. The Chorus' explicit dwelling upon their mutual enmity produces an overriding impression of resemblance and reciprocity. Thus the curse on the Labdacids is worked through to the end: Laius' original transgression is counteracted,

since no offspring of his survive (a point made by the messenger at 801–802),[20] and the bonds of kinship are reaffirmed. The city is clear of the gods' vengeance, and in a position to make a new beginning.

This is a satisfying end to the tragedy, so far as it goes. But it still leaves the central question: what are we to make of Eteocles' decision? Eteocles' principles have been at the forefront of the play: first commended as the mean, then thrown into doubt by the revelation of what they led to. We might expect to judge by results, but the result is still ambiguous. First comes the announcement that the city has survived, which ought to clinch the matter in Eteocles' favour. But the good news is short-lived. The victory is immediately overshadowed by the death of both brothers in payment for the outrage they have committed.

If we take it that the original play ended somewhere around 1004—that is, with the conclusion of the lament—then it seems that the final verdict on Eteocles' action is deliberately left in doubt. The fact of the city's survival is present in the action throughout the final part, but the last word—a long last word—is given to the Chorus. They have never accepted either Eteocles' course of action or the principles behind it, and they do not now. Presented with the rival claims of joy and mourning, they choose mourning, and go on to dwell wholly on the brothers' reciprocal fratricide.

And, of course, since there is no knowing what might have been, it is not impossible that the Chorus are in the right: that if Eteocles had taken their advice and withdrawn from the duel the end result would have been a better one. Eteocles' general attitude, that the gods work through the natural course of events, has reason and common sense on its side, but it does not predispose those who hold it to be alert to the unexpected. Otis finds that Eteocles at times seems to have the gods in his pocket;[21] it is the Chorus who remind us that the gods' power can confound human expectations. So the doubt which Aeschylus allows to stand can send us back over the whole argument again. This obstinate doubt is certainly to be preferred to any easy resolution, for the limitations on human knowledge which the play brings out are real, and cannot be simply brushed aside. The general effect in that case is of ἀπορία as much as tragedy.

All this is on the assumption that the play ends on the note of the Chorus' lament. But it is quite possible that the lament was followed by a short coda which recalled the theme of the city and the rejoicing appropriate to the

[20]If these lines mean, as I suggest, that Laius' δυσβουλίαι are wiped out and the former equilibrium restored, then the sense demands a reading of κραίνω as something like "make good," with the same ambiguity as the English phrase "make good" between "bring to pass" (of a desire or promise) and "restore to an undamaged state." In any case, the fact that the brothers' deaths are referred back to the original transgression of Laius, not the curse of Oedipus, shows that the cycle of divine anger is now satisfied.

[21]Otis (above, n. 9) 159.

victory. In that case, the play would end with the city now able to continue its life unthreatened by god or man. Since it is through Eteocles' actions that this good has been achieved, the judgment would be weighted in his favour. What he has done would at last emerge clearly as both a duty and a crime.

On this second assumption, the effect is wholly tragic. The tragedy is in the fate of Eteocles—but not primarily his death: the real tragedy is his loss of character. What leads him to break the taboos of his community is not overweening arrogance, but right judgment. But the result of his action upon him is that, like all taboo-breakers, he becomes able to φρονεῖν τὸ παντότολμον, and this transforms him from a capable and upright ruler into someone unfit to belong to human society. His death is therefore the logical, as well as the actual, consequence of his act, for he is no longer fit to live. The picture which emerges from the drama as a whole is one of a long-running crisis, set in motion two generations ago by a foolhardy action which should never have been committed in the first place, and now apparently self-perpetuating. It urgently demands a solution, but the only solution at hand is one which corrupts and destroys the man who achieves it. The theme can then stand as a type of all entrenched conflicts which cry out for resolution, but which there is no just means to resolve.[22]

MIDDLESEX POLYTECHNIC
ALL SAINTS
WHITE HART LANE
LONDON N17 8HR

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