

XXII. Some Themes in Euripides' *Phoenissae*

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I

The critics have not been kind to the *Phoenissae*. From the author of the third argument, who found it (if Wecklein's expansion of the MS. is correct) "episodic and overstuffed," to the embarrassed silence or tepid apologies of modern writers, the voices raised in its support have been remarkably few.¹ Even so sensitive a commentator as Pearson can complain that "the play at its conclusion leaves with most readers the impression rather of a series of brilliant episodes than of a single artistic conception."²

Of course, if we are expecting a central hero, or development on the Aristotelian scheme (to which so few Greek tragedies conform) we shall be forced to truncate the play by some 200 lines and

¹ Most recently André Rivier, *Essai sur le tragique d'Euripide* (Lausanne 1944) 180: "Pas de schématisation puissante et significative dans ce drame, pas de concentration proprement dramatique." Albin Lesky, *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen* (Göttingen 1956) 191, speaks of "das Streben, Fülle und Abwechslung der Handlung um jeden Preis . . . Stärker als in früheren Werken tritt die Neigung hervor, wirksame Szenen in sich zu runden und die Dünne ihrer Beziehung zu den anderen Teilen in Kauf zu nehmen." H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*³ (London 1962) 351: "scene after scene for the sake of their immediate and cumulative effect, but not for the sake of an inner drama . . ."; 358, "it is not tragic, but aims simply at creating a certain theatrical effect . . ."; 359, "a play which is sensational and not intellectual . . ."

A welcome exception is G. M. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides*² (London 1961) 353-73. P. Treves, (*Atene e Roma* 11 (1930) 171-95), adopting a more metaphysical approach finds that "le singole scene sono collegate fra loro, non da un vincolo—che è un artificio—di struttura, di tecnica, ma da un più profondo vincolo di pensiero: . . . la fede profonda di Euripide nell'ingiustizia, nella malvagità degli dèi" (191-92). According to Lesky, Riemschneider, *Held und Staat in Eur. Phoen.* (Diss., Berlin, Würzburg 1940), which I have not seen, tries to find a unity in the relation of all the characters to the state, and makes "the Theban Polis the real hero of this often unappreciated drama."

² *Euripides: The Phoenissae*, ed. A. C. Pearson, (Cambridge 1909) xxviii; the most readily available edition, and a mine of compendious information. Of the other accessible editions in English, those of F. A. Paley (London 1880) and J. U. Powell (London 1911) are still worth consulting; the former for its author's sense of Euripidean style, and the latter for its useful introduction. The text used throughout this paper, unless otherwise specified, is that of Murray² (Oxford 1913, reprinted 1954).

expunge Antigone, or, conversely, to exaggerate the importance of the beginning and end—thus giving her character full scope to “develop”—and ignore the entire central portion of the play. A more satisfactory approach is to imagine the feelings of the original spectators, watching breathlessly as the whole resplendent panorama of the Theban royal house unfolded before their eyes. It is all here, from the foundation of Thebes by Cadmus to its last glories in the great days of Oedipus; Euripides “cuts in” on events at the very moment when the royal line is threatened with extinction and Thebes herself stands on the razor’s edge of annihilation. There is something for everyone: the aged queen mother lamenting her sons; the Argive heroes at the gates (so popular that it had to be repeated before the end, like a song-reprise); an eleventh-hour truce, a dazzling debate suitably sprinkled with abstractions; a gory siege, valiant defense of the walls, hand-to-hand combat; suicides selfish and selfless; conspicuous patriotism and equally conspicuous egotism, climaxed by the pathetic emergence from the palace of the self-blinded Oedipus, the glory and the shame of the house of Laius, a mere dream-image of his former self, living on the empty memories of his vanished greatness.

When we have agreed that the successive scenes vie with one another in theatrical brilliance, and can admire the versatility of Euripides the pyrotechnician, we are still perhaps entitled to ask about underlying unity of “artistic conception.” Is there anything that ties the tableaux together, to satisfy our desire for an organized whole and save it from falling into a succession of brilliant parts? It is the purpose of this paper to suggest that there is such an underlying tragic conception: the house of Oedipus is shown in its death-throes, the last hopes of its members are kindled only to be quenched, and their grim travails are made the more piteous by being played antithetically against a background of faded glory. To involve the emotions of his audience in this tragic idea, the dramatist develops four major themes, or patterns of images, which recur regularly and undergo various poetic transformations, particularly in the choral odes. The skill with which they are manipulated by the dramatist suggests that they are an intentional device of the poet’s to provide a unifying complex of imagery for his scenes, thereby arousing and satisfying the expectations of the more perceptive of his audience

and at the same time silencing charges of "formlessness" by his less perceptive critics.

II. LIGHT—DARK (SIGHT—BLINDNESS)

The most obvious pattern in the play is the complex of images dealing with light and darkness, and the correlative contrast between sight and blindness. These images recur throughout the play, sometimes in surprising combinations, but their main importance is in the first six hundred lines, where the poet seems to be using the related patterns to achieve unity and emotional reinforcement.

Images of light and sight undoubtedly suggest life and hope, the aspirations of the various characters to success and victory for their side, and we can see the trouble the poet has taken to create an air of hopefulness in the opening scenes by an accumulation of bright images. Thus Jocasta's first words in the prologue are an address to the sun, cutting his way among the stars in his golden-studded chariot, revolving his blaze with swift horses (1-3). Oedipus' blindness is passed over quickly, and the poet risks a certain incongruity in emphasizing (no doubt for the sake of the pattern) that the pins with which Oedipus put out his eyes were golden (62). Jocasta closes her factual account with a prayer to Zeus, "who inhabits the bright recesses of heaven" (84).

Splendor and radiance continue to pervade the next scene, the *teichoskopia*, where the poet, in a happy blend of Homeric charm and Euripidean realism, shows us an eager young girl wide-eyed before the dazzle of war. That it is the enemy force makes no difference—the dark threats of the Argives will come later; here all is a shimmering delight. The poet is thus far impartial to any claims of right and wrong which might be reflected in the imagery;³ we are meant here simply to share the young girl's enthusiasm for the array of martial brilliance before her. "The whole plain is like bronze lightning," she exclaims (110-11). Hippomedon is "white-crested" (119) and "fearful to look upon...like a giant bright as a star" (*asterôpos*, 129). Antigone asks after "the youth, in gaze dazzling to look upon" (146-47), who turns out to be Parthenopaeus. When at last Polynices is pointed out

³ "With justice have they come," remarks the paedagogus, and then adds, significantly, "I am afraid the gods may *see* the matter aright" (154-55).

to her, she expresses a wish to fly to him with the speed of a wind-swift cloud, and describes him, in terms reminiscent of Jocasta's opening, as "conspicuous in his golden armor, ablaze like the sun's rays at dawn" (168-69). After the paedagogus has pointed out Amphiaraus, Antigone addresses a prayer to the "Moon, daughter of bright-clad Sun, golden-orbed radiance."⁴ At the mention of Capaneus, Antigone is moved to pray to "Nemesis and deep-roaring thunders, and burning blaze of lightning shafts" that he be struck down (182-83). She closes her prayer by addressing Artemis, "golden-curled shoot of Zeus" (191).

The scene from the walls is brilliant with image after image, and the pattern of radiance reaches its climax in the parodos, where, mid-way in the song, it is suddenly reversed; the hopes raised in the early scenes give way to the darkness and gloom of the confrontation between Jocasta and her sons. The chorus identifies itself and justifies its presence in Thebes with the same emphasis on brilliance and beauty that was so marked in the prologue. They are Phoenician maidens who have stopped off in Thebes on their way to be a state-offering at Delphi. They have been sped on their way by Zephyr's breaths, "the fairest sound in heaven" (212-13), and they have been selected as "first-fruits of beauty" (*kallisteumata*, 215). Their service will be like that of "gold-wrought offerings to Phoebus" (220-21). They speak of bathing the "maidenly luxuriance of their hair" in Castalia's spring (224). At the beginning of the epode they call on Parnassus, "O rock blazing with twin-crested flash of fire" (226-27). Then, suddenly, in the second half, all is changed. In place of radiant joy we are given the dark contrast: "before the walls the hostile blood of Ares flares" (*phlegei*, 241); "a thick cloud of shields flares around the city" (250-51). The mood of tranquil joy and Antigone's rather idealized delight in martial splendor have given way to the hard realities of the situation: Thebes beleaguered by her enemies and the two sons of Oedipus at swords' points.

A pall of gloom is cast over the next scene, the great debate between the young princes and their mother. Polynices, in an

⁴ 175-76. Over-literality led Pearson and Powell to follow Nauck and Badham in substituting ἡ Λατοῦς for Ἀελίου, but the second half of the epithet λαπαροζώνου is, as so often, without force, and certainly does not necessitate textual sleight-of-hand to produce a female divinity. The scholiast's remark shows that the genealogy was thoroughly Aeschylean.

unnecessary (save for the image) circumlocution, speaks of the "shadowy surroundings" of his sword—he means its scabbard (276)—and Jocasta describes his "dark-hued locks overshadowing my cheek" (308–9; the point is emphasized by contrast with her own "white-colored hair" at 322–23). She is "without white robes for garb" (324), but is dressed instead in "shadowy rags" (325–26). The last and most significant thing she says about Oedipus is that he is "hidden in darkness" (*skotia kryptetai*, 336); by a slight variation on the theme, her greatest regret about Polynices' foreign marriage is that she did not "kindle the light of fire as befits the happy mother" (343–46). As if to underline the emotional significance of the pattern, Polynices alludes to his mother's "dusky robes,"⁵ and his first question is of his father, "whose sight is as darkness."⁶

We notice here how naturally, almost imperceptibly, the closely-related terminology of sight is introduced into the complex of light and darkness. The blindness of Oedipus, of course, necessitates a certain number of references to sight and sightlessness, but it is not too much to say that his brooding presence within the palace makes itself felt throughout the play—he dominates it from within—in the very patterns of imagery which his physical blindness inspires. This is especially noticeable in this scene between the brothers, where the poet emphasizes their self-induced, if figurative, blindness: they refuse to see the dangerous pass to which their feud has brought their city.⁷ In almost his first breath, Polynices emphasizes the need for caution: his gaze must be "carried around everywhere, this way and that" (265–66, and we can imagine quite a lot of stage "business" here). Jocasta opens her touching monody, "at last and after myriad days I look upon your eye" (305) and she later refers to Oedipus as "that sight-bereft old man."⁸ Later Polynices describes

⁵ 372; the line is rejected by Murray following Kirchhoff on insufficient grounds of a faint resemblance to *Alcestis* 427; it is admitted by Paley, Pearson, Powell and Christ-Schmid-Stählin (1.3.575).

⁶ 377, *skolon dedorkós*; I give the rendering of Pearson, who notes the striking oxymoron and shows that "δεδορκώς is used absolutely of *keen, bright vision*."

⁷ Note Creon's anguished outburst to Eteocles at 773: "Do you not see what you ought to see?"

⁸ 327, *ὀμμιτιστοστερίας*, a rare word, perhaps echoed by Sophocles at *OC* 1260; not Sophocles' only borrowing, if Christ-Schmid-Stählin (1.3.577 and note 10) are correct in their belief that he took over from Euripides Colonus as the site of Oedipus' burial and Antigone's accompanying her father into exile.

himself, almost too vividly, as "having a stream of tears running through my eyes" (370). When Eteocles appears on the scene the sight-theme becomes more prominent. "Relax your gaze," Jocasta tells her son at 454 ff., "you're not looking at the Gorgon's head, but your own brother." She urges Polynices, too, to look at Eteocles, on the grounds that "if your gazes meet you will speak better and receive his arguments." This point she reinforces with a generalization: "When an angry dear one meets one dear to him and looks him in the eye, the reason for his coming must alone be regarded, and no memory of former wrongs retained" (461-64).

The imagery of sight continues in this scene, together with the correlative imagery of light and darkness, and both patterns are recapitulated in the first stasimon which follows.⁹ They reappear frequently in the remainder of the play, but their function as techniques of maintaining continuity is never again so important as in the opening scene, parados and first episode. Several places should perhaps be noted where one or other of the themes takes on greater vividness or emotional force. In the brothers' death-scene, for example, the sight-image emerges with touching power. Eteocles had no voice to speak to his mother and sister, the messenger recounts, but he "addressed them from his eyes with tears" (1440-41). Polynices, who can still speak, looks at them (1442) and asks to be buried in his homeland. His last words are a moving request to his mother: "Close my eyelids with your hand" (1451), and the messenger adds that he himself placed his mother's hand on his eyes. When Antigone arrives back from the field with the corpses of her mother and brothers, the chorus shouts: "The ill fortune of the house is no longer hearsay, but is present to sight (*πᾶρα γὰρ λεύσσειν*, 1480-81).

With the arrival of Oedipus on the scene, references to sight and blindness naturally increase.¹⁰ It can be argued that their thematic value as means the poet uses to tie his scenes together varies inversely as the naturalness (inevitability, almost) of references to Oedipus' blindness, but surely Antigone's words to her father as she stands over the corpses of her mother and broth-

⁹ Sight: 596-97, 615; light: 504, 543, 606; first stasimon: 653-54, 671 and esp. 659-61, where two themes blend: the dragon acts as overseer of the springs "with roving pupils of his eyes."

¹⁰ See e.g., 1539-40, 1547, 1549, 1616, 1686, 1691, 1708.

ers, "If, still seeing the four-horsed chariot of the Sun, you plied the rays of your eye in the direction of these corpses . . ." (1562-64), as well as echoing Jocasta's opening apostrophe and belying the hopes of that earlier address, are too elaborate *not* to be an intentional echo of the theme. In the final, much-maligned trochaics,¹¹ too, we have what must be an intentional and extremely moving conclusion of this pattern of sight-imagery. The decrepit, self-blinded old man throws wide his arms and addresses his former subjects: "O citizens of my famous country, look you, this Oedipus . . ." ¹²

The pattern of light and dark runs parallel to, and sometimes crosses, that of sight,¹³ but here, too, its unifying importance is secondary. An interesting counterplay of light and dark images surrounds the death of Menoeceus. Tiresias predicts that the lad's sacrifice will "make Adrastus' and the Argives' return bitter, by throwing a black *kêr* on (his) eyes" (949-50); but Menoeceus himself sees his death in a brighter light as he prays to "Zeus among the stars" (1006). But darkness descends over his act as it is recounted to Jocasta by the messenger: "he drove

¹¹ Paley, *ad. loc.*, gives the line-up of earlier views. Pearson condemns the lines for the reason (for which how many hundreds of undoubtedly genuine lines in Greek tragedy would also have to be condemned?) that they contain certain echoes elsewhere in the play; "moreover the words *πάτρας* . . . *πολιται* are out of place: they cannot be addressed to the chorus and no one else appears to be present." This argument would likewise condemn the chorus' outburst at 1425-26, for Oedipus is not at that moment present either; Creon addresses Jocasta at 1352 although she is already dead. "There is no one to whom these words can be addressed," says Powell; how was the blind Oedipus to know that? To refuse the (spiritual) presence of Thebes' citizens indicates gross insensitivity. Christ-Schmid-Stählin (586-87) accept all Oedipus' lines as well as the choral exodos; I should excise no more than 1759.

¹² Cf. also 764, 802, 834-35 (this rather odd phrase, "blind foot," is echoed at 1539-41, 1549 and 1616, with a variation, "blind hand," at 1699. This verbal parallel between Tiresias and Oedipus is reinforced by a change in the tradition noticed by the scholiast: in the *Antigone* T.'s son led him on, but here his daughter, whose name is given as Manto, does so. The parallel is intentional: as Manto leads T. off, so must Antigone accompany O. into exile at the end; which counts against the view put forward by Kitto in *CR* 53 (1939) 104-14, that in the authentic Euripidean play Antigone did not accompany her father., 870-71, 1088, 1115, 1333, 1373, 1384-87, perhaps 1565 (*phaneron*).

¹³ See 1084 and 1547-48; "to see the light" is, of course, common poetic elevation for "to live," but when the poet goes out of his way to have Jocasta utter as her last words to Antigone as both rush off to the battlefield, "If I get there before my sons cross spears, my life is in light" (1280-81), we may legitimately suggest that the thematic importance of the image is intentional. So, too, the pathos of Oedipus' question to Antigone about his wife and sons, "With what evil fate did they leave the light?" (1553-54).

a black-bound sword through his throat" (1091-92), and we are reminded that the dragon's tomb, over which he slew himself, was *melambathê* (1010).¹⁴

III. THE BEASTS WHICH THREATEN THEBES

Animals figure prominently in the play. Thus we hear in the first stasimon of the heifer which, by throwing itself down in a certain spot, directed Cadmus to the place where he was to found Thebes (639-44). A later half-member of the same species, the cow-woman Io, ancestress of both Phoenicians and Thebans, is the object of prayers by the chorus at the end of this ode (676 ff.) and is mentioned briefly both in the next ode (828-29) and in the preceding, the parodos (248). But the animals whose recurrence serves a structural purpose are those which represent some danger to Thebes, for, on close examination, it appears that the poet is manipulating them as an image-*pattern*, and so investing them with a significance which mere isolated references would not possess. For convenience, these can be considered under two heads, the literal and the metaphorical.

The most prominent of the animals which constitute a danger to Thebes is, of course, the sphinx, a *datum* of the myth, but used by the poet to good effect. The sphinx-story is recounted by Jocasta in the prologue with prosaic directness: "And when the sphinx was pressing the city hard and my husband no longer lived, Creon my brother made proclamation of nuptials for me: to join me in marriage to whoever should solve the wise maiden's riddle. But somehow my son Oedipus chanced to comprehend the songs of the sphinx" (45-50). Not until the second stasimon does the sphinx raise her girlish head again. In the antistrophe of that ode the chorus utters a vain wish: "O Cithaeron's grove frequented by wild beasts (*πολυθηρότατον*), would that you had never nursed Oedipus . . . would that the winged maiden, mountain beast, the sphinx, had not come as a grief to the land . . . she who approached the walls with four-footed claws and snatched the Cadmeian offspring to the untrodden light of air" (801-9).

¹⁴ See also 856, 872, 939, 1214, 1242, 1246, 1305, 1308, reinforced by 1311, 1372 (some irony in Eteocles' prayer to "Pallas of the Golden Shield"?), 1377, 1484, 1746 (the "burial motif": if by a phil-Sophoclean, one careful to tie his interpolation in with a major theme). Minor references: 1099, 1175, 1255-57, 1339, 1540-41, 1597.

The sphinx has almost the whole of the next song, the third stasimon, to herself. The entire strophe is devoted to a recounting of the gruesome ravages of the sphinx, itself the offspring of Echidna the viper, and the resulting lamentations by the mothers and wives of the men who have been snatched away: their groans were as thunder whenever the winged maiden made one of the men disappear from the city (1039–42). The antistrophe is taken up with the coming of Oedipus, his victory over the sphinx, and his fatal marriage. Then, when the song is almost ended, the chorus devotes a mere five-and-one-half lines to a comment on the thrilling action which has immediately preceded: Menoeceus' heroic resolve to die for Thebes (1054–59). The scholiast on 1019 feels he must complain: “πρὸς οὐδὲν ταῦτα. The chorus should have lamented the death of Menoeceus . . . instead it goes through the business about Oedipus and the sphinx, τὰ πολλάκις εἰρημένα,” and thereby misses entirely the function of the chorus in this play. It is not a mere commentator on the action, but rather it almost stands aloof from the rapidly changing scenes and insists on reminding the audience of this central figure in the past history of Thebes.

Why this repeated emphasis on the “winged maiden” from Thebes' mythical past? The effect is surely sharply—and intentionally—ironical: for the sphinx represents both the triumph and the shame of Oedipus, at once proof of his *synesia* and the cause of his ill-starred marriage to Jocasta: αἰνιγμάτων συνάπτει (note Jocasta's ξυνάψειν λέκτρα, 49), μιαίνει δὲ πτόλιν, the chorus laments (1049–50). This seems to be the purport of Antigone's curt comment to her father at 1732, “You refer to the reproach of the sphinx,” and Creon, on being informed of Jocasta's death, cries οἶον τέρμον', Ἰοκάστη, βίου γάμων τε τῶν σῶν Σφιγγὸς αἰνιγμοὺς ἔτλης (1352–53), a difficult phrase which seems to mean that Oedipus' solution of the sphinx's riddle was the first step to the ultimate disaster of her death. In emphasizing the ambivalence of Oedipus' victory over the sphinx, the poet distills all the irony of his dramatic situation: the last stages of the royal house's disintegration played out against a backdrop of the vanished glories of its rulers. The theme is made to serve one last time to deepen the pathos of Oedipus' final ruin. As the blind old man and his daughter are about to depart into exile he addresses his former subjects, the citizens of Thebes:

Behold, this is Oedipus,
 Who understood the famous riddles and was a great man,
 Who alone restrained the blood-stained sphinx's might.
 (1758–60)

The sphinx constitutes a major image-chain; minor, but no less useful, poetic material is provided by the dragon whom Cadmus slew, and from whose sown teeth sprang the *spartoi*, Thebes' founding fathers. The chorus makes passing reference to the "very holy caves of the dragon" in the *parados* (232), but the whole story is told in detail in the *antistrophe* of the first *stasimon*: "There was the murderous dragon, savage-hearted guardian of Ares, overseeing the watery streams and verdant rivers with the wide-ranging pupils of his eyes" (657–61).¹⁵ We are told how Cadmus slew it and planted its teeth (whatever the true solution of the textual garble of 665–70) on the advice of Athena, "whence the Earth sent forth a sight all in arms . . ." In the *epode* of the second *stasimon* the chorus returns to the story: "You bore, O Earth, you bore long ago . . . the tooth-sown offspring of the bestial, crimson-crested dragon, for Thebes a *κάλλιστον ὄνειδος* (818–21),¹⁶ and again at the end of the third *stasimon*, where the women pray to Pallas, "who accomplished the dragon's death with slung stone, inciting Cadmus' thoughts to the deed, whence some *até* of the gods attacked this land with ravagings" (1062–66).

But if the power of the sphinx is buried in Thebes' past history—leaving only ironical traces of his vanished glories in Oedipus' memory—the dragon slain by Cadmus not only provides a kind of mythical refrain for the chorus to sing in its first three odes, but turns out to influence the very events of the drama. The dragon was Ares' offspring (657–58, with Paley's note) and it is in recompense for the slaying of the dragon that Ares is demanding the sacrifice of a male in direct line of descent from the *spartoi* (931 ff.). As Tiresias makes clear, Creon's son Menoeceus

¹⁵ The elaborate *δεργμάτων κόραισι πολυπλάνοισι* suggests a deliberate echo of the sight-theme.

¹⁶ The oxymoron seems pointless, and the scholiast's explanation, *ὄνειδος, ὡς ἐξ ὀδόντων δράκοντος γεννηθέντες, κάλλιστον δὲ ὡς αὐτόχθονες καὶ ἀνδρείοι* explains nothing. Could it be that the poet is here anticipating the *oneidos* which the sphinx brought on Oedipus, and so on Thebes? It was in return for the slaying of the dragon that the sphinx was sent to ravage Thebes, according to one version of the story (see lines 1063–66).

is the only one to satisfy the conditions. The lad does not shirk from performing what he believes to be his duty, and he cuts his throat over the "black-deep tomb of the dragon" (1010-11).

Thus, on the literal or actual level, two hostile beasts which played an important part in Thebes' past, have a continuing impact on the events of the drama, and provide material for poetic continuity. A closely related but much more original pattern is worked out on the metaphorical plane, where the notion of a beast whose menaces threaten the city is transmuted and applied to several participants in the action: Polynices and Eteocles are themselves conceived of as wild beasts whose struggle for the throne endangers the city's existence, and even Oedipus' captivity within the palace is like that of some caged animal. The theme is introduced almost casually, but reaches a crescendo in the duel of the brothers. As soon as Polynices appears he voices fears that "they may seize me in their nets and not release me without spilling blood" (263-64). A quite ordinary figure takes on new power when Jocasta asks her son about his life in exile: "exiles feed on hopes, so the saying goes" (396), and Polynices retorts grimly, "my family background didn't feed me" (405).¹⁷ In this context the oracle to Adrastus assumes a deeper tone: the king of Argos was directed to "fasten the marriages of his children to a lion and a boar" (411), and when Jocasta asks why Adrastus likened him and Tydeus to beasts, Polynices replies, "because we came to blows for a lair" (421), a bitter presage of the later behavior of the brothers.

It may not be far-fetched to detect some minor echoes of the theme in the middle sections of the play. When Creon appears to discuss plans of defense with Eteocles, he comments, "I went around the Cadmeian gates and sentries hunting for (θηρώμενος) your person" (698-99). In the next scene Tiresias announces that Oedipus' sons, by withholding honors and not allowing him egress from the palace, have "made him wild" (ἐξήγγρῳσαν, 876). And the animal-image is used to heighten the contrast between the patriotic self-immolation of Menoeceus and the brothers' selfish bickering over the throne, even at the risk of the city's

¹⁷ Rose, *Comm. Surviving Plays of Aeschylus* (Amsterdam 1957), at *Septem* 244, βόσκειται, notes, "Groeneboom points out that this vb. is used properly of beasts, and so has a somewhat contemptuous tone when used of higher beings."

destruction. The example Menoeceus sets is emphasized by Tiresias' description of him as a colt (*pôlos*) to be consecrated to the city and slain on its behalf (947), and to this metaphorical account of the lad's patriotic gesture, the figure on Polynices' shield marks a sharp antithesis: on it, we are told, "wild running Potnian mares were leaping about."¹⁸

The metaphorical conception of the brothers as wild animals reaches its highest pitch when their single combat and mutual slaughter assume the center of the audience's interest; the savagery of their act is reinforced by a whole series of beast images. In the fourth stasimon, a more conventional commentary on the action than any of the preceding odes, the chorus bemoans the coming duel and refers to the brothers significantly as "twin wild beasts" (*didymoi thêres*, 1296). The figure is expanded by the messenger: "they fastened together after whetting their wild jaws like boars, foam running down their chins,"¹⁹ and echoed by Antigone when she tells how Jocasta found her sons at the gates, "like lions fighting in their lair" (1573-74). Finally, in the suspected last scene, Antigone extends the image when she asks Creon to be allowed to bandage Polynices' "savage wounds" (*traumat' agria*, 1669). And it is poetically appropriate that the curse of Oedipus, himself exposed by his father to be "wretched fodder

¹⁸ 1124-25. Animals play a part in the devices of two other warriors. At 1108 Parthenopaeus' shield shows his mother Atalanta subduing the Aetolian boar (see also 134, where the scholiast thus interprets Tydeus' device, "Ἀρη Ἀτρωλόν; apparently mistakenly). Adrastus' shield, we are told (1134 ff.) was "full of a hundred vipers," who were "snatching off children of the Cadmeians in their jaws" (1138); an obvious analogue to the sphinx and her depopulating. How exactly the poet meant to clothe Tydeus is not clear from the textual garble of 1120-23; as it stands he "has a lion's skin on his shield," which seems pointless. Pearson is probably right to say a reference to Tydeus' dress was intended, and that his blazon consisted of the torch-bearing Prometheus, but the textual juggling he suggests seems unlikely; I suggest a lacuna of one or more lines after ἔχων in 1120, with ἐπ' ἀσπίδι the end of a description of the picture on the left side of his shield (a hydra or other appropriate beast), thus giving point to the contrast δεξιῇ δὲ of 1121.

It is just worth noting a possible foreshadowing of Polynices' *pôloi* in Jocasta's prologue: when Oedipus ran afoul of Laius' retinue on his way to Delphi, it was the latter's *pôloi* which "bloodied the tendons of his feet with their hooves" (41-42); or is the poet playing tricks with *Oidi-pous*?

¹⁹ 1380-81. There is more to the description if Pearson is right in following Valckenaer and Hermann, who introduced an extra line from Gregory of Nazianzus, λοξὸν βλέποντες ἐμπύρουν ὄμμασιν. The simile is borrowed from *Il.* 13.471 ff. and lent to Statius' *Thebaid* 11.530 ff., and the parallels strongly suggest, as Pearson maintains, that Gregory's line is authentic. If so, we will have yet another echo of the sight-theme.

for beasts" (1602-3) should find its issue in his son's exposure as "fodder for birds,"²⁰ "given to the dogs" (1650).

iv. *Oidipous Kallinikos*

The central text for this theme is the antistrophe of the third stasimon, where the chorus speaks of Oedipus as *καλλίνικος αἰνιγμάτων* (1048-49); Oedipus' solution of the sphinx's riddle makes him the poetic equivalent of a victor in the athletic games, returning to his city to be regaled with songs of triumph. The image is ironically changed almost at once: "The pitiful man sent his sons down to the foul contest with curses" (1052-54); Oedipus, in cursing his sons, acts in pathetic contrast to the proud father—perhaps a *kallinikos* himself—who sends his son off to the games with prayers for success,²¹ in the hopes that he may be welcomed on his return with songs of victory. The chorus continues the figure in the same strophe when it comes to remark on Menoeceus' self-sacrifice (in which there is yet another subtle shift in the image, for Oedipus sent his sons off with curses, while Creon sought to prevent Menoeceus' going): "we admire the boy who has gone to death for his fatherland, leaving groans for Creon, but intending to make the seven gates of the land *kallinika*" (1054-59).

Against this patriotic heroism stands the selfish ambition of the sons of Oedipus, and the contrast is emphasized by this same theme. We remember that Eteocles left for battle protesting, apparently without shame, that he was setting off *ξὺν δίκη νικηφόρῳ* (781). After the first part of the messenger's account of events in the field, the chorus comments cryptically, *καλὸν τὸ νικᾶν* (1200). The messenger proceeds to describe the preparations of the two chieftains. Eteocles' men encourage him: "Now fight for the city, now you shall hold royal power by becoming *kallinikos*" (1252-53). In the next episode the chorus tells Creon that the sons of Oedipus are "engaging in a mortal contest," and when, immediately after, the messenger appears, Creon asks about the

²⁰ 1634; universally condemned by editors, but perhaps no more than a "remembrance" by Euripides of *Antigone* 29. A literary reminiscence seems likelier in a contemporary poet than in a scribe centuries later.

²¹ The figure is well commented on by Pearson, who gives as the equivalent of the Greek phrase (*καταβαλὼν εἰς ἀγῶνα*) "demittere ad certamen"; he notes that "*καθιέναι εἰς ἀγῶνα* is the usual phrase."

"contest provoked by the curse of Oedipus"—a clear echo of Oedipus' "sending his sons down to the contest with curses."²²

The image reappears forcefully in the prayers of the brothers before their duel: Polynices prays to Hera that he may "imbrue my hostile hand with the blood of victory,"²³ while Eteocles asks Pallas of the Golden Shield that his *enchos kallinikon* pierce his brother's breast (1374–76). We are possibly meant to see a continuation of the theme in the *Thessalon sophisma* used by Eteocles (1407–8), on which Paley comments that "the 'dodge' was one borrowed from wrestling." The dying Polynices, with still a little breath in him, deals his brother the final blow, "keeping his sword ready," as the messenger relates, "in his grievous fall";²⁴ and we are surely intended by the poet to recall that one of the sights of Thebes which the young man remembered fondly on his entrance into the city was the "*gymnasia* in which I was reared" (368). The messenger closes his account by remarking that "some of the *agōnes* have turned out most fortunate, some most unfortunate for the city" (1478–79).

The sons, then, have prayed to be *kallinikoi*, but have not obtained their wish. Menoeceus alone, by his self-immolation, was truly "bringer of fair victory" to the city.²⁵ Polynices and Eteocles, whose ambitious struggle for power is described ironically in the imagery of an athletic contest, have destroyed themselves and brought about the suicide of their mother. Oedipus, once disastrously *kallinikos* in his contest with the sphinx, is left on stage at the end a poor broken creature, surrounded by the spoiled fruits of his "victory." The pathos is almost unbearable as the blind old man, whom his wife had described in the pro-

²² 1330 and 1355. The words used, *ἀγῶνα* and *ἀγώνισμα* have both an athletic and a military flavor, but I suggest that the basic athletic image would be present to the spectators because of the vigor and persistence of the *kallinikos*-theme. See 259, where the chorus calls the *agōn* to which Polynices has come "not unjust." Perhaps a faint echo at 1095, *ἐφέδρους*?

²³ 1367–38; Pearson's rendering of the difficult *καθαματωσαι δεξιὰν νικηφόρον*. If Pearson (followed by Powell) is right to retain 1369 (against Paley and Murray) the image is continued: "Thus asking" (Canter's emendation *αἰτῶν* for the first person singular), the messenger says, "a shameful crown, to kill a brother."

²⁴ 1420; there seems to be an undertone of this metaphor, a "fall" in wrestling, at 1482, 1697 and 1701, where the immediate reference is to the "fallen" corpses. For the metaphor, see esp. Aesch. *PV* 919, Eur. *El.* 686, *Tro.* 467 and perhaps *HF* 1228.

²⁵ Just as, in another context, was Tiresias. At 855 he says that in the course of his recent services for the Athenians he made the Cecropidae *kallinikous*, and Creon describes his *stephē* as *kallinika* (858).

logue as having taken the sceptre of the land *as a prize*,²⁶ alludes in anguish to his lost glories in a pitiful echo of the theme: "Behold, I am the man who trod the fair-victorious heights of heaven (*kallinikon ouranion*), by solving the unintelligible riddle of the maiden..." (1728-31).

V. THE JOYLESS DANCE

The play's most original and most skilfully elaborated theme is the central paradox that Antigone must forsake her natural position as a young votary of Dionysus to take her stand by her father at the end as the last survivor of the ill-fated family. This paradox seems to suggest itself to the poet by the contrast between the occasion and the subject of the drama: a joyful festival of Dionysus is witnessing the final extinction of hope for Oedipus and his family. As a direct development from Antigone's paradoxical position, the similarities between the orderly motion of a chorus and the actions of a besieging army are developed by the poet at some length.

Once again, the theme explains the architecture of an entire ode. The second stasimon (784-833) has received rough handling from its critics. Hermann called it, with greater acerbity than usual, "tumidissimum inani verborum strepitu carmen";²⁷ Powell dismisses it curtly as "this turgid ode."²⁸ The song's central paradox is that the dance of war is a joyless one. Ares, to whom the chorus addresses the strophe, is said to be "out of harmony (an insufficient translation of *paramousos*) with the feasts of Bromius" (785). "You do not," the women lament, "spread your hair in the lovely garlanded choruses of youth and sing a song to the breaths of the pipe, where the graces call to the dance, but have inspired the Argive host with its warriors against the blood of the Thebans." And, returning to the oxymoron: "you lead a revel dance unsuited to the pipe," *κῶμον ἀναυλότατον προχορεύεις*,²⁹ which the scholiast on 786-90 paraphrases as *χορεύεις*

²⁶ 52, *ἐπαθλα*, which the scholiast glosses as *νικητήρια*.

²⁷ *Praef.* page xx, cited by Paley on line 784.

²⁸ *Commentary*, lines 792 ff.

²⁹ 791; *προχορεύεις* is, as Paley comments, "a term borrowed from the dithyramb." Lloyd-Jones (*CQ* 3, n.s., [1953] 96) notes this line in his interpretation of *Agam.* 151, *thusian* . . . *anomon* as derived from *νόμος*, "tune." To the other parallels he cites (*Aesch. Eum.* 332, *Supp.* 635, 681; *Soph. OC* 123; *Eur. Alc.* 447, *Hel.* 185) add the passages discussed above from *Phoen.* (785, 807, 1028) as well as *Aesch. Cho.* 467

χορείαν ὑβριστικὴν, κακομουσοτάτην. The following lines, 792 ff., are hopelessly corrupt, but it seems clear that the paradox continues: there is a whirl (*δινεύεις codd.*, *δίνῃ Hermann*) not of fawnskins and thyrsus-maddened revelers, but of horses and chariots; and at 796, *ἀσπιδοφέρμονα θείασον* is, as Pearson remarks, "an oxymoron of the same character as *κῶμον ἀναυλότατον*." The antistrophe foreshadows the sphinx-story, but even here the poet rings a change on the main theme of this ode when he describes the sphinx as coming "with most unmusical songs" (*ἀμουσοτάταισι σὺν ᾠδαῖς*, 807); by a slight variation, the joyless dance of war has become the unmelodious, because deadly, riddle of the sphinx. In the epode, mention of Amphion's phorminx and lyre, with which Thebes' walls were built, is more significant as part of this pattern, which is touched on yet again in the last words of the ode, if Pearson's interpretation of *Ἀρητοῖς στεφάνοισιν* (832) is correct: they are "the iron circle of the besieger's force, which are grimly contrasted with the *καλλίχοροι στέφανοι* of v. 786."

The theme receives its most detailed exposition in this, the second, stasimon, but it finds a place in both of the preceding choral songs. In the parodos, the chorus briefly addresses Parnassus, the blazing rock, "above the Bacchic heights of Dionysus" (227–28), and prays to become a "fearless whirling chorus of the immortal goddess" (235–36), while in the first stasimon, after the birth of Dionysus and his overshadowing by the sacred ivy have been recounted, he is called "partner in the Bacchic dance of Theban maidens" and joyful women.³⁰ In the tense scene which comes between these two odes, the theme is given a further variation: Jocasta adopts precisely this figure of the dance to express her joy at seeing her long-exiled son. "How am I to take my fill of the pleasure of former joys, by dancing all about in whirling delight?" (314–17). She must here be supposed to go through some choral steps with appropriate gestures as she sings; this effect, enforced by the accumulation

Agam. 801; *Eur. Alc.* 760, *IT* 146, *Cycl.* 124 and *Fr.* 907. The closest verbal parallels to the oxymoron in *Phoen.* are *Eum.* 332 and 345, *hymnos* . . . *aphormiktos*, and *Cycl.* 425–26, *aidei* . . . *amous*'; the image is applied to war at *Aesch. Supp.* 635, *ton achoron boan* . . . *Aré*. The "unmusical song" is a recurrent motif in *Agamemnon*; cf. 709 ff., 990 ff., 1142, 1176, 1186 f., 1473 f.

³⁰ Pearson's rendering of *Bakchion choreuma* (655); see his note on the abstract term used concretely.

of synonyms for "joy" (ἄδονᾶν, τέρψιν, χαρμονᾶν) must have been intended by the poet as a macabre foreshadowing of the frustration of all Jocasta's hopes in the later course of the play. To give her song circular structure, she closes her monody with another striking variation on the theme: "some daemon has feasted-to-death the house of Oedipus."³¹ Although the theme is allowed to lie fallow in the scenes which precede and follow its full flowering in the second stasimon³² (perhaps because the stage is held by male characters), the chorus picks it up again briefly in the third, the sphinx-ode, where the beast is described, in a phrase which echoes her "unmusical songs" of the previous ode, as "bringing murderous woes to the country with a lyreless song" (*alyron amphi mousan*, 1028).

The image is now ripe for its last and cruelest efflorescence. Jocasta has just heard of her sons' intent to fight to the death, and she calls to Antigone to come from the palace and accompany her to the battlefield. "Heaven advances you to your place not among choruses and maiden-tasks, but you must prevent your brothers from falling to their deaths."³³ And when Antigone appears with the corpses and begins her great threnody, she represents the very embodiment of the paradox: she is a βάκχα νεκύων, a "Bacchante of Death," hurling the headdress from her hair and letting loose her luxurious saffron robes (1489-91). She continues the grim juxtaposition: "What lament with tears upon tears, in tune with and accompanying my song, shall I summon to me?", where the incompatibility of μουσopόλον στοναχᾶν is almost offensive.³⁴ A sad contrast to Jocasta's premature dance of joy are these corpses, χάρματ' Ἐρινύος (1503), and before leaving the theme, Antigone touches again on its variation, the lamentable sphinx-song: "the Erinys destroyed the

³¹ 352-53; the full force of κατεκώμασε (352) defies translation: "held destructive revel" is Pearson's attempt, "revelled against the house of Oedipus," Paley's. It is clearly part of the same paradox, a celebration not of joy but destruction.

³² Unless we are to see a faint echo in the image of the Argive army encircling Thebes, as, e.g., at 711. ειλίσσων is the word used by the chorus at 234-35.

³³ 1265-66; Pearson remarks on the awkward wording of προχωρεῖ . . . κατάστασις. The latter is the *vox propria* for establishment of a chorus, see *Agam.* 23 and Aristoph. *Thesm.* 958.

³⁴ 1498-99; τίνα προσωδὸν ἢ τίνα μουσopόλον στοναχᾶν, a bold phrase whose effect it is difficult to render. In a learned note, Paley underlines the paradoxical force which the audience would have felt: "the Greeks seem to have regarded poetry, μούσα, as alien from grief and accordant only with joy." προσωδὸν in 1498 seems to suggest δρῆς . . . συνωδός of 1515-18, with its echo of the animal theme.

whole house of Oedipus when he, in his cleverness, understood the unintelligible song of the savage sphinx-singer. . . ”³⁵

It is in the context of this theme that we must place lines 1754–57, which have come under heavy critical fire.³⁶ Oedipus is trying to dissuade Antigone from accompanying him into exile. “Show yourself to your companions,” he exhorts her, “go to the altars for prayer.” When she rejects these suggestions, he offers a third: “go then, where Bromius is and the untrodden shrine of the mountain-maenads.” At the mention of Bromius she interrupts and asks, “the one for whom I once put on a Cadmeian fawnskin and danced in the sacred thiasos of Semele, rendering a joyless service to the gods?” It is the last heart-rending glimmer of a lost youth; Antigone remembers with pain the vanished joys of the dance in which she can no longer take part, for her dance must now be one long dance of death; and she is led, by the stark contrast between those lost carefree days and the sorrowful duty of leading her father into exile, to remark on the fruitlessness of her service to the Joyful God. Her comment is an appropriate summation of this paradoxical theme, and of the whole play: truly it was a *χάριν ἀχάριτον*.

VI. CONCLUSION

Hermann described the chorus of this play as “denique raro recte fungentem officio suo, aliquando etiam frigidissime aliquid interloquentem, multa autem inani verborum tumore aliena cantantem . . .” It appears that he totally misconceived its “office,” for the poet clearly intended it to serve not as a mere commentator on the action but as a unifying force to save the play from disintegrating into a progression of isolated, if impressive, scenes.

His intention is clearly to bring before the audience all the

³⁵ 1504–7, reading, with Pearson and the scholiast, *δυσζύνετον ξυνετὸς μέλος* for the jumble of the MSS.

³⁶ Pearson (Intro. xlii) would assign them to the “bungling addition of a stage-copy.” Wilamowitz (cited by Powell, Intro. 22) held that “the work of Euripides ended at line 1736.” Christ-Schmid-Stählin (586, note 5 for German criticism of the final scene) call 1747–57 “inappropriate, for they end with an unanswered question,” and suggest that between 1746 and 1758 there was a settlement of the “burial motif.” Kitto (*CR* 53 [1939] 107) executes some logical contortions: “the incoherence of 1747–1757 is monstrous . . . this passage is so preposterous that its origin is certain. No interpolator could have thought of it; it was therefore written by Euripides—but for a different context.”

characters connected with the house of Labdacus and to have them play out their last agonies in a kaleidoscopic pageant. Their death-throes are the more tragic precisely in contrast to their past history; their ultimate downfall the more pathetic seen against their lingering hopes of success, or at least survival. This, then, is the overriding irony of their situation: their past grandeur and their hopes are all belied in the event. The poet presents this dashing down of hope and intensifies its emotional effect by means of the four themes discussed above. Three of them stem directly from Oedipus' situation or his past. His physical blindness is paralleled—surpassed, rather—by the moral blindness of his sons, who will not see that they have brought their family and their city to the brink of destruction; the sun's rays are forever darkened for them and their mother, while their sister and father go off into gloomy exile. Thebes' romantic past included Cadmus' slaying of the dragon and Oedipus' victory over the sphinx, but for the former glory Menoeceus must now pay with his life, and in place of the sphinx's ravages Thebes' safety is now endangered by the bestial self-destruction of Poly-nices and Eteocles. Moreover, Oedipus' "victory" has turned against him, and here, too, he is outdone by his sons, whose hopes of emerging as *kallinikoi* are even more grimly falsified. The last theme, the "joyless dance," draws its central strength from the fate of the only other surviving member of the house: Antigone recognizes herself to be the personification of her family's ruined hopes, a "Bacchante of Corpses" in a dance of death.

That Euripides should have given these themes to his chorus to sing and sing again is not surprising, for they are the seeds of the play's tragic meaning; taking root in the odes and sending their tendrils out into the multifarious events of the drama, they form a network of images (which themselves undergo various mutations) in which the poet presents his vision of the death of hope, the complete extinguishing of past glory that lie at the heart of his tragedy.