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The Debt to Earth in the *Seven Against Thebes*

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The problems in the interpretation of the *Seven Against Thebes* arise for the most part from two sources. The first is our ignorance of the earlier plays of the trilogy, which presumably contained necessary information presupposed by the last. The second is the dual role of Eteocles as the political figure of the commanding general on the one hand, and as the curse-burdened son of Oedipus on the other. The two themes of the defense of the city and the fulfilment of the curse divide the play so abruptly at line 653 that dramatic unity has long been a problem.¹ It is the purpose of this paper to consider the theme of *gérotrophía* in the *Seven*, showing how it contributes to the understanding of the two problems of the background and the unity of the play, and points the way to an understanding of its larger symbolic dimensions.

The Greek had an obligation, recognized by law and custom, to care for his parents in their old age. Such care was called *gérotrophía*. This was one of that class of obligations which arose out of *anchisteia*, kinship²; and according to the laws of Solon, if a man neglected to provide for his parents, he was disenfranchised.³

¹ The most recent treatment of this problem is Brooks Otis, "The Unity of the *Seven Against Thebes*", *GRBS* 3 (1960) 153-74.

² Isaeus, *De Cleon. Her.* 1.39.

³ Diog. Laert. *Sol.* 1.55.

The theory was that, by virtue of the education and nurture which the parents have given and the sacrifices they have made to that end, the child has incurred a debt to them which must be repaid in turn by his caring for them when they are old. A law which provided that a man was released from the obligation of *gêrotrophia* if his father had failed to teach him a trade illustrates this theory.⁴ It is clear from the language which the poets use when speaking of *gêrotrophia* that it is understood as the payment of a debt. According to Hesiod one mark of the decay of the Iron Age leading to Zeus' wrathful destruction of that generation is the fact that children fail to pay their filial debt to parents (*Op.* 187–88):

οὐδέ κεν οἶγε
γηράντεσσι τοκεῦσιν ἀπὸ θρεπτήρια δοῖεν.

The verb *apodidonai* is used in such expressions and its object is either the epic forms *threptêria* and *threptra* or the classical *tropheia*, "cost of nurture." One reason it was thought pathetic that a young man should die before his parents is that he was then unable to repay them for his upbringing. The idea occurs in a Homeric formula used for the death of young men (*Il.* 4.477–78 = 17.301–2):

οὐδέ τοκεῦσι
θρέπτρα φίλοις ἀπέδωκε . . .

Gêrotrophia then, the obligatory care of parents in their old age, is understood as a repayment of the debt owed to them for the expense of bringing up the child. If we keep this matter of Greek law and custom in mind, much in the *Seven* becomes clear. First, this is the reason Oedipus cursed his sons.

There are four traditions which give reasons why Oedipus cursed Eteocles and Polynices. According to one fragment of the *Thebais*⁵ Polynices served wine to Oedipus in a cup which had belonged to Laius and which Oedipus had forbidden to be used. On this account he cursed both his sons. According to another fragment of the *Thebais*⁶ Eteocles and Polynices customarily sent their father the shoulder joint of the sacrifice; and when, for one reason or another, they sent him a thigh piece instead, he cursed them. Apollodorus⁷ says the reason for the curse was that the

⁴ Plut. *Sol.* 22.

⁵ Frg. II Allen *apud* Athen. 465E.

⁶ Frg. III Allen *apud* Schol. Laur. in Soph. *OC* 1375.

⁷ Apoll. 3.5.9.

two sons gave Oedipus no help when he was being banished from Thebes. The fourth tradition, which may indeed reflect the same tradition which Apollodorus reports, is to be found in the *Oedipus Coloneus* of Sophocles, where we were repeatedly told that the source of Oedipus' bitterness against his sons is their neglect of him in his old age. The words *trophos*, *tropheia*, *trophê* and *threptêria* occur repeatedly in these passages.⁸ Polynices in making his excuses specifically confesses his neglect (Soph. OC 1265–66):

καὶ μαρτυρῶ κάκιστος ἀνθρώπων τροφαῖς
ταῖς σαῖσιν ἤκειν.

It seems clear that the two brothers have failed in their obligation of *gêrotrophia* and for this reason have incurred their father's curse.

Now we may ask which of these versions Aeschylus used in the *Seven* or whether that play presupposes an entirely different account. Presumably the matter was made abundantly clear in the second play of the trilogy now lost. We must rely upon a single explicit reference in the *Seven*, and that in a passage which presents considerable textual difficulty. I will use Tucker's text which is close to the MSS. and perhaps least arbitrary.

τέκνοισιν δ' ἀραιᾶς
ἐφῆκεν ἐπικότους τροφᾶς,
αἰαὶ πικρογλώσσους ἀράς.

codd: τέκνοις δ' ἀραίας

And on his children he launched curses of wrath at their stint of his maintenance, curses alas! bitter of tongue. (Tucker's trans.)

Tucker says (*ad loc.*) "The reading (ἀραιᾶς or ἀραίας) depends upon the legend as accepted by Aeschylus. If the father had 'tabooed' certain food, and yet this was offered to him, ἀραίας would be necessary. If he was angry at the stinted manner in which he was supported (*egêrotropheito*) . . . we must read ἀραιᾶς (*tenuis*)."⁹ Other editors have taken more extreme measures to bring these lines into accord with one or the other of the two traditions of the *Thebais*. Robert⁹ has suggested *archaias tryphas*, "because of old-fashioned luxuries," seeing a reference to the

⁸ Soph. OC 337 ff; 1262; 1265; 1363; cf. Jebb's note on 1377. The case of Eur. *Phoen.* 874 ff. is not as clear but very likely refers to the same tradition.

⁹ Robert, *Oedipus* I, page 264.

story of the cup; and Wilamowitz reads *archaias trophas*, linking the lines with the story of the shoulder piece. It is impossible to be certain what *araias* means, and whatever its meaning there is probably a play on *aras*. There can be little argument about *trophas* (although some MSS. have an accusative plural), and it would seem least strained to relate these lines to the tradition used by the other tragedians, namely the neglect of *gêrotrophia*. In the following pages I hope to show that there are strong poetic reasons for preferring it to the other versions.¹⁰

There is an interesting rhetorical development of the concept of *gêrotrophia* in which a warrior who dies in defense of his country is said to have paid back to it the cost of his upbringing. Lysias in the funeral oration for the supporters of the Corinthians praised the Athenian citizens who by their bravery prevented war from touching Attica (2.70):

ἐτελεύτησαν δὲ τὸν βίον ὥσπερ χρὴ τοὺς ἀγαθοὺς ἀποθνήσκειν, τῇ μὲν πατρίδι τὰ τροφεῖα ἀποδόντες.

Likewise Isocrates says (*Arch.* 6.108):

παρακαλέσαντες οὖν ἀλλήλους ἀποδῶμεν τὰ τροφεῖα τῇ πατρίδι.

The land is a parent who has reared and cared for its citizens, and they in turn owe the fatherland the cost of their upbringing, a debt which they pay by dying in its defense. This developed rhetorical metaphor occurs in the *Seven Against Thebes*.

Parthenopaeus is a young metic at Argos who joins the expedition against Thebes, and by so doing pays back his debt to his adopted homeland (547-48):

ὁ δὲ τοιόσδ' ἀνὴρ
μέτοικος, "Αργεῖ δ' ἐκτίνων καλὰς τροφάς.

Likewise one of the Theban defenders, Megareus, says he will triumph over the boastful enemy or die in the attempt. Either he will adorn his father's house with spoils taken in battle or he will pay back to the earth in full the cost of his upbringing by giving his life in its defense (477):

θανὼν τροφεῖα πληρώσει χθονί.

In the light of the foregoing it is possible to discover less obvious occurrences of this theme in the text of the play. In the prologue

¹⁰ For the textual details see R. D. Dawe, *The Collation and Investigation of Manuscripts of Aeschylus* (Cambridge 1964), and Tucker, Groeneboom and Rose *ad loc.*

Eteocles reminds the Theban citizens of their obligation to defend their children, the altars of their gods and Mother Earth (16–20):

Γῇ τε μητρί, φιλάτῃ τροφῷ
 ἣ γὰρ νέους ἔρποντας εὐμενεί πέδῳ
 ἅπαντα πανδοκοῦσα παιδείας ὄτλον,
 ἐθρέψατ' οἰκητῆρας ἀσπιδηφόρους
 πιστοὺς ὅπως γένοισθε πρὸς χρέος τόδε.

Mother Earth your dearest nurse. For it was she who undertook the whole cost of your upbringing and reared you as in your childhood you crept upon her kindly soil to found homes, bear arms and to be faithful to this debt.

There are two problems of interpretation in this passage, *viz.* *pistous* and *chreos*. *Pistous* modifies *aspidēphorous*, and yet its position links it closely with *pros chreos tode*. Groeneboom says (*ad. loc.*) “het proleptisch praedicaat wordt door *hopōs genoisthe* verklaard, zoodat men kan paraphraseeren *hopōs genoisthe oikētēres aspidēphoroi pistoi pros chreos tode* . . . het door de plaatsing geaccen-tueerde *pistous* wordt eng verbonden met *pros chreos tode*.” In *chreos* there is a double meaning, both “hour of need” and “debt.” The two meanings of the passage are “to be faithful spearmen for this hour of need”¹¹ and also “to be spearmen faithful to this debt”.¹² (I take the *tode* in this case to refer to the idea in *otlon* above.) The predominance of the theme of *gērotrophia* in this play supports this double meaning and helps to explain the peculiar position of *pistous*. The point is that by defending their country in this hour of need the warriors are faithful to the debt owed Mother Earth for the expense of rearing them.¹³

This theme, the debt to Earth as the mother of the Thebans, rests upon a mythical basis which Aeschylus uses throughout the play as a background pattern for the events he is relating. Such thematic anticipation of a pattern is found in the *Agamemnon*, for example. Aeschylus employs the story of Menelaus' vengeance

¹¹ So Smyth and Verral, for example.

¹² Cf. Aristotle *Pol.* 1283A, 33.

¹³ See Tucker *ad loc.* He regards *pistous* as having the double meaning “loyal soldiers” and “debtors who are ‘trusted’ to pay their score.” He takes *genoisthe pros* to mean “become adequate to meet.” He says the metaphor has to do with innkeeping and the *chreos* is the lodger's bill. This is consonant with the development later in the play where Hades, who receives all (*pandokon*), is an innkeeper. It seem to me that all three ideas must be preserved: crisis, lodger's reckoning, and debt to parents.

upon Paris and Troy for the loss of Helen as a pattern for Clytaemnestra's vengeance upon Agamemnon for the loss of Iphigenia. In a similar way Euripides in the *Bacchae* uses the myth of Actaeon, who was torn apart by his dogs, as the pattern for the disaster of Pentheus. The pattern for the *Seven Against Thebes* is the story of the Sparti. When Cadmus at the direction of the oracle arrived at the site where he was to found the city, he sent his men to a nearby spring to fetch water for the sacrifice. The spring was guarded by a great serpent, the offspring of Ares, who killed them when they approached. Cadmus in anger slew the serpent and upon the advice of Athena took the monster's teeth and sowed them in the ground. There sprang up from this seed a body of armed men with golden helmets who set upon each other until all but five were killed. These five became the first citizens of Thebes.¹⁴

Aeschylus repeatedly emphasizes that the defenders of Thebes in our play are descendants of the dragon brood. Megareus and Melanippus are specifically so identified: "Megareus, seed of Creon of the race of Sown Men" (474), "Melanippus is a scion sprung from the Sown Men/whom Ares spared; he is indeed a son of the land" (412-414). Melanippus in a special way is the fruit of the land. Like grain he takes his birth and nourishment from Mother Earth. Like his ancestors he is a warrior whom Earth has produced for the benefit and protection of the city of Thebes. Aeschylus at the very beginning of the play establishes the metaphor of the warriors of Thebes as growing grain when Eteocles addresses them in the prologue (10-14):

And it is necessary for you now both the one who still lacks the full bloom (*akmaias*) of youth and the one who is fully mature growing much strength of body, (*blastêmon aldainonta*), and each one who is at his prime (*hōran t' echonth'*) . . . to defend the city.

These words are charged with the suggestion that the warriors are grain that has reached timely ripeness. The words *akmaios*, *blastêmos*, *hōra* and *aldainō* are all used of grain and fruits.¹⁵

¹⁴ Paus. 9.12.1-2; Apoll. 3.4.1-2.

¹⁵ The adjective *akmaios* means "to be in full bloom"; and although it has no strictly agricultural use in itself, the related expressions *akmên echein* and *akmazô* are both used of grain (Thuc. 4.2; 2.19). *Hōra* is the season of ripeness (Plat. Rep. 475A). Cf. *hōraios* of ripe fruits (Herod. 1.202; cf. *Sept.* 535). *Blastêmos* is a rare word, but its congeners *blastanō* and *blastos* mean respectively "to bud and grow" (*Sept.* 594; Soph. OC 697) and "shoot" or "scion" (Herod. 6.37; 8.55; cf. *Sept.* 533). *Aldainō* is the causative of *aldêskô*, which is used of growing grain (Hom. Il. 23.599; cf. *Sept.* 622).

The story of the men who grew up out of the earth provides a pattern for the story of the house of Oedipus, and Aeschylus applies to Eteocles and Polynices the images used for the Sparti (752-56):

Oedipus the parricide who dared to sow (*speiras*) a bloody root in the holy field of his mother where he was nurtured.¹⁶

Cadmus sowed the teeth of the dragon in the holy field of Mother Earth who had nourished him as she nourishes all men. Oedipus sowed the field of his mother, the womb of Jocasta where he was nurtured. From the sowing of Cadmus there sprang up a band of warriors, brothers from a common mother, who cut each other down in a bloody battle. The story of the Sparti furnishes the pattern of mutual fratricide. The root which Oedipus sowed, Eteocles and Polynices, springs up like Sown Men out of the soil of their mother, and they too cut each other down in bloody battle. The chorus asks Eteocles (718):

ἀλλ' ἀντάδελφον αἶμα δρέψασθαι θέλεις;

Will you *harvest* your own brother's blood?

It is clear that the warriors of Thebes, since they have the earth for their mother, are obliged to defend her against attack and thereby pay back to earth the cost of their nurture according to the demands of *gêrotrophia*. According to Attic law the obligation of *gêrotrophia* rests upon kinship of *anchisteia*, and likewise in the *Seven* the obligation of the warriors rests upon the law of blood relationship. The spy remarks of Melanippus who, being sprung from the Sown Men, is especially a son of the earth (415-16):

The law of kinship (*Dikê homaimôn*) it is which sends him forth to ward off the enemy spear from the mother who bore him.

This matter is reasonably simple and straightforward for all the warriors except Eteocles; for him the demands of *Dikê homaimôn* present a dilemma. It was his neglect in discharging the duties of a son toward his father, duties sanctioned by *Dikê homaimôn*, which first brought on the curse of Oedipus and led to the battle

The comparison of men and plants is not uncommon in Aeschylus (cf. *Supp.* 637 ff; *Pers.* 920 ff.). Euripides uses the metaphor in a striking way referring to the Sparti (*Phoen.* 939; *HF* 4 ff.).

¹⁶ The use of this metaphor for Oedipus seems to have been common. Cf. Soph. *OT* 1256 ff; 1497 ff; *Ant.* 569.

between the brothers. Because Eteocles is a warrior of Thebes he too owes to Earth the cost of his upbringing and will pay that debt by dying in her defense. But also in so doing he commits the ultimate violation of *Dikē homaimôn* in killing his brother. Polynices on the other hand is guilty on all three counts. In addition to his neglect of Oedipus and his killing of Eteocles, although he boasts (645 ff.) ironically that *Dikē* brings him back to Thebes, he violates *Dikē homaimôn* by marching against his homeland.

The theme of *gêrotrophia* is used in the *Seven* in four ways. First, it is the reason for Oedipus' cursing his sons. Secondly, it provides an important metaphor for the defense of the city. Thirdly, the patriotic metaphor that the warrior who dies for his country pays back the cost of his upbringing gains added meaning from the fact that the Thebans, who sprang from the earth quite literally, pay back this debt to their mother. Finally, the story of the Sparti appears as a thematic anticipation of the birth of Eteocles and Polynices, who sprang from the seed Oedipus sowed in the land of his mother and cut each other down in mutual fratricide.

The two themes which this play treats, the civic theme of the defense of the city and the generalship of Eteocles on the one hand, and on the other hand the personal theme of the fulfillment of Oedipus' curse with its tragic consequences for the hero, are unified in the figures of the Sparti and the debt of *gêrotrophia*. The Sparti provide the symbolic basis for the defense of Thebes by her warriors and also give to the play the pattern of mutual fratricide. The neglect of *gêrotrophia* prompted Oedipus to curse his sons, and in the political sense *gêrotrophia* is the patriotic reason for the defense of Thebes which brings Eteocles to his tragic moment.