

The Character of Eteocles in Aeschylus' *Septem*

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Much has been written on the character of Eteocles, but almost all of it has concentrated on his freedom of choice in deciding to meet his brother on the field of battle.¹ The pendulum has now swung over to the side of Necessity: Eteocles, it is generally held, was driven by the inexorable curse of his father. But there remains a certain uneasiness: we, the spectators, certainly feel that we are witnessing a real decision to fight. It seems high time to admit that Eteocles is both free and determined. Lloyd-Jones, in his review of von Fritz, wrote: "The notion that an act may be at the same time a duty and a crime is to most ways of thinking paradoxical. Yet it is the obvious solution of the problem of Eteocles' decision . . ." ² If this makes nonsense of traditional categories of logic, we may console ourselves with the thought that the Aeschylean world-view is beyond logic. For him, the tensions between opposites in the universe, as in the human heart, are real, and the conflicts are sometimes irresolvable.

¹ The discussion was opened by Otto Regenbogen, "Bemerkungen zu den Sieben des Aischylos," *Hermes* 68 (1933) 51-69, esp. 63 ff. (= *Kleine Schriften* [Munich 1961] 36-56). Solmsen decided strongly in favour of necessity: "As Eteocles sees it, there is simply no way of evading what Fate (i.e. the Erinyes) has in store for him . . . It may be legitimate to speak of a scheme on the part of the Erinyes. This scheme would be to create a situation in which Eteocles cannot act otherwise than he does" (Friedrich Solmsen, "The Erinyes in Aischylos' *Septem*," *TAPA* 68 [1937] 203). Two articles in the *Jaeger-Festschrift* likewise decide in favor of necessity (E. Wolff, "Die Entscheidung des Eteokles in den *Sieben gegen Theben*" and H. Patzer, "Die dramatische Handlung der *Sieben gegen Theben*," both in *HSCP* 63 [1958] 89-119). In a recent study von Fritz began to take a deeper look at Eteocles ("Die Gestalt des Eteokles in Aeschylus' *Sieben gegen Theben*" in his *Antike und moderne Tragödie* [Berlin 1962] 193-226); and an article by Lesky is provocative, if somewhat inconclusive ("Eteokles in den *Sieben gegen Theben*," *Wiener Studien* 74 [1961] 5-17). A recent attempt to absolve Eteocles of guilt, to see him as simply a "Träger hoher Arete," is unconvincing (Franz Egermann, "Menschliche Haltung und tragisches Geschick bei Aischylos," *Gymnasium* 68 [1961] 502-19).

² H. Lloyd-Jones, review of von Fritz, *Antike und moderne Tragödie* in *Gnomon* 34 (1962) 742.

The time spent trying to resolve the freedom–necessity dichotomy might better have been devoted to a deeper study of Eteocles' character; such a study would have revealed that the tensions within him are much more complicated. Eteocles is, in fact, a bundle of contradictions.³

The ambivalence in his character manifests itself most clearly in his attitude towards the city and people. Eteocles' first words show him to be a wise and benevolent king, a foresighted statesman, or, as he styles himself, "steersman of the ship of state," who has taken every precaution to assure the city's safety in its hour of danger; the figure he cuts is very like Oedipus' at the beginning of the *Tyrannus*. In a firm but calm manner he issues orders for his men to "hasten to the battlements and tower-gates . . . fill the breastworks, stand on the gangways of the towers" (30–33). After the messenger announces the enemy's plan to send a single champion against each of the seven gates, Eteocles utters a prayer to "Zeus and Earth and city-dwelling gods" for Thebes' safety.

This picture of foresighted and almost paternal solicitude is dispelled abruptly by Eteocles' words after the parodos: "Intolerable creatures," he shouts at the women, "I ask you whether this is most conducive to the city's safety . . . to fall at the gods' images, yelping and barking, you objects of loathing to moderate men" (181–86). But his own language reveals him to be anything but moderate. He proceeds to a fierce, Hippolytan denunciation of the whole "tribe of women" (188); his words are surprisingly bitter, even for a son of Jocasta. Towards the end of his vituperative outburst he proclaims: "If anyone will not heed my command—man, woman, or anything in between—a vote of death will be cast against them; it is not possible for him to escape death by stoning at the people's hands" (196–98). Strong measures are necessary to restore order at this crucial time, true, but his tone is closer to that of an irascible despot than to that of a man who is the father of his country, helmsman of the state. The petulance of his outburst is underlined by the chorus'

³ As a recent writer has put it, "Eteokles is 'consistently inconsistent'" (R. D. Dawe, "Inconsistency of Plot and Character in Aeschylus," *Proc. of the Cambridge Philological Society*, No. 189 [1963] 45.) Dawe also warns that "... we would do well to bear in mind that there do exist contradictions in Aeschylus which not even the most *avant garde* interpretations can reduce to a logical system" (*ibid.* 33.).

response, for in their opening words following his rebuke they address him as "dear child of Oedipus" (203)—and the phrase reminds us of the miasmatic atmosphere which hangs about the house.

The tension increases in this tripartite scene: Eteocles' long denunciation is followed by a lyric interlude in which he interposes trimeters to the chorus' strophic dochmiacs, and the scene closes with a rapid stichomythia. Again Eteocles keeps no check on his tongue. He tells the women to go to damnation, *ἐς φθόρον* (252), and asks them acidly for a "small favor"—silence (260, 262). Silence and good order are certainly essential, but once again we may legitimately question the means Eteocles uses to enforce order and the tone of his commands. Can these be the words of a completely guiltless victim of fate?⁴

The second episode shows Eteocles acting entirely in the role of guardian of his country. The testiness of his exchanges with the chorus he has put behind him; he has now only to assign appropriate opponents to each of the Argive attackers, apparently from the six men already chosen during the intervening stasimon.⁵ It is a majestic scene, intensified by the deliberate stylized antitheses of the paired speeches, each completed by a choral *coda*. Eteocles has already said "six men with me the seventh" (282); six gates have been assigned. The messenger comes to the seventh, and we gasp (in the way that audiences do who forget the myth in the thrill of the moment)—Polynices is the seventh attacker. Will Eteocles meet his brother in single combat?⁶

It is here that Eteocles finds himself in another contradictory position. He can discharge his function as city-defender only at

⁴ Patzer (above, note 1) notes Eteocles' "vexation and harshness to the chorus of women," but, because of his concentration on freedom-necessity, he attributes it wrongly to Eteocles' already "existing under the influence of the curse" (103).

⁵ Not that Aeschylus or his audience would have bothered very much about precisely when the men were chosen; it was enough that to each Argive attacker there should be assigned, before their eyes, an appropriate defender. Dawe (above, note 3) argues that "the inconsistencies are entirely deliberate . . ." and are "not the product of accident or improvidence, but of a conscious attempt to give the play, besides its sense of predestined doom, an element of free will" (36-37).

⁶ This point is well made by Lesky (above, note 1) 13 f., who points as well to *ὀργή* (677), *τί μέμονας, τέκνον* (686), and *σὺ μὴ ποτ' ἴνουν* (698). Note, too, the fierceness of *τεθηγμένον τοί μ' οὐκ ἀπαμβλυνεῖς λόγῳ* (715). M. Croiset wrote expressively of "la haine secrète qui brûle au fond de son cœur" and "la rivalité fraternelle . . . avec la haine implacable qui l'accompagne" (*Eschyle* [Paris 1928] 119).

the risk of incurring the defilement attendant upon the shedding of kindred blood. The chorus spares no pains to show him the horror of his intended act: there are other men enough to join battle—their blood can be cleansed; but of this pollution there is no growing old (679–82). Do not be borne away by this all-consuming, raging madness for battle; expel the beginnings of evil desire. Their words leave no doubt that the act he contemplates is a foul evil (686–88):

μή τί σε θυμοπλη-
θῆς δορίμαργος ἅτα φερέτω· κακοῦ δ'
ἔκβαλ' ἔρωτος ἀρχάν.

Their next words bring home the point even more clearly: a too savagely biting desire (ὠμοδακῆς ἵμερος) drives you to reap this bitter harvest of homicide and lawless bloodshed, αἵματος οὐ θεμιστοῦ (692–94). Eteocles may claim that Justice sides not with his brother—so far the latter's shield-emblem is belied—but with him: "for whom is it more right to meet him?" (τίς ἄλλος μᾶλλον ἐνδικώτερος; 673), but it is a hollow protest. ἐνδικώτερος here is ironic; he does not see that the lines he has just uttered about his brother apply to himself (670–71):

ἦ δῆτ' ἂν εἴη πανδίκως ψευδώνυμος
Δίκη, ξυνοῦσα φωτὶ παντόλμῳ φρένας.

As Eteocles rushes off to the seventh gate, the chorus asks in shocked disbelief: "Do you wish to pluck the fruit of your own brother's blood?" (718).

Of course the alternative which the chorus suggests, a surrogate victory over his brother, is unacceptable to a hero and a man of action; the king is already committed to defending one of the gates. But that does not mitigate the evil of Eteocles' undertaking. Because of his position as head of the state and his own temperament, he has to defend one of the gates in person. In order to do so he has to undertake the pollution of meeting and slaying his brother in single combat. It is a searing contradiction: a hero whose heroism must manifest itself through sacrilege.

The last and most serious anomaly reveals itself in Eteocles' attitude towards the gods. In the stylized scene in which he names the six warriors and assigns them to an appropriate attacker, he makes several statements which could only have come

from the lips of a conventionally pious man. Thus, Capaneus' behavior is deplored, for he "dishonors the gods" (441), and Polyphontes is stationed to oppose him, "with the good will of Artemis the Protectress and the other gods" (449-50). Hippomedon will be driven from the walls by Pallas Onka (501-3) and his opponent, Hyperbius, has Zeus on his shield; as Eteocles remarks, "no one has yet, I believe, seen Zeus defeated" (514). Eteocles' reaction to the irreligious taunts of Parthenopaeus is understandable—and entirely conventional: "May the gods give them what their thoughts deserve" (550). Throughout this scene *formulae* of piety come easily to his lips: *θεῶν θελόντων* (562), *Διὸς θέλοντος* (614).

There is nothing here to cause surprise. As the messenger names the Argive attacker at each gate, Eteocles, head of state and general with full powers, appoints an appropriate defender: the godless Argives (except for Amphiaraus) must be met by god-fearing Thebans, and Eteocles voices the conventional pieties which the audience would expect. What is surprising is the entirely different tone of Eteocles' remarks in the first scene. The concern to settle the will-o'-the-wisp question of Eteocles' freedom in meeting his brother has distracted recent scholars from a fuller examination of his character. We may justifiably insert a third term into the controversy: not, "Was Eteocles free or was he acting under the compulsion of his father's curse?" but, "How far is his doom the just retribution for personal *hybris*?" We should stop to note the importance of the question, for it takes the discussion beyond the oversimplified dichotomy of freedom *versus* necessity into the much more meaningful sphere of personal responsibility. If it can be shown that Eteocles' attitude to the gods is one-sided, or even offensive, we can perhaps conclude that his death was not only the result of his own free choice, as well as a fulfillment of his father's curse, but also that he brought it on himself in a real sense. Such a triple explanation of his doom certainly strains traditional logic to the breaking point.

When we turn from the central *Redepaare* to the opening scenes of the play, we find a marked contrast in tone in Eteocles' remarks about the gods. In the opening lines, he says, in effect, that "success is attributed to God's will, but if we fail, Eteocles gets all the blame"; and he immediately averts the evil omen contained in his mention of the complaints and groans attendant upon

failure by saying, "May Zeus Defender live up to his name" (8-9). In the second part of his speech, the gods are again mentioned, but we should mark the phrases Eteocles uses. At line 21 we read *καὶ νῦν μὲν ἐς τόδ' ἡμαρ εὖ ῥέπει θεός*, and line 35 ends with the semi-formulaic echo, *εὖ τελεῖ θεός*. But it is an undifferentiated *θεός*, and the word *ῥέπει* in line 21 suggests that Eteocles is thinking of a divinity hardly more real than "Lady Luck." The wording of line 23 is also noteworthy: "the war, for the most part," Eteocles says, "has turned out well from the gods." In using the word *κυρεῖ*, how much efficacy does he attribute to the gods' agency, how much merely to chance?

After the scout delivers the shattering news that the Argives are preparing an assault on the walls in seven divisions led by seven champions, Eteocles prays for the safety of the city, in what seems to be an unambiguously religious utterance. "O Zeus and Earth and city's gods," he begins, but then immediately adds, "and Curse, powerful Erinyes of my father" (69-70). We have here the first mention in the play of the Curse and Erinyes which assume so much importance in his final scene. The juxtaposition of Olympian gods and the Erinyes is strange. Can it be that already, in this first scene, the only gods in whose efficacy Eteocles believes are the dark ones?⁷ The seriousness of Eteocles' prayer is most strongly impugned by his next words. "Do not eradicate the city," he says, "be its defense. I hope I speak common benefits, for a city which is successful honors its *daimones*" (71-77). It is a simple *quid pro quo*: if you help the city, it will sacrifice to you, and we'll both get something out of it—*ξυνὰ δ' ἐλπίζω λέγειν* (76).

The effect is cumulative. Any one of these phrases would not show Eteocles to be irreligious, but the tone of his opening words and the bargain he tries to strike at the end only serve to emphasize the off-handed, almost perfunctory nature of his other remarks. And their total effect, the doubts as to Eteocles' sincerity they leave in the reader's mind, are reinforced by the chorus' words in the parodos. The women enter with excited dochmiacs; when they are in position their entire song is one long prayer for the city's safety. Individual divinities are invoked

⁷ To mention the Erinyes and the Olympians in the same breath may actually have been felt as sacrilegious. Apollo in the *Eumenides* calls the Erinyes *ἀπόπυστοι θεοίς* (191); cf. also *Eum.* 55-56, 411, and *Sept.* 721.

elaborately and by name. Athena, Poseidon, Ares, Cypris, Lycian Apollo and Artemis are all named by the chorus in a single strophe (127-49). Hera and Artemis are invoked in the next stanza (150-57), and Apollo and Athena and "blessed Queen Onka" (if she is separate from Athena) in the one after that. Several of the chorus' phrases echo words of Eteocles: thus the women address the θεοὶ πολιάδοι χθονός (109) and Ζεῦ πάτερ παντελής (117). The phrase τέλειοι τέλειά τε γὰς τᾶσδε πυργοφύλακες (167-68) expands and provides a sharp contrast to Eteocles' curt εἰ τελεῖ θεός. The women, in a more reverent spirit, ask, ποῖ δ' ἔτι τέλος ἐπάγει θεός; (157). Even Eteocles' last words are echoed, but with a difference. He had said, rather cynically, πόλις γὰρ εἰ πράσσουσα δαίμονας τίει (77). The women close their prayer with a simple and sincere, even naïve exhortation to the gods: "be mindful of the rites of a city which loves to sacrifice" (179-80). The innocence of the sentiment here only points up the insincerity of Eteocles' words.⁸

The scene which follows the parodos is all-important for determining Eteocles' attitude towards the gods. It is tightly constructed in three parts. First we have a proclamation from Eteocles, a violent rebuke of the chorus' invocations of the gods, which is couched, as we have seen, in calculatedly offensive language. Not, of course, that Eteocles' contention is completely groundless or his motives base, for he is trying to keep the women's cries from throwing panic into the citizens. But his outlook is incomplete: for man's action alone, without the goodwill and active assistance of the gods, can do nothing. In the course of the scene Eteocles nowhere admits that the chorus' actions are, if excessive, at least well-intentioned; and he twice implies that nothing, not even the gods, can withstand the power of fate—an hybriatic attitude which emerges as almost an obsession in his final scene.

Eteocles closes his denunciation of the women by asking sarcastically whether he is speaking to the deaf. The second part of the triptych shows him replying in trimeters to their lyric measures. In the first strophe they try to explain their actions: it was the screeching of chariot-axles and horses' bridles which threw panic into them. Eteocles retorts, "Does a sailor find

⁸ Wilamowitz noted the contrast in tone between the chorus' echo and Eteocles' earlier utterance, which, as he remarked, "klingt hier doch disharmonisch" (*Aischylos. Interpretationen* [Berlin 1914] 64).

μηχανὴν σωτηρίας by running from the stern to the prow?" (208–10). "But I was running to the gods' statues"—ἀρχαῖα βρέτη, θεοῖς πῖσυνος—the women insist; "in fear I offered prayers to the blessed ones, that they might hold their strength over the city" (211–15). Eteocles' next words are all important: "Pray that the wall withstand the enemy spear." Purely human defense measures are again uppermost in Eteocles' mind and are placed in an emphatic position at the beginning of the line: πύργον, στέγειν εὐχέσθε (216). The next phrase is crucial: οὐκουν τὰδ' ἔσται πρὸς θεῶν. All MSS. except M attribute these words to the chorus and accent οὐκουν, presumably interpreting them as a question with which the chorus interrupts, "Is not the defense of the walls the gods' affair?" Rose noted that the line-division between speakers,

unlikely in any case in so early a play, is put out of court entirely by the next speech of Eteocles, *infr.* 223–5, which is symmetrical with this; either both are divided between speakers or neither is, and 223–5 are certainly all uttered by Eteocles.⁹

But if we must follow M in assigning the lines to Eteocles, we are free to diverge from it in deciding on the accentuation of οὐκουν. Did Aeschylus intend οὐκοῦν, which Murray accepts, or οὔκουν ("rell. et *m*," Murray)? Verrall read οὔκουν and interpreted the words as a question, which Eteocles proceeds to answer himself. It seems equally possible to take them as a negative assertion.¹⁰ Eteocles' speech will then run: "Pray that the wall withstand the enemy spear. This will not come about through the god's agency. Well, however that may be (ἀλλ' οὖν),¹¹ the gods of a captured city leave it, so the saying goes." Whatever the true explanation of οὐκουν, it is clear that this last sentiment,

⁹ H. J. Rose, *A Commentary on the Surviving Plays of Aeschylus* (Amsterdam 1957) 1.179.

¹⁰ "Negative in statements" according to Denniston's classification (*Greek Particles*² [Oxford 1954] *s.v.* οὐκουν, iv.4, page 439). Denniston divides line 217 between speakers and takes the particle as interrogative. Although he remarks of the use "negative in statements" (for which I have been arguing) "I know of no example earlier than E. *Med.* 890," Italic, *Index Aeschyleus* (Leiden 1954) *s.v.*, cites *PV* 322 and 518, which seem to be unequivocal examples of negative assertions.

¹¹ Denniston (above, note 10) *s.v.* ἀλλ' οὖν (4), page 443 ("signifying an elimination of the secondary or irrelevant"). Denniston, because he accepts the line division, lists this example under (1), "In answers introducing an objection, protest or remonstrance" (page 442). This may well be correct, if Rose's argument from symmetry can be circumvented; in any case, the cynical tone of the second half of 217 and 218 remains, whether the first half of the line was spoken by Eteocles or not.

that the gods of a captured city leave it, is, in the context, directly opposed to the simple faith of the chorus; whether we call Eteocles' attitude sceptical, or sarcastic and even atheistic, makes little difference.¹² The chorus piously averts the omen: "May this assembly of gods never leave during my lifetime" (219–20), and Eteocles offers a sharp rejoinder: "Don't, in calling on the gods, deliberate badly" (223). To their hierarchy of Olympians he sets up a new pragmatic pantheon: "Obedience to rule is mother of Success and wife of Safety."¹³ The chorus falls back on its instinctive trust: "True, but God's strength is loftier . . ." (226). The only reply Eteocles makes is a return to his theme of male superiority: "This is men's function, to make sacrifices and offerings to the gods when the enemy are at hand. But your role is to be silent and stay at home" (230–32), where "sacrifices and offerings" recall his earlier attempts to strike a bargain with the gods.¹⁴ When the chorus points out that it is only through the gods' help that their city has remained unsacked thus far (233), and asks why he resents their prayers, Eteocles replies bad-temperedly, "I certainly don't begrudge your honoring the race of *daimones*, but don't make the citizens faint-hearted . . ." (236–37). It is difficult to refrain from sensing the contemptuous tone of *δαιμόνων* . . . *γένος* (236).¹⁵

In the third section of this scene, the rapid stichomythia, the chorus returns to the noise of the encircled city and their consequent fear. "It is sufficient for me to take thought about these matters," Eteocles insists (248). When the women pray that the common assembly of gods (*ξυντέλεια*) not betray the walls (253),

¹² Although the sentiment occurs elsewhere (see Rose, *ad. loc.*, 1.179), the remark, in the context of Eteocles' other utterances, is surely cynical. Surprisingly, only Verrall seems to have noted that "Eteocles speaks with the same sceptical irony here as elsewhere" (*The "Seven Against Thebes" of Aeschylus* [London 1887] 19).

¹³ 224–25. The scholiast is clearly in error when he says *λέπει Διός* and finds a reference to Zeus Soter.

¹⁴ Eteocles' choice of words in 230 may be significant. Rose, *ad. loc.* (1.180), notes that *σφάγια καὶ χρηστήρια* "are not precisely sacrifices, or, at least, he who performs, *ἔρδει*, the ritual connected with them is not laying the emphasis on sacrifice, but is asking questions of the gods rather than offering them food or inviting them to a shared meal."

¹⁵ The insult is in the use of *γένος*. The only other time it is used by Aeschylus of anything but men or animals is at *Eum.* 58, an equally contemptuous reference to the Erinyes. And *δαιμόνων* . . . *γένος* here reminds us of Eteocles' earlier reference to *γυναικείον γένος* (188), and looks forward to his later sneer at the *γυναικῶν γένος* (256).

Eteocles curses them and tells them to keep silence. "O city's gods," the women pray, "may I not fall into slavery!" "You are yourself enslaving both me and the whole city" (254). "O all-ruling Zeus, turn the shafts upon the enemy," the women plead. And Eteocles echoes their prayer, but with a bitter twist: "O Zeus, what a race you've given us in women!" (256). After he asks them sarcastically for a "small favor," silence, the chorus at last acquiesces. "I am silent. I shall suffer what is fated (τὸ μόρσιμον) with the others" (263), and the scene closes, as it began, with a proclamation by Eteocles. His opening words are purposely vague: τοῦτ' ἀντ' ἐκείνων τοῦπος αἰροῦμαι σέθεν (264). But what they have just said is that they will be silent and suffer what is fated, τὸ μόρσιμον; and Eteocles implies that he prefers this sentiment of submission to their earlier prayers to the gods, which he had interpreted as animal shrieks and useless noise. "Change your prayer for the better," he now says, "that the gods be our allies" (266). He then tells them to turn their wails into a victory shout and follow his example in prayer: a promise to offer the gods sheep, oxen and enemy spoils when success has been achieved and the city saved. Eteocles' prayer is completely consistent with the principle he enunciated in the prologue: Thebes, if successful, will honor its *daimones*; these are the ξυνά he mentioned earlier (76). This is the sort of pragmatic prayer the chorus is to utter, "not too fond of groans nor in vain wild snorts, for," he adds significantly, "you will not escape τὸ μόρσιμον any the more for that" (279-81). On other lips this might well be an entirely religious sentiment: pray in moderate tones, your prayers are no more efficacious for shrieks and wails; but coming as they do from Eteocles, we may wonder whether they do not betray a deep underlying scepticism: "there is no escaping fate for all one's prayers." The scene closes with Eteocles' voicing of his intention to go off and assign six defenders who, with him, will defend the seven gates.

In the ode which follows the chorus proceeds to a touching description of the ills which befall a captured city, but not before devoting two stanzas to more prayers to the gods. Although the women's words are quieter, they are not noticeably different in content from their previous prayers—they have not obeyed Eteocles' order—"gods born of Zeus, defend the city and army of Cadmaeans" (301-3). As in their earlier ode they again pick

up and naively echo a phrase of Eteocles: "What better land could you take in exchange for this . . . ?" (304). "Throw evil rout into the enemy, win glory for the citizens, defend the city from your glorious shrines in answer to our shrilly-wailed prayers" (315-20).

The central section of the play is taken up with the messenger's speeches. The poet is not concerned here to characterize Eteocles; he stands merely as a figurehead, whose function is to assign appropriate defenders as the messenger describes each attacker. Only when he learns that his brother stands at the seventh gate does he once more assume his position as a tragic agent. The structure of the scene is closely parallel to that of the scene which we have just considered. We have a long opening address by Eteocles, an exchange with the chorus, with the women's lyrics between his trimeters, and a stichomythia at the end. When he has been told that Polynices is attacking the seventh gate, Eteocles realizes at last the terrible meaning of his father's curse. He cries out *ὦ θεομανές τε καὶ θεῶν μέγα στύγος, ὦ πανδάκρυτον ἄμὸν Οἰδίου γένος* (653-54)—it is to the *hatred of the gods* that he ascribes his family's sufferings: *πατρός δὴ νῦν ἀραὶ τελέσφοροι* (655): for Eteocles, it is not Zeus or the other city-gods who bring the *τέλος*, as the chorus had earlier maintained, but his father's curses. The chorus attempts to deter him from fighting his brother by pointing out the irremediable miasma connected with brothers' mutual slaughter, but Eteocles can put forward only considerations of honor and disgrace viewed in purely human terms. To their demand that he "expel the beginning of evil desire" he cries: "since God is very eager for the deed, let the whole family of Laius be swept downwind to ruin" (689-91). The *gods* are to blame, Eteocles believes; the Curse of his father sits by dry-eyed, waiting for the final blow; Eteocles refuses to admit the possibility of propitiation which the chorus puts forward. "We have already been abandoned by the gods; gratitude from us at the moment of our destruction would be surprising.¹⁶ Why then cringe at death any longer?"

¹⁶ I follow Rose's interpretation (*Commentary* 1.221, at line 703): "This line, it seems to me, is somewhat grossly misunderstood by the commentators I have consulted, save Verrall, who sees that *θαυμάζεσθαι* means 'is considered wonderful, is wondered at,' not 'is held in high estimation.'" Two recent attempts to interpret the line as a reference to a self-sacrifice by Eteocles seem to me unconvincing (Egermann [above, note 1] 507-9, and Dawe [above, note 3] 42).

(702-4). The chorus urges that he should sacrifice now, while there is still time, and pray that the *daimon* blow with gentler breath in future. But their words fall on deaf ears; Eteocles is no more ready now than in the earlier scenes to take their advice that he have recourse to heaven. In the stichomythia which follows the chorus asks him to accede to a last request—the exchange is an inversion of his earlier “request” that they be silent—not to go to the seventh gate. “You will not blunt my whetted purpose with argument,” he replies (715). “But God honors a victory, even one you consider ‘cowardly’” (716). They have already suggested at 679-80 that Eteocles send a substitute to fight his brother; and, though such a victory might be “cowardly” in Eteocles’ limited view, it would be pleasing to the gods in that the sanctities of kinship would be preserved. But at their mention of a *νίκην κακήν* Eteocles bridles, and his reply reveals the short-sightedness of his view: “A warrior must not be content with this utterance” (717). The women ask in horror and disbelief, “you really wish to pluck the fruit of your own brother’s blood?” (718), and Eteocles goes off with the fatalistic comment, “one could not escape from evil if the gods so decree.”¹⁷

We strip layer after layer from Eteocles’ character to find at its very core—contradiction. The benevolent and foresighted statesman, the acid-tongued despot; a general who makes the ultimate sacrifice for his city’s safety, perpetrator of the foulest crime against claims of kinship; conventional expositor of the need of God’s help, scoffer at womanly prayers, the warrior intensely confident of his own unaided powers. Why therefore shrink from accepting the view that Eteocles is both free and determined, that he both embraces his death (which entails his brother’s as well) and is driven to it by his father’s curse? To put the matter differently, we might say that freedom and necessity are but different aspects of the same reality, that the Erinyes who stalks Eteocles *is* in fact simply this perverted drive of his own nature, this *κακὸς ἔρως* to slay his brother. The supreme irony of Eteocles’ position is just this: that in the very act of freely embracing his fate, he is in fact being driven down the wind of his evil blood-lust. He is a man of action, practical, impatient of

¹⁷ 719. The quasi-formular *θεῶν διδόντων* (in which Verrall finds a “last touch of Eteocles’ irony”) provides a sinister contrast with his earlier and more careless *θεῶν θελόντων* (562) and *Διὸς θέλοντος* (614). Cf. also *Persae* 293-94.

delay. The world of such a man is without gods; he has no time for prayer. What could be more tragically fitting than that, at the very moment when he is about to ensure the ennoblement of his heroic nature by freely accepting Fate's decrees, he should be shown in very truth to have externalized—defied, almost—an impious drive of his own nature, to whose inexorable demand for sacrilege and self-destruction he must now give ear? Earlier he had put the Curse and Erinyes of his father on a par with the Olympians; now he cannot distinguish between them. He insists that it is the gods who are destroying him: "since God is eager for it, let the house of Laius be damned" (689–91); "we have been abandoned by the gods" (702). But it is he who has abandoned the gods of light; the dark gods—from whom there is no escape because they are self-inflicted—have him in their grip. As a crowning irony, Eteocles goes to his death proclaiming that it is the will of those very gods whom he has rejected: *θεῶν διδόντων οὐκ ἂν ἐκφύγοις κακά* (719).

The debate over Eteocles' freedom *versus* the necessity imposed by Oedipus' curse has obscured not only the deeper antinomies in his character, but also the question of his own guilt, his *hybris*. Cannot his belief in the curse be explained as, in part, ironical retribution for his earlier overbearing self-sufficiency, his refusal to turn to a higher power? It is not a complete explanation, of course, but in the maze of contradictions that is Eteocles' character, it is a partial answer whose importance ought not to be overlooked.

APPENDIX: ETEOCLES AND "OPFERTOD"

Considering the tangle of tensions and contradictions which constitutes Eteocles' character, we would not be surprised to find that Aeschylus had portrayed him not only as a guilty agent of his own destruction, but also as a man who offers his life to save Thebes. Although the theory had been stated briefly by O. Klotz,¹⁸ the statement by Pohlenz has become the classic exposition:

Whereas Laius endangered the city by succumbing to his procreative instinct, Eteocles, by his own decision, offers his life and

¹⁸ Oskar Klotz, "Zu Aischylos Thebanischer Tetralogie," *Rh. Mus.* 72 (1917/18) 618.

with it the dynasty in order to save the city, and thereby expiates his grandfather's deed . . . With Eteocles and Polynices, their family goes to destruction, but the city is once and for all saved through the annihilation of the dynasty, which Eteocles has brought about by his freely willed sacrificial death.¹⁹

It is important to note that the theory does not hold simply that, in the welter of Eteocles' motives, a desire to defend his city played some part (for that is assured by an analysis of the early scenes, especially lines 282–86) but that he saved the city precisely by bringing the family of Laius to an end or, in a weaker version of the theory, that he more vaguely “saved the city by his death.” This weaker position is represented by, for example, Jaeger:

Eteocles is to die; but before he dies he is to save his city from defeat and slavery . . . the hero, by sacrificing his doomed life to the salvation of his fellow-men, thereby reconciles us to what might seem, even to the devout, a senseless and needless destruction of the highest areté.²⁰

The difficulty with the theory, in either its strong or its weak form, is that it finds no support in the text.

The theory of *Opfertod* has recently been resurrected by Dawe²¹ and, as he puts forward several new arguments, it is necessary to consider them in some detail.

One may be permitted to disagree at the outset when he writes,

on the first, second, or even third reading of this play, nine-tenths of us must have been under the impression that the death of Eteocles saved Thebes from destruction . . . the impression given by a reading of the play itself . . . is one of an *Opfertod* (38).

And many of the lines Dawe cites as evidence show nothing more than that, on one level of characterization, Eteocles is solicitous for the safety of Thebes and takes what steps he can to defend it; this is very different from maintaining that he gave his life as a sacrificial offering to save the city. Thus, however much weight is put on γε in line 71, Eteocles does not say (or even “fore-shadow,” as Dawe suggests), “take my life in return for the city's

¹⁹ Max Pohlenz, *Die Griechische Tragödie*² (Göttingen 1954) 1.94.

²⁰ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia*, Engl. trans. (Oxford 1939) 1.259.

²¹ R. D. Dawe (above, note 3) 37 ff.

safety." "What is the implication of *v.* 657?" asks Dawe. Eteocles begins his speech "O god-maddened and great hatred of the gods . . ." (653), but four lines later he pulls himself together and represses further laments, "lest a groan more difficult to endure be engendered." The significance of *δυσφορώτερος* is obscure. It may mean, as Rose *ad loc.* paraphrases, "Eteokles has no time to lament the misfortunes of his line, to the neglect of provision against his brother's attack, or there will be yet more to lament, namely the fall of the city." A likelier explanation is that it implies "a groan more difficult to bear than the one which I just suppressed among you." Before, he did not want the populace to be infected with the woman's laments; now, even though the terrible force of the curse is at last manifest, he must suppress a groan in himself for the same reason. In neither case does the line support the theory of *Opfertod*, as Dawe maintains. His third point is the juxtaposition of the city's safety and the princes' destruction at 804 (=820), 815, and 822-31. But the juxtaposition is either explicitly (in the first two lines) or implicitly (in the stanza) *adversative*, "the city has been saved, but the princes . . ." For that reason it seems untrue to say that ". . . we are gently led to infer 'post hoc, ergo propter hoc'" (39). And the fact that in all three cases we read "princes" and not "prince" seems fatal to Dawe's inference, for there should at least be some emphasis on Eteocles' death, as against Polynices', if the poet wished to suggest that the city's safety and his death were causally connected. It has never been suggested that both brothers offered their lives for Thebes' safety.

Dawe's main point is the reference to the oracle to Laius at 748-49, and the implication of the chorus "that the transgressions of Laius stand in the direct line of causation which has brought the city to its present position" (Dawe 40-41). No one would deny that this implication is intentional; the descent of *Atē* from generation to generation is one of the first generalizations one is taught about Aeschylean tragedy. But to move from this truth to a view which maintains that Eteocles is portrayed as compensating for or "canceling out" Laius' earlier impious procreation seems unwarranted. It seems safer to admit that we do not know the real reason that Aeschylus goes out of his way to emphasize the content of an oracle which, as Dawe remarks, "implies a myth unknown from other sources" (41); it may have been

simply to bring in a reference to *γέννα* (748–49) and its connotation of *γένος*.²² In any case, Dawe's two confirmatory points weaken rather than strengthen his argument. Even granting that 703 is obscurely expressed,²³ to interpret it, as Dawe (92) seems to, "the only *χάρις* which the gods would admire is one consisting of my own death," places a burden on the verse which the Greek will not sustain; and the mention of *θυσία* at line 701, so far from providing a context of patriotic self-sacrifice, clearly refers to an apotropaic sacrifice to avert the Erinys' evil power. Nothing very much can be made to depend on *ἀτέκνους* in 828; any alteration in the myth which Aeschylus could have intended by the word is cancelled out by 903 *ἐπιγόνους*. And Dawe provides his own refutation: "an *Opfertod* would clearly lose much of its point if the city were to be cast into danger in a later generation" (42). It would take more than a one-word alteration of the myth to make the audience forget that the city would be endangered in ten years' time, in a continuation of the myth recounted by Aeschylus himself in the *Epigonoí*, and that this time the curse was to be fulfilled, in the destruction of the city as well as the family.

When we turn away from the modern, rather romantic, theory of *Opfertod* to an analysis of the last part of the play, what we find is a continued anxiety for the safety of Thebes on the part of the chorus, even after the messenger has announced the brothers' deaths. It seems to me inconceivable that the poet should have emphasized this motif if the salvation of Thebes by the death of the brothers had been part of his design. The messenger's first words to the women are, "This city had escaped slavery's yoke" (793). But they are not assured: "What new and strange event has befallen the city?" (803). Again, he tries to reassure them, "The city has been saved, but the brother-princes . . ." (804 = 820). In the following stasimon they ask, "Are we to rejoice at the city's salvation, or bewail the princes . . .?" (825–28). They attribute the brothers' downfall to the *μέλαινα καὶ τελεία γένεος Οἰδίπου* τ' Ἀρά (832–33) and comment: "The unbelieving

²² Wilamowitz wrote (82): "Das Laiosorakel konnte dagegen nur auf die Eroberung Thebens durch die Epigonen gehen" (above, note 8). He found the oracle-motif "unvereinbar" with the main theme of the family tragedy. "Man mag sich wundern, dass [Aischylos] ihn nicht ganz beiseite gelassen hat" (*ibid.* 84).

²³ Above, note 16.

schemes of Laius endure. There is concern for the city: the edge of oracles is not blunted . . ." (842–44). *μέριμνα δ' ἀμφὶ πτόλιν*: these words seem to me to count decisively against any form of the theory of *Opfertod*. If Eteocles' death had actually effected the city's salvation, this continued concern for the city's safety by the chorus would be pointless. When they say, "There is concern for the city; the edge of oracles is not blunted," what they mean is precisely that Eteocles has not taken the edge off Apollo's oracle, has *not* "canceled out" Laius' disobedience in begetting Oedipus.²⁴

Besides being slow to give up their anxiety for the city, the chorus does not differentiate between the brothers. Nowhere is Eteocles' death considered apart from Polynices', as a noble deed. On the contrary, the women bemoan the personal tragedy of the brothers and cast reproaches on the sufferings they have mutually brought, mainly on their house,²⁵ but also on the city.²⁶ Their act is seen only in terms of folly and destruction: *ἔριδι μαινομένην* (935). We should not let three lines from the dubious last scene (1009–11) displace the uniform verdict of the chorus, that Eteocles' death was, quite truly, deplorable.²⁷

²⁴ Wilamowitz (above, note 8) 83 interpreted the lines in this way, and his interpretation was not seriously challenged by the special pleading of Klotz (above, note 18) 620: "fasse ich *μέριμνα* als Totenklage um Eteokles und Polyneikes und *ἀμφὶ πτόλιν* lokal."

²⁵ See 875–78 (*δύσφρονες . . . κακῶν ἀτρύμονες*), 880 (*δόμων ἐπὶ λύμῃ*), 881–82 (*δωμάτων ἐρευφίτοιχοι*), 895.

²⁶ Lines 900–2, 923 (*ἐρξάτην πολλὰ μὲν πολίτας*, where *πολλὰ* are not necessarily "benefits").

²⁷ I am grateful to Prof. D. J. Conacher of Trinity College, Toronto, for discussions and encouragement on this subject. His disagreement with many of my initial views has led me to a more balanced position.