

THE POWER OF WORDS IN THE SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

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For John V. A. Fine

The first line of the *Seven* contains the *two* principal thematic ideas of the play.¹ Καδμουὸ πολῖται opens the civic theme of patriotism and the defense of the city with the special obligation of the descendants of the Sparti.² The second phrase, λέγειν τὰ καίρια, initiates the other theme of the fulfillment of Oedipus' curse and the power of words.

Both Greeks and Romans in antiquity held the belief that the spoken word was able to affect events either favorably or unfavorably. The power of the spoken word is exercised on the one hand in magical rites, where incantation, often with some ceremonial accompaniment, is the principal operative element. But apart from the intentional use of words, the chance utterance also has an effect upon events. The priest's injunction at the sacrifice (εὐφημεῖτε, *favete linguis*) for those standing around to maintain silence was designed to prevent any chance utterance which would impair or nullify the sacrifice.³ In such a case the verbal omen would seem to be operative of its own accord, but in other cases the omen becomes operative by being *accepted*, and accepted in such a way as to twist the meaning of it advantageously. W. R. Halliday⁴ says of the acceptance of spoken

¹ The translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Line numbers to Verrall's and Tucker's editions are followed by the line numbers of Murray's second edition in square brackets. I am grateful to several people who have discussed this paper with me at various stages, especially Prof. Herbert C. Youtie, Prof. Theodore V. Buttrey, Prof. John H. D'Arms, and Marilyn Kuperman Scott of the University of Michigan, and Prof. Reinhold Merkelbach of Cologne.

² I have discussed this theme elsewhere. "The Debt to Earth in the *Seven Against Thebes*," *TAPA* 94 (1964) 1-8.

³ Cf. P. Stengel *Die Griechischen Kultusaltertümer*, 3rd ed. (Munich 1920) III.

⁴ *Greek Divination* (1913) 47.

omens, or *klêdones*, "The obvious points will be noticed that (1) the spoken word may produce an effect, not indeed irrespective of its meaning, but other than the meaning or intention of the person who carelessly uttered them; (2) the act of acceptance makes them (*κληδόνες*) irrevocable, and that in the sense which best accords with the interest of the person who accepts them. Indeed it is almost not too much to say that he forces his own meaning on the omen."⁵ It is clear that the acceptance of a chance utterance is something more than mere divination or the prediction of future events through omens, and it becomes magical when, by proper interpretation, the one who accepts the omen can control future events. Predicting an event and casting a spell become merged, and the most important example of such merger is the curse, in form a prediction, but in power effecting what it predicts.⁶ The *Erinyes* are the embodiment of that power.⁷ Finally, names themselves can be regarded as *klêdones* and the prayer, for instance, that Zeus Alexiterios be true to his name (*Sept.* 8) is a case of accepting such an omen.⁸ The power of words to effect events is to be seen in the need for silence at solemn moments so as to avoid ill-omened chance utterances, in the manipulation of chance utterances to the advantage of the one who accepts them, in cursing, and in the invocation or acceptance of the omen implicit in a name. In all these

⁵ Examples of *klêdones* and their acceptance: Herod. 1.63; 8.115; 8.137; 9.91; Plut. *Alex.* 14; Lucian *De lapsu salut.* 8.734; Xen. *Anab.* 1.8.16; Hom. *Od.* 2.35; 18.116; 20.104-120; see especially Aesch. *Choe.* 1042 f. An excellent example is *Agam.* 1652 f. When Aegisthus says he is ready to die in battle, the elders of the chorus accept the omen. See Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire de la divination en antiquité*, Paris 1882. vol. 1, 153 ff.; E. Reiss s.v. "omen," *RE* 18.350-78; W. D. Woodhead, *Etymologizing in Greek Literature from Homer to Philo Judaeus*, Diss. Chicago 1928, 22 f.; John J. Peradotto, "Cledonomanacy in the *Oresteia*," *AJP* 90 (1969) 1-21.

⁶ See the discussion of this merger in Halliday, *Greek Divination* 40-44, where he says, 43 f., "Divination, then, even after it has parted company with magic, has still the object of enabling the client to modify in his interest the course of events."

⁷ Prof. Friedrich Solmsen's article on the Erinyes in the *Seven* (*TAPA* 68 [1937] 197-211) marked an important turning point in the criticism of the play. Recently, attempts have been made to discount the importance of the Erinyes in the play, and I hope the present discussion will bring to bear further reasons for concluding that the critical direction pointed out by Solmsen is the right one. Cf. Leon Golden, *CP* 59 (1964) 79 ff.

⁸ Cf. Herod. 9.91; Aesch. *Agam.* 689; Hom. *Od.* 19.409; See esp. Fränkel on *Agam.* 682 and Verrall, *Seven Against Thebes* (London 1887) Appendix II; also W. D. Woodhead *op. cit.* (above, note 5) 26 ff.; E. S. McCartney, "Puns and Plays on Proper Names," *CJ* 14 (1919) 343-48.

cases the true meaning is usually unnoticed by the one who produces the utterance, and he speaks more truly than he knows; the meaning is to be seen and made operative by the one who accepts the omen.⁹

The dangers of the careless utterance pervade the *Seven Against Thebes*. It is necessary that everyone in the play guard his language for fear he may unwittingly speak words of adverse omen. Any suggestion of misfortune made to the gods, even if it is a prayer to ward off that misfortune, may have terrible consequences. An innocent statement may contain a hidden meaning which will have an adverse effect, and any careless statement must be followed by an apotropaic formula such as $\delta \mu\eta \gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\iota\tau\omicron$ (5). The culmination of this element in the play is to be found in the seven pairs of speeches (375–676) where the battle is symbolically and effectively won and lost by the verbal struggle as Eteocles accepts the omens of the blazons and mottos which the attackers bear upon their shields and turns these omens against them. The secret of the defense of the city does indeed lie, as Eteocles claims in the first line, in saying what is proper.¹⁰

Having presented this principle in the first line, Aeschylus soon provides an example of it. In the prologue Eteocles carelessly suggests misfortune and quickly cancels the effect of the bad omen with the proper apotropaic phrase ($\delta \mu\eta \gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\iota\tau\omicron$):¹¹

But if on the other hand—which God forbid—
disaster should befall, Eteocles would be the one
name on many a citizen's tongue. (Smyth's trans. 5 ff.)

⁹ The curse is perhaps an exception to this since it is operative in the Erinyes without being accepted. Yet it is possible to modify the apparent meaning of a curse by accepting it with an advantageous interpretation.

¹⁰ Cf. J. T. Sheppard, "The Plot of the Seven Against Thebes," *CQ* 6 (1913) 74 ff., esp. 77, "... it is the part of a good general to make *well-omened* (italics Sheppard's) speeches as well as good military dispositions. Every word that Eteocles speaks is fraught with good or evil to himself and his city." Also Helen Bacon, "The Shield of Eteocles," *Arion* 3 (1964) 27 ff., esp. 32, "To all the shield devices . . . and to all the ill-omened words of the attackers, Eteocles responds with the traditional defense against magic. He turns both the words and the visible symbols back on their originators so that they work to the destruction of the bearer." These very pertinent and true observations about the *Seven* invite investigation of how this purpose is accomplished in detail, which will reveal that the power of words has even greater importance for the play than the above two writers indicate.

¹¹ Cf. Eur. *Alc.* 1023, *Ion* 731; Aristoph. *Vesp.* 535; Herod. 5.3; esp. Aesch. *Suppl.* 511 f. where Pelasgus adds an apotropaic sentence to the ill-omened line of the chorus. See E. Fränkel on *Agam.* 997 (p. 451).

When Eteocles catches himself saying something which may be ill-omened, he neutralizes the effect of it by the proper verbal formula.¹²

Eteocles' careful preparation for the defense of the city is interrupted by the entrance of the chorus of women, who are in a terrible state of agitation and panic. The parodos anticipates the worst disasters, the approach of the hostile army, the mounting of the walls, the sack of the city, the rape and captivity of the women. They circle the orchestra embracing one by one the images of the gods and calling upon them to ward off the disasters which they describe in horrifying detail. In contrast to the meticulous caution of Eteocles in the prologue to avoid or neutralize any ill-omened utterance, the outburst of the chorus is a welter of unfortunate language. "Ward off the rising evil (88)." "Will you, Ares, abandon your own?" (104) "Zeus, ward off the capture" (116). "Do not, ye gods, abandon the city." (169) Not only do the women bring confusion and disorder at a moment of crisis but they threaten to ruin the city with their careless words.¹³ On the simple dramatic level their scurrying, noise and confusion impedes the orderly preparation of the city's defense, and their panic may demoralize and terrify the troops (191 ff.). It is sometimes said that Eteocles is unnecessarily harsh on the women because of his thoroughgoing misogyny,¹⁴ and he is by some critics thought to be guilty of hybris, either because of his treatment of the women and disregard of the gods,¹⁵ or because they see "bitter cynical realism" of an atheistical kind in his attempt to keep the women from praying to the gods (285 f.).¹⁶ But surely his urgency is justified when the enemy is at the gates, and the literary effect is to impress upon us

¹² Another explicit example occurs at line 426 when the spy says of Capaneus, "against our battlements he threatens horrors—which may fortune not bring to pass" (*ἄ μὴ κρῶνται τύχη*; Smyth's trans.). Cf. line 549 which Wilamowitz deleted on the grounds that it was repeated from 426.

¹³ Cf. Sheppard *op. cit.* (note 11) 79: "The evil-omened cries of the women constitute a danger, not only because they are a source of disorder and are calculated to discourage fighting men, but also and chiefly for the simple reason that they are ill-omened, unlucky."

¹⁴ Bacon, *op. cit.* 30.

¹⁵ Anthony J. Podlecki, "The Character of Eteocles in Aeschylus' *Septem*," *TAPA* 95 (1964) 282-99, esp. 287.

¹⁶ Leon Golden, "The Character of Eteocles and the Meaning of the *Septem*," *CP* 59 (1964) 79 ff., esp. 80.

the seriousness of the crisis and the need for instantaneous obedience in such circumstances.

Πειθαρχία γάρ ἐστι τῆς εὐπραξίας μήτηρ, γύνη Σωτήρος (224)

may be a proverb, but here it is not merely platitudinous bombast; it is eminently true.

But what is more important for the meaning of the play is the other kind of peril the women present—the danger that they will utter words of disastrous omen. It is for this reason that Eteocles tries to keep them quiet with threats and cajolery. It is the men's duty to see to the sacrifices and prayers, for there is great danger that the women will offer the wrong kind of prayer.¹⁷ The chorus says (257) "A breed beset with miseries, even as men whose city is captured" (Smyth), and this prompts Eteocles to answer:

παλινστομεῖς αὖ θιγγάνουσ' ἀγαλμάτων; (258)

"Do you again utter ill-omened words, while touching the images of the gods?"

He is justifiably horrified to hear them say such things while actually embracing the deities. Fearing that he cannot keep the women altogether quiet, he finally beseeches them at least to *change* their prayers to a better form. Instead of begging the gods to prevent the destruction of the city, a prayer which is ill-omened because it explicitly suggests that destruction, they should pray that the gods be their allies, a positive prayer which is free of any ill-omened suggestion of coming disaster (264 ff.)

*τοῦτ' ἀντ' ἐκείνων τοῦπος αἰροῦμαι σέθεν
καὶ πρὸς γε τούτοις, ἐκτὸς οὖσ' ἀγαλμάτων
εὖχου τὰ κρείσσω, ξυμμάχους εἶναι θεούς.*

'And more than this—quit thy place about the images and make a better prayer: 'May the gods fight on our side!' (Smyth's trans.)¹⁸

Since the defense of Thebes depends upon careful speech, and Eteocles' duty as general demands not only that he say what is proper but also

¹⁷ Cf. Tucker on line 252 [266]: "It is wrong to use in prayer such expressions as imply that the gods may betray us."

¹⁸ See Tucker on lines 202 [216], 252 [266], 254 [268].

that he keep others from uttering words of ill-omen, his behavior does not spring, as has sometimes been argued, from any disbelief in the power of the gods or any impatience with religious sentiment, far less from any outright hybris in his scorn of divinity and its proper honors; it springs rather from a deep conviction that religious observance is essential, that the gods are powerful, and that speech must be especially guarded when addressing them.¹⁹

Eteocles' belief in the power of words is exhibited most strikingly in the seven pairs of speeches. There is some question as to what Eteocles is actually doing in this part of the play, and there are at least four possible explanations. (1) He may be assigning the Theban warriors one by one, choosing from the whole Theban force as he hears each individual report from the scout. (2) He may have already chosen seven men including himself as one of the seven, and here he is assigning the most appropriate man of the seven to each gate as he hears each report from the spy. (3) He may already have assigned each Theban defender to his gate and be merely commenting on the appropriateness of each assignment. (4) He may have assigned some already, have been interrupted, and be continuing with his assignments as he comes on stage; that is to say, some assignments have been made previously and are only now reported, while some are made before our eyes. The question is complicated by the apparent confusion of tenses in Eteocles' speeches, some futures, some aorists, and some perfects. Although it is a question I shall not try to answer here, I prefer to think with Manton²⁰ that the third alternative is the right one, that the matches are not in fact particularly appropriate—with the sole exception of the pairing of Hyperbios and Hippomedon, and that is attributed not to design but to chance (508). But critics have really put too much emphasis on the appropriateness of the choice of a defender to match the invader, for quite independently of the manner in which the assignments are being made, Eteocles is still primarily concerned with accepting the omens in a way that is advantageous to

¹⁹ Cf. Kurt von Fritz, *Antike und Moderne Tragödie* (Berlin 1962) 217, "Eteocles ist alles andere als ein Atheist." Golden *op. cit.* 81 f. claims (I think wrongly) that Eteocles hypocritically uses conventional religion and morality only when they serve his practical ends, and rejects them when they do not.

²⁰ G. R. Manton, "The Second Stasimon of the *Seven Against Thebes*," *BICS* 8 (1961).

Thebes. The important thing that he is doing in these speeches is verbal. Each attacker bears on his shield a blazon or motto which, unbeknown to him, is an adverse omen yet unrevealed. Eteocles interprets each of these omens in a sense which is disastrous for the enemy.²¹

Aeschylus sets the pattern very clearly in the first pair of speeches. Tydeus bears upon his shield the full moon, "the eye of night."²² Eteocles announces that this night upon Tydeus' shield is prophetic and then engages in a bit of word play in which he accepts the omen and turns it against the bearer. He takes the expression "eye of night" and inverts it to "night upon the eyes." "For if night should fall upon the eyes of the dead man, then for the man who bears this boastful blazon it would be rightly and justly true to its name."

εἰ γὰρ θανόντι νύξ ἐπ' ὀφθαλμοῖς πέσοι,
τῷ τοι φέροντι σῆμ' ὑπέροκτον τόδε
γένοιτ' ἂν ὀρθῶς ἐνδικῶς τ' ἐπώνυμον (403 ff.)

Two things are to be especially noted. First the rhyme εἰ γὰρ θανόντι with τῷ τοι φέροντι contributes the quality of an incantation to Eteocles' manipulation of the boast and illustrates the use of word play to turn the omen. Secondly, the word ἐπώνυμον indicates that νύξ has a real or hidden meaning²³ and it is this meaning which Eteocles accepts.

Eteocles proceeds in the same way with the second attacker, Capaneus, who boasts that he will sack the city and not even Zeus' thunderbolts, which he compares scornfully to the gentle sunshine, will deter him. His boast is so clearly a bad omen that it hardly needs exposition. Capaneus has upon his shield an unarmed man bearing fire, a *πυρφόρος*, and it is upon this word that Eteocles plays in accepting the omen. "I am confident that the fire-bearing lightning will in all justice come upon him."

πέποιθα δ' αὐτῷ ξὺν δίκη τὸν πυρφόρον
ῥῆξιν κεραυνόν

This would seem to be sufficient to turn the omen, but he follows it up with another complicated bit of word play inspired by Capaneus'

²¹ Cf. Bacon *op. cit.* 32.

²² Miss Bacon suggests (32) that the blazon is symbolic of the evil eye.

²³ Cf. Groeneboom *ad. loc.*, Wilamowitz on Eur. *H.F.* 56.

boast about the gleaming lightning, the gleam of fire with which he will kindle the city, and the rays of the gleaming sun. Eteocles assigns Polyphontes to this gate and describes him as gleaming in his courage although slow of speech.

ἀνὴρ δ' ἐπ' αὐτῷ, κεί στόμαργός ἐστ' ἄγαν,
αἴθων τέτακται λῆμα, Πολυφόντου βία.

The pun is found in *στόμαργος* and *αἴθων*. *Στόμαργος* on the first level means 'reluctant to speak' and is to be contrasted with the overweening and uncautious speech of Capaneus. It exemplifies the recurrent contrast in the play between the boasts of the Argives and the deeds of the Thebans.²⁴ *Αἴθων* on the other hand means not only 'gleaming', and as such is used as an epithet of lightning,²⁵ but also means 'fierce'; hence Polyphontes is 'mouth slow but courage fierce.' Eteocles has taken the gleam of Capaneus' boast and applied it to Polyphontes' fierceness. The pun is then doubled again in the word *ἀργός* which means 'slow' but also suggests a pun on *ἀργής* 'gleaming' which is a traditional epithet for lightning.²⁶ Eteocles then accepts the omen of Capaneus' shield and by means of the complicated puns turns it against him and identifies Polyphontes' fierceness (*αἴθων*) and modesty (*ἀργός*) with Zeus' lightning which Capaneus to his sure destruction proudly scorns.

In the case of the third shield Eteocles does not use a punning word play, but the point of departure here too is the motto on the shield. The words written on the blazon of the Argive attacker Eteocles seem to come out of the mouth of a figure climbing a tower by means of a scaling ladder. He boldly says that not even Ares would knock him from the battlements (469). By a lucky chance (*σὺν τύχῃ* δέ τω, 472) Megareus is the one who has already been assigned to that gate, and Eteocles proceeds to interpret the significance of this match and accept

²⁴ Cf. 473, 410, 441, 554, 556.

²⁵ E.g. Pindar *Ol.* 10.83.

²⁶ *Il.* 8.133; *Od.* 5.128, 131; 7.249; 2.387. The meaning "white or gleaming" for *ἀργός* itself seems to be uncommon. Cf. Hom. *Od.* 15.161; Arist. *Top.* 149A. Cf. Macrobius *Sat.* 1.19.13 on Argus, the pursuer of Io which he says is the star-studded heaven: "*Caelum autem Argum vocari placuit a candore et velocitate, παρὰ τὸ λευκὸν καὶ ταχύ.*" But compounds would have the o-stem form, e.g. that species of eagle called the *πύγαργος* (Arist. *Hist. Anim.* 618B18; D'Arcy Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds*² 255.) See also W. H. Willis, *AJP* 63 (1942) 90.

the omen. Megareus is a descendant of the Sparti, who sprang out of the ground when Cadmus sowed the teeth of the dragon.²⁷ One version of the story would make the dragon the son of Ares. Hence Megareus would be a descendant of Ares.²⁸ But it cannot be demonstrated that Aeschylus is in fact employing that tradition, and the suggestion that Megareus is a descendant of Ares is perhaps remote. At the very least however, Ares is thought to be especially well disposed to the Sparti (412), and the boastful challenge to him will be answered by a man under his special protection. When Megareus says he will deck his father's house with spoils (479), the father in question may be Ares and the house his temple (as Verrall *ad loc.* suggests) either as Megareus' literal ancestor or as the general protector of Thebes.²⁹ The brevity of Eteocles' answer here has been noted before,³⁰ and while we need not endorse the idea of W. Dindorf that the speeches of Eteocles and the spy should be of equal length, this speech, the shortest of the seven pairs, may still arouse suspicion that a line or two has dropped out containing a more obvious word play and a description of Megareus' shield, which possibly bore a figure of Ares. It is also curious that Aeschylus seems to take no note of the coincidence of the names Eteocles and Eteocles which would seem to offer an ideal opportunity for word play. Kitto³¹ has suggested that here Eteocles misses his chance to assign himself to this gate as the appropriate defender and thus avoid meeting his brother.

The next pair of speeches is the central pair and it brings together with weighty symbolic force the two great champions of right and wrong: Zeus and Typhon. All of the conflict between the noble and

²⁷ For the story see Apollodorus 3.4.1 f.; Eur. *Phoen.* 638 ff.; 930 ff. with scholia; Apoll. Rhod. 3.1177 ff.; Plut. *Sulla* 17; Ovid. *Metam.* 3.10 ff.; Scholiast on Homer *Il.* 2.494; Pausanias 9.10.1; 9.12.1 ff.; 9.19.4.; Hyginus *Fab.* 178.

²⁸ For the fact that the dragon was the son of Ares see Apollodorus 3.4.1 f. Eur. *Phoen.* 931, 935 calls it γηγενής.

²⁹ Cf. *Sept.* 135 ff. There is also a marriage connection, since Cadmus' wife Harmonia was the daughter of Ares and Aphrodite. Cf. *Sept.* 135 with scholia. There may be a pun on κήδεσαι. See Smyth (Loeb), Groeneboom, and Verrall *ad loc.* Compare Verrall on 472 [459].

³⁰ The speech is 6 lines shorter than the expected 15. Cf. Verrall *ad loc.* and his introd., p. xxxvi. Dindorf supposed speeches of the spy and Eteocles should be of equal length.

³¹ H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*³ 49.

the demonic, between constitutional power and revolutionary power, civilized society and barbarian anarchy, the sacred and the profane, justice and evil, is summed up in the confrontation of these two great enemies, the Olympian and the monster. The Theban attacker bears Typhon's image on his shield, and the defender Hyperbios has the figure of Zeus on his. The omen in this case is virtually self-explanatory and needs no subtle word play to twist its meaning to the advantage of Thebes; but still the omen must be formally accepted by Eteocles and activated by presenting it verbally before the avenging gods. Hippomedon, by asserting on his blazon that he is precisely as terrifying as the monster Typhon, speaks more truly than he knows, for indeed he will hold no terror at all for the Zeus on his opponent's shield. Eteocles in performing his military duty to accept the omen begins his speech at line 501 with a prayer to Athena of the positive kind he has recommended to the women, that she hate the Typhoean insolence of the enemy attacking the gate near her shrine; Eteocles ends his speech with a prayer that Zeus be true to his representation on the shield and the story of Typhon's defeat. Once the omen is thus accepted by Eteocles, he adds yet another positive prayer invoking, as before, the effectiveness of words, when he prays that Zeus Savior be true to his name, *ἐπώνυμος*. Here he accepts an omen latent in the very name of Zeus. The final lines of this speech (515-20), usually bracketed since W. Dindorf's 1841 Oxford edition, have been restored to honor by E. Fränkel's judicious and convincing argument in *SBAW* (1957) 32-36. The objection had been (ignoring certain refutable objections on diction) that the lines are weak and repetitious, but Fränkel shows that they fit into a regular pattern found in the final lines of each of the seven pairs of speeches, which alternate between petition and prayer. Beyond Eteocles' accepting the omen, it is these lines which contain the characteristic word play we have found in the other speeches, viz. the invocation of the eponymy of *Ζεὺς Σωτήρ* and, it may be suggested, the pun on the name *Τυφῶν* found in the last word of the speech *τυχῶν* (520). It appears that the chorus picks up the pun in line 521 with *ἀντίτυπον*.

When the spy reports the situation at the fifth gate he too engages in a bit of the now familiar word play, although apparently with no specifically apotropaic purpose; Aeschylus seems only to be strengthen-

ing a pattern of language which he will use forcefully in the next pair of speeches, when Amphiarus plays upon the name of Polyneices (575-79). The scout holds off the name Parthenopaios until late in his report, while offering to the audience early in the speech enough information for them to solve the riddle. He is an *ἀνδρόπαις ἀνὴρ* and not *παρθένων ἐπώνυμον*. Surely the audience got the point, and perhaps there is added interest in Aeschylus' introducing a passage in which the Sphinx is featured with a riddle for the audience to solve.³² The messenger also ends his speech with an apotropaic formula *ἂ μὴ κραίνου θεός* (549, cf. 426) falling into the spirit of Eteocles' caution with words.³³ Parthenopaios has on his shield a figure of the Sphinx, the 'shame of Thebes,' and below grasped in her claws a Theban warrior. The device is intended to be an insult (529) to Thebes for two reasons. First, the enemy flaunts the distress of the city in having to sacrifice its citizens to this monster, and, second, the Theban man in the Sphinx's grasp is so placed as to receive most of the blows (544). Any Theban defender is thus put into the position of attacking and striking another Theban, the one on the shield. There is added irony and insult implied here because Polyneices, in whose behalf the expedition is mounted, is a Theban and has forced the defenders to attack a fellow citizen. The characters in the drama do not yet suspect the fullness of this

³² The true etymology of the name Parthenopaios may be 'maiden-faced,' but that of course does not preclude Aeschylus' punning on *παῖς*. But see Verrall on 519 [532]; Soph. O.C. 1320; Eur. *Phoen.* 150, 1106, 1153; *Suppl.* 888.

Groeneboom *ad P.V.* 85, collects instances of play on names. Cf. Fränkel on *Agam.* 681 ff. for the pun on the name Helen found in *Ἑλέναυς* etc.: "The subject, the giver of the name remains hidden, the object is kept back as long as possible. This postponement of the proper name (so that it is preceded by preparatory notions) here serves the particular purpose of heightening the tension caused by the riddle, but the practice is not uncommon." Cf. Fränkel on *Agam.* 687, Wilamowitz *Interp.* 77. For Aeschylean etymologies see Kranz *Stasimon* 287 ff., W. Schmid, *Geschichte der Griech. Lit.* 1.2 (1934) 297 n.3., Wilamowitz, *Glaube der Hellenen* 2.135 n.1, (cf. 2.114 n.4), Pease on Cicero *De Div.* 1.102.

³³ Once again we are indebted to the good sense of Eduard Fränkel for restoring these lines to their proper place (*Sitz. Bayerischen Akad. d. Wiss.* [1957] 36 ff.) refuting Wilamowitz *Interp.* 110 f. from Wilamowitz himself who objected to the postponement of the name. Fränkel also might have quoted Wilamowitz *Interp.* 77 (which he does on *Agam.* 687) where Wilamowitz discusses without objection, and indeed with implied praise, the postponement of the names at *Sept.* 472 ff. and 631 f.

In the matter of line 549 we are happily beyond that era in criticism when the repetition of a sentiment (cf. 426) justified its excision, especially such an apotropaic sentiment of the sort that pervades the tragedy.

irony which will be revealed in the confrontation of the two brothers, and give the derisive taunt on Parthenopaios' shield a meaning of unexpected tragic bitterness. Eteocles' duty is to accept the omen, while also turning it against Parthenopaios. He does so by pointing out that the Sphinx herself would receive the blows, and in objection to this treatment turn against Parthenopaios for his insolence (560 ff.). As before with Tydeus, Capaneus, Eteocles and Hippomedon, the attacker mocks the gods, and Eteocles, by stating this fact and exploiting what should be the gods' natural anger against the attackers, turns the force of that attack and enlists the aid of the insulted divinities.

The next attacker is a special case, Amphiaraus, the seer, who had opposed the present expedition because he foresaw that all who joined it except Adrastus were to die. Tricked into compliance by the arbitration of his wife Eriphyle, he bitterly continued to prophesy failure and to berate the leaders of the expedition.³⁴ Heretofore the Argive champions have unwittingly been responsible by their shields or by their words for an unfavorable omen. Unwittingly they have prophesied against themselves (406), but it was necessary also for Eteocles to play the prophet to make the omen explicit and to activate it by his acceptance. Amphiaraus' shield is blank. There is no omen there to be interpreted. And Amphiaraus the prophet explicitly prophesied against himself as he must, and his words need no interpretation or acceptance by Eteocles. Amphiaraus is the counterpart in the Argive camp of the women in Thebes, each speaking words of ill-omen although Amphiaraus does so in full knowledge. He accepts his own omens, making it unnecessary for Eteocles to do it.

The messenger also reports that in the series of comminations Amphiaraus has included a play on Polyneices' name. Although it is difficult to say with certainty what kind of transformation he makes in the name, it is clear that it centers around the pun on *νεῖκος*, 'strife,' and the fact that Polyneices is true to his name, *ἐπώνυμος*.³⁵

³⁴ Cf. Apollodorus 3.6.2.

³⁵ The solutions of the problem turn upon whether *ἐξυπτιάζων* is thought to mean 'invert' or merely 'etymologize or explain,' and whether *ἐνδατούμενος* is thought to mean 'divide' or 'emphasize.' (Some editors, e.g. Groeneboom and Verrall, following Schütz, read *ἄμμα ὑπτιάζων* rather than *ὄνομα*, thus eliminating that half of the puzzle.) Sample suggestions are: "Repeating the name *Πολυνείκης* with a stress upon its parts so as to bring out the meaning 'contention'" (Verrall); "disclosing the sense of his name

So far the procedure in the seven pairs of speeches has shown a definite pattern. It is the duty of Eteocles as defender of the city to provide for that defense not only by military means but also by the proper and skillful interpretation and acceptance of omens. It is the latter to which he refers in the first line of the play when he says that it is necessary for the commander to speak the words which are appropriate to the situation—*χρῆ λέγειν τὰ καίρια*. In each case (except of course for Amphiarus), he shows how the motto, boast, or blazon of the enemy is in fact true in an unexpected sense unfavorable to the attacker. His explication and acceptance of this meaning activates the omen. It is important to see that he does not refute the enemy's boast, but asserts its truth in a special way. Everything spoken in this drama is true, although people speak better than they know, and the discovery of the real truth in what they say is often surprising. It is a play of fulfilled riddles, where control of events depends upon understanding those riddles and interpreting them advantageously.

In the seventh speech Eteocles does something quite different. Polyneices appears with a double figure on his shield: a woman leading an armed man. In the caption the woman declares herself to be Justice, who will restore (*κατάγω* 647) this man to his fatherland. We expect Eteocles to do as he has done before and turn the omen of the blazon against his brother, but instead of claiming that it is *true* in an unexpected sense unfavorable to Polyneices, he claims that it is false and simply denies it. Justice would be untrue to her name if she restored him.³⁶

aye, dwelling twice . . . upon it" (Rose); ὦ πολὺν νεῖκος ὦ πολὺν νεῖκος ἐγείρας (W. Dindorf, *Philologus* 21 [1864] 211); πολὺν δὲ νεϊκέων Πολυνείκες (Wilamowitz); "*nomen ejus alta voce clamans*" (Butler); Πολυνείκης νεῖκος πολὺ (Lesky). The fullest discussion is A. Lesky, "Aischylos, *Septem* 576 ff.," *Studi in honore Gino Funaioli* (1955) 163 ff.

³⁶ There can be no doubt that in this play justice is in actual fact on Eteocles' side, for on the one hand the chorus does not reproach him for unfairness or breach of faith—and there is ample opportunity for doing so—and on the other hand Amphiarus explicitly puts all the blame on Polyneices (570 ff.) Cf. Gerhard Müller, *Hermes* 94 (1966) 265 ff. This means that the most familiar version of the story (cf. Apollodorus 3.6.1; Eur. *Phoen.* 69 ff., 473 ff.) wherein Eteocles and Polyneices had agreed to alternate in the kingship each year, and at the end of his year Eteocles refused to relinquish the throne as agreed, is not the tradition which Aeschylus is following. For a different version of the cause of the dispute see Hellanicus *FGrH* I.F. 98 and the scholiast on Eur. *Phoen.* 71. Much erroneous criticism of the play has arisen from the unwarranted assumption that Aeschylus was using the same form of the story that Euripides did in the *Phoenissae*.

Eteocles fails to turn the omen. Furthermore, given the pattern which has preceded, there is an obvious way to have done it. Justice on the shield says, "I will bring this man back from exile."

κατάξω δ' ἄνδρα τόνδε (647)

Eteocles could have played upon the ambiguous word *κατάγω*. While it is the standard word meaning 'restore from exile' it can also mean 'lead down to Hades.'³⁷ If Justice led Polyneices down to Hades she would be *ἐπώνυμος*. Instead Eteocles hedges and leaves the possibility open by saying that if she brings Polyneices back she would be *ψευδώνυμος* (670). This then of all the omens is false, and Eteocles fails to accept it. Therefore he fails to control events as he has done up to now.³⁸

What are we to make of Eteocles' statement that Polyneices is very much true to his name (658)? It seems to mark a clear change in his procedure, and a different belief about the power of words. Heretofore Eteocles has used eponymy as an element in the defense of Thebes, as when he prays that the gods be true to their names. But here with the name of Polyneices the word play seems to have no purpose other than invective. It is not employed to turn an omen. In this last case Eteocles seems to regard the omen in the name not as something to be manipulated so as to affect events, not as an opportunity to wield the power of words to determine the outcome, but instead he regards the omen as merely *confirmatory* of what has already been determined. The interpretation of the omen does not affect events, but the outcome

³⁷ Hom. *Od.* 24. 100 ψυχὰς μνηστήρων κατάγων; cf. 11.164; Paus. 3.6.2. Cf. also Clytemnestra's ambiguous and ironic εὐθὺς γενέσθω πορφυρόστωτος πόρος/ ἐς δῶμ' ἄελπτον ὡς ἂν ἡγήται Δίκη *Agam.* 911 ("with ominous double sense", Fränkel *ad* 1378).

³⁸ In her perceptive and interesting article "The Shield of Eteocles" (*Arion* 3 [1964] 27), Helen Bacon says, "Eteocles' decision to face his brother in single combat, which comes at the end of his speech (659 ff.) is a decision to *know* [italics hers], at whatever price, the ultimate meaning of Polyneices' so modest appearing shield device." Here I cannot agree with Miss Bacon. First, I should not think Polyneices' device is very modest. It reminds me somewhat of Peisistratus ushered in by Phye-Athena (and may so have reminded the Greek audience). Furthermore I cannot see that in lines 659-61 τάχ' εἰσόμεθα expresses a desire to learn what the blazon means, but rather a conviction that the boast is false, and that it will be so manifest. "We shall see", he says, and not in a spirit of inquiry. Cf. Hom. *Il.* 8.532; *Od.* 22.7. The condition contrary to fact of 662-3 makes very clear the scorn with which he dismisses Polyneices' patently absurd claim.

of events reveals the correct interpretation of the omen. Two examples from Herodotus (6.107; 1.120) will illustrate the difference. Just before the Persians landed at Marathon Hippias dreamed that he had intercourse with his mother. He interpreted this to mean that he would be restored to Athens and live to a ripe old age in his native land. But as he disembarked he sneezed and coughed with such force as to dislodge a loose tooth which fell into the sand. He then realized that *this* was the fulfillment of the dream instead of his earlier interpretation, and that the only share of Athens he was to possess was that held by his tooth. In the second example the fact that the boy Cyrus has been chosen king by his playfellows is thought to satisfy the omens in Astyages' dream. The Magi say that their prophecies are sometimes fulfilled by trivial events.

The sudden realization of the meaning of an oracle or omen hitherto misunderstood, like the solving of a riddle, seems to mark an attitude toward events different from the earlier conviction that with proper interpretation of omens events can be controlled. A note of inevitability is introduced. This new attitude becomes apparent when Eteocles at last comprehends the full meaning of his father's curse and in the conviction that it cannot be avoided accepts it to his own destruction. In his play upon the name Polyneices he begins to show this conviction that the omen in his brother's name is confirmed by present events which it has brought to pass. As a result of his failure to turn the omen of Polyneices' shield, as he has done with the others, and his unexpected conviction that the outcome is inevitable Eteocles goes to his death. It is not really Fate or the Erinys alone that brings about the duel, but Eteocles' *belief* that the curse must come true which causes him to choose as he does.

The chorus at this point is not concerned with the death of Eteocles but only with the danger of pollution. Their concern with pollution shows that they do not expect the double murder of the brothers, for if *both* brothers die, where is such pollution to lodge?

The arguments which follow will depend at crucial points upon the nature of the pollution which results when a man is murdered. The subject is complicated by the fact that the customary and codified procedures for dealing with murder change considerably in the period from Homer to Plato, but those changes can be summed up in two

developments: (1) the distinction between premeditated murder (φόνος ἐκούσιος) and unpremeditated murder (φόνος ἀκούσιος) which was introduced by Draco's code, and (2) the assumption of responsibility by the state for the punishment of a murderer. There is no evidence from Homer that the murderer incurred any ritual pollution by his deed, for there the man fleeing from the vengeance of his victim's family was readily received in other countries, no purification seems to have been necessary, and even the vengeance of the family was satisfied by the payment of a suitable wergeld. After the period represented by the Homeric poems, the murderer was held to be a polluted man by his shedding of blood, and he was forbidden to enter the temples and marketplaces of the country where the crime was committed, for, unless he was exiled, he transmitted his pollution to the land itself. He could not be received by anyone until he had been purified in one of several ways, for example, by washing in the blood of a suckling pig. If the homicide was justifiable and he was forgiven he still had to undergo this purification. This was however not sufficient in itself to end the pollution; the murderer had to give life for life if the spirit of the dead man was to be appeased. The solemn responsibility for vengeance lay upon the next of kin, and if he failed to fulfil this responsibility the *miasma* was transferred to him. When the state began to interest itself, it was possible for anybody to undertake the vengeance, more especially the state itself by public execution, and if this was neglected, the state incurred the pollution. The necessity for the next of kin to exact vengeance leads to an impasse in the case of parricide where the next of kin responsible is precisely the murderer himself. For who then can take vengeance upon the murderer and destroy the pollution? It appears that two things are necessary in case of murder, and it is difficult to distinguish them clearly. The murderer must be purified by the sacrifice and still be subject to the vengeance of the next of kin in order for the spirit of the victim to be appeased and the pollution to be eliminated. In any case upon the death of the murderer the pollution ceases to exist.³⁹

³⁹ On the subject in general see Plato *Laws* 8.865A; P. Stengel *Die Griechischen Kultusaltertümer*³, 155-67; E. Rohde, *Psyche* (Engl. tr. 1925) 174-216; G. Glotz, *La Solidarité de la Famille* (Paris 1904) 47-91, 228-37, 425-42; K. Latte, *Archiv für Religionswiss.* 20 (1921) 254-98; Hamburg s.v. *καθαρμός* in *RE* 10.2513-19; K. Latte s.v. "Mord" in

The word *αὐτοκτόνος* has been subject to misinterpretations springing from misunderstanding of the background of the play. It is sometimes supposed that Oedipus predicted that his sons would kill each other, and that this outcome was both feared and expected by Eteocles and the chorus. Both of these interpretations of Aeschylus' play, I think, are demonstrably false, but they have led to the lexical mistake of glossing *αὐτοκτόνος* as 'cut down by mutual slaughter.'⁴⁰ This interpretation can only come from reasoning backward from the outcome of the play and not from any analysis of the meaning of *αὐτο-* in compounds. The outcome of the play is a surprise. Neither Eteocles nor the chorus expects *both* brothers to die. We cannot assume that Aeschylus is following that version of the story in which it is predicted that the brothers would die by each other's hand.⁴¹ It is clear that in the *Seven* Oedipus' curse stated only that the sons would have to submit the division of their patrimony to an arbiter, and that this division would be a continual source of strife between them.⁴² Eteocles expects to win the encounter at the gate (672)⁴³ and the chorus' concern with the pollution incurred by killing a brother (682) makes sense only if one of the brothers survives to be a *locus* for the pollution. The word *αὐτοκτόνος* cannot mean 'cut down by mutual slaughter.'⁴⁴ The two possible meanings of this word, supported by

RE 16.1.278-89. The above derive largely from K. O. Müller's still useful *Erläuterungen in Aeschylus Eumeniden* (Göttingen 1833) 126-64. See also A. W. H. Adkins *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford 1960) 86-115. For the specific point that the pollution ceases to exist once the guilty person is dead, cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 603; Antiphon *Tetral.* I A 3; II A 2; B 8; D 9; III C 7 and Maidment's introductions to his Loeb edition of the *Tetralogies*, esp. 38, 40, 86.

⁴⁰ So Italie's *Index* s.v.; Smyth 681; *LSJ* s.v.

⁴¹ *Thebais* frg. 3, Allen.

⁴² *Thebais* frg. 2, Allen. In each place where the substance of the curse is mentioned in the *Septem* (727 ff.; 785 ff.; 815 ff.; 885; 907 ff.; 941 ff.) the central idea is the unfriendly division of the estate of Oedipus. The disagreement of the two fragments of the *Thebais* on this matter and upon the occasion of Oedipus' curse seems to indicate that Oedipus cursed his sons twice in the *Thebais*, and the two distinct occasions were lumped together in the later mythographic tradition.

⁴³ Kurt von Fritz, *Ant. u. Mod. Tragödie* 194.

⁴⁴ The meaning 'mutual slaughter' would be conveyed by compounds of *ἀλληλο-*; *ἀλληλοκτονέω* Hp. *Ep.* 17; Arist. *Frg.* 344; Phil. *Jud.* 2.38; *ἀλληλοκτονία* Dion. Ha. 1.87; Phil. *Jud.* 2.567; *ἀλληλόκτονος* Mosch. *Trag.* 6; Dion. Hal. 2.24; *ἀλληλοφονία* Pind. *Ol.* 2.42; *-φονοί* Pind. *Frg.* 163; Aesch. *Sept.* 931; Agam. 1576; Xen. *Hier.* 3.8. Groeneboom on Aesch. *Sept.* 681 suggests that *αὐτοκτονοῦντε* at Soph. *Ant.* 56 means *ἀλληλοκτονοῦντε* but see Groeneboom on *Sept.* 734.

the meaning of other compounds in *αὐτο-* are 'killing kindred' and 'killing self.'⁴⁵ When Eteocles decides to meet his brother in combat there is danger that he will incur the pollution of a fratricide, and this is what the chorus fears, not his death. In the second stasimon (720-91) they had recited the misfortunes of the house of Laius culminating with the curse upon the two brothers. When the double death is reported to them, they realize that what they sang in the second stasimon was ill-omened and actually prophesied that outcome unbeknown to them at the time. They realize that their song said more than they supposed, and those inauspicious utterances contributed to the tragedy. "Twas for a tomb I framed my song, when inspired by frenzy, I heard (prophetically) of their death by an evil doom and of their corpses bedabbled in blood. Ill-omened, indeed, the contest of the spear to such an accompaniment." (835 ff.)⁴⁶ The second stasimon, which the chorus regrets because of its inauspicious sentiments requires care in interpretation owing to the ambiguity of the omen. My claim is that references to the death of the brothers in the choral ode and the epirrhematic passage immediately preceding do not imply that the chorus expects both brothers to die, but on the other hand these passages are patient of that interpretation in retrospect, once the outcome of the play is known. In other words, the chorus in innocence, but with heavy tragic irony which is not lost on the audience, speaks more truly than it knows. The great concern of the chorus is the inexpiability of the pollution incurred in killing a brother (694, 680 ff., 737 f.)⁴⁷ Since the pollution must rest upon the killer, and if the killer himself is dead, the pollution does not exist, the chorus must expect one brother to survive.

There yet remains a serious problem of interpretation which appears to contradict the above conclusion, namely the plurals and duals in lines 681 f., 732 and 735 ff. The passage at 735 ff. is the least difficult, and can be explained with Verrall as referring to the whole family of the Labdacids. "If they die slain by kindred hand (as did Laius, Oedipus [by his own hand] and as Polyneices [or Eteocles] appears about

⁴⁵ See Jebb on *Antigone* 55 and 1175.

⁴⁶ Smyth (Loeb) gives this as an alternative translation. Cf. Tucker on 820 [835]. But cf. Verrall, Groeneboom *ad loc.*

⁴⁷ See Rose on 739 and Scholiast M on 680.

to do) and the dust of earth drink their black clotted gore, who would offer purification? Who would release them from the stain? O new toils of the house mixed with old evils."⁴⁸ The question "Who would offer purification?" has here nothing to do with the fact that both brothers would be dead—as if purification had to be offered by some third party—but rather with the fact that there is *no* purification for the fratricide at all.⁴⁹ A second and complementary explanation is possible for this passage. It may be a case of the so-called *allusive plural* by which a single person is alluded to in the plural number, a usage which reaches its greatest frequency in tragedy, and is especially plentiful in Aeschylus.⁵⁰ It is, moreover, especially recurrent in reference to rulers, members of the family, and the dead. A passage similar to the one under consideration is found at *Choe.* 48–53 which concerns the troubles of the house of Atreus, death, and the hopelessness of purification, where Agamemnon is referred to in the plural, and where there are four other poetic plurals as well:

τί γὰρ λύτρον πεσόντος αἵματος πέδοι;
 ἰὼ πάνοιζυς ἑστία,
 ἰὼ κατασκαφαὶ δόμων.
 ἀνήλιοι βροτοστυγεῖς
 δνόφοι καλύπτουσι δόμους
 δεσποτῶν θανάτοισι.

'For what purification is there for blood fallen to the ground. Oh grief-ridden hearth, O the ruin of the house. Sunless gloom hated by mortals enshrouds the house at the death of its lord.'⁵¹

The plural *φθιμένοισιν* (732) can also be explained by the frequent use of the plural to refer to the dead.⁵² The most striking Aeschylean

⁴⁸ Cf. Verrall on 721 [734]: "But when by kindred murderers kinsmen are slain." The reference, as the sequel shows, is to the murder of Laius, which entailed the curse now being fulfilled. The subject is men in general.

⁴⁹ P. Stengel, *Die Griechischen Kultusaltertümer*³ 157 f. Cf. a similar question in Rohde *Psyche* (Eng. tr. 1925) 207, "When the son has slain his father or mother, who shall then carry out the blood feud incumbent upon the nearest relation of the dead?"

⁵⁰ Cf. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* 1007, 1012; Fränkel on *Agam.* 1618, and especially H. L. Jones, *The Poetic Plural in Greek Tragedy* (Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, no. 19, Ithaca 1910) 141–164, where an abundance of relevant examples is presented.

⁵¹ See Jones *op. cit.* 90, 14; Soph. *O.T.* 497, and *El.* 1208 with Jebb's notes *ad locc.*

⁵² Jones, *op. cit.* 161 ff.

instances are *Pers.* 219–20:

δεύτερον δὲ χρὴ χοὰς
γῇ τε καὶ φθιτοῖς χέασθαι.

‘Next we must pour libations to earth and the dead’

where Darius alone is meant, and also *Pers.* 523:

ἔπειτα Γῇ τε καὶ φθιτοῖς δωρήματα
ῆξω λαβοῦσα.

‘Then I shall come with offerings for earth and the dead’

where the scholiast glosses φθιτοῖς by τῷ Δαρείῳ δηλονότι.

There remain to be explained then only the duals in line 681. Once again we must recall the principle that no pollution exists once the polluted person is dead. Since the overriding concern of the chorus is with *miasma*—and indeed in the immediately following line (682)—we must conclude that the one thing line 681 *cannot* mean is “the death of *both* blood brothers”. Hence ἄνδρῶν δμαίμοιν is best taken as a dative,⁵³ and the passage means “In the case of two blood brothers, such a death at the hands of kinsmen—there is no fading of this pollution!”, and the chorus does not foresee the death of both Eteocles and Polyneices.⁵⁴

Having demonstrated that nothing the chorus says can be taken to indicate that they expect the death of both brothers, and that the compounds in αὐτο-, and the crucial plurals cannot be so taken, I must turn the argument back upon itself and claim that, after all, these expressions are ambiguous, the chorus had spoken more truly than it knows, and in the third stasimon where their theme is that all of the omens and curses, the deeper meanings of the words, have come true, they particularly regret their own ill-omened statements (808, 835, 838). The word αὐτοκτόνος and its relatives are seen to have an unexpected truth. That one son of Oedipus might die by a brother’s hand was foreseen, but that in the event it was to be true of *both*

⁵³ Specifically, the so-called dative of relation, Smyth, *Greek Grammar* 1495.

⁵⁴ Cf. Verrall’s note on 668 [681]. The superscribed *ων* in MSS PBNH appears not to be a correction, but an abbreviated gloss indicating that these duals are to be interpreted as genitives. I am indebted to my colleague Marilyn Kuperman Scott for helpful discussion of this passage.

astounds the chorus. Their death was not only at a brother's hand but also *suicidal*. This is the second meaning which is revealed, not the impossible meaning 'killed by mutual slaughter'.

It is not only the Argive champions and the Chorus of Theban women who use words that are unexpectedly true. Despite Eteocles' confidence in the successful defense of Thebes and despite his even exaggerated sensitivity to the proper use of words and their ominous power, he himself at the beginning of the play speaks more truly than he knows. A grave responsibility rests upon the commander, for he will be certain to receive the blame for failure, and yet success will be attributed to the favor of the gods. For a brief moment Eteocles allows himself to foresee that failure, safeguarding what he says of course with the apotropaic formula $\delta \mu\eta \gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\iota\tau\omicron$ (s). He imagines the citizens shouting his name in the streets with scorn and lamentation (6 ff.):

Ἐτεοκλέης ἄν εἰς πολὺς κατὰ πτόλιν
ὑμνοῖθ' ὑπ' ἀστῶν φροϊμίους πολυρρόθοις
οἰμώγμασιν θ'

'The name Eteocles alone would be much chanted about
the city by the burgers in the utterings
of the crowd and in their laments.'

The word *πολύρροθος* refers to the confusion of many turbulent voices, but literally the word should refer to the splash of oars or the dash of waves.⁵⁵ What can be the point of these splashing preludes? The answer comes in the choral dirge after the death of the brothers (854 ff.) where the chorus with the wind of their sighs and the beating of their hands about their heads like the splash of oars drive the barque of the dead down the river of Hell.

ἀλλὰ γόων, ὦ φίλαι, κατ' οὔρον
ἐρέσσειτ' ἀμφὶ κρατὶ πόμπιμον χερσὶν
πίτυλον

'O friends, down the wind of your sighs row with
your hands about your heads the escorting stroke.'

Eteocles' remark at the beginning of the play has come true in an

⁵⁵ See *LSJ* s. vv. *ρόθιος*, *ρόθος*.

unexpected sense and the ambiguity latent in *πολύρροθος* has been realized in the oar-strokes of the dirge.

The central and most important example of the efficacy of words is the curse of Oedipus itself, in which enigmatic language is illuminated by subsequent events, so that hitherto unsuspected meaning emerges. The actual wording of the curse, presumably contained in the preceding play of the trilogy, has to be reconstructed from the hints given in the *Seven*. It has already been pointed out above (p. 111) that in Aeschylus' version Oedipus did not condemn his sons to killing each other, but rather his curse stated that they would have to submit the division of their inheritance to an arbiter. When Oedipus died the sons agreed upon an equitable division of the property; Eteocles took the kingdom, and Polyneices got the girdle of Harmonia. This should have settled the matter and the sons would seem to have escaped the consequences of their father's curse. They have divided their patrimony without recourse to arbitration. But for reasons we do not know, Polyneices became dissatisfied with this agreement and marched against Thebes. In the *Seven* the very fact then that he does so seems to be a fulfillment of Oedipus' curse.⁵⁶ But we must look more closely at the evidence for the words of the curse, (787 ff.; 727 ff.; 711; 816 f.; 884 f.; 906 ff.; 941 ff.). The riddling language must have said that the sons would have to submit the question of the division of their inheritance to a foreign arbiter from over the sea, born of fire, and who would give them exactly equal shares.⁵⁷ The figure of the arbiter seems to be very real, and G. R. Manton⁵⁸ suggests that the answer to the problem of the mysterious dream (710 f.) is that Jocasta in the middle play saw a man in Scythian costume discharging the office of an arbiter. The answer to the riddle is that the foreign arbiter is the sword made of Chalybian iron from over the sea (*πόντιος*) and born of the fire (*πυριγενής*) which will divide their inheritance equally, that is to give each enough land to be buried in.

⁵⁶ H. Patzer, "Die Dramatische Handlung der *Sieben Gegen Theben*," *HSCP* 63 (1958) 101.

⁵⁷ Patzer, *ibid.* Tucker's reconstruction (Introduction p. xxix) is reasonable and to the point. He suggests the actual language of the curse was *πικρὸς ἔσται χρηματοδαίτης ξένος πόντιος πυριγενής*.

⁵⁸ *BICS* 8 (1961) 77-84. See also Helmut Engelmann, "Der Schiedsrichter aus der Fremde," *Rh. Mus.* 110 (1967) 97-102.

When it is reported to Eteocles that his brother is at the seventh gate and that Polyneices (who is of course ignorant for his part that his opponent will be Eteocles) intends to seek out his brother and face him in hand to hand combat (635 f.),⁵⁹ Eteocles understands the meaning of his father's curse. It is this sudden enlightenment which causes him to exclaim at line 653 ff.:

ὦ θεομανές τε καὶ θεῶν μέγα στύγος
ὦ πανδάκρυτον ἄμὸν Οἰδίπου γένος
ὦμοι, πατὴρ δὴ νῦν ἀραὶ τελεσφόροι.

Oh god-maddened object of the gods' great hatred,
Oh lamentable race of Oedipus!
Alas, *now* it is that my father's curse is fulfilled.

In the epirrhematic passage which follows Eteocles and the chorus are talking at cross purposes. The chorus, who have not yet understood the riddle of the curse, suppose that it is mere anger, bravado, martial courage, impulsive indignation, or fear of being thought a coward which drives Eteocles on. Each time the chorus tries to dissuade him from meeting his brother, Eteocles replies again and again that it is the ineluctable curse which drives him on. Again and again he says the gods will have it this way, and that all of the omens (709 f.) point to the necessity of this fraternal duel. The chorus, lacking his sensitivity to the power of the spoken word, naturally suppose that Eteocles can avoid the encounter by assigning someone else to the gate, but this would merely postpone the meeting, for Eteocles remembers his brother's threat (636) to climb the wall and seek him out. This merely confirms Eteocles' conviction that the meeting is the inevitable fulfillment of the omens and the curse. It is his deep belief in the efficacy of words that prompts him to submit to necessity and he leaves the stage saying (719):

θεῶν δίδόντων οὐκ ἂν ἐκφύγοις κακά

When the gods bestow troubles no man would escape them.

But something here does not ring true. Eteocles' conviction that words have power to affect events has led him to accept as inevitable the duel with his brother, and yet throughout the earlier part of

⁵⁹ Cf. K. von Fritz, *Ant. u. Mod. Tragödie* 206 f.

the play that same confidence in the power of words led him, not to a belief in the inevitability of the outcome, but rather to his confident manipulation of the omens in order to *change* the expected outcome. What has happened to Eteocles' expertise in turning the omens? We have seen above (pp. 107-8) how Eteocles failed to turn the omen against Polyneices. He accepts the appropriateness of the match (673-75) without turning it to his own advantage.

'What other man is more appropriate?
leader against leader, and brother against brother,
enemy with enemy I will take my stand.'

Nothing is accomplished here by his use of words; he merely accepts their plain implication.

Eteocles has said to the chorus:

*τί οδὲν; ὁ ναύτης ἄρα μὴ 'ς πρῶραν φυγὼν
πρύμνηθεν ἡδρε μηχανὴν σωτηρίας,
νεῶς καμούσης ποντίῳ πρὸς κύματι; (208 ff.)*

What do you mean? No sailor has ever found a means
of safety by running from the stern to the prow
When his ship is laboring against the sea's wave, has he?

But when Eteocles changes from the commanding general to a participant in the fighting, he does abandon the tiller of the ship of state and rush to its prow. Instead of laying his hand on the helm and saying what the occasion demands, as he announced in lines 1-3, he forgets his systematic measures for the defense of the city and neglects to use the power of words in this present danger with the acumen and care he has so far exhibited in the city's defense.

It is his belief in the power of words which enables him to defend the city so well, and ironically it is that same belief in the power of words, namely in the effectiveness of Oedipus' curse, which drives him against his brother, and causes him to accept the omens to his own destruction.