

“Our bitterest enemies...”

An Examination of Thebes’ Role in Athenian Tragedy

By

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A thesis submitted to Victoria University of Wellington in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Classics

Victoria University of Wellington
2017

School of Art History, Classics, and Religious Studies

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to extend the greatest thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Babette Pütz, who has been meticulous, supremely patient, and tirelessly encouraging throughout the production of this thesis. Any lingering imperfections are mine alone.

I am also grateful to my fellow post-graduate students of the VUW Classics department, for making studying a thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding endeavour.

Final thanks go to my family for always encouraging me.

I would like to dedicate this work to my grandmother, Jeanette Walker, who always supported my educational pursuits.

Abstract

This thesis concerns itself with the depiction of mythical Thebes in extant Greek tragedy, and how this relates to the tragedians' view of Athens itself. Throughout the Classical Period, Thebes was one of Athens' biggest enemy *poleis*, and this complex relationship is often mirrored in the dramas that feature Thebes and Thebans in principal roles. For the purposes of this thesis, I am limiting my scope to dramas that deal with the "Seven Against Thebes" mythic cycle and, to pare the topic down even further, I am only examining those tragedies that feature either Eteocles, Polynices, or both.

Chapter one deals with Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, where I argue that Thebes is not only presented as a positive force, but actually comes to be identified as a stand-in for Athens. The Thebes of Aeschylus' play shares many common factors with Athens of the early fifth-century B.C.

Chapter two is about Euripides' *Phoenician Women*. The main argument here is that Euripides uses his Theban characters as mouthpieces for his own ideas on political rhetoric, particularly political issues that are of importance to contemporary Athens. Additionally, *Phoenician Women*'s fragmented, episodic plot and its large cast of characters contribute to an image of Thebes as a disorganised, chaotic *polis*, and one that is the antithesis of Athens. At the same time, its emphasis on the feminine complicates this picture somewhat; although this contributes to the "anti-Athens" image, whether or not this is a positive thing is unclear.

My third and final chapter concerns Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and the lack of consistency in its depiction of Theban characters. Polynices and Creon are characterised negatively, but Oedipus and especially Antigone and Ismene appear in a much more positive light. Furthermore, Theseus appears in the *OC* as a representative of Athens so, fundamentally, the *OC* is about the relationship between the two *poleis*, and an exhortation for Thebes to strive to be more like Athens.

My conclusion is that tragedy's treatment of Thebes is malleable and that there is not necessarily one standard way of depicting mythical Theban characters. At the same time, I also conclude that, no matter how Thebes is represented, there is always an underlying tension regarding how Thebes relates to Athens; the two cities are in a constant state of comparison and contrast.

Introduction

The distaste for non-Greeks, or “barbarians”, οἱ βάρβαροι, is well documented amongst the Athenian people, a phenomenon usually thought to have begun, or at least increased greatly, at the onset of the Persian Wars in 499 B.C. In fact, Aeschylus’ *Persians*, staged in 472 B.C., provides us with the first explicit binary opposition of Greeks and barbarians in literature,¹ explained by both its subject matter, and its proximity in time to the battles of Marathon (490 B.C.) and Salamis (480 B.C.). At the same time, the Athenians also regarded non-Athenians, even if they were still Greek, as generally undesirable, and certainly as inferior to Athenians. While disparate Greek peoples could unite against a common enemy, as evidenced by the alliance of Greek city states against the Persian invaders, this was relatively rare, and usually only lasted a brief time.² The much more usual state of affairs in the ancient world was allegiance, above all, to one’s individual *polis*.³ Because of this, relations between the various Greek *poleis* often fluctuated and frequently became very strained. One of the better documented examples of this is the relationship between Athens and Thebes, which was characterised by animosity all throughout the Classical Period. This hostility stemmed, in short, from the fact that Thebes continuously supported Athens’ enemies throughout the fifth century B.C. During the Persian Wars, which occupied the first half of the fifth century, the Thebans supported the Persians against the Athenians and their allies (most of whom were other Greeks).⁴ Ultimately, the Greek allies defeated the Persians, and Thebes subsequently lent their support to the Spartans (once again against Athens) during the Peloponnesian War, which dominated the second half of the fifth

¹ Heit 2005, 729.

² Cartledge 1995, 79.

³ Finley 1975, 121-3.

⁴ See, e.g., Herodotus 7. 205; 222; 233-234 for examples of Theban hostility during the Persian Wars.

century.⁵ It is no wonder, then, that Athens viewed the *polis* of Thebes with anger and outright hatred. Indeed, a passage in Thucydides even describes the Thebans as “our [the Athenians’] bitterest enemies” (2.71).⁶

Despite the overwhelming enmity detailed above, Thebes was a popular setting for many Athenian tragedies, most likely because of Thebes’ rich mythical history. Aside from Euripides’ *Bacchae* and *Heracles*, both of which are set in Thebes but tell very different stories, all of the extant dramas that deal with Thebes are concerned with the same myth: that of the family of Oedipus, ranging from his inadvertent marriage to his mother, to the seven armies, led by Polynices, that besiege Thebes, resulting in both Polynices’ death and that of his brother, Eteocles, as well as the resultant aftermath. These tragedies are Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes*, Sophocles’ *Antigone*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Euripides’ *Suppliants* and *Phoenician Women*.

Since much scholarship has been written about Athenian tragedy’s link to civic (and especially democratic) ideology,⁷ it would be rather tempting to assume that tragedy is frequently used as a platform to laud Athens while simultaneously vilifying its enemies, such as Thebes and its people. Indeed, this is sometimes true – there have been arguments, for example, that anti-Spartan (another of Athens’ enemies) sentiment can be found in many plays featuring the house of Atreus. Euripides’ *Andromache* features Menelaus, the ruler of Sparta, as a cruel and spiteful tyrant, with no empathy for Andromache, his family’s captive. Menelaus’ daughter, Hermione, is likewise presented as jealous and avaricious. Similarly, Euripides’ *Orestes* boasts a Menelaus who is cowardly and ineffectual; he makes half-

⁵ Thucydides 2. 2-3; 72; 56 details some such instances.

⁶ Trans. Warner 1954, 168.

⁷ For instance, see Carter 2004, 16; Goldhill 1987, 61-2.

hearted promises to aid Orestes and Electra, his nephew and niece, before ultimately abandoning them, fearing the potential backlash among the Greeks.

Froma I. Zeitlin, in her 1986 chapter contributing to *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Euben ed.), addresses the question of Thebes' depiction in tragedy. Zeitlin first discusses all of the extant tragedies set in or involving Thebes, using Oedipus as the common factor to illustrate "structural and thematic parallels" between the plays.⁸ From here, Zeitlin gets into her argument proper, namely that in Attic drama Thebes tends to function as an "anti-Athens". Zeitlin asserts that ancient theatre, generally speaking, was an "other scene", whereby Athens is able to question its own values and morals by viewing them (and also itself) on stage through the mythic material presented. Following this, Zeitlin suggests that Thebes functions as the "'other scene' of the 'other scene'",⁹ meaning that questions of morality and politics are explored via a city that is the opposite of Athens.¹⁰ Zeitlin sums up this idea succinctly in a paragraph that I reproduce here:

Thebes, the other, provides Athens, the self, with a place where it can play with and discharge both terror of and attraction to the irreconcilable, the inexpiable, and the unredeemable, where it can experiment with the dangerous heights of self-assertion that transgression of fixed boundaries inevitably entails. Events in Thebes and the characters who enact them both fascinate and repel the Athenian audience, finally instructing the spectators as to how their city might refrain from imitating the other's negative example.¹¹

Zeitlin argues convincingly that Thebes' function as the "other" is linked to all of the transgressive acts that happen in mythical Thebes – acts such as incest, fratricide, and civil

⁸ See Zeitlin 1986, 103-116.

⁹ Zeitlin 1986, 116.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Zeitlin 1986, 117.

war. The Athenians can experience these acts through tragedy and come away from the experience better equipped to prevent Athens from emulating these horrendous events.

With Zeitlin's argument in mind, I will examine Thebes' portrayal in extant tragedy, and assess the validity of Zeitlin's claim. It will become clear that Zeitlin's assertion holds up with regard to some tragedies, but that with others it is not so clear-cut. Ultimately, I agree that there is value in thinking of Thebes in tragedy as "the other", but it is not quite as easy to claim that this role extends over all dramas. My ultimate aim, then, is to assess how the Athenians identify themselves in relation to the mythical Thebes that is presented in tragedy, and how that tallies with Zeitlin's own argument.

Before I embark upon my discussion, there are a few points that I should address. First, my choice of tragedies. There are eight extant tragedies that are either set in Thebes or involve Thebes and Thebans. Clearly this is too large a number to survey in an MA thesis, so I have decided to focus on those tragedies that deal with the seven against Thebes myth. To attempt to achieve some degree of consistency, I have then limited discussion to the plays that feature on-stage either Eteocles, Polynices, or both, which handily leaves us with one tragedy from each of the three canonical Athenian tragedians: Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. Obviously a truly exhaustive study would include all the tragedies that feature Thebes, but I hope that my criteria at least allow me a level of consistency and comparison that will be helpful. The second point is the ordering of chapters. I have opted to proceed in the order: Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles. This is a departure from the standard order of thinking about the Athenian tragedians, but here I think it more prudent to discuss the plays chronologically in

order of production, which places *Phoenician Women* before *Oedipus at Colonus*.¹² Finally, I have transliterated all Greek terms that are considered “common”, such as *polis* and *xenia*, while the more obscure words are left in Greek. All translations featured in this thesis are my own.¹³

¹² Incidentally, Edith Hall uses the order Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles for her chapters in her book *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun*, arguing that, since Sophocles and Euripides were contemporaries and Sophocles actually outlived Euripides, this order makes more sense – see Hall 2010, 299.

¹³ For the Greek texts, I have used Hutchinson’s 1985 edition of *Seven Against Thebes*, Jebb’s 1885 edition of *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Mastronarde’s 1994 edition of *Phoenician Women* (see bibliography for full details).

Chapter One: Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*

Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, produced in 467 B.C., is the second oldest extant tragedy (the first being *Persians*, in 472 B.C.). It concerns itself with Eteocles, ruler of Thebes, preparing the defence of the city in advance of the arrival of the Argive invaders (led by his brother, Polynices). Much of the first half of the tragedy is centred on Eteocles attempting simultaneously to pacify the frightened citizens of Thebes and fortify the city effectively. Through Eteocles' exchanges with the chorus and the messenger, two differing pictures – one of Thebes, and one of the invaders from Argos – emerge. This chapter will seek to explore Eteocles' characterisation and how this reflects on the *polis* of Thebes as a whole. It will also analyse how the Argives are depicted, and what effect this has on the drama. I argue that *Seven Against Thebes* goes some way towards refuting Zeitlin's view of Thebes as the "other", in comparison with Athens. This is due to my central argument being that, although Athens does not feature in *Seven Against Thebes*' narrative, the way in which Eteocles (representing Thebes) and the Argives (representing the "other") are presented results in Thebes being aligned closely with Athens and, for all intents and purposes, functioning as a stand-in or surrogate for Athens in the drama.

For a satisfactory analysis of Thebes' role in *Seven Against Thebes*, Eteocles' characterisation is one of the most important elements, and thus is where I shall begin my discussion. *Seven Against Thebes* (hereafter referred to as *Seven*), in typical early Aeschylean fashion,¹⁴ has a very small number of *dramatis personae*, and Eteocles is clearly

¹⁴ See Davidson 2005, 203-4 for a discussion of the limitations placed upon drama by the small number of actors allowed. See also Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449a for evidence on Aeschylus using two actors rather than three, as later tragedians did.

the dominant figure in the play. Because Eteocles is the ruler of Thebes (and because Polynices, the other potential ruler, does not appear in person in the play), Eteocles can be thought of as representative of Thebes as a whole. Eteocles is Thebes, and his actions and characterisation guide us in our interpretations of Thebes as a *polis*. With this said, it is my assertion that Eteocles is characterised in a basically positive light, which then ensures that Thebes as a whole is viewed positively.

It has been observed by many scholars that *Seven* can be divided roughly into two parts: the first half (1-630) deals with the crisis in Thebes and how the citizens are reacting to the threat of war, while the second half (631-1078) deals with Eteocles' decision to face his brother in single combat in the culmination of the curse on Oedipus' *genos*.¹⁵ I will focus on the first half, as that is where the emphasis is most firmly placed on Thebes as a city, rather than on the family of Oedipus.

What is most striking about Eteocles is his leadership. Aeschylus emphasises Eteocles' position as leader of Thebes from his very first lines (1-3), building him up as a suitable and effective king.¹⁶ That Eteocles' very first words on stage express his concerns about, and dedication to, the city cement his character as supremely civically-minded,¹⁷ behaviour that was of paramount importance to fifth-century Athenian audiences.¹⁸ Eteocles expresses his devotion to Thebes via the metaphor of the ship of state, proclaiming himself to be the helmsman of Thebes. This was a very common image employed by tragic

¹⁵ Torrance 2007, 25. See also Winnington-Ingram 1983, 22 and Spatz 1982, 42 for references to the two halves.

¹⁶ Jackson 1988, 290. I do not agree with Jackson's view of Eteocles' positive qualities being undercut in the first scene by the mere fact of his being Oedipus' son. Jackson himself admits that his lineage is barely touched upon in the first half of the play, and concludes that if there are unpleasant undercurrents, they are "subordinate".

¹⁷ Giordano-Zecharya 2006, 57.

¹⁸ Meier 1990, 21.

playwrights, and will be discussed in more depth below. In terms of its significance for Eteocles' character, though, it has been observed that this particular metaphor is applied to Eteocles significantly more frequently than other tragic characters.¹⁹ This repetition serves to stress Eteocles' position as leader, and, perhaps inevitably, in almost every instance of this metaphor's occurrence, Eteocles is described as a fully competent and skilful helmsman (see 2-3; 62; 208-10), thereby solidifying his effectiveness as king.

A charge that has been levelled against Eteocles by some critics is that of impiety.²⁰ These scholars cite lines 4-9, as well as Eteocles' exchange with the chorus at 181-263 (especially 181-202 and 256) as demonstrating his disrespectful attitude towards the gods. I will discuss Eteocles' interaction with the chorus shortly, but I do not agree that lines 4-9 (where Eteocles stresses the burden he is under by observing that, if Thebes is saved, the citizens will praise the gods while, conversely, if the Argives triumph, he alone will be blamed and condemned) reveal anything impious about his character. He uses the singular θεοῦ (4), rather than referring to multiple gods, which suggests that he is talking more generally about how the Theban citizens will look to some sort of higher power if victory is assured, rather than the Olympian gods, specifically. Furthermore, as Brown notes, Eteocles proceeds to espouse a "whole series of thoroughly proper and respectful references to the gods"²¹ at 8 f., 14 f., 21, 23, 69 ff., which should help to prove that Eteocles in fact behaves towards religion as befits a noble king. Brown goes on to note that Eteocles' words at line 4 merely demonstrate his sense of pragmatism, which is characteristic of a wise and sensible

¹⁹ Winnington-Ingram 1983, 21.

²⁰ Winnington-Ingram 1983, 49. Brown 1977, 300 notes that A. W. Verrall's edition of the play pushes for a reading of the drama that would see Eteocles in an impious light. Golden 1964, 83 says that Eteocles is "highly pragmatic", when arguing that he bends the rules of religion to suit his own purposes. Podlecki 1964, 284 ff. outlines some of Eteocles' perceived negative attributes, beginning with his words to the chorus, and on p. 291, Podlecki suggests "sceptical, or sarcastic and even atheistic" as possible ways to label Eteocles' behaviour.

²¹ Brown 1977, 300.

leader.²² He is well aware of the realities of the situation, and is not taking his duties lightly at all.

The most striking element of Eteocles' portrayal in *Seven*, and the aspect on which the overwhelming majority of critics quite rightly focus when discussing the play, is his quarrel with the chorus of Theban women. Since my goal in this segment is to prove that Eteocles is depicted as a positive and praise-worthy character, I must seek to show that his interactions with the chorus do not fundamentally damage a reader's image of his character. At line 182, Eteocles enters the stage, having departed briefly earlier, and is met with the chorus of Theban women, who had been lamenting, panic-stricken about the possible sacking of their home. Eteocles' response, which is to rebuke them harshly for giving in to their fear, has been much discussed by scholars.

Some take Eteocles' behaviour towards the chorus as reflecting badly on his character, stating that it is unsettling,²³ and unjustified by the situation at hand.²⁴ Others think that Eteocles is justified in his outburst; he needs to maintain order in the city and the chorus' panic is threatening that.²⁵ In fact, most critics agree that Eteocles is correct in his

²² Brown 1977, 300. Brown does not really expand upon what exactly is meant by "pragmatism". It seems to me, though, that it indicates Eteocles' willingness to see the world how it really is, and not some sort of idealised version of it. He knows that he, and not the gods, will be blamed for any failure, so there is little use in pretending otherwise.

²³ Herington 1986, 83-4 calls Eteocles' attitude "disturbing", and states that in tragedy a dislike for women is usually followed by suffering and punishment for it, citing Creon, Pentheus and Hippolytus as examples. I think this point of view is somewhat oversimplified. Pentheus does not dislike all women, merely maenads, and he is punished for his lack of piety towards Dionysus, not his misogyny. Furthermore, Ajax expresses some degree of contempt towards women with his famous line "γύναι, γυναῖξί κόσμον ἢ σιγὴ φέρει" (Soph. *Ajax* 293), and if he is punished for anything, it is for his *hybris* and failed attack on the Achaeans, not his misogyny. Lastly, Hippolytus is not punished for disliking women, but merely for not honouring Aphrodite. It is true that the dishonour she mentions is his choosing not to marry, but it is suggested that this is not through a dislike of women, but rather a dislike of sex – Aphrodite is, after all, associated with sexual love, specifically.

²⁴ Brown 1977, 303 does not believe that the dramatic situation calls for Eteocles' rebuke, saying that even if the women are behaving irresponsibly, a curse against all of womankind is excessive.

²⁵ Jackson 1988, 290 asserts that there is "strong provocation", since the women are behaving as if the city has already fallen, which is bound to irk any commander. Hutchinson 1985, 73-4 agrees that Eteocles "deplores" the women's actions.

fear that the women could start a mass panic,²⁶ they merely disagree on whether or not Eteocles is unduly harsh in his response. Charging Eteocles with uncalled for misogyny is, I think, misguided, as the inferiority of women is a motif that pervades absolutely all of Greek literature, stretching back to Hesiod's famous descriptions of Pandora (Hesiod, *Theogony* 560-612; *Works and Days* 60-105). It seems difficult to believe that audiences would have been unsettled by this display of misogyny.²⁷

However, rather than thinking about whether or not Eteocles is excessively misogynistic or whether the chorus is behaving contrary to Thebes' best interests, I am inclined to agree with those critics who stress the gender dynamics in this scene over anything else. I do not think audiences are intended to pick a side. Instead, Aeschylus is demonstrating the differences (to his mind, and probably in ancient audiences' opinions too) between how men and women react in a crisis like this.²⁸ Neither side is "right", because they are each expressing virtues and values that are intrinsic to their own gender – for Eteocles, it is male valour and militaristic aptitude that are the most important, while for the chorus of women, the emphasis is on prayer and appeals to the gods.²⁹ Fundamentally, Eteocles, as a male, takes an active role in the city's defence and his religious duties, while the female chorus takes a more passive role.³⁰ This distinction is unsurprising. It was a

²⁶ Brown 1977, 301; Sommerstein 2010, 78. Winnington-Ingram 1983, 27-8 describes Eteocles' wish for the women to stay home and leave the important duties to the men as "reasonable enough".

²⁷ Jackson 1988, 290. Edmunds 2017, 95 notes that Eteocles' exchange with the chorus can be understood as coming from a context of "a military organization and an ethical principle that would not have seemed alien to the Athenian audience".

²⁸ Zeitlin 1990, 103 notes that the contrast is striking; Eteocles and the chorus, throughout the *Seven*, tend to behave and react completely oppositely to one another.

²⁹ Gagarin 1976, 151-62 discusses this interpretation at length, positing that the tension between the masculine and feminine is a dominant theme throughout the entire play. Likewise, Brown 1977, 306 concurs, saying that the difference in religious attitudes, rather than the misogyny, is the main focus of the scene.

³⁰ Giordano-Zecharya 2006, 59-65 elaborates on the religious opposition, stating that Eteocles favours εὐχή (the usual word for "prayer"), a more masculine approach, while the chorus employs λιτή (a lamenting and supplicatory prayer), which is more passive and feminine.

common trope in Greek thought that women were weaker and more fearful in nature while men were hardy and courageous (e.g. Ps. Aristotle, *Oeconomica* 1.334a), so some sort of difference in how they behave is virtually expected.

Eteocles is presented as a capable and responsible military leader from the very first lines of *Seven*. He embodies several traits that were appealing to ancient Athenians, most importantly his masculine strength, and his *sophrosyne*.³¹ He is dedicated to Thebes and its well-being, and every action that he takes throughout the course of the drama is to ensure the survival of his *polis*. As I have argued, I think that it is a mistake to view Eteocles' verbal altercation with the chorus as negatively impacting his character. He does not display any misogynistic views that were not widespread in antiquity, and the disagreement itself merely demonstrates the differences in gender values; neither side is objectively correct. It should be clear, then, that Eteocles is represented as a positive figure in *Seven*. If we also accept my earlier proposition, which is that Eteocles in this tragedy can be taken as symbolic of Thebes itself, then it follows that Thebes, as a *polis*, is depicted with a positive force here. It is a city that one should admire and seek to emulate; it is governed by a good man, and conducts itself well when at war.

Having established that Thebes is represented in a positive light, it remains now to discuss the reasons why I believe that mythical Thebes, in *Seven Against Thebes*, is presented in such a way that comparisons to real-life Athens are inevitable. These similarities and comparisons lead to the ultimate conclusion that Thebes, in this tragedy, acts as a stand-in for Athens. Thebes is Athens in all but name. Accordingly, an analysis of

³¹ Hutchinson 1985, xxxv-xxxvii.

these points of comparison will aid in elucidating how Aeschylus (and, by extension, Athenian audiences) likely feel about their own *polis*.

The first aspect of *Seven* that signals a link to Athens, and one that I already mentioned briefly earlier, is the emphatic and recurrent naval imagery that Aeschylus employs. The image of the *polis* being like a ship, usually referred to as the “ship of state” metaphor, most famously occurs in Plato’s *Republic* (488e-489c), although it is found extensively in tragedy as well (see Soph. *Antigone* 162-3, 189-90; *Ajax* 1082-4; Aesch. *Suppliants* 345).³² This image is almost always spoken by a leader describing his own relationship to the *polis*. It has been observed that *Seven* contains the most extended examples of this particular metaphor in ancient literature,³³ which is surely significant. It is my assertion that the repetition of the ship of state image aids in making audiences align Thebes with Athens.

Firstly, on a basic level, the repeated naval imagery serves to bolster the image that we receive of Thebes during the course of the tragedy. The first instance of the metaphor occurs in lines 1-3: χρή λέγειν τὰ καίρια / ὅστις φυλάσσει πρᾶγος ἐν πρύμνῃ πόλεως / οἶα κανωμῶν, βλέφαρα μὴ κοιμῶν ὕπνῳ (he who guards the affairs of the city at the stern, directing the helm, his eyes not sleepy with slumber, must speak timely things). With these words, Eteocles paints himself not just as the captain of the ship (which, as I have discussed, is Thebes), but as a particularly effective captain. He cannot be distracted from the task in front of him, and the careful attitude and skilful handling that he displays as the metaphorical captain are the proper attributes that he should bring to Thebes as its king.³⁴

³² Griffith 1999, 156 suggests that the ship of state image would often be received as “reassuringly traditional” by audiences.

³³ Cameron 1971, 58.

³⁴ Thalmann 1978, 32-3.

Later, at line 62, the messenger refers to Eteocles as being like a *κεδνός οἰακοστροφός* (a diligent captain). The word *κεδνός* obviously further paints Eteocles in a good naval light – Thebes is in good hands as long as he is the captain. Some more naval imagery crops up at lines 208-10, where Eteocles, rebuking the chorus for their perceived cowardice, exclaims *τί οὔν; ὁ ναύτης ἄρα μὴ 'ς πρῶραν φυγῶν / πρύμνηθεν ἤϊρε μηχανὴν σωτηρίας, / νεὼς καμούσης ποντίῳ πρὸς κύματι;* (What?! Does a sailor, having fled from the stern to the prow, find some means of safety, with his ship toiling in the waves of the sea?).³⁵ Here, Eteocles uses nautical imagery specifically to illustrate a point to the frightened chorus. Good naval men, according to Eteocles, do not give in to fear, especially when their ship, like Thebes right now, is facing difficulties. Now the nautical imagery is stretched to apply to the chorus. They are the ones who had been, according to Eteocles, running wildly throughout the city (191-2), an action of which he strongly disapproves. This image here, however, also applies to Eteocles, as *ναύτης* is singular, while there are obviously many members of the chorus. Furthermore, the *ναύτης* has been observed to refer to the helmsman, who is the most important person on a ship, which leads one to conclude that Eteocles is also being referred to.³⁶ One can see how Eteocles is bolstering his own image here by suggesting that he is in no way the type of man to shirk his responsibility out of fear, unlike the chorus of women. This is simply one more way in which Eteocles is characterised positively, and, as I argued earlier, Eteocles' positive depiction reflects Thebes' own good image.

In addition to its aid in simple characterisation, the recurrent nautical imagery actually strengthens the link to Athens merely by dint of its existence. Athens of the fifth-

³⁵ Here, I read *ἤϊρε* as a gnomic use of the aorist, indicating a general statement or maxim, widely applicable.

³⁶ Hutchinson 1985, 80 suggests that Aeschylus here wants to “recall in Eteocles' speech the flavour of the prologue”, which explains why the helmsman image is used again.

century was very much a naval-based power. Its primary strength was found in its navy, and many of its greatest victories were naval ones. This is not an observation that has been made in hindsight; there is much evidence to suggest that Athenians were very much aware of their naval prowess, and the advantages that an effective navy provided for them.³⁷

Because of the large presence that nautical imagery has in *Seven*, and because of how striking the combination of images is,³⁸ I argue that Athens is brought to the forefront of the audience's minds, given its own real-life reliance on the navy. This is made explicit in the text with lines 30-34: ἀλλ' ἔς τ' ἐπάλξεις καὶ πύλας πυργωμάτων / ὀρμᾶσθε πάντες, σοῦσθε σὺν παντευχία, / πληροῦτε θωρακεῖα, κάπῃ σέλμασιν / πύργων στάθητε, καὶ πυλῶν ἐπ' ἐξόδοις / μίμνοντες εὖ θαρσεῖτε (all of you, hurry to the battlements and the gates of our towers! Hasten with all your armour! Fill the parapets, and stand on the platforms of the towers, and be brave, remaining at the exits of the gates). Here, the images and themes of city and sea collide by means of the poet's carefully chosen words.³⁹ Many of the words (the five that are underlined) that occur here apply to the defence of a city, while also being technical terms that are applicable to a ship.⁴⁰ With these words, the

³⁷ See Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1465, when Aeschylus, offering his advice on how Athens can ensure its continued survival, says that they ought to consider πόρον δὲ τὰς ναῦς ἀπορίαν δὲ τὸν πόρον (their ships to be their wealth, and other wealth to be poverty). Clearly Aristophanes was aware of the navy's importance. See Thuc. 1. 99 for how the Athenian navy came to grow strong, and Thuc. 2. 62 for Pericles' assertion that Athens' navy is so large and powerful that it can sail wherever it wishes to. Furthermore, Xen. *Hell.* 1.6.15 features the Spartan Callicratidas accusing the Athenians of "fornicating with the sea".

³⁸ Hutchinson 1985, 52 notes that individual images that are familiar in themselves (city as ship, leader as helmsman) have been joined with more unique imagery (such as the army as the waves and the breath of Ares as the wind that drives the army forward) to create a distinctive and memorable effect. After appearing together at lines 62-4, various permutations of these images appear all throughout the rest of the play (see 114f., 208-10, 343f., 652, 759f., 795f.). Through Aeschylus' poetic ingenuity, these images appear at once both fresh and familiar.

³⁹ Lupaş and Petre 1981, 22-3.

⁴⁰ Cameron 1971, 59-60 explains the double meanings in depth. σέλμα means both "rowing bench" and "timberwork"; the base meaning of πληρώω is "fill", but it is also the technical word for "manning a ship"; θωρακεῖον is a "parapet", while also being the "crow's nest" of a ship; πύργος means "tower" but Cameron cites a passage in Athenaeus (Cameron gives the reference as 5.43, while in Olson's Loeb edition the reference is 5.208b) as evidence to suggest that, as well as cities, some ships had πύργοι, on which the crew stood in order to hurl debris at enemy ships; and finally, in the same Athenaeus passage the word ἐπαλξις is used to

images of both city and ship are conjured up in tandem, combining with each other so as to become intermingled and, for all intents and purposes, inseparable. Because city and sea are joined together in such a way, it follows that the nautical imagery would put audiences in mind of their own city – again, largely because of the navy’s importance to Athens. A tragedy in which the central city is almost defined by its metaphorical relationship to the sea surely cannot help but remind an Athenian of their own city. Accordingly, since I argued earlier that the naval imagery also aids in augmenting Thebes’ standing in the eyes of viewers, it stands to reason that, by means of the imagery employed by Aeschylus, the greatness of Athens itself is being emphasised here.

The preponderance of naval imagery is not the sole element that evokes thoughts of Athens. There is an ethnic element at play here as well. There is a motif of foreignness that occurs repeatedly during *Seven*. The invading Argives are constantly emphasised as being “foreign”, which has negative connotations in the ancient world, beginning with the onset of the fifth century.⁴¹ Although Argos was a part of Greece, in the context of *Seven* the Argive invaders are characterised in a way that makes us think of them as outsiders or foreigners.

The Argives’ foreign status is stressed early in the play, with lines 34-5: μηδ’ ἐπηλύδων / ταρβεῖτ’ ἄγαν ὄμιλον (do not overly fear this crowd of strangers). The mere act of calling the Argives “foreigners” stresses that they do not belong amongst the Thebans, who, as has been established, are good and valorous Greeks. Furthermore, ἐπηλύδων and

mean a defensive part of a ship. The only technical term in this passage that does not have a double nautical meaning is πύλαι. Tucker 1908, 16, suggests that πύλαι can mean “portholes”, but Cameron declares that this translation cannot be supported.

⁴¹ Crielaard 2009, 73 details how the Greeks, at around 500 B.C., began to develop a sense of self-identity and, more importantly, superiority, in opposition to foreign (usually eastern) peoples. Crielaard gives the conflicts with Persia as the primary reason behind this shift in thinking, and calls the Persian Wars a “watershed in the genesis of ethnic self-consciousness”. Cartledge 1993, 39 concurs with the Persian Wars driving what Crielaard refers to as “hellenocentrism”, but labels the defeat of the Persians in 480 as the “catalyst” for this “othering” of foreign peoples.

ὄμιλον have been noted to have a fairly contemptuous tenor,⁴² increasing the distance between the Thebans and foreign Argives. Line 170 continues this theme, with the chorus describing the invaders as “ἑτερόφωνος στρατός” (an other-speaking army). The Argives are so alien that they do not even speak the same language as the Thebans.⁴³ Indeed, language is something that is emphasised in *Seven*. At lines 72-3, Eteocles makes a point to mention specifically that Thebes as a city speaks Greek, which seems to be an attempt by the poet again to emphasise the disparity in culture between the Thebans and the Argives.⁴⁴ One of the principal ways to tell that someone was foreign in the ancient world was by their dialect,⁴⁵ so the emphasis on language is a nice way to illustrate the Argives’ inferior status.⁴⁶

In addition to the theme of language, the idea of slavery occurs with frequency in *Seven*. The first mention of slavery is at lines 74-5, with Eteocles speaking the words ἐλευθέραν δὲ γῆν τε καὶ Κάδμου πόλιν / ζυγοῖσι δουλίοισι μήποτε σχεθεῖν (may they [the invaders] never have the free land and the city of Cadmus under the yoke of slavery). Here, firstly, the notion of a “free city” is undoubtedly evocative of Athenian ideology, thereby highlighting Thebes’ own “Greekness”.⁴⁷ More importantly, the concept of “slavery” is inherently bound up in ideas of alien-ness and, especially, “barbarian-ness”. Persians are

⁴² Tucker 1908, 16.

⁴³ Sommerstein 2010, 80. Thalmann 1978, 161 n. 27 also picks up on this, but adds that Aeschylus further emphasises the Argives’ foreignness by stressing the whiteness of their shields at line 91.

⁴⁴ Hutchinson 1985, 54 wonders at the reason for Eteocles stressing Thebes’ Greek speech, and concludes that, while some critics believe that the Argives are characterised as ignorant barbarians who do not speak Greek, this is implausible and would have gone over the heads of many spectators. However, I argue that these lines, coupled with line 170, constitute a reasonably solid case for the Argives being characterised, broadly speaking, as barbarians. Sheppard 1913, 77 supports this idea. Tucker 1908, 24 takes a slightly different approach, and posits that the specific mention of “Greek speaking” might simply reflect the earnestness and passion of the prayer.

⁴⁵ Hutchinson 1985, 72.

⁴⁶ Spatz 1982, 41. Rose 1957, 176 agrees that it is very unlikely that audiences would not have thought of Athens at this point.

⁴⁷ Spatz 1982, 41.

often described as “enslavers”, and the Persian Wars were very much seen as a war against enslavement.⁴⁸ These lines set up the Theban/Argive conflict in the same terms as the real-life conflict with the Persians, casting Thebes as Athens and Argos as Persia. This of course furthers the simultaneous vilification of Argos/Persia and lauding of Thebes/Athens. Lines 109-112 further the slavery motif, with the chorus saying ἴδετε παρθένων / ἱκέσιον λόχον δουλοσύνας ὕπερ (see this band of maidens, suppliants with regard to slavery). Another mention of slavery again brings to mind the Persian Wars (most of which had happened within living memory at the time of *Seven’s* production) Slavery continues to be mentioned, appearing at line 254, at line 471 and again at 793, further solidifying its thematic importance (i.e. Argives being represented as Persians) in the narrative.⁴⁹

As has been made clear, the two principal ways in which Aeschylus casts Thebes as a stand-in for Athens are the naval imagery and the emphasised foreignness of the Argive invaders (which also has the effect of linking Argos with Persia). Now, I will briefly discuss the other (slightly more minor) ways by which this effect is achieved.

The first hint at the Argives’ pejorative depiction can be found in their religious observances. Beginning with line 43, the messenger describes how he has observed the Argive army preparing to attack:

ἄνδρες γὰρ ἐπτά, θούριοι λοχαγέται,
 ταυροσφαγοῦντες ἐς μελάνδετον σάκος
 καὶ θιγγάνοντες χερσὶ ταυρείου φόνου,
 Ἄρη τ’, Ἐνυώ, καὶ φιλαίματον Φόβον
 ὠρκωμότησαν ἢ πόλει κατασκαφᾶς
 θέντες λαπάξιν ἄστρῳ Καδμείων βίᾳ,

⁴⁸ For the idea that Persians represented slavery and loss of freedom, see Thuc. 3.56.

⁴⁹ Hutchinson 1985, 120 notes the importance of the recurrent slavery imagery, observing that Aeschylus gives emphasis to the idea of the “yoke of slavery” by placing it in prominent positions throughout the drama (such as Eteocles’ prayer at 75 and the messenger’s news of salvation at 793). Hutchinson, on page 174, also notes that the slavery image straddles both halves of the drama, with the poet placing equal importance on it in each half.

ἢ γῆν θανόντες τήνδε φυράσιν φόνῳ.

Seven men, fierce commanders,
cutting a bull's throat over a black shield
and touching the bull's blood with their hands,
swore an oath to Ares, and Enyo, and Phobos, lover of blood that
either, having razed the city, they will sack the city of the Cadmeans by force,
or, dead, will mix their blood with this land.

The emphasis on blood throughout the Argives' sacrifice is striking, and the gory acts that they perform (putting their hands in the blood, for instance), as well as their promise to mix their blood with Theban soil, distort the norms of a proper, pious sacrifice.⁵⁰ It is true that touching the sacrifice was sometimes considered to intensify the prayer (e.g. Antiphon 5.12; Aeschines 1.114; Herodotus 6.68),⁵¹ but this in conjunction with the deities upon whom the Argives swear seems to suggest something unsettling about their behaviour,⁵² perhaps aligning them with barbarians who do not closely follow Greek religious norms.

One of the more obvious ways in which the Argives are characterised negatively is the way in which the messenger describes them to Eteocles and the chorus during the so-called "shield scene", often referred to by scholars with the German term *Redepaare*. The first five Argive attackers (Tydeus, Capaneus, Eteocles, Hippomedon, and Parthenopaeus) are described in very negative terms, with the messenger highlighting their boastfulness and their aggression. Capaneus, Eteocles, and Parthenopaeus, in particular, act hubristically with their boasting. Capaneus asserts that not even Zeus could stop him from sacking Thebes (427-9), Eteocles claims that Ares would be unable to prevent his assault on the

⁵⁰ Thalmann 1978, 52.

⁵¹ Hutchinson 1985, 49.

⁵² Torrance 2007, 48 notes that Ares, Enyo and Phobos are all violent and unpredictable deities, and that this passage is the only one in extant Greek literature where all three are called upon together. Ares and Enyo (in addition to 15 other divinities) are invoked in the Athenian ephebic oath, but Phobos is not.

tower (468-9), and Parthenopaeus also dismisses the potency of Zeus (529-32. Note too Parthenopaeus' devotion to his spear above all the gods). The other two, Tydeus and Hippomedon, both display excessive violence and lack of respect for both their allies (such as Amphiaraus) and their enemies (see 380-394; 497-8). The vivid description of the Argive attackers aids in creating an atmosphere of extreme violence and anger.⁵³ This contrasts strikingly with the way in which the Thebans are depicted, specifically as properly god-fearing and possessing the modesty that was expected of mortals,⁵⁴ which was an important virtue in antiquity.⁵⁵

The Argives' *hybris* makes them look impious and villainous next to the Thebans, but it has a more important function, which is to strengthen the link between Argos (in this play) and barbarian Persians. As is well-known, after the battle of Marathon in 490 B.C., the battle of Salamis in 480 B.C., and the battle of Plataea in 479 B.C., the allied Greeks ended the Persians' hopes of invasion.⁵⁶ One of the reasons for the Persians' defeat was popularly thought to be their lack of the same religious reverence that the Greeks (especially Athenians) displayed towards the gods. Aeschylus' extant tragedy, *Persians*, deals with this theme explicitly, by concerning itself with Xerxes' defeat at Salamis. During *Persians*, the chorus summons the ghost of Darius, Xerxes' father, in the hope that he may be able to offer some counsel. Darius responds by lamenting his son's actions, saying "θνητὸς ὢν θεῶν

⁵³ Torrance 2007, 30.

⁵⁴ Jackson 1988, 291-2. Spatz 1982, 44 concurs, adding that the Argives are portrayed in a bestial and savage way.

⁵⁵ Many tragedies depict the problems that occur if one does not think modestly enough about oneself. Possibly the most famous example is the central character in Sophocles' *Ajax*, who is described as not thinking as mortal men ought (e.g. 777 – οὐ κατ' ἄνθρωπον φρονῶν) for which he is ultimately punished by Athena. In the same play, both Teucer and Menelaus, by their own admission, μέγα φρονεῖν (1088; 1125), which is a hubristic act and ought to be restricted to the realm of the gods. See Finglass 2011, 455.

⁵⁶ It is worth noting in addition that Aeschylus himself fought in the battle of Marathon, and his brother, Cynegirus, died there – see Herodotus 6.114. This personal link to the Persian Wars most likely explains Aeschylus' choice of subject matter for *Persians*, and his emphasis on unpleasant barbarians in *Seven*.

τε πάντων ὥετ', οὐκ εὐβουλία, / καὶ Ποσειδῶνος κρατήσιν. πῶς τάδ' οὐ νόσος φρενῶν /
εἶχε παῖδ' ἐμόν; (Although he is mortal, he thought, not with good judgement, that he could
control all of the gods, even Poseidon. Therefore, surely a sickness of the mind was holding
my son?) (749-50). Darius then goes on to decry the *hybris* of all of the Persian invaders, not
just Xerxes, with the words “οἱ γῆν μολόντες Ἑλλάδ' οὐ θεῶν βρέτη / ἠδοῦντο συλᾶν οὐδὲ
πιμπράναι νεώς. / βωμοὶ δ' ἄϊστοι, δαιμόνων θ' ἰδρύματα / πρόρριζα φύρδην
ἐξανέστραπται βάθρων. (They [the Persians], having gone to the land of Hellas, were not
ashamed to pillage the wooden images of the gods, nor to burn their temples. Altars were
gone from sight, and statues of the gods were turned upside down from their very bases in
utter confusion) (809-12). Darius' final advice is that the chorus should urge Xerxes to
σωφρονεῖν (be of sound mind) (829) and not to θεοβλαβοῦνθ' ὑπερκόμπῳ θράσει (offend
the gods with his arrogant boldness) (831). As can be seen, there is great emphasis placed
upon the transgressions of the Persians,⁵⁷ and there is no conceivable way in which their
actions could be looked upon favourably.⁵⁸ Persians (and virtually all barbarians) are
characterised by their excessive *hybris*. Accordingly, it follows that the *hybris* that is
displayed by the Argives in *Seven* aligns them further with Athens' barbarian enemies. It is
worth bearing in mind, too, that *Seven* was performed in 467 B.C., so the Persians' sack of
Athens (in 480 B.C.) was still relatively recent, during which they committed all the acts of
hybris that Darius mentions in *Persians*. Because of this, it seems more than likely that the
Argives' impiety and violence would remind Athenians of their own recent history.

⁵⁷ Hall 1996, 163 observes that Xerxes' *hybris* is a double affront – to the honour of both the gods and the Greeks.

⁵⁸ Indeed, it is reported that the Greeks swore not to rebuild any monuments that the Persians had destroyed, so that they might stand as a reminder of their barbarity. See Hall 1996, 163.

There are other ways by which the Theban/Argive conflict could have reminded Athenians of the Persian Wars. While there are numerous mentions of the Argives' cavalry and chariots in the text of *Seven* (e.g. 59-61; 79-84; 121-3; 150), particularly when the women of the chorus are describing how terrified they are, there is nothing in the text to suggest that the Thebans had any horses themselves.⁵⁹ During the Persian sack of Athens in 480 B.C., the Athenians did not possess any cavalry,⁶⁰ so this is another obvious link between Thebes and Athens, with them both being cast as victims of a mounted army.

Seven has been observed to be principally about "the successful defence of a strongly walled city",⁶¹ which provides yet another similarity to the situation Athens had found itself in a few years earlier. After the Greeks defeated the Persians, the Athenian general Themistocles initiated a policy (which was continued by Cimon, and finally fulfilled by Pericles) to attempt to fortify Athens to ensure that it could withstand possible future assaults.⁶² With *Seven*, therefore, Aeschylus has been seen by some to be tacitly supporting this idea,⁶³ given that the walls of Thebes are very important for the city's defence. More broadly speaking, *Seven* was considered, in antiquity, as a play that encouraged patriotic sentiment and the spirit of war. Aristophanes, for instance, describes it as δρᾶμα... Ἀρεως μεστόν (a play that is full of Ares) (*Frogs* 1021). Sommerstein focuses on the "powerful picture of a community facing an external, armed menace".⁶⁴ Added to this is the chorus' vivid description of what they imagine will happen if the Argives succeed in sacking Thebes.

⁵⁹ Sommerstein 2010, 80.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Vellacott 1961, 16.

⁶² Podlecki 1966, 40.

⁶³ Ibid. See also Tucker 1908, xlv-xlv; Sheppard 1913, 77.

⁶⁴ Sommerstein 2010, 81.

Lines 321-368 provide very visceral and disturbing images of what befalls a captured city.

Especially important to my argument are lines 338-44:

πολλὰ γάρ, εὔτε πόλις δαμασθῇ,
ἔξ, δυστυχῇ τε πράσσει.
ἄλλος δ' ἄλλον ἄγει, φονεύ-
ει, τὰ δὲ πυρφορεῖ: καπνῶ
δὲ χραίνεται πόλις μ' ἅπαν:
μαινόμενος δ' ἐπιπνεῖ λαοδάμας
μιαίνων εὐσέβειαν Ἄρης

For when a city has been conquered – oh! Oh! –
many wretched things happen.
Someone carries off someone else,
or kills them, or sets fires.
And the whole city is stained with smoke.
Ares, raging, subduer of people, excites,
<while> polluting piety.

So, here we have explicit mention of fire and impiety – things which, as has been seen, were closely associated with the 480 B.C. sack of Athens. The fires, in particular, seem, as Tucker puts it, “unmistakable” as an allusion.⁶⁵ The chorus is imagining that these things might happen, but many the Athenians in the audience would have experienced these transgressions first hand. The entire tone that Aeschylus achieves behind the walls of the city in *Seven* is brutally realistic, reflecting the real life practice of ἀνδραποδισμός,⁶⁶ and would have resonated personally for much of the audience.⁶⁷

The final way in which Aeschylus casts Athens as Thebes is a somewhat smaller one, which no critics (to my knowledge) mention in much depth. Beginning with line 109, the chorus of Theban women pray to the gods to offer them salvation from the invading armies. This is very standard behaviour in situations like this. However, the gods to whom they pray

⁶⁵ Tucker 1908, xlv.

⁶⁶ See Meineck 2017 for a discussion of ἀνδραποδισμός in *Seven*.

⁶⁷ Podlecki 1966, 30.

and, more importantly, the specific order in which they name the gods, are significant. They start with the words θεοὶ πολιόχοι πάντες ἴτε χθονὸς (come, all the city-guarding gods of the land). Again, this is what one would expect; prayers typically begin with an appeal to all of the gods before going on to name specific individual gods. The first god named is Zeus, at line 115-16 with the words ἀλλ', ὦ Ζεῦ πάτερ παντελής, / πάντως ἄρηξον δαΐων ἄλωσιν (all-accomplishing father Zeus, save us from capture by the enemies). It is logical for the first divine appeal to be to Zeus, as he is the ruler of the gods, and the most powerful of the divinities. Next, at lines 128-132, the chorus-women continue their prayer, proclaiming: σύ τ', ὦ Διογενὲς φιλόμαχον κράτος, / ῥυσίπολις γενοῦ, / Παλλὰς, ὃ θ' ἵππιος ποντομέδων ἄναξ / ἰχθυβόλῳ Ποσειδάων μαχανᾷ, / ἐπίλυσιν φόβων, ἐπίλυσιν δίδου (you, battle-loving Pallas, power born of Zeus, become the saviour of our city! And you, horse king, Poseidon, lord of the sea, with your fish striking instrument [i.e. his trident] give us release, release from our fears!).⁶⁸ After this, most of the other gods are invoked one after another, but the important fact is that (after Zeus) Athena and then Poseidon are the first gods to be addressed. This surely cannot be a coincidence. Both Athena and Poseidon had a special connection to Athens, due to the founding myth that was associated with them. Both deities wished to be the patron divinity of Athens, so they competed for this prize. Poseidon offered the Athenians a saltwater spring, symbolic of Athens' dominion over the sea, whereas Athena offered them an olive tree, which the Athenians ultimately accepted.⁶⁹ Because of this myth, Hutchinson observes that Athena and Poseidon "constitute a pair" to the Athenians.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the Erechtheion, situated on the Acropolis, was sacred to both Athena and Poseidon, which of course provides the two deities with another link to

⁶⁸ Obviously ἰχθυβόλῳ... μαχανᾷ is a poetic reference to Poseidon's trident.

⁶⁹ Burkert 1985, 141.

⁷⁰ Hutchinson 1985, 67.

Athens.⁷¹ Accordingly, their inclusion together in this passage, in a place of prominence within the prayer, must surely have made Athenian audiences think of themselves. The Theban women are praying to the two gods most closely associated with Athens, an act that Athenians in need of aid would do. This strengthens the thematic link that Aeschylus has established between Thebes and Athens.

To conclude, it is therefore easy to see why *Seven* has been considered to be a patriotic play, despite Athens as a city being absent from any mention in the text. As I have shown, much of the action of *Seven* implicitly calls to mind not only Athens as a city in general, but the circumstances in which Athens had found itself during the Persian Wars. Throughout *Seven*, Thebes is deliberately described and presented in a way that aligns it strongly with Athens, meaning that audience sympathies naturally tend towards the Thebans.⁷² To bring us back to one of the primary aims of my thesis, this somewhat undercuts Zeitlin's argument regarding Thebes as the "anti-Athens". Here, it is not an "anti-Athens", it is Athens. It has been seen, too, that it is the Argives and not the Thebans who are distanced from civilised people (i.e. Athenians), through emphasis on characterisation and the language that they speak. Eteocles, Thebes' representative in this play, is presented as a competent, if beleaguered, military commander,⁷³ and the repeated use of the ship of state metaphor brings Eteocles in line with Athenian military values (namely, the importance of the navy). Eteocles and the Thebans share characteristics (military valour, reliance on naval analogies, misogynistic views) with the Athenians, and their very situation is comparable to the attempted invasion of Greece by Persia. Far from being the "other",

⁷¹ Tucker 1908, 34 states that the two were joint *πολιοῦχοι* in the Erechtheion.

⁷² It is not always the case that sympathy lies with the invaded. See chapter two for an instance of the invaders (specifically, Polynices) being presented in a way that undercuts the moral high ground of the defender (Eteocles).

⁷³ Unlike his Euripidean counterpart – see chapter two.

the primary thing that is stressed is how similar Thebes and Athens are. Furthermore, Zeitlin makes mention of all of the unpleasant things that happen in Thebes (incest and fratricide, for instance) and argues that seeing these things dramatised on stage both fascinates the Athenians and helps to instruct them on how to avoid similarly undesirable things from happening.⁷⁴ However, as I mentioned earlier, the entire first half of *Seven* holds only a few stray mentions of Oedipus' curse, and the incest that he committed is elided from the play almost entirely. Aeschylus' suppression of these unsavoury elements means that Thebes here is not the den of depravity that it usually is in myth. The worst plight facing Thebes is civil war which, while obviously bad, is not uncommon in the ancient world.⁷⁵ Ultimately, *Seven* is not a display of Thebes as the "other" or "anti-Athens". All of the elements of Thebes' depiction add to a view of Thebes as a stand-in for Athens. Far from being a "negative-model" that Athens should strive to avoid emulating, here, Thebes is Athens.

⁷⁴ Zeitlin 1986, 117.

⁷⁵ Athens itself experienced a large amount of civil unrest towards the end of the fifth century.

Chapter Two: Euripides' *Phoenician Women*

Euripides' *Phoenician Women* is arguably the most unusual of the three discussed in this thesis, and almost certainly the least liked by scholars in modern times.⁷⁶ The date of the play's composition, although difficult to be certain of, is generally considered to be between 411-407 B.C.⁷⁷, meaning that it predates the production of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (though not necessarily its composition.). The commonly accepted period between 411-407 also means that Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* (which tells, broadly speaking, the same story) pre-dates *Phoenician Women* by some 56-60 years. Much like in his *Electra*, Euripides here uses the audience's knowledge of the earlier play (in the case of *Electra*, Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*), in order to surprise and innovate in his own version of the myth. Here, *Phoenician Women* has several key and distinct differences from both *Seven* and from the way in which the myth was generally understood.

This chapter will begin with a brief summary of some of the reasons why critics have derided *Phoenician Women* as inferior to many of Euripides' other works. From there, discussion will move to the *agon*, in which Jocasta, Eteocles and Polynices meet up to try to reconcile their differences. I will analyse the ways in which their characters are presented and, in the cases of Eteocles and Polynices, how they differ from depictions in other tragedies. I will then discuss the female characters of the play, upon whom Euripides places considerable importance, and what their prominence means for an interpretation of

⁷⁶ Burian and Swann 1981, 3.

⁷⁷ A scholium on Aristophanes' *Frogs* gives us a *terminus post quem* of 412 B.C. Papadopoulou 2008, 23 posits a date of composition between 411-409, whereas Burian and Swann 1981, 15 consider a window between 409-407 to be more likely. See Lamari 2017, 259-60 for further discussion.

Phoenician Women. I will end the chapter by returning to Zeitlin's argument regarding Thebes in tragedy and assessing to what degree Thebes functions in this play as "the other".

The most common criticism of *Phoenician Women* is that it is simply too busy a play. A scholiast perhaps puts it best,⁷⁸ when he describes it as "overfull" and stuffed with episodic scenes that are essentially dramatically pointless.⁷⁹ One of the scholiasts who writes about the play describes it using two adjectives which just about sum up the primary issues (if we can call them issues): πολυπρόσωπον (literally meaning "many characters", so clearly a reference to the particularly large number of *dramatis personae*) and παραπληρωματικόν (which Papadopoulou takes to mean the vast number of dramatic episodes, most of which are not really connected to each other).⁸⁰ I am going to deal with both of these concerns briefly here, before returning to them in more depth later on. In fact, the two points are rather linked, as they both imply a lack of unity and focus on Euripides' part, resulting in a muddled plot and confusing array of characters. Indeed, a lack of unity is a common complaint levelled against *Phoenician Women*.⁸¹ Of course, the quest for unity is an attempt to make this tragedy (and all extant tragedies, for that matter) conform to Aristotle's criteria for a "good" play, as he lays down in his *Poetics*. One of these criteria is "unity", which Aristotle seems to define as a group of causally connected actions undertaken either by a single character or a group of characters (Ar. *Poetics* 1451a). Although Aristotle's writings are prescriptive rather than descriptive, a large number of critics and scholars have been influenced by his work,⁸² with the result being that

⁷⁸ Who wrote the third "argument" or "hypothesis" to the play.

⁷⁹ Conacher 1967, 230.

⁸⁰ Papadopoulou 2008, 22.

⁸¹ See Craik 1988, 41.

⁸² See, e.g., Bond 1981, xviii-xx for some problems that critics have with the unity of Euripides' *Heracles*. See also Allan 2000, 40 n.1 and Mossman 1996 for common criticisms of how Euripides' *Andromache* lacks unity.

Phoenician Women is among the least popular of Euripides' tragedies,⁸³ at least in modern times.⁸⁴

Phoenician Women boasts both a large cast of characters (11 speaking characters, most of whom have fairly significant roles) and a markedly episodic structure. Both of these things make up what scholars call the "open" structure of the play, in opposition to a "closed" structure,⁸⁵ which is more focussed in its approach to characters and narrative. I am going to discuss these things briefly here, and return to them from time to time in the remainder of this chapter.

Phoenician Women, containing eleven speaking characters, has the largest number of *dramatis personae* of any surviving tragedy.⁸⁶ Not only is the cast of characters large, but at least eight of the characters have weighty, significant roles, and a further two are messengers, who typically give long, dramatic speeches in the course of a tragedy. So, essentially, throughout *Phoenician Women* we have a lot of talking and action by a lot of different characters. Added to this is the fact that there is not really a "central" character either. While it is inarguable that Oedipus dominates *Oedipus Tyrannus* or that the plot of *Medea* hinges around none other than Medea herself, it is not easy to decide which of *Phoenician Women*'s characters should be thought of as the "main" one.⁸⁷ It seems to me, however, that it might perhaps be better to make *Phoenician Women*'s episodic structure

⁸³ For this reason, there is considerably less secondary literature on this play, especially when compared to Euripides' more famous tragedies, such as *Medea* and *Bacchae*.

⁸⁴ This was not the case in antiquity. It has been observed that, after the *Iliad*, the most read and quoted texts in the ancient world were Euripides' *Orestes* and *Phoenician Women* – see Dunn 1996, 180 and Lamari 2017, 258.

⁸⁵ Papadopoulou 2008, 22; Mastronarde 1994, 3

⁸⁶ Tied with it is *Rhesus*, attributed to Euripides in antiquity. However, there are severe doubts about both its authorship and its date of composition, making it problematic to include in a discussion of fifth-century plays. See Liapis 2012 for the best modern discussion of this.

⁸⁷ Papadopoulou 2008, 22. Craik 2008, 41 argues that the lack of a central character is yet another blow against *Phoenician Women*'s all important "unity".

part of how we analyse it (see below). With regard to the function of each character, Mastronarde makes the claim that the sheer number of speaking characters causes each of them to lose a large part of their agency.⁸⁸ Because of how many separate characters there are, each pursuing his or her own course of action (though usually with the ultimate goal of helping Thebes), very often characters seem to be acting at slightly cross-purposes, or even in complete ignorance of what is happening in other parts of the city.⁸⁹ This may be true, and admittedly it can be a trifle perturbing at times (Menoceus' sacrifice going almost completely unmentioned after the fact being probably the most egregious example,⁹⁰ which will be discussed in more depth later). However, it is my contention that what is important here is not what the characters do – after all, their actions merely drive the plot, a plot which, as we shall see later in this chapter, was already well known in antiquity thanks in large part to Aeschylus and Sophocles – but instead what they say, and the opinions and beliefs that they express.

Papadopoulou seems slightly inclined to agree, with her assertion that consistency of character should not, in drama, be compromised purely for the sake of action.⁹¹ This means that, for Papadopoulou, characterisation is the most important thing, and in *Phoenician Women*, the best way to understand how the principal players are characterised is by examining how they suggest dealing with the crisis at hand.

I am going to focus my discussion here on Jocasta, Eteocles and Polynices, because the *agon* (261 ff.) in which they meet up is one of the climaxes of the play, and it is an

⁸⁸ Mastronarde 1994, 10-11.

⁸⁹ Mastronarde 1994, 10-11 stresses the dramatic strangeness of a character in the same play seemingly unaware of what has been happening elsewhere in the city, with the end result being that some characters seemingly act against their interests.

⁹⁰ Burian and Swann 1981, 10; Papadopoulou 2008, 67.

⁹¹ Papadopoulou 2008, 49.

interesting moment, because all three characters voice startlingly different beliefs and opinions. I will go through each of the characters in turn, beginning with Jocasta.

Jocasta is very much the voice of reason in this debate, trying to rein in her quarrelling sons. She voices her very strong disapproval of the conflict between Eteocles and Polynices (460-468), and, significantly, she couches her disapproval in very pro-democratic words (531-548),⁹² without actually using the word “democracy”. Jocasta, from the beginning, argues that Eteocles should give half of the rule of Thebes to Polynices (which is what their original agreement was). However, importantly, during her speech she does not actually make reference to the original deal.⁹³ She argues objectively for sharing the kingship, and her words do not even make it clear that she means that they should alternate the kingship (which, again, was the original deal).⁹⁴ Given the context in which this play was produced (fifth century Athens), and given the fact that Jocasta here is stressing *isonomia*,⁹⁵ Lloyd argues that Jocasta’s speech is essentially a defence of democracy,⁹⁶ promoting democratic rule as the most effective way for a *polis* to be governed. Jocasta explicitly criticises both tyranny (in the pejorative sense of the word) and φιλοτιμία, ambition for power.⁹⁷ The promotion of democracy and the vilifying of tyranny would have been of great importance during the time period in which *Phoenician Women* is thought to have been produced (as said earlier, probably 411-407 B.C.), as the Peloponnesian War was coming to an end, and Athens’ stability was looking doubtful. What is striking is that the importance of democracy over tyranny is not really particularly relevant to the issue with which Thebes is

⁹² See especially the exhortation to ἰσότητα τιμῶν, “honour Equality”, at line 536, as well as the assertion that τὸ γὰρ ἶσον μόνιμον ἀνθρώποις ἔφυ, “equality is stable among men”, at line 538.

⁹³ Lloyd 1992, 90-1.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Mastronarde 1994, 10.

⁹⁶ Lloyd 1992, 90-1.

⁹⁷ Papadopoulou 2008, 53.

faced here – namely, Polynices’ war on his own city. Lloyd argues that it is precisely the fact that Euripides introduces democracy into a narrative regarding Thebes’ monarchy that highlights how important an issue it was to fifth century Athens.⁹⁸ Lastly, Scharffenberger argues that the scene in which Jocasta desperately tries to mediate between Eteocles and Polynices is modelled closely on a similar scene found in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, where the eponymous central character attempts to reconcile the Athenian and Spartan ambassadors.⁹⁹ *Lysistrata* is concerned with war and the effect that it has on the citizens of warring *poleis*. The reconciliation scene (*Lys.* 1162-75) points towards how difficult and problematic it can be to convince people to stop fighting.¹⁰⁰ This particular theme is pertinent to *Phoenician Women*, and especially to the scene that Scharffenberger alleges is modelled on the one in *Lysistrata*. This topic of reconciliation can be seen as a prevalent motif in much of the literature of the latter half of the fifth century.¹⁰¹ Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, for example, is another play where this theme rears its head,¹⁰² with one of the messages of the play being that the disenfranchised citizens should be re-enfranchised (the chorus makes this point during the *parabasis* – *Frogs* 686-705; 718-737). 411 B.C. was the year of the oligarchic coup in Athens and, for this reason, the divide between oligarchy and democracy was very pronounced at the time.¹⁰³ Therefore, it is clear why the theme of reconciliation might have been so recurrent around this period. In a way, Jocasta is a

⁹⁸ Lloyd 1992, 90-1.

⁹⁹ For her full argument, see Scharffenberger 1995. Scharffenberger uses this similarity to note in her discussion Euripides’ penchant for borrowing elements from comedy, citing Seidensticker’s influential article on the matter (see Seidensticker 1978). In this instance, I think Euripides is simply borrowing a theme common to comedy, rather than trying to inject humour into his plays, as Seidensticker argues that he does in the *Bacchae*. It is also worth noting that *Lysistrata* was produced in 411 B.C., which is fairly compelling evidence for *Phoenician Women*’s production date as after this, if we accept Scharffenberger’s argument that Euripides was fully aware of Aristophanes’ play.

¹⁰⁰ Scharffenberger 1995, 316.

¹⁰¹ Papadopoulou 2008, 53.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Mastronarde 1994, 299-300.

representation of all citizens at the end of the fifth century, who were dissatisfied with the constant strife that they had endured, and wanted the conflict to end and the disparate factions to be reunited, in much the same way that Jocasta is desperate for her sons to be reconciled.

Eteocles is portrayed in the worst light of all the characters of *Phoenician Women*. While in the *OC* Polynices is depicted somewhat negatively (though this is arguable – see chapter three for further discussion of his characterisation), here the situation is reversed, and Eteocles is the one who comes out looking like the villain. His vilification begins even before his appearance on stage, as other characters continually denounce him. Jocasta attempts to remain neutral during the *agon*,¹⁰⁴ however she cannot resist referring to Polynices' exile by Eteocles as a λώβη, an “outrage” or “dishonour” (319). It is not only his mother who condemns Eteocles, either. When speaking with Antigone, the *Paidagogos* says of the invaders that σὺν δίκη δ' ἤκουσι γῆν · ὃ καὶ δέδοικα μὴ σκοπῶσ' ὀρθῶς θεοί (they have come to this land with justice; and I fear that the gods may look upon this correctly) (154-5). Here, the *Paidagogos* strongly asserts that Polynices and his Argive army have the gods behind them, since it was Eteocles who acted wrongly in reneging on the initial deal. Furthermore, a little later, the chorus, in their ode, say (256-60):

Ἄργος ὦ Πελασγικόν,
δειμαίνω τὰν σὰν ἀλκάν,
καὶ τὸ θεόθεν: οὐ γὰρ ἄδικον
εἰς ἀγῶνα τόνδ' ἔνοπλος ὀρμᾷ παῖς
ὃς μετέρχεται δόμους.

O Argos, Pelasgian city!
I fear your strength
and also the strength of the gods; for the man who

¹⁰⁴ Papadopoulou 2008, 51.

attacks his home in arms
is setting out for a contest that is not unjust.

The final character to suggest that Eteocles is acting immorally is in fact Eteocles himself. At lines 524-5, Eteocles says εἴπερ γὰρ ἀδικεῖν χρή, τυραννίδος πέρι κάλλιστον ἀδικεῖν, τᾶλλα δ' εὐσεβεῖν χρεών (for if it is necessary to act wrongly, to do this for tyranny is the best thing, but with respect to all other things, one should act piously). This is a tacit admission on Eteocles' part that he knows that he is acting unjustly,¹⁰⁵ but he justifies it with his lauding of tyranny and the importance that he places upon it.

Therefore, multiple characters have already set up Eteocles as acting unjustly even before he makes his first appearance on stage. And then, once he does appear, he does not succeed in ingratiating himself to the audience. First of all, Eteocles, from his first speech, espouses the value of tyranny, very seldom a good thing in ancient literature. In his second passage of speech, at lines 504-510, Eteocles confidently asserts the following:

ἄστρον ἂν ἔλθοιμ' ἡλίου πρὸς ἀντολὰς
καὶ γῆς ἔνερθεν, δυνατὸς ὦν δρᾶσαι τάδε,
τὴν θεῶν μεγίστην ὥστ' ἔχειν Τυραννίδα.
τοῦτ' οὖν τὸ χρηστόν, μήτερ, οὐχὶ βούλομαι
ἄλλω παρεῖναι μᾶλλον ἢ σῶζειν ἐμοί:
ἀνανδρία γάρ, τὸ πλεον ὅστις ἀπολέσας
τοῦλασσον ἔλαβε.

I would go to the rising of the stars or the sun,
and I would go beneath the earth if I were able to do this:
To hold Tyranny, the greatest of all the gods.
Therefore, mother, I do not wish to hand over this benefit
to anyone, rather than to keep it for myself.
For he who, having lost the greater thing, takes the lesser thing –
this is cowardice.

¹⁰⁵ Papadopoulou 2008, 59. Craik 1988, 197 observes that Eteocles here expresses a similar sentiment to Odysseus at the beginning of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (111), a character whose duplicity is on full display throughout that particular tragedy.

Eteocles enthusiastically defends his pursuit of τυραννίς, not only admitting that he personally craves the power, but taking it further to claim that anyone who refuses such a great benefit is a coward. The use of the gnomic aorist, ἔλαβε (510), reinforces that Eteocles is making a general point,¹⁰⁶ which is a strong indicator of his state of mind – he feels that power and tyranny are the most important things to possess, and evidently they are his driving motivations. Words and concepts such as τυραννίς and φιλοτιμία had very negative connotations around 411 B.C.,¹⁰⁷ making it especially topical when Jocasta states the following sentiment at lines 531-5:

τί τῆς κακίστης δαιμόνων ἐφίεσαι
 Φιλοτιμίας, παῖ; μὴ σύ γ': ἄδικος ἡ θεός:
 πολλοὺς δ' ἐς οἴκους καὶ πόλεις εὐδαίμονας
 ἐσῆλθε κάξῃθ' ἐπ' ὀλέθρῳ τῶν χρωμένων:
 ἐφ' ἧ σὺ μαίνῃ.

Why, my son, do you long for Ambition,
 worst of all the gods? Don't do this! The goddess is unjust;
 She has come into many happy homes and cities and
 left again, to the ruin and destruction of their owners.
 You are going mad for her.

Eteocles displays the worst attributes that an Athenian can possess, and Jocasta's rebuke of him, along with the specific language she uses, makes it clear that we are not supposed to sympathise with him.

Not only are Eteocles' views abhorrent to Athenian citizens of the fifth century, his leadership skills leave much to be desired, too. I discussed in chapter one the ways in which

¹⁰⁶ Morwood 2001, 219.

¹⁰⁷ Papadopoulou 2008, 53. For further discussion in particular of the negativity of φιλοτιμία, see de Romilly 1965, 36-41. Papadopoulou also says that Jocasta considers the two words to be synonyms, citing Mastronarde 1994, 299, who himself cites the equivalence of τυραννεῖν at 561 and φιλότιμος at 567 as further evidence of Jocasta conflating the two terms.

Aeschylus emphasises Eteocles' role as leader and protector of Thebes in the *Seven Against Thebes*. I also argued that Aeschylus paints Eteocles as an exceedingly competent military leader, one to whom the cares of Thebes are of paramount importance and who ably captains the ship of state through the crisis, even as he tragically meets his own demise by the end. The Eteocles that Euripides presents to us is another story entirely. The Eteocles of *Phoenician Women* does not display any of the selflessness or patriotism of his Aeschylean counterpart. As I have just shown, Eteocles here is obsessed with tyranny and power, lusting after command of the city, as well as lacking the proper reverence for the gods or divine law.¹⁰⁸ Lines 510-14 are telling:

πρὸς δὲ τοῖσδ' αἰσχύνομαι,
 ἐλθόντα σὺν ὅπλοις τόνδε καὶ πορθοῦντα γῆν
 τυχεῖν ἃ χρήζει: ταῖς γὰρ ἂν Θήβαις τόδε
 γένοιτ' ὄνειδος, εἰ Μυκηναίου δορὸς
 φόβῳ παρείην σκῆπτρα τὰμὰ τῷδ' ἔχειν.

Furthermore, I am ashamed to think that he might
 get what he wants: to come with arms and
 plunder this land. For this would be a disgrace
 to Thebes, if, by fear of Mycenaean spear,
 I were to give up my sceptre for him to have.

Here, Eteocles conflates his own personal quarrels with the good of Thebes as a whole. He is much more concerned with his own success over his brother to the extent that he brushes

¹⁰⁸ Craik 1988, 38 notes that Eteocles' portrayal here is a deliberate construction on Euripides' part to move his characterisation away from his previously established personality, stating that Euripides "boldly alters the received characterisation". Craik also provides a rather wonderful list of Eteocles' negative character traits, asserting that he is "intransigent, spiteful, sophistic, self-seeking and avaricious".

aside what would benefit the *polis*.¹⁰⁹ Eteocles is more concerned with personal gain than with the overall good of Thebes.

It is interesting to note too that Euripides seems, to some extent, to purposefully take the responsibility for Thebes away from Eteocles, almost as if he is commenting on Eteocles' fundamental unsuitability for the role. It is made abundantly clear during the Creon/Teiresias episode that Thebes' ultimate saviour is in fact Menoeceus, Creon's son. Teiresias makes this clear when he gives his prophecy (911-14). Whereas in *Seven*, the burden of Thebes' defence rested on Eteocles alone (and was reflected effectively in his anguished state of mind through much of the play), here Creon and Menoeceus' presence takes the responsibility away from Eteocles.¹¹⁰ This of course lessens Eteocles' importance. So, in addition to his more pejorative characterisation, Euripides also renders Eteocles essentially superfluous for the *polis*' salvation.

Furthermore, not only do Eteocles' moral deficiencies and the existence of Menoeceus contribute to his lack of suitability for his leadership position, but Euripides goes to great lengths to show Eteocles' fundamental lack of knowledge and experience as well. This is most strikingly emphasised in the scene where Eteocles and Creon debate different military strategies that they might employ in order to fend off the attacking Argive army. In this episode (spanning lines 697-782), Eteocles suggests a number of strategic manoeuvres that the Thebans could make, while Creon points out the flaws in each of them and informs Eteocles why they will most likely not work. This exchange very quickly establishes key information about each character. Eteocles is evidently naïve and inexperienced in the

¹⁰⁹ Papadopoulou 2008, 62 notes that Eteocles acts in contradiction here, suggesting that he and Thebes are pursuing the same goal, while at the same time obviously "placing his own egotistical preoccupations above the safety of the city".

¹¹⁰ Mastronarde 1994, 10.

practical matters of leading a city to war,¹¹¹ while Creon is much more competent in military affairs.¹¹² Creon even pointedly references Eteocles' inexperience and youth with line 713: μῶν νεάζων οὐχ ὀρᾷς ἃ χρή σ' ὀρᾷν; (being young, are you not able to see the things that you ought to see?). While Creon has a good understanding of military matters, Papadopoulou argues that his morality is exposed as questionable when he reprimands Eteocles for being too rash in war, but not for his strong desire to kill Polynices, his own brother.¹¹³ This scene, then, paints a picture of Eteocles, untested at war and out of his depth, relying on an advisor who has military experience, but is equally as immoral.¹¹⁴

Overall, then, I think that it is more or less inarguable that the Eteocles of the *Phoenician Women* is presented as a woefully under-experienced, morally questionable, rash and reckless fellow, a far cry from the sort of leader that Thebes needs (and, in fact, has in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*). Once we understand that Eteocles is not meant to be viewed positively here, his role in the drama, I think, becomes rather clearer. He is intended as a character against whom we can push, and from whom we can distance ourselves – almost as an “anti-Athenian”, as it were (a phrase that should remind one of Zeitlin – I will expand on this below). We have already established that Eteocles' personality is anathema to what a good leader should be like, so it logically follows that we can summarily dismiss all of the opinions and beliefs that he espouses in addition. As I have shown, Eteocles very

¹¹¹ Papadopoulou 2008, 62. Papadopoulou also highlights the fact that Eteocles' inexperience is made all the more striking, given the fact that in *Phoenician Women* he is older than Polynices.

¹¹² Craik 1988, 38-9.

¹¹³ Papadopoulou 2008, 63.

¹¹⁴ Craik 1988, 41, notes that the “military debate between Kreon and Eteokles brings contemporary concerns into the theatre”. Indeed, some critics (Craik 1988, 206 being one such) read Eteocles' and Creon's exchange as very reminiscent of the debate between Nicias and Alcibiades regarding the Sicilian expedition, as presented in Thuc. 6.12.2; 6.17.1. On the other hand, as Papadopoulou 2008, 131 notes, “the general juxtaposition between hastiness and prudence is a *topos*” (and one that, in fact, persists to this day). Mastronarde 1994, 358 cites many examples of this dichotomy in literature, including Hector and Polydamas in *Il.* 18, Xerxes and Darius in Aeschylus' *Persians*, and Alcibiades and Nicias in Thuc, 6 (as noted above).

much acts as a staunch supporter of tyranny and the wielding of absolute power, believing as he does that *τυραννίς* is essentially the highest pursuit in life, and that everything else (even familial loyalty and the common good of one's *polis*) is subsidiary to the pursuit of that kind of power. However, since Eteocles' morals have been exposed as questionable, and his competence as a commander called into question, we can reject as deeply flawed the values that he expresses, and realise that they are, in fact, wrong. Because Euripides sets up Eteocles as "bad" practically from his first appearance, the audience is able to feel more comfortable with him expressing such damaging sentiments. Essentially, it seems like Euripides uses Eteocles to express his own reservations surrounding the pursuit of tyranny and allowing personal conflicts and self-aggrandising to obfuscate what would be in the best interest of one's *polis*. They are bad sentiments produced by a bad person – and this ties in to Zeitlin's point about Thebes functioning as an "anti-Athens".¹¹⁵ While there are positive Thebans in *Phoenician Women* (see below), Eteocles, as the head of the state, perhaps embodies Thebes to a larger extent than the other characters, and all of the views that he expresses are abhorrent to how good Athenians should act. So, although it might be a bit of a stretch to say that Thebes is an anti-Athens in general in this play (see the conclusion to this chapter), Eteocles certainly acts as an anti-Athenian figure, which inevitably colours our perception of his entire *polis*. Thebes might not be "evil", but it has certainly produced someone who represents everything that Athens does not.

The last of the triumvirate of characters who feature in the *agon* is Polynices. Even as early as the prologue, Euripides gives indications that Polynices is going to be the "good

¹¹⁵ Zeitlin 1986.

brother” in this particular drama,¹¹⁶ a role that he does not always play in Greek literature.¹¹⁷ As I have already shown, it is stressed by a number of characters that Polynices is in the right regarding the brothers’ initial quarrel. With respect to Polynices, many scholars point out two things. Firstly, that he appears as reasonable, level-headed, and justified in his grievances,¹¹⁸ especially in comparison to Eteocles. Secondly, that this characterisation of Polynices is most likely a Euripidean innovation.¹¹⁹ In Polynices’ only other tragic appearance, Sophocles’ *OC*, his characterisation is much more ambiguous, tending, in the opinions of some scholars, towards the duplicitous and craven (see chapter three). Furthermore, Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes*, although lacking an actual appearance by Polynices, paints a very different picture of him.¹²⁰ In Aeschylus, Polynices is presented as a man not only obsessed with destroying his city and family, but rejoicing while doing it (see Aesch. *Seven* 631-641 for a vivid description of Polynices’ desires in that play). Polynices’ first appearance in *Phoenician Women* both sets him up as open to talking and illustrates the care that he still feels for his family. At lines 371-5, Polynices proclaims the following:

ἀλλ’ ἐκ γὰρ ἄλγους ἄλγος αὖ σὲ δέρκομαι
 κάρα ξυρῆκες καὶ πέπλους μελαγχίμους
 ἔχουσαν, οἷμοι τῶν ἐμῶν ἐγὼ κακῶν.
 ὥς δεινὸν ἔχθρα, μήτερ, οἰκείων φίλων
 καὶ δυσλύτους ἔχουσα τὰς διαλλαγὰς.
 τί γὰρ πατήρ μοι πρέσβυς ἐν δόμοισι δρᾷ,
 σκότον δεδορκώς; τί δὲ κασίγνηται δύο;

¹¹⁶ Papadopoulou 2008, 57 cites lines 74-6, 154, and 167 as evidence of Euripides’ sympathetic intent for Polynices.

¹¹⁷ See my discussion of the *OC* in chapter three for Polynices’ (possible) negative portrayal there.

¹¹⁸ For discussions of this, see Lloyd 1992, 93; Craik 1988, 38. Papadopoulou 2008, 61 states in particular that line 1446 elicits sympathy from the audience, as it represents the kind of enlarged understanding of life that can only come at one’s death. See Sophocles’ *Ajax* 678-682 for a similar sentiment regarding the mutability of *philia*.

¹¹⁹ See Conacher 1967, 229. See also Mastronarde 1994, 27, who notes that Eteocles’ “extreme” depiction is most likely an innovation as well.

¹²⁰ Conacher 1967, 235 refers to his Aeschylean off-stage presentation as a “strife-loving embodiment of the family curse”.

ἧ που στένουσι τλήμονες φυγὰς ἐμάς;

Now I see you, grief from grief, with
your hair close shaven and wearing black
clothes. Alas, myself and my woes!
Enmity between friends, mother, is such a terrible thing
and so are impossible reconciliations.
But what does my old father do in the house,
he who sees darkness? What about my two sisters?
Do those miserable girls lament my exile?¹²¹

These lines comment on two issues regarding Polynices' character. Firstly, emphasis is placed on the grief that both Polynices and Jocasta are suffering from being estranged. Polynices himself is clearly distraught, as his οἶμοι lament (373) demonstrates; his exile is tormenting him. Furthermore, this passage makes it clear that Polynices has not lost sight of the importance of family. He asks after both his sisters and his father,¹²² and appears to hold no ill-will towards them. Both of these factors distance Polynices significantly from his Aeschylean and Sophoclean counterparts.

Another important factor in Polynices' characterisation in this passage is the emphasis that is placed upon the fact of his exile. First, Polynices makes mention of how emotionally affected he is upon seeing once again his city, with all its halls and temples; in fact, this moves him to tears (367-370). A little further on, in the stichomythia with Jocasta (387-407), Polynices is given a chance to describe the woes of being an exile:

Ἰοκάστη

καὶ δὴ σ' ἐρωτῶ πρῶτον ὧν χρήζω τυχεῖν,
τί τὸ στέρεσθαι πατρίδος; ἢ κακὸν μέγα;

¹²¹ It should be noted that lines 375-8 are quite contentious among scholars – see Griffith and Most 2013, 271. Craik 1988, 192 gives as the primary reason for suspicion the fact that Jocasta does not answer Polynices' questions. Craik also argues, however, that his "musings" do not really need answering, as Jocasta had already alluded to Oedipus' situation and whereabouts, and Polynices essentially answers his own question about his sisters with his "speculative suggestion". See Mastronarde 1979, 121 ff. for an excellent detailed discussion of these lines.

¹²² If we accept these lines as genuine.

Πολυνείκης

μέγιστον: ἔργῳ δ' ἐστὶ μεῖζον ἢ λόγῳ.

Ἰοκάστη

τίς ὁ τρόπος αὐτοῦ; τί φυγάσιν τὸ δυσχερές;

Πολυνείκης

ἔν μὲν μέγιστον, οὐκ ἔχει παρρησίαν.

Ἰοκάστη

δούλου τόδ' εἶπας, μὴ λέγειν ἅ τις φρονεῖ.

Πολυνείκης

τὰς τῶν κρατούντων ἀμαθίας φέρειν χρεών.

Ἰοκάστη

καὶ τοῦτο λυπρόν, συνασοφεῖν τοῖς μὴ σοφοῖς.

Πολυνείκης

ἀλλ' ἐς τὸ κέρδος παρὰ φύσιν δουλευτέον.

Ἰοκάστη

αἱ δ' ἐλπίδες βόσκουσι φυγάδας, ὡς λόγος.

Πολυνείκης

καλοῖς βλέπουσαί γ' ὄμμασιν, μέλλουσι δέ.

Ἰοκάστη

οὐδ' ὁ χρόνος αὐτὰς διεσάφησ' οὔσας κενάς;

Πολυνείκης

ἔχουσιν Ἀφροδίτην τιν' ἠδεῖαν κακῶν.

Ἰοκάστη

πόθεν δ' ἐβόσκου, πρὶν γάμοις εὐρεῖν βίον;

Πολυνείκης

ποτὲ μὲν ἐπ' ἡμᾶρ εἶχον, εἴτ' οὐκ εἶχον ἄν.

Ἰοκάστη

φίλοι δὲ πατὴρ καὶ ξένοι σ' οὐκ ὠφέλουν;

Πολυνείκης

εὖ πρᾶσσε: τὰ φίλων δ' οὐδέν, ἦν τι δυστυχῆς.

Ἰοκάστη

οὐδ' ἠυγένειά σ' ἦρεν εἰς ὕψος μέγαν;

Πολυνείκης

κακὸν τὸ μὴ ἔχειν: τὸ γένος οὐκ ἔβοσκε με.

Ἰοκάστη

ἡ πατρίς, ὡς ἔοικε, φίλτατον βροτοῖς.

Πολυνείκης

οὐδ' ὀνομάσαι δύναί' ἂν ὡς ἐστὶν φίλον.

Jocasta

First, I will ask you what I want to know,
what is losing your country? Is it a great evil?

Polynices

The greatest. It is harder in deed than in word.

Jocasta

What is it like? What is hard to bear for the exile?

Polynices

One thing is the greatest – he does not have freedom of speech.

Jocasta

What you have said is slavery, not to speak what one thinks.

Polynices

It is necessary to bear the stupidity of those who rule.

Jocasta

This is also wretched, to be foolish along with the foolish.

Polynices

But for gain it is necessary to be a slave contrary to one's nature.

Jocasta

Hopes feed exiles, as they say.

Polynices

Yes, they are lovely for our eyes to look at, but they are always still to come.

Jocasta

But doesn't time show clearly that they are empty?

Polynices

They have a certain seductive charm among troubled men.

Jocasta

From where did you feed yourself, before finding life in marriage?

Polynices

Sometimes I had enough for a day, other time I did not.

Jocasta

Did your father's friends and guests not help you?

Polynices

Do well yourself; you get nothing from friends if you are unfortunate.

Jocasta

Did your good birth not lift you to a great height?

Polynices

Not having anything is evil; my birth did not feed me.

Jocasta

One's country, as it seems, is the dearest thing to mortals.

Polynices

You would not be able to name how dear it is.

This entire exchange is exceedingly tragic. Polynices, unsurprisingly, makes exile sound singularly unappealing, by listing the many awful things about being an exile – namely, as this passage shows, the lack of food, the unreliability of people once considered friends and, above all else, the inability to exercise *παρρησία*, a value that was critically important to Athenians of the fifth century, and which is usually translated as “freedom of speech”. What is significant about this stichomythia is the relevance that it would have had to the Athenian

audiences watching the play. Since the aspect of exile that Polynices found most difficult to bear was the lack of freedom to speak one's mind – a freedom that was one of the most important foundations of Athenian democracy¹²³ – it is easy to see why this passage might have greatly affected and unsettled Athenian audiences. Jocasta's response, that not being able to speak freely is essentially the same thing as being a slave, would also have provoked a response from Athenians watching. Polynices continues to expand upon the slavery comparison, by saying that an exile must act as a slave, even if it is against one's nature.¹²⁴ This is a moving admission, and one that could only have elicited further sympathy for Polynices by audiences.¹²⁵ Because the Peloponnesian War had been raging for a number of years by the time that *Phoenician Women* was produced, many of the Athenian citizens who saw it had very much been affected by exile, one way or another,¹²⁶ which means that Polynices' plight would resonate with them all the more. It should be remembered, too,

¹²³ Papadopoulou 2008, 59.

¹²⁴ A theme has been identified here – the tension between *phusis* and *nomos*, which was a debate particularly popular amongst the sophists of the fifth century (see Papadopoulou 2008, 60). This kind of exploration of intellectual topics is typical for a Euripidean tragedy.

¹²⁵ Papadopoulou 2008, 59 notes that a scholiast remarks that this is an undignified way for a hero to comport himself, using this line as evidence to condemn Polynices' character. Mastronarde 1994, 260-1 takes issue with the scholiast in question (whose criticism is οὐκ ἀξιόχρεως ἥρωος ὁ λόγος, "the story is not worthy of a hero"), arguing instead that this behaviour in fact illustrates Polynices' internal tension. The push and pull between his noble lineage and the debasement that he has to endure merely to survive his exile greatly enriches his character and adds to his complexity. In addition to Mastronarde's argument, it seems to me that Polynices being required to act in a way that is contrary to his εὐγένεια is little different from how Odysseus is frequently forced to act in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus is constantly appearing in rags (clothing which, as Menelaus makes clear in Euripides' *Helen* 408-419, ill befit a hero of the Trojan War), and on more than one occasion lies about his true identity, usually making himself appear less noble in the process – see his appearance when he first encounters Nausicaa (*Od.* 6. 127 ff.) and, later, when he meets Eumaeus (*Od.* 13. 429-438 describes the way in which Athena makes Odysseus appear old and frail). Furthermore, Orestes employs similar tactics in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Electra*, deceiving Clytemnestra as to his true identity. Menelaus also behaves similarly in Euripides' *Helen*. So, clearly deception and self-debasement for the sake of subterfuge and self-preservation were literary tropes common in antiquity. To my mind, there is no reason why Polynices' behaviour should be judged any differently.

¹²⁶ Craik 1988, 44-5 notes that long separation from relatives was relatively common due to the war, and that many Athenians had first-hand experience of the "miseries of long penurious exile".

that Athens was a *polis* where ostracism was commonly meted out as a punishment, so exile was very much a reality in Athenian society of Euripides' time.

Ultimately, it is clear that Polynices is presented as a sympathetic character (certainly more sympathetic than in *Seven Against Thebes*). At the same time, however, he never really becomes a positive character. His first entrance on stage is undermined by the obvious fear he feels, and his persistent hesitation and doubts about being back in Thebes (261-279).¹²⁷ Furthermore, although Polynices is in the right over his quarrel with Eteocles, declaring an attack on his own *polis* is still a short-sighted and unjust thing to do.¹²⁸ Polynices seems to exist (in the same way as Eteocles and Jocasta) to explore some themes of contemporary relevance. Polynices is used to explore the effects of a prolonged exile, and to question whether or not "justice" is enough grounds to turn on your own country and *polis*. As shown earlier, several characters indicate that they know that Polynices is the one with justice on his side. At the same time, however, Jocasta strongly warns Polynices against attacking his own *polis* (568-70), despite the fact that earlier she implied that his exile was an outrage (319). Jocasta vocalises the tension between the initial wrong done to Polynices and the lengths to which he goes in order to rectify it, thereby questioning whether or not he is in fact justified in his decision to invade Thebes. Euripides does not provide explicit answers to this question, content to simply raise it and provoke thought.

¹²⁷ Papadopoulou 2008, 58 notes that this explicitly contrasts with the heroic figure that Antigone had earlier talked about. See also Papadodima 2016, 38-9. Papadodima notes that some scholiasts even took Polynices' nervous behaviour here as comical.

¹²⁸ Lloyd 1992, 84 expands on this, noting that some scholars argue that, for all the effort Euripides makes to present Polynices in a positive light, all this does is achieve balance, since Eteocles has the audience's instinctive sympathies as the defender of his city; audiences are naturally inclined to think badly of the man who seeks to destroy his homeland. Craik 1988, 38 agrees with this sentiment, stating that Polynices is right, but still ultimately equally as culpable as Eteocles with respect to their mutual hatred.

I have shown that Euripides uses three of the most central characters, Eteocles, Jocasta and Polynices, to explore intellectual, abstract topics, by putting in each of their mouths conflicting points of view and showing their differing emotions, inviting the audience to ponder the worth of each. Now there is another group of characters worth exploring, and that is the females of the play. One surprising element of *Phoenician Women* is the fact that Jocasta and Antigone are depicted in such an unfailingly positive way. When taking into account both the ancient world's propensity for misogyny (expanded on in chapter one) and Jocasta's previous depiction in tragedy,¹²⁹ it is striking to see how they act here. I have already written at length about Jocasta's portrayal in this play. She is calm and composed during the meeting of her sons (452 ff.) and, as I showed earlier, she advocates fairly strongly for a position akin to δημοκρατία as the Athenians knew it. Her stance on equality and fairness indicates her narrative role as a "good" character.

Antigone is likewise characterised positively. Her first appearance is at line 88 in a scene between her and the old tutor, which is an obvious allusion to the τειχοσκοπία episode found in book three of the *Iliad*. In the Iliadic scene Priam asks Helen to point out to him all of the different Achaean heroes as both armies prepare for the duel between Paris and Menelaus (*Il.* 3. 121-244). In the Euripides passage, the tutor is the one who points out the various Argive champions to Antigone, meaning that Antigone takes on the role of Priam here. Priam, famously, is depicted with great sympathy and nuance in the

¹²⁹ The Jocasta of Sophocles' *OT* lacks the strength of her Euripidean counterpart – when she realises that Oedipus is her son, she flees the room and kills herself (1064-1072). The very fact that Jocasta is alive in *Phoenician Women* proves her resilience. Antigone is not wholly different here than in other plays. The main difference is probably the degree of agency that she displays – Sophocles' Antigone displays perhaps a little too much agency for ancient tastes.

Iliad,¹³⁰ so a comparison with him is bound to reflect favourably on Antigone here.¹³¹ More importantly, however, this scene serves to highlight the youth and inexperience with which Antigone begins the drama.¹³² She is unacquainted with warfare, ignorant of the enemies that will very soon be bearing down on Thebes, and forced to rely on the tutor's knowledge of the external world.¹³³ The emphasis on Antigone's youth here contrasts with how she has progressed by the end. When news of her brothers' impending duel reaches her, Antigone follows Jocasta's lead by leaving her chamber (1274), shedding her modesty (1276), and hurrying to the battlefield with her (1279). These actions speak to Antigone's maturation – she gains an agency that she did not possess earlier.¹³⁴ At lines 1485 ff. Antigone goes on to lead the mourners for her deceased brothers with Ismene (something that is a traditionally feminine activity), before launching into her disagreement with Creon (made famous, of course, by Sophocles' *Antigone*) at line 1643. The disagreement this time is twofold. First, she rejects the refusal to bury Polynices, as in Sophocles' play. Second, she argues against Creon's decision to send Oedipus into exile, finally resolving to accompany him herself. It is this final decision that signals the end result of Antigone's character growth throughout *Phoenician Women*.¹³⁵ Of course, Antigone's decision to accompany and aid

¹³⁰ The most poignant example is from book 24 of the *Iliad* where Priam comes to the Achaean camp in order to beg Achilles to release the body of his dead son, Hector (*Il.* 24. 468 ff.) Lines 504-6 are particularly tragic.

¹³¹ It should be noted that the Euripides passage is more "traditional" than the *Iliad* passage when it comes to age and gender norms. Antigone is both younger than the tutor and a female, meaning that it is natural for her to defer to an older male such as himself. The tutor is most likely a well-educated slave, so it is not unusual for Antigone to hold him in such high regard.

¹³² Lloyd 1992, 84-5.

¹³³ See Papadodima 2016, 36 for the recurring motif of fearful or ignorant interlocutors being "directed" by someone wiser.

¹³⁴ Saxonhouse 2005, 474. Saxonhouse's main argument is that Antigone becomes a "political actor" throughout the course of *Phoenician Women*, a transition that is signified by her "expressing views and taking actions based on her own views". It is true that Antigone is still following someone's lead – in this instance, Jocasta's – but what is important is that she gains the confidence to step outside of her usual domain and enter the battlefield (a place that is usually reserved for men).

¹³⁵ Saxonhouse 2005, 474 notes that this is almost the opposite of what happens in Sophocles' *Antigone*. In Sophocles, Antigone begins with the resolve to confront and oppose Creon and ends the play as "the female lamenting a lost womanhood". As we have seen here, however, Antigone begins as a naïve female before

Oedipus is a clear way of illustrating her good qualities – she is (rightly) devoted to her father and intends to care for him in his old age.¹³⁶

When considering Jocasta's and Antigone's roles in *Phoenician Women*, it seems clear cut to conclude that females are the "good guys" in this play. However, there is one other character who has been seen to eschew the "inappropriate or untraditional attitudes to family and city" displayed by many of the other characters and that is Menoeceus.¹³⁷ Menoeceus, Creon's son, sacrifices himself in order to ensure the continued safety of Thebes (991-1017), which is an unequivocally heroic act. The one element of Menoeceus' sacrifice that has puzzled interpreters is how it fits into the overall narrative of the play. Firstly, it is unclear exactly how Menoeceus' sacrifice saves Thebes, despite Teiresias' assurances that it would (911-14).¹³⁸ Moreover, not only is the Menoeceus episode isolated from the rest of the play, Menoeceus himself is hardly mentioned afterwards (the chorus mentions him at 1090, and Creon grieves for him at 1310 ff.). The Menoeceus episode may be isolated, but it does not seem any more isolated than other parts of *Phoenician Women*. The aforementioned τειχοσκοπία episode, for instance, is similarly cut-off from the rest of the action. So, for this reason, I do not think that the Menoeceus scene necessarily stands out as unusual (especially in the context of *Phoenician Women's* generally episodic

becoming much stronger over the course of the tragedy. Papadopoulou 2008, 71 points out further that Antigone's decision to leave with Oedipus is a Euripidean departure from tradition. Sophocles will pick up on this thread with his *Oedipus at Colonus*, as will be seen in chapter three.

¹³⁶ See Strauss 1993, 65 for the importance of this. *Il.* 24.540-1 and *Xen. Oec.* 7.19 point to the expectation of children to look after their parents in their old age.

¹³⁷ Foley 1985, 106.

¹³⁸ Foley 1985, 109 notes that Zeus' thunderbolt at lines 1180-88 makes the initial battle a draw and suggests that this could be due to Menoeceus. However, she also notes that Thebes does not actually win after the thunderbolt. Foley concludes that Thebes defeats the Argives after Eteocles and Polynices duel because the Thebans had the προμήθεια to keep hold of their shields, and that this προμήθεια could be attributed to divine intervention brought about by Menoeceus' death.

nature).¹³⁹ Menoeceus' selflessness contrasts strikingly with the selfishness and cowardice that Eteocles and Polynices both display.¹⁴⁰ I also argue that Menoeceus' positive characterisation does not in fact conflict with what I said earlier about female agency being the strongest force in *Phoenician Women*. This is because Teiresias specifically says that Creon's other son, Haemon, cannot be sacrificed on account of his engagement to Antigone (943-4). The one sacrificed must be τῆδ' ἀνειμένος πόλει (consecrated to his city) (947). Menoeceus' unmarried state, without any other existing attachments, makes him perfectly suitable. This aligns Menoeceus closely with other unmarried youths who sacrifice themselves for the sake of their city or family but, significantly, all the other examples of this narrative motif are females: Iphigenia, Polyxena, Macaria.¹⁴¹ Additionally, in the ancient world, if a woman was unmarried it was desirable that she be a virgin; for men, this was not as rigidly expected. Therefore, Menoeceus' status as both unmarried and a virgin associates him with the feminine sphere. For males, maturity was typically considered to be synonymous with growing a beard and engaging in sexual activities.¹⁴² So, for Menoeceus' unmarried and virginal status to be stressed here, it seems that Euripides is playing on Menoeceus' "femininity" as the virtue to save Thebes.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Several scholars argue that Menoeceus' sacrifice is not narratively separate, but instead the heroic climax to which the play has been building. See Conacher 1967, 231, where the author cites W. Riemschneider, *Held und Staat in Euripides' Phönissen*, 9-12; 22-23; 33-34. Foley, 1985, 106 calls it the "positive climax" of the play. See also Arthur 1975, 120-8 and Arthur 1977, 173-4 for positive interpretations of Menoeceus' sacrifice. Burian and Swann 1981, 4 argue that the Menoeceus episode is the central dramatic scene around which all the other scenes are arranged in "axial symmetry".

¹⁴⁰ Burian and Swann 1981, 8-9.

¹⁴¹ The sacrifices of whom are dramatised in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Hecuba*, and *Children of Heracles*, respectively.

¹⁴² Plato, *Symposium* 181d. The passage in Plato refers specifically to *paiderasteia* but intellectual and physical maturity is stressed, which presumably applies in all relationships.

¹⁴³ Lamari 2007, 20 notes that "the masculinity of Menoeceus is very little stressed".

It has been argued that the biggest difference between Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and Euripides' *Phoenician Women* is in their differing attitudes towards gender.¹⁴⁴ Aeschylus promotes masculine strength and authority through his descriptions of martial reports and the unerring focus on Eteocles, who embodies masculine strength.¹⁴⁵ In contrast, Euripides focuses more on the female side of the *polis* of Thebes,¹⁴⁶ emphasising Jocasta, Antigone and, as discussed, Menoeceus as the feminine agents who are in fact the only people who put Thebes above themselves. This means that not only does Euripides focus on women (something that is outside the norm for Greek literature, though not uncommon in tragedy, especially for Euripides),¹⁴⁷ but he actually seems to be suggesting that women are the only people who know what is best for Thebes and who try to achieve the salvation of the city (albeit, in Jocasta' and Antigone's cases, unsuccessfully). The subverting of the usual way in which a *polis* was understood to be operated feeds into Zeitlin's point about Thebes being the anti-Athens. In this respect it is almost undebatable that Thebes is Athens' opposite. In Athens, the patriarchy reigned supreme and any females who were depicted as strong or independent in literature were almost always viewed with suspicion.¹⁴⁸ Here, however, Jocasta and Antigone are not only depicted with strong views and morals, but they are unpunished for them. Euripides even makes clear that their views are the right ones, and that the men in charge of Thebes are unable to guide the city safely. Menoeceus (who, as I have shown, is a feminine character) even successfully manages to

¹⁴⁴ See Lamari 2007 for an extensive discussion of this.

¹⁴⁵ Lamari 2007, 6-14.

¹⁴⁶ Lamari 2007, 5 states that women play a major role in the events of the *polis* here.

¹⁴⁷ Many of Euripides' plays focus on female characters with much more depth than either Aeschylus' or Sophocles' tragedies (although Sophocles' *Antigone* and, to a lesser extent, *Electra* are reasonably female-focussed). See, e.g., *Medea*, *Electra*, *Helen*, *Hecuba*, *Andromache*, *Trojan Women*.

¹⁴⁸ For instance, Antigone's role in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Whether she was meant to be viewed as just or misguided was ambiguous even in antiquity. *Medea* in Euripides' *Medea* is an example of a woman who is a danger to her family and community.

save Thebes. So, while Thebes here can be viewed as the anti-Athens, this might not necessarily be a bad thing. Although Thebes is still a patriarchy, if it had relied more heavily on feminine power from the beginning, then the city might not have come so close to decimation.

I talked briefly earlier about the disjointed, episodic nature of *Phoenician Women*, and how this has troubled critics of the play. I do not agree with critics that this reflects negatively on the drama. However, the fragmented narrative nevertheless informs how the play is received by audiences. There have been various suggestions offered as to what impact these disjointed episodes have on the drama, and little consensus has been reached. Pearson argues that Euripides' primary goal was capturing realism, and the apparent lack of cohesion was a reflection of the messiness of real-life.¹⁴⁹ Kitto, conversely, maintains that Euripides is not in fact attempting any kind of tragic theme, but is instead creating a "dramatic pageant"¹⁵⁰ whereby he presents a continuous stream of scenes from myth, establishes their immediate impact, and proceeds to move directly on to the next scene – a sort of greatest hits of the Theban mythic cycle, as it were. Kitto thinks that Euripides is packing *Phoenician Women* full of mythic episodes purely for the spectacle of it all.¹⁵¹ Obviously it is impossible for us to know Euripides' intentions, but I think the somewhat fragmented narrative and the inclusion of many disparate episodes lends well to an overall interpretation of Thebes. The fractured narrative mirrors the chaos and disorder in which the Thebes of myth (shown here) often finds itself. Thebes here is on the verge of being broken by civil war and the incestuous sins of its former ruler. For that reason, the almost

¹⁴⁹ Pearson 1909, xxvii-xxx. Pearson sums up what he thinks Euripides was aiming to do as "to depict the sorrows of the house of Oedipus in such manner as to portray men and women as they lived"

¹⁵⁰ Kitto 1961, 353.

¹⁵¹ Lamari 2017, 268 seems to agree, referring to *Phoenician Women* as a "megatext" that gives an "all-encompassing presentation of the Theban saga".

“broken” structure of *Phoenician Women* is an apposite reflection of the state of the *polis*. This of course then contrasts with Athens. Although Athens was certainly struggling during the period of *Phoenician Women*’s composition,¹⁵² unlike Thebes, it was not in the midst of civil war or incest scandals. Furthermore, the presentation of mythic Thebes invites a comparison with mythic Athens, which has always been depicted favourably in tragedy (see Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* or Euripides’ *Suppliants*, for instance). Therefore, although in my last paragraph I demonstrated how Euripides might be questioning the Athenian patriarchy, at the same time he is celebrating Athens’ superiority to Thebes, making this a very complex tragedy. Thebes is the anti-Athens, both in good ways and bad – its leaders have failed it, and it is broken and on the verge of complete fragmentation, while at the same time boasting strong, intelligent feminine characters who are capable of saving it.

Euripides’ *Phoenician Women* is a tragedy that resists easy conclusions. I have shown that Euripides’ tendency to use characters to voice his own thoughts about intellectual and abstract topics relevant at the time of production – such as the lot of an exile, the value of democracy, and the perils of avarice – is present here, particularly during the *agon*. Here, the malleability of the Theban characters is helpful. Mythical Theban characters, typically, are not consistent in their characterisation in literature, allowing Euripides to mould them as he wants. For example, Odysseus is always depicted as somewhat wily, shrewd, cunning or any other permutation of the adjective “clever”. Regarding characters such as Eteocles and Polynices, writers are not so constrained,¹⁵³ meaning that Jocasta, Eteocles and Polynices can be used to explore contemporary Athenian concerns. Zeitlin’s argument of Thebes as

¹⁵² During the latter stages of the Peloponnesian War, it became gradually clearer that Athens would probably not be victorious.

¹⁵³ As shown by Eteocles’ differing characterisation between Aeschylus and Euripides, and the slight change in Polynices from here to Sophocles *OC*.

the “anti-Athens” certainly applies to Eteocles, who represents everything that is anathema to Athenian society, and Polynices who, while sympathetic, is far from a paragon of virtue. Jocasta of course is the most overtly democratic and fair-minded character in the tragedy, so Zeitlin’s argument does not fully extend to all characters. At the same time, Euripides’ (somewhat characteristic) focus on the feminine further aids Zeitlin’s argument of Thebes as the anti-Athens. While Athenian males were in charge, in Euripides’ Thebes the only characters who display consistent sense are the female or feminised ones. The anti-Athenian sentiment stretches to the structure of the narrative as a whole. *Phoenician Women* is episodic, and without much sense of cohesion, which comes to define Thebes in opposition to Athens, which is imagined as much more focussed and orderly (like its depiction in Euripides’ *Suppliants*). What we have here, then, is the sense that, in one respect (the prevalence of intelligent and competent feminine characters) it is a good thing that Thebes does not follow Athens. On the other hand, though, Thebes is presented as lacking Athens’ order and instead fostering chaos and disorder, making Athens the preferable *polis*. Ultimately, *Phoenician Women* goes to some lengths to paint Thebes and Athens as opposites. As I have shown, however, this at the same time reflects both positively and negatively on each respective *polis*.

Chapter Three: Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*

The final tragedy that I intend to examine is Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, which, unlike Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* or Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, does not feature the *polis* of Thebes as a setting. Rather, it takes place solely in Athens, specifically in the deme of Colonus, which was Sophocles' deme.¹⁵⁴ Significantly, this is one of the few extant tragedies to feature Thebans and Athenians interacting with each other on-stage.¹⁵⁵ This chapter will begin with a discussion of the principal characters of the drama, who can be divided, broadly speaking, into two categories: Athenian and Theban. The way in which the *dramatis personae* are characterised affects how audiences view Athens and Thebes as individual *poleis*, which is why the bulk of this chapter will be an analysis of characterisation in *Oedipus at Colonus*. As shall be seen, comparison and contrast between Athens and Thebes is encouraged by the action of the play, which makes *Oedipus at Colonus* crucial for an investigation into Zeitlin's claim that Thebes' function in tragedy is as the "anti-Athens". We can assess her claim while Athens and Thebes are being explicitly compared on-stage together. The characterisation here is not black and white, however, and it is difficult to gather a clear picture of how the Athenian audience is supposed to feel about Thebes. After a discussion of the Athenian characters, I will discuss the setting of Athens, specifically Colonus, more closely, and how the setting informs the tone of the drama. I will then discuss the Theban characters and, as a result, Thebes, a city which, despite not physically present, has a large presence in the minds of the central characters. I will then finish up with

¹⁵⁴ Kelly 2009, 98; Walker 1995, 174.

¹⁵⁵ Euripides' *Heracles* features Heracles (who was born in Thebes, according to most traditions) and Theseus together on-stage. Also, Euripides' *Suppliants* includes a passage where Creon's herald (from Thebes) delivers a message to Theseus. The herald, though admittedly a minor character, is presented as rude and anti-democratic (presumably to reflect poorly on Creon).

a discussion of Oedipus and sum up the importance of using Athens as the location for a story that is about Thebes.

It has been observed that the picture of Athens that we get during the course of *Oedipus at Colonus* (hereafter abbreviated as *OC*) is drawn primarily through the portrayal of its population (namely, Theseus and the chorus),¹⁵⁶ and it follows that the same is true of Thebes, also. Therefore, it is impossible to discuss the two *poleis* without engaging with the characters themselves.

It is reasonable and uncontroversial to state that Athens, as a whole, is portrayed in a very positive manner in the *OC*. A brief examination of Theseus and the chorus of elders of Colonus will demonstrate this. The chorus of the *OC* is more involved in the action than is the case in the majority of extant tragedies,¹⁵⁷ meaning that it is easier to gain a clear understanding of their personality and attitudes. First of all, the chorus is initially very willing to help Oedipus (176-206), and it is only once they learn who he is that they express reluctance at having him remain in their presence. They speak in harsh terms, ordering Oedipus to leave (226; 233), but it is important to note that their words are constructed so as to suggest knee-jerk fear, rather than ingrained nastiness. In fact, a short while later they are already softening, expressing pity for Oedipus and Antigone.¹⁵⁸

Important to the chorus' characterisation also is its piety, which is on display throughout the entire play. During the *parodos*, the chorus declares its respect for the sanctity of the holy grove (117-137). They even go so far as to close their eyes when they

¹⁵⁶ Blundell 1993, 290.

¹⁵⁷ Kelly 2009, 87.

¹⁵⁸ Kamerbeek 1984, 57 observes that the chorus' behaviour is motivated primarily by their fear of the gods, so pity is virtually all that they are able to offer. Nonetheless, he also notes that they do not repeat the "threatening imperatives" of 226 and 233, pointing, I think, towards their basic sympathies towards Oedipus' plight.

pass, lest they cause inadvertent offence to the Eumenides.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, when Oedipus asks them for help a little later, unsure what he should do (455-460), their reply clearly showcases their piety. The chorus proceeds to give Oedipus detailed advice regarding the religious ritual that he must perform in order to reconcile the Eumenides to him and his cause (as well as to apologise for violating their sacred grove) (466-492). This brief exchange is perhaps the most striking evidence of the chorus' piety and religious reverence – they do not simply advocate respect towards the gods, they know exactly how best to demonstrate that respect.¹⁶⁰ Provided that Oedipus follow their instructions, the chorus of elders resolve to support him, again emphasising their pious (and ultimately fair) nature.¹⁶¹

As well as possessing a respect for divine authority, the chorus, once Oedipus has won them over, remains steadfast and loyal to his cause,¹⁶² as is particularly evidenced during the confrontation with Creon. When Creon orders his guards to abduct Antigone, the chorus reacts with outrage and harshly rebukes him (835-843). In fact, it is clear from lines 856-7 that they even go so far as to attempt to restrain him themselves, in a rare moment of onstage violence.¹⁶³ Additionally, the chorus does not criticise Oedipus once or caution him to reign in his temper (which was notably on display all throughout *Oedipus Tyrannus*),¹⁶⁴ even when he furiously sends Polynices away in the latter half of the drama. In fact, they

¹⁵⁹ Walker 1995, 178-9 suggests that the “blind fear” that the chorus displays is somewhat problematic and mitigates the nostalgic re-creation of pre-Peloponnesian War piety for which some scholars think Sophocles is aiming. At the same time, however, Walker concedes that this fear is probably a realistic image of the average Athenian.

¹⁶⁰ Gardiner 1987, 111 describes the chorus as behaving as “knowledgeable priests”, and claims that their words make it seem “as if the ritual were being performed before us”.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Gardiner 1987, 113.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ The chorus shows discomfort with words spoken in anger at *OT* 404-7 and 523-4.

support him even in his dismissal of his own son, joining Oedipus in banishing him (1397-8).¹⁶⁵

Also highlighting their loyalty is the fact that the chorus recognises and yields to human authority, emphasised by their deference to Theseus, the king of Athens. They decide to appeal to τοὺς ἄνακτας (in this case most likely poetic plural, referring solely to Theseus) in order to resolve whether or not Oedipus should remain (294-5). Furthermore, the chorus is respectful towards Theseus both when he is onstage (e.g. 630; 1014), and when he is absent (e.g. 861).¹⁶⁶ This respect for authority,¹⁶⁷ along with their piety, ensures that the chorus is seen by audiences as a positive force in the play.

The virtuous behaviour of the chorus is important because of how Sophocles links them with real-life contemporary Athenian citizens. It has been suggested that the chorus of Greek tragedy to an extent represents the Athenian *polis* on-stage, primarily because, in contrast to the actors, who were professionals, the chorus was comprised of regular Athenian citizens, who would have been trained in dancing and singing.¹⁶⁸ As has already been mentioned, the chorus in the *OC* is made up of old Athenian citizens, which makes this, significantly, one of the few examples in extant tragedy of the chorus being made up “both literally and dramatically” of Athenian citizens.¹⁶⁹ It seems likely, then, that Athenian

¹⁶⁵ Gardiner 1987, 113.

¹⁶⁶ Accepting the common emendation to assign this line to the chorus. See Jebb 1885, 142 for an argument in favour of this.

¹⁶⁷ Blundell 1993, 294-5 notes that Theseus’ authority is “legitimate”, both because of his birth, and because of his “high moral standard”.

¹⁶⁸ Beer 2004, 3-4 states that, because of this, the chorus aided in giving the myths with which tragedy dealt a “political” element, with their Athenian identity helping to make the stories more relevant to audiences. This was emphasised in the fifth century, when the separation between professional actors and the chorus became even more distinct.

¹⁶⁹ Beer 2004, 157 observes this, and argues that it “challenges the distancing effect of myth”. Regarding other tragedies in which the chorus are also Athenians, Euripides’ *Children of Heracles*, in which the chorus is comprised of old Athenian male citizens as well, is the only other example. The chorus of Euripides’ *Ion* is made up of Creusa’s handmaidens so, although they are presumably from Athens, they would not be citizens.

audiences of the fifth century would identify much more strongly with the chorus of the *OC* than with that of virtually any other tragedy they might have seen performed. It is only natural that they would see themselves reflected in the chorus, heightened by the centrality of Athens in the narrative. The chorus' positive attributes that I have just adduced are therefore important in making them resonate with audiences. By imbuing his chorus of Athenians with piety, compassion, loyalty, and an openness to being persuaded to change their opinions and stance on matters (as proven by their eventual support of Oedipus), Sophocles ensures that they are represented as idealised Athenian citizens,¹⁷⁰ whom audiences should strive to emulate.¹⁷¹

The other representative of Athens in the *OC* is, of course, Theseus, the mythical king of Athens. Put simply, Theseus in this play is portrayed as an almost flawless, idealised individual, with whom few critics can seem to find fault.¹⁷² There has been an argument that Theseus here represents an idealised view of Pericles, and that the *OC* is Sophocles' way of hearkening back to Periclean Athens, when the *polis* was supposedly at its greatest,¹⁷³ and its most democratic, made especially poignant given the difficulties that Athens was experiencing when this play is thought to have been composed. This line of thought is reasonably attractive, but I take slight issue with the claim that the *OC* is in some way reminiscing about "true democracy". It is true that (as I have already noted) the

¹⁷⁰ Blundell 1993, 296 stresses that the abilities both to express pity and to be persuaded were fundamental to democratic thought, hence why such virtuous Athenians as the chorus are depicted as displaying them. She also notes that the openness to be persuaded functions as a check against emotion, and thus encourages *sophrosyne* and civic loyalty. It is worth noting that Oedipus even shows the willingness to listen to persuasion (1173-1206, where Theseus and Antigone convince him to hear what Polynices wants to say to him), perhaps foreshadowing his suitability to be assimilated into Athens. Gardiner 1987, 113 emphasises that Sophocles has gone to some lengths to portray the chorus in such an overwhelmingly positive way.

¹⁷¹ Gellie 1972, 172 compares the Colan elders to the Areopagites in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, who, as here, were Athenian citizens taking the roles of pious Athenian citizen jury-men.

¹⁷² See e.g. Knox 1964, 157; Markantonatos 2007, 89-90, 159.

¹⁷³ Kelly 2009, 21.

chorus' openness to persuasion is a fundamental tenet of democracy, and Pericles' lifetime was very much defined by the rise and continued presence of such democracy.¹⁷⁴ However, the Theseus who is presented in the *OC* is not really a "democratic" figure, per se. The first we hear of Theseus is in Oedipus' exchange with the stranger at the beginning of the play. Oedipus asks ἄρχει τις αὐτῶν ἢ 'πὶ τῷ πλῆθει λόγος; (who rules these places? Or is speech with the majority?) (66). This is Oedipus' way of asking if the place at which he has arrived is democratic. The stranger then replies ἐκ τοῦ κατ' ἄστὺ βασιλέως τάδ' ἄρχεται (these places are ruled by the king in the city) (67), confirming that, in this world, Athens is in fact a monarchy and not a democracy.¹⁷⁵ Sophocles here is very clearly refuting the picture of heroic Athens that Euripides had painted in his *Suppliant Women* years earlier, in which Athens is clearly a democracy.¹⁷⁶ It is abundantly clear from the text, then, that Theseus' Athens in the *OC* is not a democracy.

Furthermore, Theseus himself is not presented as "democratic". He is most certainly an ideal king (as will be discussed shortly), but he does not represent democracy.¹⁷⁷ Additionally, it has been observed that, unlike Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, in which Athena, the patron deity of Athens, plays a large role, the god most important to Colonus in the *OC* is Poseidon (specific references to Poseidon in the text will be discussed later).¹⁷⁸ Now,

¹⁷⁴ With the two major heralds of democracy being Cleisthenes' reforms, roughly 10-12 years before Pericles' birth, and Ephialtes stripping the Areopagus of all of its functions except as a homicide court in 462/1 B.C. – see Sommerstein 1989, 13-17.

¹⁷⁵ Walker 1995, 172 remarks on the strangeness of this exchange. The only *polis* ever depicted as a democracy in the heroic age is Athens, as in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*. However, since Athens is not a democracy here, Walker argues convincingly that it should be assumed that there is no such thing as a democracy at all in the world of the *OC*. Hence Oedipus has essentially just asked an impossible question.

¹⁷⁶ Storey 2008, 93-5 discusses Theseus' portrayal in *Suppliant Women*, with the main conclusions being that he is an idealised leader of an idealised democratic Athens. It should be noted, too, that although Theseus behaves like the leader of Athens, he refuses to act until the Athenian citizens ratify his decision (350-8), which marks Athens' status as a democracy (although he acknowledges that the people are likely to go along with what he wishes – see line 350).

¹⁷⁷ Beer 2004, 167.

¹⁷⁸ Beer 2004, 167-8.

Poseidon is undeniably important to Athens (as evidenced by the story of his contest with Athena, discussed chapter one), but he was also a notable aristocratic god.¹⁷⁹ For this reason, the *OC*'s preoccupation with Poseidon seems to hint towards a more old-fashioned, aristocratic reading of the play. Athens' history of aristocracy is being celebrated, with Theseus as the main point of reference for this. Supporting this is the fact that multiple scholars have commented on Theseus' innately "heroic" nature throughout the *OC*,¹⁸⁰ which, I argue, distances him from the political aspect that his presence often brings to tragedies (cf. Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, as mentioned). Furthermore, Theseus does not espouse democratic (or, for that matter, any political) ideology in the *OC*,¹⁸¹ meaning that the emphasis is very much on his humanity,¹⁸² which seems to transcend any real-life contemporary issues.

Regardless of whether or not he is "democratic", Theseus is a positive force in the play. His power over Athens and its demes is emphasised by the fact that only he (and not the chorus) can be relied upon fully to aid Oedipus.¹⁸³ That he wields this authority with such generosity and kindness (e.g. 649-667; 886 ff.) is surely to be viewed favourably.

Furthermore, Theseus, like the chorus of Colonus' elders, displays great piety throughout the *OC*. Upon his return at line 886, Theseus informs those present that their

¹⁷⁹ Beer 2004, 168.

¹⁸⁰ Kelly 2009, 111 writes that Theseus exists simultaneously in Athens of the fifth century and in the heroic world of kings. Wilson 1997, 117 notes that Theseus behaves very much like a traditional hero ought to, using the example of Theseus paying little notice to the chorus when he first enters the stage – heroic characters are usually above the "considerations of courtesy" (p. 126). He also adds that Theseus does not act like an ideal Athenian but, rather, like a hero. Wilson cites Reinhardt 1979, 213 as saying that Theseus here is not as obviously political as Euripides' Theseus, as he does not espouse political opinions and maxims. I disagree with the assertion that Theseus is not presented as an ideal Athenian, as will be discussed shortly.

¹⁸¹ Reinhardt 1979, 213 adopts this line of thinking, with his assertion that Theseus in the *OC* is not the ideal patriot that he is in many of Euripides' plays, since he does not "trot out political maxims".

¹⁸² Reinhardt 1979, 208 suggests "great security, peace, and warmth" as the cumulative effect of Theseus' presence.

¹⁸³ Wilson 1997, 118.

shouts have interrupted him just as he was sacrificing at the altar of Poseidon, who is the patron god of Colonus (886-890). As mentioned in chapter one, Poseidon was an important deity for the Athenians, so his reverence here immediately sets Theseus up as concerned with the good of Colonus, and of Athens as a whole. As the king, it would be his duty to ensure that his people did nothing to offend the gods, and his personal, hands-on involvement shows him “united in public religious activity with his subjects”¹⁸⁴, which is no doubt a positive way to behave.¹⁸⁵ In addition to the piety expected of the ruler, Theseus’ sacrifice to Poseidon takes on another dimension when one remembers that Poseidon is Theseus’ father. Theseus therefore is not only behaving with the appropriate religious reverence, but also performing his proper filial duty.¹⁸⁶ In the fifth century, respect for one’s father was an important (and socially expected) part of a male citizen’s life,¹⁸⁷ and a failure to treat one’s father properly was viewed as a serious transgression, and as damaging to the moral fabric of society.¹⁸⁸

Theseus’ moral excellence is also demonstrated by the abundance of important virtues that he displays during his time on stage. One of the most important attributes that an upstanding Athenian male should exhibit is *sophrosyne*, self-restraint or moderation. Theseus, as virtually all critics have observed, definitely exhibits *sophrosyne*,¹⁸⁹ perhaps most clearly demonstrated in his interactions with Creon. Creon repeatedly threatens not just Theseus, but Oedipus and his daughters, whom Theseus had previously declared as

¹⁸⁴ Blundell 1993, 290.

¹⁸⁵ Of course, Theseus’ off-stage activity is also useful in terms of staging, as his absence allows for Creon to be a more credible threat once he arrives. This also allows Theseus’s heroism to shine upon his re-entrance, as he quickly squares up to Creon.

¹⁸⁶ Kamerbeek 1984, 130.

¹⁸⁷ Strauss 1993, 21.

¹⁸⁸ See, for instance, the pejorative way in which hitting one’s father is depicted in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (1321-44; 1353-1444), and *Birds* (757-59; 1347-52).

¹⁸⁹ Kelly 2009, 115; Rosenmeyer 1952, 100-1.

guests of Athens (813-20). In response to these threats, Theseus maintains his composure, and refuses to lower himself to Creon's level – instead, he simply calmly informs Creon that Oedipus, Antigone and Ismene are under his protection and Creon therefore will not be allowed to harm them (905-8). Such a display of measured self-control, aside from being rather impressive, serves to reinforce Theseus' Athenian background. Important too is Theseus' generous hospitality. Guest-friendship and hospitality, under the umbrella term *xenia*, were fundamental not just to Athenian life but to the ancient world as a whole.¹⁹⁰ At the same time, however, something on which Athens prided itself (particularly during the fifth century) was its willingness to grant shelter and refuge to both foreigners and suppliants,¹⁹¹ which is another facet of *xenia*.¹⁹² Thus, the speed with which Theseus agrees to harbour Oedipus and his daughters, especially since he risks enmity with Thebes by doing so, is significant, as it once again proves to the audience that Theseus “embodies the best traditions of Athens in its reception of foreigners”.¹⁹³ It is also important that Theseus offers this hospitality without any ulterior motives.¹⁹⁴ It is true that Oedipus promises to bring a great benefit to Athens, should it help him, but Theseus had already indicated that he would help him before he heard about this (556-66).¹⁹⁵ This lack of ulterior motives separates Theseus from both Creon and Polynices, both of whom (as we shall see shortly) are decidedly self-serving.

¹⁹⁰ This is clear from the Homeric epics, where *xenia* plays a large role, despite the absence of Athens in the poems. For example, see *Od.* Books 3-4, where Telemachus goes first to Pylos and then to Sparta, and is greeted with proper *xenia* from Nestor and Menelaus. See also *Il.* 119 ff., where Glaucus and Diomedes, after meeting on the battlefield as enemies, realise that their ancestors were guest-friends, and so resolve not to fight one another.

¹⁹¹ See Jebb 1885, 50; Kamerbeek 1984, 57; Hogan 1991, 87.

¹⁹² See *Iliad* 24. 470 ff. where Priam comes to Achilles as a suppliant while Achilles is with two of his friends, and the two later on share a meal together (618 ff.). Zeus is the god of both *xenia* and suppliants, so it is logical that the two should be linked.

¹⁹³ Beer 2004, 159. See also Rosenmeyer 1952, 100-1.

¹⁹⁴ Rosenmeyer 1952, 101.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Accordingly, it is clear that Theseus has been set up as the perfect Athenian. He embodies everything that makes Athens great,¹⁹⁶ and the potentially more problematic elements of his past are merely alluded to,¹⁹⁷ but still presented in an overall positive fashion,¹⁹⁸ so that there is no question of his virtue. He is dutiful both with respect to religious obeisance, and in terms of familial loyalty. As discussed earlier, the chorus of Colonan elders is portrayed in a likewise positive light. Of course, this means that the primary representatives of Athens are depicted not only as morally upright human beings but, more specifically and importantly, as idealised Athenian citizens. This unerring focus on their positive “Athenian-ness” is taken to such an extent that it verges on being over the top (at least to the sensibilities of modern readers). However, it nonetheless is successful in its goal to extol Athens’ excellence.

In light of the discussion up to this point, I would not suggest that the *OC* is in some way a celebration of Athenian democracy. I have made it clear that the Athens of the *OC* is fundamentally not a democracy, nor is Theseus a figurehead for such a political system. What the *OC* is, however, is a more general celebration of Athens and its people, separate from politics and contemporary events. The passage that perhaps best reflects this encomium of Athens is the so-called Ode to Colonus (lines 668-719). The moment at which the chorus launches into this ode is undoubtedly significant, as it comes immediately after Theseus’ first appearance on stage, during which he demonstrated, as mentioned above, the depths of his magnanimity and the resoluteness of his morals. Then, after his exit, the chorus, seemingly inspired by Theseus’ *arete*, begin to sing about Colonus (and Athens more

¹⁹⁶ Walker 1995, 179.

¹⁹⁷ The negative aspects of Theseus’ life, such as his exile and vague κινδυνεύματα, “hazards” or “ventures”, are very briefly and opaquely mentioned at 563-5.

¹⁹⁸ Walker 1995, 171.

generally), lavishing effusive praise on them both.¹⁹⁹ The ode starts simply but effectively, with the chorus proclaiming Colonus to be τὰ κράτιστα γᾶς ἔπαυλα (the mightiest dwelling place on the earth) (669). The grove of Colonus in which they're standing is also “ἀνήλιον ἀνήνεμόν τε πάντων χειμώνων (without sun and without the wind of any storms) (676-8), conjuring up images of a perfect sanctuary, untouched by the ravages of nature and real life. Next, in lines 681-5, the flowers of Colonus are lauded:

θάλλει δ' οὐρανίας ὑπ' ἄχνας
ὁ καλλίβοτρυς κατ' ἥμαρ ἀεὶ
νάρκισσος, μέγαλιν θεαῖν
ἀρχαῖον στεφάνωμ', ὃ τε
χρυσαιγῆς κρόκος.

And the narcissus with its beautiful clusters
blooms under the heavenly dew
every day, the ancient crown
of the two great goddesses. And the crocus
shines like gold.

These images are overwhelmingly positive, painting the picture of Colonus as a picturesque and thriving utopia. Emphasis is placed on the beauty of both the narcissus and the crocus, reflecting Colonus' own beauty.²⁰⁰

The final part of the ode is probably the most significant for our purposes here, as it really carries the encomium of Athens to new heights. Up until this part, the praise has been specifically focussed on Colonus, rather than Athens as a whole. Since Colonus is a deme of Athens, and since Theseus, explicitly identified as the king of Athens, is a major

¹⁹⁹ Hesk 2012, 169 notes that at the very moment that Theseus openly displays his pity, his piety, and his willingness to help Oedipus, the chorus chooses to begin their praise-ode. It seems that Theseus' generosity of spirit encourages the chorus to display their own pride in Athens.

²⁰⁰ Hogan 1991, 98 notes that this is a “common rhetorical topos”, a *locus amoenus*, in which a place or site is praised as being beautiful, with particular emphasis placed on the naturalness of its beauty.

character in the *OC*, it would be quite reasonable to extend the lauding of Colonus to a larger praising of Athens in general. Indeed, this is what Knox does, stating that although Athens is not explicitly mentioned, it is implicitly present in the descriptions of the landscape.²⁰¹ However, the fact remains that, although it is theoretically possible to do this, Sophocles never explicitly extends his praise to Athens.²⁰² This changes with the final strophe and antistrophe (694-719), where suddenly Athens itself leaps to the forefront of the chorus' lyrics. Lines 694 ff. introduce the idea of the olive (ἐλαία)²⁰³, which was one of Athens' defining and most useful foodstuffs, a symbol of Athens' wealth and power,²⁰⁴ and, as has been discussed earlier, was Athena's gift to the nascent *polis* in mythical times. The olive here is spoken about in decidedly celebratory words. It is described as φύτευμ' ἀχείρωτον αὐτόποιον, ἐγγέων φόβημα δαΐων (a plant that is unconquered and self-produced,²⁰⁵ a terror to hostile weapons) (698-9). This represents the enormous pride that the Athenians felt towards what was essentially their patron plant – it set them aside from other *poleis* in a significant way. Lines 702-5 continue the heavy praising of the olive tree, with the chorus claiming that neither a young man nor an old man could manage to damage it or render it infertile. Finally, the chorus says that Zeus *Morios* and, more importantly, Athena, watch over and protect the olive tree. Athena was important to Athens, so it should be clear that her involvement here can only serve to add to the pro-Athenian sentiment. She and the olive tree are inexorably bound together so, in a sense, to praise one is to praise the other.

²⁰¹ Knox 1964, 154-5. Knox particularly emphasises the ivy of Dionysus and the narcissus, which remind us of Athenian theatre and the Eleusinian mysteries.

²⁰² Walker 1995, 174-5.

²⁰³ Jebb 1885, 112 sees the lauding of the narcissus and the crocus as a precursor to the mention of the olive tree.

²⁰⁴ Kamerbeek 1984, 108.

²⁰⁵ I.e., it grows by itself without human intervention.

Next, at lines 709-18, Poseidon is named:

ἄλλον δ' αἶνον ἔχω ματροπόλει τῇδε κράτιστον
δῶρον τοῦ μεγάλου δαίμονος, εἰπεῖν, χθονὸς αὔχημα μέγιστον,
εὖἵππον, εὖπῶλον, εὐθάλασσον.
ὦ παῖ Κρόνου, σὺ γάρ νιν εἰς
τόδ' εἵσας αὔχημ', ἄναξ Ποσειδάν,
ἵπποισιν τὸν ἀκεστῆρα χαλινὸν
πρώταισι ταῖσδε κτίσας ἀγυιαῖς.
ἀ δ' εὐήρετος ἔκπαγλ' ἀλία χερσὶ παραπτομένα πλάτα
θρῶσκει, τῶν ἑκατομπόδων
Νηρήδων ἀκόλουθος.

I have the greatest praise to speak for this, our mother-city,
the gift of a great god, the greatest pride of the land,
famed for horses, famed for foals, famed for the sea.
O, lord Poseidon, son of Cronus, you have set it (i.e. Athens) down on this object of
pride,
having established first in our roads
the bit that tames horses.
And the well rowed oar of the sea, plied marvellously by hand,
leaps, following the hundred footed Nereids.

It is immediately obvious that Athens is still being discussed here. The word ματροπόλει makes this clear.²⁰⁶ As the previous strophe praised Athena by way of the Athenian olive, here Poseidon is being addressed, with particular mention being made of the sea. As discussed in chapter one, Athens' biggest strength was its naval prowess and their dominion over the sea was thought to stem from Athena and Poseidon's contest over who would get to be the patron deity of Athens.

The final part of this striking stasimon is an ode not just to Athens itself, but also to Athena and Poseidon, the two deities most significant to Athens, and to the gifts that they

²⁰⁶ Jebb 1885, 120 – it applies to a larger area than just Colonus. And since the men of Colonus might call themselves Athens' children, it fits here.

had bestowed, both of which help to differentiate Athens from other *poleis* and to increase its grandeur, splendour, and renown.²⁰⁷

It should be clear from this discussion that the Ode to Colonus is a wonderfully powerful evocation of all of the things that make Athens great. At the same time, however, it is immediately noticeable that the ode is virtually devoid of any contemporary or political allusions. The absence of such allusions has the effect of placing this ode essentially in a void. It is a rousing encomium of Athens' natural and physical beauty and power, separate from politics, wars, or democracy. For this reason, I return to my earlier statement: I do not consider the *OC* to be a pro-democracy play. Rather, the tragedy is a moving and effective celebration of "Athenian-ness", of what Athens is, and what it means to be an Athenian. These sentiments would no doubt have been effective, considering the date of the *OC*'s production.²⁰⁸

I have not yet discussed the presence of Thebes in the *OC*, which is crucially important to any interpretation of Athens in the play. If one of the principal purposes of the *OC* is to praise and celebrate Athens' greatness, the same certainly cannot be said of Thebes. The most important representative of Thebes in the *OC* (apart from Oedipus, whom I shall discuss later) is without a doubt Creon. Creon has been vilified by nearly every

²⁰⁷ Hogan 1991, 98.

²⁰⁸ Knox 1964, 155 discusses what he sees as an undercurrent of sadness running through this ode. He mentions that the nightingale (675) is the bird of lamentation and that the crocus was commonly planted on graves. Furthermore, he notes that the narcissus is the flower of death (on this point, see also Kamerbeek 1984, 106). Following this line of thought seems to suggest that Sophocles is worried about Athens' decline (no doubt brought about by the Peloponnesian War) and wishes to remind audiences of a better time. This is quite an attractive interpretation, but I do not really see any other instances in the play that would strongly support this. As I have already said, it seems that democracy should go hand in hand with this kind of sentiment (since Athens' democracy was strongest in the mid fifth century, before the turbulence of the oligarchic coup of 411 and the Thirty Tyrants in 404), and as I have made clear, I do not see the *OC* as a democratic tragedy. However, it is true that Athens having just lost the Peloponnesian War would naturally render these passages more significant for audiences.

critic who has written about this tragedy,²⁰⁹ and with good reason. Upon his first entry, he plays the role of the concerned ruler of Thebes, imploring Oedipus to return home, ostensibly having his best interests at heart (728-760). Oedipus then rebukes Creon harshly, refusing to come with him and denouncing him as a self-serving, unscrupulous villain (761-799). Oedipus' vitriol here perhaps seems a little unduly harsh, especially given Creon's apparent willingness to offer his help. However, before long Creon reveals his true colours when, after Oedipus refuses to yield to his requests, he informs him that he had kidnapped Ismene prior to entering the stage, and now intends to take Antigone as well, all to force Oedipus to return to Thebes with him (818 ff.). This is a clear violation of Oedipus' (and his family's) suppliant rights, with Creon behaving most impiously.²¹⁰ In addition, making Creon doubly impious is the fact that he has clearly grabbed Ismene from the sacred grove of the Eumenides, which was where she was headed when last seen (502-8).²¹¹ Creon has regard for neither the laws of Athens nor its gods.

Creon is very much defined by his opposition to (and contrast with) Theseus throughout the *OC*. Firstly, Creon self-identifies as a τύραννος (at line 851). The word τύραννος, when it occurs in tragedy, is usually a fairly neutral term that broadly translates as "a sovereign ruler". However, since τύραννος had come to be associated with some unsavoury characters and unpleasant moments in Athenian history, and "tyrants" were heavily distrusted in real life, it stands to reason that the word, although technically neutral

²⁰⁹ Kelly 2009, 154 presents a comprehensive list of those scholars who take issue with Creon's behaviour, including Reinhardt 1979, 211; Segal 1981, 379; Blundell 1989, 232-8.

²¹⁰ Kelly 2009, 118 stresses the contradiction in Creon's behaviour. First he claims that Thebes is his priority (which might very well be true), putting him in a positive light. However, his impiety and his disregard for suppliant rights, which, as has been discussed, is an affront against Zeus himself, add a definite negative valence to his character. Furthermore, Wilson 1997, 129 observes that Theseus had previously promised hospitality to Oedipus and his daughters (556-566), so Creon's violent behaviour is also an affront to Theseus and Athens. See also Burian 1974, 420.

²¹¹ Jebb 1885, 136-7.

in drama, could still have some decidedly negative connotations.²¹² It is therefore significant that Theseus neither refers to himself as a τύραννος nor is called that by any other character. This preserves his positive character and maintains his “clean” image in the eyes of Athenian audiences. Similarly, the fact that Creon happily refers to himself as a τύραννος, when Theseus refrains from doing this, is undoubtedly negative. I also think that this is relevant to Zeitlin’s chapter on Thebes in tragedy. Zeitlin’s argument that Thebes is presented as the “other”, a place where strange and bad things happen, and that it serves as a negative model that Athens should strive to avoid emulating,²¹³ is reflected quite strongly here. The *OC* reinforces Zeitlin’s argument, as Creon’s self-designation as a τύραννος is definitely not something that Athens should share. Furthermore, at two earlier points in the play, cognate words, words with the τύρανν- root, were used to describe Eteocles and Polynices (lines 373 and 449), both of whom also represent Thebes. This emphasis on tyranny (in the pejorative fifth-century sense of the word) points towards the culture of violence and impiety that Thebes has fostered in its citizens.²¹⁴ Theseus, of course, displays none of this, making him contrast sharply with the Thebans, particularly Creon.²¹⁵ Theseus also of course displays sound interpersonal skills when he first meets Oedipus and negotiates his stay in Athens, whereas Creon continually responds with threats and violence when talking to someone.²¹⁶ Emphasis is also placed on Creon’s manipulative nature, whereas Theseus is nothing but upfront about his intentions. All of this serves to place “Creon and Theseus as leaders at opposite ends of the moral and persuasive

²¹² Blundell 1993, 295.

²¹³ See Zeitlin 1986.

²¹⁴ Blundell 1993, 295.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Worman 2012, 341.

spectrum”.²¹⁷ What really differentiates Theseus from Creon is how he maintains a grasp on his composure, even in the face of Creon’s overwhelming impiety and arrogance. He remains calm and speaks to Creon in a measured and sensible way, once again emphasising his “Athenian-ness”.²¹⁸

Polynices, Oedipus’ son and brother, is the last Theban to appear in the *OC*. He arrives in the latter half of the play, full of apologies towards Oedipus for having treated him badly earlier, and pleading with him to come home to Thebes to help him defeat Eteocles’s forces (1254 ff.). Polynices’ character has been interpreted in two different ways. Some critics think Polynices is portrayed as better than Creon because he apologises to Oedipus before trying to recruit him, and is honest about his intentions from the beginning.²¹⁹ Conversely, other critics denounce Polynices as equally as self-serving as Creon, and even question the genuineness of his opening apology.²²⁰ I think that, ultimately, exactly how one interprets Polynices’ intentions is not quite as important as what Polynices represents. Even if one believes that he is genuine in his apology, it is clear that Polynices is in trouble. He has lost his city (which is rightfully his in the *OC*, as Sophocles makes him the elder brother),²²¹ and he has also greatly angered his father, incurring Oedipus’ monstrous wrath.²²²

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Markantonatos 2007, 213.

²¹⁹ Kelly 2009, 120 focuses on Polynices’ clear intentions. Van Nortwick 2012, 150 describes Polynices as giving a “handsome apology”, clearly interpreting him as genuinely remorseful. Hesk 2012, 171 seems to take Polynices’ apology and intentions at face value. Hesk also argues that Oedipus’ vitriolic rejection of Polynices elicits more sympathy for Polynices, since he is a “sympathetically drawn and rounded character” (p. 183). Hesk stresses Polynices’ openness and honesty here, also. Rosenmeyer 1952, 107-8 considers Polynices’ remorse genuine and earnest.

²²⁰ Blundell 1993, 297 states that Polynices displays “stubborn foolhardiness” in the same way that Creon does. Markantonatos 2007, 212-14 also argues that Creon and Polynices are portrayed equally negatively, and that they accordingly both contrast with Theseus. Markantonatos also describes Polynices as a “grasping and unprincipled villain” (p. 153). Knox 1964, 120 argues that Polynices uses deceit in his speech. Worman 2012, 338 calls Polynices’ intentions for Oedipus “violent” and also believes that he is not being genuine.

²²¹ Markantonatos 2007, 106 observes that Polynices being the elder brother runs contrary to the traditional myth.

²²² Knox 1964, 159 describes Oedipus’ rebuke of Polynices as “daemonic”, meaning god or spirit inspired. He also labels Oedipus’ wrath as “superhuman”. The vitriol that Oedipus displays is indeed striking.

Polynices' ultimate fate, to die and be refused burial by Creon as dramatised in Sophocles' *Antigone* would surely weigh heavily on the audience's minds too, rendering Polynices' situation even more wretched.

So, regardless of Polynices' possible ulterior motives, he is, like Creon, a signifier of Thebes having lost its way. Both Creon and Polynices represent the *polis* of Thebes, so the fact that both are portrayed either wholly negatively (such as Creon), or as deeply flawed and troubled (like Polynices), coupled with Theseus' and the chorus' virtuousness, points to Thebes as a city, along with its citizens, being inferior to Athens. This certainly seems to be what Zeitlin feels, as her chapter principally argues that Thebes is a counterpoint to Athens and, for Athens to prosper, it should do the opposite to whatever Thebes does.²²³ However, there are two brief passages of dialogue that, I think, suggest that it is not as simple as this. Theseus, in his response to Creon's kidnapping of Oedipus' daughters, speaks thus (at lines 911-12; 919-23):

ἐπεὶ δέδρακας οὐτ' ἐμοῦ καταξίως
οὔθ' ὧν πέφυκας αὐτὸς οὔτε σῆς χθονός...

καίτοι σε Θῆβαί γ' οὐκ ἐπαίδευσαν κακόν:
οὐ γὰρ φιλοῦσιν ἄνδρας ἐκδίκους τρέφειν,
οὐδ' ἂν σ' ἐπαινέσειαν, εἰ πυθοίαιτο
συλῶντα τὰμὰ καὶ τὰ τῶν θεῶν, βία
ἄγοντα φωτῶν ἀθλίων ἱκτήρια.

Since you have acted in a way unworthy of me,
nor worthy of those by whom you were brought up, nor of your land...

And yet Thebes did not bring you up to be evil.
For Thebes does not love to rear lawless men,
nor would Thebes praise you, if it learned
that you were stealing my things, or the gods' things,
taking the wretched suppliants by force.

²²³ See Zeitlin 1986.

What is interesting about these two passages is that they indicate that Thebes is not to blame for Creon's (and, later, Polynices') behaviour. Theseus specifically states that Creon's impious disregard for *xenia*, the gods, and suppliant rights reflects shamefully on Thebes, as Thebes does not make a habit of bringing up people like him. Given the very well-documented real-life hostilities between Athens and Thebes, particularly prominent during the fifth century B.C., these lines have, unsurprisingly, puzzled interpreters of the *OC*. Wilamowitz postulates that some sort of political situation that is unknown to us caused Sophocles to wish to speak in praise of Thebes,²²⁴ but this is merely speculation.

It is impossible to know for sure why Sophocles has Theseus excuse Thebes of any wrong-doing, but the fact that he does means that Creon and Polynices are outliers. Thebes is not in nearly as much trouble as it would be in if all of its citizens behaved like them. In light of this, the fundamental notion that I think the *OC* wishes to get across is the idea that Thebes has lost its way as a *polis*, and that in order to get back on track it needs to look to Athens for guidance and aid. I have discussed the violence and τύραννος tendencies that Creon and Polynices have brought to Thebes, and it is important to note that Eteocles and Polynices have also brought civil unrest and *stasis* to their city.²²⁵ Creon and Polynices are harming their city, and the only person to recognise this fully is Theseus, as illustrated by his remarks to Creon. Theseus, as discussed, also represents Athens, and it is through him that

²²⁴ See Reinhardt 1979, 271 for elaboration of Wilamowitz's argument. Wilamowitz suggests that Ismenias (a Theban politician of the time) and his followers took issue with Theban subordination to Sparta, and that there was a small group of people in Athens who agreed, hence the apparent praise of Thebes here. It is worth noting, though, as Reinhardt does, that firstly there is no evidence available to us to suggest that these passages are in some way politically charged. Secondly, Wilamowitz's suggestion would mean that the *OC* is in fact speaking "for a minority in an enemy state during wartime", which seems extremely unlikely. Reinhardt also mentions Pohlenz, who regards the passages in praise of Thebes as posthumously added.

²²⁵ Beer 2004, 5 notes that *stasis* was arguably the worst thing that could happen to a *polis* in antiquity. Blundell 1993, 296 observes that Thebes in the *OC* illustrates the extreme dangers that *stasis* can pose to a city.

we can see that looking to Athens is what will save Thebes. This is best represented by one character: Oedipus.

Oedipus straddles the divide between Athens and Thebes like no other character in the *OC*.²²⁶ Athens is the only place that is willing to take Oedipus in – even Thebes, his own city, cannot fully commit to this.²²⁷ Furthermore, Oedipus offers great benefit to Athens if its citizens agree to welcome him (576 ff.), which is another reason why Sophocles cannot entirely vilify Thebes – it has produced a being who will greatly enhance Athens' power.²²⁸ I doubt that anyone would disagree that Oedipus has had an exceptionally difficult life, even if much of it was not his fault (as he himself states when arguing with Creon – lines 960-1013). It is therefore significant that Oedipus only manages to find peace and ascend to a higher plane of being (if that is in fact what happens to him at the end of the play – it is left rather ambiguous in the text) by being accepted by Athens; he essentially becomes an Athenian.²²⁹ It is as if the residual negativity (from Thebes) that still affected Oedipus is erased by his contact with Athens. This of course reflects Athens' status as a safe haven for suppliants, as I discussed earlier. The climax of the play is Athens' embracing of Oedipus, and we can see the wonderful effects that this has on Theseus and Oedipus' daughters.

It is crucially important, interpretively speaking, that Athens and Thebes both have a presence in the *OC*. They are each represented by their citizens – Athens, by Theseus and the chorus, and Thebes by Creon and Polynices. It is not as simple as Athens being good and Thebes being bad, however. Certainly Athens is good, but Thebes is not portrayed as

²²⁶ Beer 2004, 167 characterises Colonus as the liminal point where Thebes and Athens can meet. The meeting is, of course, centred around Oedipus.

²²⁷ Wilson 1997, 122.

²²⁸ Blundell 1993, 303.

²²⁹ Knox 1964, 154.

pejoratively as one would expect, given Athens' real life attitudes towards it. Rather, Thebes is a city in distress. Creon and Polynices, misguided, violent, and impious men, are leading Thebes down a dark and undeserved path, and the message that this tragedy sends out is that, at a time like this, Athens can (and will) offer help, which is epitomised by Oedipus' character. Oedipus is a Theban, but he comes to Athens in need of help and Theseus immediately offers him assistance and protection. In return, Oedipus becomes an "enigmatic blessing to Athens".²³⁰ Zeitlin's view of Thebes as the "anti-Athens" holds up here inasmuch as Thebes has gone down a negative path and now needs Athens' help to save itself. In particular, its leader, Creon, is very much the "other" when compared to Theseus' shining example of Athenian goodness. The fact that Athens here helps a Theban so willingly (when fifth-century Athens hated Thebes) is an indication of how noble a *polis* it is. So the Athens/Thebes relationship is crucial to the *OC* – ultimately, Thebes is used to show that even the most troubled cities can benefit from Athens' magnanimous help.

²³⁰ Badger 2013, 84.

Conclusion

This thesis sought to examine the way in which Thebes is presented in extant Attic tragedy, with a view to assessing Zeitlin's claim that Thebes, in Athenian drama, functions as the "other" in comparison to Athens, the "negative model" from which Athens should try to distance itself.²³¹ This is certainly applicable in some instances of Thebes' dramatic appearances. As we have seen, however, it is not quite as clear cut as Zeitlin suggests.

Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* is the best embodiment of Thebes as the "other", as it is the only play of those I have examined that explicitly contrasts Athens and Thebes within its narrative.²³² As chapter three shows, the contrast runs deeply through the entire play. Theseus, the mythical king of Athens, is presented as a perfect embodiment of Athenian virtues, while Creon (and, to a lesser extent, Polynices) behaves in a negative fashion, which reflects poorly on Thebes, and is symptomatic of the fact that Thebes is on the wrong path. Thebes is not operating as efficiently or as lawfully as Athens, a fact that is reinforced by having Oedipus, the only Theban character who is not in some way morally compromised,²³³ be assimilated into Athens as part of the dénouement. It is only through becoming a part of Athens and thus, for all intents and purposes, renouncing his Theban lineage that Oedipus achieves a happy ending. Accordingly, the central message that the *OC* imparts is that Thebes is "the other" without being entirely rotten. Thebes is not inherently bad, but it has

²³¹ Zeitlin 1986, 102.

²³² Zeitlin 1986, 117 notes that Euripides' *Suppliants* also does this, and that Euripides' *Heracles* compares the two *poleis* implicitly (neither of which I have discussed).

²³³ Antigone and Ismene are of course not morally compromised, but their characters are very much extensions of Oedipus himself.

certainly lost its way and is currently inferior to Athens. The best (and only) way to fix Thebes is with Athens' help, signified by Athens' aid in helping Oedipus finally be at peace.

There are also elements of Thebes as the "other" present in Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, though to a lesser extent. The episodic nature of *Phoenician Women* makes it difficult to glean one central theme or message from it, but a few recurring motifs can be discerned. The sheer amount of mythological material that Euripides includes, along with the somewhat fragmented nature of the narrative both contribute to a sense of disjointedness or "overpacked-ness" in the play, which is reflective of Thebes' state, with Thebes being torn apart by war and familial strife. However, on the other hand, there is an emphasis on female or feminine power in *Phoenician Women*, which is not at all in-line with traditional Athenian patriarchal views. In this respect, Thebes functions as the anti-Athens, but not to its detriment. Athens promoted masculine power above all else, but here it is only the female or feminised characters who act beyond reproach, with the result being that Thebes is perhaps an anti-Athens, in the sense that its gender dynamics are reversed,²³⁴ but that this is not necessarily a bad thing. The other factor that makes it difficult to pinpoint a central meaning in *Phoenician Women* is Euripides' tendency to use his characters as vessels to explore more abstract and intellectual ideas. This propensity manifests itself most prominently during the *agon* between Jocasta, Eteocles and Polynices, in which each character takes turns to express a moral or political viewpoint: Eteocles illustrates his love of power and tyranny; Polynices laments the life of an exile and is a living example of what exile does to a man; and Jocasta extols the virtues of democracy and temperance, clearly the most "Athenian" of the three characters. Significantly, all of these ideas were of great

²³⁴ Obviously males still hold power in Thebes but the text shows that they probably should not.

relevance at the time of *Phoenician Women's* production. Euripides uses Theban characters to explore contemporary Athenian concerns, while also using his drama to elucidate the differences between Thebes and Athens.

Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* is the most direct contradiction to Zeitlin's argument. It is true that the Thebes of *Seven* is (like Thebes in most tragedies) blighted by incest and war, but, importantly, the incest is elided for the entire first half of the play, with only a couple of mentions. After this, the main focus is on Oedipus' curse, and how it fulfils itself with regard to his sons. This means that for the first half of *Seven* the focus is not on what Thebes has done wrong, but on it defending itself against an invading army. There are many Athenian echoes in *Seven*, particularly in the first half – elements like the preponderance of naval imagery and the foreignness of the Argives being stressed – that contribute to a reading of the play in which Thebes is a surrogate for Athens. Virtually every aspect of Aeschylus' Thebes, from the gods to which the citizens pray, to the barbaric savagery of the Argive invaders, stresses the civilised "Athenian-ness" of the *polis*. It is not the case, therefore, that Thebes functions as the "other", or anti-Athens, in *Seven*; rather, Thebes is Athens.

What is most clear from the three tragedies that I have surveyed is that there is not one ironclad way in which Thebes was presented in Athenian tragedy. Unlike, say, Odysseus who was always a trickster in myth and literature, Thebes had a more ambiguous, ambivalent nature, which reflects the general malleability of a large amount of mythic material. Myth could often be moulded in a way that would best suit the user's

intentions,²³⁵ with the result that, more often than not, there was not one “standard” version of a myth. In addition, there is evidently no progression, chronologically speaking, in how Thebes is portrayed in tragedy. We do not see any clear pattern emerge from Aeschylus, to Euripides, to Sophocles. All three tragedies differ in how they present mythical Thebes. It is evident from this thesis that it was not necessarily the norm to depict mythical Thebes in a way that would have aligned with fifth-century Athenian hostilities with real-life Thebes. Thebes is rarely depicted as outright “bad”. Even Sophocles’ *OC*, where Thebes is most plainly painted as the “other”, stops short of outright condemning every single citizen of Thebes.²³⁶ We must conclude, then, that Athens (or at least Athenian tragic playwrights) did not necessarily allow contemporary concerns to influence their works. For the whole of the fifth century, Athens and Thebes were enemies, but there is no consistently negative pattern to Thebes’ depiction in tragedy. There is one recurrent pattern that is discernible, however. While Thebes is not always characterised in a negative fashion, the one element that seems to be always present in plays concerning Thebes is Athens. Whether explicitly appearing in the narrative, as in the *OC*, or merely present either as a concern in the background or through imagery and allusion, there can always be found some Athenian element. This no doubt illustrates two things. Firstly, it is a result of tragedy’s tendency to reflect Athenian civic ideology and morals.²³⁷ Secondly, it is symptomatic of the close connection that the two *poleis* shared. Even though it was a hostile relationship, the enmity between the two cities was so strong and defining that it

²³⁵ Consider, for instance, how Euripides invents Medea’s filicide to push her into deviating from the most basic of nature’s laws – the desire of parents to protect their children.

²³⁶ Creon and Polynices are bad, true, but Oedipus and his daughters are not. Furthermore, as I mention in chapter three, Theseus speaks positively about Thebans as a whole.

²³⁷ Carter 2004, 16; Goldhill 1987, 61-2.

was difficult to bring up Thebes on the dramatic stage without the spectre of Athens lurking in the background.

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