

Critics have long pointed out that *Phoenician Women* contains apparent criticism of *Seven against Thebes*, most notably when the Euripidean Eteokles responds directly to the famous shield scene in *Seven* by refusing to name the Argive attackers and Theban defenders at the city's seven gates. By focusing on themes of *genos* and *polis* in the two dramas, this paper will argue that *Phoenician Women* recasts Aischylean *mythos* in essential respects rather than merely in isolated details, and not primarily to criticize *Seven*, but rather for its own dramatic and ideological ends.

The shared narrative juxtaposes self-destruction of the *genos* with salvation of the *polis*, but Euripides' way of dramatizing this story diverges fundamentally from that of Aischylos, and in ways that alter its possible meanings. *Seven* is almost obsessively concerned with the *polis* and the threat to its survival. The first part of the play constitutes, in effect, a debate about how best to keep the city safe. Eteokles guides the ship of state, sees to its good order and preparedness, and in the shield scene symbolically counters the Argive threat. Only with Eteokles' discovery that he must face his brother at the seventh gate do the family curse and the brothers' mutual destruction become the city's paradoxical salvation. *Genos* and the *polis* are deeply intertwined.

*Phoenician Women*, on the other hand, emphasizes strife within the family and as it affects the family. Whereas *Seven* starts with Eteokles' address to the citizen body, *Phoenician Women* begins with Jokasta's monologue setting out the history of the Labdakids right down to the truce she herself has just arranged to allow her warring sons to meet. Only halfway through the play, when Tiresias unexpectedly announces that Thebes's very survival depends upon the sacrifice of Kreon's son Menoikeus does the fate of the city take center stage. This startling turn of events has the effect of detaching the fate of the city from the outcome of the duel that the brothers actively desire, even though they are aware of their father's curse. This way of presenting the duel as an entirely gratuitous act is as un-Aischylean as possible, the very antithesis of response of a brother who finds that he must face his brother in battle to save his city, and accepts his doom.

Such fundamental differences are no doubt due in part to the intertextual challenge Euripides mounts in what Zeitlin (1986) rightly calls his "Theban extravaganza." The regular demand for new dramas on familiar mythical subjects for presentation in a competition of great civic importance produced an ever-renewed impetus for novelty (see Burian [1997]), but the systematic reversals here seem to demand a more concrete explanation. A promising beginning was made a generation ago by Winnington-Ingram (1977), who held that the *polis-genos* thematics of *Seven* reflected the reforms of Kleisthenes, designed to lessen the power and influence of the great Athenian *genê* by strengthening the specifically civic attachments and loyalties of the citizen, a process that was still going on during Aischylos' own lifetime. If one then thinks of the political climate in Athens circa 410, one must recognize that the political context of *Phoenician Women* is as different from that of Aischylos' days as its dramaturgy and thematics are novel. Euripides shapes the old tale of the fall of the house of Laios to dramatize the factional strife and the ruthless jockeying for power that were to prove so disastrous for Athens. This was the season of Alkibiades' defection to Sparta and subsequent return from exile, and this play seems to share with Thoukydides' *History* the sense that at the root of the Athenian political crisis was the loosening of civic ties, the replacement of public interest with the interests of factions and ambitious individuals.

It is fascinating to read the words that Thoukydides puts into the mouth of the renegade Alkibiades in a speech to the Spartans, and to realize that, recast in verse, they could be spoken by the Polyneikes of *Phoenician Women*: "I have no love for my city when it does me wrong, but only when it gives me my rights. Indeed, I do not consider myself to be attacking my own country, but rather to be rewinning a country that is mine no longer" (6.92.4). Thus, when Euripides replaces the tragic nexus of *genos* and *polis* with themes of self-seeking and self-destruction as the key to representing the legendary conflicts of this myth, he gives powerful dramatic expression to the most urgent civic concerns of a troubled and dangerous moment in Athenian history.

References (data refer to original publication)

- Burian (1997). P. Burian, "Myth Into Mythos: The Shaping of Tragic Plot," in P. E. Easterling, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge: 178-208
- Winnington-Ingram (1977). R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "Septem contra Thebas," *YClS* 25: 1-25
- Zeitlin (1986). F. I. Zeitlin, "Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama," in J. P. Euben, *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, Los Angeles and London:101-41