

The Shields of *Phoenissae*

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THE SHIELDS of the Argive attackers in Euripides' *Phoenissae* occupy some thirty lines (1104–40)¹ at the beginning of the Messenger's speech describing the first inconclusive battle. Despite convincing attempts to meet the difficulties presented by these lines, wholesale excision has often been proposed as a solution.² These difficulties arise not only from the apparently meaningless symbols described on the shields, but also from the problematic relationship of the scene itself to the comparable passage in *Seven Against Thebes*, a relationship that the Euripidean lines seem deliberately to obscure and contradict. In this paper I want to investigate some of the crucial ways in which the scene measures its distance from the 'original' Aeschylean text of the *Seven*, and to suggest that the Euripidean passage can be read as the locus of an emphatic and self-aware intertextuality, in that its relation to another text or texts is part of what it thus advertises as its meaning and as the method of deciphering it. I shall proceed to offer interpretations of the individual shields, arguing that they signify in relation not only to their Aeschylean precedents but also to the central concerns of the present play.

In contrast to the passage in the *Seven*, the Euripidean account is much reduced and impoverished; by no stretch of the imagination does it constitute the centre of the play, as do the Aeschylean shields. It is true that some sort of shield scene appears to be anticipated in several strategic references made to shields (120, 142, 251, 576, 796, 1073), and more precisely by the *teichoskopia* and Eteocles' dismissive comment to Creon (751f: ὄνομα δ' ἐκάστου διατριβὴ πολλὴ λέγειν ἐχθρῶν ὑπ' αὐτοῖς τείχεσιν καθημένων). But the scene is just as repeatedly rendered impossible, or at least unlikely, by other moves in the play that pre-empt its power and significance (we know all along, for instance, that the brothers intend to kill each other). And the description of the shields is robbed of any possible charge of terror or urgency by its postponement until the battle is over and the defeat of

¹ The text used throughout is Murray's *OCT* (Oxford 1913).

² For an account, and refutation, of the arguments for deletion, see D. J. Mastro-narde, "Are Euripides *Phoinissai* 1104–1140 Interpolated?" *Phoenix* 32 (1978) 105–28.

their owners is known. Even more tellingly, at the end of the Messenger's narrative no one on stage makes any comment whatever on the shields. Their apparent insignificance is shared by the sacrificial death of Menoeceus, which is given a curiously brief notice at the beginning of the speech and is then forgotten until the entrance of Creon.

Apart from the dislocation in chronological sequence, the main structural difference between the use of the shields here and in the *Seven* is the absence of a reader for their emblems, a semiotician who might, on the model of Eteocles, recognise and deactivate their threatening images. This absence is part of the persistent displacement in the text of Aeschylean and epic forms;³ it is also symptomatic of the political situation at Thebes and a result, I would suggest, of the manifest inability of the men of the city—particularly Eteocles—to provide a central source of stable authority from which she might meet her foes. The Euripidean Eteocles is already acting out the terms of his father's curse, and the city struggles with that most extreme form of political irresponsibility, civil strife; this situation lends a grotesque irony to the Pedagogue's optimistic words in the *teichoskopia*, *τά γ' ἔνδον ἀσφαλῶς ἔχει πόλις* (117). The bankruptcy of the city's strategies is further suggested by the fact that the only characters who act with civic responsibility are those who are excluded from citizenship, namely women and children.

Eteocles can also be seen to disqualify himself as a reader of the shields in his first few words on entering the *ἀγών* with his brother (499–502). In reply to Polyneices' claim that the word of truth is single and simple (469), Eteocles states that there is an irrevocable gap between the *ἔργον* and the *ὄνομα*, so that there is agreement only about the latter and not the former. He may also be suggesting that such disagreements about the meaning of words stem from material differences between people, in that they disagree when they share nothing *ὄμοιον* or *ἴσον* (501). This would have obvious application to the situation between the two brothers. But having adopted this relativistic position, Eteocles then proceeds to deny it when he produces definitions of *τυραννίς* (507f, 524f) and *ἀνανδρία* (509f) for which he seems to claim universal validity. He also seems to contradict his initial position when he says that *λόγος* can accomplish everything that *σίδηρος* might (516f); this cannot happen where there is no agreement about the meaning of words.⁴

³ See H. FOLEY, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Cornell 1985) 112–32, for a full account of relations of the text to its literary predecessors.

⁴ Cf. Foley 122f on the positions taken in the *ἀγών* on language. The metaphor of sickness in line 472 is applied also to Oedipus and the city (66, 863, 877, 1097, 1171).

The difference in chronology and the absence of Eteocles are two important ways in which the Euripidean shield scene both diverges from the Aeschylean and draws attention to that divergence. The same process can be observed in the *teichoskopia* (103–201), one of the moments in the play that seem to foreshadow the shield scene. The Argive warriors, without their shields, are described in a passage that acknowledges its descent not only from Aeschylus but also from Homer, and again draws attention to the differences from these ‘originals’ that constitute it. The distortion that the new play works on its professed models is perhaps a sign of the incommensurability of traditional heroic discourse with the sort of war that was engaging the attention of the contemporary audience, a war that had become civil in the sense that it had split not only Greece but even Athens.⁵ That Euripides’ heroes are marred by the necessity of acting in the absence of appropriate models has frequently been recognised; in her recent work on *Phoenissae* Foley makes productive use of Zeitlin’s important article on *Orestes*, which she paraphrases (125f):⁶

Orestes borrows frantically from a “closet of masks” belonging to characters in earlier poetry and drama. Through these masks Orestes tries at one moment to escape from his myth, at another to replay familiar roles in a world that has rejected them and whose culture is fragmented beyond the point of recovery. The process expresses the hero’s crisis of identity in a world without paternal role models.

But Foley employs the image of the closet of masks somewhat differently in her own analysis of *Phoenissae*, and here I wish to return to Zeitlin’s formulation and extend it to refer also to the late fifth-century dramatist’s crisis of representation in a world that might seem bereft of adequate *literary* ‘fathers’. The absence, or distorted presence, of appropriate models can be seen not only as an image within the plays of Euripides but also, at least in the case of *Phoenissae*, as a condition of their writing.

Critics have commented variously on the difficulties posed by this new and perverse shield scene and its resolute refusal to conform to

⁵ Among discussions of the relation of the play to contemporary conditions are J. de Romilly, “The *Phoenician Women* of Euripides: Topicality in Greek Tragedy,” tr. D. H. Orrock, *Bucknell Review* 15 (1967) 108–32, and E. Ebener, “Die Phönizierinnen des Euripides als Spiegelbild geschichtlicher Wirklichkeit,” *Eirene* 2 (1964) 71–79. Language, the vehicle of representation and meaning, is often the first casualty of war, as Thucydides suggests in his passage on civil strife on Corcyra (3.82.4). The pressure of contemporary events on traditional forms and meanings might be felt with especial keenness in the period when Aeschylus’ plays were being revived.

⁶ F. Zeitlin, “The Closet of Masks: Role-playing and Myth-making in the *Orestes* of Euripides,” *Ramus* 9 (1980) 62–77.

Aeschylean criteria. In 1979 Vidal-Naquet wrote of the scene, “Y a-t-il un autre *sens* que celui d’une déconstruction systématique? Tout porte à croire en tous les cas que la scène des *Sept* formait un ensemble suffisamment cohérent pour qu’ Euripide s’acharnât à le détruire.”⁷ In Foley’s view (128),

Attempts to interpret Euripides’ description of warriors, gates and shields as symbolic have been notably unsuccessful, and the lack of significant pattern becomes a statement in itself. . . . the speech as a whole remains as teasingly inconclusive and unreadable as Amphiaræus’ blank shield. As in the *agôn* between the brothers, the relation between signifier and signified and between image and reality remains opaque and purely fortuitous.

I suggest, on the contrary, not that the shield scene is after all quite evident and accessible, but that there may be a way of reading the shields that has a double alignment and thereby elaborates rather than ‘solves’ their complexities and obscurities. On the one hand, an obvious menace can be extracted from each shield-icon, but the image in which the menace is expressed is open to a reading that undermines the threat. On the other hand, the image on each shield locks it firmly into one or more prevailing Theban discourse, but in a way that threatens not so much the city’s existence as the shield’s autonomy. The overt hostility of the shields is thus compromised both by their unavoidable implication with Thebes and by their self-destructive tendencies, in a movement that perhaps can be seen as inscribing on each shield the internal fracturing that characterises civil war.⁸

The shield of Parthenopeus, which begins the series, also stands outside it both because it presents an image with a discursive content more obvious than that of the ensuing shields, and because it presents a moment of Parthenopeus’ own family history, the killing of the Calydonian Boar by his mother Atalanta. The *ἐπίσημα* is *οἰκεῖον* (1107), a word with a charged history throughout a play that ceaselessly investigates the deformation of the central *οἶκος* and its imminent destruction. The *οἶκος* of Parthenopeus itself has a curious formation, as he and his mother are its sole members. Both here and in Aeschylus, Parthenopeus is consistently described as the son of his mother; his father is never mentioned. The exploitation of the moth-

⁷ P. Vidal-Naquet, “Les boucliers des héros,” in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie* II (Paris 1986) 115–48.

⁸ Foley 128 suggests that civil strife is indicated primarily by the Potnian horses. She quotes Arthur’s argument that the assault on the city becomes civil strife through the shield devices (M. B. Arthur, *Euripides’ ‘Phoenissae’ and the Politics of Justice* [diss. Yale 1975] 132–34).

er's image to substantiate his claim to heroic valor might again suggest the hero's crisis of identity in a world without paternal rôle models. And indeed the fathers in this play are all, in their several ways, notoriously inadequate: Creon fails his son by his lack of heroism and patriotism; Teiresias is blind and weak (*ἀσθενὴς πατήρ*, 837); and Oedipus is blind, weak, and as absent as the father of Parthenopeus, locked away in his scandalous monstrosity. Only the words of the fathers remain to bring death on the sons, as Oedipus' curse does on his sons and as Teiresias' oracle does on Menoeceus. Teiresias moreover enters with the garland that proclaims his previous responsibility for the sacrificial death of children in Athens (852–58).⁹

Parthenopeus' shield thus discounts his father and seeks to establish a continuity of action between his mother and himself. We may consider this lop-sided, unbalanced *οἶκος* as reflecting that of Jocasta, whose forced usurpation of the political scene in the face of male abdication then finds a less painful parallel in Atalanta's usurpation of the hunting function. In Thebes there is no continuity between mothers and sons but rather the opposite, as is shown by the evocation of the stories of Antiope and Niobe, as well as of Jocasta. Jocasta's 'real' male descendant may be Menoeceus, who evinces her devotion to the family and the state, and who acknowledges her breast-milk before he goes to his death (986–88).

The shield's reference to a family relation may have salutary repercussions for Thebes, but the Calydonian Boar Hunt is perhaps not the simple sign that the shield would seem to imply. Atalanta's success on that expedition led to a series of intrafamilial deaths, including that of the youth Meleager at the hands of his mother. Further, the arrows that Atalanta uses may recall the curse that Antigone brings down on Parthenopeus when she prays to Artemis to kill him (151–53).

Maternal love is regularly evoked in *Phoenissae*, not only in the person of Jocasta but also in more general references (338, 355f, 1060f). Maternity, however, is complicated at Thebes by the presence not only of Oedipus but also of autochthony, figured here by the Sown Men. Towards the end of the play the theme of *γηροτροφία* arises (in connection with Parthenopeus at 1161f and with the brothers at

⁹ This sacrificial death leads to a famous victory (858, *καλλίνικα σὰ στέφη*) in a way that can be seen to foreshadow that of Menoeceus. A. J. Podlecki, "Some Themes in Euripides' *Phoinissai*," *TAPA* 93 (1962) 355–73, explores the theme of the victory under the rubric *Oedipus kallinikos* (367–69), but does not make sufficiently clear how the various victories—those of Oedipus (1048, 1729), Menoeceus (1059), and Eteocles (1253, 1374)—conspire, in the gruesome means by which they are achieved, to ironise one another. See also P. Vellacott, *Ironic Drama: a Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* (Cambridge 1975) 195–98.

1436). The failure of children who die in battle to repay their parents for their care is a theme familiar from battle-poetry (e.g. *Iliad* 4.447f), but unlike Parthenopeus, the dying children of Thebes *do* manage to repay their parent, in the perverted terms of their city's imagery, by returning their blood to the earth their mother. Menoeceus has no mother and so can dedicate himself completely to the land that bore him (996); the brothers may be seen to re-enact the mutual slaughter of the Sown Men, described at 672–75, and so, despite their destructive intent, make a reparation to the earth similar in some ways to that of Menoeceus.

The feminine figures that accompany Parthenopeus underline the equivocation of his name. Foley (118) correctly notes that the name does not have the same charge as in the *Seven*: “Parthenopeus is a curly-haired young man with threatening eyes, a tame version of his ambiguous Aeschylean predecessor.” But throughout the play his name has resonances that deserve comment. In the *Seven*, Parthenopeus carried a moveable Sphinx on his shield; in *Phoenissae* the Sphinx is herself referred to as *παρθένος* (48, 806, 1023, 1042, 1730). *παρθευεία* is a ‘liminal’ state, full of meaning for the future, which in itself can be benign or terrifying, both for others and for the *παρθένος* herself (himself). *παρθευεία* sets the Chorus apart and fits them for their rôle in Delphi (224); but it also sets Menoeceus apart and makes him the only suitable victim for the *δράκων* (942–46).¹⁰ The *παρθένοι* of Thebes (among them Niobe's daughters, 159) are frequently referred to as witnesses to and sufferers from the city's history (616, 655, 1034, 1717, 1737); this emphasis may be related to a project of establishing a largely female centre for the play. Teiresias is accompanied by a virgin daughter instead of his usual boy attendant, presumably in order to balance and accentuate the scenes between old man and young woman in the *teichoskopia* and the *exodos*.¹¹

¹⁰ The Chorus displays in a positive and benign form all those elements that prove destructive to the other characters: virginity, exile, slavery, and dedication to a divinity. Their devotion to Delphi balances Apollo's presence elsewhere in the play as dispenser of threatening oracles; the defeated *δράκων* at Delphi can be seen as offering to Thebes an image of hope as well as a galling contrast. Although their status as a chorus is not yet completely achieved (236, *χορός γενοίμαν ἄφοβος*), they celebrate Dionysus in a way that Antigone for instance is at the end unable to do (1754–57), and their dancing and singing is a constant comment on the unmusical music of Ares and the Sphinx (50, 785–91, 808, 1028, 1499, 1506, 1728; see also Podlecki [*supra* n.9] 369–72). At 823, again in contrast, Thebes rises to the accompaniment of Amphion's music.

¹¹ Old and young of either sex are brought into constant conjunction, if not confrontation, by this play; the Pedagogue and Antigone, Jocasta and the Chorus (302), Jocasta and her sons (528–30), Creon and Eteocles (713), Teiresias and his daughter,

But it is with Antigone that *παρθενεία* acquires most significance. She leaves the *παρθενῶνες* (89) first in order to look upon the enemy army, second (1265, 1275) in order to rush upon the very battlefield and attempt once more, under far more dangerous circumstances, the reconciliation that her mother has already failed to effect. After the battle Creon attempts to send her back to the *παρθενῶνες* (as the Pedagogue did at 194) in order to await her marriage, but such passivity is no longer possible for her; instead, *she* has already called her father out of his apartments (1530–38). Deprived by her brothers' deaths of any plausible *κύριος*, she must both follow and lead her father into exile, relinquishing the customary youthful pursuits of dancing, cult activity, and friendship, as well as her marriage to Haemon.¹² Antigone's changing relation to her state of *παρθενεία* is deployed to chart her 'growing-up', perhaps the most fraught such transition in Greek tragedy.¹³ Foley notes that her act of self-sacrifice parallels that of Menoeceus and sees in the joint exile of Oedipus and Antigone a source of unambiguously positive action and rhetoric (141f).¹⁴ Devotion to the values of ritual and of family, she suggests, may save the state when its proper defenders have failed it. The plays of Euripides are distinguished by an abiding and sympathetic interest in women and the young; in *Phoenissae*, however, we may view their self-sacrifice with as much cynicism about the bankruptcy of adult male politics as cautious optimism for the salvation of the state.

In addition to the complex significance of Parthenopeus and his shield for the other characters of the play, two further points may be

Menoceus and Creon (994f), Oedipus and his sons (1243, 1360), and Oedipus and Antigone. Given also the emphasis on relations between child and parent, we may see in the drama materialisations of the three terms of the Sphinx's original riddle (child, adult, and old man), so that of these three terms, only the first and third are left, with a corresponding absence of adult males. This situation obviously has political as well as mythical resonances.

¹² It also seems highly likely that in the face of Creon's superior power she relinquishes her early intention to bury Polyneices; such a failure on her part would be in keeping with the antiheroic temper of the play as a whole. See Foley 130 for discussion of this issue and for relevant bibliography.

¹³ 'Growing-up' is obviously not a single process but one that takes different forms depending on the society in which it occurs. Vidal-Naquet's work on the *ephebeia* and related rites provides us with one model: see his articles in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (*supra* n.7) I, and in R. L. Gordon, ed., *Myth, Religion, and Society* (Cambridge 1981). See also H. King, "Bound to Bleed: Artemis and Greek Women," in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt, ed., *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London 1983) 109–27, and T. M. Falkner, "Coming of Age in Argos," *CJ* 78 (1983) 289–301.

¹⁴ See further Foley 144f on the rôle of women and children (and the very old) in the play. She reaches the conclusion that "Their [the Chorus'] vision does not deny that the forces for continuity and for violent disharmony in a community are continually held in a precarious balance."

made. First, the oracle given to Adrastus likens his sons-in-law to a lion and a boar (411). As Tydeus appears later with a lionskin, the part of the boar may perhaps be assigned to Polyneices, in which case the death of a boar on the first of the Argive shields does not bode well for the expedition. The shield can be seen to ironise itself without the intervention of an Eteocles. Second, the Calydonian Boar Hunt itself, as an expedition of massed heroes, has obvious relevance for the Argive force; but at the same time, it suggests the distance between that undertaking and this, which we have already learned to see in a sordid and unglamorous light. As so often in the plays of Euripides, one heroic myth is introduced to cast doubt on the pretensions of another.

After the expenditure of interpretative labour on the shield of Parthenopeus, the intractably blank one of Amphiaraus appears to be a mute challenge to the whole enterprise. Polyneices has, in the *ἀγών*, already cast interpretative activity in a discreditable light, for it is only the sick, *ἄδικος λόγος* that needs subtle interpretations and wise drugs, whereas the word of truth is single and simple (469–72). Polyneices undermines this claim, however, with the various double formulations he uses to describe his position: e.g. (272) *πέποιθα μέντοι μητρί, κοῦ πέποιθ' ἅμα*, and (357) *φρονῶν εὖ κοῦ φρονῶν*. His father and his present enterprise can only be described in oxymora (377, *σκότον δεδορκῶς*, and 431, *λυπρὰν χάριν*), while at 389, speaking of his exile, he insists that a disjunction between word and thing *is* possible. Waging war on his own city,¹⁵ his position must necessarily be ambivalent, as suggested by the double meaning of *ἀπόλεσα* ('lost/destroyed') in 1450. Eteocles' response to Polyneices' strictures is that interpretative activity is unavoidable because of the ever-present gap between *ἔργον* and *ὄνομα*. Paradoxically, then, the point of opacity that is Amphiaraus' shield may in fact encourage us to persist in our task.

That this is the only shield in *Phoenissae* identical in appearance to its Aeschylean antecedent should alert us to the striking contextual differences between the two. In the *Seven*, Amphiaraus follows Parthenopeus as he does here; but there they are fifth and sixth instead of first and second as here. The blank shield thus no longer performs the function of separating the other shields from the fateful entry of

¹⁵ We might compare Polyneices' position to that of Alcibiades when he speaks of his homeland to the Spartans (Thuc. 6.92.4).

Polyneices, nor does it establish resonances between being and seeming, depth and surface, as in Aeschylus (591–94):¹⁶

σῆμα δ' οὐκ ἐπῆν κύκλω.
οὐ γὰρ δοκεῖν ἄριστος, ἀλλ' εἶναι θέλει
βαθείαν ἄλοκα διὰ φρενὸς καρπούμενος
ἐξ ἧς τὰ κεδνὰ βλαστάνει βουλεύματα.

All such speculative activity is absent, for the shield is reduced to a marker between ὕβρις and σωφροσύνη (1112). In the *Seven*, Amphiarus' claim to be, rather than to seem, the best (592) threatened retrospectively to deprive the other shields of their meaning; the refusal of the Euripidean shield to signify (which the Messenger equates with σωφροσύνη) anticipates the other shields and relegates them to a position of arrogant excess. σωφροσύνη also characterises Amphiarus in the *teichoskopia*, where he is implicitly contrasted with the hybriatic Capaneus (177, 179). He is surrounded by bloody sacrifices (σφάγια, 174, 1110), which in the *teichoskopia* are referred to as γῆς φιλαίματοι ῥοαί (174), a phrase that suggests the various blood-offerings made to the earth in the course of Theban history.

The relation of the shield to the prophet himself is also different from that in Aeschylus. In the *Seven*, the emptiness of the shield's surface was taken as an image of the depth of the prophet's mind (591–94), and this mind was seen in action in his strictures on the other warriors. In *Phoenissae*, Amphiarus has no function as a prophet; his censure of Polyneices is usurped by Jocasta (562–83), and his prophecy of his own death simply disappears. His shield is an image of his silence, but in place of his oracular voice, the play is charged with all the instances of extraordinary language that Theban history affords. This history is one of oracles, prophecies, curses, and riddles, not to mention the oxymora that are persistently used to characterise the Theban figures.¹⁷ In the light of this proliferation, the shields can be seen as themselves a kind of riddle, but one that by the time of its telling has already shed its significance.

The blank shield of Amphiarus in *Phoenissae* also fails to make any claims for the moral status of the prophet, as opposed to that of

¹⁶ See F. Zeitlin, *Under the Sign of the Shield* (Rome 1982) 155, for Amphiarus' shield in the *Seven*.

¹⁷ The 'extraordinary' in language as manifested in the play includes the oracles given to Cadmus, Laius, and Oedipus, the Sphinx's riddle, the oracle given to Adrastus, the prophecy of Teiresias, and Oedipus' prophecy that he will die at Athens. Oxymora (not to mention other word-plays) are frequent: see 250f, 377, 431, 549, 569, 791, 821, 1047f, 1489, 1499, 1506, 1652, 1757.

the other warriors. It does not seem important that Amphiaraus be seen as a just man fallen into evil company, as Eteocles describes him in the *Seven* (597–600, 610–12). Attention is directed away from the attackers as individuals, so that not even Polyneices, and certainly not Amphiaraus, is allowed to stand out in this scene. The blank shield seems to underline this point exactly by being blank, abstaining from ontological claims or any further references. The absence of any differentiation among the attackers is perhaps an effect partly of their being constructed from different elements of their Aeschylean fore-runners, and partly because the account of them here is bare and schematic in comparison with that in the *Seven*. In *Phoenissae* the attackers are, however, ‘seen’ on two different occasions, both in the shield scene and earlier in the *teichoskopia*. I would like to consider briefly this previous ‘viewing’.

Like the shield scene, the *teichoskopia* makes great demands on the actors’ resources and the audience’s imagination. There are of course formal differences: dialogue as opposed to narrative monologue, characters with personal interests as opposed to the conventional transparency of the Messenger-speech. Both depict people and objects that remain offstage—indeed the *teichoskopia* effectively *keeps* the attackers offstage, not only by mediating our apprehension of them through Antigone’s vision, but also by maintaining the purely female presence that characterises the opening of the play: Jocasta gives way to Antigone, who gives way to the Chorus, while even the Pedagogue is concerned with possible female censure (196–201). The single narrative of Jocasta’s prologue is followed by a dialogue between Antigone and the Pedagogue that incidentally builds up, by referring to features of the Theban plain, a history alternative to that which Jocasta delivered and one moreover in which two very different brothers, Amphion and Zethus, collaborate in founding a city rather than in destroying it.¹⁸

But as its name implies, the scene is primarily concerned with sight and the gaze, from the possible censorious gaze of the citizens on Antigone (93–95) to Capaneus’ threatening gaze upon the walls of Thebes as he measures them for scaling (180f). The Pedagogue’s previous sighting of the attackers (96) makes possible Antigone’s present gaze; her vision will take on greater significance when she must become the eyes for Oedipus.

¹⁸ See M. B. Arthur, “The Curse of Civilization: the Choral Odes of the *Phoenissae*,” *HSCP* 81 (1977) 170, on the prehistory of Thebes and the hopeful contrast it offers to the present.

Critics have argued that in this scene Antigone's understanding of the world is shown to be derived from contemporary (*i.e.*, fifth-century) painting,¹⁹ and that the dialogue points up her tendency both to glamorise and to domesticate the scene of battle.²⁰ But while the contrast between the view of war offered here and that which develops in the course of the play is significant, it is important to note also the difficulty of seeing the attackers at all. Hippomedon is said to look like a giant ἐν γραφαῖσιν; this suggests that what is 'real' (an attacker) to the characters within the drama can only be comprehended by reference to what is 'fiction' (a picture) to them. Similarly this scene can only be approached by way of the prior fictions that are the Aeschylean and Homeric texts. Antigone's words express a constant grasping for comprehension. Hippomedon can be captured only by a proliferation of naming (127ff, γαῦρος, φοβερός, γίγαντι . . . προσόμοιος, ἀστερωπός, οὐχὶ πρόσφορος ἀμερίῳ γέννα) that confuses as much as it clarifies. The scene then plays with other possibilities of clarity or confusion. Tydeus is ἄλλος (three times, at 132 and 138) and μειξοβάροβαρος, and his outlandishness vies in Antigone's eyes with his possible familiarity as her brother's brother-in-law. At this point (if we accept the lines) the explicitly Aeschylean note of the shields is introduced (142); then γοργός is borrowed from the description of Parthenopeus, and σὺν δίκη from the shield of Polyneices, in the *Seven*. After this literary play Polyneices appears, or rather fails to: Antigone can make out his shape but cannot see him σαφῶς (161f). Polyneices remains indistinct and elusive, even though he is about to appear on stage before us.

After Polyneices' failure to materialise, the last two attackers appear in more mundane guise: Amphiaraus is distinguished by his white chariot and his σῶφρων prowess, while Capaneus' exercise of a more aggressive intelligence and control brings down on his head the liveliest imprecations of the scene.

This scene and the shield scene seem to me to advertise in different ways the difficulty of producing a set of warriors as compelling as their Aeschylean counterparts. This difficulty can be attributed to several causes. In the case of the *teichoskopia*, we have to take into account the effect of Antigone's partial (in both senses) gaze; but the analysis should not stop there, for turning the play over to the interventions of women and the young can be seen as part of a larger project of testing and rejecting the various available literary models. The difficulty in

¹⁹ S. Barlow, *The Imagery of Euripides* (London 1971) 57–60.

²⁰ Foley 118.

giving an adequate account of the attackers appears to be related to the presence of these models, which in the conditions of late fifth-century Athens embarrass both by their abiding authority and by their diminished utility. The blank shield of Amphiaraus may be seen to indicate this misfit between the literary models that the play draws on and the contemporary pressures under which it was produced, in that this shield most clearly evokes—and most resolutely refuses to be—its Aeschylean predecessor.

In contrast to the blank shield, that of Hippomedon is full of eyes, for it represents the monster Argus. The distribution of Argus' ubiquitous sight is complex; it appears that some eyes open with the stars rising and others close with their setting.²¹ Despite the difficulty of envisaging the creature, it is clear that Argus is altogether less of a threat than the Typhon which Hippomedon displayed in the *Seven*. Moreover, instead of a Zeus on the Theban side to confront the Typhon, there is another gaze to meet that of Argus: the gaze of the Messenger, who is able to look on the shield after its bearer is dead (1118). This is the only example of the containment of a shield-image by the kind of destructive irony that Eteocles continually displays in the *Seven*.

As well as being locked into the predominantly Theban discourse of sight and blindness, light and dark,²² the shield is intimately connected with Theban prehistory, in that Argus was the sometime guardian of Io. Io is invoked in the early choral odes as founder of the connection between the Chorus and Thebes (248) and again as the Thebans' *προμήτηρ* (676, 828); at 679 her son Epaphus is called upon as one in a line of deities who are favourably disposed towards Thebes, and at 828f the birth of Epaphus and further royal descendants (*Καδμείων βασιλῆας*) is contrasted with other Theban births such as that of Oedipus, the Sphinx, the Sown Men, and the city herself as she arose to the music of Amphion's lyre. The figure of Io participates in that positive evaluation of Theban prehistory which provides a hope for as well as a contrast to the sordid present.²³ As the creature of Argive Hera, Argus has a natural hostility towards the Theban side, but his image can be seen to set up resonances in Thebes that the bearer of the shield would presumably not desire.

The shield of Tydeus displays a similar 'ignorance' of its potential significance. The textual difficulty here is such that it is doubtful

²¹ See Mastronarde (*supra* n.2) 118–21.

²² See Podlecki (*supra* n.9) 357–62 on the prominence of this theme.

²³ See *supra* n.17.

whether either the lionskin or the Titan Prometheus refers to images on a shield, or whether one is a real skin and the other a metaphor for Tydeus; but since it seems unlikely that we have here another blank shield whose blankness nonetheless goes unremarked, I will assume an unproblematic association of skin and Titan with the shield.²⁴ The lionskin, like the dead boar of Parthenopeus, produces inauspicious resonances with Adrastus' beast-oracle.²⁵ The Prometheus is a more complex case. The appellation 'Titan' perhaps renders him monstrous enough to be a suitable shield-icon for the Argive side, but a Prometheus—particularly a Prometheus *πυρφόρος*—is first and foremost a culture-hero,²⁶ and it seems unlikely that the Argives can succeed in so simply appropriating the figure to an entirely destructive purpose. This shield bears a quotation from an Aeschylean shield, but it is from Capaneus', not Tydeus', and it is furthermore a misquotation. Capaneus in the *Seven* displays a *γυμνὸν ἄνδρα πυρφόρον* (432) rather than an inappropriate Prometheus, and his warrior proclaims in golden letters *Πρήσω πόλιω* (434), whereas the Prometheus here is described *πρήσων πόλιω* (1122). The shields of *Phoenissae*, in contrast to those of the *Seven*, display a marked rejection of language, either spoken or written; it is perhaps significant that this denial is most clearly enacted on a Promethean shield, since Prometheus was known as the inventor not only of writing but of other signifying practices such as divination.²⁷ The misuse of the image of Prometheus has repercussions for the Argives later when the Thebans are enabled to win the battle by their *προμηθία* (1466), although as Foley points out, the Thebans' foresight brings them discredit with their victory.

We may connect the appearance of Prometheus with the play's emphasis on human intelligence, an emphasis that is almost unavoidable in a drama that features Oedipus.²⁸ Terms for learning, sense, and folly abound. Jocasta's prologue is marked by a concern with Oedipus' knowledge and understanding or lack of it (33, 36, 50, 53, 59), and ends with an appeal to the very different wisdom of Zeus (86). Her interrogation of Polyneices includes remarks on the foolishness of those leaders under whom Polyneices had to live (393f) and on the wisdom of the god (414). The *ἄγών* is full of claims and counter-

²⁴ See Mastronarde (*supra* n.2) 122–24 on Tydeus' shield.

²⁵ Note that Eteocles and Polyneices are called boars and lions at 1380 and 1573; cf. *δίδυμοι θῆρες* at 1296. See also Podlecki (*supra* n.9) 362–67.

²⁶ The fragments of Aeschylus' satyr-drama *Prometheus Pyrkaeus* indicate such a rôle for Prometheus even in this context, where he is *φερέσβιος* and *σπενσιδωπος* (10).

²⁷ For writing and divining see *PV* 454–58, 460f, 488–99.

²⁸ D. J. Conacher, "Themes in the Exodus of Euripides' *Phoenissae*," *Phoenix* 21 (1967) 93, notes that intelligence is a theme here but does not pursue it.

claims about wisdom and intelligibility (453, 460, 495, 498f, 530, 569, 570, 584), of which Jocasta's are the more disinterested. The scene between Creon and Eteocles is concerned with strategic intelligence (735f), whereas that between Creon and Teiresias sets up a brutal economy of knowledge between the prophet, Creon, his son, and the city (839, 863, 866, 970). The *μονομαχία* turns first on Eteocles' *σόφισμα* (1408) and then on his failure of concentration (1418). References to Oedipus' intelligence and to the Sphinx return at the close of the play (1506, 1612, 1688, 1731), while Antigone and Creon quarrel over the intelligence of his proclamation and her determination to follow her father (1647, 1680). The overall tone of this emphasis is pessimistic, in keeping with the play's reliance on ritual rather than political solutions and on women and children rather than adult males; as she prepares to leave, Antigone laments (1726f):

οὐχ ὄρα Δίκα κακούς,
οὐδ' ἀμείβεται βροτῶν ἀσυνεσίας.

Polyneices appears next, described as "leading in Ares" (1124)—a double dismantling of his claims in the *Seven* to be led by Δίκη. Instead of Δίκη, he displays Potnian horses that are fixed onto his shield and move by means of pivots from the inside (1125–27). His device responds to the Sphinx of Parthenopeus in Aeschylus,²⁹ and each of these articulated shields might be considered as evoking the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18, where the field, although made of gold, grows black behind the moving ploughmen (548f):

ἦ δὲ μελαίνετ' ὄπισθεν, ἀρηρομένη δε ἔφκει
χρυσείη περ εἴουσα· τὸ δὲ περὶ θαῦμα τέτυκτο.

We can think of the shields with their mechanical devices as measuring and displaying their distance from the divinely effortless shield of the 'original' epic hero. The shields of *Phoenissae* suggest neither the construction of a cosmology as in Homer³⁰ nor the workings of a curse as in Aeschylus.³¹ Their signification turns instead on themselves. The Potnian horses are an apt symbol for this inward turning, for their evil master Glaucus, who kept them on a diet of raw human flesh, was himself eventually devoured by them.³² They suggest not

²⁹ But see Mastronarde (*supra* n.2) 124 for an argument against the articulation of the Aeschylean shield.

³⁰ As suggested by O. Taplin, "The Shield of Achilles Within the *Iliad*," *G&R* 27 (1980) 1–21.

³¹ Suggested by Zeitlin (*supra* n.6) and Vidal-Naquet (*supra* n.7).

³² Other versions of the death of Glaucus are known, but all involve the Potnian

only the internecine nature of civil war but also the ultimately self-destructive quality of the Argive enterprise.

The similarity with the motif of the Aeschylean Parthenopeus is reinforced by the fact that the horses are, like the Sphinx, eaters of raw flesh (*ᾠμοσίτροις*, 1025). In the *Seven*, Parthenopeus occupied fifth place in the series, which is taken by Polyneices here. The remaining elements of the Aeschylean Sphinx motif will be displayed by Adrastus in seventh place, the position reserved for the Aeschylean Polyneices, where his entrance into the play was a matter of awe and horror. In *Phoenissae* we are well aware from the outset of the brothers' fratricidal intention, and emphasis must fall on individual effects other than overall tension and suspense.

Only the last two shields figure the city itself in their imaged threat to it. Capaneus, a giant in the *Seven* (424), bears a giant on his shield, who instead of merely measuring the walls for scaling, as in the *teichoskopia* (181f), has uprooted the entire city and bears it on his shoulders. At 1133 the Messenger adds a comment to the effect that the device is a suggestion of what the city will suffer. This is the first time that he has remarked on the shields' signifying capacities, and it might be thought that the shield is self-evident and the comment redundant. The threat, however, can be seen to be insecure at one point, for the giant is described as earthborn, *γηγενής* (1131). Autochthony is a potentially double sign at Thebes as at Athens;³³ the Sown Men can provide either a paradigm for the fratricidal zeal of Eteocles and Polyneices, or a model of nobility and purity that will be mobilised in the person of Menoeceus for the salvation of the city.

Adrastus is left until last as the figure who advised and assisted the attack—foolishly, as Jocasta has said (569). The inclusion of Adrastus marks a return to the scheme of the *Thebaid* rather than to that of Aeschylus, who introduced Eteocles.³⁴ If the function of Eteocles is, as Zeitlin has suggested, to mirror and undermine the name and position of Eteocles,³⁵ the absence of Eteocles necessarily entails that of his near-double. The shield of Adrastus is as unsuccessful as his advice, although it draws on both the Sphinx-motif of Parthenopeus'

horses. See Σ *ad Eur. Or.* 318, Servius and Probus on Verg. *G.* 3.267, and Paus. 6.20.19.

³³ See N. Loraux, *Les enfants d'Athéna* (Paris 1981) 239.

³⁴ See Foley 127 on Euripides' shift and the consequent disappearance of Eteocles.

³⁵ Of these figures Zeitlin (*supra* n.6: 77) writes: "But the name of the attacker, Eteoklos, as a quasi-homophone of Eteocles' own name, strikes *both* at the security of Eteocles' opposite position *and* at the identity of his singular name."

shield in the *Seven* and on the snake-motifs associated with the Aeschylean Tydeus and Hippomedon (381, 495). Its threat is minimised by the Messenger's words at 1135 and 1137; *γραφῆ* here, far from confirming a frightening status as it does for Antigone in the *teichoskopia* (129), rather undermines it, while Ἄργεϊον αὐχῆμα perhaps suggests that the shield is *only* a boast, without substance.

But the crucial point about Adrastus' shield-image is that it shows *δράκοντες* carrying from the walls children of the Cadmeans (1137f). This image both recalls and replaces the Aeschylean Sphinx who carried but one adult Cadmean. The overt hostility of the surface meaning is quite obvious and needs no further comment, but the differences are signal, and bring the Euripidean image firmly into line with the specific concerns of the play. Foley (127) objects that "the Hydra . . . has no special meaning in the Theban context," but *δράκοντες* have a significant place in the history of Thebes and in the scheme of *Phoenissae*. The Chorus recall the defeat of the *δράκων* at Delphi, the city which is their destination and where they are due to become in truth a *χορός*, to sing and dance (232–38). Cadmus kills the *δράκων* of Ares in order to found Thebes (657–63, *cf.* 820)—an act calling for the sacrifice of Menoeceus that will save his city (931–35). As well as *δράκοντες*, children proliferate in the play; they are perhaps more significant than the adult Cadmean carried by the Aeschylean Sphinx, since the play's only selfless actions are performed by the young: by Antigone and Menoeceus. Furthermore, birth, relationships between the generations, parental love of children, and repayment by children of parental care are all prominent issues in the play.

The alterations to the Aeschylean image can thus be seen to establish particular resonances with the themes of the play. The affinities between the *δράκων* and the Sphinx it replaces can be read not only on the shield but also throughout the play; the two are frequently linked by the figure of Ares. The *δράκων* belongs to Ares, and the Sphinx shares with Ares the unmusical music emphasised by the Chorus (791, 807). Both *δράκων* and Sphinx carry off young men, and this is also an obvious predicate of war, Ares, itself. We might think of the Sphinx, the *δράκων*, and the war as different manifestations of a force that periodically preys on Thebes; this force would undoubtedly be connected to what has been called the "curse of civilization"³⁶—the necessity of repeated reparation for a founding act of violence.

The last Argive shield, then, can be seen to display a synchronic view of the history of Thebes, in which the single attack by the *δρά-*

³⁶ Arthur (*supra* n.18).

κουτες stands for the repeated sufferings of the Thebans at the hands of the original δράκων, Sphinx, and Ares. Such a history is an obvious choice for representation on an enemy shield. But the changes to the Aeschylean image also have another tendency: they are most significant for the bearing they have on the sacrifice of Menoeceus, the brief report of whose death introduces the Messenger-speech. As we have pointed out, the Sphinx in the *Seven* carried off a Cadmean, and in this play she is described as carrying off the children of Thebes to the accompanying lament of mothers and virgins (1033f, 1042).³⁷ The choral ode in which this reference is made comes directly after Menoeceus announces his determination to die, and it celebrates him as the city's second saviour, drawing a parallel between his sacrifice to the δράκων and Oedipus' victorious intervention against the Sphinx. The Chorus also pray to have children like Menoeceus (1060f), thus reminding us of his youth. Hence when we hear of δράκοντες carrying off children, it is hard to resist the connection with Menoeceus' sacrifice to the δράκων of Ares, who has claimed his victim as the Sphinx claimed hers.

If we consider the shield of Adrastus in this light, as an oblique representation of the sacrifice of Menoeceus, we see that the attacker unwittingly brings an image not of the destruction of Thebes but of its salvation. Critics have considered that the success of Menoeceus' sacrificial gesture is presented as ambiguous at best, since no claim is made for it after the event, and the event itself is given such brief notice.³⁸ That this salvation—if such it is—can be enacted on an enemy shield alerts us forcefully to the horror of the means whereby it is achieved, means such as an enemy would rejoice in.

The shield scene ends on an intriguing note. The descriptions of the warriors, both here and in the *teichoskopia*, are supported by 'realistic' accounts of how the speakers come by their knowledge; the Messenger says that he saw all the shields (described precisely as objects of sight, θεάματα, 1140) when he was taking a password (ξύθημα, 1140)³⁹ to the captains of the troops. The password is one paradigm of signification insofar as it consists of an arbitrary word or group of words that bears meaning as a result of agreement among sets of

³⁷ The absence here of wives is consistent with the status in the play of marriage: Jocasta's is grotesque, Antigone refuses hers, and even the anonymous wife of Polyneices is problematic (338–43).

³⁸ See Foley 106f on this ambiguity and the variety of critical opinion on Menoeceus' success. She argues (128) that the success of his sacrifice is indicated clearly by the divine thunderbolt that intervenes in the battle.

³⁹ ξύθημα signifies 'word' itself at certain points in Plato (*Cra.* 433E, *Grg.* 492C) and at Soph. *Tr.* 158.

people, between whom it establishes a circuit of communication. In contrast, the shields seem fragmented, random, motiveless signifiers, their meaning either impenetrable or self-defeating. The text of these recalcitrant, unreadable shields thus ends with an ironic flourish, as the Messenger invokes the successful code that the shields fail, so spectacularly, to be.⁴⁰

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⁴⁰ I should like to thank those who have read and commented on this paper: Pat Easterling, Michael Simpson, and the readers for *GRBS*.