

The Revolt of Images: Mutual Guilt in the *Parodos* of Sophokles' *Antigone*

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INTERPRETATIONS OF SOPHOKLES' *ANTIGONE* have often addressed the question of guilt and justification, that is, whether Antigone is justified in transgressing the decree prohibiting the burial of her brother Polyneikes. Before the events in the drama, Polyneikes and his brother Eteokles have fought for control of their city and killed each other. The purpose of this essay is to argue that, contrary to what we might expect and contrary to the supposed intention of the chorus, the *parodos* suggests that the victory song is subverted by its own ambiguous imagery, implying mutual guilt on the part of the enemies.

Moral ambiguity is an important topic in *Antigone* scholarship. Hegel famously argued that the play depicts a truly tragic conflict, which means that there is a kind of mutual guilt on the part of the enemies in the drama, Antigone and Kreon.¹ His claim, however, has been vigorously rejected. The view that Antigone is justified in her action, whereas Kreon is not, has been so dominant that it has been labelled the "orthodox" interpretation.² In one of the most influential commentaries, Gerhard Müller professed that "Antigone hat ganz und gar recht, Kreon hat ganz und gar unrecht."³ Similarly, R. C. Jebb claimed that there was no guilt on the part of Antigone.⁴ Gen-

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst* (Hamburg 1983) 168, 304; *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik* (Munich 2004) 232; *Philosophie der Kunst. Vorlesung 1826* (Frankfurt am Main 2005) 251.

² Th. C. W. Oudemans and A. P. M. H. Lardinois, *Tragic Ambiguity: Anthropology, Philosophy and Sophocles' Antigone* (Leiden 1987) 107.

³ G. Müller, *Sophokles Antigone* (Heidelberg 1967) 11.

⁴ R. C. Jebb, *Antigone* (Cambridge 1902) ii–xxx, especially xix–xxi.

naro Perrotta argued that Hegel's interpretation was merely "intellectualist exaggerations."⁵ Sometimes Hegel's conception of tragedy has been rejected in a way that seems to suggest a lack of any real interest in what Hegel might or might not have thought about Greek tragedy.⁶ Indeed, a great many commentators have failed to see anything negative about Antigone and, conversely, anything positive about Kreon.⁷ More recently and in a much more nuanced fashion, Martin Cropp has defended the view that Antigone "is right not just in her action (righting Kreon's ritual error) but in her moral and religious intuition."⁸

Yet other critics have argued that the drama depicts Antigone as acting in a one-sided and hence insufficient fashion. In this vein, Jean-Pierre Vernant has claimed that just like that of Kreon, Antigone's action is one-sided, thus committing injustice.⁹ Likewise, Martha Nussbaum has shown that Antigone's words and the web of associations evoked by the choral lyrics suggest one-sidedness and mutual "rigidity" on the part of Antigone and Kreon.¹⁰ From a neo-Hegelian standpoint, Vittorio Hösle has claimed that Antigone's position is shown to be normatively flawed and reprehensible because of her unre-

⁵ G. Perrotta, *Sofocle* (Messina/Milan 1935) 59–60 ("esagerazioni intellettualistiche").

⁶ As recently in H. Flashar, *Sophokles. Dichter im demokratischen Athen* (Munich 2000) 64.

⁷ J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles. Commentaries III The Antigone* (Leiden 1978) 28; W. Rösler, "Der Chor als Mitspieler. Beobachtungen zur 'Antigone'," *A&A* 24 (1983) 110.

⁸ M. Cropp, "Antigone's Final Speech (Sophocles, *Antigone* 891–928)," *G&R* 44 (1997) 137–160, at 153; Cropp argues that Kreon is "no monster of arbitrary injustice," but "his hybris is, up to a point, an easy error." Cf. R. Bultmann, "Polis und Hades in der Antigone des Sophokles," in H. Diller (ed.), *Sophokles* (Darmstadt 1967) 311–324, at 313 and 319.

⁹ J.-P. Vernant, "Tensions et ambiguïtés dans la tragédie grecque," in J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne I* (Paris 2001) 21–40, at 34.

¹⁰ M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*² (Cambridge 2001) 67–79.

lenting attitude and her anti-political *ethos*.¹¹ I have argued that the proper way of making sense of Hegel's interpretation is by assessing the logical consistency of Kreon's and Antigone's statements and actions, that is, by judging the colliding characters according to the normative principles expounded by the characters themselves.¹²

In the most recent edition, Mark Griffith concludes that "No consensus has emerged."¹³ Of course, it is possible that there will never be such a consensus. In any case, claims regarding mutual guilt in the *Antigone* remain contested.

In this paper it will be argued that there is a different but analogous problem of interpretation in the *parodos* of the play, depicting the struggle between Polyneikes and his Argive allies on the one hand and Eteokles and the Thebans on the other. A careful reading of the *parodos* reveals that notwithstanding the presumed intention of the chorus, the imagery conjured up by them is disconcerting in the sense that it suggests reciprocity and mutual guilt on the part of both the defenders and the enemies of the city. The chorus cannot really be thought to intend to express anything else than relief after the Theban victory over the aggressors; but their wording suggests double-sidedness and mutual guilt even though their supposed intention is only to say something about the guilt of the enemies of Thebes. Exploring the extent to which this interpretation of the first choral song could affect our understanding of the play as a whole would be beyond the scope of this paper; suffice it to say that it remains to be seen whether hints of moral ambiguity in the *parodos* could make the main moral conflict in the drama, that between Antigone and Kreon, appear ambiguous too.

After Antigone and Ismene have left the stage in the opening

¹¹ V. Höfle, *Die Vollendung der Tragödie im Spätwerk des Sophokles. Ästhetisch-historische Bemerkungen zur Struktur der attischen Tragödie* (Stuttgart/Bad Canstatt 1984) 92, 112–123.

¹² J. Tralau, "Tragedy as Political Theory: The Self-Destruction of Antigone's Laws," *History of Political Thought* 26 (2005) 377–396. For a similar approach, see M. W. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies. A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics* (Cambridge 1991).

¹³ M. Griffith, *Sophocles. Antigone* (Cambridge 1999) 28.

scene, the chorus of Theban elders enter. They celebrate the Theban victory over the invading Argives, praising the gods for siding with the city and punishing its enemies. A run-away king has returned with a foreign army in order to invade and destroy his and their home city and oust his brother from the throne. The chorus thus hail the defeat of the Argives, and at first there seems to be no notion of mutual guilt.

Indeed, it is often held that this choral song is simply the kind of joyful celebration that it appears to be: “the mood,” the most recent editor writes, “is one of pure joy.”¹⁴ Other scholars specifically addressing it have been just as reluctant to detect any ambiguity, arguing, for instance, that ominous tendencies can only be heard in later lyrical passages or seen in later events.¹⁵ Gerhard Müller, on the contrary, holds that the *parodos* is quite ominous, though not because of any hint of mutual guilt, but because wordings creep in that suggest to the audience that the violence is not at all over.¹⁶ In contradistinction to the dominant interpretation and to that of Müller, we will argue that there is not only an ominous ring to the song, but that in effect the joyful message conveyed by the chorus is undermined by the ambiguous force of the images themselves, which blur the distinction between friends and enemies. This reading, as can be expected, is not completely new. Oudemans and Lardinois have argued that ambiguity is *the* topic of the *Antigone*—and hence of the *parodos*, too. But notwithstanding their possible contribution to our understanding of the play as a whole, their analysis of the *parodos* is very brief, and in the following, we will try to substantiate their claim in the case of

¹⁴ Griffith, *Sophocles* 143; likewise G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama*² (Ithaca/London 1994) 202–203.

¹⁵ P. Vicaire, “Place et figure de Dionysos dans la tragédie de Sophocle,” *REG* 81 (1968) 351–373, at 355; V. J. Rosivach, “The Two Worlds of the *Antigone*,” *ICS* 4 (1979) 16–26, at 25; J. F. Davidson, “The Parodos of the *Antigone*: A Poetic Study,” *BICS* 30 (1983) 41–51; A. Bierl, “Was hat die Tragödie mit Dionysos zu tun? Rolle und Funktion des Dionysos am Beispiel der ‘*Antigone*’ des Sophokles,” *WürzJbb* N.F. 15 (1989) 43–57, at 47; R. Coleman, “The Role of the Chorus in Sophocles’ *Antigone*,” *PCPS* 198 (1972) 4–27, at 18.

¹⁶ Müller, *Sophokles Antigone* 47–58.

this choral song.¹⁷

On the surface of it, the chorus apparently wish to say that Helios, Zeus, Ares, Nike, and Dionysos are on the side of the Thebans, and that the intervention of these divinities not only helped the besieged city win the battle, but also shows that any moral error is on the part of the enemies of Thebes. This is no Homeric battle depicting gods fighting each other: no gods are claimed to side with the Argives. This is not to say, of course, that an intervention in battle on the part of a Greek deity is similar to that of God in Christian literature.¹⁸ Notwithstanding the plausible claims regarding elements of theodicy in Greek tragedy¹⁹, common sense tells us that gods in tragedy are not Platonic or Christian: they have not been through that kind of radical theodicy.²⁰ But it is important that the chorus express a normative and moral claim when stating that Zeus has punished the enemies of Thebes for their *hybris*, and this means that they ascribe guilt. The technique of letting the chorus make allusions that they cannot possibly be considered to intend is used in the other choral songs of the play as well.²¹ So let us listen to their song, for there might be discordant voices underneath, far too many and too pervasive to be mere coincidence.

Of eagles, dragons, and ominous mouths

ἀκτῖς ἀελίου, τὸ κάλ-
 λιστον ἑπταπύλῳ φανὲν
 Θήβα τῶν προτέρων φάος,
 ἐφάνθης ποτ', ὦ χρυσέας
 ἀμέρας βλέφαρον, Διοκαί-
 ων ὑπὲρ ῥεέθρων μολούσα,

¹⁷ Oudemans/Lardinois, *Tragic Ambiguity* 155–158.

¹⁸ As pointed out by D. A. Hester, “Sophocles the Unphilosophical,” *Mnemosyne* SER. IV 21 (1971) 11–59, at 41.

¹⁹ See Bruno Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes* (Göttingen 2000) 170; Hölsle, *Die Vollendung*.

²⁰ Cf. however *Aj.* 132–133.

²¹ In the first *stasimon*, for instance, the chorus speak of the burial—without knowing that Antigone is the perpetrator—in a way that is pertinent to Kreon; in the fourth *stasimon*, the myth of Lykurgos is applied to Antigone but perhaps equally pertinent to Kreon.

τὸν λεύκασπιν Ἀργόθεν
 φῶτα βάντα πανσαγία
 φυγάδα πρόδρομον ὄξυτόρω
 κινήσασα χαλινῶ·
 ὃς ἐφ' ἡμετέρῃ γῆ Πολυνείκους
 ἄρθεις νεικέων ἐξ ἀμφιλόγων
 ὄξεα κλάζων
 αἰετὸς ἐς γῆν ὡς ὑπερέπτα,
 λευκῆς χιόνος πτέρυγι στεγανὸς
 πολλῶν μεθ' ὅπλων
 ξύν θ' ἵπποκόμοις κορύθεσσι.
 στὰς δ' ὑπὲρ μελάθρων φονώ-
 σαισιν ἀμφιχανῶν κύκλω
 λόγχαις ἐπτάπυλον στόμα
 ἔβα, πρὶν ποθ' ἀμετέρων
 αἱμάτων γένυσιν πλησθή-
 ναί <τε> καὶ στεφάνωμα πύργων
 πευκάενθ' Ἥφαιστον ἐλείν.
 τοῖος ἀμφὶ νῶτ' ἐτάθη
 πάταγος Ἄρεος, ἀντιπάλω
 δυσχείρωμα δράκοντος.

Beam of the sun, fairer than all that have shone before for seven-
 gated Thebes, finally you shone forth, eye of golden day, coming
 over the streams of Dirce, you who moved off in headlong flight
 the man with white shield that came from Argos in his panoply,
 with a bridle of constraint that pierced him sharply, him that
 was raised up against our land by the contentious quarrels of
 Polynices, and flew to our country, loudly screaming like an
 eagle sheathed in snow-white pinion, with many weapons and
 with helmets with horse-hair plumes; he paused above our
 houses, ringing round the seven gates with spears that longed for
 blood; but he went, before his jaws had been glutted with our
 gore and the fire-god's pine-fed flame had taken the walls that
 crown our city. Such was the din of battle stretched about his
 back, hard for the dragon's adversary to vanquish. (*Ant.* 100–
 126)²²

²² The text used is that of the *OCT*, by permission of Oxford University Press, 213 words pp.187–189, vv. 100–154, from *Sophoclis fabulae* edited by

The chorus begin by invoking the sun, Helios, or literally ἀκτίς ἀελίου, “the beam of the sun,” thanking him for the relief of morning and light, and celebrating the flight of the Argive army. The help of the sun might not at first appear to be so impressive; after all, the sun rises every morning, not just in the mornings when Thebes has happened to fend off aggressors. Moreover, Nilsson held that Helios never really had any cult in Greece, and that as a nature deity he had nothing to do with morality.²³ But in myth, Helios witnesses oaths and is the “observer of transgressions,”²⁴ and elsewhere in Sophokles the chorus and others swear by him, thus stressing the moral import of the Sun.²⁵ And here, Helios chases away the invading warriors ὄξυτόρω ... χαλινῶ, with “sharp-piercing bridle.” One commentator has argued that ascribing this sharp bridle to the sun instead of the enemies would result in “ein absurdes Bild.”²⁶ But this is surely to miss the point of the image of the sun. The “beam of the sun” appears to be a synecdoche, an image where a part represents the whole to which it belongs.²⁷ Helios himself, then, controls the horses of his chariot in a manner that is not absurd at all: with bridles. Admittedly, in Aischylos’ *Prometheus Bound*, Okeanos rides a monster—in this case, some kind of bird or griffin—“without bridles,” στομίῳν ἄτερον (*PV* 287), controlling it with his will. But on vases, we find Helios depicted mastering his horses with bridles. Unlike the

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²³ M. P. Nilsson, *Den grekiska religionens historia. Olaus Petri föreläsningar hållna vid Uppsala universitet* (Stockholm 1921) 161, 170–171; there is no translation of this book.

²⁴ T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth I* (Baltimore 1996) 30; cf. Homer *Il.* 3.277, 19.259.

²⁵ *OT* 661, cf. 1425–1426, *OC* 869, *El.* 823–825, *Aj.* 845–846, *Trach.* 94–102.

²⁶ Müller, *Sophokles Antigone* 49.

²⁷ Davidson, *BICS* 30 (1983) 41–42.

translation above, then, we could argue that Helios' bridle pierces his horses, not the Argives. So Helios, the sun, ousts the attacking foreign army. Indeed, in apposition to ἀκτίς ἡλίου, which echoes one of Pindar's paean, there is "light," φάος, which Sophokles in the *Electra* uses metonymically about the Sun-god.²⁸ Sourvinou-Inwood has argued that the allusion to Pindar's words about the eclipse "introduce[s] into the celebratory ode an intimation of threat and disorder."²⁹ We shall return to this disorder. Helios is thus the first of a number of gods claimed by the chorus to have sided with the city. Helios' φάος is the "most beautiful" that has ever appeared to Thebes—and φάος means not only "light," but also "hope," "help," and "salvation," a salvation consisting in the fact that the "man from Argos" was defeated.³⁰ There is an interesting resemblance here. For the enemy "man," φῶς, in this case the accusative, φῶτα, is remarkably close phonetically to the "light" and "salvation" by which he is ousted (φῶς, here φάος). Moreover, it could be significant that φῶτα is also the plural of φάος; however, the usual form is φάεα. Are these similarities mere coincidence? Perhaps one should not make too much of it. But there are, as we shall see, far too many coincidences in this piece of elated poetry for an astute reader to let that feeling of elation prevail.

For very soon a striking image appears. The enemy is depicted as an eagle attacking the city: "him that was raised up against our land by the contentious quarrels of Polynices, and flew to our country, loudly screaming like an eagle sheathed in snow-white pinion, with many weapons and with helmets with horse-hair plumes."³¹ Interestingly, the image of the enemy oscillates between that of an army and that of an eagle: the

²⁸ Pind. *Pae.* 9.1 (fr.52k) ἀκτίς ἡλίου. Cf. *El.* 86, where the heroine evokes "sacred light" (φάος ἁγνόν).

²⁹ Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles' *Antigone*," *JHS* 109 (1989) 134–148, at 141.

³⁰ As noted by Kamerbeek, *Antigone* 53.

³¹ This passage appears to contain a lacuna. Adopting the manuscript reading and Nauck's conjecture, ὄν (...) Πολυνείκης (...) <ἡγαγε κείνος δ'> ὄξεα κλάζων, would not affect our interpretation.

creature covers the city with its wing, yet at the same time the enemy comes with weaponry and, echoing epic poetry, helmets decked with the hair of horses. Depending on which reading one adopts, the eagle could be either Polyneikes or the Argives.³² In our context, however, the important thing is that the chorus conjure up an image of the enemy as a terrifying creature menacing the city. The eagle seems to be “covered” (στεγανός—“sheathed” Lloyd-Jones) with its snow-white wing, suggesting, according to some, the image of an army completely covered by their white shields—for white is the colour of Argos. But στεγανός can also be active, meaning “covering,” i.e., the immense hovering eagle covers, overshadows, the city with its wing.³³ So it is indeed a threatening creature that has come to the city. It shrieks “loudly,” or, literally, “sharply” (ὄξέα). There is nothing unusual about a sound being “sharp” in Greek, especially that of a bird or a warrior.³⁴ But we have just heard about “sharpness.” That sharpness belonged to the god ousting the enemies of Thebes, that is, Helios and his bridle. This time, it is ascribed to the enemy himself.

And something else will soon render this image even more problematic: “he paused above our houses, ringing round the seven gates with spears that longed for blood; but he went, before his jaws had been glutted with our gore and the fire-god’s pine-fed flame had taken the walls that crown our city.” The eagle stands, hovers, over the city, yet is ousted before it can conquer it, before its jaws or beak can be filled with Theban blood. This image of the mouth is strange indeed: the creature “opens” it or “gapes” (ἀμφιχανών, with the infinitive ἀμφιχάσκειν, a very rare word) around the city. But the city of the seven gates, Thebes, is here called ἐπτάπυλον στόμα, “seven-gated mouth.” So the eagle threatening the city stretches out its jaws around a mouth. And στόμα is not only used of mouths, but also of birds’ beaks. The enemy mouth could have been that of Thebes itself. Indeed, one com-

³² See n.31 above.

³³ Griffith, *Sophocles* 147; R. D. Dawe, *Studies on the Text of Sophocles* III (Leiden 1978) 103.

³⁴ See *El.* 244, *Trach.* 963, *Aj.* 630.

mentator takes the “mouth” mentioned in the verse to be not the “seven-gated,” but the beak with which the eagle gapes around the “seven-gated.”³⁵ But this is impossible; on the contrary, “seven-gated” and “mouth” belong together, representing, that is, the city of Thebes.³⁶ To our knowledge, previous scholars have found nothing suspicious about this expression, but it is a most curious image: a mouth menacing a mouth, a menacing mouth seeking to devour another mouth—suggesting a kind of double-sidedness. Now, the “mouth” of the city is not so strange in Greek as it may seem to us, for στόμα is also “entrance” and “aperture.” Indeed, Euripides would later have his humiliated king Pentheus call Thebes the “seven-mouthed city,” πόλις μ’ ἐπτάστομον.³⁷ But given the image of the hovering eagle gaping with *its* mouth, this “mouth of the city” is not only an unusual expression, but arresting, for it creates a double image: a mouth opposed to a mouth. Furthermore, this “mouth” carries another meaning as well. For στόμα is also the “point” or “edge” of a weapon, a play on the meanings of στόμα found elsewhere in Sophokles.³⁸ We have already seen weapons in this image—namely, on the side of the eagle, the enemy, who had “spears that longed for blood.” So here too the image sets a complex interplay of reflections in motion. Both meanings of στόμα let the enemies mirror each other: a menacing mouth mirroring another mouth, the edge of a weapon mirroring another edge. Once again, the image suggests a remarkable double-sidedness.

Moreover, there is another ambiguity regarding weaponry

³⁵ Müller, *Sophokles Antigone* 51.

³⁶ Other commentators do not even take the other possibility into account: Jebb, *Antigone* 69; likewise L. Campbell in his commentary renders it by “seven-mouthed gates,” in *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments I* (Oxford 1879) 469; Kamerbeek, *Antigone* 56, declares that Müller “goes strangely astray.”

³⁷ *Bacch.* 919, *Phoen.* 287; cf. however J. Roux, *Les Bacchantes II* (Paris 1972) 531.

³⁸ *Aj.* 651, 1110; see Kamerbeek on *OC* 794, *The Plays of Sophocles VII The Oedipus Coloneus* (Leiden 1984) 119; likewise F. W. Schneidewin, A. Nauck, M. L. Rademacher, *Sophokles I Aias* (Berlin 1913) 111. An interesting point of comparison could be found in Euripides: *Phoen.* 1385.

and a part of the body. The hostile eagle wanted to fill its “jaw” or “beak” (γένυσιν, 121) with Theban blood. As pointed out by Kamerbeek, who does not explore the image in the way done here, the word also means “the edge of an axe.” So not only the attacked city and its seven gates are depicted as a mouth and a weapon; the same kind of ambiguous play of signification is used by means of another word in the case of the aggressor as well.

Soon thereafter, the chorus will say that the enemy was defeated by the “dragon” or “snake” (δράκοντος, 126). At first, this is not surprising. The dragon is the symbol of Thebes. The image of the mouth threatening a mouth may, as we said, be read as a hint at reciprocity or even some kind of mutual guilt on the part of the enemies and the defenders. Moreover, the image of the city as a mouth may also be interpreted as an allusion to the origin of Thebes.³⁹ Its founder, Kadmos, killed a dragon holy to Ares and sowed its teeth. From that seed fully armed warriors were born out of the earth, and after Kadmos had incited them to begin killing each other, five remained. These, the sown men, *Spartoi*, constituted the original inhabitants of Thebes, and their offspring were the ruling noble—and by virtue of kinship earth-born—families of the city.⁴⁰ Being born out of the earth, being autochthonous, was of course an essential theme in Greek myth and politics.⁴¹ And the myth of the beginning of Thebes depicted an original war among the autochthonous. The origin of the city was thus fratricide, foreshadowing the fratricide of Polyneikes and Eteokles: it was founded by an internal war. And this might be what the image of Thebes as a “seven-gated mouth” suggests: the mouth alludes to the dragon’s teeth, so a threatening mouth confronts a

³⁹ Oudemans/Lardiniis, *Tragic Ambiguity* 155, perspicaciously mention the myth, but not in the context of στόμα in 119, just regarding the dragon mentioned in 126.

⁴⁰ Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* 468–470; cf. Apollod. 3.4.1.

⁴¹ For the “sown men” of Thebes, see F. Vian, *Les origines de Thèbes. Cadmos et les Spartes* (Paris 1961) 158; for a brief introduction to autochthony in Greek myth, see K. Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology* (London/New York 1998) 75–78.

mouth of its own kind—the origin of this war is, indeed, to be found within the city itself, as the fratricidal prehistory of the city being repeated.⁴² Froma Zeitlin points out that in Thebes, all bad things seem to repeat themselves forever.⁴³ And that is true here. The enemy is from within Thebes, and guilt is mutual. One is the mouth of an eagle, one the mouth of a dragon. The meaning of the song changes by the double-sidedness of the image and the conjuring up of the myth of original fratricide. The confrontation between eagle and dragon, thus, in contrast to what must be intended by the chorus, suggests that the monster, the threat, and the guilt do not primarily come from the outside, but from inside of Thebes itself. The images mirror each other. The distinction between the enemy eagle and the friendly dragon or snake is hence blurred.⁴⁴ It is perhaps no mere coincidence that where this “gaping” (ἀμφιχάσκειν) of the eagle is found elsewhere in Greek tragedy, in Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers*, the animal stretching out its menacing jaws is a snake—more specifically, this is about the killing of kin as well, Orestes recognising himself as the snake that, in his mother Klytimestra’s dream, is begotten by her and then kills her.⁴⁵ The chorus ostensibly intend to use the image of the dragon defeating the eagle in order to celebrate the undoing of an enemy guilty of the war. Yet the images distort that intention and resist that conclusion. They seem, indeed, to suggest mutual guilt.

Divine intervention, fire, and the return of the eagle

The Thebans are lucky. The chorus have Zeus intervene in

⁴² For those who are not too cautious about over-interpretation, it may be interesting that when Kreon and his servants look for Antigone in her cave, the entrance is, indeed, called στόμιον (1217), the “mouth” of the cave—as it were, of the tomb.

⁴³ F. Zeitlin, “Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama,” in J. J. Winkler and F. Zeitlin (eds.), *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton 1992) 130–167, at 148.

⁴⁴ C. P. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization. An Interpretation of Sophocles*² (Norman 1999) 195, rightly points out that “the polarities blur” between Olympian and chthonian, eagle and dragon.

⁴⁵ Aesch. *Cho.* 544 οὔφις, 545 ἀμφέχασκ’, 549 ἐκδροκοντωθείς.

the battle, striking down one of the enemies with a thunderbolt. The one killed is the Argive Kapaneus. The chorus do not mention his name, but they do not have to, for the episode was well known.⁴⁶ The reason for Zeus's intervention is the typical punishment of hybriistic action:

Ζεὺς γὰρ μεγάλης γλώσσης κόμπους
 ὑπερεχθαίρει, καὶ σφας ἐσιδῶν
 πολλῶ ῥεύματι προσνισομένους,
 χρυσοῦ καναχῆς ὑπεροπτείας,
 παλτῶ ῥιπτεῖ πυρὶ βαλβίδων
 ἐπ' ἄκρων ἤδη
 νίκην ὀρμώντ' ἀλαλάξαι· (127–133)

For Zeus detests the boasts of a proud tongue, and when he saw them advancing in full flood, with the arrogance of flashing gold, with the fire he hurls he flung down him who was already hastening to shout forth his victory on the topmost ramparts.

Now, Kapaneus was famous for his *hybris*. The “hatred” or “enmity” of Zeus for the Argive enemy evokes the language of political conflict, for the verb ὑπερεχθαίρειν is an intensified derivation from ἐχθρός, which also carries the meaning “enemy”—so ὑπερεχθαίρειν means unusually strong hatred and enmity. This is an intervention in the complex play of friend-enemy determinations that pervades the play. In the opening scene, Antigone confronts her sister Ismene, who declines to assist her in burying Polyneikes. So Antigone declares that Ismene is now “hated” or an “enemy” (ἐχθρός 86, ἐχθαρεῖ 93, ἐχθρά 94, cf. also ἐχθρῶν 10) of Antigone and the family. That is a decisive moment: it is the beginning of the conflict about who is a “hated one” or, precisely, the “enemy,” ἐχθρός.⁴⁷ Here we find the chorus saying that Zeus intervened against the Argive enemy by “hating [him] above all” and turning him into an “enemy.” So this could be interpreted as a divine intervention on moral grounds that gives an answer to

⁴⁶ Apollod. 3.6.7; Aesch. *Sept.* 425–431.

⁴⁷ Walter Jens has stated that this transition from unity to enmity within a dialogue is not only important in the play, but an important innovation in dramatic technique as well: “Antigone-Interpretationen,” in H. Diller (ed.), *Sophokles* (Darmstadt 1967) 295–310, at 295–296.

the question of friends and enemies and good and evil.⁴⁸ For the “over-god” hates the *hybris*-infested enemy of Thebes more than anything. Hence he killed Kapaneus with a thunderbolt, παλτῶ ῥιπτεῖ πυρί. This of course is the weapon we would expect of Zeus. But once more, the images seem to acquire a life of their own, yet again contradicting the ostensible intention of the chorus.

ἀντιτύπα δ' ἐπὶ γὰ πέσε τανταλωθεῖς
 πυρφόρος ὃς τότε μαινομένα ξὺν ὄρμῃ
 βακχεύων ἐπέπνει
 ῥιπαῖς ἐχθίστων ἀνέμων.
 εἶχε δ' ἄλλα τάδ' <ἀλλ' >
 ἄλλ' ἐπ' ἄλλοις ἐπενώ-
 μα στυφελίζων μέγας Ἄ-
 ρης δεξιόσειρος. (134–140)

And he fell upon the hard ground, shaken down, the torch-bearer who in the fury of his mad rush breathed upon us with the blast of hateful winds. This indeed went otherwise; and different fates were dispensed to different persons by the mighty war-god who shattered them, a horse that carried our chariot to victory.

When the fall of Kapaneus is depicted, all these things seem to reappear in a perverse fashion. Kapaneus, as we have seen, attempts to set the city on fire; and here he is, indeed, πυρφόρος, “torch-bearer,” or “fire-throwing,” or literally “fire-bearing.”⁴⁹ So the “thrown fire” of Zeus corresponds to the fire borne by Kapaneus. Gerhard Müller has argued that this correspondence is intended to show the asymmetry, the overwhelming power of Zeus and his lightning as opposed to Kapaneus’ torch.⁵⁰ Still, this double-sidedness is notable, fire confronting fire. And the “fire” of Kapaneus is personified: it is

⁴⁸ Oudemans/Lardinois, *Tragic Ambiguity* 156, whose interpretation of the *Antigone*’s ambiguity is justified in the case of the *parodos*, claim that Kapaneus tries to emulate the sun in a hybriatic fashion. But that claim probably cannot be substantiated in the text itself.

⁴⁹ It has also been argued that this alludes to the fact that he will soon himself be on fire when hit by Zeus’s thunderbolt: Davidson, *BICS* 30 (1983) 47.

⁵⁰ Müller, *Sophokles Antigone* 58.

a god, Hephaistos. Elsewhere in Sophokles, πυρφόρος is an attribute of gods—in *OT* of an unnamed god, as it were, and later of Zeus's thunderbolts, and in *Philoctetes*, of Zeus himself.⁵¹ Here, the fire that the chorus attribute to Zeus thus reappears in the hands of the enemy, in the hands, indeed, of the enemy not only of Thebes but also, according to the chorus, of Zeus. So there might be something disconcerting about the enemy being πυρφόρος, suggesting that the gods are on the side of the enemies. There is perhaps yet another troubling implication. For according to Xenophon (*Lac.* 13.2), the πυρφόρος was also the priest that accompanied the Spartan armies in war, thus bringing the sacred fire to the countries attacked by Sparta. It might be an over-speculative piece of over-interpretation to assume that the choral ode carries such an allusion—an allusion that would appear ominous to the Athenian audience during a time of mounting tension between Sparta and Athens before the Peloponnesian War. In any case, this symmetry between the element of fire ascribed to both sides is at the very least noteworthy, and probably much more than that: it is ominous.

And there is more. Zeus “hurls” (ὄπτει) his fire, and this is clearly echoed in the etymologically related “blasts” (ὄπαις) with which Kapaneus attacks.⁵² One should perhaps not make too much of the fact that Zeus's hatred and enmity (ὑπερεχθαίρειν) is echoed by that of Kapaneus' ἐχθίστων ἀνέμων. Yet the attributes of the god consistently and insistently recur in each instance when the chorus in turn describe the enemy. The chorus ascribe the victory of Thebes to the intervention of Zeus on the side of the Thebans; and so the Argive enemy eagle hovering menacingly before the attack is defeated. Zeus himself strikes down the enemy eagle. But the eagle is, after all, Zeus's bird. The images blur. It is as if the images conjured up by the chorus resist the intention of attributing sole guilt to the enemies. In the end, the god siding with the Thebans seems to be present on both sides—or on neither. The enemies are similar: a mouth mirrors a mouth, fire mirrors fire, storms mirror

⁵¹ *OT* 27, 200, *OC* 55, 1658, *Phil.* 1198.

⁵² Much later, the chorus will say that Antigone is held by “blasts of the soul” (ψυχῆς ὄπαι, 930).

storms, enmity mirrors enmity.

We will see more of this. The enemy is “in the fury of his mad rush,” *μαινομένα ξὺν ὄρμῃ βακχεύων*.⁵³ There is nothing peculiar about the description of a warrior as raging or being in frenzy. It is, however, remarkable that one of those words is *βακχεύων*, suggesting of course Bacchic, Dionysiac frenzy. It has been claimed that as in many other cases, there is no allusion to Dionysos himself here.⁵⁴ But several commentators note the astonishing fact that this destructive rage is here connected to a deity that the chorus invoke.⁵⁵ The rage of the hybristic enemy of Thebes and the gods wears the name of one of the gods. And we shall see that this strangeness will be less strange and even more disconcerting.

“The great Ares” helps the city, striking down the enemies. One variant calls him *δεξιόσειρος*, “the right-hand horse” in the race, which continues the image of a horse race already used of the helping Helios. The other variant is *δεξιόχειρος*, which would mean that the war god strikes with his right hand.⁵⁶ In any case, we find one more god siding with the city. The enemy warriors at the seven gates “pay bronze tribute” to Zeus Tropaïos. It was common that the shield and weaponry of a killed enemy were set up as a *tropaïos*, a trophy, on the battlefield, with an inscription to a god.⁵⁷ But we have seen that the disconcerting question that the images suggest is whether this victory can really be ascribed to the gods’ siding with Thebes against its enemies. The description of these foreign warriors and the combat between the hating and hated brothers is evidently very symmetrical:

ἑπτὰ λοχαγοὶ γὰρ ἐφ’ ἑπτὰ πύλαις
ταχθέντες ἴσοι πρὸς ἴσους ἔλιπον

⁵³ Commentators have discussed whether this enemy is Polyneikes or Kapaneus; see R. Schlesier: “Mixtures of Masks: Maenads as Tragic Models,” in T. H. Carpenter and C. A. Faraone (eds.), *Masks of Dionysus* (Ithaca/London 1993) 89–114, at 98.

⁵⁴ Griffith, *Sophocles* 150.

⁵⁵ Jebb, *Antigone* 72; Müller, *Sophokles Antigone* 54.

⁵⁶ Müller, *Sophokles Antigone* 55.

⁵⁷ As pointed out by Griffith, *Sophocles* 151–152; Jebb, *Antigone* 73–74.

Ζηνὶ τροπαίῳ πάγχαλκα τέλη,
 πλὴν τοῖν στυγεροῖν, ὃ πατρὸς ἑνὸς
 μητρὸς τε μιᾶς φύντε καθ' αὐτοῖν
 δικρατεῖς λόγγας στήσαντ' ἔχετον
 κοινοῦ θανάτου μέρος ἄμφω. (141–147)

For seven captains posted against seven gates, man against man, left behind their brazen weapons for Zeus the god of trophies, except for the unhappy two, who, sprung of one father and one mother, set their strong spears against each other and both shared a common death.

The theme of mutual guilt is evident: the words emphasise similarity (ἴσοι πρὸς ἴσους, δικρατεῖς) and what is common to the mutual killers (πατρὸς ἑνὸς μητρὸς τε μιᾶς, κοινοῦ, ἄμφω). The defender and the attacker are depicted in exactly the same way; there is no distinction, suggesting that not only the killing is mutual, but also guilt. Thus, each thing seems to reappear elsewhere, and the gods claimed to be siding with the defenders seem to be mirrored in the aggressors themselves.

The return of rage, the return of violence

Finally, before the chorus turn the attention of the audience from their lyric exercises to the imminent arrival of Kreon, they celebrate victory, Nike. Nike has come smiling to Thebes.

ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἂ μεγαλώνυμος ἦλθε Νίκα
 τῷ πολυαρμάτῳ ἀντιχαρεῖσα Θήβῃ,
 ἐκ μὲν δὴ πολέμων
 τῶν νῦν θέσθε λησμοσύναν,
 θεῶν δὲ ναοὺς χοροῖς
 παννύχοις πάντας ἐπέλ-
 θωμεν, ὃ Θήβας δ' ἐλελί-
 θων [or ἐλελίζων] Βάκχιος ἄρχοι. (148–154)

But since Victory whose name is glorious has come, her joy responding to the joy of Thebes with many chariots, after the recent wars let us be forgetful, and let us visit all the temples of the gods with all-night dances, and may the Bacchic god who shakes the land of Thebes be ruler!

The chorus wishes “oblivion” of the recent wars. But the chorus may in fact already be oblivious, forgetting the past of the city that never learns from its history. For Thebes, as we said, always seems to repeat its own tyrannical and ominous

history. In this choral song, as we remember, someone has already over-hastily wanted to proclaim victory, Nike—namely the Argive enemy who is now dead. So things repeat themselves, and this is true of this call for celebration as well. As pointed out by Winnington-Ingram, it is striking that this song, which is sung at dawn and began by invoking the Sun and thanking him for ousting the enemies of the city, in the end turns its attention to dances going on all night, that is, in darkness.⁵⁸

The “dances,” *choroi*, of course, are the territory of Dionysos, and it is indeed he who is invoked here: “may the Bacchic god who shakes the land of Thebes be ruler!” Or is it? One commentator claims that Βάκχιος is an adjective here (meaning just “the Bacchic man”), and that only in Euripides does Βάκχιος mean Βάκχος, the god himself.⁵⁹ Another, on the contrary, says that they are used synonymously.⁶⁰ As evidence for the use of Βάκχιος as Dionysos, in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* we find the words ἐταίρε Βακχίου (262). In any case, in a way those who participate in Dionysiac cult are thought to somehow become one with their god.⁶¹ But in this case, this ambiguity should perhaps be taken even more seriously.⁶² Whether Βάκχιος is here the god himself or the inhabitant of his home city celebrating him or, ambiguously, ironically, both, the wording does evoke someone thought to be dead and gone. For a few lines

⁵⁸ R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles. An Interpretation* (Cambridge 1980) 116: “An ode which began with the rays of the sun, the bright light of victory, ends in the darkness of night.”

⁵⁹ Müller, *Sophokles Antigone* 58.

⁶⁰ Griffith, *Sophocles* 153–154.

⁶¹ As ironically alluded to in Eur. *Bacch.* 478; cf. also M. Detienne, *Dionysos à ciel ouvert* (Paris 1998) 38. This is true of Dionysos’ victims as well; see M. Massenzio, “Cultura e crisi permanente: la ‘xenia’ dionisiaca,” *SMSR* 40 (1969) 27–113, at 69, 74.

⁶² Froma Zeitlin finds that “appeals to ... Theban Dionysus” amount to “advance indications of an illusory hope” in tragedy, and that in Athens, on the contrary, Dionysos is beneficent in tragedy: “Staging Dionysus between Thebes and Athens,” in Carpenter/Faraone, *Masks* 147–182, at 154. This difference between Theban and Athenian Dionysos appears to be true not only of tragedy, but in general; see Detienne, *Dionysos* 45ff, 60f.

earlier, the one in a frenzy (βακχεύων, 136) was not the god and not the Theban, but the foreign enemy menacing the city. This new ambiguous Bacchios is the “earth-shaker” of Thebes, and shaking the earth is not only indicative of dancing and celebration, but of war and disaster as well. There is a striking and disconcerting echo of another god claimed by the chorus to have sided with the city, one who should no longer be there. “The Bacchic earth-shaker,” ἐλελίχθων Βάκχιος (with variant ἐλελίζων) sounds dangerously close to the “shattering” or “striking” (στυφελίζων) Ares mentioned a few lines earlier, that is, to *war*, to the very violence that is supposed to have been overcome. So Βάκχιος ἄρχοι is not, as claimed by some, merely a wish for the god or the Bacchic Theban to “lead on”⁶³ or “begin”⁶⁴ the dance; for ἀρχή is not just “beginning” or “origin,” or “principle,” it is also “rule,” “authority,” “political power.” Contrary to their presumed intention, the chorus end by evoking the return of murderous frenzy and the continued rule of violence: rage is to rule. Dionysos, the god of Thebes, of tragedy, and of the festival during which it was staged, appears also as the god of unleashed violence. For the images evoke something different from what we expect: the god appears to be on the side of the enemies too, or on no side at all.

It could be argued that this play of subtle repetitions, echoes, and ambiguities is a mere “ornament,” part of a poetic practice so common as not to be significant. In the *parodos* of the *OT*, for instance, Athena and Pheme, the “Voice” of Zeus, are both called “immortal,” ἄμβροτε ... ἄμβροτ’ (158–159). Dawe has claimed that “to modern taste” it might appear “inexcusable” to use the word twice in such proximity, but that this kind of echo is common in the lyrics of Sophokles.⁶⁵ A number of scholars have argued that the Greeks were not sensitive to such repetitions. On the other hand, it is nowadays more generally held that “recurrence of imagery” is simply the way meaning is created in poetry; and recent research has shown that such repetitions were indeed noticed and considered significant in

⁶³ As rendered by Campbell, *Sophocles* 472.

⁶⁴ Griffith, *Sophocles* 154.

⁶⁵ R. D. Dawe, *Oedipus Rex* (Cambridge 1982) 107.

antiquity.⁶⁶ Furthermore, it has been persuasively argued that repetitions can have different functions in a text, such as referring to a religious context or emphasising the pathetic character of a passage.⁶⁷ So a reasonable position would be that repetitions and echoes *can* have such a meaning depending on the context. And comparison between the *parodos* of the *Antigone* and the *parodoi* which are most relevant in this context could strengthen our case. In the *OT*, the *parodos* of which resembles the one discussed here more than any other in the extant work of Sophokles, there is only one such echo apart from ἄμβροτε; hence there is much less of a pervasive pattern.⁶⁸ Likewise, in Aischylos' *Seven*, the other obvious point of comparison, the repetition of words related to κτύπος (four times) could be claimed to create an atmosphere of violence and chaos. However, they do not in themselves convey an idea of ambiguity, for they seem to be used only in the context of the enemies of Thebes.⁶⁹ These repetitions are thus neither as pervasive as in the *Antigone*, nor do they systematically ascribe attributes of friendly gods to the enemies. If this kind of repetition were present everywhere, it would be less likely that it would convey ambiguity. At the very least, then, the repetitions and corresponding imagery in the *parodos* of the *Antigone* are not part of a routine repertoire that always remains the same.

So in the choral song that has been the object of this paper,

⁶⁶ P. E. Pickering, "Did the Greek Ear Detect 'Careless' Verbal Repetitions?" *CQ* 53 (2003) 490–499, at 499; cf. R. F. Goheen, *The Imagery of Sophocles' Antigone: A Study of Poetic Language and Structure* (Princeton 1951) 9.

⁶⁷ P. E. Easterling, "Repetition in Sophocles," *Hermes* 101 (1973) 14–34. Cf. also G. Avezzi, "Per una ricerca sull' uso di ripetizioni nei tragici," *BIFG* 1 (1974) 54–69, at 65.

⁶⁸ The chorus invoke "Voice" (φάτι, Φάμα, 151, 158), "offspring of golden Hope" (χρυσέας τέκνον Ἐλπίδος, 157); Pytho is πολυχρύσου (151); Athena is χρυσέα (187), Apollo's bowstrings are χρυσοστρόφων (203), and Dionysos is χρυσομίτραν (209). Dawe holds that "'golden' is applied without profound thought" in Sophokles (*Oedipus Rex* 107). So this repetition *might* be a case in which it has no particular significance. More importantly for our argument, no ambiguity is suggested in this passage in the *OT*, for there are not only just two such reiterated word stems, but they are not systematically applied to the enemy *and* the invoked deity.

⁶⁹ Aesch. *Sept.* 83, 85, 100, 103.

we find a very special kind of double-sidedness: its imagery is pervasive and ambiguous. The qualities of the gods and the Thebans reappear in a perverse fashion on the side of the enemies. The celebration of victory over those attacking the city is by the force of its own images transformed into an ominous and ambiguous allusion to destructive and relentless mutual violence and guilt. A menacing mouth mirrors another mouth, fire mirrors fire, storms mirror storms, enmity mirrors enmity. The attributes of Zeus and the gods are on both sides. Dionysiac rage is destructive, violent, and everywhere.⁷⁰

April, 2008

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⁷⁰ The author would like to thank Sara Danius, Hans Joas, Ove Strid, and Erik Wallrup for valuable comments on early versions of this paper, the former three during an energising colloquium at the Swedish Collegium of Advanced Studies, SCAS, in Uppsala. Perhaps even more importantly, several anonymous referees have generously shared their expertise and constructive advice. Work on this paper was begun when the author was a visiting scholar at the New School for Social Research, New York, and mostly finished during a research period at the Institut für Sozialwissenschaften, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. These productive periods were made possible by generous grants from the Swedish Foundation for Internationalisation in Research and Higher Education (STINT), and the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, respectively. The author wishes to express gratitude to those institutions.