

# Curse and Dream in Aeschylus' *Septem*

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FOR A DECADE now all those who have studied Aeschylus' *Septem* have worked, in larger or smaller degree, under the influence of Kurt von Fritz. In a chapter of his *Antike und moderne Tragödie*,<sup>1</sup> he reviewed the literature of the play, praising Patzer's announcement that it was a tragedy of blindness,<sup>2</sup> dismissing Wolff's early Theban gate assignments as "eine typische Philologeninterpretation,"<sup>3</sup> and presumably destroying forever the old notion that Eteocles' death was a form of sacrifice. According to von Fritz, Eteocles had no expectation of saving his city, and his action in going to meet his brother was a flawed one, chosen by the poet as an example of a fated crime that was dictated to the principal by the workings of his own character. The uncomprehended Curse was taken over from Patzer,<sup>4</sup> and Solmsen's earlier emphasis upon the force of the Fury was welcomed,<sup>5</sup> but von Fritz himself was chiefly interested in the necessities that he found to be at work within the ethos of Eteocles.

There seems to be a general agreement now that *Septem* is, just as Kitto long ago said it was,<sup>6</sup> the first tragedy of character, and recent critics have for the most part concerned themselves with the *hamartia* of the king. Eteocles has been accused of discourtesy and impiety, of cynicism and self-seeking ambition, and lately slurs have even been cast upon his military ability.<sup>7</sup> The second episode is no longer said to

<sup>1</sup> *Antike und moderne Tragödie* (Berlin 1962) 193–226.

<sup>2</sup> H. Patzer, "Die dramatische Handlung der *Sieben*," *HSCP* 63 (1958) 97ff.

<sup>3</sup> Von Fritz, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 205, in reference to E. Wolff, "Die Entscheidung des Eteokles in den *Sieben*," *HSCP* 63 (1958) 89ff.

<sup>4</sup> Patzer, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 213.

<sup>5</sup> F. Solmsen, "The Erinyes in Aeschylus' *Septem*," *TAPA* 68 (1937) 197ff.

<sup>6</sup> H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (London 1939) 44: "tragedy of character and of a single character"; cf. 52: "our first tragedy of character" . . . Eteocles "the first Man of the European stage."

<sup>7</sup> L. Golden, "The Character of Eteocles and the Meaning of the *Septem*," *CP* 59 (1964) 79ff, reports a cynical and impious man who is power-mad and driven by an inner blood lust; much in the same vein is A. J. Podlecki, "The Character of Eteocles in Aeschylus' *Septem*," *TAPA* 95 (1964) 283ff, who finds "petulance and acidity" in the king's treatment of the chorus. H. D. Cameron, *Studies in the Seven Against Thebes* (The Hague 1971), asserts that Eteocles is at fault for abandoning his proper post on the acropolis for a position at one

show a man acquiescing in his fate, or even building the machine of his own destruction, but rather it is described as displaying the fated choice of an abominable crime. Yet in spite of an almost universal determination to view the play as a tragedy of divine punishment levelled against a hero whose character has brought him to destruction, there is still no effective agreement as to just what sort of character Aeschylus has given his hero, or exactly how he has described that hero's central action, his resolved departure towards his brother's gate. What Eteocles knows and what he intends, at this crucial moment, is still a subject of dispute among readers of the play.<sup>8</sup>

Dissension in the ranks must not, however, be allowed to jeopardize the ground that has been gained. It was the great achievement of von Fritz that he rescued *Septem* from the negative criticism that had so largely prevailed. Wilamowitz's learned remarks about the double substance of the play, and his unsympathetic judgements upon the irreconcilability of the "Zweistoffen," had threatened to become dogma, so that it was a commonplace to say that the tragedy fell into two pieces and showed inconsistency throughout.<sup>9</sup> Von Fritz insisted against this view that Eteocles was presented as a single, comprehensible creature, the same in the beginning as in the end, and he insisted likewise that the chorus was everywhere equal to itself and to the situation—that the play was in fact a success and not an un-gainly failure, as so many had so easily claimed.

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of the gates (35), and he thinks that the king is "excitable in a crisis and tends to forget himself" (33).

<sup>8</sup> Paul Mazon, for example, assumed that Eteocles knew from the start of the tragedy that he had to commit a crime and to die on this day (*Eschyle I* [Paris 1920] 107), whereas Patzer argued that he knew neither of these things when he left the stage at the end of the second episode (*op.cit.* [*supra* n.2] 110–11), though he hoped to kill his brother. Max Pohlenz, *Die griechische Tragödie* (Leipzig and Berlin 1930) 88, reported an Eteocles who knew he could not survive a conflict with his brother, whereas E. Howald, *Die griechische Tragödie* (Munich 1930), wrote: "Eteokles hofft den Bruder zu besiegen" (71). O. Regenbogen, "Bemerkungen zu den *Sieben des Aischylos*," *Hermes* 68 (1933) 63ff, would have Eteocles move towards the Seventh Gate almost as an automaton, in unconscious obedience to the Curse, whereas B. Snell, *Aischylos und das Handlung im Drama* (*Philologus* Supplbd. 20.1 [Leipzig 1928]), believes that the king sees what destiny demands, freely decides to let it rule him and so chooses to die "um die Stadt zu retten" (85). In contrast to this intellectual hero is that of W. Porzig (*Aischylos* [Leipzig 1926]) and Solmsen (*op.cit.* [*supra* n.5]), a man stricken by an *atē* or an *erinyis* in the form of a criminal blood-lust that speaks from within himself.

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, this judgement has recently been disinterred by Cameron, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.7) 96ff.

Von Fritz approached *Septem* with admiration, and he analyzed certain of its aspects with a wise enthusiasm, but even so he and his followers may have been wholly in error as to the true subject of this play. For him, this was the tragedy of Eteocles' flawed decision; but it can be argued that the shape of the plot, the manipulation of the poetry and the construction of each scene all serve to describe, explain and evaluate, not the decision that put Eteocles at the Seventh Gate, but the event that occurred, once he was there. The concentration upon the central death is like that of *Agamemnon*, but a moment's reflection will show how unlike the two tragedies are. In *Agamemnon* we are asked to find a personal as well as a cosmic justice in the killing of the king, a killing that is made as ugly as possible. There the mocking display of the king's body is an insult to which the spectator is reconciled because he knows the degree to which the man himself had brought the ancestral Fury into Clytemnestra's flesh. And meanwhile the external effects of the death are shown as extensions of its internal, punitive quality, for the city goes from an appearance of salvation and legitimacy to a certainty of usurpation and despotic rule.

The instruction of *Septem*, as it is reflected in the whole shape of the play, is clearly opposite to this. Here the all-embracing action is one of salvation, for the enemy so noisily present at the beginning is gone at the play's end. Indeed the experience of Thebes is exactly opposite to that of Mycenae ('Argos'), for in the course of this tragedy the city goes from danger to security. And here the brute physical infliction of death upon the central figure is never dwelt upon, as it is by the killer herself in *Agamemnon*; no hideous images of gushing blood and impious elation are forced upon the spectator's imagination, nor is he made to listen as the fallen principal is treated with contempt. The dead of the Theban play die in a single dignified line (*ἄνδρες τεθνᾶσιν ἐκ χερῶν ἀυτοκτόνων* 805; cf. 820–21) and then are brought decently on stage for praise and lamentation by the women of the city. *Agamemnon*'s corpse will be maimed and hustled to its grave, but the bodies of Polyneices and Eteocles are bound, at the close of this play (whenever that close is thought to come), for the public solemnities of the funeral pyre and for the privacy of the paternal tomb.

*Agamemnon*'s shameful and inauspicious death is made comprehensible through his own crimes, as well as through those of his father, and in the agent of his death the separate strains of his personal responsibility and his inherited destiny mix. Clytemnestra is mother

to Iphigeneia, as well as being host to an Erinys, a dramatically embodied human gloss upon the causes of the tragedy, but in *Septem* no such figure appears. The agent of death here is literally the victim himself, as he acts with his brother to bring about their cooperative deed of familial self-destruction (813). No human figure appears to embody wrongs done by the principal; there is no avenger and no punishing divinity, only the king, who works his own destruction, and the looming Curse which somehow tells him what to do. It is this Curse that occupies the final choral parts of the play, that long lament in which the women explain to themselves the killings at the Seventh Gate. These rescued Thebans do not sing of the substance of Eteocles' quarrel with Polyneices, nor of his brutality or his gentleness as a ruler. They do not question now his decision to act as he did, nor do they discuss his piety or impiety in dealing with the gods.<sup>10</sup> We learn nothing of his treatment of his father, nothing of the sources of the paternal anger, for the Curse of Oedipus has lost its ties with ordinary life and become a self-defining supernatural force. Eteocles is presented as defender of the fatherland, and the chorus finds no act of new hybris to be charged against him. There is no richly described Aulis here, no boasted sacrilege at Troy, and no captive priestess-concubine to illumine Eteocles' own responsibility in his bloody fate. Instead there are only the old man's angry words, dwelt on again and again. Like the lion cub, they have been long in the house, have seemed almost familiar and tame, but suddenly on this day they have shown the savage nature of their parentage, for they are the dynamic force in this tragedy. Perhaps the statement suggested above—that the true subject of *Septem* is the death of Eteocles—should be made in an amended form, for it is the death, and the Curse that caused it, that shape the gesture, the poetry and the spectacle of this tragedy.

Von Fritz read the central scene as the portrait of a man deciding. Ostensibly he was deciding on the placement of his captains, ultimately upon the placement of himself, and so upon the duel with his brother. In this reading the king chose his fate without knowing what it was, pushed by his own character towards a destined, criminal, self-punishing act. The scene cannot possibly be read this way, how-

<sup>10</sup> The ἀρεβελί of 831 attaches to Polyneices, not to both. When the chorus is using every argument it can find to try to dissuade Eteocles, it speaks only of the inevitable practical (ritual) problems of miasma; cf. 738–39. Line references in Aeschylus are made to the edition of Denys Page (Oxford 1972).

ever, if the overt decisions—the assignments made to each gate—are not a part of its mechanical action but were taken before the episode began. That they were taken earlier, before the scout had returned, was the argument of Erwin Wolff, and it is perspicacious enough not to be set aside with mere name-calling.<sup>11</sup> Wolff's observation was not tediously philological but rather sensibly dramaturgical, for it is axiomatic that a character who leaves the stage saying, "I go to do a specified thing," returns with that thing done, unless the audience is expressly instructed to the contrary. Eteocles goes off at 282 saying, "I go to post six men, myself the seventh one, who shall confront the enemy at the seven breaches of our walls" (282–84). When he returns, just as the second episode begins, he comes uncalled, to the surprise of the chorus (372), so that we know that he has not been interrupted but has returned because he was ready to do so. He comes, in other words, after having seen or left word for each of the other six as to the post he will command.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> There are two future verbs of posting; the first (408) comes in answer to the scout's future at 395, where that speaker was ignorant of the assignments. The second (621) comes after the suggestion that plans might be changed and the king might decide not to waste a man at Amphiarus' gate. The sense is: "All the same I shall post Lasthenes against him, just as I had decided to do." Of the perfect at 473, von Fritz supposed (after Fraenkel) that Eteocles hesitated: "I am minded to send . . . who shall it be . . .?" Then he presumably broke out with conviction: "But indeed, the right man is already found (by my mind, which is in the act of choosing)!" It must be noted, however, that Fraenkel himself was not quite satisfied with this solution, and was tempted to remove the first of these lines. No wonder, since it refers to a specific man who is already in the king's mind and who can be referred to as *τόνδε* (472). The comparison with *Eum.* 892 is beguiling but not decisive in this context; in the case of the other perfect, the *τέτακται* of 448, it is wholly irrelevant, since there can be no question of an exclamation in that line.

<sup>12</sup> Von Fritz, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 201, admitted that the natural supposition of the audience, after Eteocles' departure, would be that the king was at work posting the Theban captains. He assumed, however, that the physical assumption of a post would be simultaneous with the receipt of command, and that Eteocles' own reappearance would therefore abrogate the spectators' expectation. Eteocles after all had only chosen a pool of six names (but for this, why absent himself at all?), to whom specific commands were yet to be given (though the play offers no opportunity for any further word to be conveyed from the king to these men). Albin Lesky, "Eteokles in den Sieben gegen Theben," *WS* 74 (1961) 5–17, tried to mitigate the force of Wolff's arguments with the suggestion of a half-finished task, supposing that Eteocles returned incontinently to the acropolis with three gates still unassigned. The resulting confusion in the second episode he labelled artful ambiguity on the poet's part, an effect created so that the audience might participate in the 'Helldunkel' of a mixture of freedom and fate (9). Cameron, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.7) 39ff, follows this suggestion, which had been made earlier by Pohlenz, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8) 85, and which seems to have originated with Wecklein; see E. Fraenkel, "Die sieben Redepaare im Thebaner drama des Aeschylus," *SBMünchen* 1957 Heft 3 p.6, n.11 = *Kleine Beiträge* I (Rome 1964) 276 n.4.

Wolff's timing of the gate assignments at last allows a functional reading of the first episode, for we understand now that it is the women, with their ill-omened fear and their obstinate vision of defeat, who have set the plot in motion. They push Eteocles into decisions that are made early and without full information, causing him to post the Thebans and himself according to a half-blind chance (note his later phrase at 459).<sup>13</sup> The king is thus deprived of any significant choice in his defensive strategy since he is forced to act not against his true enemy, the besieging army, but against panic, the unexpected threat he finds within his walls.

Even more important is the change wrought in the second episode by a proper understanding of the naming of the Theban captains to their gates. Recognition, not decision, turns out to be the achievement of this scene, one that reaches its climax when Eteocles cries out—"Now is my father's Curse contriving its completion!" (642). He finds the Curse behind the Seventh Gate, and hears it issue a new command to him, but this is a long postponed event. The poet built a monumental scene as a preface to it, and this we must consider carefully if we are to comprehend the final action of the king.

The central episode is technically a messenger scene, its brute content being the return of the scout with his fuller report. He enters from the field as Eteocles comes from the walls, and so the two men meet, each in possession of information that mirrors the other's disclosures. One actor carries a list of Argive names, the other a list of Thebans, each prepared in advance, each keyed to the names of the gates, and the business of the scene is to coordinate the two. One can imagine this exchange of information occurring in a series of two-line speeches that would move with the rapidity of, say, the choral self-interrogation during Agamemnon's death cries (*Agam.* 1346ff). A number of acceptable stage techniques could in fact be collected, each of which might get this prosopography quickly out of the way so that the actors could get on to the pith of the scene. It is however perfectly clear that for Aeschylus the balanced descriptions of the

<sup>13</sup> The women constituted a real danger; with their hands upon altars they forgot to call upon the gods and insistently summoned up instead the presence of the enemy. Kitto, following Verrall, sensed something of the dynamism of this scene; he believed that Eteocles began it intending not to stand in person at any of the gates, but then, in order to calm the women's fears, decided to join actively in the city's defense (*op.cit.* [*supra* n.6] 47).

captains was no mere preliminary, but was itself a part of the true action he had chosen to imitate with his tragedy.

Of course it has been suggested that this whole long scene was simply a sop tossed to the Athenian love of rhetoric, or that it was prolonged in order that the too-tame climax might be spiced with a little suspense.<sup>14</sup> If, however, we read looking for something larger than mere rhetoric or suspense, the first thing that becomes evident is that in the first six pairs of speeches the poet has set up a counterweight to the preceding choral ode. This present scene denies the validity of the women's just-expressed version of the city's coming fate; it proves the women's foolishness, and more than that, it proves the effectiveness of their royal adversary, the king who meant to act, that the city might survive.

As soon as their lord had gone to the walls, the women had given license, in the first ode, to their ill-timed terror.<sup>15</sup> With it as their muse they had prepared a vast canvas of disaster, singing of a visionary sack of Thebes such as John Martin might have shown—the enemy a bestial horde, the city a smoking hive (340–42) where slaughtered infants hung bleeding at the breast (348–50). Riches spilled from ruptured treasure-houses (357–62), and here and there, in shadow, livid acts of rape took place (363ff). It was a *guerre de Thèbes qui n'aura pas lieu*, but those who sang it were trained in the compelling art of pantomime, and so the spectator had been made almost to witness those factitious flames. As soon as the song is finished, however, the same audience is asked, in the succeeding scene, to look upon the fulfillment of an opposite fate for Thebes. Now a successful defense is imitated, and this time not in language alone, but in symbolic action as well. In this central episode six duels are fought by proxy between Argive attackers, represented by the scout, and Theban defenders, whose champion is their king. And six times the attack is repulsed as the victory goes to Eteocles.

The variations are nice, both in thrust and in parry, the whole like some exhibition match in a fencing school, for Eteocles is not without

<sup>14</sup> J. de Romilly, *La tragédie grecque* (Paris 1970) 59: "la lenteur même de la scène qui oppose deux à deux les chefs destinés à s'affronter fait attendre et pressentir avec une certitude de plus en plus sensible la décision qui s'opposera l'un à l'autre les deux fils d'Oedipe."

<sup>15</sup> Contrast the truth-bearing inspiration of fear that settles on the chorus of *Agamemnon* at 975ff.

wit in his performance. Images of fearfulness are voiced by the first contestant, then like the insults and threats of Homer's battlefields they are hurled back—capped, incorporated, matched, or turned aside with a joke, by the superior skill of the royal second speaker.<sup>16</sup> And while the successful Theban resistance is thus prefigured, it is also explained. The enemy is made to boast, its characteristic member being its tongue, while the Thebans are shown as scorning words for deeds, their hands their salient physical part.<sup>17</sup> This of course harmonizes well with the play's frequent figuring of the Argives as beasts filled with passion, the Thebans as men who know reason and skill.<sup>18</sup> The Argives are horsemen, the Thebans the crew of a ship; the Argives are uncontrolled floods, the Thebans masters of an irrigation system.<sup>19</sup> At the same time the invaders are painted with broad strokes in the traditional hues of impiety, and one of them is made to carry on his shield the image of Typhon, rebel against the gods.<sup>20</sup> The Thebans, on the other hand, are touched with rosy tints of patriotism, virtue and piety; they are courageous without the corruption of an ugly lust for battle. Eteocles' speeches, as he names his men, are never thoughtful, nor do they ever express that element of doubt that is usually thought necessary if decision is to be represented. They are instead like a series of small epinician odes, celebrations in advance of a list

<sup>16</sup> The image of the moon is returned, as night, in Eteocles' first speech; that of the torch is capped by that of the sun, in his second; that of the besieger is incorporated, with an almost Aristophanic joke (if Eteocles has a man on his shield then Megareus, in victory, will have two men on his) in the third; the image of Typhon is blocked by that of Zeus in the fourth speech; the image of the sphinx is simply ignored in the fifth, where the whole shield threat is reduced to mere frangible metal with the joke about its receiving a hammering.

<sup>17</sup> *βοά* 381, 392, 394, 468, 487, *cf.* 64, 84, 89; *κόμπος* 391, 404, 425, 436, 437, 500, 538, 551, summed up at 794; *ὑβρις* 406, 502; *γλώσσα* 439, 556; *στόμα* 441, 447 (*στόμαργος*), *cf.* 579 and 612 *θρασκευτόμος*. For the Thebans: *κόμπον ἐν χειροῖν ἔχων* 473, *cf.* 513; 554, where *χείρ* is in combination with *ἄκομπος*; 623. The emphasis upon the Theban *hand* is finally ironic in effect, since the doubly Theban hand of Eteocles-Polyneices, armed with Ares' iron, will kill the non-secular enemy of Thebes, the true internal enemy, the race of Laius; note refs. at 789, 805, 811, 931; and see *infra* p. 358.

<sup>18</sup> *δάκος* 558; *cf.* 53 and the women earlier at 291.

<sup>19</sup> On these two groups of images, see Cameron, *op.cit.* (*supra* n. 7) 55–84; for irrigation, especially 72.

<sup>20</sup> The question of the device seen on the shield of Eteocles is a tantalizing one. Helen Bacon, "The Shield of Eteocles," *Arion* 3 (1964) 27ff, has suggested the figure of an *erinyis*; if this were the case Eteocles would achieve visually what Orestes does verbally, with his *ἐκδρακοντωθεὶς δ' ἐγώ* (*Choeph.* 549): the formal identification of himself with the symbol of his destined act.



of victors, that are filled with praise and blame.<sup>21</sup> They are epic in tone, just as they should be, for this great episode is not the picture of a man deciding the preliminary details of a conflict—it is instead a portrait of the battle itself and of its end in Theban victory.

The women had sung of the fall of Thebes, but now two men mime the successful defense of the city, and so the poet gives us the sense that the disasters the women dreamed of have indeed come close, but are to be averted by the strong action of Eteocles and his fellow-warriors. The battle for the salvation of Thebes is symbolically fought and symbolically won in the first six encounters between the scout and the king, and the actual fulfillment of this portentous tableau is reported by the opening words of the messenger, when the next scene begins (797–99; note how *φερεγγύοις* here echoes Eteocles' use of the word at 449, and the scout's at 396). This man testifies to the Theban victory, but he also reports the special price that was paid for the city's escape, announcing that both its kings were killed before the enemy fell back. The Curse of Oedipus, he says, has brought the brothers to this common fate (819), and it is that Curse which becomes the ultimate subject of the central episode which we have been analyzing.

When four-fifths of its length has been traversed, the great scene between the scout and the king takes a sudden turn. There has been a patterned flow and ebb, as each enemy warlord was brought forward and lauded, then forced to retire under the superior praise of his Theban foe. Now, however, this fixed and steady rhythm is sharply broken, in the middle of the seventh exchange. The scout has named Polyneices, and has described him and his shield, just as he had the other Argive chiefs, and Eteocles should, in normal response,

<sup>21</sup> Eteocles has a regular formula for his counterattack which he varies only by shifting the weights, and once the positions of the component parts. The first element of this formula is essentially negative, but it is given a negative or a positive expression: "The enemy device is no cause for fear to us," or "Indeed it is a presage of evil for him." This entire element takes 10, 10, 0, 12 and 6 lines in the five speeches where a shield device is present. The second element is positive: "The Theban champion has superior qualities" (sometimes but not always expressed by shield device); this element takes 10, 4, 8, 5 and 7 lines in the first five speeches. Element one is wholly missing in the exceptionally short speech on Megareus (472–80); it follows element two in the fourth speech, on Hyperbius (501–20). In the sixth speech, the formula must be seriously altered because Amphiarus bore no device upon his shield; in this case element one becomes: "The enemy is no cause for fear because he does not truly belong to the enemy," with a more precise expression: "indeed, he probably will not fight." This is followed by the usual element two, praise of Lasthenus.

spurn the enemy and bring out his own, the fourteenth name, as the certain antidote to his brother's threats. Instead, at the opening of this last encomium, the king abandons his own six-times repeated precedent to utter an uncontrolled cry of dismay. The sudden flood of terror that breaks into the stately contest marks the crisis of the scene and of the tragedy, betraying, with its successful shock, the poetic reason for the rigid pomp of what has gone before. The *agon* has been transformed, to become a recognition scene, and something newly comprehended has destroyed the cool confidence of the king.

It is not a long-lost relative that Eteocles has found thus unexpectedly. The Argive attack has never belonged to anyone but Polyneices, and this war was never anything but a struggle between the two who claim the throne. Polyneices has been known to stand at the Seventh Gate ever since Amphiaraus was named, a hundred lines ago. No, this recognition is not one of crude identity; it is instead of the sort that Aristotle thought the best, one of situation. Like Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex*, Eteocles recognizes himself in a new rôle, but unlike Oedipus, he finds that the performance is still ahead of him. What is it that he has discovered? In appearance the problem is simple, for Eteocles tells us what form it was that loomed behind the person of his brother, when the scout's words opened that figurative ultimate gate. It was the demanding demon of his father's Curse, and it drew from him a triple cry (653-55):

O maddened and reviled by gods,  
O much-wept race of Oedipus,  
oh me, my father's curses now demand  
their satisfaction!

It is the Curse, then, that causes Eteocles' sudden reversal of mood, but yet the case is not as simple as it seems. Why has the Curse threatened him so strongly just now? Has he, like the Heracles of *Trachiniae*, only in this moment realized that this was the day in which a portent meant to work? No; that cannot be, for he has already expressed the idea that the present siege somehow belongs to his father's Curse. The paternal words were first referred to at the prologue's end, when the scout had finished his initial report. Having been told how the enemy was assigning its captains, Eteocles had responded then with a royal prayer (69-71, 76):

O Zeus and Earth and city-guarding gods  
 and Curse, my father's strong Erinys,  
 do not, I pray, uproot this city, destroy it  
 and give it to the enemy . . .

. . . . .

Rather, lend us aid!

The Curse here is one of several daimonic factors to be reckoned with when the ruler thinks of the success or failure of his defensive strategy. It appears to the king as an ambivalent force, a thing particularly Theban and extremely powerful, and most important, one that can be addressed with the plea, *γένεσθε δ' ἀλήκη* (76). Like a hero's buried corpse—like the mystic remains of Oedipus himself, in *Oedipus Coloneus*—it is a power that might mysteriously aid either those who attack or those who resist, in this battle over Thebes.

That the king, early in the day, thinks of the Curse as a public and possibly even a beneficial thing, not a private and inescapably destructive bane, is made clear in another prayer which he offers as an example to the fearful chorus. In it he makes a promise that binds his own future, a future which he sees as one of potential life and power when the war is done. These are his solemn words (271–78): “To the guardian gods, watchers over field and market place, and to Dirce's springs and Ismene's waters I say this: if we succeed and the city be saved . . .” [here several corrupt lines promising sacrifice and culminating] “. . . I will crown your pure shrines with spoils our spears have won!”<sup>22</sup> Apparently the Curse held the same mixture of promise and threat for Polyneices' ear as well, for we learn that he called in like manner upon the gods of kinship and fatherland (639–40) to act as overseers of the fulfillment of his desire, which was either to kill his brother (though at the cost of his own life), or to send him into exile while he himself ruled Thebes. Thus neither brother understood the Curse as necessarily fixing his own death, much less as calling for a double fratricide.

After the early prayer, the Curse is not directly referred to again until the moment in the second episode when the king undergoes

<sup>22</sup> Denys Page now daggers everything from 275 to 278a; Regenbogen, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8) limits the corruption to 277 and 278a, finding 278 wholly sound. One thing seems certain, however, and that is that there is no reason to doubt the *κρέψω* that begins 278a; Wilamowitz, in *Aischylos Interpretationen* (Berlin 1914) 107, wrote of Eteocles' future expectation: “Er wird das doch selbst den Göttern versprechen.” Compare Eteocles' double expectation at the opening of the play (4–8).

his attack of despair and cries out in recognition of a new state of things. This time he seems almost to have heard a new curse, for he does not call now to the Erinyes as a possible protector for Thebes; he calls instead to his own race, as certainly damned by that same paternal Fury. The Curse that seemed to direct itself, favorably or unfavorably, against the whole city, is seen now to search out only one family and to have nothing but evil to give. The race of Laius is a ship that runs down-wind direct to Hades' stream (691); the gods wish only to see its last members destroyed, and these are doomed to death and cannot procrastinate (703–04); the common spilling of fraternal blood is the evil gift the gods have given them (719). Eteocles stays long enough to express this new understanding of his accursed fate, then he departs for the last time, a sharpened instrument which cannot now be dulled (715), the tool of a divine hatred that has settled on his house. His father's implacable Curse will find its profit in the blow each brother will deal out, just before his own succeeding death (695–97).<sup>23</sup>

From the two prayers, and from the entire first section of the play, we must conclude that the Curse did not initially seem to Eteocles to demand his own personal destruction. He firmly sent the citizens to the walls; he heard the scout's first news with pious fortitude; he urged upon the women his own temperate and positive resignation and steadily denigrated the threat of each enemy captain, engulfing it in praise of his own. Six times over he asserted his expectation of victory, but now he has no thought left for that sure public success, because an entirely

<sup>23</sup> As indicated, *supra* n.8, there are some critics who believe that Eteocles, even at this point, expects to survive the duel with his brother. They are forced to read expressions like the *μόρος* at 704 (*cf.* 696) as meaning not death but a more generalized disaster, and they are forced to gloss over the dual at 681 (*ἀνδρῶν δ' ὀμαίμων*), as well as the plural at 683 and the reference to the 'whole race of Laius' at 691. In fact, all of these phrases suppose the death of both princes, and since this is the case, it may be that the first person plurals at 702–04 are genuinely plural, referring to both of the sons of Oedipus. At any rate, these lines clearly express Eteocles' own expectation of death, just as 715 and 718–19 express his intention to kill Polyneices. These facts are so plain that a very ingenious argument has had to be mounted against them. It has been asserted, though without any supporting testimony, that the miasma of kindred blood would disappear (rather than being reduplicated) if two kinsmen simultaneously slaughtered each other. Then it is argued that, since the chorus and Eteocles both recognize the possibility of miasma, it must follow that they do not recognize the possibility of mutual slaughter. Nothing inside or outside the play strengthens this view of miasma; it was first suggested by Sidgwick in his note at 734, then picked up by Howald, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8) 72, expanded by Patzer, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 110–11, and repeated by Cameron, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.7) 47.

new aspect of his private fate has been revealed to him. He has seen the Curse in a new form and has recognized in his father's long-known words a necessary consequence that was hidden before, a thing that makes his own fate more specific and more dreadful than it had seemed to be.<sup>24</sup> A moment of new comprehension and inner reversal is strongly marked (653–55) by his triple cry ᾠ . . . ᾠ . . . ᾠμοι, and his new sense of destiny is expressed in his final words of soldierly submission (719): “From evils that the gods give out there can be no retreat!” This is very different from that previous sanguine advice (202–03): “Pray that the walls may hold, for that's to the gods' advantage!”

It looks as if the old riddle-master had chosen to damn his son by means of an enigma, for Oedipus' remembered words have changed their meaning in the course of half a day. A patent riddle, however, could not have borne the ominous weight that these words had to carry, a truth well demonstrated by Tucker's mild guess at the old king's phrase. He supposed that the father's curse was simply *πικρὸς ἔσται χρηματοδαίτης ξένος πόντιος πυριγενής*,<sup>25</sup> which would hardly

<sup>24</sup> Some have suggested that Eteocles, who once knew and understood the Curse perfectly, had simply forgotten its terms, and only now recalls them; see K. Reinhardt, *Aischylos als Regisseur und Theologe* (Bern 1949) 123: “Er wird jetzt etwas gewahr, was er vorher nicht gewusst oder vergessen hatte; dass er nicht umsonst der Sohn des Oedipus ist.” Compare M. Croiset, *Eschyle* (Paris 1928) 118: “rien en effet ne convient mieux aux puissances enveloppées de mystère que de se faire ainsi oublier, après une apparition passagère, pour sortir ensuite de l'ombre brusquement quand l'heure est venue.”

<sup>25</sup> Cameron, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.7) 25, at least supposes a slightly more provocative form when he suggests, “Oedipus said that the two brothers would be unable to agree upon a division of the inheritance and would be obliged to submit the question to a Chalybian stranger from over the sea, who had sprung from fire. This last phrase would make the resolution of the quarrel seem impossible.” Just how this would come in pithy rage, and with the force of a curse, from the paternal mouth he does not try to explain. Of course nothing in *Septem* betrays the occasion of the Curse, and it remains a possibility that Aeschylus had his Oedipus blind himself and curse his children on the same day. This would make no difference in the form of the Curse, but it would avoid the epic question of what the brothers did to deserve their father's anger. In this case, the *τροφή* of 786 will refer, not to the children's ungrateful care of their parent, but to Oedipus' incestuous rearing of his children; this is the suggestion of G. R. Manton, “The Second Stasimon of the *Seven against Thebes*,” *BICS* 8 (1961) 82. In the *Thebaid*, Oedipus once prayed to the king of the gods and to the other immortals that his two sons should descend to Hades, each at the hands of the other (fr.3 Bethe=Schol. *ad Soph. OC* 1375), again that they should not divide his property in a friendly way but should ever be at war (fr.2 Bethe=Athen. 11 465E). In *OC* Oedipus plainly says that Polyneices and Eteocles must each die stained with the other's blood (1373–74), then makes the curse proper in these words: *μήτε γῆς ἐμφυλίου | δόρει κρᾶτῆσαι μήτε νοστήσαι ποτε | τὸ κοῖλον Ἄργος, ἀλλὰ κυγενεῖ χερὶ | θανεῖν κτανεῖν θ' ὑφ' οὐπερ*

scare a mouse, or stump a child. The trick of calling an imported metal a 'foreign visitor' was a piece of countrified banality<sup>26</sup> like the Sphinx's joke, and Aeschylus knew as well as Sophocles did that this sort of thing could not be dwelt upon in tragedy. A true riddle properly belonged to folk-tale or satyr-play; it would be useless in the strong evocation of fear, for once broken it would lose all its power, while its earlier difficulty would go to enhance the seeming strength of the man who broke it. Indeed, the essential assertion of the riddle-tale was that the paratragic attribute of cunning could often save a man.<sup>27</sup>

The words of Oedipus, then, had to be solemn and filled with dread, misleading but not openly provocative, with their ugliest meaning lying hidden beneath a surface of ugliness. We can see the aesthetic reasons for such opacity, but we can also see that Aeschylus, with this Protean curse, posed some serious problems for himself as the maker of a plot. In the central scene, at the crucial moment of his play, he had to show his principal solving a riddle that never had been asked, and finding out a secret that no one had thought to look for. And unless we are to take refuge in Lesky's 'Helldunkel' we ought to be able to formulate the poet's implicit explanation of his hero's reversal from blindness into knowledge. Whether or not he satisfies us, the poet will have satisfied himself by providing some sort of causation for this change, since it is the pivot of his tragedy.

A few hours have revealed a wholly new mask for the family Erinys, but how has the changed aspect of the *daimon* been shown to the king? A search through Eteocles' words in the brief post-recognition scene turns up one odd item that looks like an initial clue to this mystery, a phrase stamped as significant by its gratuitousness. The chorus would dissuade Eteocles from facing his brother, for the women at this point assume that what Eteocles has just heard as the

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ἐξελήσασθαι (1385–88). In Euripides' *Phoenissae* the curse was *θηκτῶ* *αιδῆρω* *δῶμα* *διαλαχεῖν* *τόδε* (68).

<sup>26</sup> Compare Hdt. 1.28; Xen. *Anab.* 5.5.1; Aesch. *Pers.* 133; Soph. *Trach.* 1260; Eur. *Alc.* 980; *Heracl.* 161; etc.

<sup>27</sup> Even in the solemn form of prophecy, the riddle is too brittle for tragedy; when the story of Croesus is told, the response is not pity and terror, but a superior sense of self-congratulation: What a fool he was not to have understood (as I so easily do) what Apollo meant! Failure to solve a riddle does not measure up as a serious tragic error, and meanwhile success with a solution represents salvation, or the way to material rewards, in a multitude of fairy tales built on the Sisyphian gaming-with-the-devil motif.

imperative of the Curse is actually only the impulse of his private rage. They suggest that his fury against his brother may abate in time, though now it boils, referring to his temper with the word *δαίμων* (705). Seizing on this notion, Eteocles responds bitterly (709) but with the same wit that characterized him as he capped each Argive boast: “Oh yes (a daimon boils), for the Curse of Oedipus has reached a rolling boil!” And then, apparently referring to a thing that is immediately relevant and quite well-known, he adds (710–11): “And all too true those visions of nocturnal fantasy—the mediator who divides my father’s property!”<sup>28</sup> He has discovered that the horror of the present moment satisfies not only the Curse, but also some notorious Dream, though this it has done in an unexpected way. The bitter words ‘all too true’ make it clear that the apparent promise of the Dream had been such that one hoped for its truth—a happy one in other words—and that the Dream, like the Curse, has just now taken on a new and sinister meaning for Eteocles.<sup>29</sup>

The addition of a two-faced Dream to a two-faced Curse, neither of them explicitly described or paraphrased, may not seem to be an exercise in clarification, but I believe that Aeschylus put both into his tale with a clear dramaturgical purpose. The Dream is never mentioned, as such, again, but its mediator reappears as soon as the king is gone and the chorus has begun its retrospective search for the causes of the brothers’ duel. The Curse is likewise left unclear; it is never

<sup>28</sup> Regenbogen, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8) 65, assumed that the chorus meant to refer to the daimon-curse here. Tucker made the *ἐξέζεεν* transitive, rendering 709 as “Aye, set aboil by Oedipus and his curses,” with Eteocles’ own fury as the object of the verb. In his note, Tucker assumed that the dream was a recurring one that came to Eteocles, and so he translated further: “all too true are the visions that haunt my dreams.” It would seem, however, that the plurals *ὄψεις* and *φαντάσματα* are like the plural *κατεύγματα* and the plural *δατήριοι* below which conforms: all august plurals of grandeur rather than indications of numerical multiplicity. Thus Rose’s comment *ad loc.*: “*δατήριοι* does not oblige us to suppose that there were several dividers in the dream, but is plural because *ὄψεις* is plural.”

<sup>29</sup> Many critics have ignored the Dream altogether; thus Kitto, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.6) 50–51, when he finds later references to the Chalybian stranger, explains him as the figment of an overheated choral imagination, “a strained note wonderfully expressive of strained minds” . . . “the imagery is felt so vividly that the stranger becomes almost a supernatural actor whom only the Chorus can see.” Having got this close, he failed to recognize the mediator as a supernatural actor whom the dreamer of the dream *did* see; he makes no mention at all of Eteocles’ words at 710–11. Most of those who have commented on these lines assume that the Dream merely repeated the overt content of the Curse and was thus wholly redundant; see, for example, Pohlenz, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8) 93: “Nicht nur trübe Ahnungen, auch nur zu wahre nächtliche Gesichte haben es ihm zur Gewissheit gemacht, dass Oidipus’ Fluch buchstäblich in Erfüllung gehen muss.”

repeated *verbatim*, and yet it becomes the chief subject of the women's meditation. As they sing, the chorus members seem to reexperience Eteocles' double recognition, saluting the mediator as if at last they realize just who he is, and placing him always in the context of the Curse, though Eteocles has said he was a figure from the Dream (711). Certain of the women's words and phrases resound so frequently that they come to seem formulaic, yet it is plain that the chorus is not simply restating the Curse. The reechoing words come in mixed clusters, but they sort themselves conceptually into two parallel systems, one centering about the figure of the foreign mediator, the other upon the image of an iron-bearing hand. The first of these we know to represent the Dream, and the second is explicitly attached to the Curse, in the lines that describe it most succinctly (785–90, from Hermann's text):

Against his sons he hurled his curses,  
 angered at their care,  
 the curses of a bitter tongue,  
 that they should portion out  
 his property  
 with iron-bearing hand.

Following up this dichotomy, an investigation of all the references to the portents that were fulfilled by the princely deaths<sup>30</sup> show that *iron* is associated with a division (*διέλαχον* . . . *σιδήρω* 816; *διήλλαχθε* *ὀν* *σιδάρω* 884; cf. 769 and *μοιρ*- words at 906, 947) of possessions (*κτήματα* 790, 816, 907) that is usually made by a plural subject, done by hand (789; cf. 805, 811, 933) and achieved with violence *σιδηρόπληκτοι* . . . *σιδηρόπληκτοι* . . . (911–12). This division has bitterness (*πικρογλώσσους* *ἀράς* 787; *πικρὰς* *μοναρχίας* 882; cf. 954 *τὸν ὄξυν νόμον*, 910 *οὐδ' ἐπίχαρις*, and compare the *πικρὰς* . . . *ἀράς* at OC 951) as its chief characteristic, and it is made under the supervision of Ares (907; 945–46, where the poet puns on Ares and *ἀρά*). The *mediator*, on the other hand, is associated with a sharing of goods (*χρήματα* 729, 816, 944) that is imposed by a singular subject (*ξένος* . . . *ἐπινωμῆ* 727; *δατητάς* 945) who is a Scythian or Chalybian guest-friend (816, 927, 940). This second process is achieved by means of the lot (*κλήρους* 727, *διαπήλας* 731), and

<sup>30</sup> The extended substantive references are: 727–73, 785–91, 811–21 (in whatever order), 881–86, 895–99, 941–60. Other references to the Curse appear at 70, 655, 695, 709, 720–26, 832–34, 840–41, 868, 894. The concepts of iron, *λάχεις*, property, quarrels add: 902–10, 911–14, 931–40.



it has reconciliation as its final end, for the *ξείνος* is a *λυτήρ νεικέων* (941–42; cf. 935–37, where *ἔρις*, *νεικος* and *ἔχθος* are all controlled by this notion of the quarrel's dissolution).<sup>31</sup>

In their separate forms the two patterns overlap in the notion of apportionment and they overlap in their object, which is the royal property. They diverge strongly, however, in tone and imagery, and also in their ostensible result. It looks as if Aeschylus had found in the folklore of Oedipus a riddling curse, one built on the trick of designating the sword of fraternal strife as a Chalybian stranger. Liking the idea that the brothers might stand threatened by a curse they misconstrued, but disliking the excessive transparency of the old conundrum, he restored its secrecy by dividing its information between the Curse and an apparently contradictory Dream. In something of the same way, the cyclic *Thebaid* had divided Oedipus' ill wishes between two separate curses, one of which emphasized the hand (*χερὶν ὑπ' ἀλλήλων καταβήμεναι* "Aιδος εἴσω fr.3 Bethe), the other of which spoke of the way the quarrel would not be resolved as a *sharing* of the property (*οὐ οἱ πατρώϊ' ἐν ἡθείῃ φιλότητι δάσσαντ'* fr.2 Bethe).

Evidently the Aeschylean Oedipus had cursed his sons by saying something like, "May a bitter Ares guide you, as you portion out my property with iron-bearing hand!" His words plainly threatened a civil war that would be fought between the princes for the rule of Thebes. The Dream, however, had offered to its sleeper the phantasmagoric figure of a lawful mediator, one who would bring quarrels to an end with a drawing of lots. And this of course seemed to promise peace; it also seemed to bear out the idea that the burden of the Curse was war, so that not even the canniest listener would have searched for any further meaning to its words. Both portents had presumably been supplied by the preceding Oedipus tragedy, so that they were

<sup>31</sup> The idea of equality was evidently expressed, but whether in Curse or in Dream one cannot be certain; 940ff, however, would seem to indicate that it derived from the mediator of the Dream. Probably the actual *δατητής* of Attic law made an equal division of property, assigning shares to claimants by means of the lot; cf. Arist. *Ath.Pol.* 56.6; Harpocration, s.v. *δατεῖσθαι*, and for a discussion, see H. Levy, "Property Distribution by Lot in Greece," *TAPA* 57 (1956) 42–46. Wilamowitz, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.22) 79 n.1. even noted that in some public procedures turning upon the casting of lots, a Scythian slave would supervise the process. A link between the notion of equality and the function of the *δατητής* can be seen at Pind. *Nem.* 10.86: *πάντων δὲ νοεῖς ἀποδάσσεσθαι ἴσον*. The *ἐξ ἴσου* of OC 1374 may be a reflection of an *ἴσος* word in the Aeschylean Dream-Curse.

part of the dramatic expectation with which the poet had equipped his players and his audience, in preparation for the final play.<sup>32</sup> If we assume, then, that Eteocles was in possession both of the bitter Curse and of the sweeter Dream, we will be making the only possible test of these hypotheses. Without them the play was incoherent and the king false to his own character, but with them everything falls into place. The king's early calm and his subsequent despair are clearly motivated now, and we are in a position to discover at last just why the voice of the Curse sounded a new note for him, in the climax of the second episode.

The Curse had long been understood as making war inevitable between the sons of Oedipus, and so with the Argive attack it seemed that the paternal words were to be fulfilled. Eteocles supposed that the 'armed hand' and the 'bitter Ares' would now be experienced, he felt the danger to his people and his city, but he had not thought of a pressing personal doom. At the end of the day Thebes might be almost undamaged, for it was well fortified; and that the wall should stand was, as he told the chorus, a reasonable thing for gods to grant (216). If the enemy were repelled, then he would still be king, directing the rites of thanksgiving, and more than that, the Erinyes of his father might be forever gone, since the Curse would have found its fruition in the brothers' strife. Strategically the situation was far from desperate, and even if the attack should succeed, and he be banished according to his brother's threats, still the Dream contributed its softening promise. It seemed to demand that both brothers should equally survive; thus Eteocles might be an exile for a time, but in the end the ξένος would appear, and then the two would share. Of course, the Dream did inevitably offer a less pleasing alternative: that his own present rule might eventually have to be shared. That could be left to the future, however, for on this day Eteocles meant to live, to win, to keep his power if he could, until that visionary stranger did appear from Scythia.

<sup>32</sup> There is no indication of who dreamed the Dream, nor of how it was repeated and interpreted. The most natural assumption is that of the scholiasts, that it came to Eteocles, but this is not a necessary conclusion, and Manton, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.25) 79, has suggested that it came to Jocasta. Since the chorus is expected to know it, it must have been made public at some point in the *Oedipus*. Polyneices has perhaps heard of it but failed to believe much in it (*cf.* his attitude towards the curse in *OC*), for he shows a curious expectation of equality in the fraternal fates—either both shall live or both shall die—but he does not expect any process of division.

What happens in the central scene is the complete revision of these sanguine thoughts. Eteocles discovers that what he took to be a pair of separate causes for apprehension capped with hope are, in fact, a single cause, a cause for plain despair. He marks the moment of his fullest recognition, but he does not tell us the exact form in which his understanding came to him, since the poet did not wish to make of him a wily puzzle-breaker. Eteocles cannot stop to spell out what it was that broke the code and caused the mingled Curse and Dream to yield their single message to him; he can only listen and obey. The poet, however, did not mean for the uncanny to drive all reasonable causation from his play, and so he lightly marked the path Eteocles had followed to reach this final comprehension.

Eteocles' correct understanding of his negative fate, like the understanding of the king in *Oedipus Rex*, forms itself only gradually because it is constantly baffled by deceptive hopes, and finally it is so stifled by the horror of what the mind has grasped that it can be expressed only in desperate action. Like that more famous recognition, this one depends upon the joining together of two strands of information, for just as the shepherd and the Corinthian must meet in that play, so must Ares and the mediator—the angry Curse and the milder Dream—in this. The essential link between the two is given to Eteocles at the beginning of the tragedy, but this bridging concept has to work itself slowly into the mind of the king, for he has been blinded, like Oedipus, by the conviction that knowledge is already his.

The key concept, the first cause of Eteocles' recognition of the unity of Curse and Dream, comes 600 lines before that recognition, in the *lot* that assigns each Argive captain to his gate (55). This is the token that proves not just consanguinity but identity between the war god and the guest-friend, betraying the fact that they are not two but one. The idea of sortition by lot is established here, at its first introduction, with the greatest care and artistry; then it is slyly reiterated so that it forces itself imperceptibly upon the king. The melodramatic pre-dawn scene of the drawing of lots is extensively laid out and gorgeously described in the scout's first speech. Thirty lines (39–68) of consecutive narration are given over to it, their dread richness achieved in a vocabulary that echoes and prefigures both the Dream and the Curse of Oedipus. Thus hands (44) are dipped into an iron-rimmed shield that is filled with blood, and men likened to lions with Ares in their eyes (53), men of iron boldness (52), swear

their oaths by Ares, Enyo and Phobos (45; cf. the *Ἄρεως* below at 65, picked out for emphasis by its enjambment). The blood in the shield is then exchanged for lots in a helmet, and the men take the tokens which assign them each to a gate. The phrase that describes the actual process of sortition is thrice redundant in expression, as if the poet feared that the point of it might be missed, and it is constructed so that its first word expresses the central concept of the Dream, while its last is the key verb from old Oedipus' Curse. "I left them," says the scout, "casting lots, that each, by lot, might get his portion (of a gate-command)." And just in case anyone had missed the final word, *λαχών*, it is echoed with an off-rhyme at the end of the following line (55–56): *κληρουμένους δ' ἔλειπον, ὡς πάλω λαχών | ἕκαστος αὐτῶν πρὸς πύλαις ἄγοι λόχον.*

It is plain that this reported scene and its terminology are meant to make a deep impression, and this impression is not allowed to disappear. The frenzied women of the *parados* are yet enough in their senses to repeat the essential phrase about the enemy: that he has *portioned out the gates according to lot* (*πύλαις . . . προσίστανται πάλω λαχόντες* 126). In fact, the women give this process the fullest emphasis that choral poetry can produce, closing their first strophe with a long rhetorical and metrical period that ends with these words. In the pause that follows, before the antistrophe begins, the phrase *πάλω λαχόντες* will echo solemnly in the quiet dancing space.

Three times after this, in the central episode, the scout reverts to the same information. He reminds the king that the Argive chiefs have taken their places as the lot assigned them, introducing the whole sequence of his seven speeches with the words: "I would tell you, as one who knows it well, the situation of the enemy; how each has *taken his portion by lot* at the gates" (*ὡς τ' ἐν πύλαις ἕκαστος εἴληχεν πάλον* 376). His second reference is somewhat offhand (423): *Καπανεύς δ' ἐπ' Ἡλέκτραϊσι εἴληχεν πύλαις.* After this, however, he revives the magical moment when the lots leapt out of the upturned helmet, giving it an instant of tangible reality in three loaded lines (457–59): *καὶ μὴν τὸν ἐντεῦθεν λαχόντα πρὸς πύλαις | λέξω· τρίτῳ γὰρ Ἐτεόκλω τρίτος πάλος | ἐξ ὑπτίου πῆδησεν εὐχάλκου κράνουσ.*<sup>33</sup> Eteocles, meanwhile, offers proof that he is beginning to take the lesson of this

<sup>33</sup> Keeping 457, which Page deletes with H. Wolf, but which Groeneboom sensibly defends. It would seem that the poet was pleased by the similar sounds of *πάλος* and *πύλαις*, which so frequently sound in the same phrase, and it is possible that even the *ἀντίπαλον*

frequent repetition. When he asks for the name of the third Argive chieftain, he says, "Tell me of another who has got *his portion* at another of the gates" (λέγ' ἄλλον ἄλλαις ἐν πύλαις εἰληχότα 451).

All of this means that when the king is told the name that can in itself no longer shock him—when he hears that it is Polyneices who will stand outside the gate he will defend—the sharpest part of his knowledge is that his brother has been given this place *by the action of a lot*. Ares has brought Polyneices to Thebes, but the πάλος has placed him, giving him the Seventh Gate as his apportioned share. The iron-bearing hand of the Curse is thus discovered to be working by the means specified for the mediator of the Dream, and so Eteocles is forced to see that the ξένος and the god of war are one. And in spite of its attempts to dissuade, the chorus has responded to the same insinuations. It too understands that the Curse and Dream are one, mingling to demand the spilling of fraternal blood. As soon as Eteocles has gone, the women sing of the identity of the foreign dream-figure with the iron of the ancient Curse. "Yes, the stranger makes use of the lot," they say, explaining Eteocles' unspoken comprehension, "but he has proved a bitter mediator—savage-natured iron—and with his tokens of allotment he has portioned out shares of land as much as corpses need" (ξένος δὲ κλήρους ἐπινωμῆ | Χάλυβος Σκυθῶν ἄποικος, | κτεάνων χρηματοδαίτας | πικρός, ὠμόφρων κίδαρος, | χθόνα νοίειν διαπήλας | ὅπως αὖ καὶ φθιμένους ἐγκατέχειν 727–32).

A full conflation of Curse and Dream will soon be made when the chorus sings (906ff) of its princes: ἐμοιράσαντο δ' ὀξυκάρδιοι κτήμαθ' (as the Curse told us they would), ὤστ' ἴσον λαχεῖν (as in the Dream), διαλλακτῆρι δ' οὐκ ἀμεμφεία φίλοις (though the Dream seemed to promise that the mediator would be worthy of our praise), οὐδ' ἐπίχαρις Ἄρης (indeed he was bitter, just as the Curse had said!). The meshing of the two is once again expressed at 940ff, where the known equations, Ares=iron (*i.e.* strife), and ξένος=mediator (*i.e.* supposed peace), are reformulated as ξένος=iron, and Ares=mediator. The special emphasis here upon the word πικρός shows that the chorus is just now grasping the effectiveness of that word in the Curse of Oedipus. What they see is that it was not an ordinary Ares (simple civil war as all had thought), but an extraordinary one that the

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of the chorus at 417 was chosen for its punning effect. It is certain that Aeschylus puns on Ἄρης and ἀρά at 945; see Groeneboom's note *ad loc.*

old king had called upon to divide the Theban patrimony (941–44).<sup>34</sup>

πικρὸς λυτῆρ νεικέων ὁ πόντιος  
 ξεῖνος ἐκ πυρὸς κυθείς  
 θηκτὸς εἶδαρος, πικρὸς δ' ὁ χρημάτων  
 κακὸς δατητὰς, Ἄρης, ἄρὰν πατρώϊαν τιθεὶς ἀλαθῆ.

“Bitter” (as in the Curse) “was the healer of quarrels, that Pontic stranger” (that the Dream had shown) “who was tempered iron drawn from fire” (such as the Curse had spoken of); “bitter this bad distributor of property,” (dream-figure who has proved to be) “Ares, as he gave fulfillment to the father’s Curse.” Here the conceptual repetition between 946 and 886–87 establishes a last cosmic equation, the one that has ruled all: Ares=Erinys. Each has been the agent for imposing truth upon the Curse.

Ares and the mediator together produced the fraternal confrontation at the Seventh Gate, and if the lot was thus not a peaceable thing but an instrument of war, then it followed that the Dream’s resolution of the quarrel could only be like Heracles’ rest from his labors—a bitter euphemism for the peace of death. The sword that was to have divided the paternal property would slash instead through the brothers’ limbs (895). The promised equality, likewise, could only mean that each heir would be identically empowered through being portionless among living men (*ἀμοίρους* 733), though both would have the same ‘iron-struck’ portions (*σιδηρόπληκτοι . . . λαχαί* 911–14) in their father’s tomb. All this the chorus makes out in the revolutions of its song, but Eteocles had seen it first. He had interpreted the Dream correctly at last when he learned of his brother’s portion at the Seventh Gate, and he had heard then, for the first time, the true import of his father’s words. He knew that he would kill and be killed by an equal antagonist that the lot had placed for him; he knew that both would have their share of death, and he gave his new knowledge an appropriate expression: “the race of Laius, hated by Apollo, takes its portion in the wave of Cocytus” (*κῦμα Κωκυτοῦ λαχόν . . . γένος* 690–91).

Eteocles did not know, at this point, what the outcome of the Argive attack would be, any more than he had so known at dawn. He

<sup>34</sup> For the ominous weight that the word *πικρός* can bear, compare Alcaeus 42.3 L.–P., where it covers the whole genocidal war at Troy, and also Orestes’ extremely sinister usage at Soph. *El.* 1504.

knew only that because of his father's Curse, because they were the last of Laius' race, and because Apollo wished it, he and his brother had to die. To this necessity he gave his submission, not gladly—that would be impossible—but with full will and knowledge. So much the choral attempt to dissuade makes clear. The messenger makes the next point plain: that immediately after the two brothers have satisfied the Curse, the city of Thebes is saved. The supernatural threat has passed, the daimonic world is assuaged, and safety has come, just as it did to the Heraclids after Makaria's death, just as favorable winds came when Polyxena's or Iphigenia's blood had flowed. And so the chorus says in five simple words (960): *καὶ δυοῖν κρατήσας ἔληξε δαίμων*. A tragic action of sacrifice depends upon the shape of its plot, not upon the sentiments that its principal expresses, and that principal dies, not because of error, incomprehension, or a flaw in character, but because a death is demanded and he knowingly decides to let it be his. Fortunately for the variety of the genre, he is not required to be always as sententious as Menoeceus, or as certain of all the consequences as Alcestis; he need not know exactly what his death will buy, he knows only that it must be.

There is no priest and no altar here, but the *praxis* of *Septem* is nevertheless one of sacrifice. All the irreducible elements are present: the conscious, unblemished, self-destroying principal; the rejected suggestion that a substitute be found, or that the hero should abandon his resolve; the formal departure for the fateful spot; the lamentation for the victim, and finally, surrounding all, the public disaster and its swift removal. Ordinarily in such a drama the central character is directly summoned by the world beyond—a ghost makes its demands, a priest interprets portents that a god has sent (though Antigone obeys another sort of voice)—and ordinarily the reception of this summons provides a major scene in the tragedy.<sup>35</sup> And so it is in *Septem*, for what truly happens in the second episode is that the words of Oedipus, misconstrued until now, at last reach the ear of Eteocles and summon him to die. The Curse is the oracle here, the letter of the divine desire for blood, and once Eteocles receives it, he sets off for the chosen place of immolation, sharpened like a sacrificial knife (*τεθηγμένος* 715), ironically about to fulfill his own promise

<sup>35</sup> Alcestis provides an exception, but her vision of Thanatos is a reduplication of the original supernatural call; on the elements of sacrifice tragedy, see my *Catastrophe Survived* (Oxford 1971) 22–26.

of thanksgiving to the gods for his city's rescue. And by the poet's artistry the audience has already seen in the previous tableau the victory that he both brings and celebrates.

The sword was the central image upon which the old-fashioned riddle had fixed, but Aeschylus, with his alloy of Curse and Dream, emphasized instead the notion of the lot. In making this change he showed once more that sense of the universally appropriate symbol that is one of the secrets of his perpetuity. In his view, man's destiny had, like the lot, the appearance of pure chance and the reality of divine direction; it was also, like the military lot, in essence a command. The trilogy of which *Septem* was the conclusion told of three such imperative portions which fell at different times to different members of a single family, and it described, with three generations, the full range of human response to its allotted destiny (942-91). To Laius, Apollo had said: "Save the city by dying without having made a new member of your race," but Laius was a proud and faithless man and he disobeyed. (Note line 842, where the phrase *βουλαὶ δ' ἄπιστοι* makes his disobedience an expression of his disbelief, and how it is keyed to the *ἔργον ἄπιστον* of 864, with which the grandsons pay for that disbelief.) Laius did engender a son, and the birth of Oedipus was a temporary defiance of Apollo's fixed intent. This meant that the next allotment was necessarily of a more active sort. Instead of "Do not create a new member of the race," the assignment came to Oedipus as the destruction of an old member, Laius, and the creation of new ones, a "bloody root" (755) for the race, which he had then to curse. This second family portion was not willingly accepted, but it was given an unwilling, unknowing compliance, and it brought into existence more of those same Labdacids whose suppression Apollo had originally linked with the salvation of Thebes.<sup>36</sup> And so to the monstrous offspring of Oedipus a third and final version of the racial portion was assigned: they were to destroy one another.

The response to this third command is the subject of *Septem*, a third play that had to ease the tension Aeschylus had made between heaven's absolute demands and the flawed obedience of the house of Laius. This time there is neither the defiant abrogation of a Laius nor the unknowing compliance of an Oedipus, though Polyneices acts out *in absentia* this negative heritage.<sup>37</sup> Instead, this third generation,

<sup>36</sup> See the discussion of *εὐάζειν πόλιν* in 749 by Manton, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.25) 80.

<sup>37</sup> Judging from the threats reported from him (633ff) it is safe to say that Polyneices did



in the person of Eteocles, at last offers a disciplined, knowing submission to a thrice-dreadful destiny and so puts the true stamp of heroism on the fate of the Theban royal family. The magical words of an angry old man are, however, a difficult premise for heroic action or for tragedy, and what we have been observing is how the poet forced them to alter their tone. By adding the Dream to the Curse, Aeschylus made for himself a pair of portents, both dulled by obscurity, that could suddenly join together during the action of his play, to produce a new and single meaning as sharp as a spear's tip. The Curse-Dream, because of its ambiguity, could display a dynamism, a terrifying vitality, as it appeared at first indistinctly, drew close, changed aspect, and then pounced upon its prey like the demon from a fairy tale.

Paradoxically, however, the Curse-Dream is given a theological expansion, even as it takes on this savage voracity. When the poet tells us that Eteocles put himself at his brother's gate before he knew that the Curse was apportioning that gate to both, he works a kind of miracle. With this premature obedience, this first deaf adherence to a command that has not yet been rightly heard, Aeschylus grants a kind of apotheosis to the parental Curse. It is no longer now the crude, Erinys-bound superstition of an older, meaner age. The divine chance of the lot moves Polyneices, as the premature mortal exertion of reason moves Eteocles, but both go with perfect synchronism to the rendezvous that Oedipus had set (*ὦ μέλαινα καὶ τελεία γένεος Οἰδίπου τ' ἀρά . . . ἢ δύκορνος ἄδε ξυναυλία δορός* 832–33, 838–39). Chance and reason, god and man are shown to work together in the interest of the fulfillment of the Dream-Curse, for what the Erinys and the lot ask of these last Labdacids is no more than what all of the gods have decreed.

This largest truth is what Eteocles knows when he obeys. He hears the Curse as part of Apollo's wish, and he concurs in the divine determination to destroy his family. "Let it be swept away . . . the whole of Laius' race is hated by Apollo!" (690–91).<sup>38</sup> His compre-

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not fully understand the meaning of the Curse when the siege of Thebes began, and there is no reason to think that he had any illumination about its meaning, parallel to that of Eteocles. Thus the gods have taken two victims, one knowing and the other unknowing, one reasonable and the other passionate, one pious and the other impious as far as the gods of the fatherland were concerned.

<sup>38</sup> Apollo's involvement was rather a shock to Solmsen, though he did not recognize the

hension of his fate is perfect when he leaves the stage, to be both victim and master of the sacrifice in a double blood-offering. The letter of Apollo's original request was violated, but with the apportionment of twin graves to the last of the Labdacid kings, its spirit is fulfilled. The city of Thebes can be saved, as Apollo had meant it to be, by a third generation that has learned to accept the lot of its apportioned destiny.<sup>39</sup>

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full extent of it. He maintained that there was a certain obtuseness in the Aeschylean view of justice, as displayed in *Septem*, which was later refined in the *Oresteia* (*op.cit.* [*supra* n.5] 197ff, esp. 204).

<sup>39</sup> The mythic fact that this salvation will be a flawed one is perfectly suited to the fact that the compliance of the Labdacids was flawed. Aeschylus, however, chooses to keep all reference to the second siege of Thebes out of his play. The *ἐπιγόνους* of 903 means "for men other than the presumptive heirs," as in Pl. *Leg.* 740c, 929c. The thought is exactly parallel to that at Pind. *Ol.* 10.88-89, with its reference to the special bitterness of having family possessions fall to an outsider. Here the situation is the sharper because the possessions caused the quarrel which now leads to the absence of inheriting sons.