

THEBES AS THE “ANTI-ATHENS”?  
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE CITY’S TRAGIC FUNCTIONS

by

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ABSTRACT: This article responds to the structuralist school of thought which posits the city of Thebes in Greek tragedy as negatively contrasted with the home city-state Athens. The author emphasises the mutability and diversity of Thebes’ depiction in the genre and explores the limitations of a schematic reading of tragic settings.

The staging in Attic tragedy of Thebes as *topos* for the most extreme of human experience – infanticide, incest, insanity, to name but a few examples – has given rise to a perception of the city as an anti-type of Athens which functions as an “other” place, a dysfunctional locale where those experiences may be explored at a comfortable distance from the home city-state where the plays were staged<sup>1</sup>. The idealised city of Athens which prided itself on the political loyalty of its citizens and the advanced nature of its laws, with which we are familiar from the Funeral Oration<sup>2</sup> and which is in tragedy reflected most strongly in the suppliant plays, is contrasted implicitly and explicitly with its “shadow self”<sup>3</sup> in Thebes as a place of civic discord, violence and transgression<sup>4</sup>. Thus the displacement to the “other” setting of the “irreconcilable, the inexpiable, and the unredeemable” negates any risk to Athens’ (self-) image<sup>5</sup>.

However, this schema implies a monolithic approach to tragic drama which is incompatible with the nuanced and shifting dramatic representations of Thebes (and Athens) across the genre. It is certainly true that the troubled history

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<sup>1</sup> The seminal discussion is ZEITLIN 1990.

<sup>2</sup> The speech of Pericles at Thuc. II 35–46 is of course the most well-known example. On the funeral oration in general, see LORAUX 1986.

<sup>3</sup> ZEITLIN 1990: 144.

<sup>4</sup> See also VIDAL-NAQUET in VERNANT, VIDAL-NAQUET 1988: 334–338. His argument rests largely on ZEITLIN’s schema of Thebes vs. Athens.

<sup>5</sup> ZEITLIN 1990: 144 f.

of mythical Thebes – particularly, of course, the Oedipus legend, that Theban myth *par excellence* – provided ample material for the epic poets and other early Greek writers<sup>6</sup>. This literary heritage was naturally exploited by the fifth-century tragedians in their exploration and re-shaping of the city’s legends, working as they were within what was an already well-mined mythical repertoire and one by which they were conditioned to a significant extent. This innovation in the use of ancient myth was also propagated by the agonistic nature of tragic performance itself: originality and variety were essential to the individual poets’ professional success. This is borne out on the tragic stage: the dramatic representations of Thebes and its legends vary considerably both across the genre and in the works of the individual tragedians.

This diversity and fluidity in Thebes’ mythical representations is central to the fallibility of the “anti-Athens” thesis. The city cannot be reduced to a single “type” or model, and the audience is not invited to associate Thebes with specific and consistent patterns or themes, such as, for instance, intra-familial killings, or madness. This is true of both the tragic and pre-tragic genres. Homer indeed mentions the Labdacids, but he also alludes to other Theban myths which were to be explored on the fifth-century tragic stage – to Antiope, her twin sons, and to Alcmene, mother of Heracles<sup>7</sup>. So too do Hesiod and Pindar<sup>8</sup>. The recurrence of these themes indicates their popularity and endurance within the epic and post-epic literary cultures. In tragedy, there is no denying the prominence of the Oedipus myth – we have the “Theban” plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes*, and the late *Phoenissae* of Euripides, as well as the related fragments; and indeed it is scarcely unlikely, given the evident popularity of the myth, that there were other plays written on the same theme which are now lost. Yet the extant material also provides many other variations on Theban themes: in *Phoenissae*, for instance, Euripides breaks with tradition in presenting a double civic legend which combines the well-known assault on Thebes by the Argive warriors with the city’s troubled origins and complex history. The poet was to return to a different branch of the autochthonic legend a few years later in *Bacchae*. The same dramatist’s *Heracles* concerns a different set of characters and events altogether; and his *Suppliants* – like the late *Oedipus at Colonus* of Sophocles – features a non-Theban setting but remains strongly focused on the city. Then there are the fragments – of Euripides’ *Antiope*, or Sophocles’ *Niobe*. Niobe’s husband Amphion had provided inspiration for Aeschylus in a play of the same name. Sophocles himself had written an *Amphitryon*; Aeschylus wrote a Pentheus trilogy; and so it goes on. Again, there is no reason to exclude the possibility that

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Hes. *Op.* 161–163; Hom. *Il.* IV 378 and 406; *Od.* XI 271–280; Stesichorus’ *Thebaid*, and in the fragments of the Theban epic cycle, frs. 2–3 of both the *Oedipodea* and the *Thebaid*.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Od.* XI 260–270.

<sup>8</sup> See Hes. *Th.* 975–978; and Pind. *Isth.* 7, 1–15.

many and various other plays on Theban subjects were written and performed, but which are no longer extant. Our perspective on Thebes as dramatic entity is irrevocably distorted by the accident of survival, which threatens to impose a reductive neatness on a set of phenomena which were no doubt a great deal more complex than the extant material suggests.

This diversity within the Theban mythical repertoire is matched by the diversity of the city’s very individual depictions in tragedy. Varying degrees of emphasis are placed on the city as physical or geographical “place”; so, for instance, Aeschylus in *Seven against Thebes* creates a consistent and highly realistic sense of the city as under immediate threat from the encroaching Argive army. The emphasis in the Parodos on what the Chorus can see and hear of the warriors outside the city<sup>9</sup> maintains a high level of tension and anticipation of the final disaster. This is increased in Eteocles’ subsequent methodical organization of the defence, and reaches its peak at his conclusion: seven warriors at the city’s seven gates, with himself seventh and last<sup>10</sup>. The construction of the central part of the play – this defence strategy – around Thebes’ most recognizable landmarks sustains the audience’s impression of the city as an actual physical location surrounded and threatened from all angles: the dramatic effect also, of course, lends some irony to our perception that the real threat to the city in fact comes from within, in the *dusboulia* of Eteocles himself, who consciously and deliberately chooses to confront his brother in battle. Yet such focus on the city as physical entity is vastly reduced in a play such as *Oedipus Tyrannos*, which concentrates instead on the systematic and torturous process of (self-) discovery made by the lead character; aside from the thematic significance of the *miasma* which beleaguers the city as a result of Laius’ killing, Thebes itself does not feature heavily in the play. Then if we return to *Phoenissae* we find that this drama’s extended historical perspective allows for the development of the city’s physical identity in a manner unsuited to, and therefore not found in, the more concentrated and focused dramatic pace of, for example, *Antigone*. The latter play in its linear progression from the conference between Antigone and Ismene, the burial by the former of their brother Polynices, the confrontation between Antigone and Creon and her condemnation to death before Creon’s belated realization of his ill judgement, maintains a swiftness and intensity in the development of events which does not allow for the significant development of Thebes as an “actual” or recognizable place. *Phoenissae*, on the other hand, reveals an unusual level of interest

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<sup>9</sup> See esp. 78–85; 149–157: the whirling dust, the sounds of the horses’ hooves; the rattling and creaking of the enemies’ chariots.

<sup>10</sup> ἐμοὶ σὺν ἐβδόμῳ, 283. His insistence on his own position at the seventh gate at an early point in the play heightens the audience’s expectation of the discovery that Eteocles’ own brother will confront him in direct combat. It also, of course, underlines Eteocles’ autonomous decision to fight, undermining his own conviction later in the play that it is the family curse alone which propels him to battle (see esp. 689–691; 709–711; 719).

in the characters' movements within and beyond the city (Antigone on the roof in the early *teichoskopia* scene, Polynices' arrival in Thebes, Menoikeus' exit to commit suicide on the spot of the city's foundation, the brothers' departures to the battlefield, followed by their mother and sister, Oedipus' late entry to the stage, and finally his departure with Antigone into exile) which corresponds with the dramatist's sustained focus on the city as individualized *topos* which is central to the thematic interest of the play's two inter-dependent myths of Theban autochthony and the Argive assault on the city<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, the individual dramatists did not present the same Thebes in each of their plays: the city in *Heracles*, for instance, is not the Thebes of *Bacchae*, which extends from that city's territory to the wilds of Mount Cithaeron in its exploration of Dionysiac cult and the contrast between civilization and wildness, madness and sanity. Thematic variety also abounds both across the genre and in individual plays: the interaction of men and women, for instance, and the conflicting concerns of *polis* and *oikos*, occupy a far more prominent position in *Seven against Thebes* than in a drama such as *Oedipus Tyrannos*, which, in turn, lacks the heavy political emphasis of *Antigone*.

The dangers of reductivism also caution against the isolation of Thebes as *the* "anti-Athens". It is true that tragedy does tend to avoid associating the negative with Athens, and that it often displaces to an "other" setting questions and problems relatable to the home *polis* yet which can be explored at a safe distance from it. Of course, the concept of an "other" place within the inherently "other" world that is heroic-age myth on the fifth-century tragic stage may be seen as problematic; but tragedy gains a further sense of dislocation – and thus greater distance – through the hybrid settings of the plays, neither fully in the world of the epic poems nor in that of contemporary reality. This is especially relevant to a play such as Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, which is partially set in Athens, and in which there is a clear tension between the "heroic vagueness"<sup>12</sup> of the play's mythical setting and its evident relatability to contemporary experience in developments on the Areopagus, the democratic reforms of 462, and to potential political instability in the home city-state. The chronological disjunction and mythical colouring allow the tragic poet to explore at a more comfortable distance experiences which were real-life concerns.

Yet mostly tragedy sought to implement an added dimension of comfortable distance in the relocation of political concerns relevant in contemporary

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<sup>11</sup> See RAWSON 1970 for a discussion of the importance of the Theban land in the play. Caution must however be applied to her view that the conflict between "family and fatherland" is the "main preoccupation" (p. 112) of a drama which encompasses a variety of wide-reaching themes.

<sup>12</sup> See EASTERLING 1997: 26 on the representation of political institutions in this play in such a way as to preclude a simple correspondence between dramatic depiction and contemporary events or practice.

experience to a *non*-Athenian setting. The tragedians evidently exploited the centrality of many “other” places in the mythical repertoire within which they worked: it is clear that any non-Athenian setting may function as an “other” *topos*, be it Greek (Argos, Sparta, Corinth), or non-Greek (Troy, Thrace, Persian Susa). It is also important that, as with Thebes, all of these locations will not reveal a sustained and recognizable pattern of topographical or thematic characteristics: the Argos of Aeschylus’ *Suppliants*, for instance, is in many ways significantly different from that found in the same poet’s *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi*, which equally do not reveal the same political – and in particular, democratic – emphasis of the earlier play. Thus Argos, as a consistently varied and varying dramatic entity, cannot be said to function as a “middle-term” between Thebes and Athens, as has been suggested<sup>13</sup>, since it performs widely differing functions across the genre. This essentially structuralist or semiotic reading of tragic geography again highlights the limitations of the “anti-Athens” thesis, since it fails to take into account, or to allow room for, the functional diversity of the “other” places. Moreover, we must also bear in mind that the examination of the “self” (i.e. Athens) through the agency of the “other” extends beyond the question of physical location and distance. Thebes, Argos, or any other tragic location serves as only one aspect of the home city’s perennial concern with its own image. The Athenian – and, by extension, Greek – identity is constructed upon a series of polarities between “self” and other: man versus god, male versus female, or Greek versus barbarian.

Closer examination exposes the tensions inherent in any of these schemas. Let us take the example of race and ethnicity; that is, Greek versus non-Greek. The *Persians* of Aeschylus creates a certain affinity between two ostensibly so different peoples in presenting the Persians not only as everything that the Athenians are not – but specifically, as everything that the Athenians strove not to be, and in turn, everything that they *could* be. Of particular importance for the breakdown of the “Greek versus barbarian” antithesis is the play’s theological framework, which is constructed upon the traditionally Greek precepts of surfeit, *koros*, insolence, *hubris*, and retribution, *nemesis*. The articulation of the play’s ethical and theological design through the part of the dead Persian king Darius suggests the ease with which the Greeks were able to transfer to “other” cultures the traditional Hellenic conception of religion. The play suggests in the Persians’ downfall and suffering a certain sympathy for the “barbarians” and an approach to human vulnerability (ultimately Homeric in inspiration) which elides the Greco-barbarian division and locates the root causes of self-destruction not in ethnicity but in human nature, individual and collective. Of course, that is not to preclude an element of triumphalism in the downfall of Athens’ enemies; but the play does reveal a balance between similarity and difference. Self and other are

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<sup>13</sup> ZEITLIN 1990: 146 f.

not mutually exclusive. The creation of this effect in an “other” territory – a non-Greek one for good measure – and through an ostensibly alien people cushions its impact on the sensibilities of a fifth-century Athenian audience, which is invited to perceive the existence of the self in the other, and *vice versa*<sup>14</sup>.

This question of audience perception reminds us that the ostensible dichotomy between Athens and any example of the “other” must be placed within its contemporary (political) context. The universal scope of tragic themes and the plays’ fundamentally Homeric approach to human nature, *to anthropinon*, did not preclude the fact that as a genre created and maintained by the Athenians, tragedy was rooted in the cultural perceptions and assumptions of its age. This would inevitably have shaped the manner in which a contemporary audience viewed the plays, and also reminds a modern audience that its response to those same dramas would naturally be different<sup>15</sup>. These “perceptual filters”<sup>16</sup> conditioned to a significant extent the collective response<sup>17</sup> of a contemporary audience which had lived through the political developments which inform the plays to a greater or lesser extent, and which also to a significant degree shared the same value system. Yet it is also the case that (contemporary) audience perception could be controlled (at least to some extent) by the playwright himself to suit an individual artistic purpose and/or in conformity with the limitations of the genre, which precluded a straightforward correspondence between dramatic representation and contemporary experience. To quote from the highly influential work of SOURVINOU-INWOOD, the tragedian employed “zooming” and “distancing” devices which encouraged the audience to reflect on the relation between the dramatic events and their own experiences (and perhaps in doing so to challenge their own assumptions)<sup>18</sup>, or which, conversely, created a sense of detachment from those events (and thus protected the contemporary audience from overly close associations which could potentially prove uncomfortable). If we look again at *Persians*, we can see how such a distancing effect is achieved through, for instance, the sustained contrast between Persian battle manoeuvres at night (with its connotation of stealth and slyness) and Greek

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<sup>14</sup> See further the discussion of PELLING 1997b.

<sup>15</sup> See the classic argument (in specific relation to *Antigone*) of SOURVINOU-INWOOD 1989.

<sup>16</sup> SOURVINOU-INWOOD 1989: 134.

<sup>17</sup> This is not to preclude the possibility of a co-existent individual or personal response: tragedy provided a shared opportunity for the audience to reflect on common social and political questions and concerns, but it may also provoke a personal or emotional response which is not conditioned by the dramatic presentation *per se* but by the individual’s own perception of and response to that presentation. The audience response was not uniform.

<sup>18</sup> This is not to suggest that tragedy inclines to subversion, as argued by, e.g., GOLDHILL 1990; rather, that the genre is an inherently exploratory and questioning one, especially in relation to political matters. This will be important to our discussion below of Eur.’s *Suppliants* and the *OC*.

movements during the day (implying openness and fair play)<sup>19</sup>. There are other ways in which Aeschylus draws a distinction between the two peoples, with the associated implication that the Greeks’ conduct is superior: the Persians exhibit disorderliness and chaos (e.g. 480 f.); the Greeks are methodical and considered (e.g. 374–376). Then of course we note reference to the typically luxurious material tastes of the Persians, with its connotations of self-indulgence, or the equally extravagant manner of their grieving their catastrophic losses at Salamis (e.g. 541–545; 834–836): all, of course, in direct contradistinction to the Greek ideal of moderation, *sōphrosune*<sup>20</sup>. And yet the text also reminds the contemporary Athenian audience of the overriding will of the gods to which Greek and Persian alike are subject: it was a *daimōn*<sup>21</sup>, says the Messenger, which tipped the scale of battle and caused disaster to the Persians, not a deficiency in their numbers of ships; it was the gods who saved Athens (345–347). Xerxes had given instructions to his fleet (361 ff.), and although the implication of the Persians’ intellectual inferiority to the Greeks is present in the text<sup>22</sup>, it is also clear that the gods are in control, and the issue of battle is already determined: Xerxes was not to know what the gods intended, τὸ μέλλον ἐκ θεῶν (373). In Darius’ later observation on the general human condition of suffering and adversity<sup>23</sup> there lies a Homeric universality which implies, as the *Iliad* does, that in their ultimate fragility there is no fundamental distinction between Greek and non-Greek. Darius’ cautionary advice to the Persians against the dangers of overweening pride, the ineluctable will of Zeus and the necessity of *sōphrosune*<sup>24</sup> could remind a contemporary audience that it too was bound by those same moral and ethical conditions; and that it too was not invulnerable to the gods’ power, to chance, to human error. It is not such a far leap to imagine that the catastrophe which destroyed the Persian forces could occur at home, in Athens.

We now turn back to Thebes. In Euripides’ *Suppliants*, it would seem clear that at face value the city is persistently and negatively contrasted with Athens; and to be sure, the play’s production at around the time of the battle of Delium in 424<sup>25</sup> makes some degree of anti-Thebes bias within it plausible at a particularly low point in Athenian–Theban relations (and a readiness on Euripides’

<sup>19</sup> See PELLING 1997b: 2–6.

<sup>20</sup> For a general study of *sōphrosune* in Greek literature, see NORTH 1966.

<sup>21</sup> Note also Darius’ later comment at 725: it was a *daimōn* which impaired Xerxes’ judgement.

<sup>22</sup> Xerxes failed to comprehend the *dolos* employed by the unidentified Greek, which lured the Persian fleet out into the Straits of Salamis, just as he was unaware of the gods’ grudge against his people: οὐ ξυνεῖς δόλον/ Ἕλληνας ἀνδρὸς οὐδὲ τὸν θεῶν φθόνον (361 f.).

<sup>23</sup> ἀνθρώπεια δ’ ἄν τοι πῆματ’ ἄν τύχοι, “human suffering is the lot of mortals” (706). (All translations of Greek texts in this paper are my own.)

<sup>24</sup> See esp. 820 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Thuc. IV 97. The general consensus is that the play post-dates Delium; see COLLARD 1975: 8 f.

part to exploit this), which were troubled throughout the second half of the fifth century<sup>26</sup>. The intrusion into the play of the contemporary Athenian spirit towards Thebes is supported by the drama's concern with themes doubtlessly pressing in contemporary experience – particularly those of religion in war-time, the politics of lamentation, and the burial of the dead. Yet, as in the presentation of the defeated nation in *Persians*, clear tensions are revealed in the contrast drawn between Athens and Thebes. This contrast has of course a political aspect in the play's examination of democracy *vis-à-vis* autocracy. The distinction is immediately apparent in the violent heartlessness of the Theban herald as poised against the rationality and clemency of the Athenian king Theseus in his concession to the Argives' burial. But the championing by Theseus of the democratic cause is tempered by the underlying suggestion of a certain disjunction between the constitution in ideology and in practice. It is important that the play creates this effect without any simple tendency towards subversion; and equally important that in a contemporary context Theseus' concern with personal and political expediency (see 339 ff.) would not necessarily impact negatively on his and thus by proxy Athenian image: he does ultimately relent and appeal to the people. But at the same time, his initial imperviousness to Adrastus' pleas<sup>27</sup> and his persuasion of the people by means of the same rhetorical aptitude against which he had inveighed in the Theban herald<sup>28</sup> suggest not so much an outright alignment of democratic and autocratic rule – although some blurring of this antithesis perhaps cannot be wholly denied<sup>29</sup> – as a more nuanced and subtle

<sup>26</sup> During the Peloponnesian War the Thebans were firm allies of Sparta, which eventually in 427 helped them to defeat Plataea, which had been supported by Athens during Thebes' previous attempts to take the state. The battle of Delium in 424 saw Thebes wreak destruction on the Athenian forces.

<sup>27</sup> No sympathy is evident in his long harangue at 195–249; his hard-heartedness is highlighted by the deferential manner of Adrastus throughout the exchange, even and especially after Theseus' refusal, as well as the Chorus' gentle support of the former's position (see 193 f.; 250–252; 263 ff.). We are also reminded of Adrastus' own words at 253–256: he came not for judgement or punishment, ἀλλ' ὡς ὀναίμην, “so that I might be helped” (256).

<sup>28</sup> Theseus will win over the people, he says, λόγοισι πείθων, “persuading [them] with words” (347); his mind is already made up: δόξει δ' ἐμοῦ θέλοντος, “and my wish will ensure it” (350); but he needs to at least make a pretence of consulting the city at large, in keeping with its own principle of enjoying an “equal vote” (ἰσόψηφον πόλιν, 353), a privilege Theseus himself had bestowed. This will also make the people “better disposed”, εὐμενέστερον (351). Yet soon afterwards he will criticize the eloquence of the Theban herald: κομψός γ' ὁ κήρυξ καὶ παρεργάτης λόγων, “the herald is a clever chap and skilled with words” (426). The herald had himself hinted at Theseus' rhetorical manipulation of the people in contrasting it with the practices of autocratic Thebes, where οὐδ' ἔστιν αὐτήν [scil. Thebes] ὅστις ἐκχαυνῶν λόγοις / πρὸς κέρδος ἴδιον ἄλλοτ' ἄλλοσε στρέφει, / τὸ δ' αὐτίχ' ἠδὺς καὶ διδοὺς πολλήν χάριν, / ἔσαῦθις ἔβλαψ', “no one there puffs it [scil. Thebes] up with words, and for his own gain manipulates it every which way” (412–415). On Theseus' own rhetorical adeptness, see COLLARD 1975, esp. on 513–563.

<sup>29</sup> This is a concern explicitly mentioned in Pericles' famous words at Thuc. II 63, 2: ὡς τυραννίδα γὰρ ἦδη ἔχετε αὐτήν, ἣν λαβεῖν μὲν ἄδικον δοκεῖ εἶναι, ἀφεῖναι δὲ ἐπικίνδυνον, “... ”



exposure of contemporary recognition of the difficulties of making democracy work in practice. It is interesting that the play’s setting in Eleusis, here part of Athenian territory, allows for some element of distance from contemporary experience – but significantly less so than would be accorded were the play set over the borders in Boeotia, in Thebes itself. This implies the pressing nature of contemporary political concerns, emphasized to the audience by their exploration in a setting which might seem uncomfortably close to home. Yet that is not to say that civic ideology is directly challenged or contradicted. It is more that the superiority of Athenian democracy is established in a more questioning and complex manner. The historical background to the play implies that Thebes *is* deliberately selected as negative *exemplum* of the autocratic state – but there may also be a tension between Thebes’ dramatic role as reflective of contemporary Athenian attitudes towards the city, and its function in highlighting autocracy-related problems in general. In turn, these problems may or equally may not be problems specifically of *Theban* autocracy.

This is an interesting concern of *Oedipus at Colonus*. At 919 f. Theseus says to Creon: “It is not Thebes which has educated you to be evil; the city does not like to nurture unjust men” (ἄνδρας ἐκδικούς). This implies the separability of the behaviour of (some) Thebans from the Theban identity in general, especially as perceived by non-Thebans. It might also suggest a fault in autocracy as a constitution in its potential fostering of negative behaviour, and thus also suggest that it is the constitution at large (rather than the specific identity of the character representing it in this play) which is contrasted with Athens and Athenian democracy. The distinction between Thebes and the actions of its representative is confirmed in Theseus’ assertion that the city at large would not approve of Creon’s behaviour<sup>30</sup> and that that behaviour brings undeserved shame on Thebes<sup>31</sup>. The concession in this play to Thebes’ potential for good also reveals a certain disjunction between contemporary historical experience and dramatic theme. There is an illuminating contrast here with a play such as Euripides’ *Suppliants*; for although it may be difficult to pinpoint the exact nature of Athenian–Theban relations at the time of the Sophoclean play’s production, it is clear that they had not improved significantly since the staging of the

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that it [*scil.* the city of Athens] is a tyranny which you now possess, which it was unjust to take command of, but which would be dangerous to let go of”. See also Aristophanes, *Knights* 1111–1114: ὦ Δῆμε καλήν γ’ ἔχεις/ ἀρχήν, ὅτε πάντες ἄνθρωποι/ δεδίασί σ’ ὥσπερ/ ἄνδρα τύραννον, “Demos, it is a fine rule you have, which everyone fears as they do a despot”.

<sup>30</sup> οὐδ’ ἂν σ’ ἐπαινέσειαν [*scil.* Thebes], εἰ πῦθοίατο/ συλῶντα τὰμὰ καὶ τὰ τῶν θεῶν, βία/ ἄγοντα φωτῶν ἀθλίων ἰκτῆρια, “It [*scil.* Thebes] would not praise you, if it knew that you were forcibly driving off its wretched suppliants, and thus despoiling me and the gods” (921–923).

<sup>31</sup> οὐ δ’ ἀξίαν οὐκ οὔσαν αἰσχύνεις πόλιν/ τὴν αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ, “But you are bringing shame on a city – your own city – which it does not deserve” (929 f.).

Euripidean play two decades earlier<sup>32</sup>. This respect for Thebes from a sympathetic character in a play which does present on one level, as *Suppliants* does, a favourable portrayal of the home city and its representatives as against their flawed and misguided Theban adversaries, ought not to puzzle the critic. Rather, it reveals the flexibility of the treatment (by the genre and individual authors) of this – as so many – aspects of the fictive (and through it the real) world, and in addition the fallibility of assuming a straightforward correspondence between contemporary experience and dramatic representation<sup>33</sup>. Further, there is also the suggestion that Thebes at large is not beyond redemption. In implying that Creon's ill-counsel, *dusboulia*, is a personal fault<sup>34</sup> – even if it is also a fault of the constitution he represents – rather than a generic tendency of the Thebans, Theseus implies the city's potential for positive action.

Further tensions are revealed in the ostensible distinction between the two *po-leis*. Theseus in his generous evaluation of Creon's behaviour displays no naive trust in his antagonist<sup>35</sup>, since this is the same man who is also quick to suspect an Athenian conspiracy with Creon (1028–1033)<sup>36</sup>. Theseus' suspicion cannot have failed to bear some contemporary resonance when one considers the events of 411<sup>37</sup>, with the oligarchic revolution and the culture of mistrust which pervaded Athens. This not only cautions against too idealized a view of Athens' presentation in the play, but may also point to the fragility of the *polis* in general in its vulnerability to internal threat – to destruction at the hands of its own inhabitants. When one considers also Theseus' earlier words to Creon in exonerating Thebes from its ruler's misjudgement, this may also hint at the possibility that what is happening at Thebes could happen to any city, Athens included. Again, as in *Persians*, an “other” place and an “other” people are used to expose indirectly the vulnerability of the “self”. There is no need to overstate this and view Thebes as the – or even a – negative paradigm from which an idealized Athens is to learn a cautionary lesson. If we take the Athens of the *Colonus* as the pre-war city and the Thebes as what war-time Athens could become without due care<sup>38</sup>,

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<sup>32</sup> Following Athens' defeat in the war Thebes would in 404 propose the utter annihilation of the city, although in the following year it covertly supported the restoration of Athenian democracy in order to establish a supportive force against Sparta, from which Thebes had become detached at the end of the war.

<sup>33</sup> See also 606, where Theseus seems surprised at the possibility of enmity between the two cities: καὶ πῶς γένοιτ' ἄν τὰ μὲν κάκεινων πικρά; “But why should there be enmity between them and me?”.

<sup>34</sup> See 930 f., where Theseus rather sympathetically ascribes Creon's attitude to his old age.

<sup>35</sup> Thus ZEITLIN 1990: 167 in an attempt to explain Theseus' apparent sympathy for the Theban cause.

<sup>36</sup> As pointed out by EASTERLING 1989: 14.

<sup>37</sup> See also JEBB's (1928) n. on *OC* 1028.

<sup>38</sup> So BLUNDELL 1993: 304–306.

this comes dangerously close to allegory, and implies a one-dimensional subjectivity scarcely consistent with the systemic vagueness which EASTERLING has plausibly identified as being at the heart of tragedy’s success as a communicative medium<sup>39</sup>. Instead, plays such as the *Colonus* or *Suppliants* engage in a civic discourse which exposes the nuances and tensions inherent in the Athens–Thebes antithesis and encourages the audience to consider political problems and questions which may be applicable to the power structures of any *polis*, as well as – if not necessarily or exclusively – to Thebes or Athens in particular.

This is important to our appreciation of recent responses to the “anti-Athens” school of thought. The dissociation in *Oedipus at Colonus* of Creon’s actions from Thebes and the Theban identity may lead to a conception of the city as a generic *polis* exploited in tragedy as convenient “other” territory for the safe exploration of political topics which may be pertinent to any city, including (and perhaps especially) Athens. It is true that in the broadest terms Thebes can be used thus, and true also that events at Thebes invite reflection on the problems and very nature of political life as an abstract whole. But – as we noted earlier – not only may any non-Athenian *topos* perform this function, the thesis that Thebes can function as any “other” *polis* also implies a view of tragedy’s political discourse as entirely generic, i.e. non-Athenian. Tragedy was, indeed, exported to other parts of Greece – although in fact during the fifth century it may have been the tragedians rather than tragedy which were exported<sup>40</sup>. However, tragedy’s rooting in and centrality to the civic Dionysia equally presuppose a strong (though not necessarily exclusive) element of Athenocentrism. There is no reason to preclude the co-existence in tragedy of both general and specifically Athenian socio-political issues. Scholarly debate in recent years has tended to impose monolithic views of the genre as either political<sup>41</sup> (in the sense that it engages with contemporary politics) or non-political (i.e. that tragedy functions purely as an art form which is entirely separable from its contemporary context)<sup>42</sup>. Equally polarized distinctions have been made between tragedy as overtly democratic<sup>43</sup> (as it was a genre which flourished in the developing democracy of classical Athens) or, conversely, as bearing no significant relation to that political institution<sup>44</sup>. But this inclination to “label” the genre as a whole

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<sup>39</sup> See EASTERLING 1997 (esp. pp. 24–26).

<sup>40</sup> There is not a great deal of evidence for the performance in the fifth century of Athenian plays outside Athens. See e.g. PICKARD-CAMBRIDGE 1968: 42–56 and part VII; WILSON 2000 (esp. pp. 279–302 and 309 f.); cf. also TAPLIN 1993 (esp. ch. 3).

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. the essays of LONGO (1990) and WINKLER (1990); cf. also SEAFORD 1994.

<sup>42</sup> See e.g. GRIFFIN 1998.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. GOLDHILL 2000.

<sup>44</sup> See RHODES 2003, a response to GOLDHILL 2000; or the still more limiting view of CROALLY 1994: 3.

again results in a restrictiveness which fails to take into account the flexibility and multi-faceted nature of the plays, which would best be appreciated as individual works. The variety and fluidity of the dramas' political emphases – again, both on the generic and individual authorial levels – presuppose an interest in the political, the democratic, the Athenian, or the non-Athenian.

This variability is well illustrated in a play such as *Antigone*, that most political of “Theban” dramas. The play's concern with questions such as the burial of the dead in war-time and the conflict between state and individual (and by extension between *polis* and *oikos*) may be related to the *polis* as an abstract; those same issues (*inter alia*) may, as we saw earlier in relation to Euripides' *Suppliants*, also be relevant to the Athenian (democratic) *polis* in particular<sup>45</sup>. Yet that is not to preclude their centrality to and rooting in the Theban and Labdacid myth on which the drama is based. *Antigone* taken as a whole may be viewed as at once, and to differing degrees, political, Athenian and “Theban”. This brings us back to the fallibility of the polarization between Thebes and Athens. It also reminds us of the individuality of Theban myth, which demands its own place in “political” appreciations of this play and indeed of “Theban” plays in general. This has been overlooked in recent responses to the “anti-Athens” school of thought. EASTERLING, for instance, in arguing against the Thebes versus Athens dichotomy relies heavily on the dissociation of the Theban identity from the political concerns of “Theban” plays. Thus of *Antigone* she writes that the heroine's arguments concerning divine and civic law are not “questions that have a special, specifically Theban setting”, just as Creon's edict regarding Polynices' burial implies the potential of any leader to make the wrong decision<sup>46</sup>. Yet EASTERLING's emphasis on the suppression, as she sees it, of Thebes both in name and in physical feature in the play requires some qualification. Firstly, the implication that Thebes, as Greek city, cannot bear too close an association with serious or even insoluble religious and political problems<sup>47</sup>, needs to be approached with some caution, since we cannot take it for granted that the Athenians would necessarily have refrained from presenting Thebes in a negative light on the tragic stage – or even from destroying it completely; after all, Athens had long experienced a troubled relationship with the city<sup>48</sup>. A reading such as EASTERLING's seeks to impose a particular conception of panhellenism which overlooks the element

<sup>45</sup> See again SOURVINOU-INWOOD 1989.

<sup>46</sup> EASTERLING 2005: 62. It is worth noting, however, that the legal question of burial in the play corresponds in some respects to Athenian law on the subject; so, as Thebes becomes a type of hybrid in legal/ethical terms between the two cities, nor either can Athens be easily dismissed from the equation. On burial law at Athens in relation to treason, cf. MACDOWELL 1978: 176–178 and 255 f. See also GRIFFITH 1999: 5–8 and 29–33.

<sup>47</sup> EASTERLING 2005: 57 f. and n. 43; and 62 with n.54.

<sup>48</sup> A further point is equally important: the mythical heritage of the Athenians was a greater influence on the tragic poets than any common anxiety regarding the unpropitious dramatic treatment

of conflict and competition of which the Greeks were acutely aware, and which was especially prominent in the most overtly “panhellenic” locales or contexts such as Olympia or Delphi. EASTERLING’s emphasis on the importance of Theban topography, the separation of which from the political problems of *Antigone* forms the basis of her argument for Thebes as generic *polis*, may cause difficulty. We noted earlier the varying focus on the city’s geography from play to play; this fluidity hampers to a significant extent the use of Thebes’ physical features as a hermeneutic base for a general argument<sup>49</sup>. EASTERLING’s thesis errs in countering the opposing view with one equally monolithic: she answers ZEITLIN in ZEITLIN’s own terms in offering a reading which is equally inflexible.

It is further important that for all that Thebes may function as a useful non-Athenian locale for the exploration and questioning of civic ideology and political problems, it is not to be grouped anonymously with Argos, or Susa, as merely *any polis* – just as Argos or Susa do not themselves solely fulfil this function. For equally, as we noted earlier, Thebes does bear an individual and widely varying political identity across the tragic genre. The city’s history and associated problems can be, and are, presented as specifically and uniquely Theban. Further, we may also say that this duality in the city’s dramatic identity highlights the complementary nature of the Theban role as “any” *polis* and as individual and individualized *topos*: the city may be seen as an ideal setting for general political problems because its troubled past and present breed such fertile ground for them. For, after all, Thebes *is* different; and the tragedians continually return to it. In the late *Phoenissae*, for instance, the two separable yet closely interdependent aspects of the city’s dramatic function(s) – as mythical Thebes with its own specific problems and as more anonymous or flexible political entity – co-exist in a finely-balanced relationship. Euripides indulges in the city’s wealth of myth by uniting the autochthonic and Labdacid legends in a massive Theban *tour de force*; yet he also looks beyond the mythical past to examine pressing contemporary political themes which can be related both to any city and/or to the home city of Athens<sup>50</sup>. Thus the themes of usurpation and political loyalty,

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of a city with which Athens had long been at war. Thebes in myth is not destroyed as Troy is; tragedy likewise must keep the city standing.

<sup>49</sup> For instance, on *Ant.* 1015 EASTERLING 2005: 62 comments that Teiresias “mentions no place names: it is ‘the *polis*’ that is sick”. She seems here and throughout her argument to over-emphasize the anonymity of Thebes: certainly the failure of burial is an important cultural concern, but within the scope of the play and of Theban myth it is also first and foremost a specifically Labdacid and Theban one. Furthermore, whenever anyone speaks of the *polis* in this play, the *polis* is Thebes.

<sup>50</sup> We ought, however, to qualify this by underlining the especial importance of Athenian politics in *Phoenissae*, as is evident in the relocation to the heroic-age autocratic Theban setting the pressing concerns of late fifth-century Athenian democracy, notwithstanding the fact that the Athenians had by this time seen all of these factors played out across the Greek world during the two decades of the Peloponnesian War.

of the use and abuse of human intelligence – questions especially apt in late fifth-century Athenian society – are given voice by the dramatic characters in their own individual mythical setting and are as central to the subject matter of the myth as they are to the contemporary world. A pertinent example of this is found in the case of Menoikeus' sacrifice, which is central to the (resolution of) the play's myth of autochthony, i.e. the atonement, through his own death, by a young unmarried male (Menoikeus) for the long-ago killing by Cadmus, a founder of Thebes, of Ares' dragon, which had guarded the spot where the city was established (see Teiresias' words at 930–952). This episode, a Euripidean innovation, is rooted in the complexities of specifically *Theban* concerns – especially the city's troubled history, difficult relationship with the gods, and more specifically in Menoikeus' own moral and emotional ties to his homeland. But it is equally applicable and relevant to contemporary political (Athenian) issues – as Euripides himself implies in the intertextual reference at 852–857 to his own earlier play *Erechtheus*, in which sacrifice on behalf of the *polis* (here Athens) is, of course, the central theme. This allusion has been taken by some scholars as supportive of the thesis that Thebes functions as an “anti-Athens”<sup>51</sup>, in that it implies a contrast between Athens as positive model of sacrifice made as a result of civic loyalty and Menoikeus at Thebes as negative *exemplum* of a ritual barely acknowledged and which will bear a questionable influence on the city's fortunes. But could not the ostensible polarity rather indicate the implications of sacrifice as a wider political theme, both within the mythical worlds of Athens and Thebes, and on a broader contemporary level in association with the problems of political loyalty in any *polis*? Moreover, it would be difficult for a contemporary audience to accept at face value this apparent element of Athenian triumphalism, since recent historical experience had revealed only too clearly the fragility of the *polis* and the impermanence of civic ties. Although such selflessness in response to the needs of the *polis* was lauded in the war years, the loss of Menoikeus, and the intense suffering of Praxithea in *Erechtheus* in offering up her children for the city, also imply from a heroic-world perspective the ruthlessness of the overriding claims made on the individual by the *polis*. The themes of grief and loss, of conflicting loyalties and the cost of war to non-combatants, are as pertinent to fifth-century Athens as they are to mythical Thebes.

We noted earlier in relation to Euripides' *Suppliants* that Thebes does reveal a potential for positive action. This is not an isolated *exemplum*. In the fragmentary *Antiope* Euripides looks back to the foundation of the city and goes beyond its troubled beginnings as delineated in *Phoenissae*<sup>52</sup> to create a Theban identity

<sup>51</sup> So again ZEITLIN 1990: 143; see also DE ROMILLY 1967: 134; and FOLEY 1985: 129.

<sup>52</sup> See ARTHUR 1977 for a study of the play's choral odes and the impact of the city's past on subsequent events at Thebes.

from the external standpoint of the play’s setting at Eleutherae, on the borders of Thebes and Attica. The creation at the end of the play of an extra-dramatic future for Thebes – one of predicted concord and prosperity in the dispatch under Zeus’ orders of the twin brothers Amphion and Zethus to found the city<sup>53</sup> – now points to the city and its construction as signifying prospective good. This contrasts sharply with the characters’ suffering in the play’s main action. But here at the end, we have the promise of a Thebes which is quite different. In the mutually complementary integration within the city’s foundation of the separate powers as represented by Amphion and Zethus<sup>54</sup>, there exists a newfound unity and coherence productive of positive action. This is focused on the constructive influence of the Dionysiac at Thebes, and the potential harmonious co-existence of martial activity and musical quietude<sup>55</sup>. This may be contrasted with the discordant and destructive nature of these apparent opposites, represented in the gods Ares and Dionysus, elsewhere in a Theban context such as *Bacchae*. Here in *Antiope*, however, the positive nature of the Dionysiac at Thebes is emphasized by contrast with its ambivalent influence at Eleutherae, where it is associated with conciliation and ritual worship but is also seen as productive of violence and frenzy. That the Dionysiac may be presented with some ambivalence in a non-Theban context – one not too distant from Athens for good measure – and in association with integration and harmony in a Theban setting bears significant implications for a polarized antithesis for the Dionysiac at Thebes and outside it<sup>56</sup>. The external focus on Thebes<sup>57</sup> as the locale for an extra-dramatic future implies its potential for resurrection and reconstruction in myth, and reaffirms

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. fr. c col. II 86–103 (pp. 290–292 in CROPP, COLLARD, GILBERT 2004).

<sup>54</sup> Hermes at fr. c col. II 86–95 speaks of Amphion’s music as lightening the burden of the builders as Zethus directs the founding.

<sup>55</sup> The debate in the play on the respective virtues of activity and inactivity is recreated in the philosophical context of Plato’s *Gorgias* (485E–486D).

<sup>56</sup> This is the main direction of ZEITLIN 1993, a more recent paper in which she concedes some potential for good at Thebes, yet still seeks to apply a polarized schema to the Dionysiac at Thebes as generally negative, and as positive in non-Theban contexts. She may err primarily in basing her argument on the presentation of Dionysus and the Dionysiac influence, since these range widely across the scope of the tragic corpus, and as widely in the plays set in or directly concerned with Thebes.

<sup>57</sup> There is no reason why this should be problematic, or impact negatively on Thebes’ presentation in the play, as suggested by ZEITLIN 1993: 181 f. in arguing that the Dionysiac at Thebes – and indeed the city itself – can only be positively depicted from an extra-Theban viewpoint. She is still firmly inclined to the “anti-Athens” in further explaining the positive depiction of Thebes as due to its depiction from the vantage point (because in close proximity to Athens) of Eleutherae, p. 182. This not only passes over the dramatic conflicts of that location in the play, but also appears to overlook ZEITLIN’s own earlier concession to the possibility of Theban-type problems in relation to Athens (in the context of Eur. *Ion*, p. 170). This again undermines an unequivocally positive reading of Athens’ depiction in tragedy. On the problems of autochthony in *Ion*, see LORAUX 1990.

the diversity and mutability of the city's tragic identity<sup>58</sup>. For after all, Thebes must remain standing; the city's survival in tragedy signifies the extent to which the genre was shaped by a longstanding mythical heritage in which the city does not fall as Troy did. Yet that in itself suggests also the durability and permanence of Thebes as dramatic locale. Tragedy ensures Thebes' survival so that the genre itself can continue to return to it and to propagate the city's myths. Thebes remains; and there is thus an ultimately life-affirming quality in its endurance despite – perhaps even because of – the suffering to which it was home, and to which the poets would always return, καὶ ἔσσομένοισι πυθέσθαι.

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<sup>58</sup> We must again bear in mind the sheer quantity of plays lost to us: it would be extremely unlikely that none of the non-extant dramas which in one way or another concerned Thebes reflected, as *Antiope* does, the city as a place for potential (or actual) positive action.



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