

# Sexual and Familial Distortion in Euripides’ *Phoenissae*\*

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This article offers a further solution to the vexed issue of the thematic and poetic unity of Euripides’ *Phoenissae*. Scholarship on the play frequently focuses on the question of its coherence, which has been much doubted since antiquity.<sup>1</sup> Given the already problematic state of the text, some scholars have tried to impose unity by excising passages they feel fit in awkwardly with the rest of the play. Others take a more charitable approach, and argue that such unity can be found by a careful reading of the play’s themes.<sup>2</sup> Of this second group, the most successful are those which identify themes that make sense of the play’s plot and structure, rather than simply observing repeated strands of imagery and language. Thus, for example, Elizabeth Rawson (1970) notes a consistent concern with family and country, through which she explains the significance of the Menoeceus scene and the focus on Antigone at the end. Similarly, Marilyn Arthur (1977) argues for a thematic unity throughout the choral odes, which present a conflict between nature and culture, and thus link the present suffering of Thebes back to its mythological origins.

In this article I shall set out a further theme which runs throughout the play and links the mythological paradeigmata of the odes to the onstage action. Mismanaged or dysfunctional sexuality underpins the story of the Theban royal house, from the events currently afflicting the city back to the origins of the curses laid upon it.<sup>3</sup> Analysing the way this theme works not only illustrates a further source of thematic unity, but also helps to illuminate the poetic function of the play’s more surprising and most often debated interludes (the *teichoskopia*,

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<sup>1</sup> The views of an ancient critic are preserved in the third hypothesis to the play: he describes it as “over-stuffed” (*παραπληρωματικόν*) and singles out Antigone’s *teichoskopia*, Polynices’ visit to Thebes, and Oedipus’ final lament as being unnecessary: see Mastronarde and Bremer 1982: 79. Burgess 1987: 104 is right to stress that we should take such criticisms as literary judgements rather than evidence for the authenticity of particular scenes.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Treves 1930; Riemschneider 1940; Grube 1941: 370; Podlecki 1962; de Romilly 1967.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, I understand “sexuality” broadly, including the social norms that regulate sexuality and gender roles. “Mismanaged” and “dysfunctional” of course means relative to the norms governing fifth-century sexual and gendered behaviour.

Menoceus' suicide, and Antigone's behaviour at the end). Moreover, it also provides a positive justification for Euripides' unusual choice of Chorus.

To explore the significance of this theme, I shall begin by examining the role of sexuality in Euripides' presentation of the downfall of the Labdacid house (§I). The Labdacids are used to embody the play's moral lessons: we are shown how the royal family's suffering is causally connected to their perversion of sexual and familial norms. This general point is strengthened through the presentation of Antigone, who effectively acts as a case-study to demonstrate the workings of the curse (§II): it is this which explains her prominent status in the play.

However, this theme is not present simply to explain the fall of a particular family; rather it is shown to have wider ramifications. For just as the troubles of the ruling house risk the safety of the *polis* as a whole (by the war between the two brothers), so too the problems created by mismanaged sexuality are shown to affect the wider community. The wider significance of the Labdacids' transgressions are first suggested by Menoceus' suicide: a death demanded as compensation for the sin of the community as a whole, yet which is also presented as linked to the ruling family (§III). I shall therefore explore how Euripides encourages the audience to recognise the transferable significance of this theme, partly through the choral odes with their imagery of wilderness and civilisation (§IV), and partly through the imagery of the Sphinx and the danger she poses to Thebes (§V).

However, the play does not end on a note of total despair. Like many tragedies, *Phoenissae* seeks to salvage something positive from the horrors of the mythological past, and it does this by indicating the existence of an alternative model by which the suffering of the play's characters can be avoided. As we shall see in the final section (§VI), the exotic Chorus with its complicated history is essential in achieving this, for the Chorus provides a positive *exemplum*, highlighting the need for the community to incorporate and manage sexual and social transitions in a safe and religiously sanctioned way. Thus *Phoenissae* explores, via both negative and positive exempla, the reasons behind the contemporary ideology which underpins gender roles and the management of sexuality. The play's morality is therefore a conservative one, for the Labdacids suggest the dangers of deviating from socially approved

rules governing sexuality, while the Chorus, with their links to contemporary transition ritual, remind the audience of the benefits offered by their own model of sexuality (see §VI below).<sup>4</sup>

The text of *Phoenissae* is notoriously difficult, and whilst the majority of the passages I discuss are generally accepted as authentic, some individual lines I refer to are disputed. Whilst I deal with specific points in footnotes, a detailed study of the text of *Phoenissae* is outside the remit of this article. However, lest I be accused of neglecting the state of the text, two general points are worth noting at this stage. Firstly, since the aim of this article is to seek unity, it is appropriate to read the play charitably. Where the text is disputed solely on grounds that the passage reads awkwardly or seems irrelevant, I regard a defence of the literary purpose of the lines as equivalent to defence of the text.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, like any piece of literary close-reading, my argument is built on a clustering of evidence, and it is appropriate to make the strongest case possible. Thus, even if readers are not convinced of the authenticity of a particular line, this need not detract from the overall strength of my case if other passages are accepted as legitimate. However, I will avoid basing my argument on material drawn from the most controversial passages, namely, the final lyric interchange (1735-57), which even Mastronarde's generous interpretation condemns as inauthentic, and the description of the Argive shields (1104-40).

## **§I: The Labdacid curse**

As usual in tragedy, the suffering of particular mythological heroes is used to highlight issues of general human concern, and the mistakes of the Theban royal family form the emotional core of the play. We are shown how distorted sexuality lies at the heart of the Labdacid curse, and how each successive generation plays a role in perpetuating this mismanagement of the sexual norms.

The theme of sexuality gone wrong is first highlighted by Jocasta's prologue, which tells us that the suffering of the Labdacid house began with Laius and Jocasta's conception of a child.

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<sup>4</sup> This should not be taken to imply that I believe the play to be overtly propagating contemporary ideology. While I agree with scholars such as Rabinowitz 1993 that tragedy (including *Phoen.*) tends to uphold the patriarchal order, I would not want to see this as a conscious political statement either in the minds of the poet or of the audience. It seems most likely to me that the importance of obeying cultural *nomoi* (including those surrounding gender roles) was a commonplace among both males and females in fifth-century society, and hence the dominant ideology reflects a shared set of values, not something which needs to be foisted upon (some sections of) the audience.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Foley 1985: 111 n.13: "a convincing reading of the play can indirectly contribute to a defence of the received text".

Jocasta describes the episode in detail: Laius was warned by Apollo not to beget a child and was informed of the consequences of doing so (17-20); it is made clear that the conception was against the gods' will (δαίμωνων βία, 18). Jocasta describes the conception of Oedipus as an act of drunken lust: ὁ δ' ἠδονῆι <ν>δοῦς εἶς τε βακχείαν πεσῶν (21), thus enhancing Laius' culpability. Laius does not simply misunderstand or forget the oracle's message, he gives in to physical pleasure in a moment of irrationality. In contrast with Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where the reasons for the Labdacid curse are downplayed, *Phoenissae* foregrounds Laius and Jocasta's culpability, and thus the moral nature of their crime: a disregard for divine authority and preference for lust over reason.<sup>6</sup>

The play continues to stress the causal chain within the Labdacid house to explain the succession of devastating events in Thebes. We are told that the Sphinx was sent to Thebes by a god (φόνιος ἐκ θεῶν / ὅς τ' ἄδ' ἦν ὁ πράξας, 1031-32), and though the reasons for this are not explicit, the divine causality suggests that the Sphinx is a form of punishment. Indeed, the Pisander scholion on *Phoen.* 1760 (Teubner arg. 11= Σ1760), which gives an account of the history of Thebes, claims the Sphinx was sent by Hera, to punish Laius for conceiving a child. Scholars dispute how reliable a source the scholion is for earlier traditions of the Oedipus myth, and it is true that our sources linking Hera to the Sphinx post-date Euripides.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, these later sources may well have been drawing on earlier traditions now lost to us, and thus it seems plausible that a version of the myth involving Hera was in circulation by the fifth century.<sup>8</sup> Even if the identity of the god responsible is intentionally left vague (as Mastronarde suggests),<sup>9</sup> the reason for the Sphinx's arrival and her connection to Laius'

<sup>6</sup> In *OT*, the only mention of the curse comes when Jocasta explains that Laius received a prophecy that he would die at the hands of the child ὅστις γένοιτ' ἔμοῦ τε κάκεινου πάρα (714). This version places less emphasis on Laius' own culpability in conceiving Oedipus: the use of the optative suggests Oedipus is not yet conceived; nevertheless the oracle is given in such a compressed form that we are not encouraged to dwell on the reasons for the oracle or why Laius disobeyed it.

<sup>7</sup> For the scholion, see Schwartz i.414-15. The scholion and its origins have been much discussed: for an account of the scholarly debate see Lloyd-Jones 2002: 3-4. Lloyd-Jones examines the scholion in detail and outlines the arguments for attributing its content to earlier sources: he argues that Hera's anger with Laius, and her role in sending the Sphinx would have been familiar to the audience from the epics *Oedipodeia* and *Thebaid*, and also featured in Aeschylus' *Laius* and Euripides' *Chrysippus*. For further recent discussion of the scholion and its origins, see Mastronarde 1994: 31-38; Bernabé 1996: 17; West 1999: 42-44;

<sup>8</sup> Hera is named as responsible in Apollod. 3.5.8; Dio. Chry. *Or.* 11.8. Herter *RE* 3A. 1714 suggests that by locating the Sphinx on Cithaeron rather than on Phikion (cf. Hes. fr. 195) Euripides intends his audience to recognise that he is using the version of the myth where Hera Gamostolos (worshipped on Cithaeron) sent the Sphinx. Bethe 1891: 8-10 suggests that Hera's relevance is suggested by Jocasta's statement in the prologue that the infant Oedipus was exposed in the meadow of Hera (24).

<sup>9</sup> As Mastronarde 1994 notes on 810 and 1032, the Chorus' statement at 810-11 that the Sphinx was sent by Hades is best understood as a figure of speech, expressing the number of deaths she caused, rather than implying Hades himself was involved.

crime may still have been still known to the audience. Oedipus is thus the reason for the Sphinx's existence, as well as the cause of her defeat: an ambiguity picked up when Antigone refers to the Sphinx as an ὄνειδος at the end of the play (1732).<sup>10</sup> The scholion also explains the reason that Laius incurred divine anger as being due to his rape of Chrysippus. While commentators on *Phoenissae* are sceptical as to whether the play itself contains allusions to this myth, some version of the Chrysippus story must have been in circulation in the fifth century, as attested by Euripides' own *Chrysippus*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, whether or not Euripides explicitly alludes to Laius' previous sexual transgression in this play, it seems likely that the audience would have been aware of the story. The play offers no other motivation for divine anger, and it is thus plausible that the Chrysippus myth would have come to the audience's minds as a possible explanation for Apollo's oracle. Euripides' handling of the myth is thus designed to emphasise the causality of the play's events, and to suggest that they all lead back to a single occurrence: Laius' failure to regulate his sexuality with his own wife, an incident which is both explained and foreshadowed by his earlier transgression.<sup>12</sup>

Jocasta's forbidden pregnancy leads to further perversion of familial norms: it results in the arrival of the Sphinx and Laius' death, the two factors which enable Oedipus' incestuous marriage. Oedipus then goes on to add a new chapter to the history of sexual and familial transgression by his murder of his father and marriage to his mother. Similarly, the play encourages us to view the conflict between Eteocles and Polynices as part of the wider distortion of family relationships within the house of Labdacus. It is not simply that the Labdacid house is cursed because of inappropriate sexual behaviour; the curse itself is enacted in the corruption of normal sexual roles down the generations. We find this idea expressed overtly in the second stasimon, which (though corrupt) suggests that the destruction brought about by Eteocles and Polynices is inevitable given their origins:

οὐ γὰρ ὁ μὴ καλὸν οὔποτ' ἔφυ καλόν  
 τοῦδ' οἱ μὴ νόμιμοι  
 παῖδες ματρὶ λόχευμα μίασμα πατρός·

814-17

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Mastronarde 1994 on 1732: "the triumph over the Sphinx was no true victory, but a cause of shameful marriage and incestuous offspring". Mastronarde defends this line as authentic in part because of the striking way this word is here used figuratively.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of possible allusions in *Phoen.* see Mastronarde 1994: 31-38 and West 1999: 42-43.

<sup>12</sup> I take it that Laius' pederasty was not regarded as objectionable *per se*, but the need to punish Laius can easily be explained by his inappropriate behaviour in making use of violence and abduction. See Mastronarde 1994: 31-5 for a reconstruction of Euripides' *Chrysippus* and the nature of Laius' crime.

ἢ δὲ συναίμονος εἰς λέχος ἦλθεν.†<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Polynices' attack on Thebes is made possible by his choice of marriage, since it is through his new connection with Adrastus that he has been granted an army (427-28). The ill-omened nature of Polynices' choice is made clear by Jocasta's description of the marriage in her lyric address to him:

σὲ δ', ὦ τέκνον, γάμοισιν ἦ- 337-49  
δη κλύω ζυγέντα  
παιδοποιὸν ἄδονάν  
ξένοισιν ἐν δόμοις ἔχειν,  
ξένον δὲ κῆδος ἀμφέπειν,  
ἄλαστα ματρὶ τᾶϊδε Λα-  
ίου τε τοῦ πάλαι γένει,  
γάμων ἐπακτὸν ἄταν.  
ἐγὼ δ' οὔτι σοι πυρὸς ἀνῆψα φῶς  
νόμιμον [ἐν γάμοις] ὡς πρέπει ματέρι μακαρίαί·  
ἀνυμέναια δ' ἴσμηνὸς ἐκηδεύθη  
λουτροφόρου χλιδαῖς, ἀνὰ δὲ Θηβαίων  
πόλιν ἐσίγαθεν σᾶς ἔσοδοι νύμφας.

“But, my son, I hear that you are yoked in marriage and the joy of child-bearing in a foreign house, and you court a foreign marriage-bond: insufferable for your mother here and for the race of ancient Laius, a marriage curse brought in from abroad. I did not light the fiery torch for you as is the custom [in marriages], as is appropriate for the blessed mother. The river Hismenus contracted this marriage without wedding songs and without the luxury of the bridal bath, while there was silence throughout the city of Thebes at the entrance of your bride.”

Jocasta here draws on the conventional motif of the “marriage to death”: the ironic assimilation of wedding and mourning language to describe an untimely death. Thus, for example, Medea uses similar language to describe the loss she will feel at her children's deaths (1024-27), while the imagery is found commonly of tragic *parthenoi* who die before achieving a marriage.<sup>14</sup> Here, however, the convention is inverted, for Polynices' marriage really *is* a marriage rather than a funeral, even if it is a marriage which will lead to further funerals. The frequency of the “marriage to death” motif in Greek literature means that

<sup>13</sup> The precise translation of these lines is much contested: see Mastronarde 1994 on 814-7 for the variant readings and translations of the passage. However, the general sense of the lines is clearly that nothing good can come from bad beginnings, and that this is exemplified in the sons of Oedipus, cursed by their polluted origins.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. e.g. Soph. *Ant.* 804, 813-16, 891; Eur. *IA* 667-70; *IT* 364-69. The motif is particularly prevalent in tragedy, as discussed by Rehm 1994. However, inscriptional evidence such as the Phrasicleia *korē* (*CEG* 24) suggests that it was a standard *topos* of Greek thought rather than a strictly literary or tragic device.

Jocasta's language derives additional significance by drawing on the *topos*: because the audience is used to envisaging an untimely death as a marriage to Hades, they are here encouraged to imagine Polynices' marriage as though it were a death. Jocasta evokes details of the Greek wedding in order to emphasise the perverted nature of Polynices' marriage: the raising of the torch by the mother, the *makarismos* (evoked by her self-description as μακαρία at 345), the ritual bath, and the singing of *hymenaioi* during the bridal procession. Here, however, all the ritual details are mentioned only to stress their absence: Polynices' wedding is not in line with social convention (νόμιμον, 345) and its failure to abide by the norms is presented as though it were the underlying reason for its other destructive effects. Just as the troubles of the Labdacid house began with an illicit sexual act, and was continued with an incestuous marriage, so too in third next generation they are perpetuated by a destructive union. The causality between these events is emphasised by Jocasta herself, who sees the strife within the family as the result of divine anger, caused by her and Laius' own sexual mistake (κακῶς θεῶν τις Οιδίπου φθείρει γένος· / οὕτω γὰρ ἤρξατ', ἄνομα μὲν τεκεῖν ἐμέ, 379-80).

Thus the sexual transgression begun by Laius takes the form of a curse which is worked out through his son and his grandchildren. The fullest exposition of this idea, however, is found in Euripides' portrayal of Antigone, whose development is used to reinforce this message. The problematic sexuality within the Labdacid house affects both its male and female members, but the importance that achieving a marriage held for Greek women means that the failed transition of a young girl creates a particularly poignant effect. While marriage may be a *telos* for men as well as women, it is not the *only telos*: young men are expected to grow up to be soldiers and citizens as well as husbands and fathers. Conversely, the ultimate purpose of a Greek woman's life was the production of children, via the institution of legitimate marriage, and the central role that this played is demonstrated by the widespread use of the "marriage to death" motif. Thus Antigone's corruption into a further victim and perpetrator of her family's transgressive behaviour is a powerful way to encapsulate the nature of the Labdacid curse.

## **§II: Antigone: curse's victim and perpetrator**

Antigone, as her name suggests (ἀντί γονή: "in opposition to offspring"), is frequently presented as a figure who rejects conventional Greek expectations as applied to young

women.<sup>15</sup> *Phoenissae* begins, however, by presenting Antigone not as the defiant and unfeminine figure with whom we are familiar from Sophocles' *Antigone* or *Oedipus at Colonus*, but as the very archetype of a well-behaved Greek maiden who fully buys into the ideology of the society in which she lives. Over the course of the play, Antigone changes from a sheltered girl to one prepared to face Creon's wrath and accompany her father into exile. In doing so, she rejects the social conventions that have previously governed her behaviour, and this rejection is epitomised by her refusal to consent to marriage, the institution by which female sexuality is managed, and usually regarded as the goal of a girl's life.

This transition is often regarded as a positive development, a rare act of altruism in a play where so many characters behave selfishly.<sup>16</sup> However, when we examine Antigone's presentation systematically, and avoid anachronistic ways of thinking about female behaviour, we find that the play in fact presents a more ambiguous picture. Greek society places a great deal of emphasis on the control of women, and particularly unmarried girls.<sup>17</sup> In Athens women were continually under the guardianship of a *kurios*: a role which by the end of *Phoenissae* would have been occupied by Creon, Antigone's maternal uncle, to whom Eteocles has entrusted her (757-60). Women's physical movements were also the subject of strict social rules, and whether or not Athenian women did in fact leave the house, the cultural ideal was certainly that they should remain inside. An archaic law, ascribed to Solon, defined those women who fell outside the law's protection (and so with whom a man could safely copulate) as "those who sit in a brothel, or those who walk to and fro in the open".<sup>18</sup> Physical space thus comes to represent female sexual availability, an idea echoed by the fact that descriptions of seduction scenes are usually set in a remote outdoor location. In Greek thought, the image of a young girl out in the wilderness comes to signal a lack of chastity and thus depicts the seduction as safe, removed from the hazards and opprobrium a real-life seducer would face.<sup>19</sup> Antigone proceeds from being a *parthenos* whose position is protected by the norms of her society to a victim of her family's curse, and this development is

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<sup>15</sup> Antigone, because of her rejection of male authority and normative values, has long been interpreted by modern theorists as a feminist figure: see in particular Butler 2000.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Garzya 1962: 104-5; Rawson 1970: 123; Foley 1985: 144.

<sup>17</sup> For the constraints on real women's lives in the fifth century see Gould 1980; Cohen 1991: esp. ch. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Dem. 59.67; cf. Lys. 10.19, Plu. *Solon* 23.1. Men. fr. 546 and Xen. *Oec.* 7.30 offer a similar perspective. See Vernant 1983: 135-42; Davidson 1997: 73-8 on the rules governing female space.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Deacy 1997: 44-45; Lefkowitz 1993. For the legal situation surrounding rape and seduction see Ogden 1997; Omitowoju 2002.

mirrored in the changes in her behaviour and physical movements. Whereas she begins the play within the maiden-quarters, obedient to male authority, she ends it by going into exile with Oedipus, rejecting the legal authority of her *kurios*. Moreover, her decision to go into exile is coupled with a conscious rejection of marriage, a rebellion against her designated social role. Thus we should see Antigone's attitude and position by the end of the play as representing a further instantiation of the family's perversion of sexual *mores*.<sup>20</sup>

At the beginning of the play, Antigone is presented as a well-brought-up *parthenos*: she is kept within the house, asks her mother's permission to leave the maiden-quarters, and when she does so is chaperoned by an elderly slave (89-95). Antigone's maidenly modesty, however, is more than just the sign of her good moral character. Tragic conventions allow women a greater degree of flexibility than would have been regarded as appropriate in real life.<sup>21</sup> Women can appear outside the house without casting doubt on their character, and even interact with non-related men. We sometimes find gestures to social reality in tragedy, when female characters justify their presence outdoors, but these references usually operate at a fairly superficial level. For example, in Sophocles' *Electra*, Clytemnestra accuses Electra of shaming the family by her presence outside the house, criticising her for "wandering around at large" (516-8). Yet although in fifth-century Athens it would indeed be inappropriate for a young girl to spend her time outdoors, the play does not encourage us to believe that Clytemnestra's criticism is valid or to feel distaste towards Electra because of this. Similarly, in *Antigone*, Creon orders that Antigone and Ismene be taken inside the house, suggesting that their freedom to roam around outdoors is unseemly for females (578-9). However, this motive is immediately weakened when Creon gives a further reason for keeping the women locked up: the pragmatic fear that they will try to escape (580-1), suggesting that the need to keep them inside is because they are convicted criminals rather than out of concern for their modesty. Indeed, the play does not suggest at any point that Ismene is anything other than a virtuous *parthenos*, and her role is to provide a foil to the unfeminine and proactive Antigone,

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<sup>20</sup> We find hints of a similar tendency in Soph. *Ant.* where the Chorus suggest that Antigone's wild and problematic nature is a result of her paternity (471-72) and see her suffering as part of a chain of inherited guilt (856). However, Sophocles here, as elsewhere, tends to play down any sense of past causality, encouraging the audience instead to focus on Antigone's own actions and motivations.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Easterling 1987, who demonstrates that scholars like Shaw 1975 are wrong to see women on-stage in tragedy as being automatically subversive.

an opposition which would be damaged if the audience was meant to see Ismene's behaviour as inappropriately masculine.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, from Antigone's first appearance in *Phoenissae*, we find an obsession with the ideals of (fifth-century) female behaviour.<sup>23</sup> In the opening scene, Antigone does not leave the palace but appears on the roof of the *skēnē* building, which represents a view from within the palace (μελάθρων ἐς διῆρες ἔσχατον, 90).<sup>24</sup> Lest we perceive Antigone's desire to see the army as self-willed or insubordinate, we are told immediately that she obtained permission from her mother before taking any action (90-1). Her presence in the upper floor of the house is also conventional: despite the servant's concern that she may be seen, she is occupying space which is associated with females.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless the servant stresses the importance of her remaining unseen and insists that she withdraw as soon as there is a risk of her being noticed even by another group of women: the Chorus (193-201). Antigone's own language in this scene is equally conventional: she shows naïve excitement at the glamour of the battlefield, expresses her fear of the city being sacked, and anticipates the enslavement of Theban women if this should happen (151-3, 182-92).<sup>26</sup>

The play's obsession with presenting Antigone as a virtuous and modest *parthenos* is thus not only unusual but extremely ostentatious, which suggests it may have a broader significance. The motif is further emphasised in Antigone's next appearance, when Jocasta summons her from the palace to send her to the battlefield (1264-83).<sup>27</sup> Antigone expresses her reluctance to comply with Jocasta's request, hesitates to leave the maiden-quarters (ποῖ, παρθενῶνας ἐκλιποῦσ', 1275), and explains that she feels *aidōs* to be seen in public (αἰδοῦμεθ' ὄχλον, 1276). Jocasta for her part acknowledges that that what she is asking of Antigone is

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<sup>22</sup> Ismene casts herself as traditionally female when she objects to the idea of taking action over the issue of the corpse on the grounds that she is a woman (61-68).

<sup>23</sup> I take the *teichoskopia* as authentic, and argue here that it is thematically integral to the play. For a defence of the scene, see Burgess 1987; Mastronarde 1994: 168-73.

<sup>24</sup> As Mastronarde 1990 has shown, the *skēnē* in the fifth century probably had a flat roof.

<sup>25</sup> Poe 2000 argues that Antigone is meant to be imagined as inside the house, not actually on the roof. We can infer that women associated with the upper-storeys from Lys. 1.9 where the women's quarters are described as normally being upstairs: see Gould 1980: 48.

<sup>26</sup> Foley 1985: 117-8 shows how Antigone's language in the *teichoskopia* emphasises her propriety and innocence; see also Barlow 1971: 57-60; Craik 1988: 165.

<sup>27</sup> Diggle follows Fraenkel in deleting 1265-69. However, as I argue here, these lines are thematically relevant and thus the argument that they are unnecessary or inappropriate cannot stand. The only linguistic difficulties are the obscurity of 1266, and the use of ἐκνεύοντε in 1268 to mean "veering towards death". See Mastronarde 1994 *ad loc* for a defence of both these points.

not normally appropriate for a *parthenos*, contrasting the usual activities of an unmarried girl with what is required of Antigone:

οὐκ ἐν χορείαις οὐδὲ παρθελεύμασιν  
νῦν σοι προχωρεῖ δαιμόνων κατάστασις

1265-6

“It is not in choral dances or maidenly activities that your fate, established by the gods, proceeds”

However, she justifies her request by appealing to the extremity of the situation, suggesting that Antigone’s circumstances do not allow her to indulge in a protected life: οὐκ ἐν αἰσχύνῃ τὰ σά (1276). Jocasta thus makes it clear that Antigone’s capacity to lead the life that a well-born *parthenos* could normally expect is disrupted by the family curse.

The Antigone who appears in the play’s final scene is, however, an altogether different figure, and her opening words make clear the contrast:<sup>28</sup>

οὐ προκαλυπτομένα βοτρυχώδεος ἀβρὰ παρῆδος  
οὐδ’ ὑπὸ παρθενίας τὸν ὑπο βλεφά-  
ροις φοίνικ’, ἐρύθημα προσώπου,  
αἰδομένα φέρομαι βάκχα νεκύ-  
ων, κράδεμνα δικοῦσα κόμας ἀπ’ ἐ-  
μᾶς στολίδος κροκόεσσαν ἀνεῖσα τρυφάν  
ἀγεμόνευμα νεκροῖσι πολύστονον.

(1485-92)

“I do not cover up the delicate skin of my cheek, where locks of hair fall, nor do I feel shame because of maidenly modesty when I display the scarlet beneath my eyes, the blush on my face. I rush forward, a Bacchant of the dead, tossing back the veil from my hair, loosening my luxurious saffron robe, an escort of corpses, full of tears.”<sup>29</sup>

Antigone refers to the modesty appropriate for a *parthenos* in order to emphasise her rejection of this mode of behaviour. Yet her description is couched in sexual terms, emphasising her desirability in language familiar to the audience from erotic poetry: loose and flowing hair, tender skin, blushing cheek.<sup>30</sup> While unveiling or ripping of clothing is commonly used to symbolise grief, it can also suggest a loss of chastity: indeed the two may

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<sup>28</sup> Craik 1988 on 1270 claims that “Antigone’s character does not change in the course of the play; merely her circumstances”. However, this fails to take account of Antigone’s active rejection of parthenaic norms in the final scene: there is no circumstantial reason she should not simply obey Creon.

<sup>29</sup> I follow Mastronarde 1994 on 1492 in taking ἀγεμόνευμα to be passive, *pace* Seaford 1987: 124 n. 185.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Archil. fr. 30, 31 196a W; Sapph. fr. 94.16; 105a (where the reddening of the apple reflects the blush of the girl); 122; 126 V.

be linked, as in *Iliad* 22, where Andromache's dropped veil evokes her own future rape and enslavement (468-72).<sup>31</sup> Here, the sexual element is made explicit by the description of Antigone's clothing as saffron (κροκόεσσα). A parallel to this passage is found in *Agamemnon*, where Iphigeneia lets her saffron robe fall to the ground at the moment of her sacrifice (κρόκου βαφᾶς δ' ἔς πέδον χέουσα, 239), a gesture whose erotic overtones and links to female transition ritual have been noted by scholars.<sup>32</sup> The removal of saffron clothing recalls the ritual of the *arkteia*, where the young "bears" wear and then remove the *krokotos*, and it is therefore associated with the development to female sexual maturity. The saffron garments may also recall the bridal veil, which some scholars have argued would have been a similar colour.<sup>33</sup> In any case, the wearing of saffron was associated with adult women, and was frequently symbolic of sensuality as well as of luxuriance and high status.<sup>34</sup> Thus, when Antigone first wears and then starts to remove saffron clothing, the audience would have understood this gesture as indicative of a change in her sexual nature. Whereas the girls of the *arkteia*, however, remove the *krokotos* as one of the mechanisms towards reaching a healthy maturity, in the case of Antigone the gesture comes at the moment in the play where she rejects the usual progression of a *parthenos* and refuses to make the transition to marriage.

Antigone's self-description as a Bacchant reminds us of the choral dances she previously participated in (1265).<sup>35</sup> However, presenting Antigone as a Bacchant also indicates that she is operating outside the sphere of conventional behaviour: Bacchantes are exempt from the normal social rules, and their activities are associated with the breakdown of gendered and societal boundaries.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, this imagery recalls the Bacchic language at the start of the play to describe Laius' error in conceiving a child (εἶς τε βακχείαν πεσῶν, 21). The use of

<sup>31</sup> Cf. also Eur. *Hipp.* 201-3 where Phaedra's removal of her headdress symbolises her departure from female norms; *Andr.* 829-35 where Hermione removes her headdress and is upbraided by her nurse for her inappropriate behaviour. See Craik (1988) on 1490-1.

<sup>32</sup> See Sourvinou 1971; Stinton 1976; Drew Griffith 1988: 554; Scodel 1996: 115-16 for the sexual symbolism of the saffron robe in the Aeschylean passage.

<sup>33</sup> See Cunningham 1984 for a discussion of this view.

<sup>34</sup> For saffron representing sexual desirability and sensuality, see Aristoph. *Clouds* 51; *Eccl.* 879; *Lys.* 44-51, 219-20. On the *krokotos* in the *arkteia*, see Sourvinou-Inwood 1988: 119-24, 127-34; Parker 2005: 242-43.

<sup>35</sup> Antigone also mentions dancing in honour of Dionysus later in the scene, contrasting her innocent virginal life with the horrors that now face her (1754-57). Whilst it is unlikely that the very ending of the play is genuine (see Mastrorade 1994 on 1736-57) it is nevertheless interesting to note the interpolation picking up on ideas found earlier in the text.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Eur. *Bacch.* 694 where the Bacchantes mix social groupings normally kept distinct, and 699-702 where they blur the boundary between human and animal by suckling wild animals. For the Bacchantes' transgressive nature, see Segal 1982: 59-60 and 95; Goldhill 1986: 30.

the word βακχεία, then, not only alludes to the fact Laius was drunk but is suggestive of a more general level on which rules and boundaries are transgressed. However, the use of this language also highlights its inappropriacy to the current context: while the transgressive behaviour of real Bacchantes is part of their worship of Dionysus and thus religiously sanctioned, Laius' βακχεία is his failure to heed divine instruction. Antigone's use of Bacchic language is therefore indicative of the way we see the curse perpetuated down the generations. Laius' transgression of the limitations on his sexuality brought about the Labdacid curse, while Antigone's transgression of the behaviour appropriate to her status and gender comes about as a result of the curse's operation upon Laius' descendants.

The problematic nature of Antigone's new status is emphasised by her interaction with Creon and Oedipus in the remainder of the scene. Far from being a meek *parthenos*, Antigone argues with Creon, threatens disobedience, and insists on going into exile with her father (1646-82).<sup>37</sup> Creon orders her into the house at 1635-38, evoking the norms of parthenic behaviour which have previously been so significant to her:

σὺ δ' ἐκλιποῦσα τριπτύχους θρήνους νεκρῶν  
κόμιζε σαυτήν, Ἄντιγόνη, δόμων ἔσω  
καὶ παρθενεύου τὴν ἐσιοῦσαν ἡμέραν  
μένουσ', ἐν ἧι σε λέκτρον Αἴμονος μένει.

"You, Antigone, leave off your three-fold lament for these corpses, and take yourself inside the house. Live like a *parthenos* and wait for the coming day which awaits you: your marriage to Haemon."<sup>38</sup>

The rebuke implied by παρθενεύου acknowledges that Antigone's current behaviour is inappropriate. In Creon's eyes, Antigone's public display of grief is not the correct attitude of a *parthenos*, and this indication enhances the symbolism of Antigone's use of sexualised language to describe her mourning. In the play thus far, Antigone's appearances have been overshadowed by others' opinions on where she should be, and whom she should be seen by. It is therefore striking that Creon appeals to the set of beliefs which controlled her earlier behaviour, and significant that his instructions are ignored. Antigone does not attempt to justify her refusal to go indoors, she simply passes over it in order to criticise Creon's decision to banish Oedipus and to expose the corpse of Polynices (1639-45). Her refusal to

<sup>37</sup> As Conacher 1967 notes, Antigone ultimately abandons her resolution to bury Polynices: hence the ideas of the exodos are not inconsistent, and we need not choose between the burial theme and the exile theme.

<sup>38</sup> 1637 is metrically corrupt, and thus unlikely to be genuine. However, deleting the passage entirely would mean that the marriage theme emerges without preparation, so the other lines must stand.

return to parthenic space becomes still more marked when Creon attempts to force the issue by ordering his bodyguards to physically remove her; when Antigone resists, Creon rebukes her, addressing her as παρθένε as though to underscore the limitations of her status (1662). Significantly, Oedipus too regards Antigone's new attitude as problematic, describing her choice to accompany him as αἰσχρά (1691).<sup>39</sup>

Antigone's rejection of parthenic values takes on a more sinister aspect at 1672-82, where she refuses to marry Haemon, and threatens murder if she is not allowed her way:

- |     |  |           |
|-----|--|-----------|
| Κρ. | οὐκ ἐς γάμους σοὺς συμφορὰν κτήσῃ γόοις. | (1672-79) |
| Αν. | ἦ γὰρ γαμοῦμαι ζῶσα παιδί σῶι ποτε;      |           |
| Κρ. | πολλή σ' ἀνάγκη· ποῖ γὰρ ἐκφεύξῃ λέχος;  |           |
| Αν. | νύξ ἄρ' ἐκείνη Δαναίδων μ' ἔξει μίαν.    |           |
| Κρ. | εἶδες τὸ τόλμημ' οἷον ἐξωνείδισεν;       |           |
| Αν. | ἴστω σίδηρος ὄρκιόν τέ μοι ξίφος.        |           |
| Κρ. | τί δ' ἐκπροθυμῆι τῶνδ' ἀπηλλάχθαι γάμων; |           |
| Αν. | συμφεύσομαι τῶιδ' ἀθλιωτάτῳ πατρί.       |           |
- 
- |    |  |
|----|--|
| C: | Do not bring bad luck on your marriage by your lamentations.                   |
| A: | Do you really think I'll ever marry your son while I'm alive?                  |
| C: | It's entirely necessary for you to do so. Where can you go to escape marriage? |
| A: | My wedding night will make me one of the Danaids.                              |
| C: | Did you see the rashness of her taunts?  |
| A: | Let iron and sword know the oath I make.                                       |
| C: | Why are you so keen to be free from this marriage?                             |
| A: | I will go into exile with my wretched father.                                  |

The Danaids are emblematic of the destructive potential of mismanaged female sexuality: *parthenoi* who, rather than overcoming their fears about marriage, instead continue to reject it to the extent that they destroy their potential husbands ([Aesch.] *PV* 853-69).<sup>40</sup> By making Antigone's violent potential explicit, Euripides thus ensures an ambiguous response to her decision to accompany Oedipus. Antigone is depicted as blackmailing her legal *kurios*, as well as disregarding her brother's wishes by rejecting the marriage he arranged for her.<sup>41</sup> We

<sup>39</sup> Although Oedipus eventually accepts Antigone's offer, he continues to attempt to dissuade her, suggesting alternative maidenly pursuits (1747-52): cf. Foley 1985: 140, 142-43. Again, this passage may not be authentic, but it is striking that the interpolator has clearly drawn on ideas developed earlier.

<sup>40</sup> Craik 1988 on 1675 also notes that Antigone's threat assimilates her to the Argive enemy, who are called Danaan or Danaid at 430, 466, 860, 1226, 1245).

<sup>41</sup> Goff 1988: 141 claims that Antigone must follow her father as she has no plausible *kurios*, but seems to forget that Creon is Antigone's maternal uncle: the scene between Eteocles and Creon (757-60) makes it clear that Eteocles expects Creon to take responsibility for her if he dies. In addition, Antigone has been betrothed, and

can recall the Messenger's description of the deathbed scene between Antigone and her brothers, where she laments that they have not arranged her marriage (1436-37). In fact, we have already seen Eteocles oversee Antigone's marriage when he arranges his affairs before going out to battle, and when he asks Creon to ensure the marriage goes ahead he presents it as a well-established arrangement (757-60). Antigone's lament, however, is conventional, mourning the loss of Eteocles and Polynices in their capacity as both sons and brothers, and thus drawing on the traditional duties of each. What is striking is that Antigone withdraws from this conventional position after the deaths of her family, rejecting her brother's arrangement.

It is also significant that the grounds on which she rejects marriage is her wish to join her father in exile (1679, 1684), and to die with him (1681), rather than dislike of the particular marriage arranged for her. Female development involves a partial transfer of loyalties from the natal house to the new marital house, as symbolised in the marriage ritual by the physical transfer of the bride from the one to the other.<sup>42</sup> Antigone's loyalty to her birth-house is not simply a sign of her nobility and heroic self-sacrifice; it is also emblematic of her inability to follow the social rules.

Construing Antigone in this light helps us to make sense of the final moments of the play, where we can see elements of wedding ritual and song perverted. The lyric interchange which ends the play evokes the wedding song which would accompany the bride on her journey to her new husband's house, and the opening words suggest processional language (πάτερ γεραιέ, πομπίμαν / ἔχων ἔμ' ὥστε νασιπομπὸν αὔραν, 1710-11). Rather than being passively escorted, however, Antigone is herself the escort, demonstrating the reversal of roles between father and daughter. Oedipus then refers to Antigone as ἀθλίᾳ (1715), a word she picks up and repeats back to him the following lines:

γενόμεθα γενόμεθ', ἄθλιοί  
γε δῆτα Θεβαιῶν μάλιστα παρθένων

1716-17

"I am, I am, indeed, wretched, above all Theban maidens"

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has therefore had a future *kurios* selected for her, and Tiresias takes the status of the betrothal for granted (944-46).

<sup>42</sup> See Seaford 1990; Scodel 1998: 141-42 for how Euripides exploits the tensions inherent in these divergent loyalties.

The antiphonal use of this language of misfortune evokes the conventional *makarismos* of wedding song, where the bride and groom are called blessed.<sup>43</sup> Whereas the bride is normally exalted above the other members of her age-group, Antigone compares herself to the other Theban maidens in order to stress her exceptional misery.<sup>44</sup> The destruction of Antigone's family, via the workings of the Labdacid curse, has corrupted her own sexual potential, leading her to choose a state where she is neither truly a *parthenos* nor able to become a *gunē*.

Antigone's function in the play, therefore, is in part to demonstrate how the curse perpetuates itself down the generations, and how in each generation it takes the form of distorted family relationships and mismanaged sexuality. The portrayal of Antigone earlier in the play as a well-brought up *parthenos* is important because it demonstrates the drastic changes brought about in her attitude and situation as a result of the deaths of her mother and brothers. The play's insistence on making Antigone's behaviour "realistic" also heightens the impact of its ending. We are led to see Antigone's actions at the end of the play through the lens of the real-life constraints and expectations on the behaviour of an unmarried girl, instead of as mitigated by tragic convention.

It is important to recognise, therefore, that the original audience's attitude to Antigone would have been ambiguous. Thus, modern scholarship which sees her change of character in terms of learning to take responsibility is anachronistic: empowerment was not on the agenda for an Athenian *parthenos*, and it is made clear how inappropriate Antigone's behaviour is. This is not to suggest that the audience would have disliked or demonised Antigone: even Creon acknowledges that her decision to go into exile with her father is a noble (if foolish) act (γενναιότης σοι, μωρία δ' ἔνεστί τις, 1680), and the end of the play relies on our sympathy for her plight. Antigone's position at the end of the play, however, is more that of a pitiable victim of her family's mistakes than an admirable heroine. We are led to see Antigone's transformation from a respectable girl to a potential Danaid as part of the broader corruption of familial and sexual relationships within the royal house.

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Hes. fr. 211.7 Merkelbach and West; Sapph. fr. 112 V.

<sup>44</sup> Antigone's lament at being parted from her friends at 1737-39 also draws on this imagery: cf. Sapph. fr. 104a V; Soph. *Trach.* 527-31; Theoc. 18.38-9; Catull. 62.21-2. Again, however, I wish to avoid basing substantive argumentation on a passage which is generally felt to be interpolated.

### §III: Menoeceus: virgin and victim

Over the course of the play, then, we see Antigone corrupted from a sweet and sheltered virgin to a *parthenos* who rejects sexual transition. Antigone's fate is also paralleled by that of Menoeceus, another virgin whose sexual development is cut off as a result of the curse on Thebes. Yet while Antigone suffers as a result of her family's corrupted past, Menoeceus represents a more corporate guilt, for his death is required as compensation for the crimes of the community as a whole. While Antigone's fate involves a rebellion against social conventions, Menoeceus' upholds the ideology that places the wellbeing of the community above that of individuals. The Menoeceus episode is generally agreed to be Euripides' own invention.<sup>45</sup> In plot terms it is gratuitous, for there is no need that the fate of the city should depend on anything outside the battlefield; indeed various scholars comment on how quickly Menoeceus' fate fades into the background.<sup>46</sup> Menoeceus' decision to sacrifice himself to save his city forms a positive paradigm of dedication to the greater good, in contrast to the selfish desires of Eteocles and Polynices.<sup>47</sup> However, the Menoeceus episode is also linked to the themes of sexuality we have already identified, and further develops these ideas.

Tiresias makes it clear that Menoeceus' death is only one way to assure the city's safety; the first and best option would be the expulsion of the entire Labdacid house from Thebes (886-90). We are reminded of the central role that the Labdacid family plays in the history of Thebes: Menoeceus too has become embroiled in the Labdacid curse, which has come to endanger the city as a whole. However, the city can also be protected by the ritual sacrifice of a representative of the city's original family (940-44). Menoeceus' family history makes it clear that he represents the whole community (ἐκ γένους δὲ δεῖ θανεῖν / τοῦδ' ὅς δράκοντος γένυος ἐκπέφυκε παῖς, 940-41): his ancestors were literally born from the earth of Thebes itself, as a result of the act which enabled the city's foundation (the killing of the serpent).<sup>48</sup> Tiresias then goes on to explain that Menoeceus is the only suitable candidate because he is still a virgin, whereas Haemon's betrothal means that he is no longer pure (Αἵμονος μὲν οὖν γάμοι / σφαγὰς ἀπείργουσ' 944-45).

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<sup>45</sup> See Mastronarde 1994: 28-29.

<sup>46</sup> Conacher 1967: 241-2; Foley 1985: 135-36.

<sup>47</sup> For scholars who take a positive view of Menoeceus' sacrifice, see e.g. Garzya 1962: 104-5; de Romilly 1967; Rawson 1970; Arthur 1977. For an alternative reading of the death as ironic, see Conacher 1967: 241-42; Vellacott 1975: 203.

<sup>48</sup> Autochthony myths fulfil the function of connecting the citizens to the land they inhabit, and justifying their right to rule over it. See Saxonhouse 1986; Loraux 1993: 37-71 for the functions of such myths.

The importance of virginity is not surprising, since it is paralleled by the religious expectation that sacrificial victims should be pure and untouched. However, there is something rather contrived about the motif: after all, Menoeceus could still choose a heroic death even if there were an alternative candidate (as in *Heraclidae* and *Erechtheus*), while Haemon's betrothal in the previous episode seems to have been raised simply to justify his exclusion from Tiresias' prophecy. Menoeceus' virginity thus seems set up in a way which is not required in order to make sense of his sacrifice, and it therefore makes sense to look for wider significance in it.

The sacrifice of a noble victim is a favourite motif of Euripides and is found in several plays.<sup>49</sup> What is striking about *Phoenissae*, however, is its presentation of a male as the designated victim. The play itself acknowledges this strangeness, for Tiresias describes Menoeceus as a πῶλος (947), an image more commonly used of *parthenoi*.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the emphasis on Menoeceus' virginity would be more conventional if used of a female, as we find little in Greek culture to parallel for men the female transition from *parthenos* to *gunē*.<sup>51</sup> In any case, by insisting on Menoeceus' virginity as the reason for his sacrifice, the play assimilates him to the (female) virgins of the other sacrifice-myths, and thus to the "marriage to death" motif which lies behind their deaths. Menoeceus also resembles the male victims of the Sphinx, whose failure to achieve marriage is alluded to in the figures of the *parthenoi* who mourn them (ιάλεμοι δὲ παρθένων / ἐστέναζον οἴκοις, 1033-5), and like them, his death is a result of the Labdacid curse. The link is confirmed by the description of Adrastus' shield (if genuine), which depicts serpents carrying away young Thebans from the city walls (δράκοντες ἔφερον τέκνα Καδμείων γνάθοις, 1138). As has been noted, this evokes the similar picture on Parthenopaeus' shield in Aeschylus' *Seven*, where it is the Sphinx that plays a similar role.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Allan 2001 on Eur. *Held.* 474-607.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Craik 1988 on 947. The *locus classicus* for πῶλος used of young females is Anacr. fr. 417 *PMG*, where breaking in the filly represents deflowering the girl; see also Eur. *Andr.* 621; *Bacch.* 165, 1055; *Hec.* 142; *Hipp.* 546; Aristoph. *Lys.* 1307-8. Spartan parthenaic ritual involved the cult of the White Fillies (Leucippides); cf. Eur. *Hel.* 1465-6, with Kannicht 1969: 381-3; Calame 1977: 1:323-30. Where males are described using horse imagery it is often to highlight the reversal of the power-balance (e.g. their subjugation to Eros): cf. Ibyc. fr. 287 *PMGF*; Anacr. fr. 360 *PMG*.

<sup>51</sup> Male maturation focuses more on taking on citizen responsibilities and becoming involved in adult activities: see Swift 2006: 129.

<sup>52</sup> Goff 1988: 150. I would also suggest that the wild flesh-eating πῶλοι on Polynices' shield (1124-7) present a further allegory of the mismanaged "taming" process leading to destructive results. However, as noted above, it is risky to rely on inferences drawn from this passage.

As a virgin whose transition to maturity is cut off, Menoeceus' fate forms a parallel to that of Antigone, herself a victim of her family's curse. Yet Menoeceus also suggests the wider ramifications of the sexual distortions in Thebes, for through him we see how the community as a whole suffers for the transgressions within the Labdacid house. Antigone's transition is, on an imagistic level, evocative of the monstrous Sphinx: herself a *parthenos* who presents a threat to men, and who, as we have seen, is representative of the Labdacid family's troubled history. Conversely, Menoeceus' fate may remind us of the male victims of the Sphinx, yet his death is the result of a different type of monster. While the Sphinx is directly connected with the Labdacids' crimes, the Serpent represents an older type of guilt: its killing marked Cadmus' claim on the land, and it is that act which requires vengeance.<sup>53</sup> Both Sphinx and Serpent are connected, however, portrayed as threats to the young men of Thebes, and thus to the wider health of the city. Therefore in order to understand the broader significance of Menoeceus' sacrifice, we must turn to the way that wilderness and monsters are depicted within the play.

#### **§IV: Nature and culture: imagery of wilderness**

We have seen how the curse is caused by, and results in, distorted sexual and familial relationships. While these begin with the flaws of the Labdacid family, their mistakes come to endanger the community as a whole, as made clear by the death of Menoeceus, who represents the autochthonous community of Thebes, which suffers as a result of its ruling family. The Labdacid curse, then, is not simply limited to one family but has wider ramifications, and this is indicative of the way in which individual transgressions can destabilise wider social *mores*. The broader applicability of this idea becomes clearer when we examine the play's imagery and its choral odes in closer detail.

As Arthur noted in her study of the choral odes in *Phoenissae*, the odes draw on the theme of monsters which threaten Thebes.<sup>54</sup> They are permeated by a clash between nature and civilisation, and an acknowledgement of the potential dangers in the process of taming the wilderness. Thus, killing the Serpent is necessary for the foundation of the city, but its death brings about the birth of the Spartoi, a further threat for the founders (657-75). In each generation, the cycle of violence between monsters and civilisers is perpetuated, suggesting

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<sup>53</sup> As Arthur 1977: 171 notes, Cadmus needs to kill the serpent in order to obtain lustral water, a central part of founding the city.

<sup>54</sup> Arthur 1977: 173-74.

that the battle is something that must be constantly re-fought, rather than a single event. What has been overlooked, however, is the symbolic association of the nature versus culture motif, which is frequently found in Greek thought as representative of human sexuality. The assimilation of the woman's body to the fertile land and the man to the plough is omnipresent in the metaphors used of sex and marriage.<sup>55</sup> Marriage is understood as the imposition of civilisation upon the wilderness, to regulate fertility for the benefit of the community. Read in this light, the choral odes cast additional light on the events of the play. The acts of cultivation and monster-slaying are part of Thebes' history, but are also allegories for the taming of human sexuality into a regulated and socially beneficial form. Sexuality is a potentially dangerous force, which can have negative consequences for the community if not properly managed. The monsters symbolise the potential social breakdown at stake, and their impact on Thebes as a whole encourage us to broaden our picture beyond the Labdacid family.

Just as civilisation and wilderness are frequently used allegorically to represent human sexuality and its “taming”, so too monsters and supernatural beings can be used to represent the negative potential of mismanaged sexuality (especially female sexuality). The clearest example of this motif is found in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus faces a range of monstrous or supernatural female figures which try to kill or entrap him. As well as the magical Calypso and Circe, Odysseus also faces the destructive forces of the Sirens (discussed further below), Scylla and Charybdis. Even the warlike Laestrygonians are first described through their monstrous women, and it is the actions of these females which lead to the men's deaths (10.105-15). The dangerous power of these female figures expresses, in an extreme manner, the dangerous potential of female sexuality, which on a human level is shown through the concerns about Penelope's fidelity and the comparison between Odysseus' *nostos* and that of Agamemnon.<sup>56</sup> The later association between monsters and sexuality is made explicit in a fragment of Anaxilas (Kock ii.270, also quoted in Ath. 558a-e7) which compares female monsters to types of *hetairae* and likens the dangers associated with them to an equivalent risk from becoming involved with a prostitute. Imagery is of course not monolithic, and both imagery of monsters and that of the wilderness can be used in a range of ways and evoke different types of associations. However, in a play where, as we have seen, the dangers of

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<sup>55</sup>See Vernant 1983: 135-42; Segal 1981: 27-29; Winkler 1990: 181-83; Carson 1990: 144 for discussion of this *topos*. For marriage as ploughing, see Aesch. *Eum* 658-61; Soph. *Ant.* 569; Men. *Pk.* 435-6; Luc. *Tim.* 17.

<sup>56</sup>Agamemnon's fate: Hom. *Od.* 1.35-40, 3.196-98, 3.234-310, 4.514-37, 11.404-34; Penelope's fidelity: 1.215-16, 13.333-36, 15.16-23, 18.274-80, 23.177-204.

sexuality are so foregrounded, it seems plausible that the sexual component of such imagery should be of particular importance.

That this reading of the odes is justified is confirmed by the preponderance of sexual language in the Chorus' descriptions of primitive Thebes and the acts of taming and cultivation which define her future. In the first stasimon, Thebes is described in terms reminiscent of the *locus amoenus* familiar from erotic lyric and iambic poetry (639-56): a lush and luxuriant place, fertile (χλοηφόρος, 647, 653, βαθυσπόρος, 648) shady (κατάσκιος, 654) and well-watered (καλλιπόταμος ὕδατος, 645).<sup>57</sup> The potential regulation of this natural fertility is implied by the adjective πυροφόρος ('wheat-bearing', 644) to describe the site of the new city. However, it is characterised in pre-agricultural terms, and praised for its dewy rivers, luxuriant grasses and shady overgrowth. The goddesses named at the end of the ode, Io, Persephone and Demeter, (683-89) are themselves figures in stories about sexual development and its dangers. Io and Persephone are both girls whose transition to maturity becomes problematic: Io is dehumanised at the moment of reaching sexual adulthood, while Persephone is literally married to death, symbolising the irreversible change from *parthenos* to *gunē*, and the potential traumas associated with it.<sup>58</sup> In the second stasimon too, Thebes is described as a *locus amoenus*: at 801-2 it is praised for its shady foliage and its association with Artemis, goddess of virginity as well as of the wilderness (ὦ ζαθέων πετάλων πολυθηρότα-/ τον νάπος, Ἀρτέμιδος χιονοτρόφον ὄμμα Κιθαιρών), while at 826-7 it is again described in terms of fertilising rivers and fruitful land (Δίρκα χλοεροτρόφον ἄι πεδίων / πρόπαρ Ἴσμηνοῦ καταδεύει).

This idea is enriched if we examine the presentation of these monsters and the language associated with them. Both the Sphinx and the Serpent are presented as crucial elements in the causal chain affecting Thebes, and act as pieces of recurring imagery underpinning and linking the choral odes.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, both monsters have a direct impact on the events of the play. The Sphinx is named as the origin of the suffering of the Labdacid house (ὦ τλήμων, οἶον τέρμον', Ἰοκάστη, βίου / γάμων τε τῶν σῶν Σφιγγὸς αἰνιγμοῖς ἔτλης, 1352-3). She is the cause of Jocasta's marriage to Oedipus, and of its resulting catastrophic events. As

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<sup>57</sup> For the sexualised *locus amoenus* cf. Hom. *Il.* 14.294-351; *HHDem* 2-14; Archil. fr. 196a W; Sapph. fr. 2 V; Ibyc. fr. 286 *PMGF*: see Vernant (1983): 135-42; Segal (1981): 27-29.

<sup>58</sup> As Luschnig 1995 196 notes, "even fertility goddesses are mixed up with war".

<sup>59</sup> The Serpent is mentioned at 654-75, 818-821, 1062-6, and the Sphinx at 806-8, 1018-42.

commentators have noted, she represents not only the triumph of Oedipus' intelligence, but also the curse he and his family inflict upon the city.<sup>60</sup> Whereas Sophocles' *OT* uses the Sphinx to represent the debt that the community owes to Oedipus for saving the city (35-6, 391-98, 504-10, 1197-1201), in *Phoenissae* she acts as a device to link the sins of the house of Labdacus to the suffering of the wider community. The Serpent, on the other hand, is named as the origins of Thebes' troubles, and the source of an ongoing curse affecting the whole community, which can only be satiated with further bloodshed (931-5). By understanding the Sphinx and Serpent as bridges between the symbolic world of the choral odes and the on-stage action of the rest of the play, we not only appreciate their function in the play more fully, but we also come to see the development and unity of the play's main themes.

### §V: Deadly *parthenos*: the Sphinx

The Sphinx is mentioned throughout the play, from Jocasta's history of Thebes which opens the play (45-9) to Oedipus' final lament (1760), and as we have seen, she is presented as a divine punishment for Laius and Jocasta's failure to heed divine warning (see §1 above). As such she is linked to the dysfunctional Labdacid house, and when Creon learns of Jocasta's death, it is the Sphinx he describes as responsible for her fate (1352-3). The fullest presentation of the Sphinx is found in the third stasimon, where the Chorus describe her impact on the city:

ιάλεμοι δὲ ματέρων,  
 ιάλεμοι δὲ παρθένων  
 ἐστέναζον οἴκοις·  
 ἰηϊήιον βοάν,  
 ἰηϊήιον μέλος  
 ἄλλος ἄλλοτ' ἐποτότυζε  
 διαδοχαῖς ἀνὰ πτόλιν.  
 βροντᾶι δὲ στεναγμὸς  
 ἀχά τ' ἦν ὁμοίος,  
 ὁπότε πόλεος ἀφανίσειεν  
 ἅ πτεροῦσσα παρθένος τιν' ἀνδρῶν

1033-42

“The wailing of mothers, the wailing of maidens, burst out in the houses. A cry of lament, a song of lament, was wailed out in turn by different voices at different times throughout the city. The groans and cries were like thunder, whenever the winged maiden made a man disappear from the city.”

<sup>60</sup> Cf. e.g. Podlecki 1962: 363.

The Sphinx's attacks are described in terms of her effect on the women of Thebes, a conventional device given the role of women in mourning. The girls mourning for the young men are most likely to be their prospective brides, thus allowing the men to be mourned as sons and as (potential) husbands: again, a common motif.<sup>61</sup> The focus on families is significant given the Sphinx's origins, for we are encouraged to see how the community as a whole is punished for Laius' crime. The Sphinx's effects on the city are linked to her status as a symbol of corrupted marriage, and Laius' failure to manage his own family correctly results in the disruption of other family relationships within Thebes.

However, the abduction of the young men has a further significance, for the presence of *parthenoi* rather than wives reminds us that the men are unmarried, and have been abducted before reaching full maturity. A strand of tragic imagery which has been much discussed is the "marriage to death" motif, where a young girl who dies is lamented using imagery of marriage: her death is imagined as a kind of wedding, drawing on wedding traditions which construct marriage as a form of death.<sup>62</sup> Since marriage is considered the *telos* of a woman's life, when a young girl dies unmarried the poignancy is brought out by focussing on her failure to achieve a marriage. Thus, her death is described as a form of marriage, with Hades himself sometimes playing the role of bridegroom.<sup>63</sup> Deploying this hymenaeal imagery creates an ironic effect, contrasting the normal associations of weddings (fertility and new life) with the death and destruction we see taking place on-stage. In *Phoenissae*, however, this imagery is also investigated from the male perspective. The young men are abducted before their marriage, and the community laments their failure to reach sexual maturity. Moreover, their murderer is herself a *parthenos* figure, who rather than being tamed and controlled by men, brings about their downfall. The Sphinx's ability to destroy these young men is thus a further perversion of the sexual status quo.<sup>64</sup> We can therefore see a parallel

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Mastronarde 1994 on 1034-35, who cites Pind. *Pyth.* 9.98-100, 10.59 as a parallel, where the victor is admired by young girls, giving the praise sexualised overtones. The most obvious literary parallel for mourning is Hecuba and Andromache's lament for Hector at Hom. *Il.* 24.719-60. Women also mourn at *Il.* 6.497-500 (for Hector), and 19.282-303 (for Patroclus).

<sup>62</sup> See Seaford 1987; Loraux 1987: 31-48; Rehm 1994.

<sup>63</sup> Seaford 1987: 107-8 on *Antigone*; Foley 1982 on *IA*.

<sup>64</sup> The threat posed by the Sphinx is couched in sexualised terms, but this does not mean we are required to assume that she actually copulates with the men she abducts, any more than believing that a *parthenos* who dies is literally married to Hades. Delcourt 1981 argues for an iconographic tradition presenting the Sphinx as a seductress, but while this would further corroborate the argument here, it is not necessary (see Moret 1984 for criticism of his analysis). Female monsters are conceived in sexualised terms because of the emphasis placed on their gender, and a female figure which steals away young men is sexually menacing because of the perversion of gender-norms implied. For the Sphinx as a sexual predator, see Stehle 1997: 126 on the portrayal of the

with Antigone's position at the end of the play: the Sphinx enacts on a wider and more extreme level the lessons we have already seen can be drawn from Antigone's failure to abide by the rules of appropriate behaviour.

The Sphinx, then, represents a model of disruptive sexuality. In plot terms, she is a punishment for the sexual sins of the Labdacid house, and she visits further disruption on the families of Thebes. However, as a supernatural female figure, she also embodies lessons about sexuality and gender, providing a negative *exemplum* for human females.<sup>65</sup> The Sphinx is a *parthenos* and a singer, but whereas mortal *parthenoi* can use their voices for socially integrative purposes, the Sphinx uses her song to disrupt and destroy.<sup>66</sup>

We see traces elsewhere in Greek literature of other female monsters representing something similar. At *Odyssey* 20.61-82, for example, Penelope prays to Artemis for death or to be abducted by the Harpyiae (Storm Winds) in order to escape marriage to any of the Suitors, giving the parallel of the daughters of Pandareus who were snatched away before they could be married. The most extensive parallel is that of the Sirens, who like the Sphinx are singers who use their song for destructive purposes. Both are part-monstrous, and winged, but their human aspect is that of a young girl, and as such they prey upon men. Both Sirens and Sphinxes have chthonic associations in later Greek literature and iconography.<sup>67</sup>

In the *Odyssey*, the threat the Sirens pose is seductive but not explicitly sexual: while we are told that they charm men to forget their families and homeland (12.41-6), any erotic overtones are suppressed, and their song leads to death, not an erotic encounter.<sup>68</sup> However, the Sirens are sexualised in that they fit into a wider pattern of beguiling female characters who seek to delay Odysseus' return. Locating the Sirens in a flowery meadow (λειμῶν ἀνθεμόεις, 12.159) highlights this motif: not only does the meadow indicate seduction scenes

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Sphinx in the ithyphallic song for Demetrius Poliorcetes (Athen. 6.253bc), who notes how a (political) enemy to the male-singers can be construed as female and monstrous.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Suda μ 385 = 3.344.27 Adler; Diogenian. 6.35, which suggests that the Sphinx was a metaphor for prostitutes.

<sup>66</sup> The Sphinx is described as a *parthenos* and a singer at 48-50; 806-8; 1728-30. See also Soph. *OT* 36; 130; 508; 1199.

<sup>67</sup> The Sphinx is commonly found on grave monuments: see Sourvinou-Inwood 1995: 271-72 (and n.665 for further bibliography on her chthonic roles). For the Sirens as a funerary decoration see Ridgway 1977: 160-62, and for their chthonic aspect see Roscher, *GRM* iv. 607-8. Sirens are also described as companions of Persephone in the underworld: cf. Eur. *Hel.* 167-78; Apoll. Rhod. 4.894-7, Ovid, *Met.* 5.552, Claudian *de rapt. Pros.* 190.

<sup>68</sup> The scholia on *Od.* 12.43 suggest that the sailors waste away because the enchantment of the song makes them forget to eat.

in Greek poetry in general, but within the poem it recalls the flowery meadows of Calypso's island (λειμῶνες μαλακοὶ ἴου ἠδὲ σελίνου, 5.72).<sup>69</sup> In addition, the Sirens are (like the Sphinx in *Phoenissae*) described in terms of their destructive effects on marriage and the family unit, as well as on the individual men they kill (12.41-4). As we have been shown by observing life on Ithaca in Odysseus' absence, the wives and families of men who disappear merit our sympathy just as much as the men themselves. In the few surviving fragments of parthenaic song, we find choruses of young girls using the Siren as an alternative and powerful form of female song, which must be rejected by the mortal *parthenoi*, for the purpose of *partheneia* is to integrate the young women into society, not allow them to become a threat to it.<sup>70</sup>

Monstrous virginal figures thus present a negative paradigm for mortal *parthenoi*, symbolising the dangerous nature of mismanaged female sexuality. Like many *rites-de-passage*, young girls' transitions are conceptualised as a potentially hazardous time: examples like the Sphinx and the Sirens demonstrate the importance to society as a whole of ensuring that sexual norms are maintained, for failed transitions damage the wider community as well as the girls themselves. Within the world of the play, Antigone's failure to achieve maturity in a normal fashion provides a parallel. Rather than reaching her *telos* of marriage, she herself becomes a Sphinx-like figure: a *parthenos* whose violent rejection of normal sexuality leads her to become dangerous to men, and to the community as a whole.

## §VI: Another way? The Chorus

We have seen, then, that malfunctioning sexuality lies at the heart of the problems facing Thebes in *Phoenissae*, and that the curses on the city and the Labdacid house perpetuate these problems throughout the generations. Part of the play's impact, therefore, is to affirm the importance of managing sexuality and family relations appropriately, and to remind the audience of the importance of these elements to a harmonious and well-functioning society. In order to achieve this, the play provides negative paradigms: on a symbolic level the Sphinx and Serpent; on a literal level the members of the Theban royal family. As well as these

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<sup>69</sup> Gresseth 1970: 208-9 notes this parallelism, but suggests the meadow indicates death or supernatural activity (citing the meadow in the underworld at 11.539 as further evidence). However, the meadow as an erotic motif is well known in Greek poetry: cf. Hom. *Il.* 14.294-351; Sapph. fr. 2 V; Archil. fr. 196a W. See Vernant 1983: 135-42; Segal 1981 27-29.

<sup>70</sup> Sirens appear as rival singers at Alc. fr. 1. 96-9; Pind. fr. 94b.13-17. For the symbolic role that Sirens can play in parthenaic poetry, see Bowie forthcoming; Stehle 1997: 95-99.

negative models, however, the play also presents a positive one in the Chorus of Phoenician women who give the play its title.

The choice of chorus is highly unusual: whereas tragedy tends to present choruses with a stake in the action, the Phoenician women are not only foreigners, but are only in Thebes by chance, and for a brief period (216-25). Explaining it away as an opportunity to indulge in exoticism is not entirely satisfactory: Euripides could have introduced an irrelevant yet exotic Chorus into any play, so why choose this one?<sup>71</sup> As various scholars have noted, a detached and objective Chorus provides certain dramatic benefits, whilst a Phoenician Chorus emphasises the racial links between Thebes and Phoenicia, thus allowing the Chorus to become emblematic of the city's mythological heritage.<sup>72</sup> However, this still seems somewhat unsatisfactory, for then the back-story to explain the Chorus' presence is unnecessarily complicated. If all Euripides needed was a justification for the presence of a group of Phoenicians, why not simply make them a group of slaves? Yet the story of their selection for the shrine at Delphi is not only improbable (in real-life terms), but is also felt to be significant enough that most of the *parodos* is devoted to explaining it (cf. esp. 202-5).

On closer analysis, however, the story behind the Chorus' presence in Thebes is connected to the play on a more thematic level. The Chorus are a group of *parthenoi*, who have been selected as such in order to perform a religiously sanctioned rite (220-5, 234-8). We are not told the reasons for the Chorus' journey to Delphi, or the nature of their service. However, the Chorus stress their pride in being selected, and the honour of serving at the shrine (214-5, 234-6). Understanding them as exiles or war-captives therefore makes little sense: the joyous Chorus could not set a more different tone to the play's description of the horrors of exile (388-407, 1003-5), while their free movement in the city and pride in their status makes it unlikely they are captives.<sup>73</sup> The girls describe themselves as ἀκροθίνια (203), which can indeed refer to captives taken in war.<sup>74</sup> However, the word literally means the choice of the

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<sup>71</sup> The scholiast on 202 suggests that a foreign Chorus can criticise Eteocles more freely: as various scholars have noted, however, the Chorus hardly criticises Eteocles and remains fairly detached from detailed judgement of the play's characters. Rawson 1970: 112 and de Romilly 1967: 114 suggest a deliberate contrast with the local (and personally involved) Chorus of Aeschylus' *Seven*. However, this seems a weak reason to set up as complicated a scenario as Euripides creates to explain the presence of the Phoenician women, who require the entire *parodos* to explain their story.

<sup>72</sup> Luschnig 1995: 196 focuses on the advantages of an objective Chorus for Euripides' telling of the myth, while Arthur 1977 and Hartigan 2000 stress the ethnic heritage. See also Mastronarde 1994: 208-9.

<sup>73</sup> See Mastronarde 1994: 208.

<sup>74</sup> Scholars who take the Chorus to be war-captives (e.g. Mueller-Goldingen 1985) rely on this phrase.

heap, that is, the first-fruits of the harvest, given to the gods in thanks. The word's common use to mean "war-spoils" is thus a figure of speech, and is frequently clarified by the addition of πολέμου: the word can be used more broadly to indicate any choice offering.<sup>75</sup> Given the word's associations with the harvest-fruits, we can see the link between natural and human fertility which the choral odes will go on to expand upon.<sup>76</sup>

Moreover, when we examine the Chorus' self-description in closer detail, it becomes apparent that they emphasise their status as *parthenoi* and see it as integral to the nature of their religious service:

(214-25)

πόλεος ἐκπροκριθεῖς ἑμᾶς  
καλλιστεύματα Λοξίαι  
Καδμείαν ἔμολον γᾶν,  
κλεινῶν Ἀγηνοριδᾶν  
ὁμογενεῖς ἐπὶ Λαΐου  
πεμφθεῖς ἔνθαδε πύργους.  
ἴσα δ' ἀγάλμασι χρυσοτεύ-  
κτοῖς Φοίβωι λάτρεις ἐγενόμαν·  
ἔτι δὲ Κασταλίας ὕδωρ  
περιμένει με κόμας ἑμᾶς  
δεῦσαι παρθένιον χλιδᾶν  
Φοιβείαισι λατρείαις

“Selected from my city as an offering of beauty for Loxias, I came to the Cadmeian land, home of the famous descendants of Agenor, I was escorted to the towers of Laius' family. I became a servant of Phoebus, like a statue of gold. The water of Castalia awaits me, to make my hair damp, my maidenly luxury, for the service of Phoebus”.

The Chorus have been selected to serve Apollo from the other girls of their age-group because of their beauty, and this suggests the girls are approaching marriageable age and therefore already sexually desirable. We find a parallel in Alcman's first *partheneion*, which emphasises the beauty of Hagesichora and Agido and thus displays them to the audience in a

<sup>75</sup> As Mastronarde 1994 on 203 notes, “it is uncertain whether the notion originated with heaps of crops or war-booty”. Suda α 1002= 1.92.13 Adler gives both meanings, but places the harvest-offerings first, while the scholiast on Pind. *Ol.* 2 feels the need to give the literal meaning of ἀκροθίνια to explain its use in the context of war-spoils. For other figurative uses, see Aesch. *Eum.* 834 (of the harvest-offerings brought to the Eumenides); Eur. *IT* 75, 459 (of Artemis' demand for human-sacrifice), *Her.* 476 (where Euripides coins a verb ἀκροθινιάζομαι meaning “to select the best”); Pind. fr. dub. 357 (of hunting spoils). The scholiast on *Phoen.* 203 glosses the use of ἀκροθίνια by explaining that the Chorus are αἱ τῶν καρπῶν ἀπαρχαὶ (“the sacrificial first-fruits”), thus stressing the word's associations with natural fertility.

<sup>76</sup> We find a similar use of language at *IT* 18-21, where Iphigeneia describes herself as owed to Artemis on account of her beauty. The *IT*'s plot hinges on the dysfunctional rites of Taurian Artemis, whereby Iphigeneia, a *parthenos* robbed of her own transition, becomes a destructive figure (like a Sphinx or Siren).

safe and socially-sanctioned way.<sup>77</sup> The Chorus, imagining their future life of service at Delphi, describe wetting their hair with water from the sacred spring of Castalia, a reference to the importance of purification before entering the shrine.<sup>78</sup> However, the image conjures up other connotations. Hair is used to represent the desirability of *parthenoi*: Alcman's girls praise Hagesichora's golden hair (fr. 1.51-4 *PMGF*), and list hair in their catalogue of female beauty (fr. 1.70 *PMGF*), while in the more fragmentary *second partheneion* (fr. 3 *PMGF*), the chorus of *parthenoi* toss their blonde hair (9) and praise the perfumed hair of their beloved Astymeloisa (71-2). Similarly, Archilochus evokes the erotic attraction of a young girl by describing her hair as loose (fr 31 W). In addition, the image of young women occupied in a ritual bath in a sacred stream is a common feature of marriage ritual: it was conventional for the bride to begin her wedding day by bathing in the waters of her local river.<sup>79</sup>

So while generally vague about the reasons for their journey to Delphi, the Chorus describe their service in terms which emphasise that they are *parthenoi* reaching an age to negotiate their transition into adulthood. The play never directly states the terms on which the Chorus will serve Apollo, and whether their service is fixed-term or permanent. However, their wish to bear sons like Menoecus at 1060-61 (γενοίμεθ' ὧδε ματέρες / γενοίμεθ' εὔτεκνοι) is often taken to imply they will not stay at Delphi indefinitely.<sup>80</sup> In addition, the tradition of captive (and therefore permanent) *hierodouloi* is an Asian rather than a Greek one, and it therefore seems unlikely that a Greek audience would tend to that conclusion. In Greek foundation myths, citizens may be dedicated at Delphi, but they later leave the shrine in order to settle in a colony.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Most scholars now agree that Alcman's *partheneion* reflects some form of transition rite. See Calame 1977; Stehle 1997 chs 1 and 2.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Eur. *Ion* 95-7.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Thuc. 2.15.5. The ritual prayer of girls in the Troad for the river Scamandrus to take their virginity ([Aeschines] *Epist.* 10.3-5) also indicates a role for rivers in female transition ritual.

<sup>80</sup> Mastronarde 1994 on 1060-1 notes that this wish can be understood as a general piece of praise rather than taken literally. However, the other examples he gives of similar wishes in tragedy differ in that they are not implausible for the chorus of those plays to make: the Chorus' back-story is complicated enough to draw our attention to it, and if Euripides has intended them to be understood as a chorus of perpetual virgins by religious design, making them wish for a son seems oddly jarring. In contrast, a chorus of old men wishing for a virtuous wife (cf. *Alc.* 473) or of slaves wishing to be of good birth (*Andr.* 766-9) seems to clash with their characterisation less.

<sup>81</sup> E.g. Strabo 6.1.6; Plut. *Thes.* 16.2. Ion in Eur. *Ion* is no counter-example for he is a foundling and so has been brought up to serve at the shrine, not dedicated from a community elsewhere. See Mastronarde 1994 208; Graf, F., "Hierodouloi.", in Cancik, H. and Schneider, H. eds *Brill's New Pauly* (6.308). Brill, 2007.

In contrast, transition rituals which involve a temporary separation followed by a reintegration are common in Greek *rites-de-passage*, as in many other cultures.<sup>82</sup> In fact, by constructing the Chorus' experience using the vocabulary of female transition rituals, Euripides encourages the audience to connect the Chorus' position to these other rites. The best-attested equivalent is the Athenian *arkteia*, which contains interesting parallels with the Chorus' situation: a group of girls is selected but conceptualised as representative of the whole community;<sup>83</sup> they are removed from normal society for a period of time in order to perform a special religious service; the description of the rituals play on notions of female sexual development, highlighting the transitional function they perform.<sup>84</sup>

The Chorus' optimism thus highlights the contrast between their own experience and the chaotic situation in Thebes, while the shared ethnic roots of the two groups encourage us to link the two. Thebes demonstrates the problem of sexual development, and the risks to the individual and to the wider community when such social norms are undermined. Conversely, the Chorus represents a positive model, reminding the audience that these potentially problematic issues can be managed without unleashing the disasters that are visited upon Thebes.

## Conclusion

At the core of *Phoenissae* lies a concern with the issues surrounding sexual, social, and familial norms, and the Oedipus myth, with its focus on a perverted family, provides an obvious filter for the exploration of these issues.<sup>85</sup> This theme is most fully embodied in the

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<sup>82</sup> The pattern of separation, isolation and then return is a common one in transition rituals; see van Gennep 1960 for examples from various cultures.

<sup>83</sup> The Suda claims that all Athenian girls had to participate in the ritual (*α* 3958 = i. 361.4 Adler). However, this is incompatible with the scholiast on *Lysistrata* 645 which speaks of *epilegomenai parthenoi*, and modern scholars have largely rejected the idea of universal participation on grounds of sheer practicality. The concept of representative initiation has been challenged by recent scholars (cf. Faraone 2003: 47), but we can nevertheless understand the relationship between the chosen girls and the wider cohort of their age-group as representative "in the sense that the ritual represents something about the meaning of that age-class to the wider community" (Redfield 2003: 91; cf. Parker 2005: 227-28). For an account of the sources and the debate, see Sourvinou-Inwood 1988; Dowden 1989: 24-31; Parker 2005: 232-35.

<sup>84</sup> See Sourvinou-Inwood 1988; Parker 2005: 242-3.

<sup>85</sup> The anonymous reader is concerned as to why the audience should need to be reminded that uncontrolled sexuality can be problematic: a moral which is hardly controversial. I would respond firstly that tragedy often upholds generally agreed truths via negative *exempla* (for example the dangers of excessive behaviour, the need to respect legitimate roles within the *oikos*), and secondly that the dangers of inappropriate sexuality are a particularly common tragic theme (e.g. Hippolytus' failure to respect Aphrodite in Eur. *Hipp.*; Heracles' or Agamemnon's insistence on introducing a concubine and thus destabilising marital roles (Aesch. *Ag.*; Soph. *Trach.*)). This moralising should be understood not as conscious "propaganda" but as deriving from a core set of shared values whose exploration and affirmation is satisfying.

portrayal of Antigone, and it is in this light that we should interpret her involvement in the action. Antigone's journey from an innocent *parthenos* to a wilful and threatening figure demonstrates the Labdacid curse in action: brought about through the family's sexual misdemeanours, it operates by the further perversion of sexual and familial roles. Antigone's corruption into a female who rejects social norms and becomes a danger to males is paralleled symbolically by the Sphinx, another dangerous *parthenos* activated by the Labdacids' transgressions, while the damaging effects the royal house has on the wider community is exemplified by the demand for Menoeceus' untimely death. The imagery of monsters threatening the city also is more broadly linked to the imagery of sexual abnormality, through the metaphors of fertility and cultivation which underpins the choral odes.

Tragedy frequently imparts moral lessons, and it does so most obviously via the figures of admirable yet flawed heroes, whose failings bring about their own destruction. Yet sometimes the plays more overtly highlight a positive outcome to be salvaged from the destruction onstage: for example in Euripides' frequent references to the cults that are founded as a result of the action we have seen.<sup>86</sup> In the case of *Phoenissae*, this alternative model is never overtly stated, yet is present through the presentation of the Chorus and their future world of peace and joy. The Phoenician Chorus, whose city shares a common ancestry with Thebes, represents what Thebes could have been. Just as their harmonious future forms a contrast with Thebes' war-torn present, so too the Chorus also embody a positive set of sexual norms, and a community where the potential hazards of sexual development are regulated through religious activity. The Phoenician women, therefore, far from being problematic or irrelevant, lie at the heart of the play's ethical and religious concerns, while their symbolic function is underpinned by the play's broader narrative and pervasive patterns of imagery.

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<sup>86</sup> E.g. Eur. *Hel.* 1666-9; *Her.* 1331-3; *Hipp.* 1425-7; *IT* 1462-6; *Med.* 1381-3.

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