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Phoenician Women

Laura Swift

Play and Text

Phoenician Women reminds us that the judgements we make in studying Greek drama are not aesthetic absolutes but are grounded in our cultural preconceptions. It is rarely performed today and generally regarded as one of Euripides' lesser works, but in the Byzantine period it was, along with *Orestes* and *Hecuba*, one of his most popular plays.¹ It offers an action-packed exploration of the troubled Labdacid house, featuring almost every important figure from Theban myth. Unlike tragedies that focus on a single character or pivotal moment, *Phoenician Women* contains several different plotlines. It follows Jocasta's doomed attempts to reconcile her sons Polynices and Eteocles, Creon's dilemma as to whether to sacrifice his son to save the city, Antigone's journey from naïve young girl to an assertive figure prepared to defy Creon, and finishes with a surprise appearance by Oedipus. This varied succession of incidents is overseen by the chorus, a group of Phoenician maidens on their way to Delphi, who are trapped in Thebes because of the war.

The play opens with Jocasta, who, unlike in other versions of the myth, remains alive after the discovery of her incestuous marriage. Her **prologue** recounts the 'story so far', explaining the circumstances of Oedipus' birth, the discovery of his identity, and the conflict between Eteocles and Polynices (1-87). Euripides inserts an additional scene between the prologue and the parodos, where the young Antigone climbs to the roof of the palace to look at the invading army (88-201). This scene is known as the **teichoskopia**, after the Iliadic scene where Helen views the Achaean army from the walls of Troy (*Iliad* 3.161-244). The chorus of Phoenician women then enter, and in their **parodos** (202-60) explain that they are on their way to serve as temple slaves at Delphi. In the **first episode**, Polynices enters Thebes and is greeted warmly by Jocasta. However, her attempt to mediate her sons' quarrel ends in failure (443-637). This is followed by the **first stasimon**, where the chorus sing of the foundation of Thebes, and of how Cadmus slew the dragon of Ares which was guarding the sacred spring and sowed its teeth in the earth. These turned into warriors, thus producing the first generation of Thebans (638-88). In the **second episode**, Creon and Eteocles meet to discuss military strategy, and Eteocles agrees to station his best fighters at the city's seven gates (697-783). The **second stasimon** (784-832) contrasts the sphere of Dionysus with that of Ares, and then returns to the history of Thebes, including Oedipus' defeat of the Sphinx. The prophet Tiresias makes an appearance in the **third episode** in order to warn Creon that Thebes can only be saved if he sacrifices his son Menoecus (845-959). The god Ares has cursed Thebes because Cadmus, its founder, killed his sacred dragon, and Ares now demands a sacrifice from one of the descendants of the dragon's teeth. Creon orders Menoecus to save himself by fleeing (960-90) and the young man appears to obey, but when left alone on stage he reveals to the chorus that he intends to sacrifice himself to save the city (990-1018). In the **third stasimon**, the chorus sing again of the Sphinx and Oedipus, and praise Menoecus (1018-1065). The **fourth episode** begins with a messenger, who has come to report affairs on the battlefield. He warns Jocasta that her sons are about to fight each other in single combat (1066-1264), and she orders Antigone to leave the palace and come with her to supplicate her brothers (1265-83). The chorus express their fear for the brothers in the **fourth**

¹ See Bremer (1985); Cribbore (2001).

stasimon (1284-1307), and these fears are quickly realised, since the **fifth episode** (1308-1479) contains a second messenger speech, reporting Eteocles' and Polynices' deaths and Jocasta's suicide over their bodies (1310-1479). Antigone now arrives and mourns her family in a lyric aria (1485-1538), at the end of which she summons Oedipus from the house. Father and daughter sing of their grief in a duet (1539-81). In the **exodos** (1582-1709), Creon announces that Oedipus must go into exile, refuses Polynices burial, and orders Antigone to marry Haemon, but Antigone defies him and goes into exile with her father.

The lavish scale of the action, with its many twists and turns, was presumably part of what appealed to Byzantine audiences, along with the play's innovation with myth, flamboyant monodies, and exotic chorus.² However the complexity of the plot was also criticised in antiquity, and the critic whose views are preserved in the third hypothesis to the play described it as 'over-stuffed', and singles out several scenes as being unnecessary. The question of coherence has dogged studies of *Phoenician Women* ever since, and scholars' desire to streamline the play can be seen in attempts beginning in the eighteenth century to excise awkward passages as interpolations. The state of the text remains a problem for those wishing to study the play, since there is little agreement on how much is authentically Euripidean. A detailed study of the text and its most controversial passages goes beyond the scope of a Companion volume, and for the purposes of this chapter, I follow the analysis of Donald Mastronarde's large scale commentary, which errs on the side of generosity regarding which passages should be retained.

The wide-ranging plot allows Euripides to explore many aspects of Theban myth, and this chapter will begin with an overview of how *Phoenician Women* reflects and adapts earlier versions of the Theban stories. However the play's complicated structure should not make us overlook how the divergent narratives are connected, and so I will also outline ways in which *Phoenician Women* can be said to be a coherent whole.³ It is important not to be beguiled by Aristotle's analysis of tragedy as depicting the fall of a great individual, since this is only one strategy for a tragedian to choose. *Phoenician Women* makes better sense if, rather than focusing on individual characters, we look for overarching ideas that connect the separate plotlines, and make them more than a series of vignettes. The chapter will therefore explore three of the most important themes, those of community, family, and the history of Thebes. The chapter will close with an examination of the chorus. This group of Phoenician women are the most surprising choice in any Euripidean play, since they lack any connection with the play's action or setting, yet as we shall see, the chorus provide an essential unity to the play, by shedding light on many of its central ideas.

Myth

Phoenician Women highlights Euripides' creativity with myth, as well as the way that he self-consciously positions his work within the mythological and literary tradition. The myths of Thebes and the Labdacid house were well-worn territory for poets, and the story was established enough by Homer's day that he could simply allude to it in Odysseus' journey to the underworld (*Od.* 11.271-80). As well as treatments of the myth by the epic and lyric poets,

² For a positive view of the play's variegated style, see Michelini (2009).

³ For discussion of the unity of the play, see Podlecki (1962); Mastronarde (1974) 267-96; Mueller-Goldingen (1985) 1-5; Foley (1985) 112-32; Luschig (1995) 173. For scholars instead arguing for a lack of unity, cf. e.g. Lesky (1956) 191; Kitto (1961) 351.

Euripides had to position his work against previous tragic versions, notably Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, which like *Phoenician Women* focuses on Polynices' attack on Thebes and the brothers' duel and death. Far from ignoring the existence of the Aeschylean treatment, Euripides draws his audience's attention to it, and so highlights ways in which his own play diverges.⁴ For example, when Eteocles decides to position champions at each of the city's seven gates, he remarks to Creon 'To tell you the name of each man would consume too much time with the enemy encamped at our very gates' (751-2), a playful dig at Aeschylus' treatment, where the ordering of the warriors at the gates forms the centrepiece of the play. This kind of self-consciousness is typical of Euripides' style; and as well as showing the poet's awareness of his role in the tradition, it also flatters the audience's learning.⁵ Similarly, Euripides presents familiar characters in a new light, and so alludes to his awareness of their previous incarnations. Eteocles is not the duty-driven king of Aeschylus, but a selfish tyrant who admits that his only concern is to keep power for himself (503-8). His brother Polynices enters the stage not as a fearsome aggressor, but as a timid man who jumps at shadows (269-70), while Creon, who in Sophocles' *Antigone* advocates duty to the city above all else, cries out 'city be damned' (919) when required to sacrifice his own family.

Any innovative poet would adapt a myth to suit his own ends, and by Euripides' day multiple versions of the story existed. For example, in the *Odyssey*, though Oedipus' mother-wife (here called Epicaste) kills herself upon discovering her husband's true identity, Oedipus himself lives on as king of Thebes. In the epic tradition, Oedipus' children are not the products of incest, and making them such seems to have been an innovation of the tragedians.⁶ Tragedy tends to explore the darker side of human nature and prioritises myths of dysfunctional families, so it is not surprising that the tragedians increased the horror of Oedipus' marriage by extending its consequences into the next generation. In Euripides' play, the pollution of the incestuous marriage is taken still further, since Jocasta has not killed herself in shame but lives on in Thebes as the Queen Mother. The incestuous nature of the marriage appears to be of relatively little importance to the characters, and as March notes, 'there seems to be no frenzied sense of horror and shame about the incest . . . , but rather a quiet feeling of resigned sadness'.⁷ Jocasta acts with authority throughout the play, and appears unsullied by her past. This lack of concern by the characters need not, of course, be shared by the audience, and Jocasta's insouciance about her marriage must have been shocking. Euripides here adapts the Sophoclean innovation that makes Oedipus live on in the palace, with his exile delayed to a future date, a motif we find in both *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. In *Phoenician Women*, Oedipus is kept in Thebes despite (as Creon reveals at the end of the play) a prophecy by Tiresias that his presence in Thebes will blight the city (1590-1), a further indication of the problems for the wider community caused by the

⁴ For Euripides' self-conscious use of intertextuality, see Papadopoulou (2008) 27-48; Burian (2009) 17-20; Lamari (2009).

⁵ Audience-members who were unfamiliar with Aeschylus' version would not feel excluded, since the allusion would simply pass unnoticed.

⁶ No incestuous children are mentioned in the *Odyssey*, and the gods reveal the truth soon after the marriage: on the details of how we should interpret this passage see Tsitsibakou-Vasalos (1989); Davies and Finglass (2014) 360 n.18. In the *Oedipodeia* Oedipus' children are the products of a second marriage (*Oedipodeia* fr. 1 *GEF*, Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.5.8, and the Pisander scholium, *PEG* I 17-19), while in Pherecydes Eteocles and Polynices are born from this second marriage, and Oedipus' earlier incestuous children are killed (fr. 95 *EGM*). Conversely, Oedipus' mother-wife is also the mother of his children in Aesch. *Seven*, Soph. *Ant.*, *OT*.

⁷ March (1987) 130.

Labdacids' sexual distortions. As we shall see later in this chapter, dysfunctional sexuality is a central theme of *Phoenician Women*, and Jocasta and Oedipus's ongoing presence in Thebes is crucial in establishing this pattern.

If the incestuous queen living on is probably Euripides' innovation, other aspects of Jocasta's characterisation allude to earlier treatments of the myth, and in particular Stesichorus' *Thebais*, a lyric poem that dealt with the quarrel between Eteocles and Polynices.⁸ In the surviving section of the poem, the mother of Eteocles and Polynices (who is probably not Oedipus' mother but a second wife) attempts to mediate between her sons, hoping that her intervention may prevent disaster. Euripides adapts the details of this intervention, since in Stesichorus, the mediation occurs at the time of the original conflict between the brothers. Whereas epic and narrative lyric can tell long sections of a myth, the temporal action of tragedy is compressed (usually to a single day), and so by placing Jocasta's intervention later, Euripides makes it possible to portray it directly within his play. Moving it also changes the tone: whereas the Stesichorean queen hopes that she can pre-empt catastrophe, Jocasta is involved in a last-ditch attempt to save her sons when they are far gone in their hatred, which makes for a more desperate situation. Nevertheless, the authority with which Jocasta speaks and acts reflects Stesichorus' portrayal of a queen who takes a leading role in public life.⁹

The characterisation of the two brothers is possibly also inspired by Stesichorus. The names of Eteocles ('true glory') and Polynices ('many quarrels') suggest that Eteocles was originally felt to be the virtuous brother and Polynices the wicked one. In Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, culpability is unclear, but Eteocles defends the justice of his position (658-71), while in Sophocles' *Antigone*, Creon argues that Polynices' actions make him an enemy of the city (198-210). In *Phoenician Women*, on the other hand, Euripides goes further in reversing the original relationship between the brother, by making it clear that Eteocles has reneged on an agreement to share power (69-76) and by having him openly declare that he cares less for justice than for power (503-25). Though the fragmentary state of Stesichorus' text means we must be cautious, he too appears to have placed Eteocles in the wrong, since Tiresias appears to criticise him and to forewarn that he will withhold what belongs to Polynices (282-3).¹⁰ In *Phoenician Women*, while Polynices may act wrongly in attacking his homeland, Euripides creates sympathy by allowing him to describe the sorrows of his life in exile (388-407), and by showing the love he feels for his mother and sister (616-18). Conversely, Eteocles is criticised by his own mother as an avaricious usurper (549-67), and fulfils many of the negative stereotypes the Greeks held about tyrants: greed, inability to control his desires, and lack of concern for justice.¹¹

The most significant Euripidean innovation is the episode involving Menoeceus, which appears to have been created for this play.¹² Euripides elsewhere shows a fondness for the motif of self-sacrifice, and several plays contain virgins who willingly lay down their lives (*Children of Heracles*, *Hecuba*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Erechtheus*). In *Children of Heracles* and

⁸ Fr. 97 Finglass. The original title of this poem is not attested, but in calling it *Thebais* I follow Davies and Finglass (2014). For Stesichorus' influence on *Phoenician Women*, see Maingon (1989) 52; Zeitlin (2008) 329; Lamari (2010); Ercoles and Fiorentini (2011); Swift (2015); Finglass (forthcoming).

⁹ For further discussion see Swift (2015) 140-3.

¹⁰ See Swift (2015) 142.

¹¹ On the characterisation of the two brothers, see Mueller-Goldingen (1985) 36; Mastronarde (1994) 27-8. For justice as a theme in the play, see Papadodima (2011) 31-5.

¹² See Mastronarde (1994) 28-9.

Erechtheus, this sacrifice is required to preserve the wider community, and so is likened to the sacrifice a soldier makes when he risks his life defending his country. In *Phoenician Women* Euripides adapts this trope, making the character in question a youth rather than a girl. Menoeceus is thus contrasted with the other two young men in the play, Eteocles and Polynices, and his true patriotism is set against their selfishness. Menoeceus is chosen for sacrifice because he is a virgin (944-6), and because he is a descendant of the Spartoi, rather than a member of the Labdacid house (940-3), and thus his fate highlights the themes of family and distorted sexuality that run through the play. The Menoeceus episode also unites Thebes' past history with its present, and the cost of imposing civilisation on the wilderness, another central theme of the play. It now remains for us to turn directly to these themes, and investigate what they contribute to our understanding of *Phoenician Women*.

City and homeland

The fate of Thebes forms the constant backdrop to the decisions made by the characters, and each of them must grapple with the question of how much they owe to their community, and how they should relate to it.¹³ In a city at war, the fate of the city and of its inhabitants are linked, yet this is a conflict caused by a disagreement over who should rule the city, and raises questions of how far an individual can press his claims to justice when this endangers the wider group. The chorus stand in contrast, since as foreigners who are merely passing through Thebes on their way to Delphi, they are entirely distanced from the city and her struggles.¹⁴ While they express warm sentiments about Thebes, their detachment sets into relief the other characters' close connection with their city.

As we have seen, *Phoenician Women* overturns mythological convention by presenting Polynices as the righteous brother, with Eteocles a usurper. But although Polynices has a legitimate grievance, since he has been exiled from his homeland, he addresses it by endangering the community he claims to love. This tension is highlighted early in the play, and is one of the functions of the *teichoskopia* scene, where we see through Antigone how the lives of individuals depend on the safety of the wider community.¹⁵ When Antigone sees the warrior Parthenopaeus, she prays that Artemis will kill him, explaining 'he has come to my city to sack it! (153). Her old slave's reply explains why Thebes is in a dangerous predicament:

'That is my prayer too, my child! But they are coming to the land with justice on their side. And I am afraid that the gods may see this all too clearly.' (154-5)

The slave, a neutral observer, sees Polynices not as a vicious aggressor but as a wronged man, and fears that divine justice may favour his cause above the safety of Thebes and its inhabitants. Yet the slave also echoes Antigone's fear and her prayer that the gods will protect them. Thus while he implicitly criticises Eteocles for his unjust deeds, we can also appreciate that Polynices is blameworthy for bringing violence to his community. Antigone herself attempts to keep her feelings for her brother separate from her emotions about the danger she is in. When she sees Polynices she wishes she could embrace him and feels pity

¹³ The fullest study of this theme is Rawson (1970), though it has long been identified as significant, cf. Hartung (1843-4) ii.442-4; Riemschneider (1940).

¹⁴ Cf. de Romilly (1967) 114; Rawson (1970) 112. On the objectivity of the Chorus see also Luschnig (1995) 196.

¹⁵ For the importance of the *teichoskopia* scene in framing a female perspective, see Lamari (2007) 14-17.

for his position as an exile (163-7). Yet shortly afterwards, she expresses anger and hatred when she sees Capaneus, and reflects upon the life of slavery that awaits women in a conquered city (182-92). The audience is aware that while Capaneus may have uttered the boast that he can enslave the Thebans, it is Polynices, as the expedition's leader, who is ultimately responsible.

Love of country and duty to it are explored further in the scene that follows between Jocasta, Polynices, and Eteocles. In his dialogue with Jocasta, Polynices emphasises the horrors of exile, which he describes as 'the greatest calamity' (389). His description of the disadvantages faced by exiles (lack of free speech, a hand-to-mouth existence, fickle friendships) highlights the benefits of belonging to a community, as Jocasta confirms: 'Dearest to men, it seems, is native soil' (406). Polynices' love for Thebes may be eloquently expressed but it is also selfish, since he prioritises his own needs above the wellbeing of others in his community, a point he himself admits when he tells his mother that the members of his army are 'rendering me a favour that I need but that brings me pain: it is my country that I am marching against' (431-3). Moreover, Eteocles' later agreement that Polynices may remain in Thebes provided that he does not aspire to kingship (518-19) exposes the shallowness of Polynices' love of his homeland, since his real motivation is merely the desire to rule. Conversely, Eteocles appears to lack any feelings for Thebes whatsoever. His speech to Jocasta focuses on his love of power, and the sense of shame he would feel if he yielded to Polynices (503-25). Eteocles acknowledges that his actions are unjust (524), but makes no mention of the possible consequences of war, and it is left to Jocasta in her response to him to describe the misery that the sack of Thebes would inflict upon its inhabitants (561-7). Jocasta questions whether Eteocles would prefer to save his city or to be king (559-61), but it is clear to the audience that he has already made his choice, and that the safety of Thebes weighs little in the balance. Indeed, Eteocles does not respond to Jocasta's points, but merely reiterates his position, and tells her to give up her attempts to persuade him (588-93). Jocasta speaks in political terms, but her primary concern is the safety of her sons and the preservation of her family, and it is to save their lives, rather than out of a sense of political duty, that she attempts to stop the war.¹⁶

The attitude of Eteocles and Polynices is contrasted with that of Menoecus, who willingly sacrifices his life to save Thebes.¹⁷ Menoecus' death in fact makes the duel between the brothers irrelevant to the fate of the city, since his sacrifice has already guaranteed Thebes' safety before the duel. Thus the battle between the brothers determines only who shall hold power, and so strips bare the selfishness of their ambitions. Menoecus must die because he is the last descendant of the Sown Men, the autochthonous first inhabitants of Thebes, and as someone who was literally born from the soil, he represents the closest possible relationship an individual can have with his community.¹⁸ Menoecus likens the sacrifice he makes to the soldiers who are defending Thebes (999-1002). Thus while the audience may be struck by his heroism, they are also reminded that putting the wider good before individual desires is no more than what the *polis* expects of all its male citizens who must risk their lives in battle. The Chorus in turn praise Menoecus and hope to be mothers of men like him (1061-2),

¹⁶ Cf. Burian (2009) 24-5.

¹⁷ See Garzya (1962) 104-5; de Romilly (1967); Rawson (1970); Arthur (1977).

¹⁸ Cf. Papadopoulou (2001) 24; Burian (2009) 32.

reinforcing the idea that everyone in a community has a role to play in ensuring its survival, even those such as unmarried girls who play little role in public life.

Menoceus' decision emphasises another important aspect of the theme of homeland: the potential conflict between duty to family and to city.¹⁹ Despite Creon's initial patriotism ('How can I not wish to save my country?' 560), when he learns the true nature of the choice he must make, his immediate response is to save his son at the cost of the city. Unlike Eteocles and Polynices, Creon is capable of putting others before himself, and he offers to die in Menoeceus' place (968-9). However, he sees his responsibility to his own household as greater than that to the community, and claims that everyone would feel the same way ('All men alive love their children, and no one would give his own child to be killed', 965-6). When Menoeceus justifies his decision to sacrifice himself, however, he conceptualises it not as prioritising the city over the needs of his family, but as protecting both. Fleeing to save his own skin would, in his eyes, be to 'betray father, brother, and my own city' (1003-4). Yet the audience is aware that Menoeceus' choice is not as straightforward as he claims, as is reinforced by the Chorus, who praise him but comment that he is 'leaving lamentation to Creon' (1057). It is ironic that Creon, who unashamedly favours the claims of kin over those of community, takes the opposite stance when elevated to kingship. At the end of the play, he refuses Antigone the right to bury Polynices, and argues that those who betray the city must become enemies to their loved ones (1652). We might wonder whether Creon is a hypocrite who tried to avoid practising what he now preaches, or whether his change of attitude shows a recognition of his own past error. The audience's awareness that Creon himself refused to put family in second place also foreshadows Antigone's own refusal to do so, since it highlights the deep emotions that we feel towards our loved ones.

Family and sexuality

The fate of the city is entwined with that of the Labdacid house, and it is the curse upon this family that has brought Thebes into its current danger. Unlike treatments such as Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, which focus on the decisions of the human agents, *Phoenician Women* shows the role of inherited guilt in shaping the family's destiny. While the individuals in the play may believe themselves to be acting freely, they are part of a broader cycle from which they cannot extricate themselves, and we see the same pattern of mistakes across the generations.²⁰ In the case of the Labdacids, the trait that brings the family into ruin is their inability to manage sexual and familial relationships appropriately. In the prologue, Jocasta highlights this theme, as she explains how Laius begat Oedipus against divine will, and so brought a curse upon the house. In this version, Laius is clearly warned of the consequences of begetting a child (17-20) and ignored this advice in a moment of drunken lust (21). The audience would have known of Laius' own history of sexual transgression, since in one version of the myth (told in Euripides' play *Chrysippus*), he had incurred divine anger by raping Chrysippus, the young son of his host.²¹ Jocasta's forbidden pregnancy leads to further sexual and familial transgressions, since the child Oedipus grows up to murder his father and marry his mother. The sons of this incestuous marriage are, the Chorus suggest, doomed from

¹⁹ On individual vs collective safety, see Carter (2006) 153-7.

²⁰ On inherited guilt in the play, see Sewell-Rutter (2007) 37-48; Gagné (2013) 378-86.

²¹ Whether Euripides directly alludes to this myth in *Phoenician Women* is disputed: for discussion, see Mastrorarde (1994) 31-8; West (1999) 42-3.

their origins, and it is therefore unsurprising that they come to no good (814-17).²² Jocasta too sees Laius' error, and her marriage to Oedipus, as the reasons that her household cannot escape ruin (379-81). Indeed, the youngest generation repeat the Labdacid inability to form functional sexual relationships, and so perpetuate the family curse through their own behaviour. Polynices is not only the son of a forbidden marriage, but himself makes a marriage that destroys his family, since it is through his father-in-law, Adrastus, that he has access to the army with which he will attack Thebes (427-8).

The Labdacid distortion of sexuality is further shown through the corruption of Antigone from a sheltered virgin to a maenadic figure prepared not only to defy male authority but also to reject the transition to the adult life of a married woman.²³ On Antigone's first appearances in the play she acts as a virtuous Greek maiden would be expected to: she asks her mother's permission when she wishes to leave the protection of the maiden-quarters, and is accompanied by a chaperone (89-95). Even when she does appear on-stage, she is viewing events from the roof-top of the palace rather than out in the streets, and she retreats as soon as she might be noticed by outsiders (193-201). When Jocasta orders Antigone to accompany her to the battlefield, she is hesitant, and afraid to be seen in public (1275-6). Yet once the curse has exacted its toll on her brothers and mother, Antigone undergoes a drastic change, and the girl who appears in the final scene is a very different character, who rejects maidenly modesty in an ostentatious display of grief, and who describes herself as a Bacchant (1485-92). Just as Laius at the start of the play was said to commit his crime (forbidden relations with Jocasta) under the influence of Dionysus (21), so too Antigone is likened to a devotee of the god at the point where she transgresses against the normal sexual and social boundaries. When Creon orders Antigone to return to her maidenly lifestyle within the house (1635-8), she refuses, and threatens to murder her betrothed, Haemon, if she is forced to marry him (1675). Thus the Antigone of the final scene is an ambiguous figure: while we may admire her devotion to her father and brother, we also see how her life is shaped by the family curse, and how she too comes to perpetuate the Labdacid inability to form healthy sexual relationships.

The dangers of mismanaged sexuality are explored at the symbolic level through the figure of the Sphinx, who is mentioned throughout the play from Jocasta's history of Thebes in the prologue (45-9) to Oedipus' final lament (1760). The Sphinx is sent as a divine punishment (1031-2), and according to the Pisander scholion on line 1760, her presence was Laius' punishment for conceiving a child.²⁴ If we assume that the audience were familiar with this tradition, the Sphinx's existence is therefore entwined in the Labdacid distortion of sexual norms: she is sent to Thebes because of Laius' sexual transgression, and her defeat by Oedipus enables his incestuous marriage. While in Thebes, the Sphinx preyed upon the young men, snatching them from their prospective brides before they could reach maturity, as described by the chorus in the third stasimon (1033-42). As a destructive maiden who attacks her sexual partners, the Sphinx thus reflects Antigone's journey within the play, since she too is a dangerous virgin who rejects the transition to adulthood and instead threatens to prey

²² These lines are very corrupt, but the general sense is that nothing good can come from bad beginnings, as shown by the case of the sons of Oedipus. For discussion of the variant readings and attempts to translate, see Mastronarde (1994) *ad loc.*

²³ See Burian (2009) 28-31; Swift (2009) 62-9.

²⁴ Teubner arg. 11 = Σ 1760. This scholion is much discussed: for an overview, see Mastronarde (1994) 31-8; Lloyd-Jones (2002) 3-4.

upon young men. Her effects on the city are connected with her role as a symbol of corrupted marriage, and the failings of the Labdacids result in the disruption of other Theban families, as mothers lose their sons and girls their bridegrooms.

The history of Thebes

The Sphinx is only one in a series of monsters and traumatic events that shaped Theban history, and to which *Phoenician Women* repeatedly refers. The play situates Thebes' current crisis within a broader narrative of her struggles, and traces these back to the city's original foundation. Thus it emphasises the way that history consists of repeated patterns, and how individuals cannot escape the wider context which shapes their destinies. This theme is foregrounded in the drama's opening words, where Jocasta recalls Cadmus' arrival in the land and his foundation of Thebes, and describes it as an 'unblest' day for the city (4). Since the foundation of a city is normally a cause of celebration, Jocasta's words subvert the audience's expectations of how a community should refer to its past, and indicate that Thebes suffers from a curse that can be traced back to its origins. These ideas are reinforced throughout the play, and are explored with particular force in the choral odes.²⁵ It is common in tragedy for the choral odes to provide a wider perspective on events of the play, drawing on the world of myth or on wider moral issues. Yet the Phoenician women are themselves a reminder of Thebes' ancient history, since Cadmus came to Thebes from Phoenicia, and it is particularly appropriate that they should be the ones to investigate how Thebes' past shapes its present.²⁶

Thebes' foundational act is Cadmus' slaying of Ares' dragon, which guards the sacred spring from which he must fetch water, and this story is told in the first stasimon (637-89). As in Jocasta's prologue, it is presented not as a moment of glorious heroism but as a troubling deed. Before Cadmus' arrival, Thebes is presented in utopian terms as a blessed land, whose fertility and luxuriance is emphasised (638-57). The dragon is connected with this prelapsarian state of harmony, and he is the guardian of the sacred spring (658). Euripides highlights the violence of this moment in the detail of the scene, dwelling on the choice of weaponry (a stone, 663) and the dragon's bloodied head (664). The destructive nature of Cadmus' actions is also emphasised by the repetition of the word ὄλεσε ('destroyed'), which recurs first as a verb (663) and then in the striking adjective ὄλεσίθηρος ('beast-slayer', 664). The dragon's brutal death immediately leads to further violence, since its teeth generate the Sown Men who are no sooner born than they begin to kill each other (670-3).

This choral ode is performed immediately after the quarrel between Eteocles and Polynices, where Jocasta's attempt at mediation rapidly degenerates into bitterness. The conflict between the two brothers is reflected in the chorus' account of the fratricide of the Sown Men. Thebes' history explains why the attempt at reconciliation was doomed, since from its foundation the city is enmeshed in internecine strife. As the play continues, it becomes clear that the killing of the dragon is not merely mythological background, but continues to shape the fate of Thebes. Tiresias explains that Cadmus' actions incurred the anger of Ares, who now wants vengeance for the dragon's death (931-6). Menoeceus is revealed to be one of the last descendants of the Sown Men, and is therefore doomed by his connection to Thebes'

²⁵ For a detailed discussion, see Arthur (1977).

²⁶ See Michelini (1999-2000) 43; Hartigan (2000).

autochthonous first settlers. The survival of Thebes once again depends on innocent blood, and the city's inhabitants are constrained by its past.

As Menoeceus goes to his death, the chorus sing an ode that describes the visitation of another monster, the Sphinx. Their opening words, ἔβας, ἔβας ('you came, you came', 1018) might at first appear to be directed to Menoeceus, who has just departed the stage, but it soon becomes clear that the chorus is describing significant moments in the past where a new arrival brought disaster to Thebes, first the Sphinx, and then Oedipus (1043).²⁷ Oedipus and the Sphinx repeat the pattern established by Cadmus and the dragon, whereby a human defeats a monster to help the city, but rather than being a glorious act, it ends up bringing a curse upon the community. This chain can only be broken by Menoeceus' willingness to sacrifice his life, but the audience is struck by the irony that the city can only be saved by the destruction of the best of its citizens.

The chorus

The chorus of Phoenician Women is among the play's most baffling elements. Euripides rejects the convention whereby the chorus has a strong connection to the events of the play or to the location where it is set, and instead chooses a chorus distanced as much as possible from the action. Though the chorus speak fondly of Thebes, and express sympathy for the play's characters, little is at stake for them. Their presence in Thebes is accidental, and the war that devastates the characters' lives is merely a temporary inconvenience that prevents them reaching Delphi. Nevertheless, the chorus is in fact thoroughly integrated in the play at a thematic level, and their own story ties together many of the play's underlying ideas.

As we have seen, the chorus' identity as Phoenicians allows for an exploration of Thebes' past, and their odes demonstrate how the events of the play are not random but shaped by what has gone before.²⁸ Though they dwell on the crises and monsters in Theban history, they also acknowledge brighter moments that emerge from the chaos. In the first stasimon, for example, Cadmus' slaying of the dragon is bookended by references to the divine favour that Thebes also enjoys. They sing of Thebes' special relationship with Dionysus, and the beauty of his birth there (649-57), and they pray for the protection of Persephone and Demeter, fertility goddesses who will redeem the bloodying of the earth that was begun by Cadmus and the Sown Men (681-9). Similarly, the second stasimon contrasts the bloodshed of Ares with the beauty of Dionysus' realm, and suggests that Thebes has a share in both horrors and delights (784-800). Later in the ode they refer once again to the slaughter of the dragon and the birth of the Sown Men, which they call the 'fairest reproach' to the city (821). While the slaughter of the dragon is a violent act that generated divine anger and fratricide, the militaristic origins of the city and its close ties with the land are also a source of pride. The chorus then go on to sing of gentler moments in Theban history: how the gods attended the wedding of Cadmus and Harmonia, and how Amphion built the walls of Thebes by charming the very rocks with his music (824-32). The chorus thus finish the ode by reminding the audience that Thebes is a place not only of brutal conflict, but also of harmony and music, and that the gods have blessed as well as cursed it.

²⁷ See Craik (1988); Mastronarde (1994) *ad loc.*

²⁸ For discussion of the odes, see Arthur (1977); Papadopoulou (2008) 78-87.

The chorus' own backstory also offers a positive model that contrasts with the dysfunctional lives of the characters. Their detachment from Thebes forms a contrast with the characters, who are too intimately caught up in the history of their city, since their ancestors' faults have caused damage to the city and bring about their own doom.²⁹ As foreigners displaced from their own country, and trapped before they can reach their real destination (Delphi), their position sheds light on the importance of homeland elsewhere in the play. The chorus have left their native land, yet unlike Polynices, who laments the horrors of exile, they anticipate their new life in Greece with joy, praising Delphi's landmarks and history, and praying that they may arrive safely there and serve the god (226-38). Their story reflects that of Antigone in that they are maidens who abandon their home and the conventions that govern women's lives in order to follow some higher calling. Yet while Antigone's story reflects the sexual dysfunctionality of her household, the chorus are involved in a religiously sanctioned *rite-de-passage*, which appears to increase their maidenly desirability (222-5), and which may one day lead to marriage and children (1060-1).³⁰ Both in their odes and through their characterisation, the chorus therefore hint at an alternative world where the distortions of the play are resolved, and where the relationships individuals have with their family, city, and history can both be harmonious and productive.

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²⁹ On the objectivity of the chorus, see de Romilly (1967) 114; Rawson (1970) 112; Luschnig (1995) 196.

³⁰ On the nature of the chorus' service at Delphi, see Swift (2009) 79-82.

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