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Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

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Like several other plays of Euripides, especially those of his later years, *Phoenissae* shows marked tendencies toward an 'open' form of composition and away from the 'closed' form. The latter is more typical of 'classical' forms of drama and, under the influence of Aristotle and of modern ideologies of order and coherence, has generally been preferred by influential critics.¹ The closed form tends toward concentration and self-containment, creating an impression of totality and unity through a simply organized structure with a single rhythm of rise and fall and through restriction to the deliberate actions of a few figures. The open form tends in the opposite direction, diminishing concentration and hierarchy in various ways. Event (what happens because of outside forces) becomes as prominent as, or more prominent than, action (what occurs because of the deliberate choice of a figure); the number of figures involved in the action is increased and their separate influence on the course of events reduced; the rhythm of complication and resolution is varied and multiplied; the interconnection of the acts or scenes is to be understood by an inductive movement that notes juxtapositions and implicit parallels and contrasts rather than by a deductive movement that recognizes a causal connection in terms of 'necessity or probability'. The open structure is not to be viewed as a failed effort at closed structure, but rather as a divergent choice that consciously plays against the worldview of closure and simple order.

Phoenissae is a complex but well-organized dramatic

¹ For a clear brief presentation of 'open' vs. 'closed' forms in drama, see M. Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama* (Cambridge 1988) (transl. of *Das Drama* (Frankfurt 1977)) 239–45.

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structure.¹ It does not concentrate solely on the strife and death of the sons of Oedipus, as the play's severest critics expected or demanded that it should.² Rather, it engages a whole ensemble of figures from the families of Oedipus and Creon in exploring themes of selfishness and blindness, familial disaster, familial loyalty, political duties and loyalties, divine-human interaction, and the lability of human wisdom. This is not the place for a detailed reading of the play, and it would be uneconomical to repeat here all the observations that are made about structure and function in the commentary, especially in the remarks that introduce each scene or ode (there, too, are addressed many of the complaints found in much traditional criticism of the play). This section is therefore confined to a sketch of my understanding of the play.³

The action is shaped most of all by two elements, the search for salvation and the interplay of loyalties to self, to kin, and to country in the various figures in their various situations.⁴ From the beginning, the danger to the family from Laius'

¹ See in particular Strohm on the interconnection of the episodes (against the claim that the episodes are self-standing) and Ludwig on symmetrical structure.

² Cf. Morus and esp. Hermann's *praefatio*, which has been very influential. On their view, *Phoen.* should have been a simple variation on *Septem*: after the first 637 lines, Eur. should have reported the duel and death of the brothers.

³ For fuller discussion, see my Toronto dissertation, *Studies in Euripides' Phoenissai* (1974), esp. 267–96 ('The Problem of Unity'); cf. also Mueller-Goldingen, 1–5, 267–71; Foley, 112–32; Arthur; Said.

⁴ Recognition of the importance of the themes of family and fatherland is a key element of Hartung's defence of the play against Hermann's strictures (*Euripides Restitutus* II.442–4). Cf. P. Voigt, *NJPP* 153 (1896) 817–43, who argues somewhat one-sidedly that all figures in the play except Menoecus are shown failing the city for various selfish reasons. In an interpretation distorted by Nazi ideology, Riemschneider makes the city the 'hero' of the play and judges all the figures as defenders or enemies of the state. The best discussion of this complex of themes is that of E. Rawson, 'Family and Fatherland in Euripides' *Phoenissae*', *GRBS* 11 (1970) 109–27.

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disobedience and from Oedipus' curse threatens not only the brothers but also the city. Jocasta's prologue naturally concentrates on the family's salvation, but her action is not in conflict with the best interests of the city. After an imagistic evocation of the danger to the city in the *teichoskopia*, the first episode develops the dilemma of Polynices' position (the misery of exile is both partly based on his love of fatherland and a cause of his attack on his fatherland) and the intransigence of both brothers. Despite Jocasta's noble effort at validating a world-view of order and equality sponsored by the gods, the interests of both city and family are shown to be secondary to the personal desires of the brothers, and the only new result of the meeting is that the brothers are eager to face each other in battle. Yet the attack of the Seven and the fratricidal duel are strikingly postponed. The next movement of the play, in the second and third episodes, brings about a split between the fate of the royal family and that of the city. Eteocles' strategy-session with Creon works in contrast to the famous central scene of Aeschylus' *Septem*: it is Creon who is aware of the latest military intelligence and Creon who suggests the strategy of defence at the seven gates, while Eteocles' σοφία is exposed as shallow; and the final instructions of Eteocles ensure that he himself will not know of Tiresias' advice and that his hatred will carry on beyond his death. In the Menoeceus-episode the salvation of the city is successfully separated from that of the royal family. By incorporating the legend of Cadmus into the background of this play, Euripides has contrived to establish a communal guilt that threatens to reinforce the Labdacid guilt. But this communal guilt can be separately appeased by the generous patriotism of the idealistic youth, which contrasts strongly with the selfishness of the brothers, with the inability of Creon to maintain his professed patriotism when confronted with danger to his own kin, and with the polluting rescue brought to the city by Oedipus long ago. The separation between city and royal family is then realized in the separate narratives of

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battle and duel in the fourth and fifth episodes: the main battle is won with the brothers unexpectedly still alive, but a challenge to a duel (displaced from its 'proper' position before the full-scale battle) leads finally to the expected conclusion. This sequence also allows Jocasta to make a second futile attempt at saving her sons, parallel to the first. After the death of the brothers and the suicide of Jocasta there follows a lyric lament, and Oedipus, whose presence in the house has been evoked throughout the play, is brought forth. In the final scene (if its main lines of action are accepted as Euripidean) various themes are rounded off. The exile of Oedipus is the last in a series and a renewal of his earlier state. The argument over the treatment of Polynices' corpse answers to the earlier portrayal of both Antigone and Polynices, and it highlights the familial loyalty of Antigone in contrast to the very narrow sympathies of Creon, who denies an appeal in the name of his own sister. The betrothal to Haemon, introduced in the second episode and then exploited in the third to deflect the demand for sacrifice onto Menoeceus, serves here as the linking device between Antigone's abandoned purpose of burying her brother and the new purpose of attending her blind father in exile.¹ The play ends, as often in Euripides, with the grief-stricken survivors clinging to each other, having only their human solidarity as a compensation for their suffering.

The interlocking sequences of the plot are drawn together by shared scenic and verbal motifs and repeated general motifs.² Systems of repeated imagery do not constitute the

¹ In his treatment of Antigone, therefore, Eur. features both a movement from sheltered innocence to engagement in brutal action (cf. Ion, Iphigenia in *IA*) and a reinterpretation of her traditional heroism (cf. Heracles). For the motif of Antigone as sheltered or secluded maiden, see 88–201n., 88–102n., 196–201n., 1067–283n. *ad fin.*, 1265n., 1582–709n., 1691n.

² See, e.g., Strohm, Ludwig, and Saïd, 513–18; also Podlecki, though his treatment seems to me somewhat mechanical and too inclusive.

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unity of a literary work, but they serve to underscore the analogies between disparate events and to lead an audience toward a recognition of latent connections of similarity and contrast. Among the scenic gestures may be mentioned old man and young girl joining hands (teichoskopia, exit-lyric), a daughter leading a blind father (Tiresias-scene and exodos), a speaker checking the departure of a reluctant informer (Creon and Tiresias, Jocasta and the first messenger), and supplication (Creon to Tiresias, Antigone to Creon). The most striking verbal parallels include the chorus' comment on Jocasta's love of her child (355–6 φιλότεκνον) and Creon's remark about his own (965 φιλότεκνος); Eteocles' ἐρρέτω πρόπας δόμος in 624 and Creon's χαίρτω πόλις in 919; Eteocles' οὐκ ἂν τύχοις in 615 (rejecting Polynices' desire to see his father) and Creon's οὐ γὰρ ἂν τύχοις τάδε in 1666 (rejecting Antigone's supplication on behalf of Polynices); Jocasta's πότερα τυραννεῖν ἢ πόλιν σῶσιςα θέλεις in 560 (to Eteocles) and Tiresias' ἢ γὰρ παῖδα σῶσιον ἢ πόλιν in 952 (to Creon), Creon's οὐδ' ἂν τὸν αὐτοῦ παῖδά τις δοίη κτανεῖν in 966 (trying to save Menoeceus) and οὐ φονεύσεις παῖδ' ἐμόν in 1682 (protecting Haemon).

Probably the most pervasive repeated motif in the play is that of kinship, made all the more striking by the ironic juxtaposition of the horrors of infanticide, patricide, incest, and father's curse with extreme devotion. The audience observes the loyalty of Jocasta to her sons and son/husband, the devotion of Antigone to Polynices and her father, Polynices' references to his family (both the present Jocasta and the absent father and sisters), the brother/sister tie between Creon and Jocasta and the special foster-mother tie between Menoeceus and Jocasta, and the kinship of Tyrians and Thebans through Io.¹ Related to this motif are those of

¹ Examples are too numerous to list in full; see esp. 11n., 156n., 202–60n., 288–90n., 291–2n., 433–4n., 436n., 615–16n., 691n., 769n., 784–833n., 987–8n., 1284–1307n., 1323n., 1427–79n.

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marriage, birth, and fertility,¹ shading off into the motif of disastrous marriage, incest, and monstrous births (Spartoi, Sphinx, Oedipus and his children). Fratricide, like incest, is a drastic perversion of kinship-ties, and the mutual slaughter of the Spartoi is presented as a prototype of the fratricidal duel. Exile and arrival are repeatedly evoked, and the important arrivals are ambivalent (Cadmus as founder/sinner, Oedipus as saviour/polluter, Polynices as much-loved son/attacker) or openly baneful (Sphinx). The repeated motif suggests a long-standing pattern of doom in which apparent successes mask guilt and disaster and in which the human agents, though conquerors of savage beasts, are ultimately like the beasts.² Similarly ironic motifs are the wisdom that is shallow, ineffectual, or disastrous³ and the victory that is tarnished or ignoble instead of 'fair'.⁴

The ambivalence in these actions is closely related to the double-faced relationship of the gods as benefactors and persecutors to the figures of Theban myth and the Labdacid clan. Apollo sends the founder Cadmus and saviour Oedipus and his oracle induces the Argive marriage of Polynices. Ares provides the stock of the Spartoi who people Thebes, and Earth provides the fertile plains and waters that sustain its prosperity, but the dragon and the Spartoi oppose the foundation of a human city and leave a trace of divine wrath as a stain upon the city. Epaphus, son of Io (herself once recipient of special divine persecution and favour), is summoned

¹ E.g., 1-87n., 301-54n., 638-89n., 649-56n., 666-9n., 673n., 757-65n., 784-833n., 801-2n., 814-17n., 820-1n., 1019-66n., 1043n., 1352-3n., 1436-7n., 1570-6n., 1582-1709n., 1672n., 1732n.

² For the arrival-motif see 201-60n., 295n., 638-83n., 638n., 1019-66n., 1019n.

³ Note the uses of σοφία, σοφός and other words of intellect in 453, 460, 472, 495, 498, 499, 530, 735-6, 746, 1259, 1408, 1728-31; conversely, words of folly in 395, 569, 570, 584, 763, 1612; also, the 'wisdom' of the gods, disappointing in 86, superior to the blindness of mortals acting in conformity to fate (414, 871).

⁴ See 1019-66n., 1048n.

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with Demeter and Kore to help, but the Sphinx too is a visitation from the gods. Dionysus, product of a strange birth himself and sponsor of a magical fertility, represents a memory of the frenzy of joyful worship that is now expelled by a frenzy of war and grief. Some have interpreted the divine elements, which are found especially in the choral odes, as a mythological alternative that is played off against, but does not mesh with or reduce the validity of, the psychologically credible human choices and actions that produce the disaster.¹ But the pattern of fated doom is in fact present in the episodes of the play as well (especially in Tiresias' speeches, but also in minor hints elsewhere, concluding in the reference to an oracle in 1703–7), and from the tragic audience's perspective such patterning may serve to undercut the apparent freedom of the human figures and to suggest that they are often blind to the ways they are fulfilling a destiny, or to offer a surplus of possible causations that is not meant to be resolved.²

Another important feature of *Phoenissae*, again one shared by many of the contemporary plays of Euripides, is its self-consciousness about its relation to the literary and dramatic tradition.³ In small ways, the drama imitates, evokes, or produces variations on the *teichoskopia* in the *Iliad* and the self-sacrifice in *Erechtheus*. Both *Antigone* and *OT* are evoked in the confrontation of Creon and Tiresias, and the burial-argument and reinterpretation of Antigone's heroism depend on allusion to Sophocles' masterpiece. The reconciliation attempt of Jocasta probably owes something to Stesichorus' poem on the quarrel of the brothers. The most important model, however, for intertextual allusion is Aeschylus' *Septem*.

¹ For the best exposition of the view of mythological and realistic elements as distinct, see Conacher, Chapter 13, and cf. Parry, *Lyric Poems* 173.

² For the particular problem of the effectiveness or irrelevance of the sacrifice of Menoeceus, see 1067–283n., 1198n., 1308–479n., and esp. 1427–79n.

³ These are brought out especially in the discussions of Foley and Saïd.

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We have already noted how Creon and Menoeceus are used to alter fundamentally Eteocles' responsibility for the defence and salvation of Thebes. The exotic foreign chorus makes possible a more distanced reaction to events, on the one hand not deflecting attention from the specific individuals seen on stage to the Theban citizenry as a collective and on the other reinforcing the long-term view of Theban history that provides depth and complexity to the disaster of this day. *Septem* allowed the audience to see and hear Eteocles alone, but *Phoenissae* puts Polynices on stage and explicitly argues the justice of the dispute. Related to this innovation is the evocation of contemporary political concerns by the use of language of political ambition and strife and Jocasta's countervailing appeal to principles of ἰσονομία.

Phoenissae, then, offers a complex, but not incoherent, presentation of the downfall of the Theban dynasty, giving full weight to the complication of the event, in human terms and in divine terms, in familial terms and in public terms, with both the apparent immediacy of a wholly new situation and the inevitability of a pattern perceived through generations. There is no single narrowly defined event or single person as focus, as 'classical' critics have so often desired. Rather, the several figures are made weaker as agents by their number, the briefness of their appearances, and the separation of their actions. They often act in partial ignorance or in vain: Eteocles seems not to know of Menoeceus' sacrifice, Creon mourns his son in ignorance of the duel, Jocasta fails in her first attempt at reconciliation and arrives too late for the second, the duel does not produce a winner and even fails to end the conflict between the two armies, Creon's actions in the exodos are not entirely his own, Antigone and Polynices are not reunited until the moment of his death, his appeal for burial in Theban soil goes for nought, various prayers to the gods for help are unanswered. Like other late plays of Euripides, *Phoenissae* is thus more engaged in presenting and exploring a generalized tragic world-view than in studying

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in depth one or two figures of extraordinary personality or isolated suffering.

II THE PROBLEM OF DATE AND
COMPANION PLAYS

Were no other evidence available, one would speculate that *Phoenissae* belongs to the last decade of Euripides' life because of many features of dramatic construction and technique, such as the use of trochaic tetrameters, the large number of speaking roles, the overall length of the piece, the presence of two messenger-scenes and the length of the *rheseis* in them, the 'dithyrambic' style of the choral lyrics, the extensive use of polymetric astrophic actor's songs. The most reliable criterion of dating for Euripidean tragedies, the number and nature of the resolutions in his iambic trimeters, also clearly establishes *Phoen.* as a late work.¹ The resolution rate is closest to that of *Helen*, and likewise in the number of resolution-types not attested in the 'severe' and 'semi-severe' styles our play is closest in behaviour to *Helen* and *IT* and somewhat less free than *Or.*, *Ba.*, and *IA*.²

Of the two pieces of external evidence that bear on the question of date, the didascalical hypothesis of 'Aristophanes' (Teubner arg. 7) is too corrupt to be useful, while the scholion on *Frogs* 53, without contradicting the evidence based on resolutions, provides a *terminus post quem* but no reliable narrowing of the range of possible dates. The latter, commenting

¹ For the most recent and convincing discussion of dating by resolution-rate, see Cropp and Fick. In my own study of the resolutions in *Phoen.* (in which I have received the generous help of Martin Cropp), I count 1163 trimeters (excluding various corrupt lines and those deleted in my text) and 405 resolutions, for a rate of 34.83% (of trimeters; compare the rate cited by Cropp and Fick, 6.96% of eligible feet = 34.80% of trimeters).

² Cropp and Fick, 60–1.