SHADOWS ON THE SON: AESCHYLUS, GENEALOGY, HISTORY

DISSERTATION

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By

Richard Evan Rader Jr., M.A.

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The Ohio State University
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Dissertation Committee:
Professor Anthony Kaldellis, Adviser
Professor Tom Hawkins
Professor Bruce Heiden

Approved by

Adviser
Greek and Latin Graduate Program
ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines genealogy and history in *Prometheus Bound*, *Seven against Thebes*, and *Persians*. It asks how a character’s relation to his own family history affects his perspective on the past. I argue that in each play the conflict between a son and a father, say between Xerxes and Darius, is replicated at the level of a theory of history. Genealogy suggests two different relations between the past generations and the present, since it is both a reproduction of the same (the ideal son who takes after his father) and a production of difference (the son can never be identical to the father). These two genealogical relations correspond to two theories of history: what I identify as a retrospective view of history, which transfigures discrete historical events into teleology and inevitability, where history becomes the movement of necessity; and a prospective one, which sees historical events as only the trace of desire, hope, potential and human agency, where history becomes the movement of what could have been, the contingent unfolding of unlimited possibilities. In the *Prometheus Bound*, for example, Aeschylus stages the discord between Zeus and Prometheus as a conflict between two views on history: Prometheus leverages a secret about Zeus’ sexual desire against him because he sees a necessity of repetition in Zeus’ genealogical past; but Zeus, the play stresses, is fully capable of reason, compromise, and collaboration, and thus his future (unlike his predecessors’) remains open to will, desire, and choice. My project combines recent
historicizing approaches to tragedy and close attention to the literary qualities of the plays. Drawing on diverse theories of history, it poses historical and political questions but seeks to answer them through detailed philological analysis.
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VITA

January 15, 1978……………………….Born – Jacksonville, Florida, USA

2000………………………………………B.A. Classics, University of Virginia

2002………………………………………M.A. Greek and Latin, The Ohio State University

2000-2006………………………………Graduate Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University

2006-2007………………………………Research Fellow, Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdiesnt, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................... iv
Vita ........................................................................................................................................ v

Chapters:

1. Introduction: Shadows on the Son ................................................................................. 1
   1.1 Two Perspectives on the Past .................................................................................... 2
   1.2 Making Meaning in History ..................................................................................... 8
   1.3 The Tragic Subject in History ................................................................................ 12
   1.4 Tragedy and the City ............................................................................................... 21
   1.5 Chapter Breakdown ................................................................................................. 26

2. The Tyrannies of the Past, The Tyranny of the Past: *Prometheus Bound* ............ 29
   2.1 The Father and the Tyrant ....................................................................................... 36
   2.2 Hesiod and Aeschylus ............................................................................................ 42
   2.3 Zeus in History ....................................................................................................... 48
   2.4 The Potential of Prometheus and Zeus .................................................................. 61

3. “And whatever it is, it is you.” The Autochthonous Self in
   *Seven Against Thebes* ................................................................................................. 80
   3.1 The Civic Force of Autochthony ........................................................................... 91
   3.2 A Civic Incest? ....................................................................................................... 100
   3.3 The Autochthonous Citizen and his (Br)other .................................................... 118

4. The Undead Past in *Persians* ...................................................................................... 127
   4.1 Persians in *Persae*, Persians in History .............................................................. 132
   4.2 Genealogical Anxiety ............................................................................................ 136
   4.3 The Long Shadow of Darius ................................................................................ 147
   4.4 Aeschylus and Herodotus ...................................................................................... 155
   4.5 An Open Past, an Open Future ............................................................................ 162
   4.6 Traces of the Past ................................................................................................ 171
   4.7 Aeschylus’ Responsibility to History ................................................................... 175
5. Conclusion: The Fate of Fate ................................................................. 180

Bibliography ......................................................................................... 192
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: SHADOWS ON THE SON

My principal concern in this dissertation is the past—history broadly conceived—and its representation in *Prometheus Bound*, *Seven Against Thebes*, and *Persians* of Aeschylus. The guiding question will be: how does the protagonist of each play (Prometheus, Eteocles, and Xerxes respectively) conceptualize the past and his relationship to it? How does this past affect his ability to act and make decisions in the present and for the future? The primary link with the past, I will argue, is genealogy. It is perhaps a rather commonsensical observation that each of these protagonists faces the past from the perspective of his family history. As Aristotle already noted, tragedy’s most effective plots focused on a handful of well-known *families* and did not draw randomly or too widely from the well of mythical stories. But the prevalence of these few noble families in tragedy (such as those of Oedipus, Orestes, or Thyestes) may blind us to the broader significance of genealogy, in particular in the tragedies of Aeschylus that I consider here. All of the surviving seven tragedies of Aeschylus deal in part with the influence of a family’s past on a protagonist and its ramifications for the present and future. Most in fact focus on or are underpinned by this very issue. So it is perhaps safe

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1 *Poetics* (XIII.16-22)
to say that Aeschylus has a keen interest in the meaning of the past and its influence on the present and for the future. If, Aeschylus asks, we are trapped by our ancestors’ decisions and actions like Orestes, seemingly forced to make our own decisions in accordance with the limits imposed by theirs, then how can we imagine a future unbefehden to the past, a future all our own? In the plays I will examine here Aeschylus has his protagonists grapple with all the ambiguities and repercussions inherent in this difficult, important question. Tragic protagonists have no choice but to pay attention to history, so perhaps we too ought to pay careful attention to their attempts to come to grips with it. It will be the job of this dissertation to provide just that.

1.1 Two Perspectives on the Past

The meaning of history is a huge and complex question. In order to illustrate this and to provide at least provisionally firmer ground from which to proceed for our purposes here, I begin with Eteocles, child of the incestuous union of Oedipus and Jocasta. In a way Eteocles’ play Seven Against Thebes, which deals on the face of it with his leadership of the city of Thebes while it is under attack by his brother, Polynices, and his decision to meet Polynices in battle, is infused throughout by questions pertaining specifically to his familial past and its influence. Will the dysfunctional sexual history of his family line cast a malign shadow over his ability to lead the Thebans? Does this past or the curse uttered against him and his brother by Oedipus doom his decisions or predetermine their outcome? As early as line 70, for example, after his scout has described the enemy array outside the Theban walls, Eteocles cries out, “…O Curse
(Ara), binding spirit (Erinys) of my father!" And later when he hears that Polynices is stationed at the seventh gate, he exclaims, “…Now indeed my father’s curses come to pass” (656). Eteocles thus draws a connection between the past and the present: this must be fate. We could say that every imagining of the past, including memory, is a way of making meaning out of history. But the meaning of the past can be weighted by various influences, one of which, as we see here, is a curse. So this is more than just memory for Eteocles; it is a freighted past long forgotten but now rearing its fatal head.

But Eteocles is not as fatalistic as he may seem. In fact immediately following his exclamation about his father’s curse coming to fruition, he calmly says, “It would be unseemly of me to make a scene weeping, and I don’t want to create even more reasons to lament” (657-58). That is, as soon as he raises the possibility of his meeting with Polynices as being predetermined, he drops it and says instead, “I have faith that Justice (Dikē) is on my side and I will stand (xystēsomaï) against him myself (autos)” (672-73). Eteocles takes responsibility for the decision to face his brother all by himself, a fact underscored by the somewhat redundant combination of the middle-voiced verb and the reflexive pronoun. Aeschylus thus emphasizes that this is Eteocles’ decision, not the workings of fate. He makes this decision looking toward an open future, not an inexorable past.

But Eteocles eventually gives in to the fatalistic interpretation. In his back-and-forth with the chorus following his decision to meet Polynices, he claims things like, “A

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2 Cf. Stehle (2005: 113) on how this invocation proves Eteocles’ words are self-defeating: “The Erinys does not belong in the company of the city-holding gods; her presence destroys any charis Eteokles’ prayer might have had. On the contrary, mentioning her can only remind the gods (and the audience) that Eteokles is enagēs in their eyes, ritually outcast.”

3 As Hutchinson rightly points out, “[i]f Eteocles continued to indulge his ignoble grief, that might weaken his determination. That in turn might result in laments still harder to bear, the laments of the vanquished Thebans blaming their king” (1985: 150 ad loc.).
god surely press this thing on.” (689), “My father’s hateful, dreadful curse clings to me.” (695-96), and “Oedipus’ curse made the Spirit rage.” (709). It is the chorus in this exchange who, at least at first, offer counterpoint to Eteocles’ interpretation, consistently emphasizing the other possibilities. They claim he could give offerings to the gods in order to avert this outcome (700-01), that the malign Spirit inspiring Eteocles’ passion could well change its mind and come with “gentler breath” (705-08), and urge him simply not to go (714). To their mind the future has not yet been written, not even by the curse. But Eteocles cannot be persuaded and thus takes his final decision by surrendering his own agency: “You cannot escape god-given misfortunes” (719). What began as a proud act in the face of a seemingly inevitable confrontation with Polynices ends with simple resignation to fate. Tellingly, it is only after Eteocles has departed, determined to face his brother, that the chorus relate the story of the curse pronounced by Oedipus (720-91). That is, after Eteocles has sealed the meaning of his past with his blood. For the blood of Argives shed at the hands of Thebans can be cleansed; but the blood of a brother shed at the hands of a brother cannot (679-82). There is no expiation for that pollution; the future will have to bear it without question, without the possibility of escape.

From this brief recapitulation of the penultimate episode of Seven we can see that the meaning of the past can be approached in two distinct ways: from the present looking backwards (retrospectively) and from the past (and present) looking forwards (prospectively). The conclusions we draw about meaning in history are thus inextricably caught up in the direction we look. Let me develop the features and implications of each, beginning with the former and keeping in mind the example of Eteocles from above.

Looking back, for example, one can identify various events or things that happened as meaningfully contributing to the current state of affairs. Thus first one pinpoints different events in the past and construes them as similar, then endows them with a narrative continuity out of which a clearer meaning emerges. Because of these events the current state of affairs was bound to come about; because of his father Oedipus’ curse Eteocles was determined to meet Polynices at the seventh gate. That is, one can locate a certain teleology or inevitability in the narrative imposed on these events, so that all of the things one has singled out as meaningful express their own momentum and direct the course of events to their end.

My use of “looking back” in the previous paragraph is deliberate because it is from the perspective of the present that one finds this meaning in history. It is a retrospection, a backward gaze, which finds the appearance of patterns. Eteocles comes to understand who he is as a son of Oedipus in the present by seeing who he was before the revelation of the curse, that is, a leader and son who did not know the very things he knows now (that his meeting with Polynices was predetermined). For him now in the present these events, facts, and occurrences seem objectively real—they were there all along, he just did not recognize them for what they were at the time. This view of the past we might call “retrospective”.

But in the revelation or recognition of these objective facts and the subsequent emergence of their meaning, it is possible to misrecognize one’s own complicity in the making of meaning. And this complicity is born specifically out of retrospection. This is because, taken at their proper moment in the past, these events lack the clarity of narrative. An event of the past I have identified as meaningful may have gone unnoticed
in its occurrence or may have had a different, even contradictory, meaning. Having experienced something, I can gauge its meaning by retrofitting it within a structure I have created, but ultimately I cannot know its final meaning (whether it is teleological and inevitable) for two important reasons. First, anything else might have occurred; what actually happened was never necessary. Hence the measure of an event is never simply itself but the many other events that could have taken place but did not. And second, the future stands before me with all its potential and openness. How could I possibly know in the present moment that this experience will become one of many that I will construe as significant in a narrative at some point in the future? So from the perspective of the present (or the past) looking toward the future, anything else might have happened and anything else yet might. We might then say that this vision of history, in contrast to the former, is “prospective”. Accordingly, I see the events of the past as traces of a much more complex web of contingencies and possibilities, including expectations and desires. As the chorus say to Eteocles, the future is open to caprice, prayer, hope, and the like. Accordingly, I cannot read teleology and inevitability out of a narrative construct because the narrative has yet to be finished and thus the end, if ever we can reach it, can never be known.

Hence we have two ways of looking at the past: out of a retrospective view meaningful patterns emerge, destinies and fates record their unbending trajectories; out of the prospective, contingent events unfold from unlimited possibilities. The latter perspective, I believe, asks us to acknowledge our complicity in the creation of meaning in history, to acknowledge our intrusion in the objectivity of what we call facts and actualities. The dialogue between Eteocles and the chorus implies that Eteocles could
only find the cursed trajectory of his life by looking backwards. The chorus challenge him to look forward (as he had in response to his scout), but by then he is too committed. I am not suggesting that there are no meaningful patterns in the past or that these patterns do not have ramifications. I am proposing rather that the relationship between the facts as we see them and the narrative we use to make sense of them is symbiotic; indeed the one depends on the other. Patterns do not exist independent of narrative relation. They require configuration, including selection and suppression, by an agent whose reasons for configuring them in such a way may well be motivated by conflicting and conflicted, contradictory, conscious or unconscious desires. For a story is not just a generic structure of events with narrative and event mutually constituting each other; it is also a structure of desire and memory. It too is positioned in the midst of history, and thus of ideology and identity, denial and loss.

Reading the past and the construction of its meaning in this way reveals the act of interpretation behind what we call history. Thus history is intimately a matter of perspective. But to understand the past as a matter of intimate perspective is also to suggest that the meaning of the past is never exhausted. This is because, on the one hand, there are always more perspectives whose interpretations we might not be able to take into account, and thus there are infinite possibilities for other meanings; and, on the other, because when I change—and I will change—the meaning of my past, my interpretation, will also change. Hence it is not a huge conceptual or logical leap to argue, as I will in the course of this dissertation, that because the meaning of the past is never exhausted, the past in itself is never exhausted, is never really over. As Faulkner famously put it,
“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”5 And since I am never really over but, as Heidegger said, “underway”, my relationship to the past will always be changing.6

I have thus posited a “subject” and “history”—both of which, as I think is evident from the discussion above, I take to be malleable, unfinalizable concepts. Without belaboring the theoretical genealogy of this admittedly contemporary stance, I would like to lay out briefly some of the background that informs my thinking on these concepts and that will constitute the underlying premises of this dissertation as a whole. I begin with “history”.

1.2 Making Meaning in History

I claimed above that we are intimately connected to our understanding of the past. No amount of objectivity will release us from our involvement in its value and meaning. We are always positioned in history, a fact that belies any attempt to remove ourselves from its influence on our very ideas about it. If we posit that every imagining of the past is a form of writing the past, an historiography involving selection and suppression, then history is always caught up in an act of our creation. There is then no disinterestedness. In fact as Keith Jenkins puts it, “[t]he idea of writing an objective, neutral, disinterested text, where explaining, describing, and ‘introducing’ something is done from a position that isn’t ostensibly a position at all, is a naïve one.”7 This is because “history is always for someone.”8 The relationship between the past “as it really happened” and the writer of this past is reciprocal and thus raises an interpretive—one might say political—question:

5 Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun
7 Jenkins (1999: 1)
8 Ibid. (1999: 2)
...[I]t is now clear that ‘in and for itself’ there is nothing definitive for us to get out of [the past] other than that which we have put into it. That ‘in and for itself’ the past contains nothing of obvious significance. That left on its own it has no discoverable point. That it expresses no intelligible rhyme or reason...It is clear that the past doesn’t exist historically outside of historians’ textual, constructive appropriations, so that, being made by them, it has no independence to resist their interpretive will, not least at the level of meaning. However irreducible, stubborn, painful, comic or tragic the past may have been, it only reaches us through fictional devices which invest it with a range of highly selective and hierarchical readings which are ‘always subservient to various powers and interests’.9

By this reading the past “as it really happened” can be no more than a phantasm, the facts at best the traces of a world no longer available, at worst an ideological imposition aligned with power.10 “Put simply,” he claims, “we are the source of whatever the past means for us.”11

Even if we cannot reach the past “as it really happened”, we can still attend to the “traces” of the past. For Jenkins this means that “what actually happened” is filtered and “appropriated textually through the sedimented layers of previous interpretive work(s), and through the reading habits and categories/concepts of our previous/current methodological practices and our previous/current ideological desires.”12 It may be there somewhere, but we will never find it unadulterated.13 As I briefly outlined above, for me

9 Ibid. (1999: 3). The quotation in the final sentence comes from Derrida (1994; “The Deconstruction of Actuality”). One sees in this quotation the influence of White, de Certeau, and La Capra among others. Jenkins acknowledges them but develops his argument via Derrida, Lyotard, and Baudrillard.
10 See Ibid. (1999: 3ff.) for a discussion and critique of those who claim Jenkins’ position is anti-realist. He adduces Derrida (op. cit.) to suggest that all “actualities” are artificial (cf. 207-08 n.4).
11 Ibid. (1999: 14). Batstone (2007: work in progress), whose views on postmodern historiography directly influence my own, runs with these implications, provocatively arguing that our modern historiographical methodologies for understanding the ancient world, based as they are on objectivity and scientific method, are anachronistic and too often ignorant of their own complicities with power and institutions.
12 Jenkins (1999: 14)
13 Cf. Martindale (2006: 12): “How could one ever know if one had truly stripped away all the layers of ‘anachronism’ in this process of intellectual ascesis? And, even could one do so, what would be left might turn out to be rather evidently impoverished. If we strip away all ‘accretions,’ we don’t get the ‘original truth’ but something much more insubstantial...” Richard Rorty once said, “The world is out there for sure. But descriptions of the world are not.”
it also means “what could have happened”. “What actually happened”, in other words, is but a trace of other possible actualities and immeasurable things like hope, desire, prayer, chance, and reneging—the “adulterations” inherent, but never necessarily expressed, in any historical “fact”. There is never just “what actually happened”. As I discuss in chapter three, Herodotus’ description of Xerxes’ decision to invade Greece illustrates well the ebb and flow of decision-making. For he registers not only the final decision of this famous historical moment but the (false) hopes, the confusions, and the second-guessings as well. In the debate between Mardonius and Artabanus and the subsequent difficulties Xerxes experiences in finally taking a decision, Herodotus records those innumerable traces of alternate possibilities, those slight but meaningful shadows at risk of being lost in the search for the facts of history.

Apart from this slight modification of the sense of “traces”, however, I concur with Jenkins that one of the implications of “objective”, or in my case “retrospective”, history is a potentially dangerous sense of determinism:

Having no meaning-full existence independent of historians’ textual embrace, being constructed by them, the past constituted as historicised text has ultimately no choice but to go along with whatever purposes are desired. Thus, in it we have almost invariably ‘found’ those origins, roots, teleologies, trajectories, lessons, facts and values we have been looking for. In our various historical turns (tropes) we have turned (the tropes of) contingency into necessity, the random into the patterned, and have transformed the accidental and the ephemeral into expressions of essences, continuities and inevitabilities.¹⁴

Thus depending on the way we narrate history, the present and the future may seem
fatally beholden to the past.\textsuperscript{15} And only if we attend to the tropes by which we construe
meaning in history can we escape this determinism.

Even if determinism is to be considered one of the traps or sins of retrospective
history, it still figures prominently in the world of Greek tragedy, especially Aeschylean
tragedy, which takes as one of its principal concerns the effects of the past on the present.
To reiterate what we observed about \textit{Seven}, Eteocles faces the inscrutable menace of both
his family’s sexual history and a curse pronounced against him by his father. As many
scholars have pointed out, the momentum of the play drives inevitably toward the
realization of his destiny (death at the hands, and mutual murder, of his brother
Polynices).\textsuperscript{16} Thus every revelation of or ironic hint at his past seemingly structures the
action and determines Eteocles’ decisions. The ending of the play then is a fulfillment of
what we expected, and what the play has structured, to happen. This reading of the play,
as I will argue in chapter two, is symptomatic of what I have identified as a retrospective
interpretive strategy. Like Eteocles, critics have “found” fate in his history. To borrow
Jenkins’ words once again, they have “transformed the accidental and the ephemeral
into…inevitabilities.” This is not to say that fatalistic perceptions of the past are not rife

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Batstone (2007): “Suddenly, the narrative trajectory of history begins to entail things like ‘meaning in
the world’ and ‘predetermination’, if not ‘the hand of god.’
\textsuperscript{16} See, for example, Winnington-Ingram (1983: 16-54) or most recently Stehle (2005, with a good
bibliography). While I am sympathetic to Stehle’s thorough treatment of the relation between prayer (as
performative utterance) and curse, I am troubled by her assumption that what tragic characters identify as
the gods’ (malign) intentions are in fact their intentions. For example: “[T]he more [Eteocles] attempts to
pray and protect the city from ill omen, the more he alienates the gods” (117); or: “What devastates
Eteokles, sensitive, as we know, to others’ ill-omened speech, is hearing the Erinys assert the equivalence
of the two brothers…” (119). I suppose it bears noticing that there are no gods present in the play.
Roisman makes the sensible point that “[t]he important question…is what each of the characters
understands the curse to mean. For although the curse is unclear to us, the characters do not seem to be in
doubt as to its meaning” (1988: 83).
in the tragedies of Aeschylus, only rather to suggest, as we saw with the choral response to Eteocles above, that Aeschylus provides glimpses of ways out. The real tragedy, he shows us, is not fate but fatalism. For Jenkins this dangerous tendency means we should stop doing history.17 But for Aeschylean tragedy in general, and Eteocles in particular, that gesture is not so easy. As de Romilly has argued, tragedy provides a “perpetual reflection about the relation between [a] series of events and the past or the future; it discusses and mediates about intricate causes and responsibilities.”18 We would do well then to take into account the attempts and resistances to stop “doing” history.

1.3 The Tragic Subject in History

History is comprised of human decisions, not necessarily impersonal forces, and thus requires actors. And tragedy invests strongly in these actors, producing a mimesis of subjective depth. But this claim is not as uncontroversial as we might like. In fact the question of the tragic subject, variously rendered as “protagonist”, “agent”, “character”, “subject”, or “self”, has been a fixture in the critical imagination since criticism began. Discussion begins with Aristotle, who in his Poetics very clearly indicates that “character” is incidental to tragic action:

[The reason plot is the most important element of a play] is because tragedy is mimesis not of persons but of action and life; and happiness and unhappiness consist in action, and the goal is a certain kind of action, not a qualitative state: it is in virtue of character that people have certain qualities, but through their actions that they are happy or the reverse. So it is not in order to

17 “[I]f…historical ‘knowledge’ has been fatally undercut by postmodern scepticisms and relativisms and pragmatisms anyway, then not only is the question indeed raised as to what would a ‘viable’ postmodern history look like, but the question of why bothering with one at all looks not only attractive but positively compelling; I mean, why bother historicising a past anymore?” (1999: 11-12) While I agree in principle with Jenkins’ suggestion, we might balk a bit at his use of “anyway”. It rather too swiftly moves to a particular hermeneutical stance.

18 de Romilly (1968: 11). She goes on to suggest that “past actions or dead persons, for Aeschylus, are still alive and still active; and one can acknowledge their presence in what is actually going on. In other words, the past is not wholly past” (1968: 26). See further pp.59-85.
provide mimesis of character that the agents act; rather, their characters are included for the sake of their actions.¹⁹

For him plot (the arrangement of actions) is the first principle and character secondary (deuteron), and it is for this reason that he reiterates “tragedy is mimesis of action and it is chiefly for the sake of the action that it represents the agents.”²⁰ By Aristotle’s reckoning character colors the action of which tragedy is a mimesis.

Many scholars have failed to match Aristotle’s precision in their readings of Greek tragedy and its characters, misrecognizing the ethical color of characterization in the Poetics for a notion of the tragic hero. John Jones has argued that critical interest or fascination with the tragic hero is an “importation” into the Poetics. As he maintains, “the center of gravity” of Aristotle’s principal concepts is “situational and not personal.”²¹ That is, tragedy is concerned with the situation or context of action; everything else, from character to diction and so forth, is organized around it. As Halliwell explains, Aristotle envisions a reciprocal relationship between character and action but nevertheless sees a “clear conceptual disjunction of motive and intention (character) and their realisation in action.”²² But claiming that Aristotelian tragic theory is situational and not character-oriented, however, does not mean that tragedy involves a disembodied sense of action.²³ As Jones acknowledges, by stating on several occasions that tragedy is a mimesis of action, “[Aristotle] cannot mean than Tragedy lacks what we loosely call human interest; somehow the imitation of actions and life must carry human

¹⁹ Poetics 1450a15-21. Translation is Halliwell’s.
²⁰ Poetics 1450b1-2
²¹ Jones ((1962) 1971: 16)
²² Halliwell (1987: 94)
²³ Cf. Halliwell (1987: 95): “…[A]ction’ is no loose or empty term for whatever may occur in a play, but a way of denoting tragedy’s encompassment of the significant goals of life.”
interest without being an imitation of human beings.”

By claiming that character is secondary to action, “he is saying that character is included for the sake of the action; he is not saying, or he is saying only incidentally, that character is less important than action.”

But we may ask ourselves despite Aristotle’s insistence whether tragedy still does not have an interest in, or at least a focus upon, human beings and their characters as such. For the plays we have are almost entirely populated by humans—only sometimes by gods—whose motivations, desires, et cetera behind their actions are explored in some detail. As Foley says, “[t]ragic characters may view themselves as undertaking intentional actions for which they may be viewed as responsible and judged accordingly. Yet at other points the character herself, the chorus, or another character may view her action as partly determined, or even in the case of madness entirely determined, by gods, or inherited curses and dispositions, or even separate internal forces within the self.”

Conflict is registered (and speculated upon) at the level of character. And if we are to take Aristotle seriously, should we not also take seriously Plato’s critique of tragedy as setting up in each individual soul “a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality and by currying favour with the senseless element,” destroying the rational?

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24 Jones ([1962] 1971: 30)
25 Ibid. ([1962] 1971: 31). Cf. Goldhill (1990: 102). The virtue of Jones’ discussion is his precision with Aristotle’s text. Consider for example his critique of Bywater’s and Else’s inflections of secondary into subordinate (31). With the exception of a small instance in which he has Aristotle pedantically respond to Kitto (18), Jones concedes that a more precise reading of Poetics (i.e. excising any notion of the tragic hero) still leaves the text making less than perfect sense and does not necessarily improve our understanding of Greek tragedy (cf. 17).
26 Foley (2001: 17; cf. also 243-71)
27 Plato Republic (X.605b-c)
This is not the place to set Plato and Aristotle against one another. I raise this question because the pure precision of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy lays the problem of character to rest without giving consideration to such things as motivation, self-perception, or conflict. For this reason the problem of the tragic subject continued to occupy an important place in the critical imagination. Perhaps the most influential advances in this regard belong to J.P. Vernant. In a series of essays Vernant reconceptualized the importance of Greek tragedy as marking a “new stage in the development of the inner man and of the responsible agent.”28 Vernant was quick to point out that this new development in the tragic subject did not entail the concomitant emergence of the “psychological subject, an individual ‘person’”;29 but he was the first to put forward a new theory of the tragic subject that situated him as an intentional, “willful” agent within the world of tragic action.30 The tragic subject became an agent in a world that he could not entirely control but of which he was an intimate and responsible part.

A feeling of the contradictions that tear apart the divine world, the social and political universe, the domain of values, and thus reveal man himself as thau̱ma or daɪmōn, a sort of incomprehensible and confusing monster, both agent and acted upon, guilty and innocent, mastering all nature by his industrious mind, yet incapable of governing himself and blinded by a delusion sent by the gods.31

“[Tragedy] takes as its subject the man actually living out [a] debate, forced to make a decisive choice, to orient his activity in a universe of ambiguous values where nothing is

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ever stable or unequivocal.” Vernant refigures the “ambiguous” position of the tragic subject as caught between ἔθος (“all that the hero feels, says and does”) and δαίμων (“the expression of a religious power”). “Tragic man is constituted within the space encompassed by this pair, ἔθος and δαίμων.” Hence the relationship between agent and action so precisely articulated by Aristotle becomes more complex:

The action does not emanate from the agent as from its source; rather, it envelops him and carries him away, swallowing him up in a power that must perforce be beyond him since it extends, both spatially and temporally, far beyond his own person. The agent is caught in the action. He is not its author; he remains included in it.

This more complex relationship means, as Goldhill claims, that “[t]ragedy, for Vernant, depicts a conflict within man himself.”

Goldhill’s observation, coupled with Vernant’s contention that ἔθος is the well-spring of “all that the hero feels, says and does”, might lead us to believe that in reading Greek tragedies we can with increased critical sensitivity come to a better understanding of what a character really feels or a better appreciation of who a character really is. Already Vernant questioned this possibility by situating the tragic subject amid the “tensions and ambiguities” of human existence as imagined in the world of tragedy—responsible for his or her decisions and actions, but never fully in control of or comprehending them. By introducing the ἔθος/δαίμων dialectic, Vernant both gave the tragic subject autonomy and limited it and thus limited out own access to his or her “real” character.

32 Vernant ([1972] 1990a: 26)
33 Vernant ([1972] 1990b: 37). Cf. also Vernant ([1972] 1990c: 75): “The nature of tragic action appears to us to be defined by the simultaneous presence of a “self” and something greater that is divine at work at the core of the decision and creating a constant tension between two opposed poles.”
34 Vernant ([1972] 1990c: 63)
35 Goldhill (1986: 170)
Goldhill developed this line of thinking in a different direction by adducing Barthes’ argument (in *S/Z*) about the dynamic, reciprocal relationship of character and discourse. First, there is a distinction to be made between a “figure” and a “person”: the former is in simplest terms “a character in a literary text”, the latter “an individual patient with a subconscious, a history, a family.” Accordingly, “[i]t is because a character is a ‘figure’ and not a ‘person’ that there can be no sure and fixed answer to what a character is ‘really feeling’, ‘really thinking’, ‘really wanting’—his/her (real) motivation—at any particular moment in a text.” And second, a figure cannot be divorced from the discourse or world s/he inhabits. Goldhill underscores the symbiotic relation between a character and the discourse with which and within which s/he functions:

"Discourse and character...can be seen in ‘good narrative writing’ as mutually and inextricably implicative: ‘from a critical point of view...it is as wrong to suppress a character as it is to take him off the page in order to turn him into a psychological character (endowed with possible motives): the character and the discourse are each other’s accomplices.’" This approach “enables us to see the questions of motivation as part of the narrative discourse of the play...”

Taken together, the ideas of Vernant and Goldhill open the door to a new sense of the tragic subject in the study of Greek tragedy. Vernant’s tragic subject is a semi-autonomous agent in the world, irreducible to that world but responsible to it all the same. Goldhill’s is an agent whose decisions and actions are indissociably bound up with

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36 Goldhill (1990: 106). Goldhill had also deployed this methodology in his *Reading Greek Tragedy* (1986: 168-98).  
37 Ibid. (1990: 113). Contrast, for example, Winnington-Ingram (1983: 35 n.51): “Eteocles knows from the beginning that he is under a curse which is likely to be fulfilled and could mean the destruction of the family. When he learns that his brother is at the seventh gate, it is a moment of revelation in which vagueness is turned into clarity. Though at 672, as at 271-8, he speaks as if he might survive, he really knows that he and his brother will die” (my emphasis).  
38 Ibid. (1990: 112) quoting Barthes.  
39 Ibid. (1990: 113)
the discursive demands of the play and the dynamic of its world. Vernant and Goldhill endow the tragic subject with enough character to make him or her more than a cipher but less than a fully realized human with such complications as “a subconscious, a history, a family.”

I take the ideas of Vernant and Goldhill as fundamental, even axiomatic, to my discussion of the various tragic subjects I address in this dissertation. For Prometheus, Eteocles, and Xerxes we must be attentive to the factors that shape their understanding of themselves and the contexts in which they decide and act as tragic characters. We must consider as well the discursive forces of the play that construct each character and influence his decisions and actions. But can we, as Goldhill avers, maintain a firm distinction between a figure on stage and a “real” person with “a subconscious, a history, a family”? I argue, in fact, that these very elements are also a part of tragedy’s discourse and create the mimesis of the tragic subject’s depth.

As Easterling has pointed out, the distinction between figures on stage and real people presupposes that “‘real people’ and the ‘real world’, as opposed to stage figures in the world of make-believe, are relatively stable and definable and can serve as some sort of yardstick (for comparison or contrast) when we come to think about theatrical creations.” By Easterling’s reckoning we have to acknowledge that “our working

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40 Cf. Foley (2001: 16) for similar observations.
41 Easterling (1990: 84). Easterling’s argument, which I do not follow here all the way through, puts forward a sociological theory of interaction between character and audience. For example: “… [O]nly if we are willing to make constructions from [characters’] words can we become involved in the issues raised by their different points of view” (96). Cf. also Cixous’ strong remarks: “The ideology underlying [the] fetishization of ‘character’ is that of an ‘I’ who is a whole subject (that of the ‘character’ as well as that of the author), conscious, knowable; and the enunciatory ‘I’ expresses himself in the text, just as the world is represented complementarily in the text in a form equivalent to pictorial representation, as a simulacrum” (1974: 385).
assumptions about ‘reality’ and ‘real people’ are in fact quite provisional.”42 A hard and fast distinction between the stage world and the real world, while commonsensical and useful at first glance, could eventually collapse under the weight of its presumptions.

More than this tragedy very much also depicts “figures” with histories, families, and, one could argue, subconscio...43 Even Aristotle claimed that the best tragedies were centered on a small number of notorious families, families whose complicated and treacherous histories made for the best plots (Poetics 1453a16-22). These families may well be just figures on stage, but tragedy takes a vested interest in their relations to and effects upon the tragic subject. And further one of the plays I discuss here, Persians, is in fact an historical tragedy centered on a father-son relationship involving real people, people perhaps even too real for the Athenians. We might then move beyond Goldhill to suggest that histories, families, and subconscio...s are also terms in tragedy’s discourse.

It is precisely in exploring the tension between the individual agent and his family history, I argue, that tragedy opens up a space for the tragic subject. And this is exactly where Eteocles stood, between the present moment of his own decisions, facing an unknown future, and a past that long ago seemed to write the course of his actions.

All this does not, of course, necessitate a couch-session for the tragic subjects I explore here44, but at times I will bring psychoanalytical insights to bear on them. This should not be considered an anachronism, since trying to understand Aeschylean tragedy on its own terms is at best superficial, at worst politically dubious. As Loraux writes:

42 Easterling (1990: 85)
I...ask myself *from where do we speak*, we who want to return the Greeks to their own discourse; how are we able to put ourselves, as it were, in parenthesis in order to make statements such as ‘the Greek city is x’ or ‘The Greeks thought y’; by what miracle—us who had aimed to debunk the myth of the Greek miracle—were we able to gain access without mediation or distortion to Greek thought?\(^{45}\)

This admission that anachronism is in fact all we have, however, does not have to lead us into “collapsing the study of other cultures into a form of unthinking presentism.”\(^{46}\)

Rather, very much in the vein of Goldhill’s Barthesian semiotics, the use of psychoanalytic insights is an attempt to register the textual structures and symptoms that contribute to the tragic subject’s ability to decide and act. And family and history are part of the discourse that defines the tragic subject. This type of “symptomatic” reading has been the practice of numerous scholar—Segal, Loraux, Zeitlin, among others—many of whose works influence and inform my own. To raise the example of *Seven* again, we might ask: to what extent does the sexual history of Eteocles’ family (from Labdacus’ initial transgression down through to Oedipus’) unconsciously shape or color his “misogynistic” treatment of the choral women? Further, how do the suppressions involved in identifying with the autochthonous ancestors of Thebes affect his view about autochthony as a unifying principle? I seek to uncover how the discourse of the play poses questions like these, how (in Goldhill’s terms) they function in the discourse of the play as questions. While for Goldhill they are not open to a “true and certain answer”\(^{47}\), I try to trace the way *Seven* in general, and Eteocles in particular, attempts to address and


\(^{46}\) Leonard (2006: 125-26)

\(^{47}\) Goldhill (1990: 114)
resolve these ambiguities even if ultimately they cannot. Eteocles, in fact, goes to his death for this very ambiguity.

1.4 Tragedy and the City

So by exploring the question of the tragic subject in relation to his family history, I mean to consider how intra-familial relationships affect decision-making and acting. The tragic subjects I explore here face an inscrutable and many times unavoidable presence of their family histories in their lives. As we have seen, Eteocles in Seven has to face the physical and psychological damage of being the son of Oedipus, his family the classic paradigm of dysfunction. Likewise Xerxes, the focus of Persians, seems unable to escape the frustrating pressure of the heralded reign of his father, a father whose ghost even makes an ominous appearance. Even Zeus, the newly crowned king of the gods in Prometheus Bound, appears to be haunted by a past fatally limiting the prospects of his future. It is this tension between the seeming deterministic influence of a family past and a tragic subject’s ability to decide and act that animates the tragedies I examine here.

As I stated earlier, this tension consists in the distinction between a retrospective and a prospective sense of the past. I argue that genealogy suggests two different relations between the past generations and the present: it is both a reproduction of the same (the ideal son who takes after his father) and a production of difference (the son can never be identical to the father). For this reason it is the paradigmatic metaphor for history and corresponds to the two theories of history I have laid out. How, I ask, does Aeschylus exploit the tension between these two views of history to dramatic, ethical, and intellectual effect?
One of the ways Aeschylus does this is to use this matrix of ideas surrounding history and genealogy to work through a collective (i.e. Athenian), not just individual, relationship to the past. The assertion that the plays I examine here speak in a broader, allegorical sense to concerns facing the Athenians of the day could well seem to rest on a host of vague assumptions.\textsuperscript{48} First of all, these plays were produced at different times within a span of approximately 20 years\textsuperscript{49} as only one part of a trilogy whose other pieces we no longer have.\textsuperscript{50} And second, even despite Goldhill’s (among others) impressive study of tragedy’s relation to civic ideology\textsuperscript{51}, it is still not entirely clear that tragedy, if anything a work of imaginative literature, necessarily owes anything to the society in which it was produced.\textsuperscript{52} Apart from these justifiable reservations, however, if we follow Heiden (as I do) in suggesting that tragedy bears a considerable affinity to philosophical discourse, that it “share[s] an obsession with ethics, which necessarily frames a temporal horizon much longer than that of a performance,”\textsuperscript{53} then it is no stretch to associate the

\textsuperscript{48} Easterling (1997) does a good job parsing the difficulties of tragedy’s “refraction of the society that provided the context of production” and its presentation of a “distinctively different world from that of the original audiences” (21).

\textsuperscript{49} I discuss questions of dating (and in the case of PV authenticity) in the individual chapters.

\textsuperscript{50} I leave aside but acknowledge the thorny question as well of tragedy’s relation to the polis. See Goldhill (2000) for a sensitive reappraisal of this very issue.

\textsuperscript{51} In chapter one I discuss Griffith’s (1995) assessment of Goldhill’s (1987 and 1990) and others’ “ideological” readings of Greek tragedy.

\textsuperscript{52} I follow Goldhill’s premise that the Great Dionysia is “in the fifth century fully an institution of the democratic polis, and that the plays constantly reflect their genesis in a fifth-century Athenian political environment.” However, I find his insistence that “[a]ny analysis that simply treats tragedy as literature—which is not an ancient category—and treats literature as a superstructure to the base of political and social formation in nowhere less persuasive than with fifth-century Athenian drama” (2000: 35) a bit too defensive. Goldhill is right to criticize purely aestheticizing readings (specifically Heath [1987] and Griffin [1998]) and honest enough to acknowledge the need to historicize our current zeal for historicizing tragedy. But for someone who takes Kovacs (1987) to task for “ludicrous” assumptions about Athenian audiences (2003: 43 n.48), he is remarkably coy about the possibility that some audience members might have enjoyed the mythic tales being performed in front of their eyes simply as stories.

\textsuperscript{53} Heiden (2005)
questions of Aeschylus’ plays with the political or ethical questions of the day. These plays, I suggest, reflect upon civic consciousness as well.

The earliest of the plays I examine, *Persians* (472), was performed only eight years after the conclusion of the war between the Greeks and the Persians that the play depicts. Why would Aeschylus stage a provocative play about Persian national defeat (under guise of a father-son relationship) at a time of precarious Athenian security? Some have suggested patriotic celebration (even worse, propagandistic grandstanding). But if, as others contend, the play has a more humanistic dimension—that it deals with the desires and follies that attend all human beings, not just Persians—then *Persians* is perhaps also an expression of the anxieties that arise in the development of what Edward Cohen has called the “Athenian nation”. In *Seven*, I argue, the solidarity Eteocles invokes on behalf of his people’s autochthonous roots hangs on some ugly suppressions but also reflects the desire for and importance of such identity fictions for the community.

I pursue these questions by incorporating the work of historians like Edward Cohen, whose *The Athenian Nation* compellingly contends that Athens of the fifth and fourth century BCE was to a large extent a “nation” in its historical, political, and economic institutions. Since for the Athenians civic identity was perceived in explicitly genealogical terms (one’s political status was determined almost entirely by one’s birth), the question of what it means to be an Athenian is very much tied up with what it means to be a son. And one Athenian myth spoke specifically to this link

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54 Even this formulation risks misrepresenting Heiden, who takes a stand specifically against narrowly political readings of drama. His point is that tragedy takes as its intrinsic emphasis the tension between the transience of the current moment and the duration of its ethical, metaphysical vision. Thus here I am merely extrapolating from his argument in order to augment mine in a more general way.

55 Cohen (2005)
between genealogy and civic identity: autochthony, the deepest connection to the land a citizen could have, since it signified either that his ancestors were born of the earth or that they had inhabited it since time immemorial. For Cohen autochthony was a “noble lie” that buttressed Athenian “nationalism”. But for critics like Loraux, as I show in chapter two, it was an unconscious desire for purity bought at the expense of the exclusion of women and foreigners. That Aeschylus raises the question of collective or civic self-consciousness in his tragedies in such an ambivalent way as to inspire radically opposed interpretations as these perhaps means that he saw civic identity itself as an ambiguous entity, asking us to weigh the significance of both its constructive and destructive elements.

One does not have to look very far in the critical literature to find scholars noting the deleterious effects of a myth that relates to, or is used by those who purport to promote, civic identity (like autochthony). But in order to get insight into the constructive use of such myths in the definition of identity, we should look beyond the field of philology to the work of contemporary scholars like Gregory Jusdanis, whose book *The Necessary Nation* (2000) argues that nationalism (in many cases an institutionalized set of myths, discourses, etc.) does not necessarily presume or proceed from an essential sense of identity and difference, but rather from the ability and opportunity to define and redefine a sense of self at will.\footnote{Jusdanis (2000)} Jusdanis rebuts the criticism that nationalism simply entails violence and exclusion\footnote{See for example Viroli (1995).} and acknowledges that national myths, while they can be harmful in the exclusivity they often justify, are important for
creating a perceived unity and have been instrumental in the development of many nations. In his own words:

Rather than advancing a narcissistic concern with the self, nationalism actually mediates in the interaction between the self and the other, between the individual and the universal, the old and the new. Nationalism fosters an interchange among groups by promoting self-confidence among them, by encouraging them to find strength in their own cultural resources, and ultimately to fight against oppression and for independence.58

To extrapolate from this description for my own purposes, the effectiveness of identity discourses is their imagination, their sense of potential and possibility and not necessarily foreclosure or exclusion. This is not to deny the connection between essentializing identity and the prospect of violence, only rather to reorient our perspective from backward to forward. This sense of “essentialism”, in fact, is one product of what I have called retrospective history. Critics who regard such discourses as “essentializing” look retrospectively from the resultant sense of self back to the founding myths as opposed to looking prospectively from them toward the many possibilities they generate for a sense of self.59 This reverse orientation misidentifies the effects or ends of national myths as their goals.

Bruce Lincoln has come closest to distinguishing between these two orientations when he speaks of the “instrumentality of the future”. In addition to myths that concern the past, “there are other myths, and extremely important ones, that are set…in the future, a mythic future that—like the mythic past—enters discourse in the present always and only for reasons of the present.”60 This means that myths do not expressly or simply

58 Jusdanis (2001: 7)
59 I am not suggesting that violence is not a possible outcome, only rather that violence is not an inevitable or the only outcome.
60 Lincoln (1989: 38)
seek to justify their effects in the present by means of a connection to the past: myth is a
“mode of discourse, the instrumentality of which is not restricted to the reproduction of
those social relations of which it is itself the product.”61 He argues instead that myths
can portend “the reconstruction of society in some radically new form.”62 They can
imagine new possibilities. We can therefore ask, for instance, whether the myth of
autochthony so forcefully invoked and interrogated in Seven really demands the
exclusion of women and foreigners, or is an imaginative way to unify all citizens in the
defense of the city, or both. Is Aeschylus asking us to view autochthony retrospectively
(exclusion) or prospectively (unity)? In proper Vernantian fashion I would argue that this
dialectic of retrospective and prospective history creates the tensions and ambiguities of
the plays I explore in this dissertation.

1.5 Chapter Breakdown

The first chapter begins with an investigation into how Prometheus Bound
constructs a familial relationship between the protagonist Prometheus and his absent
antagonist Zeus. Genealogically they two figures are only distantly related, but
Aeschylus, through the various other characters we meet in the play, conceptualizes their
relationship as father (Zeus) and son (Prometheus) in order to explore the affective
dimensions of genealogy for action and choice. Prometheus knows a secret about the
future fate of Zeus that relates to Zeus’ family history and desire. Prometheus keeps this

61 Ibid. (1989: 49)
semiological system” (cf. Barthes [(1957) 1972: 114]) but is less cynical about its implications than
Barthes. Contrast Barthes: “[M]yth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and
making contingency appear eternal. Now this process is exactly that of bourgeois ideology. If our society
is objectively the privileged field of mythical significations, it is because formally myth is the most
appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion which defines this society” ([1957] 1972: 142—my
emphasis).
secret defiantly to leverage his relationship with him, but Aeschylus stages the ill will in such a way as to draw out the tension between their respective views on history. Prometheus sees the necessity of repetition in Zeus’ genealogical past, but Zeus, the play hints, is capable of reason, compromise, and collaboration, and thus his future (unlike his predecessors’) remains open. Chapter one explores what such a conflict between views on history says about the nature of authority and political identity.

The second chapter analyzes Seven against Thebes. My investigation considers how Aeschylus disorients our perception of the action and behavior of Eteocles with subtle echoes of his family history. Can Eteocles escape that history and forge a new one? My specific focus is Eteocles’ use of the myth of autochthony as a means of civic solidarity in the face of an invading host (led by his twin brother Polynices). I seek to show how Aeschylus laces this rhetoric with the corrupted desires of his family history. Is this “national” myth (autochthony) just a useful metaphor for defining who we are, a serviceable fiction to describe our difference? The way Aeschylus poses the opposition between Eteocles and Polynices suggests that when a war comes down to brother against brother, there is no such thing as difference.

The third examines Persians. Here a literal father-son relationship between Darius and protagonist Xerxes evokes the frustration of failure and the anxiety of influence. I argue that Xerxes’ failed effort to outstrip or even to match his father’s achievement precipitates reflection on the meaning and meaningfulness of his historical sensibility. His father Darius’ success, his injunctions to remember his historical record, seems to impose history and memory as a stifling conservatism upon Xerxes’ decisions and prospects. As Aeschylus’ oldest surviving play, what does Persians make of the
historical moment the Athenians face before them and the future they seems poised to make as nationalists and imperialists like Xerxes. Does the play transform Xerxes’ history into a resource of answers for the Athenians? Or does it imagine a sort of failed contrafactual to the patriotic, ethnocentric narrative of the Greek victory?
CHAPTER 2

THE TYRANNIES OF THE PAST, THE TYRANNY OF THE PAST:

PROMETHEUS BOUND

Let me start with a naïve, albeit, I think, important question: why would the Athenians invoke Zeus as the safeguard of democracy against tyrannical iniquity? This is an important inquiry because Zeus, at least as he is represented in the literature of the fifth century, is a poor figure for egalitarian right. He is, as both Homer and Hesiod termed him, the “king of gods and men.” He does not suffer the vagaries or the transience of power that affect, for example, human kings and tyrants as attested in most of the major literary works of the time. His rule is eternal and unchallengeable. There is no shortage of material, especially in the tragedians (but also Homer and Hesiod), implying or outright charging that Zeus was also a tyrant. And tyrants, as authors from Solon through to Aristotle insist, must necessarily fall. So why the contradiction?

This question will be one of the guiding inquiries of the present chapter. I examine here Prometheus Bound (hereafter PV), a play whose political and intellectual import, I will argue, is to confront its audience with the question of the permanence of Zeus’ sovereignty. Aeschylus seems to be posing an outright challenge to this
permanence in *PV*: herein we have a fellow immortal, Prometheus, known for his ability to see far into the future, threatening Zeus and anyone else who will listen (the chorus, Okeanos, Io, Hermes) that Zeus’ rule as king of the gods will eventually come to a bloody end. Prometheus claims this fall from grace will be the result of Zeus’ tyrannical behavior (specifically his punishment of Prometheus), which he sees as an inevitable continuation of the violence in Zeus’ genealogical past (Ouranos and Kronos). Because of the ill will between Prometheus and Zeus, Prometheus will not reveal to him the woman with whom a fatal sexual liaison will produce a child greater than Zeus. *PV* thus raises the question of Zeus’ sovereignty in an unequivocal way: will his authority be threatened either by the “arbitrary tyranny” of his rule, which stretches in a genealogical pattern back to the beginning of time, or by the prospect of a son who will depose him, or both? These are serious questions Aeschylus poses, leaving us unsure whether Zeus’ power is as eternal as it is assumed to be. The unfortunate state of the remains of the original trilogy offers us little help in resolving the extent to which Aeschylus really interrogates Zeus’ rule, though most assume that the overall movement of the trilogy was toward a resolution of the conflict between Zeus and

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63 Solmsen (1949: 149, 152)
64 The debate about the authorship and authenticity of *PV* has raged back and forth for many years now. Cf. Solmsen (1949), Podlecki (1966), Herrington (1970), Herrington (1979), Conacher (1980), Griffith (1983), Said (1985), West (1990), Marzullo (1993). I will here refer primarily to Griffith (1977), who considers the authority and who suspects the play is not from the hand of Aeschylus. The problem is vexed, however, and for the sake of this chapter I will proceed from the cautious position of the most recent article on the topic by Lloyd-Jones, who seconds Herrington (1979): “But if they play is not authentic, it is remarkable that no ancient author seems to have suspected it; the only surviving tragedy that is generally considered not to belong to the author under whose name it was transmitted, the *Rhesus*, was suspect even in antiquity” (2003: 54).
65 See Griffith (1977: 245-49; and 249-52 on the possibility that *PV* was a monodrama), Ibid. (1983: 31-35; and especially 281-305 for collation of and commentary on the surviving fragments), West (1979), and Ibid. (1990: 51-72).
Prometheus and the redemption of their relationship for the benefit of both immortals and mortals.\textsuperscript{66} After all Zeus was to remain the supreme ruler, father of gods and men.

That eventually Prometheus and Zeus are reconciled, however, does not mean that Aeschylus could not or would not pose the question of the permanence of Zeus’ rule, even if, as Farnell claims, he is “\textit{par excellence} the apostle of Zeus.”\textsuperscript{67} Most critics focus on the narrowly political or character-oriented aspect of \textit{PV} and argue that Aeschylus’ interrogation of Zeus’ reign is articulated strictly in terms of tyranny versus democracy or, more judgmentally, authoritarianism versus freedom. It is not hard to imagine why this is the case. As Shelley most famously put it many years ago, the imprisoned Prometheus represents “the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends.”\textsuperscript{68} Marx and Goethe felt similarly. By this reading Prometheus is aligned with the forces of enlightenment and progress, facing off against the brutality and repression of Zeus’ totalitarianism. For this reason many critics suggest the point of \textit{PV} is to show that the threat to Zeus’ power

\textsuperscript{66} Hesiod makes a point of this resolution as well, though the exact motivation for Zeus’ charity is somewhat unclear. He says that Prometheus was released “not without the will of Olympian Zeus who reigns on high, that the glory of Heracles the Theban-born might yet be greater than it was before over the plenteous earth” (\textit{Th.} 529-31; translation is Evelyn-White’s). Solmsen (1949: 161, 165-73) suggests that the redemption of Zeus and Prometheus fits the pattern—“the same fatal entanglement of a family in a heritage of crimes and curses”—of the history of the Labdacids and the Atreids which he dramatized elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{67} Farnell (1933: 45). My position here in influenced by Vernant ([1972] 1990) and Goldhill (1990). There are problems to this approach, as Wohl (2005) has pointed out in regard to Segal’s work, since it tends to ontologize a poetics of ambiguity and to disregard tragedy’s attempts to resolve ambiguities. And as Bouvrie reminds us, we should not “a priori assume the poet to oppose accepted values and beliefs” (1993: 192).

\textsuperscript{68} Shelley (1820)
will only subside when he gives up his tyrannical ways in favor of more just or democratic ones.\textsuperscript{69}

Others have gone entirely in the opposite direction, arguing that Prometheus gets his just desserts for challenging Zeus during the precarious time of political succession.\textsuperscript{70}

These types of interpretations tend to hang on a simple allegorical polarity between tyranny and democracy, an opposition whose terms are assumed to be self-evident and to be weighted ultimately in favor of the right and good (Prometheus/enlightenment/democracy) and not the bad (Zeus/repression/tyranny).\textsuperscript{71} As Griffith has pointed out, however, “it may be that an (understandable) critical preoccupation with development and progress, and a concomitant tendency to locate and define a coherent ‘democratic ideology’ as the Athenian norm against which tragedy’s ‘trangressions’ and conflicts are played out, have resulted at times in readings that are too one-dimensional, even skewed.”\textsuperscript{72}

I would build on Griffith’s suspicion toward such one-dimensional interpretations of \textit{PV} to suggest that the question of the permanency of Zeus’s reign and his relationship with Prometheus is less about tyranny and democracy than the meaning of the past and its effect on the future. Does viewing the relationship between the past and the future in the

\textsuperscript{69} Especially symptomatic in this vein is Podlecki (1966: 101-22). For the “anthropological” allegory—that \textit{PV} traces a “symbolic opposition between civilised life with agriculture, \textit{dike}, \textit{xenia} and uncivilised life knowing technology, but lacking agriculture, marriage, and \textit{xenia}”—see Bouvrie (1993). Fowler (1957: 180) makes the interesting case that the allegorical opposition between Zeus and Prometheus is one between tyranny and aristocracy. Cf. also Griffith (1995).

\textsuperscript{70} See, e.g., Wecklein ([1878] 1981: 7-19) and Dodds (1973: 26-44).

\textsuperscript{71} See, e.g., Todd (1925).

\textsuperscript{72} Griffith (1995: 109). This is an important observation because he acknowledges the many virtues of the work of, say, Goldhill (1986 and 1990), Meier (1988), Zeitlin (1986), Winkler and Zeitlin (1990), Ober and Strauss (1990), and Rose (1992) at the same time as he refuses to let ideas about \textit{demos}, \textit{polis} or “ideology” become substitutions for critical inquiry. Or in his own words, to let them “stand too pat” (1995: 109 n.143). See, however, Goldhill (2000, esp. 50 ff.) for a thoughtful critique of the occlusions of this article.
way Prometheus does, i.e. deterministically, foreclose the open-endedness and potential of the future? This is not a fanciful reframing of the PV’s moral question. As Karsai notes, the play “focus[es] on the effects of the past…rather than rendering the story as a series of subsequent acts of the characters.”73 This means that the very structure of PV, static and uninteresting as it may appear, focuses our attention on how Prometheus views the connection between past, present, and future.74 Griffith identifies a similar thread, suggesting that one of PV’s dramatic techniques is to stress the ambiguous relationship between what is (or seems) inevitable and what is possible. In his own words:

“Throughout the play, a tension is maintained between the inevitability of certain future events (Heracles’ birth, P.’s release, reconciliation between P. and Zeus) and the possibility of the unexpected—which may contradict these ‘inevitable’ events (increased or eternal sufferings for P.; the overthrow of Zeus).”75 This, I believe, is a far more productive approach to PV than the strictly moral or political ones of the stripe I outlined.

73 Karsai (2001: 194)
74 Whether this means I am ascribing to PV a “philosophically minded audience” (Bouvrie [1993: 190-91]), I do not know. What I am assuming is that the play (any play for that matter), despite its presumed fealty to dramatic convention or entertainment, offers philosophical and intellectual insights nevertheless. I see no reason, in other words, why we need to brand some interpretations of PV as too intellectualizing for a genre supposedly as civic-minded as tragedy (see Griffith [1995: 63 n.3 and 107-24]). Bouvrie’s notes on the pages just cited (190-91) adduce numerous references to such interpretations. She assumes on the other hand that “the meaning to the original audience was conveyed at at [sic] subconscious level of perception…In staging these truths instead of proclaiming them in bald statements the audience will incorporate them more readily in their sense of value. In fact, the audience is responding to their fundamental need to (re)create the culture collectively and thus their ‘selves’ in this manner” (200). This approach, it seems to me, holds more problematic assumptions—subconscious responses, sense of value, culture, self—than those espoused by philosophical interpretations. I prefer to follow Heiden’s instructive remarks: “In short, the plays of Aeschylus…have considerable kinship with philosophical discourse, and in staging them their playwrights posed ethical and intellectual challenges […] . The performances themselves were therefore partly protreptic, and in the centuries since the performances disappeared, the unperformed texts have nevertheless exercised considerable influence […]. On the other hand, if somehow performance of Greek drama became abundant but texts were unattainable and the plays could not be contemplated in silence and privacy, we would lose most of what they have to offer” (2005: 12). Cf. further Roesler (1970), Rath (1997), Adan (1999), Palladini (2001).
75 Griffith (1983: 17)
above. In fact I want to use this insight as a foundation for my own argument here. Irrespective of the political orientations we assign, whether problematically or not, to each character—each is a god, so the analogy is by default somewhat crude—I will argue here that the political import of *PV* is the (political, cosmic) potential of the relationship between Zeus and Prometheus. That is, the play is less concerned with the gradual progression or teleological resolution of tyranny into democracy\(^\text{76}\) than with the combination of what each protagonist embodies, intellectual cunning and foresight with unlimited power. The realization of this potential is capable of releasing Zeus and Prometheus from both the forces of the past and the seemingly inevitable prospects of the future. With this potential they are able to make new worlds and new histories.

But *PV* shows the struggle and the difficulty involved in realizing the potential of a productive relationship between Prometheus and Zeus. The principal obstacle to this reconciliation, I argue here, is the sense of determinism and inevitability that infects Prometheus’ perspective. To his mind Zeus is doomed to repeat the transgressions of his genealogical past, so he therefore holds back a secret that will release Zeus from this fate in order to leverage his own freedom. But *PV* exposes the flaws of this type of thinking and the limitations it imposes on the possibilities of their relationship. To make this case we must be attuned to the various other voices overpowered by the forceful and compelling words of Prometheus. These include the chorus of Oceanids, Oceanus, Io, and not least of all Zeus, who makes no appearance outside his henchman, Kratos, and

\(^{76}\) Consider, e.g., Konstan (1977: 70): “Looking back [via *PV*] upon the struggles which had brought the democracy into being, he could see them not only as the product of conflicting motives or existential commitments but also as a necessary episode in the realization of a destined end.”
his middle-man, Hermes. Through these characters we hear the critique of Prometheus’ perspective and the traces of a future collaborative potential between Zeus and Prometheus. This, I believe, we should not ignore, no matter how much Prometheus fascinates or impels us, nor how much Zeus repels or appalls. Let me be clear: I do not intend to vindicate Zeus or suggest that Aeschylus intended to do so. I am only interested in the “Zeus problem” to the extent to which it obscures the larger issue of his potential relationship with Prometheus. But the critical history of PV has weighed decisively in one direction for some time now. Without belaboring it, I would on the one hand simply like to rebalance the scales and, on the other, to take criticism of the play beyond this measure of its worth and meaning. To do so I want to bring to bear on the play the new considerations of genealogy and history I suggested above, ones hopefully untethered to moral investments in either character.

When speaking of history in PV, I mean the salient past of Zeus’ genealogy, which is itself tied inextricably to the history of his political succession. In this play, in fact, genealogy is a direct threat to the political and cosmic order: a future fatal tryst will produce a child who will depose Zeus unless Prometheus reveals the secret to him. We have of course no Zeus to contest or corroborate this version of his history or future, only Prometheus. But Prometheus is a credible witness for two reasons: (1) by his own account he took part in, even aided, Zeus’ ascension to the throne; and (2) he has, as both

77 Given the fact that Zeus is nowhere to be found in PV, I am surprised to find (even recent) treatments of the play that unreservedly assert “Zeus exhibits a typical tyrant’s paranoia and desperation, fearing his own fall from authority” (Rehm [2003: 47]).
78 For a succinct survey of the “Zeus problem”, see Griffith (1983: 33 n.105). Bouvrie (1993) also provides a nice summary but insists that “our intense focusing on psychology and morality is a modern interest” (188) and that the “Zeus problem is our problem, not that of Aiskhulos or his audience” (189).
79 White (2001), whom I discuss in further detail below, is a notable exception, tracing elements of theodicy in the play.
his name testifies and he himself asserts, a knowledge of the future. Prometheus draws the connection between these two threads: because Zeus failed to recognize his aid and loyalty\textsuperscript{80}, he has decided to withhold the secret that will save Zeus’ rule. The question is then: to what extent does Prometheus’ knowledge of Zeus’ genealogical past, coupled as it is in his eyes with a determinate, almost cursed, future, affect the potential of a collaborative relationship between him and Zeus?

This is one of the questions I would like to address in this chapter. My argument will proceed in four stages. First, I will examine how the opening of the play draws a connection between Zeus’ rule as a father and his rule as tyrant. Second, I will make a small digression on Aeschylus’ departure from Hesiod in creating an alternate picture of genealogy and history. Third, I will situate Zeus in his own history, including references to his own father Kronos, Prometheus’ allusion to a curse, and Prometheus’ predictions about the future. Finally, I will conclude by analyzing the play’s emphasis on the potential of collaboration between Zeus and Prometheus.

2.1 The Father and the Tyrant

I begin my analysis with the very opening of the play, where Hephaestus, Kratos and a silent Bia\textsuperscript{81} have come to the farthest reaches of the world to punish Prometheus (1-

\textsuperscript{80} As I will elaborate later, even this loyalty is up for dispute. Prometheus decided to join Zeus’ side only after he failed to convince his fellow Titans that they could not defeat Zeus by force, but only by cunning (cf. PV 204-18). There is also, of course, his theft of fire.

\textsuperscript{81} As far as I can tell, no one has ventured to explain Bia’s silence. According to Hesiod (Th.385ff.) she and Kratos are children of Styx, who “have no home except with Zeus, and no place to rest nor road to travel except where he leads them.” She is, as Griffith notes, a κόφων prosópon and embodies along with Kratos “the military basis of Zeus’ newly-won tyranny (1983: 81; cf. also 31). Benardete makes the cryptic remark that “Bia is there as a silent actor because Prometheus does not yet understand it” (1964: 135), but does not go on to explain what he means. And it seems funny to me that Taplin (1972), in an article fittingly titled “Aeschylean Silences and Silences in Aeschylus”, would not give consideration to her silent presence here.
In this scene, I argue, Hephaestus and Kratos set up the relationship between Zeus’ rule as father and his rule as tyrant. There are further references to these motifs in the play, but what makes this opening gambit notable is that it is the only time Prometheus is not speaking.\(^{82}\) We therefore get a different perspective on paternity and tyrannical authority from Prometheus’ point of view.

\(PV\) begins with Hephaestus, Kratos, and Bia dragging Prometheus to Scythia, where Hephaestus has been ordered to nail Prometheus to a high crag. The very first reference to Zeus in the play omits his name, simply referring to him as “father”. Kratos barks:

"Ἡφαιστε, σοὶ δὲ χρὴ μέλειν ἑπιστολὰς ἅς σοι πατήρ ἐφεῖτο, τόνδε πρὸς πέτραις ὑψηλοκρήμνοις τὸν λεωργὸν ὀχιάσαι ἀδαμαντίνων δεσμῶν ἐν ἀρρήκτοις πέδαις.

Hephaestus, you had better take care of the orders father gave you and bind this criminal to these skyscraping rocks with adamantine chains! (3-6)

In the ensuing speech of Hephaestus and the subsequent back-and-forth over the severity of the punishment, three further references to Zeus as father are made:

\[\text{εὐωριάζειν γὰρ πατρὸς λόγους βαρὺ}\]

Disregarding father’s words means heavy consequences. (17)

\[\text{σύμφημ', ἀνηκουστεῖν δὲ τῶν πατρὸς λόγων οἴον τε πῶς; οὔ τοῦτο δειμαίνεις πλέον;}\]

How could one possibly disobey father’s words? Do you not fear that even more? (40-41)

\[\text{οὔκουν ἐπείξηι τῶιδε δεσμὰ περιβαλεῖν,}
\text{ὡς μὴ σ’ ἐλινύοντα προοδερχθῇ πατήρ;}\]

\(^{82}\) Cf. Taplin (1972: 78-79) on the dramatic purpose of this silence.
Hurry up and put these chains on Prometheus, so that father doesn’t catch you slacking off! (52-53)

Perhaps it is not a striking observation that Zeus is repeatedly called father, since after all he was known as the father of gods and men. But what makes these appellations conspicuous and significant, apart from the number of times they are used, is the authority that is linked specifically with Zeus’ paternity. Lines 17 and 40 for example make an explicit case. In the first instance Hephaestus insists that, though he is hesitant to harm a relative (synggenē theon [14]), “disobeying father’s words means heavy consequences.”83 In the second, even though Kratos understands Hephaestus’ hesitation to harm Prometheus, he can only pose the question of whether it is even possible to disobey Zeus. That would be a bold act of fearlessness (deimaineis [41]).

More than this there is a pervasive sense of obligation to Zeus’ authority as father, which in four instances is grounded by the force of necessity: chrê (3), dei (9), anangkê (16, 72). This sense of inevitability links Zeus’ words to their execution by another and thereby forecloses the possibility of disobedience. The strength of this paternal authority is emphasized by the less emphatic, but no less binding, way that Zeus conveys his orders. He “puts upon” (epheito [4]) Hephaestus his epistolas. His entolē (12)84 has one purpose and nothing else.85 These descriptions would suggest that Zeus’ word is the final word; he imposes his orders and there is no circumventing them. Zeus even

83 Presumable we are meant to catch the illusion to Il. 1.711-16, where Hephaestus relates the tale of his one-time decision to stand up to Zeus, a decision whose consequences were indeed heavy.
84 Chantraine relates entolē (<tellō) to telos. But even the remote connection cannot obscure the auditory echo between the two that emphasizes the necessity of completion within the command.
85 The phrase echei telos de k’ouden empodôn eti (13) could also mean that Hephaestus has finished his work and is asking Kratos to back off. Cf. Woolsey (1869: 55 ad loc.), Mather (1883: 85 ad loc.), Griffith (1983: 85 ad loc.).
“oversees” (*prosderchthēi* [53]) Hephaestus’ work.\(^{86}\) Furthermore he has *dysparaitētoi phrenes* (34) and his new rule is *trachys* (35). He is the only one truly free (50) and does not suffer intellectual competition (62).\(^{87}\) These examples paint a rather clear picture of Zeus: he is the father and he has all the power.

But is he also to be thought of as Prometheus’ father? This is the question that arises when we consider the strange way Kratos characterizes Prometheus’ punishment, which also links Zeus’ paternity and his authority. Kratos claims Prometheus must pay a penalty for his transgressions (8-9)

\[\text{ὡς ἂν διδαχθῆι τὴν Διὸς τυραννίδα στέργειν, φιλανθρώπου δὲ παύεσθαι τρόπου.}\]

*So that he learns to love the tyranny of Zeus and to give up his human-loving ways. (10-11)*

The primary association of the verb *stergein* is the love between parent and child (LSJ 1). While the word is frequently used in Attic to mean “acquiesce” or “submit”\(^{88}\), here in the context of paternal authority it underscores and brings out filial/parental associations. Kratos is implying that Prometheus’ love for mortals is an aberration because it is not properly oriented toward Zeus.\(^{89}\) The diction of these lines suggests that Prometheus is like an errant child defying his obligation to his father.

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\(^{86}\) Notice also in Hephaestus response to Kratos in the following line (54) how *pros-* has been dropped from *derkesthai*. This would perhaps imply that not even Kratos, the very personification of Zeus’ power, has the same oversight authority as Zeus.

\(^{87}\) The word Kratos uses is *sophistēs*. See Griffith (1983: 95 *ad loc.*) for the semantic range of this term. He suggests that “the sentence does not compare Zeus and P. as sophists: rather, ‘he may learn, sophist that he is, that he is more stupid than Zeus’”.

\(^{88}\) See Woolsey (1869: 54-55 *ad loc.*), Harry (1905: 129 *ad loc.*).

\(^{89}\) Cf. Beneveniste (1973: 280-81) on the behavior expressed by the verb *philein*. 
Parker has argued that the term *tyrannis* did not by the time of *PV*’s composition necessarily connote brutality, but rather power held without monarchical succession.⁹⁰ He does contend, however, that of Aeschylus’ tragedies only *PV* exhibits both the neutral connotation and its later connotation of violence.⁹¹ And as White points out, “Zeus’ rule, while repeatedly labeled tyranny, is never called despotic.”⁹² That is, calling his rule a tyranny does not necessarily mean it is a brutal tyranny, even though there are more than a handful of allusions to Zeus as “tyrant” in the play where the connotation is entirely negative.⁹³ In this opening scene, however, we cannot be certain. Kratos’ brusque assertion that Prometheus must learn to accept Zeus’ rule through violent punishment may give us pause⁹⁴, but not even Hephaestus objects completely to Prometheus’ punishment (cf. 29-35, 51, 72). In any case it would be impossible to settle definitively whether or not it has pejorative associations. What we can say is that the word designates Zeus’ absolute authority as father. Discernible in these lines then is the explicit connection drawn between Zeus’ role as father and his role as tyrant, whatever precisely that word may ultimately prove to connote. Prometheus, just like Kratos and Hephaestus, must obey his “father”.

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⁹¹ Parker (1998: 159). Cf. *PV* 35, where Zeus’ rule is called *trachys* because it is new.

⁹² White (2001: 130 n.89). I do not subscribe entirely to this reading for reason which I will elaborate below in my discussion of Io.

⁹³ Cf. *PV* 150-51, 222, 224, 305, 310, 357, 756, 909, 942, 957, 996.

⁹⁴ Griffith wryly notes that “[*tyrannis*] often, but not always, carries pejorative associations. To Kratos it does not […]” (1983: 84 *ad loc.*).
But though Zeus may be figured for obvious reasons as father by Kratos and Hephaestus (and later Hermes\(^{95}\)), Prometheus is not really a son of Zeus. Despite the fact that everyone calls Zeus father, it is not quite clear just where Prometheus stands in this family tree. I will address the question of why it is significant Prometheus is assimilated into the family line in a later section, when I consider Prometheus’ version of his history with Zeus. But for now we can glean some important information from this opening scene. Twice Hephaestus invokes his kinship with Prometheus: he refers to him as a *synggenē theon* (14) and later expresses reservations about harming him due to the power of *to sunggenes* (39). There is rather tortuous genealogical connection between Hephaestus and Prometheus (put in the simplest way, Hephaestus is a great-grandson of Ouranos and Gē; Prometheus a grandson). And more than this, as Griffith claims, Hephaestus “probably has in mind too his functional relationship with P.”\(^{96}\) Apart from these considerations though, there is nevertheless a relation between them strong enough (*deinon* [39]) to make him reluctant to punish Prometheus. These allusions, and the opening scene in general, suggest that Prometheus bears a genealogical relation to his captors but leaves that relation undefined.

Eventually Hephaestus clarifies Prometheus’s place by addressing him directly as “sheer-minded son of sagacious Themis” (18). This parentage is a strange invention by Aeschylus. Hesiod makes no mention of Prometheus’ relation to Themis but notes that

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\(^{95}\) Cf. *PV* 947, 968, 984, 1018.

\(^{96}\) Griffith (1983: 85 *ad loc.*) On the “functional” relationship: “[B]oth are deities of fire and the skills which depend on it. In Athens they shared an altar in the Academy.”
she was Zeus’ second wife after Mētis. I will get to Aeschylus’ engagement with Hesiod shortly, but for now the ascription of Prometheus to Themis’ bloodline again raises the question of Zeus and Prometheus’ relationship. If we are to follow Hesiod’s theogony that Themis was the daughter of Ouranos—and we have no reason to assume Aeschylus and his audience would not as well—then Prometheus would be something like Zeus’ cousin. Thus in terms of genealogy, if nothing else, Prometheus and Zeus are relatively of the same standing. This already complicated picture gets even messier when Prometheus later identifies Themis with Gē (“one figure though of many names” [209-10]). This would make him an uncle rather than a cousin of Zeus. As in Hephaestus’ invocations of kinship above, we are left with a rather murky idea of the relationship between Zeus and Prometheus. This ambiguity, I believe, keeps open the question of their relationship with one another as the play goes on, as well as the question of their relationship with their own forebears. For now I have tried to show specifically how the opening scene of the play links Zeus’ tyrannical power to his role as father and hints at some unspecified genealogical relation between Zeus and Prometheus. In the following section I expand upon Aeschylus’ engagement with Hesiod and elaborate some of the implications of his departure from him.

2.2 Hesiod and Aeschylus

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97 Vernant (1974 a) elaborates the implications of this double marriage: marriage to both Themis, who represents the once-and-for-all, and Mētis, who represents future possibility, seals Zeus’ sovereignty.
98 I acknowledge but leave aside the difficulty of conceptualizing divine blood ties by recourse to human.
99 Griffith (1983: 127 ad loc.) states that “[g]ods often have several names, reflecting their different functions and cults. Here the two titles are boldly united as aspects of the same goddess, who is both primeval mother of strange and ancient creatures and an august prophetess.”
100 See Griffith (1983: 5).
In this section I will lay out Hesiod’s version of the genealogy of Zeus and his relation to Prometheus and then discuss Aeschylus’ divergence from it. I hope to show that Aeschylus’ variation on the Hesiodic theogony marks a critical turn away from a teleological, deterministic view of history, even adopting some of Hesiod’s own insights regarding the potential for collaboration and the openness of the future.

According to what we can discern from *Theogony*—and it is difficult to be certain, since even Hesiod reports variations—Prometheus and Zeus are cousins. Prometheus was born to Iapetos (the Titan child of Ouranos and Gaia) and Clymene (child of the Titan Okeanos and Tethys), Zeus to Kronos (the Titan child of Ouranos and Gaia and younger brother of Iapetos) and Rhea (herself the Titan child of Ouranos and Gaia, thus sister to both Kronos and Iapetos). In terms of linear descent Prometheus and Zeus are of the same standing. But nowhere does Hesiod make this relationship specific. We do know, however, that there existed a prophecy that Kronos was to be overthrown by one of his children “through the conniving of great Zeus” (*Th.* 465), and for this reason Kronos attempted to swallow them all down (*Th.* 463-91). So we suspect at least that Zeus was to go on to greater things and would continue the tradition of filial usurpation and eventually take the throne.

When, therefore, in Hesiod the father is also the king, it follows that a genealogical succession will also be a political succession. For this reason Hesiod does

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101 On the strange order of the catalogue of the sons of Iapetos after the birth of Zeus, see most recently Clay (2003: 105-06, with useful discussion of previous scholarship in the notes): “In delaying the line of Iapetus, Hesiod manages to reverse the expected genealogical order and, in a way, makes the Iapetids appear to be the younger sons of the family of Cronus. The significance of the genealogical sleight-of-hand derives from the repeated pattern of the succession myth, where it is always the youngest son who deposes the father.”
not need to explain why Zeus’ defeat of Kronos looks forward to his assumption of power. It is just the case that upon overcoming the Titans and particularly Kronos, Zeus became ruler, “father of gods and men” (Th. 457). Given that Prometheus’ challenge to Zeus comes before Zeus’ power is established (i.e. before the Titanomachy), the important point seems to be that Prometheus represents a rival royal line and a different source of authority (humans) that threatens Zeus’ new and vulnerable reign.\(^\text{102}\) We can see, however, that Hesiod’s ambiguous account of the relationship between Zeus and Prometheus does not at all affect the supposed teleological momentum of *Theogony*: order comes to rest with Zeus as supreme ruler and “father of gods and men”.

Closer inspection, however, shows that Zeus’ ascension was less a matter of teleological necessity than a simple willingness to listen, compromise, and collaborate. In fact the narrative of the Titanomachy, which seals Zeus’ sovereignty (Th.617-735), directly follows the episode with Prometheus (Th. 507-612) and very explicitly states that Zeus’ decision to enlist the Titans, who had been imprisoned by Kronos during many years of infighting, was at the advice of Gaia:

\[
\text{ἀλλὰ σφέας Κρονίδης τε καὶ ἀθάνατοι θεοὶ άλλοι}
\text{oús τέκεν ήύκομος Ρείη Κρόνου ἐν φιλότητι}
\text{Γαίης φραδμοσύνησιν ἀνήγαγον ἐς φάος αὖτις·}
\]

\textit{But the son of Cronos and the other deathless gods whom rich-haired Rhea bore from union with Cronos brought them up again to the light at Earth’s advising. (Th. 624-26)}\(^\text{103}\).

Along with the fury of Zeus’ thunderbolt (Th. 687-93) the strength and handiness of Kottos, Briareos, and Gyes proved instrumental to the victory (\textit{eni prōtoisi} [713]).

\(^{102}\) Vernant (1974b)

\(^{103}\) Cf. also Th. 883-85
would suggest that Zeus’ potential reign was not simply a given but rather the product of his ability to take advice and collaborate with his former enemies (neither of which his father or grandfather were capable of). It is the same willingness to listen that forestalls the threat of his union with Mētis:

ἀλλ’ ὅτε δὴ ἄρ’ ἔμελλε θεὰν γλαυκῶπιν Ἀθήνην
tέξεσθαι, τότ’ ἔπειτα δόλῳ φρένας ἐξαπατήσας
αἰμυλίσει λόγοισιν ἐν ἐκάθετο νηδύν,
Γαίης φραδμοσύνης καὶ Οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος
tῶς γάρ οἱ φρασάτην, ἣν ἡ βασιλιδὰ τιμὴν
ἀλλος ἔχοι Διὸς ἀντὶ θεῶν αἰειγενετάων.
ἐκ γὰρ τῆς εἵμαρτο περίφρονα τέκνα γενέσθαι
πρῶτην μὲν κούρην γλαυκώπιδα Τριτογένειαν,
ἴσον ἔχουσαν πατρὶ μένος καὶ ἐπίφρονα βουλήν,
αὐτὰρ ἔπειτ’ ἄρα παῖδα θεῶν βασιλῆα καὶ ἀνδρῶν
ημελλεν τέξεσθαι, ὑπέρβιον ἔχοντα·

But when she was about to bring forth the goddess bright-eyed Athene, Zeus craftily deceived her with cunning words and put her in his own belly, as Earth and starry Heaven advised. For they advised him so, to the end that no other should hold royal sway over the eternal gods in the place of Zeus; for very wise children were destined to be born from her, first the maiden bright-eyed Tritogeneia, equal to her father in strength and in wise understanding; but afterwards she was to bear a son of overbearing spirit, king of gods and men. (Th. 888-98)

I bring these examples to the fore because they show that Zeus, at least as he is represented in Theogony, secures his sovereignty by his desire to collaborate and his compliance with the advice of others.¹⁰⁴

Though Hesiod makes no mention of Prometheus taking Zeus’ side in the Titanomachy, Prometheus’ account in PV offers an important take on the beginning of

¹⁰⁴ This is apparent even in his decision to swallow Mētis: “Zeus put her into his own belly first, that the goddess might devise for him both good and evil” (Th. 899-900). This would suggest that these are more than just “political deals”, as Brown puts it, whereby “Zeus secures the instruments of organized violence which are characteristic of political power: and armament industry (the Cyclopes), and a mercenary army” (1953: 20). They emphasize rather, as Clay more generously claims, “the principles of reciprocity and the importance of political alliances” (2003: 107).
their relationship that emphasizes collaboration as well. We learn from him that, after consulting his mother (Themis/Gaia), Prometheus advised his fellow Titans on how to defeat the Olympians, forewarning them that dolos and not strength was the means to victory (PV 199-215). Seeing his advice go unheeded, Prometheus decided to take a stand at the side of Zeus, both equally willing in the partnership (hekonth’ hekonti [218]). It is at this point that Prometheus claims to have given Zeus the advice—though what advice we never learn—that established him in power (219-21). Of note in Prometheus’ version of this history is that both Zeus and Prometheus are willing partners. There seems to be no antagonism between them. Further Zeus does not appear to know he will be victorious. By Prometheus’ account it was his own boulē that assured Zeus’ success. This would suggest that Prometheus, far from being in a position of subordination to Zeus, is either an equal (as implied by hekonth’ hekonti) or the advisor to his future sovereignty. Thus Zeus is established in power with Prometheus’ collaboration.

Furthermore, Prometheus makes reference to his dual maternity, here conflating Themis and Gaia into a singular entity. In light of this maternity, whether he was the son of Themis (the Titan daughter of Ouranos and Gaia) or Clymene (so Hesiod), he was relatively of the same standing as Zeus (the immortal equivalent of cousins). But by identifying Themis with the primordial mother-earth, Gaia, Prometheus rewrites his relational ties to Zeus from simple subordination (or equality) to a position of greater authority by moving himself back a generation. Zeus is never subject to Prometheus kat’

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105 By his own account Prometheus seems to have thought this would be a monarchy with him as advisor. Instead it turned out to be a tyranny (224) with neither reward nor even regard for loyalty.

106 Cf. also PV 90, where Prometheus calls upon his pammētor gē.
ischyn (212), but the play seems to suggest that their relationship was not always so hierarchical.

Thus PV, which clearly engages with the mythology and genealogy offered by Hesiod, gives us a more complicated picture of the relationship between Zeus and Prometheus. Prometheus’ take on their history situates him with more autonomy vis-à-vis Zeus, crediting him with the determining factor in Zeus’ ascension to power. But more than this Aeschylus’ engagement with Hesiod both appropriates elements of his theogony and takes a distance from it. As this brief look at Prometheus’ perspective illustrates, PV seems to borrow Hesiod’s emphasis on Zeus’ willingness to be advised and to collaborate. This is important because it implies that, even amid all the teleological and fatal movement from one generation of gods to the next, stability and order come to rest under Zeus because of his openness to such advice. The emphasis thus shifts to the decisions and actions of the protagonists together. Scholars still consider Hesiod’s narrative to be fatalistic107, so Aeschylus’ departure from that sense of fatalism has important implications. First, the effect of collaboration and reciprocity, as we can glean from this scene, is that Zeus was not beholden ultimately to the cycle of transgression and fall in his family’s past; his genealogical history would not determine the course of his own reign. And second, this episode shows that when Prometheus and Zeus work together, the potential of their relationship is explosive: they are able to create a new cosmic order, one not subject to the mistakes of the past.

In the section to follow I come back to PV to examine these divergences and developments in order to situate Zeus in its own version of his family history. I will here

107 See for example Clay (2003, passim).
consider the references to Kronos and an allusion to a curse uttered against Zeus, Prometheus’ dealings with Io, and finally Prometheus’ predictions about Zeus’ downfall. In these instances we will see Prometheus’ perspective on the determinism of the past and its influence on the present and future as he makes his case against Zeus. Zeus’ reign, as Prometheus often and loudly proclaims, is at the mercy of his genealogical past.

2.3 Zeus in History

PV situates the father of gods and men within his own family history as well, that is, as the son of Kronos. There are three important illusions to Kronos in the play:

"Ἀκίχητα γὰρ ἤθεα καὶ κέαρ ἀπαράμυθον ἔχει Κρόνου παῖς.

The son of Kronos has an unapproachable temper and a heart unsoftened by words. (184-85)

"Τί ποτὲ μ’, ὦ Κρόνιε παῖ, τί ποτε ταϊδ’ ἐνέζευξας εὑρὼν ἁμαρτοῦσαν ἐν πημοναῖσιν.

Child of Kronos, what did I do wrong to deserve this suffering you have put me through? (577-78)

"Πατρὸς δ’ ἀρὰ Κρόνου τότ’ ἤδη παντελῶς κρανθήσεται, ἢν ἐκπίτνων ἠρᾶτο δηναιῶν θρόνων.

Then indeed his father Kronos’ curse will be brought to pass, a curse he uttered as he fell from his mighty throne. (910-12)"^108

These references indicate not only Zeus’ succession of rule, but also more importantly draw a connection, to Prometheus’ eyes at least, between the violent paternal behavior of the past generations and their subsequent downfalls. Prometheus traces this pattern from the past (Kronos) to the present (Zeus) to some future (Zeus’ son). Whereas from the

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^108 Cf. also PV 219-21: “Because of my advice the depths of black Tartarus now hold ancient-born Kronos along with his allies.”
beginning of the play Zeus was first and foremost a father-figure with authority, the first two references to Kronos provide us with a sense of history by situating Zeus in his own family line. In the first case the chorus inquire, horrified, about Prometheus’ punishment and conclude that the severity of it bears none other than Zeus’ signature (160-67). After Prometheus defiantly predicts his release and redemption, the chorus caution him about his unrestrained tongue (eleutherostomeis)\(^{109}\), warning him that “Kronos’ son has an unapproachable temper and a heart unsoftened by words” (184-85). In the second the wandering and tortured Io desperately invokes Zeus’ name: “Child of Kronos, what on earth did I do to deserve such suffering?”\(^{110}\) These references to Kronos, straightforward as they seem, point to a deeper history of paternal authority and imply that Zeus is not the end-all of what it means to be a father. Zeus also had a father. He may be the father of the new world order, of everything that Kratos, Hephaestus, Prometheus, Okeanos, the chorus, and Io know, but he is also a son and thus subject (at one point at least\(^{111}\)) to someone greater than himself. This fact reminds us of Zeus’ genealogical rise to power and seemingly figures his all-powerful authority as similar to that of his fallen father, Kronos. As Benardete notes, “Zeus is a god who was generated, and as a generated being nothing in his ancestry warrants any other presumption than that he like his father and his father’s father before him will be overthrown.”\(^{112}\) Apart from their more clear-cut, descriptive nature, these patronymics then appear subtly to trace an

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\(^{109}\) Cf. \textit{PV} 50, where Kratos claims only Zeus is \textit{eleutheros}.

\(^{110}\) After Homer and Hesiod these locutions occur only three times, twice here and once in Sophocles’ \textit{Philoctetes} (679).

\(^{111}\) \textit{PV} 197ff. tells us that Zeus has already overthrown his father and usurped his authority. It is the effects of this usurpation/sovereignty that the characters of the play experience in present time.

\(^{112}\) Benardete (1964: 137)
historical line of (violent) paternal behavior that ultimately resulted in the son’s deposition of the father. The implication of course is that Zeus faces the same threat. Hence these allusions seem to sketch out a pattern of transgression and fall that will find its reiteration at some point in the future and deterministically prefigure Zeus’ downfall. The tyrannies of the past fortify the tyranny of the past: Zeus thinks his own patricide was the end of the familial violence, as it was in Hesiod, and that he will continue to rule forever. But Prometheus claims otherwise, and that knowledge is the source of conflict between them.\footnote{Solmsen follows this line: “Neither [Aeschylus’] moral nor his dramatic sense allowed him to acquiesce in the view that the sequence of sin and punishment should cease to work at the moment of Zeus’ advent to power. And if the record of Zeus’ reign was defiled by deeds of violence, it was all the less possible to believe that he should from the beginning have been immune against a repetition of the fate which his two predecessors had suffered” (1949: 162).}

This sense of the determinism of the past brings us to the final reference to Kronos. Before the entrance of Hermes in the final episode of the play Prometheus speaks of the fatal marriage that will bring Zeus’ demise (908-10), drawing a connection between this union and a curse of old uttered against him: “Then his father Kronos’ curse will have been effected entirely, the curse he pronounced upon being banished from his glorious throne” (911-12). As he had already hinted to Io, the content of the curse is that Zeus will bear a son greater than him (768). As in the previous two examples Zeus is here positioned as a son in relation to his father (\textit{patros} \[910\]). But the important point is Prometheus’ allusion to a curse (\textit{ara}, \textit{ērato}). Hesiod makes no mention of it, and it is found nowhere else in our literature.\footnote{Cf. Griffith (1983: 249 \textit{ad loc.}). Solmsen (1949: 160) sees an allusion to the curse which Hesiod has Ouranos pronounce upon his own usurpation.} Griffith believes it is a “casual and pointless”
reference, given that it was likely the first time anyone had ever heard of it. But in terms of the history it precipitates and its repercussions for Zeus’ future, the allusion is seminal. For the curse sets in motion the history that is Zeus’ past, present, and—if we are to believe Prometheus—his doomed future. A curse is pronounced in the present with effect in the future, but only understood after the fact (hence the future-perfect *kranthēsetai*); it is retroactive, since it applies to Kronos’ usurpation of Ouranos as well as Zeus’ usurpation of Kronos, and prospective, since Zeus will potentially be overthrown by his child. Taken together, these allusions unify past, present, and future, focusing our attention on those predetermined and deterministic aspects of Zeus’ paternal authority that he is seemingly blind to. There is a dangerous history contained in these common locutions which was always latent but becomes active and significant within the thematic context of the play.

What we glean from these allusions, especially Prometheus’, is the potentially fatal connection between the past and the future. Is Zeus’ sovereignty threatened by the history of tyrannical transgressions in his family line? Is he doomed to commit the same transgressions because of the curse which activates that past? Prometheus emphasizes as much, an intellectual feat suggesting he sees broader, meaningful connections between the past, present, and future. And PV takes his far-seeing ability seriously. For if it were simply the case, as it was in *Theogony*, that Zeus’ foresaw everything and was thus never

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115 Griffith (1983: 249). That is, unless it was mentioned in the *Pyrphoros*. For a good discussion of whether *Pyrphoros* was the first or last play of the Prometheus trilogy, see Fitton-Brown (1959: *passim*).
the fool to Prometheus’ wits\textsuperscript{116}, then \textit{PV} would be a play about Prometheus’ delusion and Zeus’ cynical torture. That possibility is not entirely out of the question, but Aeschylus’ depiction of Prometheus’ knowledge is still compelling and impressive, even if he is exposing the limitations of his way of thinking. And nowhere is this intellect more apparent than in the central scene of the play with Io. It is here that Prometheus reveals his extraordinary ability to see into the past and into the future and to make the meaningful connection between her suffering and her eventual redemption.

Io enters about halfway though \textit{PV}, and her story dominates the second half of the play (561-885).\textsuperscript{117} In this episode we learn of her travels and travails, as she recounts for the chorus the history of her wandering and her torture\textsuperscript{118}, and as Prometheus foretells her future course. A strong affinity between Io and Prometheus as victims of Zeus is expressed in this scene, but the bonds that create this affinity—the remoteness of his punishment which underscores how far she has travelled, her role as progenitor of his savior—are more than simply personal. They also play out in the interstices of genealogy and history, and the connection between Io and Prometheus comes to express the connection between past, present, and future.

At the chorus’ request Io recounts her plight (645-86). She tells of Zeus courting her in her dreams, her father’s confusion about the meaning of the dreams and his

\textsuperscript{116}I.e. in the sacrifice ruse (\textit{Th.}535-60). Notice, however, that Hesiod matter-of-factly claims that Zeus was deceived by Prometheus at \textit{WD} 48. For a good discussion of whether Zeus is ever really fooled, see Clay (2003: 100-28 \textit{passim}).

\textsuperscript{117}For discussion and overview of the function of the Io-scene and its integration in the play, see Bouvrie (1993: 192-95 and 203 with attendant notes).

\textsuperscript{118}White’s claim (2001: 120 n.54) that \textit{PV} does not address “[w]hy Zeus chose and why she migrates to Egypt” seems a bit strange. In keeping with his libido Zeus wants to have sex with her: “A god, lusting to have sex with this mortal, cast this wandering on her” (\textit{PV} 737-38). Dorter, I think, strikes a good balance between Zeus’ “mere lust” or “selfish obsession” with Io and his “(perhaps penitent) curing” of her in his discussion of the force of love in the play (1992: 128-33).
subsequent forcing of Io from home, her metamorphosis into a cow, the gadfly, and her long journey which drove her world-over to the very spot where Prometheus hangs.\footnote{White contends that Io’s compliance with male authority figures (her father, Zeus, even Prometheus) is “won mainly by persuasion, not physical violence” (2001: 134, 135). For him, then, “the crucial question [for an Athenian audience] is whether this end justifies the means. Or rather, since the goal envisioned is a foundational episode in Greek cultural history, why is her ordeal so long and arduous?” White’s sublimation of Io’s suffering into a ritual process, in which “great blessings require great struggle and suffering” (135), misses the trees for the forest by subordinating her pain to the ultimately benevolent plan of Zeus. I see the point, but I am troubled by the blithe conclusions. Cf. White (2001: 115) on the world in which Io suffers: “Human life as Prometheus portrays it is a stark struggle for survival, and the world he envisions, while recognizably human, is devoid of the sacred and humane: no kindness or fellowship, no religion or government, no families or civil society.” His suggestion that Prometheus’ “parageography” reveals that he is “confused, hence presumes to know more than he does” (116 with attendant footnotes) does not seem to be the point of the episode. The issue at hand is Prometheus’ immense knowledge of Io’s travels both past and future, about which he is hardly confused. In fact he is dead on, whether or not his knowledge reflects the actual cartography of the continents as it was known in the fifth century, or whether it is just an “irrelevant intrusion of the poet’s craze for geography” (so Bouvrie [1993: 195] discussing critics’ dismissals of these geographical oddities). Cf. also West (1997) and Finkelberg (1998).}

Prometheus then shows his broad vision, proceeding to lay out the long wandering ahead of Io (707-35, 790-815, 844-76), even recounting the travels she has undergone up to the present (829-43) to assure her of the accuracy of his words (824-25).\footnote{White’s assertion (2001: 121) that “[f]or an Attic audience, Io’s ordeal evokes a physical, psychological, social and ritual process peculiar to her age and gender” takes a lot for granted given our limited knowledge and speculative understanding of spectator participation. The audience could well see elements of an institutional ritual; or they could just see torture.} The gist of Prometheus’ speech is that ultimately she will reach Canopus in Egypt, where Zeus will restore her form and impregnate her with his gentle touch (atarbeia cheiri [849]), thereby initiating the generational line that will eventually set Prometheus free.\footnote{White (2001: 121)} Given no time to take heart in her future redemption, no time to “look forward to a comforting vision of maternal joy and prosperity,”\footnote{White (2001: 121)} Io is driven off in a fit of pain by the gadfly (884-85) and that is the last we see of her.

But even if Io cannot relish Prometheus’ revelation, the importance of the Io excursus in \textit{PV} is nevertheless paramount for the play itself. For it provides proof of
Prometheus’ metahistorical perspective, proof that he sees larger, more significant and meaningful relationships in the movement of time between past, present, and future. He tells the story of Io’s past, a feat of intellect and prescience since it is news to everyone else except himself and Io, as well as her future, weaving them together into a broader tapestry of meaning for her (redemption), for himself (Io’s descendant Herakles will free him), and for Zeus (who will send Herakles to reconcile with Prometheus). This illustration of Prometheus’ prescience is vital, because on the one hand it shows that he is not just making idle threats or boasts with his foresight. Zeus takes these threats seriously, justifiably sending Hermes to find out about this potentially fatal sexual tryst. The knowledge Prometheus professes to have becomes the crux of the conflict between him and Zeus. And on the other it reiterates the sense that the past curses the future: as the victim of Zeus’ sexual tyranny, Io signifies that Zeus’ past sexual behavior will ruin him in the future. Prometheus connects the dots: the same sexual proclivity that brought Zeus to impose himself upon Io in the past will bring him to mistakenly impose himself upon an unknown woman in the future, who will produce a son to depose him. By relating Io’s past and foretelling her future, Prometheus intimates that the violence and usurpation of Zeus’ family line has not yet come to an end. In this regard it is a remarkable scene in that it illuminates the central conflict of the play as a conflict about the determinism of the past, even without Prometheus’ loud accusations and prophecies about the future (which I will get to shortly). Prometheus, it is clear, sees a direct cause and effect.
But there is of course more to Prometheus’ knowledge about Zeus than the Io scene reveals. Throughout _PV_ Prometheus often and explicitly speaks of Zeus’ future and his doom with fervent passion. The Io scene exposed his extraordinary hind- and foresight and showed with some clarity that his mind was a force to be reckoned with. We ought therefore to pay due respect to his predictions about Zeus. I cited Griffith above, however, to the effect that in _PV_ there is a tension between the inevitability of Prometheus’ assertions and the possibility of things turning out otherwise.\(^{123}\) For this reason it would be circumspect to listen for the ambiguities in Prometheus’ predictions and not to assume, as many critics have, that what Prometheus says is simply the way things have to be. For it is in this tension that Aeschylus interrogates the force of the past and its meaning for the future and marks out the way toward the collaborative potential of Prometheus and Zeus’ relationship.

“Every scene,” Griffith notes, “except for the Prologue and the Ocean scene, is built around a prophecy of some kind from P[rometheus].”\(^{124}\) As such, there are numerous references to Zeus’ fate or Prometheus’ redemption or both together. To take just a few examples initially: near the end of the parodos Prometheus proclaims to the chorus that Zeus will need him “to disclose the new plot, who shall rob him of his throne and power” (169-71). A bit further on Prometheus is “sure, I know, that [Zeus’] temper will soften, when he has been broken in this way [i.e. by the ‘plot’]” (188-92). In the subsequent stichomythia he tells the chorus that his torture will not end until Zeus sees fit (258). At the end of the second episode with Okeanos, Prometheus openly, though

\(^{123}\) Cf. also Unterberger (1968 _passim_) and Conacher (1980 _passim_).

\(^{124}\) Griffith (1983: 16)
cryptically, announces the fall of Zeus (511-25). And in the Io scene “the central stichomythia unexpectedly combines the triple themes of Zeus’ fall, P.’s release and Io’s respite from pain” (757-79). Near the end of the play Prometheus’ predictions become more strident: lines 907-40 and 955-59 assert Zeus’ demise without the slightest doubt. The threat posed, it seems, is not to be taken lightly. If Prometheus’ mind is as formidable as it has been shown to be, then we ought to give him the benefit of the doubt that his predictions mean something.

In this light consider the number of times that Prometheus invokes “necessity” or “fate”. Themis/Gaia foretells Prometheus what is ordained (krainoito) to happen in the Titanomachy (211-13). Moira has determined (peprōtai) that Prometheus shall not yet be released from his bonds; besides, his skill is far weaker than anangkē (511-14). The chorus ask Prometheus, “Who is the anangkēs oiakostrophos?” (515) Prometheus tells Io that one of her descendants is fated (chreōn) to bring about his release (772). Prometheus asserts to Hermes that nothing will force him to give up who is destined (chreōn) to overthrow Zeus (996). We noticed in the opening of the play a connection between Zeus’ rule and necessity: these terms seemed to ground his authority and hence the obedience/subordination to it. But in these instances it is clear that necessity dictates even Zeus’ fate and is beyond his control. Consider especially the heated exchange of 511-25. Prometheus responds to the chorus’ frightened hope for his release (euelpis eimi

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125 Griffith (1983: 16)
127 There are 19 occurrences of chrē-related words in the play, the majority of which record simple “recognition of some immediate and practical demand, whether moral or physical” (Griffith [1983: 225 ad. 772]). These include: 3, 103, 295, 630, 640, 659, 715, 730, 930, 970.
128 Cf. PV 103-05: “And yet I must (chrē) suffer this fate of mine as ably as I can, for I know full well that the force of necessity (anangkē) is unimpeachable.”
[509]) that Moira has yet to sanction his liberation and that his technē is powerless against anangkē. This prompts the chorus to ask, “Who governs anangkē?” To this Prometheus replies, “the triple-form Moirai and the ever-remembering Erinyes,” and claims that “not even Zeus can escape what has been ordained (tēn peprōmenēn) for him.” These are strong words and they confuse the chorus: “Are you saying that Zeus is not more powerful than [the Moirai and the Erinyes]?” (517)

Prometheus’ invocation of the Erinyes here is intriguing. Hesiod makes no mention of a direct tie between the two sets of sisters—the former are Zeus’ daughters by Dikē, the latter the offspring of the castrated genitals of Kronos—so their association is not apparent at first glance.129 Griffith succinctly explains the twin reference as follows: “The Moirai represent what must be, eternal, immutable, universal law. The Erinyes (whose etymology and original functions are not known) often work as the agents and enforcers of this law, punishing or correcting those who disturb the natural order of things.”130 Thus the Fates and the Furies work together to determine and police natural law, the latter especially punishing any transgressions thereof (like kin-bloodshed). But more than that if we take kin-bloodshed as the paradigmatic perversion of the natural order, then the association of the two sets of sisters has more important implications for what Prometheus knows about Zeus. Prometheus’ allusion to the Erinyes (as the deities

129 In Eumenides Aeschylus also draws a connection between the sisters. Apart from the duties (lachos) Moira has assigned to the Erinyes (334-40), the Erinyes call the Moirai “sisters of one mother” (matrokaignētai [962]).
130 Griffith (1983: 180 ad loc.). Padel (1992: 164-69) argues that unlike their Homeric roles the tragic Erinyes “are now deeply concerned with the tragic consequence.” For the strange theology espoused in this line, see Woolsey (1869: 75 ad loc.) and Mather (1883: 100-01 ad loc.). Griffith (1983: 18) sees no systematic theology but concedes that “it is essential that powers above and beyond the Olympians are felt to be shaping events in ways that only P. can describe.” For references to the nature of the Furies in the scholia and other Aeschylean plays, see Harry (1905: 222 ad loc.).
who punish parricides) hints at the connection that his knowledge makes accessible
between the past (Kronos usurping Ouranos, Zeus usurping Kronos) and the future (his
child usurping Zeus\textsuperscript{131}), which the Moirai will enforce. What these “ever-remembering
Erinyes” remember then is Zeus’ own kin-bloodshed; what the Moirai will ensure is the
birth of a son greater than him. For this reason Prometheus can scoff at Hermes:

\begin{quote}
νέον νέοι κρατεῖτε, καὶ δοκεῖτε δὴ
ναίειν ἀπενθῆ πέργαμ’· ὡν’ ἐκ τῶν δ’ ἠισθόμην;
δισσοὺς τυράννους ἐκπεσόντας ἠισθόμην;
τρίτον δὲ τὸν νῦν κοιρανοῦντ’ ἐπόψομαι
αἰσχῖστα καὶ τάχιστα.
\end{quote}

\textit{You guys are young, just like your power, and you think you’re living beyond the reach of grief. Haven’t I already seen two tyrants fall from these very heights? Now I’m about to witness the third, our present ruler, swiftly and disgracefully.} (955-59)

As Solmsen sees it, behind the scenes “nothing less than Zeus’ world government, his
future and that of his family are at stake.”\textsuperscript{132} In Zeus’ eyes the history of family violence
came to an end upon his ascension to the throne, whereupon fate and necessity became
the force behind his words, the tools of his authority. But the secret Prometheus holds
(519-25), the fate of Zeus and the continuation of the cycle of violence, extends back
from the beginning of time all the way to that point in the future when Zeus will be
deposed. Prometheus’ knowledge, engaged as it is with both the past and the future,
exposes the unbroken continuum of signification that history and fate share with one

\textsuperscript{131} Benardete (1964: 137) argues that “the Chorus of Oceanids is silently there to threaten [Zeus] with his overthrow, for Thetis, granddaughter of Ocean on her mother’s side, surely lurks in their shadow.” On the bleak dialectical movement of these genealogicalsuccessions, consider Dorter (1992: 127): “There are no definitive liberations only renewals, and renewals need not be liberation for anyone but their instigator. Kronos was no better than Ouranos; Zeus is here no better than Kronos. There is no reason to expect more from a son of Zeus and Thetis, or, for that matter, from Prometheus himself should he ever achieve such power. Aeschylus’ characterization makes this all too clear.”

\textsuperscript{132} Solmsen (1949: 157)
another. Zeus believed he had intersected and cut that continuum, but this fate, this necessity, as Prometheus sees it, requires Lachesis’ scissors and not Zeus’ own. The Erinyes and the Moirai are there to bear witness.  

Taken together, these passages point toward a potentially serious problem for Zeus, seeing as Prometheus’ formidable mind grants him insights into a future as of yet unavailable to Zeus. But Prometheus’ understanding of the connection between past and future is limited. Consider for example his take on the cycle of violence and deposition in Zeus’ genealogical past. There is a conspicuous absence in this cycle: why would Prometheus not mention Ouranos? It would certainly make a stronger case about genealogical determinism. To be sure Aeschylus engages with Hesiod’s account of teleological succession, but how much can we or should we infer about its meaning for PV if there is no mention of Ouranos. As we have already seen, Aeschylus has departed from Hesiod by making Themis/Ge the mother of Prometheus. Is it not also likely or plausible that he has made similar changes in the relationship between Ouranos, Kronos, and Zeus? Presumably he did not need to belabor the mythology, as his audience would have known most of it. But it is striking that if Aeschylus wanted to make a play about the teleological reiteration of transgression and fall, he would not have Prometheus, the master of historical vision, trace the line farther back than one generation. This is to say, despite Solmsen’s (among others) claim on Aeschylus’ “moral and dramatic sense” concerning sin and punishment, there is no pattern of transgression threatening to undo

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133 Cf. Padel (1992: 171) on Erinyxs as the “daemon of the lasting reality of remembered hurt.” See also Solmsen (1949: 158): “The immediate cause of [Kronos’] punishment is his unjust conduct toward his wife and children, but when he is overthrown by Zeus he suffers at the same time due punishment for the outrage which he has perpetrated upon his father. It was not for nothing that the Erinyes were born when Uranus was emasculated by his son.”
Zeus’ rule. The pattern and the threat it posed were meaningful for Hesiod’s theology/theogony. But maybe what was meaningful to Aeschylus, and thus over Prometheus’ head, was that the pattern, if ever there was one, need not be repeated deterministically, that the past does not work like a curse upon the future and can be averted with compromise and collaboration (both of which Ouranos and Kronos were lacking). So we can say that there is a hole in Prometheus’ knowledge of the past, that his knowledge is also partly an interpretation colored by his outrage at Zeus.

But there are also holes in his understanding of the future. As Griffith has pointed out, Prometheus’ predictions are inconsistent, even to the point of contradiction. For example we hear at 755-56 that for Prometheus “there is no end of my suffering in sight until Zeus falls from power.” In the ensuing dialogue with Io he asserts in no uncertain terms that Zeus will in fact fall (757-68). That is, unless Prometheus is released and warns him (769-70). But as has become clear already from his own predictions to Io about her wanderings, it will be one of her descendants who liberates him (771-74, 871-73). Griffith thus sees a tension: “In this play, P. is unusually aware, and his interlocutors unusually inquisitive—but his statements to them are not quite consistent, and thus the tension between the inevitable and the possible, between the known and the anticipated, is maintained.” Here I also agree in part with White, who suspects that Prometheus “misinterprets his ‘secret’, that Zeus only appears to be at risk, and that the marriage of Thetis to Peleus was eventually revealed to be a part of his plan [...]”. But since, as even White admits, our evidence for such a conclusion is “too tenuous for confidence”, I

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134 Griffith (1983: 16)
135 Griffith (1983: 19)
136 White (2001: 115 n.35)
am hesitant to endorse it entirely. For we have seen how Aeschylus builds an impressive image of Prometheus’ knowledge. So although, as Bouvrie notes, “the audience is constantly reminded of the fact [that Zeus is ‘supreme and invincible in his power’]”\(^\text{137}\), Prometheus is all the same an excellent foil for Zeus precisely because his knowledge, whether accurate or misinterpreted, is enough of a threat to warrant him sending Hermes. For this reason I prefer Griffith’s cautious reasoning about the tension between the inevitable and the possible. But I would go further to suggest, as I have thus far, that this tension between the determinism of the past and the potential of the future is the crux of the play. \(PV\) illuminates both perspectives, so we are left with an ambiguous sense of the future. Zeus reiterates the mistakes of his family line, but the pattern is only traced back one generation. Further, he is willing to take advice, and Prometheus’ predictions are inconsistent. And as I will argue in the next section, the potential of the future is specifically the potential for the things Zeus and Prometheus can accomplish together, not simply the possibility of Zeus’ downfall. The inconsistency of Prometheus’ predictions does not necessarily vitiate the power or foresight of his mind, but rather reframes the personal conflict between him and Zeus within a broader conflict over the determinism and force of the past and melds this conflict with the possibilities embodied in their collaboration. And it is this potential that I would like to explore in the following section.

2.4 The Potential of Prometheus and Zeus

One could get the impression from \(PV\)—and in fact many critics have—that the past and the future are doomed to cycles, and that in the conflict between Prometheus and

\(^{137}\) Bouvrie (1993: 210)
Zeus is expressed a “perennial polarity between intelligence and force” (Dorter). But for all their antagonism Prometheus and Zeus are productive partners, and PV hints at the potential of their relationship. As Dorter notes, “the intelligence that recognizes the possibilities inherent in the nature of things can create something new.”

It goes without saying perhaps that since PV is a tragedy, it does not paint the picture in the sunniest terms. Rather, this potential is presented litotically: the play narrates the cosmic success of their relationship as it once manifested itself in the past and focuses on the tragic results of the failure of their relationship for the present and future. If we are to take Prometheus at his word (i.e. analyze his rhetoric and develop its implications) that he was instrumental in Zeus’ ascension to the throne (261ff., 305), then it is evident that their relationship is a world-changing, cosmic event. The new world order achieved by their collaboration may not have turned out exactly as Prometheus planned, but it was nevertheless nothing short of a revolution. Hence the many references to Zeus’ “young” or “new” reign.

The potential of their relationship, and importantly the tragedy of their failure to work together and achieve this potential, becomes in the course of the play a consistent point of emphasis.

In the second episode, for example, Prometheus informs the chorus that there will come a time when Zeus will

\[
\text{τὴν δ’ ἀτέραμνον στορέσας ὀργήν}
\]
\[
\varepsilon\iota\varsigma\ \alpha\rho\theta\mu\omicron\upsilon\ \epsilon\iota\omicron\ ο\iota\kappa\iota\ βιλό\tau\iota\tau\alpha
\]
\[
\sigma\pi\epsilon\upsilon\delta\omicron\upsilon\ ι\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\delta\omicron\upsilon\tau\iota\iota
\]

*Put aside his interminable wrath and come into a bond of friendship with me, both of us willing partners.* (190-92)

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138 Dorter (1992:xxx)
139 Cf. PV 96, 149, 310, 389, 439, 942, 955, 960.
This somewhat startling revelation of mutual concession, as Griffith sees it, suggests “something closer to a political friendship (amicitia) than to any sort or personal affection. It will be motivated, not by any sense of mercy or generosity on either side, but by practical advantage.” Unusual as it may seem, however, it at least hints, even predicts, that Prometheus and Zeus are capable of collaborating in a reciprocal way (speudōn speudonti). The damage wrought by Prometheus to his relationship with Zeus and his other philoi\textsuperscript{141}, as was attested so compellingly in the opening episode with Kratos, is here shown to be a temporary setback (if you consider 13 generations temporary). Eventually the bonds of philia will be restored.

In the broader scheme of this episode between Prometheus and the chorus, moreover, philia and (un)willingness to compromise are central themes. The chorus’ first words to Prometheus are an affirmation of this very principle:

\begin{quote}
μηδὲν φοβη-
θής· φιλία γὰρ ἣδε τά-
εἴς πτερύγων θοᾶς ἀμιλ-
λαίς προσέβα τόνδε πάγον, πατρώιας
μόγις παρειπούσα φρένας·
\end{quote}

No need to fear, Prometheus. It is out of friendship that we have come to this place on racing wings, just barely getting permission from our father. (128-30)

\textsuperscript{140} Griffith (1983: 123 ad loc.). I would query this formulation, however, because it contradicts the very thing Prometheus is saying. The nature and context of the conflict between Prometheus and Zeus is personal (at least as he sees it), so why not at least admit the possibility that the resolution will also be personal?

\textsuperscript{141} Cf. Griffith (1983: 15): “[Prometheus’ philanthrôpia is] the heart of the problem: in honouring mortals as his chosen philoi, P. has alienated his natural philoi, who regard the maintenance of the aristocratic hierarchy as their prime duty; and this hierarchy is still recovering from the violent dissension of a dynastic war, and is neither strong nor settled enough as yet to bend to compromise.”
It is first and foremost the Okeanids’ *philia* that brought them to share Prometheus’ grief. The sentiment they express is one of mutual affliction: even though you are the one really suffering, Prometheus, because of our bonds we suffer as well. But more than this, the seeming throw-away detail that they had to win their father’s assent to visit Prometheus implies that with the proper approach (*pareipousa*) any mind (*phrenas*) can be swayed.\(^{142}\)

Compare this with their characterization of Prometheus in the second antistrophe, responding to his defiance:

\[
\text{σὺ μὲν θρασύς τε καὶ πικραῖς}
\]
\[
\text{δύασιν οὐδὲν ἐπιχαλὰς,}
\]
\[
\text{ἄγαν δ᾿ ἔλευθεροστομεῖς.}
\]
\[
\text{ἐμὰς δὲ φρένας ἠρέθισε διάτορος φόβος,}
\]
\[
\text{δέδια δ᾿ ἀμφὶ σαῖς τύχαις,}
\]
\[
\text{πάι ποτε τῶνδε πόνων}
\]
\[
\text{χρῆ σε τέρμα κέλσαντ᾿}
\]
\[
\text{ἐσιδεῖν·}
\]

*You are too brash. You’ll never be released from your bitter pains this way. You run your mouth too freely. Now a piercing fear stirs my heart, a fear for your predicament. You need to steer yourself toward deliverance of this suffering.* (178-84)

Whereas in the previous passage *philia* brought them to sympathize with Prometheus and to share his pain, the Okeanids charge him here with overweening boldness (*thrasys*) and pointedly remark that his behavior is obstructing the possibility of his release. His too-free tongue (*eleutherostomeis*) is, paradoxically, the root cause of his unfreedom. And in this case their hearts know only one unflinching thing, fear. And their fear is in fact the point: because Prometheus is unwilling to bend, through their *philia* the Okeanids also share his suffering. The implication is thus that even if—or specifically because—the

\(^{142}\) Even perhaps the mind of Zeus, who, as I cited earlier, was described as having a *kear aparanymphon* (184-85).
benefits of collaboration are reciprocal, so also must the tragedy and suffering be reciprocal when that collaboration is hindered. This is not to suggest that the Okeanids suffer in exactly the same way as Prometheus, but rather to intimate that there is a similarity in kind between their pains that PV underscores, a similarity that the chorus themselves insist upon by invoking the principle of philia. As willing sympathizers and mutual victims, the Okeanids express a subtle sensibility about relationships in opposition to Prometheus’ intransigence.

This sensibility is evident elsewhere. Consider for example the chorus’ back-and-forth with Prometheus concerning the exact reasons Zeus punishes him:

Πρ. πρὸς τοίοδε μέντοι πῦρ ἐγὼ σφίν ὄπασα.  
Χο. καὶ νῦν φλογωτόν πῦρ ἔχουσ᾿ ἐφήμεροι;  
Πρ. ἀφ᾿ οὗ γε πολλὰς ἐκμαθήσονται τέχνας.  
Χο. τοιοίδε ἔθι σε Ζεὺς ἔπ᾿ αἰτιάμασιν  
Πρ. αἰκίζεται γε κούδαμή ὁ καλὰς κακῶν.  
Χο. οὐδ᾿ ἐστὶν ἀθλὸς τέρμα σοι προκείμενος;  
Πρ. οὐκ ἄλλο γ᾿ οὐδὲν πλὴν ὅταν κείνωι δοκῇ.  
Χο. δόξει δὲ πῶς; τίς ἐλπίς; οὐχ ὁρᾶς ὅτι ἥμαρτες; ὡς δ᾿ ἥμαρτες, οὔτ᾿ ἐμοὶ λέγειν καθ᾿ ἡδονήν σοι τ᾿ ἄλγος.

P: In addition to [the gift of blind hope] I gave them fire.  
Ch: Are you saying that mere mortals now have gleaming fire?  
P: Yes, and from this they will acquire many more arts.  
Ch: This is the reason Zeus...  
P: ...insults me like this and will never quit his evil ways.  
Ch: Is there then no end in sight of this suffering?  
P.: Not until Zeus sees fit.  
Ch: But he won’t. There’s no hope. Can’t you see you were wrong? But it’s not pleasant for me to say that, and it is certainly painful for you to hear. (252-61)

There are many things of note in this short exchange. First, as in Kratos’ offended resentment about Prometheus’ love for mortals from the opening of the play, here the
chorus express shock at the prospect of “mere ephemerals” possessing fire, heretofore a divine privilege. Thus from the perspective of the (divine) Okeanids this “benefaction” is incomprehensible. This is why they respond with, “That’s the reason Zeus…” But before they can complete their thought—which may have included something like “is justifiably punishing you”—Prometheus interrupts and reinterprets with “disgraces”. To be sure the verb (aikizetai) picks up verbatim the chorus’ earlier question:

ποίωι λαβών σε Ζεὺς ἐπ’ αἰτιάματι
οὕτως ἀτίμως καὶ πικρῶς αἰκίζεται.

*For what reason has Zeus snatched you up and continuously disgraced you so dishonorably and harshly?* (194-95)

But from what follows in this passage (252-61), it is clear they think he made a mistake, twice asserting his responsibility (hēmartes). And second, in their final words to Prometheus they signal yet again their bond of *philia* with him. Insisting that Prometheus was wrong, they claim, is just as painful for them as it is for him, a sentiment reiterating that when his relationship with Zeus fails, they suffer the consequences as well.

In this brief episode between Prometheus and the chorus we hear a critique of Prometheus’s position and the traces of a collaborative relationship between Zeus and Prometheus. While the benefits of this mutual relationship are only obliquely expressed (*speudōn speudonti* [192]), the scene with the chorus amply demonstrates the counterpart, that the failure of Prometheus and Zeus to realize their potential is a real tragedy. And we have both Prometheus and the chorus to bear witness to the ramifications of this failure.
Prometheus himself is aware of the powerful potential embodied in his collaboration with Zeus. He was in fact witness to it. The history of his involvement in the Titanomachy makes this abundantly clear:

τοιαῦτ' ἐμοῦ λόγοισιν ἐξηγουμένου
οὐκ ἡξίωσαν οὐδὲ προσβλέψαι τὸ πᾶν.
κράτιστα δὴ μοι τῶν παρεστώτων τότε
ἐφαίνετ' εἶναι προσλαβόντα μητέρα
ἐκόνθ' ἐκόντι Ζηνὶ συμπαραστατεῖν·
ἐμαῖς δὲ βουλαῖς Ταρτὰρου μελαμβαθῆς
κευθμῶν καλύπτει τὸν παλαιγενῆ Κρόνον
αὐτοῖσι συμμάχοισι.

After [the Titans] heard my suggestion, they spurned them, failing to foresee the whole picture. So I decided it was best to take my mother and stand by Zeus' side in the battle, both of us willing partners. Because of my advice the depths of black Tartarus now conceal the ancient-born Kronos along with his allies. (214-21)

The diction here is telling: line 218 speaks of the relationship between Prometheus and Zeus at the time as hekont' hekonti and further expresses their equal standing and collaboration with symparastatein. The spatial arrangement of the line even enfolds Zeus within these phrases connoting partnership. Zeus, by Prometheus' reckoning, was victorious because he received Prometheus' boulē. The Titans were not so prudent, and as a result allies in loss (symmachoisi) share the same fate of imprisonment in the underworld. A little later Prometheus says to Okeanos:

dέρκου θέαμα, τόνδε τὸν Διὸς φίλον,
tὸν συγκαταστήσαντα τὴν τυραννίδα,
οἰαὶς ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ πημοναῖσι κάμπτομαι.

What do you see here? This philos of Zeus, the one who helped him establish his tyranny, me—I am bent over with pain because of him. (304-06)
By working together (*syn-katastēsanta*) Prometheus and Zeus revolutionized the cosmic order. Whether it is simply Prometheus’ bitter opinion that he was instrumental, *PV* makes clear that this collaboration had spectacular results.

But Prometheus also recognizes that both prosperity and suffering are mutual among *philoi*. As a *philos* of Zeus he conceives a new sovereignty in heaven, but as a *philos* of Okeanos Prometheus expects him to feel his pain:

\[
\textit{Or did you come to behold my misfortunes and sympathize with my ills?} \\
(302-03)
\]

And Okeanos, like any good *philos*, is willing to do so. His opening words express his feelings of obligation to Prometheus:

\[
\textit{Know that I share in your misfortunes, Prometheus. Our blood-ties, I think, make it necessarily so. But even apart from our relationship, there is no one I give greater respect than you. Believe me, it’s true: I would never flatter you without reason. So tell me what I can do for you. This way you’ll never claim Okeanos isn’t a true friend to you.} \\
(288-97)
\]

Despite the fact that Okeanos is primarily a “warning” figure, “a friend whose sensible advice or warning is rejected by the tragic hero,” and that he “cuts a slightly ridiculous
figure at times,” he nevertheless emphasizes the importance of reciprocity. Like the chorus he shares Prometheus’ suffering (synalgō), citing their familial relationship (to xyggenes, genous) as a binding, even necessitating (esanangkazei) force, and even offers to do something for him in light of his bond (symprassein) because that is what a philos does. Next to Prometheus’ titanic personality Okeanos’ prudence seems but a naïve squeak (cf. Prometheus’ condescending responses throughout the episode). But he patiently makes a case for the need, the necessity, for collaboration. His initial response to Prometheus’ assertion that he aided Zeus in the establishment of his tyranny but only got punishment as a reward is a quick, but subtle, remark:

όρῶ, Προμηθεῦ, καὶ παραινέσαι γέ σοι
θέλω τά λόιστα καίπερ ὄντι ποικίλῳ.

*I see that, Prometheus. To be sure you are a subtle person, but I still wish to give you the best advice I can.* (307-08)

Okeanos makes no pretense of being more clever or subtle than Prometheus; he simply states that even clever, subtle types need advice sometimes. Just as Prometheus stood by Zeus’ side and offered him advice, so Okeanos is willing to do the same with him (parainesai). This is the responsibility of a philos, and he twice offers to visit Zeus to see if he can get Prometheus released (325-26, 338-39). Prometheus, however, does not

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144 Podlecki (1969) makes a point of reciprocity in *PV* as well but means by it rather “the constant recurrence of key concepts and terms, now applied by Prometheus to Zeus or his supporters, now shown by the other characters, or acknowledged by Prometheus, to be equally applicable to himself” (287).
145 Konstan (1977: 68) makes the convincing point that Okeanos is “symbolically suited to the role of conciliator. His spirit of sympathy, kinship, and cooperation is not only the manifestation of a political point of view but also a function of his mythic identity, inasmuch as he represent par excellence the original unity and harmony of nature.” Prometheus on the other hand offers “tales of tension and dissociation…[which express] the cosmogonic process by which the natural order emerges out of chaos” (69). Benardete (1964: 137-38) claims that “Oceanos also, as *theon genesis*, at least partly appears to remind us of generation…As the embodiment of generation he represents the missing element in the rule of Zeus, for Zeus does not know how to control it.”
believe that it is possible at present to reconcile and collaborate with Zeus. He agrees in principle with Okeanos that “words [i.e. a willingness to talk] are the cure for this plague of anger between you two” (378) but adds a subtle qualification:

έαν τις ἐν καιρῶι γε μαλθάσσῃ κέαρ
καὶ μὴ αφριγώντα θυμὸν ἰσχναίνῃ βίαι.

Yes, but only if you apply them to the heart at the right time, and only if you don’t try to bring down swollen pride with force. (379)

These instructive words, of course, could well apply to himself\(^{146}\), but what is telling is that Prometheus here hints at the possibility of reconciliation himself, only not right now.\(^{147}\)

Even though Okeanos will eventually depart having decided not to make the futile gesture of interceding on Prometheus’ behalf, we can nevertheless perceive his commitment to him and his investment in the relationship between Zeus and Prometheus:

γίγνωσκε σαυτὸν καὶ μεθάρμοσαι τρόπους νέους· νέος γάρ καὶ τύραννος ἐν θεοῖς,
εἰ δ’ ὄδε τραχεῖς καὶ τεθημένους λόγους ρίψῃς, τάχ’ ἂν σου καὶ μακράν ἀνωτέρω θακῶν κλύοι Ζεύς, ὥστε σοι τὸν νῦν ὀχλὸν παρόντα μόχθων παιδιάν ἐστιν δοκεῖν.

ἀλλ’, ὃ ταλαιπωρ’, ἃς ἔχεις ὄργας ἄφες, ζήτει δὲ τῶν πυρόντων ἀπαλλαγάς.
ἀρχαῖ’ ἴσως σοι φαίνομαι λέγειν τάδε· τοιαῦτα μὲν τῆς ἄγαν ὑψηγόρου γλώσσης, Προμηθεῦ, τἀπίχειρα γίγνεται.

σὺ δ’ οὐδὲπω ταπεινός, οὐδ’ εἶκες κακοῖς,
πρὸς τοῖς παροῦσι δ’ ἄλλα προσλαβεῖν θέλεις.


\(^{147}\) Konstan (1977: 65). Prometheus also ends his long speech with Oceanos with, “You save yourself as you know how. Me—I’ll suffer this fortune of mine until the rage in Zeus’ mind subsides” (374-76). I hesitate to say, as Konstan does (1977: 64), that this line is evidence Prometheus “warmly anticipates the resolution of their conflict,” but do agree in principle that it looks forward to some resolution.
τραχὺς μόναρχος οὐδ᾽ ύπεύθυνος κρατεῖ.

Get a hold of yourself. 148. Adapt to the new world. For the ruler of the gods is also new. If you keep flinging out these barbed words, pretty soon Zeus is going to hear you from high on his throne and make your present misfortunes seems like child’s play. Really, my tragic friend, put aside this anger of yours and look for a way out of this suffering. Perhaps what I’m saying you’ve heard a million times over. But your present hardships are surely the product of your overreaching tongue. You, however, refuse to be humble, refuse to yield to misfortune. You would rather pile more misery on top of what you are already suffering. Let me be your teacher, your incentive. See that the new ruler is unflinching and beholden to no one in his power. (309-24)

As in Okeanos’ opening speech, in which he generously expressed his bond with Prometheus and thus the mutual responsibility to share all things between them, here again Okeanos identifies the problem as an unwillingness to cooperate (metharmosai tropous neous [309]). That is, as Konstan notes, Okeanos “does not demand that Prometheus recant, but only that he be reconciled.” 149. By Okeanos’ estimation Prometheus just does not fit in. The placement of neos (310), Zeus’ relatively ambiguous epithet, right next to Okeanos’ exhortation to Prometheus to make his ways neous flirts spatially with the possibility of their compromise by likening their characters. Zeus is new, so Prometheus ought to be new. Okeanos, however, pulls no punches about the power dynamic: as he says just a few lines later, Zeus is a trachys monarchos oud’ hypeuthynos kratei (324). So this is not exactly a fair trade. But Okeanos also pointedly observes, as had the chorus in the previous episode, that things do not have to be this

148 The phrase I have translated here is gignōske sauton, an iambic variation of the well-known gnōthi seauton, which is regularly invoked to “admonish the proud or ambitious to recognize their limitations” (Griffith [1983: 144 ad loc.]). I mean to evince this meaning (i.e. that Prometheus for all his cleverness does not have the same standing as Zeus) but also to play off Okeanos’ very next sentiment (“Can’t you see, Prometheus, that you don’t fit in anymore with this behavior of yours. You need to adapt and evolve like the rest of us.”).
149 Konstan (1977: 64)
Prometheus’ punishment is here not the result of his aiding of mankind (as Prometheus so eloquently elaborates) but rather of his loud, running mouth (τῆς αγαν ἱψηγοροῦ γλῶσσῆς [318-19]; μῆδ’ αγαν λαβροστομεί [327]; γλῶσσῆι ματαιαί [329]). This is important for Okeanos because for him words are the key: they can heal (ὀργὴς nosousῆς εἰς ἱατροὶ λογοὶ [378]) or exacerbate (311-14). But Prometheus cannot be taught this insight. He offers instead clever rebuttals, though as Conacher points out, “however sound Prometheus’ timing and his confidence in his hidden knowledge, there is in this exchange an irony at his expense as well.”\footnote{Conacher (1980: 46)} Okeanos fails as a teacher (ἐμοίγε χρῶμενος διδάσκαλοι [322]) because misfortune is to be Prometheus’ teacher (συμφορὰ didaskαλος [391]).\footnote{I acknowledge that I am modifying the standard translation of this line (“Your misfortune, Prometheus, is a lesson to me.”) which picks up the repetition of didask- terms (322, 373, 382, 391) and suggests, as Kontan argues (1977: 65-66), that there is a role reversal in this scene (Okeanos becomes the pupil to Prometheus). Cf. Dorter (1992: 119-20) on Prometheus’ condescension toward the other characters, particularly Okeanos and Io.} It is an irony expressing both Prometheus’ unwillingness to collaborate in his own redemption and Okeanos’ attempt to sympathize where ultimately he cannot. This symphora is entirely Prometheus’ own.

In the episode with Okeanos, then, we hear yet again the critique of Prometheus’ intransigent viewpoint and the potential for collaboration between him and Zeus as an alternative. Though this potential is primarily raised litotically though Okeanos’ emphasis on the misfortunes of the present that are the result of their potential; and though this potential is written off once again by Prometheus as categorically impossible, it is evident that Okeanos is invested in the relationship between Prometheus and Zeus and committed enough, at least initially, to intervene on behalf of it. This commitment to
potential and collaboration finds its expression both in his invocations of reciprocity and solidarity among *philoi* and in his belief that words—which in his eyes means nothing more than simply talking to one another—can poison or cure this potential.

The fascinating thing is that *PV* keeps raising the question of the potential of Prometheus and Zeus’ relationship only to shoot it down again and again. Consider for example some of Prometheus’ declarations in the remainder of the play:

οὐ δῆτα, πλὴν ἔγωγ’ ἂν ἐκ δεσμῶν λυθείς.

*No, as a matter of fact, he does not [have any escape from this future], except for me if I am relieved of my imprisonment.* (770)

τοιῶνδε μόχθων ἐκτροπὴν οὐδεὶς θεῶν δύνατ’ ἂν αὐτῷ πλὴν ἐμοῦ δείξαι σαφῶς· ἐγώ τάδ’ οἶδα χῶι τρόπωι.

*None of the gods except me could reveal to him as clearly how to avoid these troubles. I’m the only one who knows how...* (914-15)

οὐκ ἔστιν αἴκισμ’ οὐδὲ μηχάνημ’, ὅτωι προτρέψεταί με Ζεὺς γεγωνῆσαι τάδε πρὶν ἂν χαλασθῆι δεσμὰ λυμαντήρια.

*There’s no disgrace, no contrivance Zeus can do to make me give up my secret until this painful imprisonment is absolved.* (989-91)

Prometheus is a firebrand to be sure, but he keeps saying “until”. The phrasing of these retorts could mean it is more likely Prometheus will not be revealing his secret. Or it could mean he eventually will, provided he is released. Critics tend to assume the former, fascinated as they are by Prometheus the Knoxian tragic hero. But through to

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152 Griffith (1983: 224 ad 770)
153 Cf. Griffith (1983: 9): “Like Sophocles’ Ajax or Philoctetes, he has kept his pride intact amidst pain and humiliation, and finds solace in the anticipation of his enemies’ downfall. And like them, he arouses in his friends, as in the audience, mixed emotions of revulsion and sympathy, horror and admiration.” Cf. also to a lesser extent Lloyd-Jones (2003).
the very end the possibility for a different outcome is emphasized. The examples just adduced speak to this very potential, even if the potential ultimately goes unrealized (at least in this play).

But more than this, the final episode lays particular stress on what this conflict between Zeus and Prometheus means in the last instance. Prometheus, the one who offered Zeus his boule before the Titanomachy and thus was instrumental in the creation of a new world order, will not take boule.

ὦπται πάλαι δὴ καὶ βεβούλευται τάδε.

I figured this out a long time ago and made up my mind then. (998)

The semantic range of bouleō covers both advice (in the active) and deliberation/resolution (in the middle). In this case it is obvious we are dealing with the latter meaning: Prometheus himself (presumably) weighed the pros and cons of helping Zeus by revealing his secret and decided he would rather not save him. As Griffith notes, “[t]he perfect tenses of P.’s reply underline the finality of his decision.” But this is precisely the problem: Prometheus refuses to take advice from anyone else, even those who are willing to help him. This resolve, this refusal to change his mind—heroic or not—is the very substance of the conflict, and Hermes calls him on it:

τόλμησον, ὦ μάταιε, τόλμησόν ποτε πρὸς τὰς παρούσας πηρούσας ὀρθῶς φρονεῖν.

You fool, at some point you ought to start thinking in the right way about your present misfortunes. (999-1000)

Like Okeanos’ admonition that the new cosmic order requires new responsibilities and behaviors (309-10), Hermes insists that new situations demand new plans and

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154 Griffith (1983: 262 ad loc.)
solutions. But Prometheus tells Hermes that his advice is as useless on him as it is on the waves (kyma [1001]), nothing being more intransigent to external pressure than the movement of the ocean. Words have no effect on Prometheus. As we saw above, the episode with Okeanos illustrated the vanity of his belief that words can make a difference. The final episode reiterates both the belief and the vanity—Hermes replies, “I seem to be saying a lot of things and saying them in vain.” (1007)—and emphasizes this sense of boulē.

After describing the torture Prometheus stands to suffer, for example, Hermes gives him another chance:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{πρὸς ταῦτα βούλευ', ὡς ὃδ' οὐ πεπλασμένος} & \text{ (1030-35)} \\
\text{ὁ κόμπος ἀλλ' εὖ καὶ λίαν εἰρημένος·} & \\
\text{ψευδηγορεῖν γάρ οὐκ ἐπίσταται στόμα} & \text{So make up your mind again, because this is not some hollow boast. Once it has been pronounced, it takes effect all too well. Zeus' mouth tells no lies; every word finds its mark. So take a look around and give it some thought and don't make the mistake of thinking that stubborn pride is a better thing that good advice.} \\
\text{τὸ Δίον, ἄλλα πᾶν ἔπος τελεῖ.} & \text{(1030-35)} \\
\text{σὺ δὲ πάπταινε καὶ φρόνιζε, μηδ’ αὐθαδίαν} & \text{The chorus are persuaded, “express[ing] surprisingly firm support for Hermes’ view,} \\
\text{εὐβουλίας ἀμείνον’ ἡγήσηι ποτέ.} & \text{even to the point of echoing his key words.”} \\
\end{align*}
\]

155 Griffith (1983: 263 ad loc.): “Here…the audience is faced squarely with the question whether P.’s conduct is morally, or practically, appropriate. The answer remains unclear.”

156 Griffith (1983: 269 ad loc.)
To us at least what Hermes is saying is not unhelpful. He’s just encouraging you to put aside your pride and seek out good and wise advice. Listen to him. Because it would be a shame for a thoughtful person like you to miss this opportunity. (1036-39)

Prometheus is resolutely not persuaded (1040-41), and Hermes once again marks it:

τοιάδε μέντοι τῶν φρενοπλήκτων
βουλεύματ’ ἔπη τ’ ἔστιν ἀκοῦσαι·
τί γὰρ ἐλλείπει μὴ <οὐ> παραπαίειν
ή τοῦδ’ εὐχή; τί χαλᾶι μανίων;

What you’re hearing are the words and decisions of a madman. Don’t you see his bold assertions are striking out wildly? I see no end of this madness. (1054-57)

Manifest in all of these passages is a concern for boulē. Prometheus asserts, as we saw just above, that his mind was made up long ago (bebouleutai [998]); and we remember that by his reckoning it was his boulē that proved key in Zeus’ victory against the Titans (219). In that instance it was clear that boulē connoted collaboration: Prometheus’ good advice ultimately helps Zeus in battle, so presumably he is aware that it is an exercise in partnership. But line 998 betrays an unwillingness to cooperate by foreclosing the opportunity: working together with Zeus was a thing of the past, a conclusion whose intractable finality is strongly marked with the perfect tense—it’s over and done with, I’ve made up my mind, there’s nothing more to say about it.

This is, I think, what leads Hermes to exclaim that Prometheus’ problem is that for all his insight into the future he is stuck in the past, whereas he should be thinking about his current state of affairs and how to remedy it. And thinking about alternate possibilities is good advice (bouleu’ [1030], euboulias [1035]). If we are somewhat taken aback or unconvinced by Hermes’ exhortation by dint of his being Zeus’
mouthpiece—an “unreliable source”, as Griffith calls him\(^{157}\)—the chorus are at least convinced. They too consider his advice meaningful: they call his words *ouk akaira* (they certainly could have used something more evocative of abject fear or submission if they wanted to emphasize the terror of his threats), insist Prometheus should put aside his *authadia* for *euboulia*, and even load their sentiment with moral language (*aischron*).

Even if they are just a chorus of Okeanids, “simple-minded”\(^{158}\) but sympathetic observers of the sufferings of the major players like Io and Prometheus, they are not negligible: they even take a stand alongside Prometheus against Hermes in the final few lines, a feat of courage that critics have not left unremarked.\(^{159}\) So we should perhaps take their words to Prometheus as significant, especially in this context where their advice echoes that of other “stronger” characters.

But Prometheus’ only response to the potential of this *euboulia* for his present hardships and his future relationship with Zeus is, as it was at 998, an assertion about the past:

\[
\text{εἰδότι τοί μοι τά σδ’ ἀγγελίας}
\]

*I already knew what this guy had to say.* (1040-41)

In the Io episode Prometheus proved his extraordinary ability to make connections between the past (Io’s suffering/travels up to the moment of her arrival) and the future (her redemption by the gentle touch of Zeus and eventually his own). Here, however, his *authadia* (1034, 1037) obstructs any such metahistorical perspective. Thus *PV* has to end with the commencement of the further torture of Prometheus. (For as Hermes stated

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\(^{157}\) Griffith (1983: 263 *ad loc.*).

\(^{158}\) So Winnington-Ingram (1983: 176).

\(^{159}\) Cf. Griffith (1983: 11).
matter-of-factly, once Zeus pronounces his words, they take effect.)  Whether or not this end is inevitable—as Konstan claims, “the effect [of the Okeanos scene] is to inspire a sense of necessity in the rift between Prometheus and Zeus”. —I nevertheless hope to have shown that PV still holds out to the very end the possibility of Prometheus and Zeus coming together. The play narrates the cosmic success of their relationship as it once manifested itself in the past and focuses for the remainder on the tragic results of its failure for the future. PV raises the question of the potential of their relationship only consistently to sabotage it. This likely means, I believe, that Aeschylus could well understand the difficulty and ambivalence of bringing together the forces that Prometheus and Zeus embody, even if the results were spectacular in the past and could be so again in the future. Consequently, if the remains of the trilogy prove nothing conclusively, they at least show us Aeschylus’ commitment to the redemption of Prometheus and Zeus’ relationship.

The conflict I have been arguing for, however, between the past and the future, specifically the seemingly inexorable demands of family history and the wide-open potential of the to-come, involves both Zeus and Prometheus. Zeus is by all appearances—that is, in Prometheus’ eyes—beholden to the mistakes and transgressions of his genealogical line, fated to commit the same sins and to suffer the same disgrace. Prometheus is committed to a too-rigid sense of the past’s influence on the future, a future whose course he is convinced he can trace to the tee if he just holds on to his secret. Hence both characters face a sense of determinism, only from opposite sides of

160 So is it really the case, as Winnington-Ingram suggests (1983: 185), that “[t]he stubbornness of Prometheus is determined by the harshness of Zeus”? Or perhaps the other way around?

161 Konstan (1977: 70)
time. *PV*, as we repeatedly noticed, focalizes this determinism through the experiences of Prometheus and forces us to reckon with the strength of fatalistic perceptions of history and the future. Prometheus was shown to have a formidable mind; and besides, when your name is Foresight, it makes sense that people listen to your predictions. But the play also never gives us over entirely to the cause or view of Prometheus, but rather makes a compelling case for not seeing the past as a curse or the future as closed to new possibilities. Otherwise, Aeschylus suggests, we are left resigned to the possibility that history is doomed to cycles and that the future, like Prometheus at the end of the play, can only fall into an abyss of torture and suffering. Thankfully, purposefully, Aeschylus wrote a trilogy.\(^{162}\)

\(^{162}\) At the end of an essay detailing the link between Zeus and the Erinyes as a necessitating force in Aeschylus, Winnington-Ingram intriguingly, but I think thoughtfully, entertains the possibility that persuasion can overcome even necessity. In his own words: "The significant point is, of course, the conception of a Necessity that can be 'persuaded'—a notion which commentators find perplexing...That the Greek gods of power, with all their record of forceful action, might in the outcome be not only coercive by persuasive agencies—that, surely, was the great contribution of Aeschylus to Greek religious, and for that matter philosophical, thought...[T]here are indications that in the development of the Prometheus story the author of *Prometheus Vinctus*—whether Aeschylus or another writing under the influence of Aeschylean thought—found the solution to a cosmic problem in the triumph of persuasion over violence" (1983: 173-74). Unfortunately, Winnington-Ingram leaves this possibility undeveloped.
CHAPTER 3

“...AND WHATEVER IT IS, IT IS YOU.”

THE AUTOCHTHONOUS SELF IN SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

For the Athenians of the fifth century, the myth of autochthony provided both a useful organizing principle for a people seeking to define its sense of civic belonging and a sense of entitlement and exclusion. Autochthony posits a community member’s birth from the very soil he inhabits, creating a privileged connection between an individual, his community, and the land. According to one of its myths Athens imagined the genesis of its forebears as an unconsummated relationship (misconsummated, we might say) between Hephaestus and Athena. Born of the very soil which received Hephaestus’ seed, Erechtheus became the primordial father of the Athenians; the “Athenian name” became all the more prestigious because the city’s patroness—who acknowledged and nurtured Erechtheus—was virginal and therefore embodied the prestigious principle for which her people stand (genesis from the earth itself). Descendants of this line share the blood of the city’s first children and recognize the earth as their communal womb. As Plato has Socrates say to Menexenus, the ancestors of the Athenians were “children of the soil,

really dwelling and having their being in their ancestral home, nourished not, as other peoples are, by a stepmother, but by a mother, the land in which they lived.”

This is a powerful image for establishing the connection an Athenian might feel for his city and his brother-citizens, making him feel toward his city what a son feels toward his mother and toward his fellow-citizens what one brother feels for another. But the flipside of this privilege, it is argued, is a restrictive, sometimes violent, parochialism which bars “others” from access to its communal benefits. As many have pointed out, this Athenian desire for civic purity and connection seemingly builds its foundations on exclusions, namely the exclusion of women and foreigners. Here Socrates is explicit: “That is how firm and sound the high-mindedness and liberality of our city are, how much we are naturally inclined to hate the barbarians, through being purely Greek with no barbarian taint…Consequently, our city is imbued with undiluted hatred of foreignness.” And further, if the city auto-genetically produces her children, it valorizes the privilege of a non-(hetero)sexual union and relegates the functional role of women as child-bearers to an unnatural necessity that never quite recaptures the long-fallen, originary production. As Socrates famously says, “the earth does not mimic woman in conceiving and generating, but woman earth.” Hence the myth of

165 Menexenus (237b--translation is Paul Ryan’s). It is worth noting, of course, that in Menexenus Socrates is parodying the institution of funeral orations, putting the exercise on par in fact with dancing naked. Heiden (2005: 24 n.45) has a useful, clarifying remark on the sexual figuration of the city: “The ‘city’ could be figured as either ‘father’ or ‘mother,’ according to whether it was conceptualized as a union of strangers in close friendship (‘father’/‘home’/‘citizens’) or a biological descent group (‘mother’/‘earth’/‘earth-borns’).”
166 Cf. Ibid. (239a): the Athenians are “brothers born of a single mother.”
167 Cf. Ibid. (249c): “Quite simply, for the dead [the earth/city] stands as son and heir, for their sons as a father, for their parents as a guardian; she takes complete and perpetual responsibility for all of them.”
168 Menexenus (245c-d)
170 Menexenus (238a)
autochthony is problematic, as the reverse face of a perceived unified identity is a denial of women’s procreative power. This disavowal simultaneously abrogates their unique difference from men as mothers and prejudicially marks the difference of their children from those of mother-earth.

The ambiguity inherent in the myth of autochthony in all likelihood accounts for the ambivalence of the critical interpretation of it, as two general positions emerge: one we might call ideological, the other historicist or materialist.\textsuperscript{171} The former is best exemplified by Nicole Loraux, the latter by Edward Cohen.

In three valuable books Loraux develops a critique of Athenian civic discourse (whether tragic, rhetorical or philosophical) by locating its breaks, gaps and inconsistencies—that is, what the text must repress to organize itself—performing in a way a psychoanalysis of what she terms the Athenian “imaginary”.\textsuperscript{172} Through a series of “symptomatic” readings Loraux argues that the myth of autochthony, of a pure origin, satisfies a male desire for a society exclusive of the female, a male desire for the reproduction of civic bonds without the messy complication of heterosexual relations.\textsuperscript{173} In this light it “dispossesses the women of Athens of their reproductive functions.”\textsuperscript{174} She then asks: “If in the civic imaginary the fatherland is self-reproducing, what place remains for women, whose role is negated in just that sphere of fertility to which the city,

\textsuperscript{171} Let me note from the outset that these distinctions are my own and that the positions I have identified are not entirely opposed to one another. Each is critical of the idea of autochthony but from a different angle. Their opposition, in my opinion, emerges from the discourses that each employs and consequently the limitations that each claims the other’s discourse has.

\textsuperscript{172} For a useful explanation of the “imaginary”, see Loraux ([1984] 1993: 3-22 passim).


\textsuperscript{174} Ibid. ([1984] 1993: 9). Loraux’s feminist reading of the myths of autochthony developed contemporaneously with the work of Arlene Saxonhouse, whose “Reflections on Autochthony in Euripides’ Ion” echoed this vein of thinking. See Saxonhouse (1986). See further Dougherty (1996) and Walsh (1978), who makes the connection between autochthony and nobility (eugenetia).
in practice, confines them?"\textsuperscript{175} And later: “[W]e must ask what kind of benefit accrues to a city of men, whose dream is to reproduce themselves, by entrusting the civic earth with the task of avoiding all sexual union, \textit{in extremis}.”\textsuperscript{176}

On the historicist side of the critical spectrum is Edward Cohen’s \textit{The Athenian Nation} (2000). Cohen is skeptical of “modern scholars’ assumption that autochthony was a fundamental ‘belief’ of the Athenians” and refuses in effect to believe that the Athenians were incapable of rationalizing their own myths which discernibly contradicted the “secular workings of life.”\textsuperscript{177} Given his interest in the material, social structure of the city rather than an ideological vision of it (Loraux), Athens was in Cohen’s opinion like a nation. In other words it was entirely capable of accepting “widespread immigration and assimilation.”\textsuperscript{178} Through Cohen we get the picture of a dynamic, living and breathing city, multicultural, ethnically diverse and fully conscious of, even taking pride in, its sense of openness.\textsuperscript{179} Accordingly, “unexamined, the \textit{mythos} of autochthony might promote xenophobic [and we might add misogynistic] exclusivity; purified by reason, the \textit{logos} of autochthony offered no insurmountable barrier to

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\textsuperscript{175} Loraux ([1984] 1993: 122). From reading Loraux one might get the impression that all authors present autochthony in a positive light. Saxonhouse (1986), however, argues that Euripides dramatizes the fundamental problems of this exclusive discourse by “forc[ing] us to see the violence at the beginnings of cities, as well as the heterosexual (and thus the female and not just the male) that lie there” (259). The specific critique of Creusa, Xuthus and Ion pertains to the whole discourse of identity and difference in general. It is a discourse, she maintains, that resembles the “almost fanatical attempts to remain pure and enjoy a freedom from the dependence on others” (265), whether female or foreign.

\textsuperscript{176} Cohen (2000: 87-88). The “rationality” Cohen refers to here is the \textit{mythos/logos} dichotomy (cf. 88-90). He appropriates Levi-Strauss’ self-evident assertion that “[p]rofessing to believe in autochthony’ necessarily conflicts with ‘the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman’ (Levi-Strauss [1968: 212])” (88 n.58). Loraux, however, already addressed this very point: “This formulation is not necessarily right, however, and I am more prepared to believe that the effect of the doctrine of autochthony is something like the satisfaction of a desire, rather than a misunderstanding of the laws of reproduction” (Loraux [(1984) 1993: 17]).


\textsuperscript{178} For example, cf. chapters 5 (“Wealthy Slaves in a ‘Slave Society’) and 6 (“The Social Contract: Sexual Abuse and Sexual Profit”).
assimilation.”\textsuperscript{180} The problem lies, Cohen contends, in the very definition of autochthony: “Although some scholars tautologically translate the single word \textit{autokhthones} here as ‘having been born from the soil’ (Loraux [1984] 1993: 66), the seminal meaning of \textit{autokhthones} (‘living in the same land for a long time’) eliminates the otherwise patent contradiction of the Athenians’ ‘acquiring’ (without ousting anyone else) the soil from which they were born.”\textsuperscript{181}

In sum, for both Loraux and Cohen autochthony is an imaginary or ideological construct. Cohen stresses the incongruity between the myth and reality, whereas Loraux see the myth as constitutive of reality. The apparent differences between these two views of autochthony, however, are not as insurmountable as they initially appear. In fact Cohen and Loraux each gesture in the other’s direction. For Cohen Athenian “nationalism” was usefully attended by myth (specifically myths of origin) and a healthy dose of historical amnesia:

Athenian nationalism likewise was served by stories claiming for the Athenian people, and for each individual Athenian, an eternal tie to Attika. But metaphorical interpretations of otherwise incredible myths, and the simultaneous flourishing of disparate historical traditions and multiple contemporary dialogues, allowed the inhabitants of fourth-century Attika to enjoy this ‘noble lie’ helpful to national definition, while largely avoiding the social agonies that would have been generated by a society in which full participation was truly limited to persons whose progenitors had lived in Attika from time immemorial, descendants of ancestors born from Attic soil.\textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{180} Cohen (2000: 90). Contrast Loraux on the second-hand treatment myth usually receives in the study of the ancient world: “In French universities, it is true, the subject of ‘Ancient Greece’ suffers from an imperious set of restrictions whereby myth scarcely has a place, at least not among historians, infatuated as they are with ‘reality.’ […] As a general rule, historians of Ancient Greece prefer to exclude myth from the city (or leave it to those who enjoy a good story, which is essentially the same in the end), so they can devote themselves undisturbed to the more prudent historiographical method that cherishes the study of institutions” ([1984] 1993: 4-5).

\textsuperscript{181} Cohen (2000: 99)

\textsuperscript{182} Cohen (2000: 103). Cohen’s interpretation, one sees from his invocation of the “noble lie”, is Platonic; he reads autochthony is the same demythologizing way as the \textit{Menexenus}. This perspective sees a
For Loraux autochthony’s domain, the imaginary, represented the “spell of an ideality,” an “institutional illusion” lived as fact. Speaking of the funeral oration, one of the prime civic institutions, she contends:

On the horizon of the oration is an ideality. *He polis*, an impossible prime mover, is the irreducible kernel of meaning; opaque like everything appertaining to origin, but the source of all value, the city presides over the celebration of the Athenians, beyond the unbridgeable gap that separates the dead from the living in the funeral. Against this background is ordered a whole series of gaps, not only between ‘reality’ and the oration… but also, within the oration itself, between the experienced time of the city and *aion* that always tends to have the last word…

These two moves by Cohen and Loraux respectively acknowledge the problem of exclusive adherence to either conceptualization of autochthony. For it is easy to be seduced either by the seeming certainties of the material record or theimaginative literature that came to underwrite and augment that material record.

The virtue of Cohen’s materialist approach is that it asks us to acknowledge that there is at least a minimal, irreducible distance between myth and reality. There were, in other words, fully acculturated foreigners and financially successful women in Athens (at least by the fourth century)—not to mention real mothers giving birth to real children—despite the fantasy otherwise expressed in the myth. His rationalistic account, however, and more specifically his polemic toward Loraux leave little room ultimately to examine the psychic depth of a belief or myth or the inarguable connection, in most cases reciprocal, between the individual imaginary and the social, material world. While Loraux’s cultural psychoanalysis may not sufficiently explain how the imaginary affects reality, nevertheless the psychoanalytic approach is instructive specifically because it

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seeks the relation of the individual to the social and consequently traces the path of the social construction of the self. This has the virtue of granting that an Athenian’s relation (or perception thereof) to his community—and its myths—is an important one, a relationship not to be dismissed simply as, or simply because it is, irrational. In Loraux’s words: “The Athenian experience of the city cannot be reduced to the empiricism of the political experience so readily attributed to the Greeks; in the polis, as the Athenians of the classical period understood the term, the imaginary occupied a greater place than is usually believed.” The advantage of Loraux’s argument is that it does not ask us to make a hard and fast distinction between the reality of autochthony and the fiction of autochthony, theory and material praxis, metaphor and realia. In effect psychoanalysis interrogates the gap between truth and fiction by locating the latter (in such guises as “fantasy”) within the realm or experience of the former, making it a constitutive term for the consistency of the symbolic order. Fiction (like myth), in

184 Loraux, while one of the prime exponents of the psychoanalytic reading of Greek culture, is nevertheless cautious in her use of it. For example she labels Slater’s “Oral-Narcissistic Dilemma” (Slater [(1968) 1971: 75-122]) “dubious” (Loraux [(1986) 1993: 20 n.36]). More specifically: “It seems to me that the experiences basic to the Greek city, war and politics, should be the starting point for deciphering the fantasies of the Athenian imaginary, not, as certain ill-considered applications of psychoanalysis would urge us to believe, the structure of the Greek family” ([1986] 1993: 17 n.28).

185 Cf. Ryan (1989: 5): “We exist and have being or content as social entities in the forms of behaviour we practice, the modes of interaction we engage in, the formal patterns of speech and communication we undertake, the styles of work we assume, and so forth. […] Our emotional life patterns take the form of stories whose scripts are not entirely idiosyncratic; they are often the translation into individual terms of general cultural narratives.” On the criticism that (Freudian) psychoanalysis is not sufficiently materialist, see the instructive remarks of Eagleton ([1983] 1996: 141-42): “This accusation reflects a radical misunderstanding of Freudian theory. There is indeed a problem about how social and historical factors are related to the unconscious; but one point of Freud’s work is that it makes possible for us to think of the development of the human individual in social and historical terms. What Freud produces, indeed, is no less than a materialist theory of the making of the human subject. We come to be what we are by an interrelation of bodies—by the complex transactions which take place during infancy between our bodies and those which surround us.”


187 Cf. Loraux [(1986) 1993: 15]: “In short, in constructing the city, we see that there is a symbolic order—one of representations, and another one of space in which these representations are distributed and organized.”
other words, is the unconscious glue that holds together one’s sense of material reality.\footnote{188} In Loraux’s words: “When it becomes necessary to be selective in thinking about identity, the imaginary knows how to make its own choices, even at the heart of contradictory reality.”\footnote{189} Her alternative to Cohen’s rationalism then would be that we need not consciously or rationally believe in a myth like autochthony which promises a pure origin, but that does not eliminate the possibility of an unconscious desire or belief in it. Because myths comprise a “complex cobweb of symbols, images and attitudes,” they can effectively “overdetermine” one’s experience of the real world.\footnote{190} It is entirely possible then that an Athenian’s perception of his ties to the city, and likewise his perception of women and foreigners, is colored by myths of autochthony.

I propose in this chapter to synthesize Cohen’s historicist interpretation and Loraux’s ideological interpretation via Žižek’s conception of “ideological fantasy”.\footnote{191} This approach deploys the strengths of each scholar’s arguments into a broader, cohesive theory of the correlation between myth and reality, the material and the imaginary. I argue we should read the “normative” myth of origin (the desire for distinctiveness) as the underlying organizing principle of the material reality of day-to-day life. As Žižek explains:

> What [those who participate in ideology] overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but they are still doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to

\footnote{190} So Žižek (2006).
reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the
*ideological fantasy*.\(^{192}\)

For Loraux autochthony is an imaginary construct that affects and effects social reality
(specifically, but not exclusively, for women); for Cohen autochthony contradicts
historical reality. Both posit a disconnect between the idea of autochthony and Athens’
real social structures. But Žižek states that an unconscious desire can persist in an
ideology that seems inexplicable on its surface given its contradiction to reality.\(^{193}\) We
know full well we are not really born from the earth, but we act as if we did not know
because it captures—*not* unproblematically—the singularity of who we are.\(^{194}\)

To claim that autochthony is a fantasy is to claim that an unconscious belief in the
purity of origins may underwrite fifth-century Athenian social discourse and its
institutions (no matter how much reality may contradict the myth).\(^{195}\) To claim further
that the fantasy is “ideological” is to say that the fantasy can serve any particular
ideological agenda (e.g., the exclusion of the Other). The presence of contradictory
elements, however, does not necessarily undermine the original fantasy. For this reason
we can say that Cohen and Loraux are both right and incomplete at one and the same
time: Cohen has no truck with the unconscious desire (or fear) expressed in autochthony

\(^{192}\) Žižek (1989: 32-33)
\(^{193}\) Žižek, following Marx, calls this the “fetishistic illusion”.
\(^{194}\) That is, “they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still they are doing it”
(Žižek [1989: 33]).
\(^{195}\) Žižek provides the example of German anti-Semitism: even though the German discovers that his
Jewish neighbor is *in reality* a decent person contrary to official propaganda, s/he nevertheless translates
the Jew’s genial behavior into shiftiness and deceit—further reason to suspect and hate him: “We must
confront ourselves with how the ideological figure of the ‘Jew’ is invested with our unconscious desire,
with how we have constructed this figure to escape a certain deadlock of our desire. […] The proper answer
to anti-Semitism is therefore not ‘Jews are not really like that’ but ‘the anti-Semitic idea of Jew has nothing
to do with the Jews; the ideological figure of the Jew is a way to stitch up the inconsistency of our own
ideological system’” (Žižek [1989: 48]). Likewise for the jealous husband: “[E]ven if all the facts he
quotes in support of his jealousy are true, even if his wife really is sleeping around with other men, this
does not change one bit the fact that his jealousy is a pathological, paranoid construction” (48).
as an ideological fantasy (hence the “noble lie”); Loraux conceptualizes the desire but does not explain how it affects reality.

Following Žižek’s analysis then, we might say that autochthony was for the Athenians an ideological fantasy enacted alongside sustained critique of the myths themselves (whether they are “true”, whether they are normative), as well as the civic institutions that sustain and embody them. The “myth” of autochthony, with all of its implicit exclusions, stitches together the visible disconnect between the natural difference and the natural similarity of male and female, self and other, autochthon and alien. As an ideological fantasy, autochthony is “true” to the extent that it reinforces the autochthonous citizen’s perception of real life, a fact which complicates the simple process of relieving him of his “false consciousness”. For as Žižek states, “The fundamental level of ideology…is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself.” From this perspective the myth of autochthony is the “fantasy” which structures an Athenian’s perception of everyday social reality, making his connection to the city simultaneously “real” and ideological. As Wohl clarifies, “…this ideological fantasy is reality, and ideological struggle is the struggle to define society’s reality through the medium of fantasy, by arousing and directing the communal libido.”

With Žižek ’s theory in mind I would like to examine how Aeschylus’ Seven Against Thebes articulates this dual character of the ideological fantasy, as it levels a

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196 For this reason rationalizing away the absurdities (a la Cohen) does not necessarily change anything. 197 Žižek (1989: 33). Cf. also Žižek (2002: 19): “The lesson of psychoanalysis here is the opposite one [from the postmodern tenet that ‘reality is a discursive product, a symbolic fiction’]: we should not mistake reality for fiction—we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it. […] Much more difficult that to denounce/unmask (what appears as) reality as fiction is to recognize the part of fiction in ‘real’ reality.” 198 Wohl (2002: 26)
critique at the notion of autochthony at the same time as it shows up the powerful roots it has planted in the lives of those who live it (Eteocles in particular). Saxonhouse, I believe, is correct in arguing that Euripides’ *Ion* interrogates the ideas of autochthony and birthright. The play exposes the inconsistencies and absurdities of each of his character’s assumptions and in so doing calls into question the notion of civic purity. Given Euripides’ reputed subversiveness, it stands to reason that he would subject to critique an Athenian idea like autochthony. Aeschylus on the other hand, as both *Marathonomachos* and veteran of Salamis, is often considered more univocally supportive of Athenian ideology, but my reading of *Seven* will show that he too is critical of this central tenet of Athenian civic belief. I will argue that Aeschylus’ representation of the war and politics of Eteocles and Thebes throws into relief the perversions and contradictions inherent in a city that believes in a pure, autochthonous origin. Aeschylus’ drama turns a critical eye on the idea of civic purity by drawing out autochthony’s darker implications; at the same time he illustrates how the myth unconsciously influences and structures civic consciousness, exposing in the mix the potential danger of its grip on Eteocles and his citizens.

Aeschylus, I argue, staged the drama of communal self-definition by playing out the difficulties of his protagonist Eteocles. As the incestuous son of Oedipus, Eteocles in a way embodies the principle of autochthony in that autochthony and incest share, as we shall see, an undifferentiation in origin. Through him the ambiguity of the myth is

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199 Saxonhouse (1986)
200 Surprisingly, very little has been written about the political or ideological implications of *Seven*. Podlecki (1966) and Petre (1971) are the most specifically focused on the topic, but each is more interested in locating proper historical allusions in the text. Zeitlin (1986) is primarily interested in Thebes as a theoretical screen for Athenian projections of identity and society.
exposed. *Seven* renders clear Aeschylus’ convictions about the difficult relationship between autochthony and identity as it pertains specifically to Athenians. And if, as Zeitlin has convincingly argued, Thebes represents the “anti-Athens”, its “mirror opposite”, a *t(r)opos* where “it can play with and discharge the terror of and attraction to the irreconcilable, the inexpiable, and the unredeemable, where it can experiment with the dangerous heights of self-assertion that transgression of fixed boundaries inevitably entails,” then *Seven* is a uniquely Athenian play addressing Athenian concerns.\(^{201}\) We ought then, following Freud, to listen for the confession echoing behind the denial.

### 3.1 The Civic Force of Autochthony

Let us begin with the very opening of the play, which sets the stage for the action and introduces both the character of Eteocles and the important issue of civic loyalty. In this section I will argue that the ideology of autochthony is affirmed in its positive, productive aspect and shown to be of seminal importance to Eteocles as the city’s leader. Eteocles opens the scene with an address to his fellow citizens on the sense of duty to one’s city demanded in times of crisis, in this case the attack of an Argive army led by his brother Polynices. The speech is paradigmatic of his civic piety and his desire to be a virtuous leader.

\[
\text{Κάδμου πολίται, χρή λέγειν τὰ καίρια}
\]
\[
	ext{ὅστις φυλάσσει πράγος ἐν πρύμνηι πόλεως}
\]
\[
	ext{οἴσκα νωμῶν, βλέφαρα μὴ κοιμῶν ὕπνωι.}
\]
\[
	ext{εἰ μὲν γὰρ εὖ πράξαιμεν, αἰτία θεοῦ·}
\]
\[
	ext{εἰ δὲ αὖθ', ὃ μὴ γένοιτο, συμφορὰ τύχοι,}
\]
\[
	ext{Ἑτεοκλῆς ἂν εἷς πολὺς κατὰ πτόλιν}
\]

\(^{201}\) Zeitlin (1986: 117). Despite the phantasmic relation of Thebes to Athens, Zeitlin is cautious about analogizing Theban and Athenian autochthony: “One must beware, however, of treating autochthony as a unitary phenomenon, since it can take many different forms in many different locales. Athens’s comparable myth follows very different lines and, unlike the Theban version of the Sown Men, does not include the ingredients for internal strife or the same equation with incest” (1986: 122 n.19).
Citizens of Cadmus, he who watches over the affairs of a city, guiding the oar at the prow, must say the right things at the right time, never letting his eyes rest with sleep. If things turn out well for us, thanks be to god. If—and I pray this doesn’t happen—some misfortune may strike, “Eteocles” alone would be sung throughout the city with loud-swelling chants and laments. But may Zeus, true to his name, be the protector for the city of the Cadmeans. But you must come to the defense of the city and the altars of our land’s gods, you who are still short of maturity as well as you who are past your prime, nourishing the great strength of your body. You must not let their honors be erased ever. Protect also your children and your mother-earth, that nurse most dear, for she, receiving the whole weight of your upbringing, reared you from young crawling with kindly foot into settlers of homes and shield-bearers. In return, you must be loyal to her in this time of need. (1-20)

There are two references to Cadmus here in this passage (1,9), which evoke the autochthonous history of the city. In fact the very first word of the play evokes Thebes’ primordial antiquity. As Benardete points out, never once in the play is Thebes called “Thebes”, so the fact that the city and its citizens are identified only by the name of its mythical founder is noteworthy. The references to Cadmus emphasize the city’s deep history, the privilege of its forbears having sprung from the very soil, a fact which “somehow throws light on the origins of Thebes, and hence, by implication, on the
origins of any city.” The fact that Eteocles can address his citizens as “Cadmeans” suggests that they too identify with their autochthonous origins, and for this reason he can invoke the necessity to defend the city in times of dire need. Lines 15ff. in particular make this connection: “Protect also your children and your mother-earth, that nurse most dear, for she, receiving the whole weight of your upbringing, reared you from young crawling with kindly foot into settlers of homes and shield-bearers. In return, you must be loyal to her in this time of need.”

Eteocles considers the defense of Thebes of utmost importance: one must respond to the city’s crisis as if coming to the aid of a mother: \textit{gēi mētri, philtatēi trophōi} (16). The family metaphor shores up the strength of the allusions to the autochthonous history of the city (i.e. the use of “Cadmeans” for Thebans) by figuring the relationship between the Thebans and their city as a maternal one. This has the desired purpose of demanding loyalty from his people, a metaphor that calls upon the reciprocity his citizens owe to Thebes, “a debt,” contends Cameron, “which they pay by dying in its defense.” To Eteocles the defense of the city (and his identity as its leader) is the defense of that which gave him birth, his mother-earth. Hence the devotion to their principal nourisher is the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Benardete (1967a: 27 n.9)}
\footnote{These references to Cadmus have two associations: the Spartoi, who were born out of the ground where he planted the teeth of the slain dragon, and his foreign origin. The simultaneous presence of both associations will figure in the conflict between Eteocles and Polynices, which I discuss in further detail below.}
\footnote{On the semantic range of \textit{trophos}, in particular that it “ne seul désigne la nourrice mais aussi la mere,” see Demont (1978, esp. 379).}
\footnote{Cameron (1964: 4)}
\footnote{Hence the Thebans will more-or-less be re-enacting the battle of the Spartoi, for whom the earth is literally mother. See Cameron (1964: 7) for a useful explanation of the parallel between the Spartoi and the house of Oedipus.}
\end{footnotes}
first and foremost obligation the people of Cadmus’ city must show.\textsuperscript{207} This much in fact the Thebans’ mother-earth has already prepared them for, having raised them for the very purpose of defending her in times of need (\textit{ethrepsat’... aspidophorous} 19).

Eteocles, however, does not omit himself from this reciprocity. He, too, is intimately committed to his autochthonous city: “As your leader, Cadmean citizens, I am ultimately the one to be blamed if the war does not turn out well” (1-3, 6-8). The \textit{heis} of line 6, in fact, isolates him in his responsibility. Eteocles further signals his devotion when he hears his scout’s report of the enemy array outside the walls (39-68). In response to the bleak situation there, Eteocles prays:

\begin{verbatim}
ὦ Ζεῦ τε καὶ Γῆ καὶ πολισσοῦχοι θεοί,
 Άρα τ’ Ἐρινὺς πατρός ἢ μεγασθενής,
 μὴ μοι πόλιν γε προμίνθεν πανώλεθρον
 ἐκβαμνίσητε δηιάλωτον ἗λλάδος,
 [φθόγγον χέουσαν καὶ δόμους ἐφεστίους]
 ἐλευθέραν δὲ γῆν τε καὶ Κάδμου πόλιν
 ζυγοῖσι δουλίοισι μὴ δῶτε σχεθεῖν·
\end{verbatim}

Zeus and Earth and all you gods who protect our city, Fate and mighty Erinys of my father, do not uproot this city of Greece, turning it over, delivering it captive to its enemies. It pours forth its prayer; these homes, this free land, this free city of Cadmus, must not be subjected to slavery. (69-75)

Greece is a free land, one unworthy of the \textit{zygos doulios}, and so is the \textit{Kadmou polin,} with the \textit{te kai} maintaining the distinction between the earth and the Theban city at the same time as it preserves the thematic relation between the two (both are to be saved from the threat of subjugation). This reading is strengthened if we take \textit{eleutheran} as the predicate of both \textit{gēn} and \textit{polin}: this earth and this city of Cadmus are free; therefore let

\textsuperscript{207} Benardete notes, however, that “Eteocles presents the earth as the sole progenitor of the Thebans, regardless of whether their ancestry warrants it or not; for in listing what has to be defended——city, altars of native gods, children, earth—he does not mention human parents” (1967a: 28).
them not be subject to the yoke. Apart from this link between Thebes and the earth again, there is the telling substance of Eteocles’ prayer: “Do not, I pray, uproot my city at least” (71-72). The structure of the line emphasizes both polin (with ge) and moi (by word order).\textsuperscript{208} These two passages suggest that for Eteocles the fate of the autochthonous Kadmou polis rests first and foremost in his own and his citizens’ willingness to defend her and second on the gods’ favor. He makes their responsibility to Thebes as citizens antecedent to the gods’ responsibility.

In several other passages we get a similar sense of Eteocles’ commitment to the city. At the beginning of his rebuke of the choral women for example—which I will come to shortly—Eteocles’ anger is the product of his desire for solidarity (or fear for its loss). He asks: “Do you think these cries of yours are the best thing for the safety of the city, or will bring strength to our besieged army” (184-85)? For their disheveled dread has the negative effect of “flooding” the citizens with panic, which only aids the enemy (192-93). Invoking soon after the value of rationality (as opposed to wild fretting), he asks them: “Would a steersman, whose ship was in danger on the sea’s swells, find safety by rushing to the prow?” (208-10) Instead of chaotic prayer, Eteocles enjoins, “pray that the city can withhold the enemy’s spear” (216). Eteocles sees the safety of Thebes as a product of reasoned—not fearful—communality.

The devotion of Eteocles to the city is something the chorus eventually acknowledge. After the report of the mutual death of Eteocles and Polynices near the end of the play, they say: “All the city [lit. towers] groans, the earth which loved this man now groans” (901-02). Speaking further on about the divided loyalties of the brothers,

\textsuperscript{208} Dawson (1970: 36 ad loc.) contends that the postponed position of ge throws unusual emphasis on polin and therefore gives a “momentary glimpse of [Eteocles’] personal concern” for the city.
the chorus claim that “having saved the city [for himself] he lost his life” (981). This much the messenger also intimates in his official proclamation about the status of the two brothers: Eteocles will be buried within the city for his devotion (eunoia) to the city, having died in its defense, a noble thing for men of his age to die for. (1007-12) And finally, at the end of the play, when the chorus has split in half to mourn the two brothers, the hemi-chorus speaking on behalf of Eteocles closes with these words of civic praise: “And we for our part will go with Eteocles, as both the city and justice [to dikaion] give mutual approval. For after the strength of blessed Zeus, this man most of all saved the city of Cadmus from overturning and being wrecked by a wave of foreign men” (1072-78).

These passages make clear that Eteocles is willing to stand by his devotion to Thebes, a devotion which he forcefully grounds in his city’s autochthonous history, and therefore expects the same commitment from his citizens. We see, following this demand for devotion, that Eteocles’ invocations on behalf of the city are (desperately) inclusive. Consider lines 10-15 again:

But you must come to the defense of the city and the altars of our land’s gods, you who are still short of maturity as well as you who are past your prime,

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209 The choral ode here is an utter mess. I am following Page’s text in assuming sōtheis in this passage refers to Eteocles, as opposed to sutheis for Polynices (from mss. VK; cf. Hutchinson [1985: 205 ad loc.]). In the appetatur criticus he suggests that “personarum vices incertissimae; easdem atque in 966 seqq. Expectasses, sed necesse videtur 978-81 eidem personae tribuere nisi gravius corrupti sunt” (ad loc.).

210 There seems to be a consensus that verses 1005-78 are an interpolation composed after the production of Sophocles’ Antigone and/or Euripides’ Phoenissae. Lloyd-Jones (1959) makes a strong case for their potential authenticity. For a succinct overview of the various positions, see Hutchinson (1985: 209-11 ad loc.), who contends that by ending at l.1004, “[i]n effect, the play will have ended with the emotion of the audience at its highest point.” Vidal-Naquet’s remarks to the contrary, however, are instructive: “[T]o judge by the texts of the manuscripts, it is indeed a political debate that sets one half of the chorus against the other half, whether or not the two groups are headed by Antigone and Ismene. It is a debate that sets in opposition on the one hand the changing law of the city and, on the other, the stable law of lineage. Whether or not it is entirely from the hand of Aeschylus himself, the epilogue of the Seven is altogether in line with the logic of the play” ([1986] 1990: 282-83).
reinforcing the mighty seed of your body. You must never let their honors be erased. Protect also your children and your mother-earth, that nurse most dear.

Eteocles’ speech calls upon young and old alike to come to the city’s aid, for both are equally responsible for the prosperity of the city. Given the situation he is facing, he is forced to call on men who are properly too young and too old to fight. But the emotional imperative—“Never let the city’s honors be destroyed!”—transfigures his desperate invocation into a call to unite youthful vigor with aged experience in a common cause.

Eteocles may have no other choice but to enlist as many people as he can muster, but it is important to notice that the present need to defend Thebes dictates him doing away with pretensions of exclusivity: anybody and everybody is, as a Theban, to stand in her defense.\(^\text{211}\) Anybody, that is, except a woman.

This belief in the unifying power of autochthony, we might say, underlies Eteocles’ “misogynist” response to the chorus of women frightened by the prospect of the war.\(^\text{212}\) For their “subversive piety” in this time of crisis directly threatens to undo his carefully constructed evocation of Theban civic loyalty.\(^\text{213}\) Their parodos (ll.78-181), which follows Eteocles’ first reaction to his spy’s report of the enemy array, is a tour de force of fear and anxiety. The imagery they conjure is stunning: dust in the air (81), the clatter of hoofs (83-84), the clang of shields (100), the rattle of “not one spear” (103), horse-bridles singing death dirges (122-23), the thud of chariots (151), a hail of stones (158). Their recourse is to beg the gods, each individually by name, for salvation.

\(^\text{211}\) Below I return briefly to this passage to discuss how the rhetoric of autochthony nevertheless makes an exclusive distinction between men and women.

\(^\text{212}\) Caldwell (1973) presents the most systematic (psycho)analysis of Eteocles’ aversion to the women by locating it in his genealogical background. The traces of such ideas may also be found in Finley (1955) and Bacon (1964).

\(^\text{213}\) This pithy oxymoron (“subversive piety”) I have taken from Zeitlin (1986).
Eteocles’ reaction to the chorus’ fearful cries is a tirade about the insufferability of women in general: “You miserable creatures, do you think your agonizing is helping the city or bringing strength to our army? The problem with women is that in neither peace nor wartime are they anything but trouble. If only I could live without them.” This is the gist of ll.183-195.

Cameron takes Eteocles’ ranting reaction to the chorus to be a distinctive hypersensitivity toward the proper use of language in avoiding ill omens. He contends that “[Eteocles’ behavior] springs rather from a deep conviction that religious observance is essential, that the gods are powerful, and that speech must be especially guarded when addressing them.”\(^{214}\) This interpretation seems to justify the brutal, almost totalitarian zeal with which Eteocles responds without acknowledging that it goes a bit too far in its generalization. Burnett reorients us toward the pragmatic dimension of the situation: Eteocles is “deprived of any significant choice in his defensive strategy since he is forced to act not against his true enemy, the besieging army, but against panic, the unexpected threat he finds within his walls.”\(^{215}\) As Burnett suggests, Eteocles’ fears are less about religious piety than civic unity, civic unity being the very thing he has strived so far to encourage in his citizens. And this much he makes clear from the outset of the passage: “Let me ask you something, women, you insufferable creatures: do you think these cries of yours are the best conduct for the safety of the city, or will bring strength to our forces here under attack” (183-85)? The implication here is that the women’s behavior threatens to *disunite* the city, a possibility he cannot tolerate in dire straits. The end of his

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\(^{214}\) Cameron (1970: 100). For other interpretations, Cameron’s references on these pages are useful and succinct. See also Foley (2001: 46, esp. n.92).

\(^{215}\) Burnett (1973: 348)
speech also highlights his civic perspective: “Outside things are men’s business, so don’t worry about them. Stay inside and cause us no more harm” (201-02).

The whole passage is framed by appeals to the city’s well-being, a concern anterior to and likely motivating Eteocles’ anger at women in general. This is not to excuse his totalizing, Semonidean characterization of the female genos—for he makes a rather crass and unjustified shift from “women threaten the city’s security” to “women are rotten all around”—but rather to see it as emerging from his larger civic sensibility which pays heed, if somewhat aggressively, to the safety of all Thebans first and foremost. The violence of his temperament (which seems out of place in the play and has startled many critics), we might add, is precisely a measure of the force of his civic passion.216 Eteocles’ demands, ultimately, are simple: “Listen to my vows and raise the sacred cry of victory with good heart, the sacrificial shout known to all Greeks, as inspiration to those we love” (267-70). In his desire for civic unity he identifies women as the sole site of difference: they are the one thing preventing the total unity he hopes to create. This explains the generalizing nature of his criticism and his allusion to the “genos gynaikôn” theory of women as a separate race from men.

Later in this chapter I will address the personal, genealogical dimension of Eteocles’ reaction to the choral women. For now we have yet another picture of a leader in passionate defense of his city. This passion, I have argued, emerges from the attachment he has to his city’s autochthonous history. The terms of his devotion may be myopic and the parameters of his devotion may far exceed reason, but we are never in a position to doubt the fact or the depth of his devotion or his belief that the maternal

216 Foley notes that “[t]he force of Eteocles’ intervention is heightened by the fact that the characters do not generally respond directly to choral odes” (Foley [2001: 45], with reference to Hutchinson [1985: 75]).
relationship of Thebes to her citizens can inspire them in a desperate time. The threat he perceives both from without and within is real to him. The loss of autochthonous Thebes to an army of foreigners (*heterophonōi stratōi* [170]), therefore, is something he will not tolerate.

### 3.2 A Civic Incest?

Thus far we have seen how Aeschylus imagines the productive possibilities of the myth of autochthony. Through the vision of his protagonist Eteocles autochthony becomes the cohesive argument uniting all Thebans in defense of the city. It is the feature of their unique identity and the principle for which they stand, especially in this life-or-death situation. But Aeschylus is never so single-minded. In fact it would not be far-fetched to suggest that there are more problematic aspects in his representation of the war and politics of Eteocles and Thebes than not. For every step we advance in our judgment of the character of Eteocles (his inspiration, his desire to be a good leader), we face a critical obstacle: Eteocles is the son of the incestuous union of Oedipus and Jocasta. The complication I would like to explore here is the connection between autochthony and the incest of the Labdacid line, a connection, I suggest, that problematizes Eteocles’ image of, and relation to, his city.

The previous section I hope made clear that Eteocles imagines/represents Thebes as an autochthonous city with genealogical ties to the land. As the city’s leader and representative he exhibited in his invocations to his citizens the very commitment to Thebes he expected of them, drawing a personal, filial connection between city and

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217 There are 18 references to the house of Oedipus in the play: 70 (*patros*), 203, 372, 654, 677, 695 (*patros*), 709, 725, 752, 775, 801, 807, 833, 885, 926-32, 976, 987, 1055.
218 This is, of course, only one of many issues facing the viewer/reader of *Seven*. See, for example, Vidal-Naquet ([1986] 1990: 284-85) on the thematic and interpretive richness of the play.
citizen. It is a move that reveals his dedication and the value of his city’s primordial lineage. But it reveals much more than that when we consider not just the person he is and desires to be as leader, but also who he is genealogically.

*Seven* in no way hides his genealogy. The choral ode that follows his departure to face Polynices lays out the history:

> I speak of a transgression born long ago, one that brought swift punishment, and now remains in the third generation. Then Laius disobeyed Apollo, who told him at the Pythian oracle’s navel that he would save his city if he died without children.

> But conquered by the unreason of passion, he gave birth to his own undoing, the patricide Oedipus, who sowed the forbidden field of his mother in which he grew and bore the fatal root of his act. (743-56)

Following the death of the two brothers near the end, the chorus reiterate the issue:

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Greek text:

παλαιγενῆ γὰρ λέγω
παρβασίαν ὥκυποινον, αἰῶνα δ’ ἐς τρίτον
μένειν, Ἀπόλλωνος εὗτε Λάιος
βίαι τρὶς εἰπόντος ἐν
μεσομφάλοις Πυθικοῖς
χρηστηρίοις θυάσκοντα γέν-
νας ἀτερ σῶιζειν πόλιν,

κρατηθεῖς ἐκ φιλαν ἄβουλιαν
ἐγείνατο μὲν μόροιν αὐτῶι,
πατροκτόνον Οἰδιπόδαν, ὡστε ματρὸς ἁγνὰν
οπείρας ἀρουραν ἀν’ ἐτράφη
ριζαν αἰματόεσσαν
ἐτλᾶ·

δυσδαίμων σφιν ἁ τεκοῦσα
πρὸ πασᾶν γυναίκων
ὁπόσαι τεκνογόνοι κέκληνται;
παίδα τὸν αὑτᾶς πόσιν αὐ-
ταί θεμένα τοῦσδ’ ἐτεχ’, οἱ δ’
ωδ’ ἐτελεύτασαν ὑπ’ ἀλλαλοφόνοις
χερσῖν ὁμοσπόροισιν.
She was unfortunate the mother of these men, above and beyond all women who are called mothers. For taking her own son as her husband, she bore them—these men here who died by each others’ hands, hands which grew out of the same seed. (926-32)

The infamous myth of the Labdacid line sets the groundwork for the trilogy as a whole and has considerable thematic resonance within Seven itself. As early as line 70 Eteocles reveals his genealogical self-awareness, acknowledging in response to his scout’s report of the enemy array the influence of “the all-powerful Curse and Erinys of my father.” And the very first time the chorus address him they call him “child of Oedipus” (203).

If we are to follow these textual allusions, then we need to acknowledge who Eteocles is. The individual he wants to be—a good leader for his people—cannot erase the mark of his family history. As any member of the audience would immediately recognize, he is the child of the incestuous union of Oedipus and Jocasta, a fact which forces him into the strange position of embodying both legitimacy and illegitimacy. Eteocles is both a gnēsios (legitimate heir) and a nothos (bastard). He shoulders by no fault of his own the figurative “lameness” of his perverted genealogy, a disability handed down to him by his cursed predecessors. It is this disability that ultimately disrupts his actions as the leader of Thebes, as he embodies the “unnatural contradiction of genos and polis”.

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219 On the trilogy, see Hutchinson (1985: xvii-xxx)
220 The term “lameness” I have borrowed from Vernant ([1986] 1988), who, when describing the structural similarities between the three generations of Labdacids, means “lame” quite literally, as all three had physical limps. My use of the term, it goes without saying, is more figurative. See further Delienne and Vernant (1991: 259-75, “The feet of Hephaestus”)
221 Zeitlin (1982: 29). Bacon puts it well: “There is a danger ‘outside’ which must not be let in, and a danger ‘inside’ which must not be let out[...] The problem is to know who really is the stranger, the outsider, the enemy. This ambiguity about who is really an enemy and an outsider, and about where he is, is the ambiguity of the house of Laius itself. The homeless stranger who slew Laius, solved the riddle of
Froma Zeitlin has suggested in two formidable studies that autochthony and incest are thematically connected by an undifferentiation in origin. Speaking of the homology between Thebes and the house of Oedipus, she argues that “a hidden analogy connects family and city, since each reproductive model (autochthony, incest) looks back to a single undifferentiated origin and each holds out the ideal of a self-referential autonomy.”

Whereas autochthony envisions an *imaginary* pure origin (so Loraux), incest *literally* guarantees the purity of one’s stock. But the seed uncontaminated by foreign blood in the Labdacid line produces a contamination—and a curse—all its own. From this perspective Eteocles’ identification with the autochthons of Thebes’ myth-history runs the risk of “transposing the pattern from one domain to the other…and contaminating the city’s myth of solidarity with the negative import of his own story.”

This has the effect of posing autochthony as the *civic* model of a defective genealogy (a civic incest), making its implications for the city and its citizens more haunting than perhaps Eteocles—with the positive spin he puts on autochthony—is aware. For Zeitlin this means that Eteocles “will function as the bridge between a defective model of city and a defective model of family; he will serve as a negative mediator between the

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the sphinx, and so won the kingdom of Thebes with the hand of the queen, was in reality the son of the king he slew and the queen he married, and the legitimate heir to the throne, φιλοκαι— a blood relative, and an insider in every sense [...] They are all too close in blood. But they are also, for three generations, enemies and strangers to each other” (Bacon [1964:30]).

Zeitlin (1986: 122). Further: “[T]he desire on the political level to rule alone in autonomy is also equivalent in the family domain to the desire for an autonomous self-engendering, which the acts of patricide and incest imply” (122).

Recall *hagnan* (752) from the choral ode just cited above: it has the sense of both “pure” and “forbidden”.

Zeitlin (1982: 31)
two."  

I would suggest further that the double association casts a shadow over the positive, patriotic tenor of Eteocles’ civic, autochthonous rhetoric.

Consider Eteocles opening speech again. We previously noticed that the picture we got of Eteocles was of a devoted leader demanding a civic and personal attachment from his citizens based on the city’s autochthonous origins. But if Eteocles is the product of an incestuous union, what light does his doomed genealogy cast upon the glorious ancestry of the city he represents?

Like the man in the riddle of the Sphinx, a riddle which encapsulates the compressed temporality of the Labdacids, Eteocles is “the being who is at one and the same time two-, three-, four-footed, the man who as he advances in age jumbles up and confuses the social and cosmic order of the generations instead of respecting it.”

Eteocles’ speech calls upon young and old alike to come to the city’s aid—“But you must come to the defense of the city and the altars of our land’s gods, you who are still short of maturity as well as you who are past your prime, nourishing the great strength of your body” (10-14). But there must be at least a touch of irony at play here since Eteocles represents both parts of this equation through the double position he occupies in the Labdacid line. Young and old are equally responsible for the prosperity of the city, a leveling that unites youthful vigor with aged experience in a common cause. But when

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226 Vernant (1982: 25). Cf. also Cameron (1964: 7) and Zeitlin (1986: 128): “On the one hand, the riddle suppresses the dimension of time, since the enigma resides in the fact that it makes synchronic the three phases of human life by uniting them under the single form (or voice) that is Man. As such, Oedipus’ unique ability on the intellectual level to solve the riddle is commensurate on the familial level with his singular acts of patricide and incest. On the other hand, the full interpretation of the riddle would seem to require that Man must properly be defined in his diachronic dimension. Man is to be measured by the sum total of his life, which can only be known as he passes through time. Hence, each of his multiple aspects (four-footed, two-footed, and three-footed) will be construed as a sequential phase of orderly human development.”
that chronological leveling takes place within the family line (Eteocles is both son and brother to Oedipus), the result is not solidarity but division.

As a civic genealogical metaphor autochthony does not discriminate within the citizen body but between citizens and Others (female and foreign). This is important for two reasons. First, the (female) choral response to this speech—the expression of their fear—provokes Eteocles to make nasty characterizations of women as a race and to exclude them from the public sphere. This exclusion was, as Loraux argued, the ideological effect of autochthony. Second, it deceives him into thinking that his own twin brother Polynices is an alien invader. Polynices is by all rights the same as Eteocles: a son of the incestuous union of Oedipus and Jocasta, a Theban autochthon, a (displaced) leader. Eteocles’ attempts to differentiate between himself and his brother, native Thebans and external invaders, founder on the deeper similarity between the two—a similarity that Eteocles must constantly suppress. One might say that the denial is necessary for the rhetoric of civic purity, but it is nonetheless born of a false logic. For when one’s enemy is one’s brother (who is himself of the same incestuous stock), there is no difference except that which is insisted upon rhetorically. 227 “[I]ssue from an incestuous union,” Zeitlin claims, “cannot establish any difference between its offspring, but can only produce sons who embody the principle of difference, irreconcilable except through their inevitable identical end.” 228 The singularity Eteocles insists upon (heis 6) is

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227 The chorus make this point pithily at 829-31: “Indeed they perished of their own unholy purposes, true to each other’s names: [both truly lamentable (eteokleitoi),] both full of strife [polyneikeis].” I analyze this ode in further detail later. Let me note in the meantime that this ode has many textual problems. I have followed Page in leaving 830 unreconstructed, but Wecklein, noting the pun suggested by polyneikeis, emended the missing part with eteokleitoi. Prien proposes eteon kleinoi. In either case there is an important auditory echo. For the meaning of “Eteocles” as “truly lamentable”, see Bacon (1973: 14-15), whose argument Zeitlin endorses (1982: 39).

228 Zeitlin (1982: 26)
haunted by the presence of his brother both in the denial of his twin-ness that it implies and in the adverbial juxtaposition of *polys* of the very same line.\(^{229}\)

Further, just as the Theban earth has produced in all her nourishment (*philitatēi* *trophōi* [16]) citizens who perform their function in affairs both domestic (*oikētēras* [19]) and martial (*aspidophorous* [19]), so the mother of Eteocles has made of him the current settler of the cursed house of Oedipus as well as the shield-bearer against it. The citizens of Cadmus settle homes and face the burden of outside attack, while Eteocles settles into his father’s throne and must face the burden of his brother’s attack. Eteocles himself made the unity and unanimity of self and city explicit, but behind his program for civic piety echoes the corrupted history of his family.

This dynamic homology between the autochthonous history of Thebes and the incestuous background of the house of Oedipus involves more than just the physical person of Eteocles. In fact the few other characters we have in this play (the chorus, the scout) seem to elicit in their interactions with him the very thing he struggles with unwittingly—the problem of his genealogy and who he is. In a way they draw out his internal inconsistencies, bridging the gap between who he is as the son of Oedipus and who he wants to be as ruler of Thebes. These characters, I argue, disturb the firm distinction Eteocles tries to make between his responsibilities to *genos* and *polis*; they highlight rather the tensions and ambiguities that underlie the mutually informing nature of these commitments.

The scout’s report of the enemy array gives voice to the echoes of Eteocles’ genealogical troubles behind his civic and autochthonous rhetoric.

There are seven men, valiant leaders, slitting a bull’s throat over a black-rimmed shield. Dipping their hands in the bull’s gore, they swore an oath by Ares, Enyo and bloodthirsty Fear that they would either bring destruction on the city of the Kadmeans and drain it of its blood by force or in their death would mix their gore in this land. They piled tokens of themselves for their parents at home into the chariot of Adrastus, shedding tears, but no cry of pity left their mouths. (42-51)

The scout had opened by directly addressing Eteocles by his name (39), ironically summoning the very identification Eteocles had himself made in the opening lines between his failure as the city’s leader and its subsequent lamentation.²³⁰ He also repeats the civic and autochthonous reference to the Cadmeans. He is explicit about his knowledge and the discharge of his duties and informs Eteocles that he has seen the seven Argive leaders swearing oaths over a black shield full of bull’s blood (a scene whose gory details signify nothing if not violent destruction and which looks forward to the shield scene later in the play). Polynices, it seems, the leader of this force, has his own claim on autochthonous Thebes and has come to take it back.²³¹

²³⁰ See Foley (2001: 49) on the mixture of language for praise and lamentation in the opening of the play. It is of note that there are only four occurrences of his name in the play: 6 (his own play on words), 39 (the scout), 999 (the antiphonal lament of Ismene), 1007 (the herald proclaiming Eteocles a hero). Six occurrences for Polynices: 577, 641, 658, 830 (the pun: both brothers were polyneikeis), 1013, 1067.
²³¹ Cf. Zeitlin (1982: 26-27): “This reduplication subverts the ideological unity of the oikos by generating two sons instead of one to inherit a single patrimony, sons who demonstrate their sameness (not their resemblance) by their struggle for the same object which they cannot share. […] Thus excessive sameness, which violates the law of difference, must generate excessive difference as its response, in this case, in the
The scout, however, does not stop there. He notes that, upon swearing their oaths over the black shield, the Argive leaders in an inverted familial economy leave behind mnēmeia for their parents. Apart from the patent connection between these “tokens” and death (i.e. like a mnēma, they are monuments to one’s death), the retrogressive movement of the mnēmeia (from child to parent, as opposed to the other way around) picks up the subtle strands of stalled genealogical movement expressed in Eteocles’ appeal to children and elders. As in that instance, we get an insight into how generative succession trips up on the desires of the very people who are to guarantee its forward progress. For just as Oedipus’ desire for Jocasta forestalled proper linearity, so the Argive desire for Thebes threatens to reverse natural, genealogical movement (and it only makes sense that Polynices is the leader of the attack). In a sense the genealogical reversal of the mnēmeia points to, or is the result of, the Argives’/exiles’ return to the “womb” of their motherland.

The resonance of the genos of Oedipus that seems to lurk behind the invocations and desires of each brother for the polis may supplement the motivation for Eteocles’ “misogynist” tirade against the frightened choral women. Apart from a simple desire for order, the passage we looked at earlier also opens up further consideration of Eteocles’ behavior. His first question to the women reinforces his sense of identity as a sovereign and the responsibility he holds as a leader (i.e. to provide ta kairia): “Do you think these cries of yours are the best conduct for the safety of the city or will bring strength to our forces here under attack?” (183-85) These women, he implies, are acting irresponsibly in their disheveled agony (even though Eteocles himself had intimated in the opening lines of antithetical opposites which cannot be mediated.” See Gagarin (1976: 121, esp. n.7) for a discussion of the origin of the dispute between Eteocles and Polynices.
that such a response would likely occur if ever his city were in danger). He claims he wants nothing to do with women, a prejudice that accords well with the civic-ideological purpose of autochthony as Loraux and Saxonhouse argue. City things are men’s business, so women need to stay out of the way. But in this repudiation of the genos of women in favor of the polis, the irony of his contradictory double-bind is exposed: the presence of women as a genos in the polis troubles him since women are the single locus of difference in the otherwise unified city he desires; but on another level the absence of a properly differentiating female figure in his own family history colors the present moment of the play. Jocasta’s presence as this figure was a perversion: in the chorus’ words from above she was the most dysdaimôn of all mothers (926-28). Eteocles’ aversion reflects and recapitulates the very circumstances that put him where he is as both leader of Thebes and as a point in Labdacid genealogy. As Zeitlin suggests, Eteocles’ invective “against all women for all time demonstrates precisely the status of Eteokles as the child of an incestuous union, who knows only how to repress the ‘speaking signs’ that are essential to the city for its genealogical diversity in favor of a homogeneous commonality ruled by a single principle.”

Genos and polis are inextricably related, an analogy masquerading as polarity.

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232 Cf. Vernant (1988: 40): “The only contribution Eteocles will allow the women to make toward a public and political religion that knows how to respect the distant character of the gods without trying to mix the divine with the human, is the ologügē, the wail, which is described as hieros because the city has integrated it into its own religion, recognizing it as the ritual cry to accompany the fall of the victim in the great blood sacrifice.” Graf’s remarks on the role of women in warfare seem entirely apt here: “The prayer for the besieged town was the only thing left to the womenfolk. [...] Women stood aside and acted only in emergencies, by throwing stones or by praying, preferably silently” (Graf [1984: 246—my emphasis]).

233 Zeitlin (1982: 32-33)

234 Cf. Zeitlin (1982: 34): “Each term lends to the other the appropriate metaphorical quality by which literal and symbolic stabilize one another in an integrative system of values.”
We could say that this hidden connection between the family and the city—the well-spring of Eteocles’ fear and acidity—points up the ambivalence of the autochthony he is so adamant about. Autochthony is after all a civic genealogical metaphor for the desire for the coincidence of family and earth/city. But in this instance Eteocles wants to keep them separate. There is a strong current of racial/genealogical discourse in Eteocles’ misogynistic diatribe. He first calls the women *thremmata* (180), prays he never has to live with the *gynnaikeïoi genei* (188), rails against the ills of *gynaixi synnaiôn* (195), and ends definitively by asserting “What’s going on outside is a concern for men—no woman should concern herself with it” (200-01). The fascinating point here is that exactly where Eteocles’ vision of autochthony unites the city (the male race of Theban autochthons), young and old and everything alike in between (10-12), it also divides it (male vs. female). That division is important since it is built into the very structure of the play in the form of the dialogue between the female chorus and the male protagonist (203-63). The only way ultimately that Eteocles can suppress the ambivalence of autochthony—that it both unites and divides *genos* and *polis*—is by threat of death:

κεὶ μὴ τις ἄρχησ τῆς ἐμῆς ἀκούσεται
ἀνήρ γυνὴ τε χόῳ τῶν μεταίχμιον,
ψήφος κατ’ αὐτῶν ὀλεθρία βουλεύσεται,
λευστῆρα δήμου δ’ οὔ τι μὴ φύγη μόρον.

Any man, woman or anything else in between who disobeys my authority will be sentenced to death and will not escape the fate of being stoned in public. (196-99)

235 Cf. l.256: “Zeus, what a gift you have given us in this race of women!”
236 Lines 194-95, under this ambivalence, take on an ironic new light: “You’re really aiding what’s happening outside, while we’re ruined from within by our own!” Cf. Dawson (1970: 48, 50 *ad loc.*).
Even this forceful attempt at closure, however, is fraught with ambiguity. *Tōn metaichmion* in line 197 unsettles his distinctions and seems to be Eteocles’ unconscious acknowledgment of the falsity or impossibility of his own polarities.

The difference between Eteocles and the women, at least from his purchase, is radical. He defends the civic order of autochthonous Thebes with almost oppressive passion, while they erratically endanger its stability with their poisonous femininity. For this reason he prescribes for them in his final words the proper vocal response (261-85), demanding that they pray for a good outcome. It seems strange that he is so adamant about a univocality between himself and the women, seeing as in all other instances he wants nothing to do with them (cf. 201). In this case, however, he brings into union their purposes (like he did with the city earlier), a move that simultaneously pushes the women away as it draws them closer and, importantly, silences them by dictating their words.

I suggested above that the chorus agitate Eteocles’ inner turmoil, and the destabilizing force they symbolize (the homology of autochthony and incest, the inextricable connection between *genos* and *polis*) is all the more potent given that they have to be forced into compliance. This exacerbation of Eteocles’ contradictions then underscores the lengths to which he will go to valorize *polis* over *genos*. But the women of the chorus cannot abide by such a radical demarcation. In the choral ode that intervenes (288-368) Aeschylus will put their disobedience and fear into stark relief as

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237 Caldwell’s claim that Eteocles’ “deep-rooted fear of women” is his response to the curse that Oedipus levels against his sons (reiterating a similar sexual dynamic to that of Laius’ recourse to homosexuality) is attractive. In this light, “[t]he dramatic occasion of civic danger brings to the fore those attributes of Eteocles most representative both of the prevailing social climate and of his own individual, yet paradigmatic, response to the threatening female, the Curse of his family[...](Caldwell [1973: 216-17]).

238 Bacon is right on when she claims that “the harshness of [Eteocles'] language and the intensity of his horror of women leave one with the feeling that the success [i.e. “calming” the women] is somehow against nature, and therefore unstable” (Bacon [1964:30]). Cf. also Foley (2001: 46 n.90).
the chorus expressly liken themselves to victims on several metaphorical registers which
deploy the language and themes of autochthony.

If, as Zeitlin suggests, the women speak both for the city and for the family, and if, following Benardete, Eteocles “cannot at all affect the principle for which [the
women] stand”, then the chorus by their very presence highlight the sexual dimension of
the family behind the civic dimension of the city.\footnote{Zeitlin (1982: 30); Benardete (1967a: 29)} In the ode the women make
themselves the powerful and scary, yet apt symbol for the notion of a pure origin,
exposing in the mixture of threats from without and within the truly dual nature of this
myth of autochthony. This characterization consists of a vision of their rape by the
Argive attackers, an antithesis (incest/autochthony—rape) that expresses a fundamental
synthetic link, “[f]or war and incest both interrupt the normal exchange of women, one in
excessive exogamy, one in excessive endogamy.”\footnote{Zeitlin (1982: 33)}

What is striking in the ode, shot through the entire strophic/antistrophic exchange,
is the pervasiveness of the sexual dynamic of this war. The women, as this ode makes
poignantly clear, are ultimately those who stand to suffer the most if the war turns out
badly (they will be sold into slavery instead of killed).\footnote{Death is no picnic, of course, but the women unlike the men have less in the way of ideological
compensation for it (kleos, a beautiful death, etc.). Cf. Gagarin (1976: 159) and Byrne (2002: 144). The
chorus’ words are: “I declare that the one who dies fares much better than these [captive]” (336-37).} It stands to reason that they do
not calmly choke back their fears as Eteocles had ordered in favor of better-sounding
prayers.\footnote{Dawson (1970: 58 ad loc.) contends, however, that the absence of the dochmiac meter in the ode is
evidence that the women are “somewhat calmer.” Cf. Gagarin (1975: 152, esp. n.2) for the difficulty of
discerning the “emotional tone” of the dochmiac meter in Seven, since it is “the earliest surviving play to
make extended use of the meter, which Aeschylus may have created” (213).} The fear they exhibit cuts right to the heart of who they are, women at risk of
being raped and enslaved, and therefore the sexual aspect of this civil war is inevitably

\footnote{Zeitlin (1982: 30); Benardete (1967a: 29)
Zeitlin (1982: 33)
Death is no picnic, of course, but the women unlike the men have less in the way of ideological
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make extended use of the meter, which Aeschylus may have created” (213).}
emphasized in their ode. As in their previous ode, their prayers for civic prosperity are consistently infused with eruptions of sexual panic.

The women open the first strophe (288-303) with a metaphor equating the Argive army to snakes threatening a nest of young birds. The Thebans, one assumes, are the nestlings whose home is being insidiously encroached upon, and the chorus call upon the gods to rescue the Kadmogenē polin (302-03). The sexual imagery is explicit, as the women characterize the serpents as dyseunētoras (292), “bad bedfellows”, diction that likens the Argive invasion to a perverted sexual act. Apart from the obvious reminiscence of the Cadmean serpent, the reference to bad bedfellows seems an ironic and appropriate term for the Argive men, specifically Polynices, as it hints at the history of sexual transgression of his genos.

The antistrophic response (304-20) inscribes a moral plea for the defense of Thebes (areion [305]), the “deep-rooted land” (bathychthon’ aian [306]), as it houses the waters of Dirce, “by far the most nourishing of the streams which Poseidon the earth-shaker sends forth, of all those which are the children of Tethys” (305-11). Unlike the Argives’ threatening, dangerous desire for Thebes which resembles the forcible, sexual threat of snakes, Dirce provides the proper ritual of reproduction and nurture (eutraphestaton [307]) for her children.

Strophe 2 (321-32) recalls the primordiality of Thebes (āgygian [321]) and reiterates the emotional investment in the safety of the city (oiktron [321]). But again the women cannot escape the real possibilities of the war, that “they will be man-handled and dragged away, young and old alike, like horses by their forelocks” (326-28). Distinctions are erased as even cries become mixed up (meixothroou [331]). Eteocles’ invocation of
young and old alike in his opening was a valiant call to arms which set a standard for Theban civic loyalty. But here the consequences are foregrounded (the collapsing of generations) and the truth of a city bereft of its women is properly characterized as 

bareias tychas (332).

Antistrophe 2 (333-44) envisions unwed, yet marriageable young women giving up their proper wedding rights for the “path to hateful homes.” This strophe hints that not even the “most-nourishing” Dirce can impart a timely, sufficient nurturing to these artitrophois (“just-nursed”) girls who are plucked unripe (ōmodropōs). For that which defines the primal maternity of Thebes, Dirce, is cut off in the war for the right to own her.

Strophe 3 (345-56) carries on the imagistic crescendo by picturing the bloody screams of infants at their mothers’ breasts, the productive nourishment of these artitrephis spoiled by native gore. The proper, natural rearing of Thebes’ children is perverted by the invasion, milk poisoned by blood.

Finally, antistrophe 3 (357-68) concludes with a vision of the waste of the earth’s bounty. Her fruit (her children) falls to the ground indiscriminately, much to the bitter chagrin of their caretaker, stalling in the process forward-moving generational succession. In the city of Thebes the children of the earth are the fruit scattered and wasted, leaving behind nothing but a barren city, ekkenoumena polis (330). An apt way to finish, summing up the relation of family and city: houses left without an heir are said to be keno.

In this brief recapitulation of the choral ode we can see that the sexual images evoked are vivid. The women are firmly in support of Eteocles, but they cannot betray,
in Benardete’s terms, the principle for which they stand (family). They cannot, in other words, disregard the ramifications they face as a *genos* for the sake of a blind civic piety. What makes this ode so moving is that it is thoroughly civic-minded but makes no pretense to conceal the sexual aspect of war. The conceptual opposition drawn between the women’s fear (radical, brutal exogamy) and Eteocles’ desire (radical uniqueness) animates their connection: for the women of the chorus, the projected victims in the end, the sexual (their *genos*) is the political; for Eteocles, the political is infected by the sexual.243 The further Eteocles distances himself from them, the stronger we see their connection becomes.244 Consequently, the more he tries to segregate *genos* from *polis*, the clearer their interconnection becomes. Thus by the principle for which the women stand, they are a constant reminder to Eteocles that he cannot ever escape the principle for which he stands: the homology of *genos/polis*, the homology of autochthony/incest. The real fears the chorus express in their ode bear witness to the fact that war fought in the name of autochthony is destructive to normal human reproduction and hence to the future of the city.245

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243 Finley (1955: 237) argues that the women symbolize “the city’s rooted life, with which Eteocles, for all his desire, cannot identify himself except by dying.” Cf. also Caldwell (1973: 204): “To be a hero and a Labdacid is to cut oneself off from what the women represent, from the earth and the city and eventually from the instinctual sources of life itself.”

244 Byrne (2002: 144) suggests that the choral odes, particularly the parodos and stasimon, “create…a subtle impression of similarity between Eteocles and the chorus of women so that the women’s fear of rape prefigures and predicts the emotional collapse and death of Eteocles.” She claims, however, that “women’s fear of rape is used in the *Seven* to serve the twin purposes of signaling the problematic nature of women’s presence in the *polis* and of supporting the tragic development of the male protagonist...[I]n the *Seven* women are unfairly made to condemn themselves” (Ibid. [2002: 149, 158]).

245 It is worth noting that all wars are destructive to human reproduction; female choruses have similar laments, for example, about the Trojan War. What makes this ode important is the pervasive use of autochthonous metaphors, the very thing Eteocles uses to shore up his city’s defense. Foley remarks on the relationship between the language of the ode and funerary lament that “[a]lthough the chorus is not formally lamenting here [in the parodos], the way that the text subtly alludes to traditions in which funerary lament played a central role serves to anticipate and like the role of the disruptive chorus here to its later role in lamenting the brothers” (Foley [2001: 47 n.94]).
This disturbing vision of autochthony with its connection to incest, rape, and the destruction of the city is a far cry from the normative vision of the myth’s ability to create political and civic solidarity. Behind Eteocles’ rallying cries to save the city, all centered on a notion of autochthony and civic purity, there echoes the voice of his family history. The genealogical aspect of his identity, the fact that he is the son of Oedipus, brings to the surface of his patriotic rhetoric the unforeseen similarities between his genealogy and the genealogy of Thebes which he so forcefully invoked. The scout’s speech drew out these unseemly allusions as well, and the women of the chorus evinced the terror of a war fought on behalf of autochthonous roots in the very same terms Eteocles so proudly vaunted them. Taken together, these unforeseen associations dim the positive light Eteocles had shone on autochthony and expose it for the defective civic genealogy it is. Mixed with the pride and solidarity of deep roots are incest, rape, and death.

Aeschylus then gives us the picture of autochthony as a double-voiced myth. On the one hand it serves as a unifying discourse, bringing together all those under the light it casts. We have a long-standing connection to this place we call our home, and the strength of that connection is fortified by a conviction that our ancestors were born of the earth in this very place. Hence the land is our mother and our first and foremost obligation. But on the other hand autochthony appears to be exclusive in nature, as it divides “us” from “them” and treats heterosexual reproduction as a perversion of the original production of the earth.

Seven, I believe, objectifies this ambivalent movement between the twin poles of unity and exclusion in order to present the myth of autochthony as a complex and contradictory means to stake a claim on who we are, showing up the problematic nature
of how deeply we live the perception of ourselves. This myth provides the autochthonous citizen with a powerful organizing metaphor for his singularity: on the one hand it is a conscious deployment of identity and difference (“us” and “them”); and on the other it is an unconscious buttress against the possibility, the fear, that his singularity is only an illusion hiding his connection to others behind the veil of radical difference. It is then, as with all identifications, a play of desire and feint, hide and seek. Aeschylus seems to be suggesting that there is a fundamental connection between self-consciousness and the suppression of difference. But, importantly, that suppression is not simply directed against Others; it is also fundamentally a suppression of the Other within.

*Seven* orients our attention toward the link between autochthony and its dark sides. In so doing it precisely illustrates that the inherent, ineradicable contradictions of autochthony situate the myth between belief and reality by making it an intimate part of the autochthonous citizen himself. The tensions and ambiguities of autochthony comprise the tensions and ambiguities of the citizen himself. And what is the autochthonous citizen if not caught between myth (his ancestors born of the earth) and reality (himself born of flesh-and-blood parents)? Logic may well help the autochthonous citizen to identify these ambivalences, but it cannot necessarily unmoor them from him. For as Freud would say, if there is one thing you cannot really know, it is your own unconscious. At any rate as absurd as it may sound, reminding Eteocles that his enemy is in fact his brother will not shake him from the conviction that Polynices and his gang of warriors are, in the chorus’ words, *heterophōnōi* (170).\footnote{To the very end the chorus—at least the half who have sided with Eteocles after his death—refer to Polynices and his army as “foreigners” (*allodapōn* [1076]).} This is because to acknowledge that he and his brother are one and the same person would dissolve the firm
distinctions that make him the very person he is in his own eyes. Eteocles’ self-
consciousness, and thus also every autochthonous citizen’s self-consciousness, hangs on
this very suppression. “[I]dentity and alienation are thus strictly correlative.”247 In the
next section I will examine this dynamic and consider how it unravels in the end.

3.3 The Autochthonous Citizen and his (Br)other

In the introduction to this chapter I adduced Žižek to illustrate the relationship
between the subject and ideology. Žižek called this connection, anchored in the
unconscious, the ideological fantasy. One sees, I think, in his theory of the ideological
fantasy that it is necessarily not a “thing” in its own right that a subject takes on and
“uses” for the sake of ideological distortion.248 The ideological fantasy is rather an
intimate, essential feature of the subject, the very condition of possibility for his
emergence. Fantasy in this light has the prime role in the constitution of the self; it is the

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248 This in fact is how Žižek develops and expands upon Marx’s idea of false consciousness. By his
reasoning it is decidedly not a false consciousness in the sense of an external imposition; rather it is a self-
sustained suppression within the subject. The belief in the ability to appropriate extra-ideologically an
ideology for one’s own purpose is the very trap of ideology, a trap that betrays one into thinking there is a
beyond. The notion that there is no outside of ideology (most famously theorized by Althusser [1984]) has
perturbed many. See for example Rorty (1994), Eagleton (1994) or Michael Bérubé’s discussion and
critique on his weblog’s “Theory Tuesday” (http://www.michaelberube.com). Žižek ’s (ethical) position,
however, is instructive: “Here, however, one should be careful to avoid the last trap that makes us slide into
ideology under the guise of stepping out of it. That is to say, when we denounce as ideological the very
attempt to draw a clear line of demarcation between ideology and actual reality, this inevitably seems to
impose the conclusion that the only non-ideological position is to renounce the very notion of extra-
ideological reality and accept that all we are dealing with are symbolic fictions, the plurality of discursive
universes, never ‘reality’—such a quick, slick ‘postmodern’ solution, however, is ideology par excellence.
It all hinges on our persisting in this impossible position: although no clear line of demarcation separates
ideology from reality, although ideology is already at work in everything we experience as ‘reality’, we
must none the less maintain the tension that keeps the critique of ideology alive. […] [I]deology is not all;
it is possible to assume a place that enable us to maintain a distance from it, but this place from which one
can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality—the
moment we yield to this temptation, we are back in ideology” (Žižek [1994: 17]).
“level on which ideology structures [his] social reality itself.”

To reiterate Žižek ’s terms:

Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real impossible kernel…The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel.

“Consciousness, then,” as William Batstone has recently argued, “is structured by the drives and desires we suppress for the sake of the images and mirages we identify with.” If we are to read the myth of autochthony as it is presented in Seven in this way, as an ideological fantasy whose suppressions underwrite the subject’s self-consciousness and give consistency to his reality, then Aeschylus illustrates Žižek ’s point well. For the suppressions Eteocles makes by assuming the mask of the ideological fantasy (the myth of autochthony) are the very thing that make him who he is, in this case both different and ultimately exactly the same person as his twin brother. That is, when the war you wage is civil and the enemy is your twin brother, there is in the last instance no such thing as difference. In Batstone’s words: “[N]o matter where you turn something is suppressed, and, whatever it is, it is you.” Whatever rhetoric Eteocles deploys to define himself and his people, there is something suppressed, and whatever it is, it is him (and his brother Polynices). Looking back, this much was already echoing in the first lines of the play in the tension between heis and polys (6). In fact Eteocles’ very first

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249 Žižek (1989: 30)
250 Žižek (1989: 45)
251 Batstone (2006: 16)
252 Batstone (2006: 20). He adds an important qualification/implication: “And [suppression] is not really all that bad. For, as Lacan liked to point out, the suppressions of the unconscious not only mean that we are worse than we believe, but also that we are better than we know.”
invocation of the people, *Kadmou politai* (1), a civic rallying point, now sounds less defining when we remember that Cadmus was not an autochthon himself but a Phoenician exile. That is, he has foreign blood but still represents the archetypal autochthonous citizen. Thus every subsequent reference to Cadmus—including the ones we examined—carries within it this fundamental fragmentation. This underlying divide figures significantly in the conflict between Eteocles and Polynices. Aeschylus stresses this tension between autochthon and alien, self and (br)other, when he has Eteocles finally confront Polynices and ultimately himself (653-77). The radical distinction between *genos* and *polis*, autochthon and alien, here comes apart.

Eteocles may be concerned about the nature of the threat or the truth posed by Polynices’ shield—how is it possible that Dikē would restore Polynices to the throne? What type of falsely-named (*pseudōnymos*) Dikē is this (662-71)?—but there is a conspicuous element missing in his response, his own shield. This has led critics like Helen Bacon to speculate that Eteocles’ shield bears the *sēma* of the Erinys on it, for

[the fury is certainly the proper counterpart to Dike on the shield of Polynieces. To appeal to Dike is to appeal to the fury that will enforce Dike—his own Dike, but also his brother’s Dike, for they are equal in this as in everything else. Each brother is subject to the law which he invokes against the other. This is the inescapable knowledge which the shields express.]

This is a keen insight, but the extra-textual step is unnecessary because the whole shield scene, as Benardete has pointed out, moves toward the gradual equivalence of shield

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253 Cf. Orwin (1980: 190): “Most Thebans descend not from Theban earth—and ultimately from the teeth of the chthonic serpent slain by Cadmus—but from Cadmus and Harmonia. That the Thebans are called ‘Cadmeians’ is a recurrent reminder that their origins are otherwise than Eteocles would have them.”
256 Benardete ([1967a] 1968: 14)
and shield-bearer. To Eteocles at least, the shield and the person are indistinct and “signs have become fates” (Benardete). This has the effect of turning the enemy’s shield against its bearer by positioning opposite it a shield with a naturally inimical sēma on it. “In each case,” as Cameron explains, “[Eteocles] shows how the motto, boast, or blazon of the enemy is in fact true in an unexpected sense unfavorable to the attacker. His explication and acceptance of this meaning activates the omen.”

By the time we hear of Polynices’ position at the seventh gate, there is no one but Eteocles to face him—tis allos mallon endikōteros (673)—and the shields become immaterial. This is finally a contest over a sense of self, where the dual nature of Eteocles’ being comes into direct confrontation with itself in the person of Polynices. In this context it seems especially significant that Eteocles’ shield is blank, for his nature is not dual if it is just an empty mirror of Polynices’. “The agon,” Burnett claims, “has been transformed, to become a recognition scene.” The language Eteocles uses reflects his divided commitments coming together—it is both civic and kindred, exclusive and self-reflexive—and he discovers the “uncanny at the heart of the familiar.”


257 Cf. Burnett (1973: 350 n.20): “If [the identification of shield and shield-bearer] were the case Eteocles would achieve…the formal identification of himself with the symbol of his destined act.” Following Cameron—who ultimately believes Eteocles “forgets his systematic measures for the defense of the city and neglects to use the power of words in this present danger with the acumen and care he has so far exhibited in the city’s defense” (Cameron [1970: 118])—this would be an ill-omened move. On the consistency of Eteocles’ character throughout the play, see the forceful essay of Kirkwood (1969). On the infelicity of looking for consistency in character, however, see Vernant ([1972] 1990: 36) and Gagarin (1976: 125).
259 Cameron (1970: 107)
260 Burnett (1973: 352)
261 Batstone (2006: 17-18)
I myself shall stand against him, leader vs. leader, brother vs. brother, hateful enemy vs. hateful enemy. (674-75)

The reality Eteocles had known—the sound distinction between Theban autochthons and Argive aliens, himself and his brother—here dissolves as his suppressions emerge. It produces his final moment of clarity, his final moment of self-understanding. As Batstone argues, “in representing the other, we play ourselves. In the theater of plurality we find the fiction of identity. That is because we cannot understand what we do not understand, and so, when we come to understanding (of any thing, of the other) we come to self-understanding.” Eteocles is not Polynices but ultimately is, the child of an incestuous union, an autochthon, a leader, a brother, an enemy, who in his death simultaneously gains his identity and loses his difference.

ὦ μεγάλε Ζεῦ καὶ πολιούχοι
dαιμόνες, ὅτι δὴ Κάδμου πύργους
τοὺς δὲ ρύεσθαι ἢ,
πότερον χαίρω κἀπολολύω
πόλεως ἀσινεὶ σωτῆρι < >
ἡ τοὺς μογεροὺς καὶ δυσδαίμονας
ατέκνους κλαύσω πολεμάρχους,
oi δήτ’ ὀρθῶς κατ’ ἐπωνυμίαν
< > καὶ πολυνεικεῖς
ὡλοντ’ ἀσεβεὶ διαιοίαι;

Oh mighty Zeus and all you gods who protect us, you who have saved the city of Cadmus. Am I to celebrate and shout for the safety of the city which has remained unharmed? Or am I to mourn for our pitiable and ill-fated warriors who died childless? For indeed they perished of their own unholy purpose, true to each other’s names: [both truly lamentable,] both full of strife. (822-31)²⁶²

“Polarized difference,” Zeitlin contends, “then yields to doubling homology, as the double progeny of a doubly seeded womb meet in a duel and collapse their single selves

²⁶² This ode as well has many textual problems. I have followed Page’s version in leaving 830 unreconstructed, but Wecklein, following the pun on names in polyneikeis, has emended the missing part with eteokleitoi. Prien suggests eteon kleinoi.
into the grammatical category of the dual.”\textsuperscript{263} The logical conclusion of a (civil) war fought on behalf of autochthony is not just similarity but a deadly conflation of two into one—and finally none.\textsuperscript{264}

Ultimately the move Aeschylus makes here is revealing and redemptive. By playing out the existential difficulties of a city with dreams of a pure, autochthonous origin in the genealogical echoes of its devoted leader, he shows at one and the same time the uncanny similarity between autochthony and incest, the violence and exclusion underlying civic unity, and the essential desire for a singularity that separates (but ultimately bridges) self and other. For though, as the scout reports, all the warriors have died (794-98), most notably Eteocles and Polynices at each other’s hands (805), nevertheless true victory has come to the city of Thebes. She has survived the war and has rid herself of the curse of the Labdacids: “Take heart, children nurtured by mothers, our city has escaped the yoke of slavery!” (792-93)\textsuperscript{265} The scout’s words are telling: he addresses the citizens as children born of mothers. There is no mention of autochthony. The death of the sons of Oedipus reproduces in the last instance the prosperity of the city. Until, that is, the next generation emerges.\textsuperscript{266}

I noted above (n.123) that the end of \textit{Seven} is widely regarded as an interpolation added sometime after the production of Sophocles’ \textit{Antigone} and/or Euripides’

\textsuperscript{263} Zeitlin (1982: 41). Cf. Benardete ([1967b] 1968: 11): “Thus the war which began as a war between two cities becomes a war within a single city between its two principles. These two principles, which first appear as far apart as Typhon and Zeus, turn out in the end to be related. Eteocles and Polynices, the offspring of an incestuous union between mother and son, mutually destroy themselves.”

\textsuperscript{264} Cf. Cameron ([1964] 1971: 89): “The story of Thebes has come full circle, as the two brothers recapitulate the tale of the Sown Men.”


\textsuperscript{266} See Foley (2001: 50 n. 110) on the chorus’ unease about the continued pollution of the city even after the brothers are dead.

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Antigone and Ismene, heretofore unmentioned in the play (let alone acknowledged as children of Oedipus), arrive and with the chorus divide the responsibilities of mourning. Antigone and one half of the chorus stand beside Polynices, Ismene and the other half beside Eteocles. A herald then arrives to announce the edict, here pronounced by the “leaders of the people of the Cadmean city” (i.e., there is no mention of Creon), that Eteocles is to be buried honorably within the city and Polynices to be left unburied outside. Hutchinson argues that “[t]he whole structure of the drama, and its relation to the trilogy, are destroyed by this inopportune appendage.” By Vidal-Naquet’s judgment, however, the final scene still captures the logic of Seven: “It is a debate that sets in opposition on the one hand the changing law of the city and, on the other, the stable law of lineage.” That is, it maintains the divided commitments of city and family so poignantly illustrated throughout the play, bringing them to their tragic confrontation. As Benardete claims, “Antigone survives Eteocles to split the city exactly where he boldly assumed that it was whole.” The finality of this ultimate civic act—the end of a civil war, the victory of the city of Thebes—is sealed not with a celebration of male solidarity but with the split laments of two females, two sisters. More tragedy will follow because what is expressed here is not the closing of a sad chapter in Theban history but the continuation of it.

267 Cf. Foley (2001: 52, with citations): “[I]t is largely agreed that the interpolator was a remarkably good imitator of Aeschylean style. If, as seems probable, the interpolation was made for an actual revival of Aeschylus in fifth- or fourth-century Athens, however, the interpolator was writing as a member of his culture and for an audience in this culture.” See also Orwin (1980: 187 n.1) for older scholarship and for the compelling case that the end presents the triumph of a feminine form of justice.

268 See Orwin (1980: 193) for a defense against the view that the absence of Creon proves Aeschylus’ “dramatic ineptitude”: “The Herald has no son engaged to Antigone. He has no private fate in which to interest us, and this is his contribution to the drama. He does not obtrude between us and the city.”

269 Hutchinson (1985: 210)


Aeschylus’ *Seven* shows us that the reproduction and prosperity of a society conforms to the dialectical responsibilities of family and city. The terms he chose to dramatize this tension, the unity of a city in a desperate time and the aberrations and exclusions it creates, shore up how meaningful—and how dangerous—the desire for singularity can be. Through Thebes, a city riven with perversions and contradictions, a city which experienced almost generationally solidification and fragmentation in a seemingly endless cycle, Aeschylus asks us to behold the relationship between city and man (and woman) and to remember the ambivalence bred of the fantasy of a pure origin. And though, as Burnett says, “the all-embracing action is one of salvation,” where the city finally escapes the danger posed by the war and the Labdacid curse, Aeschylus leaves us with the uneasy feeling that more trouble is just over the horizon.

And as an Athenian writing and producing his play in a paradigmatically Athenian context, Aeschylus seems to be gesturing toward that horizon, implying that wherever the Athenians turn—whatever means they justify for whatever civic, political or national ends they pursue—there is something suppressed. And whatever it is, it is them. This much the chorus supporting Eteocles intimate in the final words of the play:

*ἡμεῖς δ’ ἅμα τῶιδ’, ὥσπερ τε πόλις*  

272 Cf. Orwin (1980: 196): “The city must reject its roots in the earth in favor of its roots in the family. At the same time it must in times of crisis continue to demand of its citizens an allegiance no less than that due one’s parents. The tragedy of the city is that it both requires and cannot tolerate Eteocles.”

273 Burnett (1973: 345)

274 See, paradigmatically, Goldhill (1990) on tragedy’s relation to the Great Dionysia and civic ideology.

275 Heiden’s concluding remarks on *Oedipus Tyrannus* are apt in this context: “Will to cooperate finds a way, while public *lautge*, an archive of serviceable old improvisations, presupposes community as its basis and this is powerless to sustain it. In presenting *Oedipus the King* before the public, Sophocles invited eavesdroppers to overhear the conversations of mortals who had progressed beyond friendship and styled themselves law-abiding citizens instead. Their best behavior was not bad, but their worst was horrifying. The play, I surmise, was a poet’s gift to his friends, whoever and wherever they might be: knowing that gifts come under seal, they would in turn recognize theirs and figure out how to unseal it. Eavesdroppers who expected poetry to address ‘society’ in public Greek, uttering no riddles and withholding no secrets, would probably remain untouched by its intimacy for a good long while” (2005: 25).
καὶ τὸ δίκαιον ξυνεπαινεῖ·
μετὰ γὰρ μάκαρας καὶ Διὸς ἱσχῦν
ὁδε Καδμείων ἤρυξε πόλιν
μὴ νάτραπήναι μηδ’ ἄλλοδαπῶν
κύματι φωτῶν
κατακλυσθῆναι τὰ μάλιστα.

And we will go with Eteocles, since here the State and Justice speak with one voice. For it was he above all who after the blessed gods and Zeus almighty, as pilot of our Cadmean city, saved us from overturning and from being engulfed in a wave of foreign invaders. (1072-78)²⁷⁶

The saga continues: even after Eteocles has died, the suppressions survive.

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²⁷⁶ In 1069-70 the half of the chorus that mourns Polynices justifies the side it takes by claiming that “this tragedy is shared by the entire race (geneai).” As Foley says, “[h]ere the chorus again conflates family and city in a manner contrary to Eteocles’ stated practice (not bourne out in the event)” (2001: 50 n.107). I am not sure, however, how this means they “claim the grief of the house as their own.” The reference to genos may well signify the female genos responsible for mourning, but it seems more likely that they mean the Cadmean genos as a whole (which would include them). This reading is buttressed by their allusions to the laws of the polis at the beginning (1066) and end (1070-71) of their lines. Hutchinson (1985: 221 ad loc.) agrees with this assessment “if after [geneai] we postulated a lacuna.”
CHAPTER 4

THE UNDEAD PAST IN PERSIANS

For every event, there were multiple documents and artifacts, until there were more documents and artifacts than events. Inevitably, someone called a document an event, and people made documents of documents... Time would pass without my seeing or recording events. Some events I would have to imagine. The made-up events were sometimes more believable than actual events. The actual events were often difficult to believe.276

The confrontation between the tragic subject and the past, specifically family history, informs the plays we have been examining thus far and stands as the organizing theme of the chapter to come. A desire to flee or repress the deterministic influence of history has characterized the protagonists we have encountered up to this point. Zeus with his newly won authority fails to see (at least from Prometheus’ perspective—and this is important to remember) that the outcome of his own desire is written in the genealogical record of his father and grandfather’s actions, reactions and subsequent downfalls. The secret Prometheus professes to know about a fatal sexual liaison holds the key to Zeus’ lack of foresight and stands as his only hope for redemption and Zeus’ hope for security. The answers, it seems, always lay in Zeus’ family history, whose momentum provides the inexorable limits of his desire and his reign. The problematic feature of this secret, as I argued, is that we only have Prometheus’ point of view. But

276 Miranda Mellis, “The Revisionist”
despite this, what even his limited vision of Zeus’ supremacy reveals is the experience or notion of history as a glowering necessity, the sense that things could not have turned out otherwise and that the price of this past is the loss of the future.

Eteocles, as we saw in the last chapter, lived with his own reservations about the past. The skewed sexuality of his family history left an indelible imprint on his ability to act in the present. This history was the very thing he tried to repress but which reared its head even in his most urgent civic decisions. Thus like Zeus of the PV, Eteocles, whose family is the classic paradigm of dysfunction, seems to face an inscrutable force working behind the scenes toward his demise, and comes to realize that history’s “alienating necessities”, to paraphrase Jameson, will not forget him no matter how hard he tries to forget them. 277

In these instances we can see the confrontation between genealogy (as the influence of family) and history (as the influence of the past’s momentum). 278 It is the messy entanglement of these elements that our protagonists seemingly misunderstand, a fact that has led critics to conclude that in the world of Greek tragedy, genealogy and history are as inescapable as fate. 279 We have seen, however, that upon further reflection inevitability is less of an issue in either play than perhaps it may initially appear. Prometheus’ recalcitrance, for example, has inspired many (Marx, Goethe, Shelley), but we should perhaps be troubled by the one-sided and obstreperous nature of his argument. As I argued in the first chapter, Zeus despite his conspicuous absence knows a bit more about the force of history and the influence of his genealogy than Prometheus might be

277 Jameson (1981: 102): “[...] History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its ‘ruses’ turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention [...]”
278 I further refine these definitions below in my discussion of Foucault.
279 See for example Solmsen (1937).
willing to admit. In fact, PV taught us just that: Zeus was capable of reason, compromise, and collaboration, all of which mark his reign as everlasting in contradistinction to his predecessors. Prometheus sees determinism in Zeus’ genealogical past and in the current reiteration of his desires (for Io specifically), but Aeschylus complicates this conclusion by staging the ill-will between the two characters in such a way as to draw out a tension between their respective views on history. The course of Zeus’ reign to come may resemble the course of his predecessors’ reigns, but the future remains open to the will and desire of Zeus, a decision-maker even as the king of the gods.

The same perhaps can be said for Eteocles. He acknowledged early on the curse of his father and its apparently ineluctable influence on his decisions. But to attribute to an inescapable fate or a genealogical imperative the sum of his every action, as many critics do, would be to strip him of his most characteristically human quality, his ability to choose. Even the chorus was skeptical of such fatalism. Tragedy, even apart from Aristotle’s specific definition, is about decision; it dramatizes an ethical commitment. To reiterate Vernant’s argument: “[Tragedy] takes as its subject the man actually living out this debate, forced to make a decisive choice, to orient his activity in a universe of ambiguous values where nothing is ever stable or unequivocal.”

Whether a tragic subject is fully aware of the influences on or the consequences of his decisions is, of course, what this genre explores; but every decision he makes is from his vantage entirely his own. This is partly what makes tragic characters so meaningful and compelling to

280 Vernant ([1972] 1990: 26)
281 In this vein cf. Vernant’s remarks on ἔθος and daimōn in the tragic subject: “In the tragic writers, human action is not, of itself, strong enough to do without the power of the gods, not autonomous enough to be fully conceived without them. Without their presence and their support it is nothing—either abortive or producing results quite other than those initially envisaged. So it is a kind of wager—on the future, on fate and on oneself, ultimately a wager on the gods for whose support one hopes. In this game, where he is not in control, man always risks being trapped by his own decisions. The gods are incomprehensible to
us: like them, we make decisions whose influences and ramifications may far exceed our conscious thought. *Seven* illustrates that history also exists in the desires, hopes and prayers of those who want to make it. The critic’s retrospective eye may well see an element of fate in Eteocles’ meeting with Polynices, but for Eteocles each decision is progressive, expressing far more scope than the trace which history will eventually record. Eteocles is no automaton: “I shall station myself at the seventh gate.” He makes his decisions looking toward an open future, not an inexorable past.

So there is a subtle reshaping of the meaning of history that envelops these tragic protagonists. On the one side is the vast world of inevitability, fate, and necessity, which transfigures discrete events in the past into a teleological force. By this reading the past determines the present and limits the potential of the future, reducing like a curse the possibilities of human decision-making to the narrowest of trajectories. On the other side emerges a different understanding of the past, a prospective one, wherein historical events are only the traces of incalculable things like desire, hope, potential and human agency. History becomes more broadly the contingent unfolding of unlimited possibilities, the progressive stance of the tragic subject at the moment of decision, the future standing before him. By resituating the tragic subject in his decision and the conditions that surround him, as La Capra writes, a prospective view “reasserts the role of man in a world that appears to slide out of control.”

To put it more concretely: while for Zeus and Eteocles one gets the impression, as Marx put it in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, that “the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the

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282 LaCapra (1985: 25, quoting Gilbert)
living,” Aeschylus challenges the deterministic force of their respective genealogical pasts by reopening the present moment of decision to potential and alternative and allowing each protagonist to make his decisions on the prospects of the future.

Foucault identifies this distinction between the retrospective and the prospective, between determinism and contingency, as the difference between history and genealogy. Where the former seeks origins in “the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies,” the latter sets out to study history’s “numberless beginnings”, “its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats.” Where history lives in the static events and identities of a knowable, useable past that holds timeless secrets, genealogy cultivates history’s “moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells.” For at the root of historical events are more roots, “the dissension of other things,” disparity. What Foucault terms, following Nietzsche, “effective” history (360ff.) “confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference,” recording “energies and failings, heights and degenerations, poisons and antidotes.” Foucault’s distinction between history and genealogy is a useful and productive one because it refuses history’s teleology and sees at the historical beginning of things not a singular

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283 Foucault ([1971] 1994: 351-69). Let me note that I use the term genealogy in its more traditional sense of family history and not Foucault’s definition of it in opposition to history. I have been unable to find any discussion of his—or Nietzsche’s—adoption of this term as the basis for his theory. I suspect though that, like Nietzsche, Foucault was drawing on a somewhat Darwinian model of evolution, which was itself largely concerned with accident and contingency. However, I can only speculate.

287 Ibid. ([1971] 1994: 353). Cf. Morson (2005: 21): “…Tolstoy asks why it could not be that if we looked behind the mass of contingent historical events, things would not simplify, but complexify. Perhaps behind each contingency would lie many more. Causes might ramify and perhaps the simplest paraphrase of the universe is not some simple equation but the universe itself. In that case, prediction would be impossible, even in principle.”

point of departure directing the course of events to come, but rather a plurality of voices, desires, imaginations.

Aeschylus is not Foucault, but his *Persians*, I argue, shows a similar suspicion to the deterministic model of history. With this play Aeschylus elaborates a more critical understanding of the past, recording those energies and failings, poisons and antidotes that were so crucial to Foucault the genealogist. *Persians* stages a tension between retrospective and prospective visions of history and suggests that the potential embodied in the moment of any historical action, and thus the possibility of different outcomes, is as vital as the event that history will eventually record. That is, he exposes the dead facts of the past as mere traces. This is a bold move by Aeschylus, reopening the past to a more nuanced understanding of possibility and the human element in history, embedded as it is in the most famous play about cultural difference (Greeks vs. Persians) and given expression in the tragic story of the most feared and hated man, Xerxes.

4.1 *Persians in Persae, Persians in History*

Produced in 472, Aeschylus’ earliest surviving drama, *Persians*, has been called by many critics an unlikely, unremarkable play, “far from revealing its author at the topmost pitch of excellence.” Its action consists of not much more than the report of Xerxes’ disastrous expedition against the Greeks in the battle of Salamis, the summoning of his dead father Darius’ ghost for some old-fashioned moralizing on the vices of youth, and the plaintive accompaniment of Xerxes’ bedraggled return. But the relative unexcitement of its plot bears almost no relation to the power and attraction the play held

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290 Smyth ([1924] 1972: 72)
for Athenians of the day. In the wake of the very event that inspired the play just eight years prior, as well as the ill-starred production of Phrynichus’ similarly contemporary-historical play *The Sack of Miletus* (492), it is perhaps remarkable the play was even produced. *Persians* strikes a precarious balance between joyous remembrance and painful reminder. It is self-consciously evocative and begs no amnesty, no gesture of forgetting what cannot be forgotten in order to restore communal solidarity. But even freshly bandaged wounds still bear the traces of blood recently spilled. The pivotal difference between Phrynichus’ play and Aeschylus’ is that the Athenians (all Greeks for that matter) were victorious in the latter instance. Hence as many have suggested, *Persians* expresses the patriotic pride of a burgeoning city-state in the overthrow of an overweening and menacing enemy.

But *Persians* is far more than a celebratory paean (or worse, propaganda) to the victory of Greek virtue over Eastern decadence. Even the most cursory perusal of the

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291 The hypothesis of the play tells us that Aeschylus won first place. Smyth’s thoughts on the play are well put: “The *Persians* is at once patriotic and religious, a combination of qualities rare enough in literature and dangerous enough for the unity of interest vital to the successful conduct of a tragic drama. It is significant that two of the most powerful human emotions have fostered so few truly great poems in literature. Love of god and love of country have each inspired verse for years; yet little is charged with the proper magic of the true poet’s art” (Smyth [(1924) 1972: 67]).

292 Phrynichus: see Herodotus 6.21.2. Hall (1989: 69) suggests that “[i]t is with artistic parallels in mind that the ‘historical’ tragedies should be approached. Their subject-matter was indeed qualitatively different, but rather than being glaring anomalies in their genre, they formed part of the mythopoeic process by which the Persian wars were commemorated [...]”


294 Gagarin (1976: 33) points out that “[t]he terms ‘Greece’ and ‘Greeks’ are often used, to be sure, to refer to Persia’s enemies, but, whenever a specific Greek polis is singled out, it is Athens.”


296 The *locus classicus* for a discussion of the development of the Greek/barbarian dichotomy is Hall (1989). See especially pp.47-55 where she examines the emergence of barbarians in tragedy as contemporaneous with “the combined Greek efforts against the Persian empire but also with the consolidation of Athenian democracy and Athenian hegemony in the Aegean” (54-55), and pp.56-100. She provocatively ends her study by suggesting with almost deconstructive language that “[t]he barbaric Greeks and noble barbarians of Euripides therefore presupposed the invented ethnocentric world of tragedy [...]” (222). For a more taxonomic examination of the barbarian in tragedy, see Bacon (1961, esp. 15-63 on Aeschylus).
text renders clear that the Persians are given sympathetic treatment (consider the choral odes, for example). Indeed, as theater the play would not be as compelling if one could not identify to a certain measure with the Persians. So there is a human dimension alongside the specifically Greek dimension. Aeschylus created a sympathetic Persian perspective on the failure of Xerxes, not just a jingoistic statement of Greek pride. For all of the play’s stress on the differences between the two cultures, *Persians* draws into stark relief the cost of human striving and its collateral damage. Hence Vidal-Naquet provocatively claims that “[e]very Athenian tragedy is a reflection on the foreigner, on the Other, on the double.” This means that *Persians*, as Meier contends, is not just about a Persian tragedy but also “the character of human destiny in general”. By watching fellow citizens “playing the other” and thus projecting the emotional resonance onto the enemy, Edith Hall maintains, the Athenians could “simultaneously enjoy profound patriotic pride, a sense of ethnic superiority, confirmation of their own masculine self-image, the thrill of victory, and the covert exorcism of their own psychological pain.” It is for this reason that *Persians* became the perennial “politicized expression of the archetypal David-and-Goliath theme” for modern Greeks in their War of Independence, the British defeat of the Spanish Armada, and even such

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298 Vidal-Naquet (1997: 119)
299 Meier (1993: 71). Cf. Smyth ([1924] 1972: 87-88): “Only the judicious might observe the means whereby dramatic sympathy was assured to the characters who impersonated the leaders of a national enemy visited with the humiliation of defeat. It will not have escaped their notice that the poet showed a due measure of restraint on occasions when he might have cheaply purchased applause or otherwise stirred patriotic sentiment ...”
300 “Playing the other”: Zeitlin (1990). Quotation from Hall (1996: 19). Pelling (1997: 13) is similarly even-handed: “It is rare for any drama to proceed without some emotional engagement with some of its characters. As characters, particularly characters responding to disaster, the figures of *Persae* may invite audience engagement, association, perhaps even a form of identification; yet as Persians who are strongly differentiated from Greeks, they would seem to repulse any such emotional involvement.” Cf. ibid (1997: 16-19 and 224-35): “Part of civic ideology, in fact, was to feel worried about civic ideology, in the right place and the right setting. And the tragic theatre was the right place.”
literary and philosophical giants as Yeats and Nietzsche. And “[o]nly from the Persian point of view,” Meier contends, “could all of this be represented as tragedy.”

If refocusing our attention on the human dimension of Persians moves us away from a restrictive binary understanding of Greek versus Persian (or worse, “barbarian”), then perhaps an exploration of genealogy and history in the play will also prove an important point of contact between the Greek and Persian worlds. I will argue in this chapter that Aeschylus’ Persians stages within the confrontation between father (Darius) and son (Xerxes) a correlative confrontation between two philosophies of history, the retrospective and the prospective. Darius, I suggest, embodies in a way the former historical sensibility with its static events (its facts) marching along to the tune of fate and determinism, and Xerxes the latter with events (as experiences in the making) born out of any number of desires or contingencies. Aeschylus, in fact, correlates genealogy and history when he has Atossa explain to the ghost of Darius that Xerxes’ decision to invade Greece was triggered by the pressure he faced to live up to his father’s celebrated past (753-58). Atossa’s words signal the confluence of genealogy and history by making Xerxes’ decision an expression of filial responsibility (or failure thereof). It remains for us to disentangle and explore the dimensions of this connection. We will then be more fully able to answer whether history (for Aeschylus, for us) is an oppressive father and whether we are to reproduce it or murder it.

This chapter then will aim to do four things: first, to show how Aeschylus underscores the father-son conflict between Darius and Xerxes and emphasizes the ethical obligation of being a son; second, to explore the (mis)representations of Darius’

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301 Quotation and overview of the historical reception of the play from Hall (1996: 1).
302 Meier (1993: 69)
303 I discuss this passage in further detail below.
history; third, to examine how Aeschylus problematizes this model of historical and
genealogical responsibility by opening up the past with diction for memory and
motivation; and fourth, to consider how Aeschylus ultimately develops an opposing
philosophy of history.

4.2 Genealogical Anxiety

The *PV*, we saw, constructed the relationship between Zeus and Prometheus as a
familial bond. And *Seven* illustrated with considerable emotional effect the pathos of a
man desperately trying to avoid the psychological havoc of his incestuous background.

But *Persians* stages the conflict of generations in a direct and devastating way, as it
shows the emotional and physical effects of a father-son relationship envisioned
primarily in terms of genealogical anxiety. For *Persians* is not just a play about a
disastrous expedition undertaken by the protagonist Xerxes but also, importantly, a
family drama which pits son against father. This antagonism may not be literally
combative, but it teems with frustration and a resigned failure to gain affirmation.

Aeschylus pulls no punches in his characterization of the relationship between
Xerxes and Darius. After Darius’ ghost has been summoned from Hades and has been
informed of the disaster, in disbelief he questions the rationale for Xerxes’ expedition:
“How could this not have been a disease of the mind (*nosos phrenōn*) that overcame my
son?” (750-51).³⁰⁴ Atossa in reply cuts through the metaphors:

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that Atossa has to disabuse his mind of the possibility that it was pestilence or faction that had prompted
her desire to seek his ghostly counsel.”
τήνδ' ἐβούλευσεν κέλευθον καὶ στράτευμ' ἐφ' ἑλλάδα.

Brash Xerxes learned these things by keeping company with wicked men. They say you won great wealth for your children in war, while he out of cowardice stays home and plays a warrior inside and does not increase his father’s estate even a little. It’s because he heard such insults from these base men that he crafted the way and expedition against Greece. (753-58)

This was no nosos phrenōn; it was the nagging impression of insufficiency, of failure in the eyes of his peers to live up to his father’s name. Aeschylus drives the point home by juxtaposing the great wealth (megan plouton) Darius won on campaign (syn aichmēi) with Xerxes’ indoor warring (endon aichmazein) and cowardice (anandrias hypo). One can even hear a spatial and geographic differentiation in ektēsō and endon, not to mention the strong gender implications. This passage emphasizes external reputation infecting Xerxes’ sense of self: internalizing the taunts of others, Xerxes saw himself as an emasculated toy soldier disgracing his father’s legacy.

Mark Griffith has argued that Greek tragedy takes a special interest in oedipal dynamics, especially among aristocratic or elite members of society, where sons face the pressure of proving themselves over and against their fathers. In his own words, “[t]he son of a successful dynast faces an especially difficult challenge, as he is constantly being measured against the achievement of his father and ancestors and must balance the desire to prove his own individual, inherited worth against the risk of humiliation and of squandering the family fortune and symbolic capital through wasteful and irresponsible ventures far afield.”305 Xerxes, as the son of a prosperous and idolized leader, faces an almost intractable burden to follow in his footsteps. And as Barry Strauss has argued, “a son’s affective relationship to his father was a matter of winning the father’s approval and

305 Griffith (1998: 32)
of avoiding his censure by achieving great things in life.” 306 This despite the fact, as he sensibly claims further on, that very few great fathers produce great sons. 307

Xerxes and Darius, of course, never actually meet on stage; Xerxes has yet to return when Atossa summons Darius’ ghost from the underworld. But this does not diminish the potency of their indirect confrontation. 308 In fact as Griffith suggests, “[e]ven though (or perhaps because?) Xerxes himself does not witness this demonic apparition nor confront this paternal gaze in person, the demands that are made of him by the eye and voice of the Father are as irresistible as they are unanswerable.” 309 One recognizes this pressure in effect relatively early in the play when Atossa describes to the chorus her dream about the two female figures—one in Greek dress, one Persian—that Xerxes tries to submit to the yoke (181-199). The “Greek” female is recalcitrant and breaks the yoke, throwing Xerxes to the ground. As if the humiliation of his defeat were not enough, Xerxes, Atossa relates, must face his father’s judgment:

τίπτει δ’ ἐμὸς παῖς, καὶ πατήρ παρίσταται
Δαρεῖος οἰκτίρων σφε· τὸν δ’ ὡπώς ὀραί
Σέρξης, πέπλους ρήγνυσιν ἀμφὶ σώματι.

*My son falls to the ground, and his father Darius stands near pitying him.
Xerxes sees him and tears the garments on his body.* (197-99)

Darius is present, like a good father, to take pity on his son’s misfortune. But the second and third lines are revealing: it is only after Xerxes sees his father beholding him that he tears his clothes, a cause-and-effect that seems to suggest resignation and failure on

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306 Strauss (1993: 81)
307 Strauss (1993: 87)
308 Cf. Griffith (1998: 33): “The plays seem to suggest, indeed, that the best, if not the only, way to avoid confrontation and friction between father and son was to keep them apart: for to bring a father and son together, face-to-face, on stage, was to subject the son to a doubly intense scrutiny, as the spectators’ and Chorus’ critical gaze immediately begins to assess his encounter with the gaze of his father.”
309 Griffith (1998: 61)
That the confrontation between father and son is focalized in Atossa’s dream and is further part of an allegory about the conflict of Greeks and Persians does not vitiate the emphasis on the strained relationship between Darius and Xerxes. In fact, as I return to later, the fact that even Atossa visualizes Xerxes’ nightmare (standing before his father, beaten and humiliated) reiterates the symbolic weight of father-son conflict, finding expression beyond the one-to-one relationship between Darius and Xerxes.\footnote{Cf. Broadhead (1960: 81 \textit{ad loc.}): “That his father should witness his fall caused Xerxes deep shame and mortification; hence the rending of his robes.”}

But in his response to Atossa’s explanation for Xerxes’ disaster (753-58) Darius’ sympathy for his son gives way to moralizing and further clues us in to the drive behind Xerxes’ fateful decision to invade Greece:

\begin{quote}
I went on many an expedition with a large army, but never did I bring such disaster on my city. Xerxes my son is young and thinks unwise young thoughts and does not remember my injunctions. For know this well, contemporaries of mine: all of us who have held power, we would never [appear to] have done such damage. (780-86)
\end{quote}

Apart from the historical revisionism, which I will come to later, Darius’ tone impresses upon us the burden Xerxes faced before his expedition and now faces even after it.

Darius surveys past successes (780-81) and even stakes a claim on some unreal future (785-86).\footnote{This scene also suggests a role for the mother that I do not fully explore here but that is, of course, key for the oedipal relationship.} The terminology he uses to judge his son is predictable—he’s young (\textit{neos}), he’s not very wise (\textit{aphronei}), he doesn’t remember what I told him (\textit{ou mnēmoneuei})—

\begin{quote}
κάπεστράτευσα πολλά σὺν πολλῶι στρατῶι,
ἀλλ’ οὐ κακὸν τοσόνδε προσέβαλον πόλει.
Ξέρξης δ’ ἐμὸς παῖς νέος ἔτ’ ὤν νέ’ ἀφρονεί
cou mnēmoneuei tâs émâs épistolâs:
eû γὰρ σαφῶς τόδ’ ἱστ’, ἐμoi ἕυνηλικες,
ἀπαντες ἡμεῖς, οἱ κράτη τάδ’ ἕσχομεν,
óuk ἀν φανεῖμεν πῆματ’ ἐξάντες τόσα.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}I went on many an expedition with a large army, but never did I bring such disaster on my city. Xerxes my son is young and thinks unwise young thoughts and does not remember my injunctions. For know this well, contemporaries of mine: all of us who have held power, we would never [appear to] have done such damage. (780-86)\end{quote}

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\begin{quote}Darius surveys past successes (780-81) and even stakes a claim on some unreal future (785-86). The terminology he uses to judge his son is predictable—he’s young (\textit{neos}), he’s not very wise (\textit{aphronei}), he doesn’t remember what I told him (\textit{ou mnēmoneuei})—\end{quote}
but his ultimate emphasis is basically himself (*emos, emas, emoi xynēlikes, hēmeis*). Not even after death can Darius let go of the psychic burden he imposes on his son, and his final lines in this passage bear this out: “I would never have made these mistakes.” All of this renders clear that the principal characteristic of his relationship with Xerxes is competition.

Darius is not alone, though, in driving a competitive wedge between himself and his son. The chorus, too, participate in his retrospective romanticizing. Their entire ode following the departure of Darius’ ghost (852-906) celebrates his reign. Ours was a world of civic order, they claim, when the intractably wonderful Darius was in power (*pantarchēs akakas amachos...isotheos* [855-56]). We proved ourselves excellent (*eudokimous* [857]) in military campaigns and our boys returned home uninjured and unharmed (*aponous apatheis* [860]). City upon city fell under his sway, island upon island (865-85), when he commanded that unbreakable force (*akamaton...sthenos* [901]) of men in arms. 313 It is the picture of a perfect man with a perfect past. 314

As we saw above, Atossa claims Darius’ successful past spurred on the taunts of Xerxes’ peers (753-58), taunts which explicitly referred to his failure to increase his household’s wealth (*plouton*) or fame (*olbon*) because he was “playing a soldier” indoors.

Earlier in the play when she enters for the first time, Atossa expresses her fear that “our

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313 Hall (1996) has this to say about the chorus’ awe at Darius’ ability to take cities “without even crossing the Halys, without ever leaving his hearth” (865-66): “It is not clear precisely why the chorus should regard it as so impressive that Daricós delegated the subjugation of the Thracian cities to others and stayed at home himself, but a differentiation between Persian and Greek ideals of leadership is almost certainly intended” (Hall [1996: 167 ad loc.]). Griffith offers the compelling (and corrective) explanation that Darius is here being related to Zeus and that the chorus are therefore using “sacral” language (what the god does should be accomplished easily) (Griffith [1998: 59-60]). Cf. also Pelling (1997: 15).

314 Cf. Broadhead (1960: 212-13 ad 852-908): “That the whole of this stasimon should be devoted to Darius is fitting for two reasons: (i) the eulogy follows naturally upon the impressive ghost-scene in which the wisdom of the beneficent monarch and the prosperity of his kingdom are the background against which he makes his weighty pronouncements and solemn predictions; (ii) it throws into strong relief the utter humiliation and misery and self-confessed folly of Darius’ son, as they are manifested throughout the kommos.”
great wealth (*ploutos*) will grind our good fortune (*olbon*) to dust, turning it over with its foot, a good fortune which Darius raised…” (163-64). This fear is motivated, we find out a few lines later, by Xerxes’ absence from home: “I would say that the ‘eye’ [fortune/prosperity] of the house is the presence of the master” (169). And in her initial response to Darius’ ghost she greets him as follows:

> ω βροτῶν πάντων ὑπερσχὼν ὀλβον ἐὐτυχεῖ πότμωι,
> ὡς ἐως τ’ ἔλευσες αὐγὰς ἠλίου ζηλωτὸς ὦν
> βίοτον εὑαίωνα Πέρσαις ὡς θεὸς διήγαγες,
> νῦν τέ σε ζηλῶ θανόντα πρὶν κακῶν ἰδεῖν βάθος·

*Darius, you exceed all mortals in fortune due to your good lot, such that when you were alive you were an object of envy, and lived your well-measured life as a god among the Persians. Even now I envy you as a dead man, since you have yet to see the depths of misfortune.* (709-12)

I cited Griffith above to the effect that Atossa’s and the chorus’ reverence for Darius is consistent with conventional thetic invocations—thus it stands to reason that he would be blameless and enviable. But Atossa’s insistence on wealth (*ploutos*) and fortune (*olbos*), which she emphasizes over and over again in these passages, is a bit too insistent. It is as if she cannot but reproduce the terms of the discourse of father-son conflict so vivid in the taunts of Xerxes’ peers and in the chorus’ plaintive nostalgia. Atossa is like a cipher in this regard, less a doting mother—though we should not entirely strip this from her—than a mouthpiece for received wisdom and traditional platitudes about fathers and sons. Even apart from her powerful presence as queen and mother, she seems just as much a

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315 Though it is not an avenue I pursue here, Aeschylus seems to be drawing on different cultural attitudes toward wealth and the question of whether Asia’ *olbos* is its gold, its men, or its king. On the complex relationship between *ploutos* and *olbos*, see Gagarin (1976: 44-45, esp. n. 35), Sansone (1979), and Hall (1996: 122 ad 161-64).
voice whose sole purpose is to express and facilitate the conflict between Darius and Xerxes and by extension to remind us of Xerxes’ burden.\textsuperscript{316}

So we have a rather clear idea here of what Xerxes must cope with. These passages pose Xerxes’ actions and the consequences they bring directly in terms of his relationship with his father. And it is specifically this genealogical anxiety that the play seeks to dramatize. Consider for example the opening gambit which recounts, name by fateful name, each of the Persian nobles who embarked upon this mission. Standing at the forefront of this expedition is \textit{anax Xerxēs basileus Dareiogenēs} (5-6). The patronymic epithet \textit{Dareiogenēs} alone occupies all of line 6, arresting both meter and momentum.\textsuperscript{317} Xerxes is a nobleman; so much the title and patronymic indicate. But more than that, the patronymic identifies Xerxes in terms of his father. It situates Xerxes within a familial structure that imposes certain obligations and responsibilities—the son must live up to his father’s name. This is precisely the pressure we see at work in the contest between Darius and Xerxes. As Meier contends, “Xerxes does not have sufficient stature by himself; instead he appears in counterpoint to his father.”\textsuperscript{318} Strauss in fact argues that the patronymic bears no less ideological and symbolic force than literal: “...we inherit from our father a status and a stance toward society. The father—the symbolic father, the family name, and the real, flesh-and-blood father—mediates between the individual and society.”\textsuperscript{319} And since there is no face-to-face confrontation between Xerxes and his father (and thus since Xerxes more readily faces Darius’ symbolic

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item[316] See, however, McClure (2005) for a good reappraisal of Atossa’s maternal authority in the play.
  \item[317] Hall identifies the meter of the parodos as a “‘marching anapest’, a metre from archaic times associated with a synchronised military pace” (Hall [1996: 106]). For a more detailed discussion, see Broadhead (1960: 37 n.1).
  \item[318] Meier (1993: 72)
  \item[319] Strauss (1993: 27)
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
authority), Strauss’ formulation takes on a special force. Xerxes then, as an allegorical figure on the Athenian stage, “instantiates and embodies the pressures experienced by the aristocratic Greek family at their most unmanageable extreme.” A father is intimately and inextricably a part of the son’s identity: Xerxes is both anax and basileus to be sure; but he is also always Dareiogenēs.

Genealogy thus carries with it an ethical obligation for a son to make the right decisions that will live up to, better increase, his father’s name. This is apparent not only in the passages we have already examined but also elsewhere in Greek literature. Both Griffith (who examines tragedy) and Strauss (who examines historiographical, rhetorical, and philosophical texts) make a strong case that a son is responsible for following through with, for example, his father’s hatreds and devotions, enemies and friends. Otherwise the entire family line could become a source of derision. A son therefore faces a real pressure to actively live up to his father’s name and reputation—as we saw in Atossa’s reply to Darius (753-58)—by increasing his wealth and fame. For this reason the patronymic Dareiogenēs in line 6 reveals so much about the relationship between Xerxes and Darius and the anxiety it creates. For it carries with it all those taunts by Xerxes’ peers, all his dead father’s moralizing gravitas, all the chorus’ plaintive nostalgia.321

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320 Griffith (1998: 53)
321 These passages (including Darius’ manifesto in lines 780-76), however, also underscore a different, but no less important, familial obligation: the responsibility to the Persian land, the place of origin of Xerxes and his soldiers. Aeschylus vividly illustrates in this play what it means, in his eyes at least, to be a Persian—which incidentally does not seem to differ all that much from the civic and familial obligations so familiar to the Greeks. This is an overtly Persian play, but Aeschylus textures it with the geographic survey that comprises his opening lines. Each of the Persian warriors who has left for Greece with Xerxes belongs to a specific place of origin. This identification, we might assume, is important because it is so much a part of the chorus’ descriptions of the men. By their reckoning these lands have reared them: the force of men which departed is characterized as Asiatogenēs (12); the polythremmōn Nile sent forth others (33); the noble Pentagaston is called Aigyptogenēs (35); the Lydian race is defined as being ēpeirogenēs (42); this
Xerxes stands at the front of this mission, literally and figuratively. Thus not only does he shoulder the burden of his own genealogical record but also in a way all the family histories of his men as well. He takes on as leader, that is, all the weight of his soldiers’ responsibilities to their own fathers. Nowhere does the play make this more explicit than the woeful call and response of the strophic/antistrophic exchange that accompanies Xerxes’ return in the final scene (908-1075). Here we revisit that now-fateful list of names that opened the play in such proud terms. Here, however, the mood is much darker as the full scale of the damage wrought by Xerxes is registered. The second and third pair of strophes/antistrophes drives home the magnitude of the human loss: no fewer than 25 proper names are pronounced in the chorus’ catalogue of devastation. To take one illustrative example, a lacuna in line 982 hides a name whose patriline is recounted to three generations. It is not just any unknown soldier Xerxes has left behind for dead but “the son of Batanachos, son of Sesames, son of Megabates.”

This episode in fact is already the second time a reprisal of the devastation has been given. Earlier in the play the returning messenger gives a similar story of wreck and ruin and human loss (302-31), laying out in painstaking detail the same shock as he recounts the names of nineteen Persian nobles who lost their lives. As in the choral threnody from above, this passage underscores the degree to which Xerxes has failed in

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flower of Persian manhood the entire land of Asia nurtured, threpsasa (62). Like Xerxes to his father, so these warriors have a responsibility to their lands of origin. I do not pursue this tension between the demands of a father and those of a “nation” here, but it seems a productive inquiry given that Persians was produced at a moment when the old aristocratic system of familial allegiance was being complicated by the demands of the democracy. Griffith (1998) discusses this in part.

322 Cf. Smyth ([1924] 1972: 88): “No criticism of the play is more vicious than that of an English editor which discovers in the lengthened antiphonal dirge at the end no other purpose than to make the Great King an object of derision.” Cf. also Meier (1993: 71): “It is hard to imagine that, apart from isolated instances, there was any real opportunity here for Schadenfreude on the part of the victorious Athenians.”

323 Cf. Hall (1996: 173 ad loc.): “It befits an official of such high status as the King’s Eye that he is the only individual other than Xerxes to be given such a long genealogy.” Broadhead (1960: 234 ad loc.) makes the important point that the list of multiple patronymics is “in the Greek manner, since the Persian custom was to give only the father.”
his role as leader and in his responsibility toward his men. As if mimicking the opening
of the play where the chorus proudly proclaimed Xerxes the lone leader of the Persian
army—where the pressure of his father’s historical record, written in a patronymic title,
already imposed its presence—here again Xerxes stands alone. But something has
changed:

Ζέρξης μὲν αὐτὸς ζῆι τε καὶ φάος βλέπει.

Xerxes himself lives and sees the light of day. (299)

Here for the first time emerges the singular self of Xerxes, an identity independent of his
father’s name, a hard-won sense of presence stripped of image, title and identification.324
He is neither basileus nor Dareiogenēs, only autos. Xerxes as Xerxes comes alive in his
survival (ζῆι), sees the light in his present, persisting existence (φάος βλέπει). His failure
in a way is his success, his way of differentiating himself from his father. There is in this
moment of ruin no one but Xerxes.325

But this singularity is without a doubt a matter of misfortune and a reason to
judge him against Darius. It becomes the focus of the choral ode that follows, drawing
together all the threads of Xerxes’ self: responsibility to father and country, the
frustration and anxiety of being Darius’ son:

υὖν γὰρ δὴ πρόπασα μὲν στένει
γαῖ’ Ασίς ἐκκεκενωμένα·
Ζέρξης μὲν ἄγαγεν, ποποῖ,
Ζέρξης δ’ ἀπώλεσεν, τοτοῖ,
Ζέρξης δὲ πάντ’ ἐπέσπε δυσφρόνως
βαρίδεσσι ποντίαις.

τίπτε Δαρεῖος μὲν οὐ καὶ τότ’ ἀβλαβὴς ἐπῆν
τόξαρχος πολιήταις,
Σουσίδος φίλος ἀκτώρ;

324 Line 5 also uses autos anax Xerxēs.
325 Cf. line 734: μονάδα δὲ Ζέρξην ἐρημοῦν φασιν ὦ πολλῶν μέτα
For now the entire land of Asia laments, entirely emptied of her men. Xerxes led them there, Xerxes destroyed them, Xerxes drove everything on with poor understanding in seafaring ships. Why was Darius so blameless then, the lord of the bow to his citizens, the beloved leader of Sousa? (548-57)

Three parallel constructions strike a balance between agent and action, with Xerxes anchoring all the chorus’ sentiments. Xerxes led them there, yes, but he destroyed them. Xerxes led them, yes, but he drove them on rashly. What is more, the strophe, the thought, is framed by Xerxes’ twin responsibilities, land and father. All the Asian land, emptied-out like a house with no heir (ekkenoumena), now groans: Xerxes has failed his country. Xerxes has also failed his father: Darius was “blameless” (ablabēs), “beloved” (philos), perhaps even too much so (houtō).

I hope it has become clear that in Persians there is an almost obsessive interest in the relationship between Xerxes and his father and more generally in familial responsibility. To invoke Marx’s insight once again, it is hard not to get the impression that on Xerxes “the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare,” a nightmare which even Atossa experiences for him. But as even Marx makes clear, the nightmare is not simply some obscene boogeyman-father but rather also the force of tradition—history—which haunts. The long shadow of the father is cast by his achievements, a shadow which a son can emerge from only if he can match or outdo those achievements. Xerxes, as I emphasized earlier, never actually has to see his father

326 Cf. Broadhead (1960: 148 ad loc.) on the idealization of Darius. Winnington-Ingram makes the interesting point here, following Broadhead, that the chorus express their admiration of Darius in the form of a question because they are impressed he has not incurred the envy of the gods. In his own words: “According to the traditional view of the jealousy of heaven, [Darius’ prosperity and good fortune] were a prescription for ultimate disaster. And yet he lived out a life of blessedness through to the end and, by dying before ill befell, was truly eudaimon in the Herodotean sense. What, then, was Darius? He was the good king who brought no great disaster upon his people; and his career of everlasting success was evidence that wealth and prosperity and enviability are harmless, if men know how to bear them” (1983: 9). It is hard to tell here, however, as in many places in Winnington-Ingram’s study, whether he is simply reiterating the position of the chorus or presenting it as his own.
like Atossa and the chorus do. What he faces is his father’s storied past. Since then
Xerxes’ fraught relationship with Darius is as much about his father’s historical record, it
is important to consider how *Persians* represents—or misrepresents—Darius’ historical
legacy, so that we may later come to understand better whether Atossa’s and the chorus’
nostalgia for Darius’ reign reflects their stance on the contest between Darius and Xerxes,
and what light the obvious historical inaccuracies cast upon their stance. The next
section will sketch out these historical representations.

4.3 *The Long Shadow of Darius*

Let me begin by briefly returning to the choral ode I cited above (852-906).
Recall that here immediately following the departure of Darius’ ghost, the chorus sing
praises for the golden age of Darius’ reign: the Persians were masters of all (*pantarchēs*),
equals to the gods (*isotheos*), free of ills (*akakas*); they proved themselves noble
(*eudokimous*), suffering no defeats (*aponous apatheis*). By all rights the chorus have a
point: Xerxes has just engineered the greatest military defeat the Persians have ever
experienced, so it stands to reason that a little hyperbole is warranted. But there is, of
course, an inconvenient detail: Darius’ defeat at Marathon. The intriguing thing is that
Marathon does not go unmentioned. For example, in response to Atossa’s question about
the Athenians’ staying power in battle, the chorus respond not with an answer but a
result: “Good enough to destroy the great and noble army of Darius” (244). And later in
reaction to the messenger’s account of the devastation, Atossa cries out, “My son has
found bitter requital from the famous Athenians. Those whom Marathon claimed back
then must not have been enough” (473-75). Since Atossa and the chorus, the two most

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327 See also l.1236: in response to Atossa’s question about the Athenians’ supply of men, the chorus respond:
“Their army is large enough; it did much harm to the Medes.”
invested in the brilliance of Darius’ authority, both are aware of Darius’ loss, then the
question of (his) history becomes a question of (mis)representation: why would they
obscure Darius’ failure and highlight Xerxes’? It is as if Cicero’s famous dictum at
Orator 120—“ignorance of history is forever to be a child”—has lost its didactic force (to
remember the past): knowledge of his father’s history is precisely the thing that forever
makes Xerxes a child.

Critics have not missed the glaring inaccuracies, specifically regarding Marathon,
in Persians’ depiction of Darius’ reign. Groeneboom, for example, notes the
“contradiction” to the actual turn of events (“Widerspruch zur Geschichte”) and claims
Darius’ campaigns in Africa and his death kept him from waging further wars against
Greece, which presumably would have brought disgrace on him as well.\footnote{328}
Broadhead suggests that the diction of lines 473-75 (“Those whom Marathon claimed back then
must not have been enough.”), to which in his note he supplies paidi emōi (i.e. “not
enough for my son”), indicts Xerxes’ for foolishness: “the lesson of M. was lost on
him.”\footnote{329} He acknowledges by way of refuting Wecklein that a misrepresentation of
Darius’ past is in keeping with an idealization of the dead king\footnote{330}, but ultimately believes
the present disaster brought about by Xerxes is the play’s true focus. In his words: “We
know from Hdt. that Darius’ expeditions were by no means always successful, and this is
implicit in [line 781]. His failure in Scythia and the defeat of Marathon are outstanding
examples: but even these were not comparable with the crushing disaster of Salamis.”\footnote{331}
Irrespective of whether the two major losses at Marathon and Salamis were comparable

\footnote{328} Groeneboom (1960: 164 \textit{ad} 786)
\footnote{329} Broadhead (1960: 134 \textit{ad loc.})
\footnote{330} Ibid. (1960: 196 n.2)
\footnote{331} Ibid. (1960: 197 \textit{ad} 781)
in magnitude, according to Hall the play nevertheless seeks to elevate the devastation of the latter in part “to create a distinctive (if wholly inaccurate) contrast between the careers of wise old Dareios and rash young Xerxes.”\textsuperscript{332} The point then seems simply to be a dramatic contrast between the two leaders. Thus these critics all handily answer the question why Persians misrepresents Darius’ history (to pose his reign in contradistinction to Xerxes’) but do not address why it would do so in such a glaringly misleading way.\textsuperscript{333} For it is one thing to glorify the great king by exaggerating his success, quite another to do so by lying about his failure. So we need to ask what is at stake in protecting Darius from the revelation of his own failures other than simply his reputation. As I will argue, it is precisely the meaning and value of the past that is at risk.

Let me start, however, with the (mis)representations of Darius’ reign. The chorus, as I stressed earlier, have an investment in Darius’ image. He was “blameless” \textit{(ablabēs)}, they remind us, over against Xerxes’ rashness \textit{(dysphronōs)} (553-57); by their reckoning “never did he, by war’s obliterating recklessness, wipe out his own men” (653-54); lines 853-906 use deferential terminology to describe him \textit{(pantarkēs, isotheos, akakas, eudokimous, aponous, apatheis)}. The chorus’ language, that is, reinforces their structural or institutional subservience to their king. By these criteria Xerxes, to take our modification of Cicero again, could never escape his father’s long shadow—he is forever a child to his father’s past. The collective romanticization of Darius’ reign puts Xerxes in a position of chasing a forever receding standard of judgment.

In Darius’ response to Atossa from above (780-86) he, too, makes a case for the sanctity of his reign. After laying out the history of royal succession and situating

\textsuperscript{332} Hall (1996: 12). See also Said (1981).
\textsuperscript{333} Gagarin (1976: 29-56), whom I discuss in further detail below, offers a compelling and spirited counterpoint to all of these interpretations.
himself in the line of Persian kings (765-79), he claims first that he never brought such ruin on his city (781) and ends his speech boldly asserting he would never have caused such a disaster (784-86). In between these declarations of invulnerability that transcend the barriers of time are, as I elaborated earlier, his judgments of Xerxes: neos (782), apherei (782), ou mnêmoneuei (783).

But Darius goes further than this. He suggests on the one hand that Xerxes’ failure was the fulfillment of a prophecy he had heard some time previously (739-41) and, on the other, that it was also the necessary product of his impiety (specifically bridging the Hellespont [745-48, 829-31]). That is, his judgment of Xerxes’ reign in contrast to his own takes on the tone and language of determinism.

Let me consider the latter instances first. It is clear Darius considers Xerxes’ bridging the Hellespont an act of impiety. He therefore offers a predictable diagnosis: “Mortal though he was, he foolishly (ouk eubouliai) thought he could overcome the gods, especially Poseidon” (749-50). Later, near the end of his final speech before returning to the underworld, he advises the chorus to “use sensible words (sôprhonein kechrêmenoi) to admonish him to quit offending the gods with his overweening boldness and to keep some sense” (829-31). To Darius’ mind impiety transforms the ambiguous presence of the divine in human affairs into an overdetermining force of ruin: “When man himself hastens [the outcome of an oracle] along, the god fastens onto his purpose” (742). Once a hybristic act has been committed, there is no stopping the “blooming” of its dire consequences: “Hybris flowers and the fruit it bears is a crop of disaster (atês), from
which reaps a harvest of mourning‖ (821-22). Thus in Xerxes’ acts of impiety Darius sees his failure as predetermined and necessary.  

Darius also draws a connection between the revelation of Xerxes’ failure and an oracle of old. He says:

φεῦ ταχεία γ' ἠλθε χρησιμόν πράξις, ἐς δὲ παῖδ' ἐμὸν
Ζεὺς ἀπέσκηψεν τελευτὴν θεσφάτων· ἐγὼ δὲ που
διὰ μακροῦ χρόνου τάδ' ἡχὴν ἐκτελευτήσειν θεοὺς·

Alas how swiftly the outcome of these oracles has come to pass. Zeus has struck upon my son the fulfillment of prophecies. I had hoped the gods would bring them to fruition much later. (739-41)

Though, as Hall notes, Aeschylus nowhere specifies what these oracles consisted of, let alone where or when Darius received them, this allusion nevertheless “confirms the play’s thesis that the defeat of Persia was divinely ordained.” We might quibble with Hall’s contention that this was the play’s thesis, but the sentiment rings true for Darius’ rhetoric at least. For what is important about this move by Darius is that in effect it rewrites the history of Xerxes’ defeat, transforming the contingent human factors of motivation and decision (and mistake) into an expression of fatal causality. This allusion may well be, as Broadhead suggests, “dramatically irrelevant,” but it is not simply the case that Darius is “giving…sound advice to his people so that they may avoid such

334 Gagarin (1976: 46-48) convincingly argues that despite this predictable rhetoric about Xerxes’ impiety, Persians nowhere explicitly condemns him for it. In his own words: “We should bear in mind…that no one else in the play treats Xerxes’ actions as impious, and none of the other references in the play to the bridging of the Hellespont suggest that impiety was part of the deed…Neither the chorus nor the queen nor the messenger attributes any act of hybris or impiety to Xerxes, although both the queen and the chorus hear Darius’ accusation. However, they clearly do not accept the old king’s views: the queen’s immediate reaction is to blame Xerxes’ advisers, who urged him to follow his father’s example; the chorus praise Darius’ military successes but do not attribute his success to any special piety or morally right behavior, only to his remaining within certain territorial limits; and when Xerxes enters, they never speak of his failure in moral terms” (47-48, esp. n.43 and 44). For this reason it is strange that Rehm (2003: 74-75) would suggest that “[b]oth [Atossa’s] dream and [Darius’] prophecy associate Xerxes’ territorial expansion—‘yoking’ the Hellespont via a bridge of ships—with the moral outrage of hubris…”

disasters in future.‖ He is revising the past as well. Looking back, he recognizes with tragic clarity (pheu) what he sees as the ineluctable truth of the past, that it determines the present. As Gagarin points out, however, “Xerxes was hastening toward disaster by his ill-conceived military strategy more than…impious or immoral behavior.”

But Darius does not stop at rewriting the past as it is imagined in the play; he also lays a claim on the future. In response to the chorus’ question about the safe return of the Persian forces, Darius elaborates on the impious transgressions of Xerxes’ men in their expeditions to Greece (809-12). In return for the suffering they have caused they will suffer even more:

τόσος γὰρ ἔσται πελανὸς αἵματοσφαγῆς
πρὸς γῆι Πλαταιῶν Δωρίδος λόγχης ὑπὸ·
θίνες νεκρῶν δὲ καὶ τριτοσπόρωι γονῆι
ἀφώνα σημανοῦσιν ὀμμασὶν βροτῶν
ὡς οὐχ ὑπέρφευθεν θυητὸν ὄντα χρῆ φρονεῖν.

The blood they spill at Plataea at the hands of the Doric spear will be inconceivable. Piles of corpses will signal voicelessly to the eyes of the living even three generations hence that mortals must not think thoughts beyond them. (816-20)

Within the temporal confines of the play the battle of Plataea has yet to take place, but Darius predicts another disaster. But in the context of his previous allusion to Zeus’ oracles it is clear that this is more than just speculation. It is rather, like a curse, a predetermination: Darius in his god-like presence becomes an ersatz-Zeus, setting in motion a c(o)urse of events that Xerxes and his men can only vainly hope to avoid. We know of course that by the end of the play Xerxes is the lone survivor, and so here we are

336 Broadhead (1960: xxi, my emphasis). He goes on to suggest that the reference to the oracles “makes his utterances all the more impressive.” I would say rather they make him more oppressive.
337 Gagarin (1976: 182 n.41)
338 Cf. Groeneboom (1960: 170 ad loc.) and Broadhead (1960: 204 ad loc.) for discussion of Aeschylus’ recognition of Sparta as the key victors at the battle of Plataea.
prepared for that very outcome. And further, in the context of the performance of
*Persians* this prediction functions in a similar way as Darius’ first revelation of oracles,
except that the Athenian audience now owns the hindsight and can reinterpret the victory
at Plataea as itself a product of fate. Again the human element is reduced to mere
footnote in an ultimately fatal succession of events.

Given all these (mis)representations and revisions, it is no surprise that the
shadow of Darius’ reign is something Xerxes could never possibly escape. He is
competing against both an elusive, almost sublime, father with an ideal history and the
loss of his own place in history to the forces of necessity. For this reason Strauss’
contention that the symbolic or ideological father is as relevant as the “real” father is an
important insight—no actual feat Xerxes could accomplish would ever outstrip the
image, the mythology, the representation of Darius and his history. It is only fitting then
that Darius here is a ghost; he is a phantasm both literally and figuratively. By the
standards of Atossa and the chorus—and Darius himself of course—Darius gives
meaning to history, not the other way around as in Xerxes’ case. His feats become
history’s truths, events once and for all determined, enclosed in an ontological space
beyond the vicissitudes of meaning and interpretation (Marathon, Scythia). Xerxes’
feats—by Darius’ reading, and this is important to keep in mind—become the product of
fate’s alienating necessities, spurred on by the hybris and the follies of youth. Thus I
think we can say with some confidence that Darius (his ghost, his symbolic authority, his
mythology, etc.) embodies what I identified earlier as the retrospective sensibility.
Darius, along with Atossa and the chorus, sees in (his) history a static collection of events
which speaks a transhistorical truth about the present and future.
It makes sense in a way for Darius to suggest that if Xerxes had remembered his injunctions (*mnēmoneuei tas emas epistolas* [783]), this whole disastrous expedition could have been avoided.\(^3\) The substance of these *epistolai* is not clear, and none of the literature makes much of it, but it is perhaps safe to assume that, coupled with memory (*mnēmoneuei*) and directly following Darius’ account of the successive kings of Persia (765-79), the word evokes the authority earned from his place in the continuity and success of Persian hegemony. Darius was the eighth ruler in a long line of (presumably inviolable) kings.\(^4\) Memory thus answers to history, a long-standing, well-known history at that. As if the taunts of his peers were not enough to goad Xerxes into making what was by Darius’ retrospective judgment a rash decision, here we are treated to the lesson of history from a disappointed father: remember the past—*specifically my past*—and use it as a guide for the present. Darius’ theory is seemingly supported by the outcome of Xerxes’ expedition and is in keeping with the way the play has constructed his history. So it is not entirely out of the ordinary to point out the difference between the brash inexperience of the younger generation (*neos* [782]) in contradistinction to the older.\(^5\) Besides, what Aeschylus gives us here is in fact time-honored Greek wisdom: to remember and to learn from the accomplishments of one’s fathers.

But as I hope to have shown, *Persians* renders this position on Darius’ idealized past problematic. We can conclude thus far that this imperative not only to remember

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339 Cf. Broadhead (1960: 197 *ad loc.*): “Darius’ *epistolai* would seem to be the invention of the poet, designed to point his lesson and sharpen the contrast between father and son.”

340 There seems to be one exception here: Mardos (774) is called a disgrace (*aischynē*) and is quickly done in by Artaphrenes and some conspirators (775-77). Whether or not the murder was legitimate—and according to Darius it was (though cf. Groeneboom [1960: 162 *ad loc.*], Broadhead [1960: 194-96], and Hall [1996: 162 *ad loc.*])—the language he uses to condemn Mardos is telling: in keeping with the terms of the play, Mardos was killed because he was a disgrace to his fatherland (*patrai*) and ancestral throne (774-75).

341 Though, as Hall (1996: 108 *ad 13*) reminds us, “in reality Xerxes, at around forty years of age, was no spring chicken at the time of Salamis.”
one’s father’s actions but also to outdo them drives Xerxes to his disastrous expedition. And further, the glorious legacy of the father is the product of collective romanticization, even falsification. To the extent that the son remembers and acts in this legacy, history is driven by a lie. Persians affords us several other instances, however, where history is conceived as something far more restless and alive than the seemingly static truths of Darius’ and the chorus’ imaginations. It is in these instances we will see emerge what I identified as the prospective historical sensibility, where the relationship between time and agent intersects with desire and potential and where history comes alive in the moment of decision.

But let me first make a small digression to Herodotus’ treatment of Xerxes and his decision to invade Greece, following in his father’s footsteps. Because Aeschylus’ Persians was one of Herodotus’ sources and influences, his treatment of the dynamics of Xerxes’ decision is an indispensable supplement to our purposes here. In fact Herodotus, I will argue, stages in the episode with Mardonius and Artabanus a similar confrontation of the retrospective and prospective sensibilities, regrounding the movement of history in the moment of contingent human decisions and actions. By taking Herodotus’ narrative into account, we may then be more fully able to read back into Aeschylus the initial traces of this very confrontation with the past.

4.4 Aeschylus and Herodotus

Cf. Broadhead (1960: 189 ad 753-55) and Hall (1996: 161 ad 753-54) on Persians as a source for Herodotus. Said (2002) offers the most systematic exposition of the relationship between Herodotus and tragedy. While the evidence she musters to build the bridge is near exhaustive in its scope, ultimately the conclusion disappoints: “Therefore I propose, as a paradoxical conclusion of a paper devoted to ‘Herodotus and Tragedy’ that Cornford ((1907) 137-9) was right, after all, in opposing nearly a hundred years ago, an epic Herodotus to a tragic Thucydides.” (147) The wrench, in her opinion, that throws this perspective awry: “It is precisely [the] pervasive instability which prevents the Herodotean world from being ‘tragic’, if tragedy implies the belief in an iron law of history.” (147) It is exactly this “iron law of history” that I believe Aeschylus—even Herodotus, who seems to have developed a similar outlook—finds problematic.
Herodotus explicitly states that Xerxes had no immediate desire (oudamōs prothymos [7.5.1]) to make an expedition against Greece, preferring rather to build up his forces for an attack on Egypt. It was at the urging of his cousin and political advisor, Mardonius, that he was persuaded (anepeise [7.6.1]) to carry out the expedition for vengeance and requital (timōrian te kai tisin [7.8a.2]). Xerxes held an advisory council to weigh options, during which two opposing positions emerged, one espoused by Mardonius, the other by Artabanus, Xerxes’ uncle. In the course of this debate Herodotus articulates a theory of history that looks beyond the confines of events and facts toward a more nuanced vision of the open-endedness and potential of the past.

The gist of Mardonius’ speech is as follows: if history teaches us anything, there is absolutely nothing to fear of the Greeks. I’ve myself had the experience of their unwillingness to stand up to Persian presence, and their style of warfare is utterly absurd, seeing as they choose only to fight on the fairest and most level piece of ground (7.9). Mardonius’ impression of Greek-style warfare is supercilious at best, and he suggests that history is a resource of answers: never before have the Greeks been so bold as to confront a Persian army. Hence to Mardonius, historical precedent, historical fact, defines the probability of human behavior (or Greek behavior at least), in that how one has acted predicts how one is likely to act again. Mardonius voices an understanding of the uses and advantages of history which equates events with truths and expresses the provocative assumption that history, i.e. human events, is as it was, is, and always will be. He lays claim to the inevitability of the present and future based on the precedent of the past. And if history teaches us anything, he tells the Persians, every one of our attempts in the past was met with subsequent success.
Artabanus picks up on Mardonius’ one-dimensional view of the past and challenges it. In fact the very multidimensional nature of the medium of debate frames his coming speech as he acknowledges the utility of reasoned dialogue: proper counsel, like pure gold, stands up only to the test of contact and comparison (10.1a.1). For even fool’s gold, when uncritically accepted as the real deal, attracts. Unlike the short-sighted optimism of Mardonius’ belief that history inevitably determines the future, history for Artabanus is also the history of failure: even Darius was defeated by the relatively innumerous and ill-organized Scythians. And what is more, failure can be as simple as the loss of only one front of warfare (either naval or land): we may succeed in the land battle, but if the Athenians defeat our fleet and then destroy our bridge home over the Hellespont, as it almost happened in the previous expedition, “the empire of Persia would be utterly wasted.” Artabanus underscores this sense of possibility: “I’m not suggesting these things out of some private wisdom of my own. Rather we narrowly escaped disaster (oligou edeēse katalabein pathos) last time when…” Sometimes, in other words, success consists in non-failure, just getting out alive. There are certain factors that cannot be accounted for and therefore certain risks in assuming the past (i.e. precedent) will determine the future.

Far more powerfully and presciently, Artabanus flips Mardonius’ orientation toward human striving on its head and reintroduces a theological, and therefore capricious, element. Greatness breeds envy among the gods who lash out at hybristic endeavors: “The god does not suffer pride/ambition in anyone but himself.” This turns

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343 7.10g.2
344 7.10g.1
345 7.10e
the assured success of Mardonius’ conception of action back into what, in Artabanus’ eyes, defines human action: unpredictability. Nowhere does Artabanus say the god will strike down upon them with furious vengeance, but he sees it as entirely within the purview of human circumstance. Hence for Artabanus, precedent cannot account for human action because it only amounts to one of the many conditions out of which decisions emerge. He has a concern for both historical fact and the infinite potential of the moment as guide to present action and future outcome. His position is that one must look not only at what did happen, but also at what could have happened.

Under the surface of this dispute over power and retribution there lies a theory of historical perspective. For Mardonius history is the dead, determining weight of precedent, facts of the past that guarantee the future will repeat itself ineluctably. How could things possibly turn out otherwise? We’re Persian, they’re Greek: excellence presupposes comparison, effects presuppose causes. For Artabanus, on the other hand, history is also the trace of unfulfilled potentials, the contrafactuals, and bears with it the prospective gaze of hope and intention (and, of course, the will of the gods). In his own words: “I think that to have a good plan laid is the best of all things. If there proves to be some adverse circumstance, still the plan was well laid and the plan was defeated by chance. But he that has planned ill, if fortune attend him, has only had a stroke of luck; but nonetheless his plan was bad.” Thus Artabanus lays particular stress on the human element of planning and decision-making. By his reasoning it is not the past that

346 Cf. Morson (2005: 19): “[F]or an indeterminist, more than one outcome is possible at some moments. That is, there are more real possibilities than actualities. Time is open. The same set of circumstances might lead to a different result. I like to think of these events as shadowed by the other possibilities that might have happened—I call these ‘sideshadows’.”

347 7.10d.2
determines the outcome but the deciding agent in the circumstances and chances that envelop him.

We can see that for both men historical sensibility is deeply rooted in human action, whatever side of the divide we may ultimately find more compelling (historical precedent determines human action vs. historical action is influenced by myriad contingencies). This dichotomy seems to have been important to Herodotus, who depicts for us as the narrative continues first Xerxes’ indignation at Artabanus’ advice (7.11), his subsequent consternation and change of mind (7.12), and finally his disturbed concession to a vision in his dreams (7.12-13). ³⁴⁸ That is, the very exposition of the narrative illustrates an ebb and flow in decision-making, recording Xerxes’ energies and failings, almost instantly disproving Mardonius’ point of view. Herodotus gives us no indication as to how we are to interpret this strange episode. But perhaps this lack of clear choice—typical of Herodotus’ historiographical method—reflects the general ambivalence and ambiguity of human, historical action. Xerxes is in a hard place here: he realizes “it is not a good idea to make an expedition against Greece” (7.12.1), but must confront the inscrutable menace of divine will. For the vision is forthright in its purpose: “Be then very sure of this: if you do not launch your war at once, this shall be the outcome: just as a short while raised you to be great and mighty, so with speed again shall you become humble” (7.14); and further on: “But neither hereafter nor for the present will you escape scot-free for trying to reverse fate” (7.17.2). ³⁴⁹

³⁴⁸ Herodotus calls it an “alleged” vision: hōs legetai hypo Perseōn (7.12.1); Xerxes calls the vision a theos (7.15.3), Artabanus daimonē tis (7.18.3).
³⁴⁹ Thus we have, as in Darius’ allusion to oracles, what appears to be a transfiguration of the contingent into the inevitable. Notice, however, that the vision never states that the expedition will be successful. In other words choice is still a factor. Despite the fact that the choice to go is overdetermined by the vision, the outcome is still indeterminate.
Xerxes is confused by the contradictory messages: on the one hand Artabanus has convincingly shown him that an invasion of Greece would be an infelicitous move; but on the other he is haunted by a vision in his dreams seemingly forcing him to do it anyway. Xerxes asks Artabanus his advice on the dream, to which Artabanus responds that dreams are merely the residue of the day’s thoughts and concerns. But to further settle Xerxes’ fears, Artabanus agrees to sleep in Xerxes’ chambers in order to see if the same vision appears to him. Unsurprisingly, Artabanus, the resolute interpreter of the irresolvable, the sage hermeneut of dreams, sees the vision in his own right and backs off of his initial advice to Xerxes.\textsuperscript{350} This might lead one to the apparent conclusion that there is ultimately no difference between the positions espoused in contradistinction by Mardonius and Artabanus.\textsuperscript{351} But in fact Artabanus’ inconsistency precisely illustrates the point he is trying to make: anything can change at any time; even unpredictability is unpredictable. Irrespective of history’s influence on human action in general, Xerxes will like his father before him make history anyway, staking his whole life on a resigned desire to conquer the Greeks. In this light history becomes less what the past as an ontological fact can teach us than the subjective dimensions that inform decisions to act (motivation, desire, hope, etc.) in the present. Artabanus instructs Xerxes that history is not necessity, only the trace of something much bigger (his impetus), much more personal (himself). Hence the outcome of this episode (eventually Xerxes’ whole expedition will suffer disastrous defeat) is less judgmental of Xerxes as a Persian than it is diagnostic and symptomatic of the chancy human condition. Decisions have to be

\textsuperscript{350} Artabanus oneirokritikos: 7.16b.2

\textsuperscript{351} To be exact, there are in fact three positions espoused here, with Artabanus occupying two.
made and history will record them regardless of their subjective dimensions. For Herodotus, however, the contingencies that affect decision-making are never irrelevant.

As we can see from Herodotus’ account, history creates a parallax: depending on the vantage one takes, it offers two compelling stories. A retrospective viewpoint sees events, finalized and recorded, as the determining factor of human behavior. Its terms are teleology and inevitability, the movement of necessity, where “dread radiates from the age-old occurrence to make every event its mere repetition.” A prospective viewpoint envisions events as only the trace of desire, hope, potential and human agency. Its terms are the contrafactual, the contingent unfolding of unlimited possibilities, where “[t]he task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past.”

Aeschylus’ portrait of the family dynamics of Darius and Xerxes, I believe, illustrates this very dichotomy. The collective romanticization of Darius imposes a stifling sense of necessity upon Xerxes’ decisions and actions. But *Persians*, though seemingly vindicating this retrospective view, does not entirely endorse it and offers alongside it a subtle argument for the prospective sensibility. In the final section I will examine the instances where history is free of the determinative constraints imposed upon it by Darius, Atossa, and the chorus. It is in these instances, I hope to show, that the past is less a deterministic repository of events than the contingent experience of the moment of decision, subject to the dynamic potential of desire, chance, motivation, poison and antidote.

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352 Raaflaub (2002) rightly recognizes that for Herodotus “history is determined largely by the decisions of individuals” (183), but sees these decisions as “dominated by the antithetical desires for liberty and power” (184). One detects a certain anti-humanism in his reading of Herodotus: “[H]istory consists of a sequence of rises and declines of great powers and powerful leaders; human happiness, success, and power are unstable and unlikely to last long; the higher a person or a state reach, the sooner they will fall [...]” (177).


354 Ibid. xv
4.5 An Open Past, an Open Future

Let me begin with a few examples from the opening of the play where the chorus’ anticipation of the Persian army’s return ties the past, present, and future together. Recall that here the choral parodos gives a long list of names of Persian nobles who went on the expedition to Greece (12-64). With the exception of three instances, all of the verbs the chorus use to describe the mission are in the present tense: *aphikneitai* (15), *hepetai* (41), *katechousin* (43), *ex(h)ormōsin* (46), *steuntai* (49), *pempei* (54), *hepetai* (57), *oichetai* (60), *stenetai* (62), *tromeontai* (64).355 In the strophic/antistrophic exchange that follows, we find a similar use of the present tense: *elaunei* (75), *epagei* (85), *amussetai* (116), *aišetai* (121), *pimplatai* (134), *leipetai* (137).356 The use of the present tense is not uncommon for lending a certain vividness to the action, making it more immediate. But it also expresses the continuity between the past and the present—in other words, the vividness of the past (in the present) is the point. All these passages speak in the present tense about a conclusion now, unbeknownst to them, reached: they are, as they foreshadow at lines 14-15, just waiting for a messenger to arrive with the news. The outcome may well have been concluded, but they do not technically know that yet, and thus they evoke how the past and the future are lived in the present: already their hearts are troubled (*orsolopeitai* 10), already the Asian land groans (*stenetai* 62), already parents and wives tremble (*tromeontai* 64), already their minds are cloaked in fear (*amussetai* 116), already the Kissian walls resound with cries (*aišetai* 121), already Persian wives fill their beds with tears (*pimplatai* 134). For the chorus, the past has yet to be determined finally. But the tenor of their words seemingly transforms their forward-

355 Exceptions: *ōichōken* (13—which is technically a present perfect), *eban* (18), and *epempsen* (34).
356 Exception: *ekleloipen* (130—cf. *ōichōken* in the previous note.)
looking anticipation into mourning, which cannot but be retrospective. They are already judging the present from the vantage of the future. Thus even before the chorus start mourning (after the messenger arrives with news of the disaster), their anticipatory lament brings together the past and future into one poignant moment in the present.

There is also the present moment of the performance of *Persians* where the trauma is reenacted. Here the Athenians experience this definitively over-and-done-with war as being on the verge of the future perfect. The Athenians, then, are in the position of knowing on the one hand what will have been (their success) and, on the other, living the traumatic experience of uncertainty by identifying with the Persians in the play. Aeschylus asks the Athenians to suspend their disbelief that the outcome is not known and entertain the possibility that things could have turned out differently.

Atossa’s nightmare about Xerxes’ failed attempt to subdue a horse in Greek dress (181-99) conveys a similar mixing of temporal registers. We ought to notice that this nightmare is in fact a double metaphor: it is not just a figurative expression of the cultural differences between Greeks and Persians (they’re indomitable, we’re slaves to authority); it is also, and no less importantly, a pre-figuration of the history being made...
in the present moment (Xerxes’ failure). This was a nightmare Atossa had in the past that she presently relates for the chorus. The dream, however, concerns some speculative future occurrence, whose outcome has already been determined and will soon be narrated by the messenger. Thus her narrative of the nightmare indicates how much the past, the present, and the future depend upon one another. Our knowledge of the determinate events—that is, that this nightmare has more meaning than Atossa is aware—is suspended in the indeterminacy of the experience underway. But the fact that it is a nightmare contaminates her ignorance with the Athenian audience’s retrospective knowledge and gives it a more determinate shape (Xerxes has already lost). Dreams are almost always ambiguously situated in time, processing the past while also foreseeing the future. For Atossa there is still the possibility that Xerxes will be victorious: “If he should succeed, he would be a man worthy of wonder” (212). We know better, but the point is not simply to allow us to revel in that knowledge. Even though the temporal issues here appear straight-forward from the audience’s perspective, Aeschylus shows the complexity of their interrelation and thereby reveals that meaning in history can only ever be deferred to the future.

But Aeschylus uses this hope of Atossa’s, specifically the way she expresses it, to pose a more ambiguous question about this relation between the past, present, and future. Consider her expression:

εὖ γὰρ ἴστε, παῖς ἐμὸς
πράξας μὲν εὖ θαυμαστὸς ἂν γένοιτ' ἀνήρ,
κακῶς δὲ πράξας, οὐχ ὑπεύθυνος πόλει,
σωθεὶς δ' ὀμοίως τῆσδε κοιρανεῖ χθονός.

*Take this to heart: if my son should succeed, he would be a man worthy of wonder. If not, he is not accountable to the city—so long as he’s alive he’ll rule our land all the same.* (211-14)
The temporality of the phrase *praxas men...genoit'* is seemingly straightforward: a future-less-vivid condition, whose protasis is economically expressed by a simple-past participle (*praxas*). Hence given where we are in the play, Atossa is voicing a mother’s hope: if all should turn out well, Xerxes would be a legend. But given the different registers of time we noted above, there is a momentary suspension of temporal perspective. The aorist protasis could have two possible apodoses, an optative (future-less-vivid) or an aorist indicative (past contrafactual). This ambiguity is resolved by the end of the line, but it retains its contrafactual potential: if Xerxes *had* been successful, he *would have been* a man worthy of wonder.

From where we sit as spectators, the multivalence of the conditional expresses a poignant irony. We know full well that Xerxes has not in fact succeeded, but we are also complicit in Atossa’s hopes.\(^360\) Here the interconnections between past, present and future (perfect) weave together. The present moment of the play is a dense nexus of temporal relations: Atossa presently stakes her hopes on some unreal future, while we presently experience and identify with her hopes from a future perfect vantage. The past as we know it is definitively over (regarding Xerxes at least). But Aeschylus creates for us here a complex interaction between the play and audience, which provides a basis for difficult questions about the relationship between a subject and history. How, he asks, do we create meaning from the past given our ambiguous but invested position in it? For unlike the (mis)representations of Darius’ history, which were by the reckoning of Atossa

\(^{360}\) For this reason, I do not understand Broadhead’s assertion that “[t]he fact that in spite of the dream the Queen mentions the possibility of success makes the expression of her overriding anxiety less prominent and direct” (1906: 85, *ad loc*). Less direct, to my mind, does not necessarily mean less prominent: her fear is real and her nightmare was frightening, but she can still hope that Xerxes will return—if not victorious, then at least alive. This “comforting reflection” is precisely the thing that signals how prominent her anxiety, and subsequently how necessary her hope, is.
and the chorus impervious to the vagaries of interpretation, the events-in-motion expressed by these previous examples are entirely subject, as experiences underway, to the lived present. Their meaning is indeterminate because they are always awaiting tomorrow to become what they will have been.  

I asked earlier whether Darius’ injunctions to remember his historical record impose history and memory as a stifling conservatism, closing the past off to interpretation. Memory was the vehicle for (his) history’s transcendent meaning. But the references to memory in *Persians* are deceptively formulaic and push a perspective on chronology not necessarily bound by the shackles of history and finality. There are only a handful of references to memory in the play, and they fall into a rather straight-forward taxonomy: those that look back and remember something that is over and done (285, 286-89, 329, 824), and those that posit memory as the persistence of the past in the present (353-54, 759-60, 989-90). These two groups underscore respectively the double sense of memory: one that records a static past composed of static events, and one that records the open-endedness and potential of a more wide-ranging relationship between past, present, and future. I will consider here the latter group. The three references are as follows:

\[
\text{Ἠρξεν μὲν, ὦ δέσποινα, τοῦ παντὸς κακοῦ φανεῖς ἀλάστωρ ἢ κακὸς δαίμων ποθέν:}
\]

*The whole mess began, mistress, at the advent of a vengeful spirit or some evil deity.* (353-54)

\[
\text{τοιγάρ σφιν ἔργον ἐστὶν ἐξειργασμένον}
\]

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361 This sense of the future perfect, of what will have been, has important implications for *Persians* as a literary and cultural artifact. The temporal structure of the play itself and the kind of temporal psychology it encourages work to equate all subsequent audiences with the original audience of 472. There are, in other words, not simply two moments in tension here (480 and 472) but also every successive moment of performance up to the present day. This would suggest then that every performance of *Persians* is an interrogation of nostalgia, an expression of desire for an idealized past. Bassi (1998) makes a good point of this, arguing that memory, subject as it is to selection and deletion, is never disinterested. See further Peradotto (1989).
μέγιστον, ἀείμνηστον

What [Xerxes] has done is unfathomable, forever unforgettable. (759-60)

ἀγαθῶν ἑτάρων ὑπομιμνήσκεις
<ἄλαστ'> ἄλαστα στυγνὰ πρόκακα λέγων·
βοᾶι βοᾶι <μοι> μελέων ἐντοσθὲν ἦτορ.

You stir up memories of my dear comrades, speaking these unforgettable, unforgettable, hateful ills. (989-90)362.

Each of these instances, I argue, acknowledges the impossibility of closing off the past.

The first example refers to a vengeful spirit (alastōr). When asked by the queen who started the battle between the Greeks and the Persians, the messenger’s first reaction is to blame this alastōr.363 Apart from the (malicious) divine association, scholars do not make much of this allusion. Most in fact are more interested in the mention of a fake Greek defector—presumably a nod to Themistocles—in the following lines.364 Neither Broadhead nor Hall pays any special attention to it; Groeneboom claims it is “ein fernes Echo” but does not explain what of exactly.365 Loraux has argued that alast- cognates stress not just the unforgettable aspect of some traumatic or criminal event but also the unforgetting aspect. In her words: “…there is an obsessive component to alaston, a relentless presence that occupies, in the strong sense of the word, the subject and does not leave.”366 This would imply that memory cannot simply recall a closed past because the

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362 The manuscripts have hypomimnēškeis here, which Hall (1996), following Headlam, emends to anakineis. Broadhead (1960: 234-35 ad loc.) finds “[a]ll this scepticism is quite unwarranted”; because the verb already occurs in the play (hypemnēsthēn, 329), he follows Blomfield and Page in retaining hypomimnēškeis.
363 The messenger also calls it a kakos daimōn.
364 See, for example, Pelling (1997) on this narrowly political interpretation.
365 Groeneboom (1960: 87 ad loc.). I also cannot find any scholarship suggesting that Xerxes acts as his father’s alastōr, avenging his defeat at Marathon.
past—in this case what is unforgettable—inhabits the voice, the “I”, of the one remembering in the present.  

The alastōr forges the link between memory and vengeance by embodying “the requital for an unexpiated crime”, in this case the invasion of Greece. It deals in what is not yet determined, its principal feature is non-oblivion, and it “expresses the atemporal duration, immobilized in a negative will, and immortalizing the past in the present.” Xerxes makes the mistake of trusting the Greek defector, but the alastōr sets the framework within which he acts. The unforgettable thing accomplished by Xerxes, the disaster he suffers, is here retrospectively cast as a personified (theomorphic?) unforgetting spirit and instigates the battle. Because neither the messenger, nor Atossa, nor the chorus claim any special relevance for vengeance or requital, the alastōr must then stand for the future-perfect result (defeat) of that very battle for which “requital” is necessary. It is as if the avenging spirit has come back in time to remember and to remind Xerxes of a “crime” he has yet to commit. Hence the messenger’s invocation of this alastōr in his reconstruction of the event evokes and depends upon the past, the present, and the future (perfect), collapsing them into the same moment. His memory captures both its finalized figuration as a thing of the past and its future anteriority.

A similar temporal tension, I think, is manifest in the third of the examples I cited above, where Xerxes and the chorus exchange lamentations. In response to the choral recollection of men who were lost Xerxes says: “You stir up memories of my dear

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368 So Wilamowitz, quoted in Broadhead (1960: 119 ad loc.).  
369 Loraux ([1990] 1998: 100)  
370 This allusion then functions similarly to Darius’ reference to oracles: it retrospectively imposes a sense of determinism to events of the past.
comrades, speaking these unforgettable, unforgettable, hateful ills” (989-90). The use of *hypomimnēskeis* and its present tense bring the memory of loss to the fore and establish its restless, living presence in the mind of Xerxes. The iterative nature of the verb underscores that memory cannot but be a continuous process, the event it records in motion, repeatedly reaffirming its unforgettability. As Loraux suggested, this characteristic haunts the subject, never allowing him to become oblivious. Hence these *alasta alasta*, despite their verifiable historicity, cast a shadow over his present ability to make sense of them and, like the *alastōr* just above, promise infinitely to remember, and to remind him of, his responsibility to his men.

The imperfect character of events, their ability to defy the closure of the past, likewise inhabits our final example of memory (759-60). Describing the damage wrought by Xerxes, Darius makes this judgment: “What [Xerxes] has done is unfathomable, forever unforgettable” (759-60). The beauty of this compound adjective (*aeimnēston*) is two-fold: first, the Greek emphasizes memory, not the unforgettable, a subtle but, as Loraux stresses, important distinction that underscores persistence and not closure; and second, its temporal range is unbounded. The finality of this adjective, as expressed by the non-iterative -*mnēston*, is transformed by the conjugation of the adverb *aei*-, the temporality of which reaches as far back into the past as it does into the future. *Aei* collapses—or has as its intrinsic characteristic the collapse of—chronological distinction into unbroken continuity. The addition of this prefix highlights the temporal continuity between past and present in memory and also projects it into the future. Hence as much as Xerxes’ mistake is a thing of the past, an historical event, its

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371 In fact *aei* is effectively atemporal, as its temporal meaning is only ever fixed by its relationship to the tense of the verb it modifies.
meaning is determined just as much by its futurity, the fact that it will forever remember and haunt him.

When, therefore, Darius commands Xerxes to remember history—his own history—that is a more complicated operation than it might at first appear. From these instances it is clear that memory has a double sense: on the one hand it records a static past composed of static events seemingly impervious to change; and on the other it registers also the open-endedness of the past and its intimate relationship with, even dependence upon, the present and future. History and memory are necessary bedfellows, but the relationship between them is not as simple as Darius, Atossa, and the chorus might think. This latter substance to memory finds greater nuance in history and even casts an illuminating light on the one instance where Darius assumes he has his historical “lesson” neatly and firmly figured out. Here are lines 782-86 again:

Ξέρξης δ' ἐμὸς παῖς νέος ἔτ' ὢν νέ' ἀφρονεῖ
κού μνημονεύει τὰς ἐμὰς ἐπιστολάς·
ἐῦ γὰρ σαφώς τὸδ' ἱστ', ἐμοὶ ἡμῶν μέλικες,
ἀπαντες ἥμείς, οἱ κράτη τὰδ' ἔσχομεν,
οὐκ ἀν φανείμεν πῆματ' ἔρξαντες τόσα.

Xerxes my son is young and thinks young thoughts; he doesn’t remember my injunctions. For know this well, my contemporaries: all of us who held power in the past would never have accomplished such disaster.

On the one hand Darius upbraids Xerxes for not remembering/repeating his glorious past, presuming therefore that this past is a done deal, a matter of historical fact. But on the other hand he expresses that past in the form of a past contrafactual (ouk an...erxantes). So there is a sense of potential and possibility built into his view of the past, even as he presents it as a paradigm. So although Darius insists that memory provides access to a knowable past whose events seem beyond the vagaries of meaning, the temporal scale of
memory in this instance and in the others we have considered evokes a compelling, living connection between past, present, and future. What is knowable about the past in these allusions depends intimately on the experience of the present underway and on a future which will never allow it to come to rest. Memory then pays heed to history’s intricate beginnings and infinite possibilities and ultimately illuminates the past as a tapestry of unlimited potential.

I cited Foucault above to the effect that (Nietzschean) genealogy—what I take as my model for prospective history—seeks history’s “numberless beginnings,” “its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats.” If we insist, as I have, on the limitation of viewing history as a repository of events, then it stands to reason we should seek out the numberless beginnings *Persians* records for us. To be sure, only a single tragic event animates this tragedy. But Aeschylus textures this event with a rich and complex matrix of opportunities and possibilities. If history, as I have suggested, records only the traces of desire, imagination, and motivation, here Aeschylus throws light on the negligences and suppressions. It is here, I suggest, that Aeschylus has boldly created a new philosophy of history.

4.6 Traces of the Past

First, to resituate ourselves: by the accounts of Atossa and the chorus Darius is only ever described by the wondrous things he achieved. Nowhere is a (psychological) commitment, a motive, or a mistake in judgment registered or even implied. Atossa reveres him as the man who outshone the world in good fortune and wealth, enviable man to his death (709-11). In Darius’ own words he “went on many campaigns with a large army, but never brought such a great catastrophe upon the city” (780-81). The chorus, as
we saw earlier, can only speak of the many good things he accomplished: he was victorious on campaigns, our boys returned safe and sound, he took cities without crossing the Halys, conquered cities in droves by land and sea (852-904). The only time we are given indication of Darius’ own desires and ambitions is in the relatively unrevealing revelation that “the lot I desired [to become king in succession] fell to me” (779). And even that is less important than the fact that he became king. So even in the halcyon days of Darius’ storied past his will and his motivations become mere footnotes to actions and events. The point Darius himself, Atossa, and the chorus seem to be making is that he, unlike Xerxes, did not let his desire drive him too far, past what the gods willed. But again this is not the whole story, because Darius did despite his claims go past the Hellespont, which would imply a desire. Aeschylus thus avoids showing Darius’ desire and overreaching ambition where he had material to do so. So the question again becomes: why would the play obscure Darius’ desire and highlight Xerxes’?\(^{372}\)

With Xerxes Aeschylus is more revealing. Xerxes puts faith in his men: the chorus claim he is “confident in his strong and terrifying captains” (\(echyroisi pepoithōs styphelois ephetais\) [79-80]). He desire, longs: Atossa asks, “Was this the city my son desired (\(himeir\)’) to hunt down as prey?” (233) He is presumptuous: Atossa asks, “Was it my son who started the battle, exulting (\(katauchēsas\)) his strength in number of ships?” (352) He misunderstands: the messenger reports “he did not recognize (\(ou xyneis\)) either the Greek man’s trick or the jealousy of the gods” (361-62). He is mistakenly optimistic: the messenger claims Xerxes made his plans to counter the Greek move (as relayed

\(^{372}\) See Broadhead (1960: 277 ad 684-85) on the emotionless Darius. See also Hall (1996: 162 ad 778) on the “psychological impact”, not the veracity, of Aeschylus’ account of Darius’ succession to the throne.
falsely by the Greek defector) with a confident heart (hyp’ euthymou phrenos) (372). He does not anticipate the future well (kakōs to mellon historōn [454]): the messenger claims Xerxes’ idea to plant men on a small island opposite Salamis to catch the Greeks unawares did not foresee the possibility of a Greek advantage, resulting in the slaughter of even more Persians. He has expectations: Atossa replies to the messenger’s bloody report that “my son expected (dokōn) to get revenge [for Marathon] and has brought upon us incredible suffering” (476-77).

Already Aeschylus has plumbed a personal depth in Xerxes far more interesting than Darius’ catalogue of wonderments. Here we behold a sense of meaning and commitment for Xerxes to these decisions—he actively desires, hopes, and expects from them—as well as the potential for misjudgment, failure, fatality. By emphasizing the moment of decision and texturing Xerxes’ decisions with these nuances, Aeschylus highlights not the predetermined finality of these events but the potential that inhabits them. While the finality of Xerxes’ defeat is definitive in the play, Persians broadens the scope of his history by posing his actions in these more open-ended terms. For in these shadows there is nothing but potential, no finality save perhaps a future perfect image of the end (as the end of desire always is).

Elsewhere hope informs Xerxes’ decisions. According to Darius, Xerxes “[was the one] who hoped to check (ēlpise schēsein) the running of the holy Hellespont with fetters like a slave, the divine Bosporus” (745-46). Later he is characterized by Darius again as “deluded by empty hopes” (kenaisin elpisin pepeismenos) (804). In all of these instances the finality of the action proper is balanced by an unfinalizable potential. Here

373 Not much later the messenger claims that, upon realizing the Greeks were not in fact departing but making a surprise attack, “fear overcame the barbarians as they realized their mistaken judgment” (391-92).
the terms are the future (*praxein dokōn, schēsein*), psychology/motivation (*himeir’, euthymou, ēlpise, elpisin*), and imagination (*phrenos*). The tenor of Darius’ judgments implies that things could not have turned out otherwise. As we observed earlier, his sense of the history made by Xerxes is informed (or tainted) by a retrospective prejudice: Xerxes should have known these hopes were futile. For Darius, these hopes, these motivations, are the vanities of those who do not properly remember and act according to (his) past, in this case the youth. Aeschylus, however, intimates that history is not necessity or vanity, only the trace of something much bigger (his impetus), much more personal (himself).

Taken together, these passages point up a broader vision of historical perspective by underscoring the “numberless beginnings”, those energies and failings whose dimensions do not necessarily stand up to measurement and whose products are almost never recorded by history. Though Xerxes’ hybris in crossing the Hellespont has become par for the (dis)course in the history of the Persian Wars, *Persians* reclaims that hybris from the forces of determinism and necessity for the human capacity to imagine that it is. While Darius’ praises are sung with the retrospective clarity of nostalgia and a discourse that views history as a succession of mute, inviolable events, Aeschylus weaves into his exposition of Xerxes’ decision the openness of the past to the present and future and the traces of much larger desires and unrealized possibilities.

4.7 Aeschylus’ Responsibility to History

Mark Griffith contends that *Persians* “reaffirm[s] the need, and the inevitability and even desirability, of elite political rule of a kind that draws much of its power and
appeal from the model of the ideal or idealized father of the family.” 374 I would draw an entirely different conclusion. Persians may strongly articulate a desire for the protective rule of father figures, but I have tried to show that this nostalgia is based upon misrepresentation and suppression. The “inevitability”, I have argued, is a product of retrospection and revision. So are we to say that in 472, in the midst of an emerging democracy that was gradually supplanting the old, hierarchical, elite system of family allegiance, Aeschylus was urging the Athenians to give over their potential and their future to an idealized, patriarchal past based in part upon lies? Is his play complicit in the same type of romantic, retrospective historiography that, by my argument at least, it takes Darius to task for? I would never suggest Griffith is pushing such a simple (and unseemly) conclusion. But if we follow his argument through to the end, this in fact would be one of the ramifications, or purposes, of Persians. 375 In any case I have tried to show that by opening up the past to the potential of the moment of decision and leaving its meaning for a future beyond our grasp, Aeschylus vindicates Xerxes for the decision-making human being he is and depicts Darius as an oppressive phantasm, not simply a model of restraint and wisdom. In the character of Xerxes Aeschylus intimates a new philosophy of history, a prospective one, where events and decisions are only one out of so many traces of the past, dynamically open to the potential of the future. Even though Xerxes loses, Aeschylus is asking: why does looking back foreclose looking forward? Fathers and the past they (mis)represent are an important part of who one is, but to give

374 Griffith (1998: 43)
375 Cf. Goldhill (2000: 51) on Griffith: “While there is undoubtedly a recognition of a social elite in Athens, ‘looking up to one’s betters’ would need a more careful detour through the imaginary as well as the institutions of the Athenians before its ideological force could be asserted so baldly.”
oneself over to the “inevitability” of their history is to surrender the potential of making one’s own in the future.

I do not mean to suggest, as my argument is perhaps doing, that Aeschylus was a revisionary historian, or that he was trying to make an ironic (anti)hero out of Xerxes. Aeschylus is not Anthony Swofford and his Persians is not Jarhead. As many critics like to point out, Aeschylus was bound by both the historical memory of devastation, human loss but ultimately success of a battle only eight years prior, as well as by his own and his audiences’ expectations and commitments as Marathonomachi. As Lattimore once put it, “we have no right to assume that the Athenians would award first prize to a tragic poet for dealing wildly with known facts in a contemporary theme.”

For Conacher it is a matter of observing “the minimum of historical responsibility”: “The willing suspension of disbelief” cannot be expected to extend indefinitely in the treatment of events which have radically affected the lives of the audience.”

These are sensible assumptions. I think we can safely say Persians pays respect to a minimum of historical responsibility. After all even with a few inaccuracies here and there, glaring or not, he did not present Xerxes as, say, victorious. But these assumptions about “responsibility” are still bothersome and limit the scope of what I believe is the real novelty of Aeschylus’ play. For they simply fail to ask why: why must Aeschylus’ Persians pay fealty to the “facts”? As I have already shown, these “facts” as they are (re)presented in the play are both subject to misrepresentation and suppression

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376 See Hall (1989: 70) on how the “moral lesson” of Persians—that “destruction attends upon hubris”—seemingly overrides what she believes is the more important aspect, i.e. that Persians is the earliest testament to the “ideological invention” of the Other. For yet another reiteration of the “moral lesson”, see most recently Rehm (2003: 65-86).

377 Lattimore (1943: 87)


379 Pelling (1997: 1-19, 213-35) draws similar conclusions from the play but is wary about assuming too much about Athenian ideological commitment.
and come shadowed by an almost infinite number of other traces. So how real or innocent are these “facts” in fact? Certainly not enough to determine objective boundaries. But even apart from these considerations, we ought to acknowledge that tragedy was also a work of imagination, not simply an historical record. *Persians* can be situated in the generic context of “historical tragedy”, but we have too few precedents to say for sure that they had to tow the historical/factual line.\(^{380}\) That Darius’ ghost makes an appearance in the play ought to temper our certainty that it was simply about the “facts”. We might then ask: why draw the line about what is and is not allowed here as opposed to somewhere else? Drawing a firm distinction is pointless. So why even speculate—and how could we ever really know?—about what liberties Aeschylus was allowed or not allowed to take? So something is missing when we ask of Aeschylus to be responsible to history. For we are surely deceiving ourselves if we think either that we are in a better position *a posteriori* to define the boundaries of (his) responsibility or that (our) defining those boundaries makes us any less susceptible to the traps of nostalgia and desire (like suppression and misrepresentation) in interpreting his play as jingoistic or ironic. What is missing is an understanding of the politics of history and the making of meaning in the past. And this understanding is the very thing Aeschylus has given us with *Persians*. For here he shows that all meaning in the past, all memory, involves interpretation, even suppression and misrepresentation, and cannot be determined ultimately because the future keeps moving. When we find necessity and determinism and oracles and idealized fathers driving history, we have not discovered the tragic, inescapable truth of the past. We have found instead ourselves finding necessity and

\(^{380}\) And judging from Phrynichus’ fate, perhaps the Athenians were not terribly fond of the factuality of his representation.
determinism and oracles and idealized fathers driving history. At some point in the future we may even find something else.

In portraying the past in the way that I have argued, *Persians*, I believe, is far more responsible to history than some would acknowledge and responsible in a way that others simply do not recognize. Aeschylus returns the past to the potential of the present moment and defers its meaning to an ever receding future. By rescuing Xerxes from Darius’ long shadow, Aeschylus has in fact rescued history, even that of a mortal enemy, from oblivion.\(^{381}\) This is because, as Peter Rose has suggested in a recent study of Sophocles’ *Ajax*, “what is truly past is truly irrelevant.”\(^{382}\) And Xerxes could never be irrelevant. So the present and the future succeed the past as a son succeeds a father: the similarities and patterns are observable but ultimately cannot determine the course ahead. A son is a reproduction of his father but can never be identical to him; thus he is neither cursed to repeat his father’s past nor forced to bear the burden of responsibility toward it because that past is itself never closed to change. When the son changes, so also will that past change, no matter how much a Darius tries to freeze it in time.

In putting forward this understanding of the politics of history, Aeschylus has achieved something far more didactic and lasting than any pandering to nostalgia or ethnocentrism could ever achieve. Namely, the survival of *Persians*. For if the past were truly over and done with (that is, truly past), then *Persians* would be irrelevant. Aeschylus shows us that it is not. And so every performance aimed at capturing for any

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\(^{381}\) Cf. Gagarin (1976: 42): “It would be an exaggeration to say that the Persian tragedy closes on an optimistic note, but the play does give us at the end a certain sense that the city and its king have come to an understanding of the disaster, have managed to survive, and will continue to survive in the future.”

\(^{382}\) Rose (1995: 61)
historical moment the nostalgia or desire for something long-gone but deemed important simultaneously has in *Persians* its gold-standard and its potential bankrupting.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: THE FATE OF FATE

In his recent essay “Tragedy and Revolution” Terry Eagleton has suggested that one of the (ideological) functions of theories of tragedy is to ennoble human suffering by recourse to theodicy. That is, the tragedies inflicted upon man, and his decisions and actions in response, are testament not to the vagaries of human choices and chance but to the “mysteriously providential” influence of the divine. In his own words:

For some of its apologists, tragedy is also a displaced form of religion in being a trace of the numinous in a naughty world, a residue of the mysterious, mythological, and metaphysical in a disenchanted age. It can talk of the transcendent without the embarrassment of having to put a name to it, hijack its high-toned glamour while ditching its tedious doctrine. Tragedy is where the gods, blood guilt, cosmic destiny, and the mystery of evil can still find a precarious foothold…Tragedy celebrates the sovereignty of power and fate over human agency, unmasking sentimental humanitarianism for the contemptible sham that it is. In disdain of all brittle doctrine of progress, it rubs our noses in the eternally irreparable. 383

In contrast, tragedy itself, he rightly observes, “stubbornly refuses to let the gods off the hook. Far from making suffering seem cosmically explicable, it allows its raw shrieks to resound unredemptively around the stage.” 384 The distinction Eagleton is (I think)

383 Eagleton (2005: 17)
384 Ibid. (2005: 17)
making is subtle but important: tragedy proper illuminates the “drably quotidian” suffering of humans as simply human (even while, or even despite, doing it in a moving way); tragic theory abstracts it into a metaphysical principle. Tragedy depicts humans (and gods) making choices; tragic theory introduces Necessity. Eagleton seems to be excluding Aristotle from this judgment, who takes no interest in the gods and who, as we saw in the introduction, is almost as indifferent to human agents themselves. But it is hard to tell whether Aristotle entirely escapes his implicit critique of the German philhellenists (Hegel, Schelling, Schiller, et. al.) who made this position viable.

Indeed, the question of Necessity is one that has preoccupied tragedy studies for some time now. As Bruce Heiden has pointed out, modern classical scholarship in general, with its Enlightenment background and “determined adherence to the explanatory first principle of Necessity”, has typically been hostile to the imaginative possibilities of poetry. Summing up his characterization in abbreviated form, he puts it this way: “If you believe that there is a supreme being, and that being is Necessity, then the notion of choice, including the imaginative choices of poets, is a pernicious illusion…[The] subject matter [of ancient poetry] consists of stories about consequential choices, choices so far in disregard of Necessity that they are even made by super-powerful gods.”

This assessment jibes well with Eagleton’s critique that “[a] knowledge of necessity is the dream of the human sciences, since then we would be able

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385 Ibid. (2005: 15)
to calculate our actions more exactly and hence more free to realize our projects.”  

I do not intend to rehearse the history of scholarship on fate, necessity, double motivation, or determinism here, most of which has been supplanted nowadays anyway by a broader model of “cultural poetics”, but which, as I have tried to demonstrate, still shows up from time to time in it.

But one of the ambitions of this project, even if it is only implicitly running through my argument about genealogy and the two models of history, is to put to rest definitively this notion of Necessity in the tragedies of Aeschylus, at least specifically for the time being in the ones I have examine here. In concrete terms: Aeschylus does not believe in Necessity; his plays in fact, to borrow the words of Heiden, are “so far in disregard” of it. That assertion may sound more provocative than I think it needs to be, perhaps even nonsensical, given the fact so much of his poetry is suffused with questions about divine or impersonal forces of influence. We could even say that his plays are meditations on these very themes. But we cannot, as I believe has been the case with even recent scholarship, confuse the words of his tragic subjects for programmatic statements. When an Eteocles, a Prometheus, or a Darius decries the workings of Fate, we should not assume either that what they say is right or that it is the declaration of a systematic poetic program. Not especially when none of those characters—with the exception of Prometheus—happen to be gods, and none of them happen to be making programmatic statements about their deterministic intentions. This type of observation,

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387 Eagleton (2005: 18). He goes on: “Yet such predictive knowledge is also the ruin of freedom, which thrives on the incalculable…Freedom and order are not really compatible.”
388 Leonard (2006: 32-68) has a great overview of the issue (even if her focus is elsewhere).
389 See again Stehle (2005), whom I discuss in the introduction.
the dissociation of poet and character, is not novel in itself; it has in fact been a feature of literary interpretation since the rise of the New Criticism. For this reason my assertion could well seem banal.

But the perception persists, and not, I suspect, because scholars of tragedy just have not paid close enough attention. It could be the case, as Heiden (and to a similar extent Eagleton) argues, that Necessity is an interpretive category with a fair amount of institutional investment, an investment that has been furthered considerably by the rise of “anti-humanist” literary criticism. It would be wrong to call the currently dominant cultural studies or political mode of interpretation anti-humanist, though it is clear these new modes (some of which I myself employ) sometimes downplay the dramatic and ethical function of tragedy as literature. And one of the dramatic and ethical functions of Aeschylus’ tragedies—perhaps even the principal one—is to depict the mistakes and miseries of humans who make claims on the gods’ intentions or assume that things could not be otherwise. As I have tried to show, there are glimpses in each play, in the voice of one or more characters, of alternative possibilities, of chance, hope, and difference. That these voices and these possibilities go unheeded by the tragic subject does not vindicate his position or the sense of Necessity he invokes; rather it illuminates precisely why these plays are tragedies and not something else. What Aeschylus finds tragic is not the Fate of man but his fatalism. If we can find then a theory of the tragic in Aeschylus’ plays, it most certainly should not fall on the wrong side of Eagleton’s judgment.

As I discussed in the introduction, by seeking out the relationship of the tragic subject to his genealogical past, we see that two philosophies of history emerged, the
retrospective and the prospective. And it was specifically the retrospective view that produced a sense of determinism, evident in each of the plays we examined. The impersonal force of Necessity that Darius invokes to condemn Xerxes’ “hybristic” behavior was part of a memory (he had received oracles from Zeus); thus he had to look back to ground that invocation. In doing so he abstracts the human element of choice and the forward-looking motivations behind it (ambition, anxiety, hope, etc) from Xerxes’ decisions. At best he allows Xerxes a smidgen of agency, but only insofar as he swims with the tide of hybris. A similar point can be made for Eteocles. When he looks back, he finds fate and his father’s curse conspiring to put Polynices behind the seventh gate. The chorus challenge, even beg, him to look forward, but Eteocles is committed to that sense of Necessity, even dying in its name.

So Necessity seems to emerge from the retrospective point of view. But as I have tried to sketch out in this project, there is another side to this equation. Inasmuch as these plays make a case for the past and its influence on the tragic subject, they also quietly concern the future. That is, they raise the question of how the tragic subject finds himself trapped by his familial past with its impersonal, alienating forces and losing sight of what lies, or could potentially lie, ahead. A thorough investigation of how these plays oppose to the deterministic influence of the past on the tragic subject an open future in which he is a decisive part would require more space than is available in a concluding essay. But I would like to initiate at least this inquiry with an analysis of some representative passages from *Prometheus Bound*, which unlike *Seven or Persians* explicitly addresses the problem of fate or necessity. In these passages Aeschylus raises a subtle but
unmistakable challenge to the force of Necessity that informs Prometheus’ point of view. It is here, I believe, that Aeschylus has made his most provocative statement regarding the past and its relationship to the future.

In chapter two I pointed out (via Griffith) that Prometheus’ predictions about Zeus’ future as sovereign were confused and contradictory. One of the passages I adduced was the heated exchange of 511-25, where Prometheus hints to the chorus at the inevitable and divinely ordained downfall of Zeus. Their conversation turns on the subtle switch between the personified and the impersonal:

Pr: Moira who brings all things to pass has not been appointed to fulfill these things in this way. Only when I have been wracked by infinite pain and torture will I escape this imprisonment. Skill is far weaker than Anangkē.

Ch: Who then is the helmsman of Anangkē?

Pr: The triple-form Moirai and the ever-remembering Erinyes.

Ch: Are you saying that Zeus is weaker than they are?

Pr: Not even he could escape what is ordained.

Ch: Well what has been ordained for Zeus except to rule forever?

Pr: You’re not going to find out, so don’t keep asking.

Ch: I suppose what you’re holding onto so tightly is something beyond conceiving?
Pr: Think about some other thing, because it’s not quite the right time to reveal this one. Rather I must keep it buried within me as much as possible, for by holding on to it I will escape these disgraceful bonds and tortures. (511-25)

Prometheus begins by invoking Moira, but as Griffith points out, this is less clear than it sounds. For it conflates two statements: one in which Moira is the active subject of kranai, the other in which Moira is the passive subject of peprōtai. In either case, however, it is still evident that Moira is the subject. She is the one who determines in one way or another when Prometheus will be released from his imprisonment. Prometheus then closes his remark by linking the power of Moira with anangkē: it is an abstract, impersonal force of necessity or compulsion; therefore his abilities are far weaker. But Prometheus starts by personifying Moira, which would suggest that her power to change his circumstances is a matter of choice.

The chorus’ response picks up this very identification. They ask a peculiar question: who “turns the steering-wheel” (oiakostrophos) of anangkē? The chorus thus seem to take Prometheus at his word that there is in fact someone at the helm of the ship of necessity. For this reason they ask who (tis)—and not what—is in control. For if it were an impersonal force directing this ship in a necessary or destined direction, presumably it would neither need a person to steer it (nor would it have a rudder handle in the first place), nor could it be turned (-strofphos). Prometheus then corroborates this suspicion by answering with “the triple-form Moirai and the ever-remembering Erinyes”. These are, in other words, someones and not somethings. To be sure the Moirai and the Erinyes have an ambiguous status as personified beings in classical literature, but without

390 Griffith (1983: 179 ad loc.)
exhausting (for the time being) all the references to them, we can say with some confidence that here they are very much personified agents and not impersonal forces. This means, as it did just above with Moira, that they are capable of choosing the direction they want to steer the ship of *anangkē*. For they are, as Prometheus answers the chorus, the *oiakostrophoi*.  

Hereafter there is a subtle shift from the personified to the impersonal. In response to the chorus’ question concerning Zeus’ relationship to the Moirai and Erinyes, Prometheus says: “Not even he would escape what is ordained (*tēn peprōmenēn*).” Prometheus does not say that Zeus is subject to the Moirai and the Erinyes (or what they represent), rather only “what has been ordained”. This slight—shrewd, we might say?—modification re-abstracts the discussion of the fate of Prometheus and Zeus out of the world of decision-making agents into the realm of impersonal forces. And as in the previous instance, the chorus take their cue from Prometheus, dropping the reference to the Moirai and Erinyes and asking after “what has been ordained” (*tí gar peprōtai*). Following Prometheus’ lead, the chorus substantiate the abstraction from the personified to the impersonal. Prometheus then directs them to drop the subject altogether.

But this abstraction raises a question: if the downfall of Zeus has already been ordained, why would Prometheus need to keep it a secret? It is for this reason, we might say, that the chorus do not in fact follow his demand to move on, at least not immediately. Their perplexity at the turn the conversation with Prometheus has taken prompts them to characterize (via one last question) his secret as *semnon*. The

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391 In chapter two I cited Griffith to the effect that the combination of the Moirai and the Erinyes seems to suggest that Zeus’ fall from sovereignty is inevitable. It is clear, I think, that Griffith makes of them a personification of impersonal forces by conflating them with their duties.
implication is that what Prometheus professes to know about Zeus’ future is somehow beyond their comprehension or status, goddesses though they are. Prometheus neither affirms nor denies that the substance of his secret is as they describe, citing only that it is not the right time to reveal it, so the chorus again should just drop it. He claims instead that holding on to it will enable him eventually to escape his punishment. This fact implies that the future is less a matter of ordinance than his decision to release this secret at the proper time. He thus unwittingly backs off the strength of the impersonal abstraction he had just asserted to the chorus (τὴν πεπρομένην, πεπρόται) and reaffirms the principle of choice.

I hope it has become evident that Necessity has been twisted, strained, and contradicted in this brief passage. So are we then to believe Prometheus when even he cannot offer a consistent vision of the impersonal forces at work against Zeus? I raise this question only partly to show that Aeschylus problematizes Prometheus’ certainty about the future and his (and Zeus’) involvement in its unfolding. Primarily, though, I believe it fundamentally challenges any confidence we might have about such deterministic discourses in this play in general. In one final passage, the opening lines of Hermes in the last episode, I would like to point out this very dynamic by emphasizing the absence of such rhetoric. Hermes arrives and says:

σὲ τὸν σοφιστήν, τὸν πικρὸς ὑπέρπικρον, τὸν ἐξαμαρτόντ’ εἰς θεοὺς ἐφημέροις πορὸντα τιμᾶς, τὸν πυρὸς κλέπτην λέγω· πατὴρ ἀνωγέ σ’ οὐστίνας κομπείς γάμους αὐτού, πρὸς ὄν τ’ ἐκεῖνος ἐκπίπτει κράτους· καὶ ταῦτα μέντοι μηδὲν αἰνικτηρίως, ἀλλ’ αὐθ’ ἐκαστὰ φράξε, μηδὲ μοι ὄπλας ὁδοὺς, Προμηθεὺ, προσβάλλης. ὥραις δ’ ὅτι
Zeús toîs toioútois óy̱hî malθakîzêtaî.

You there, sophist, bitterly embittered, insulting the gods by giving their honors to mortals, thief of fire—I’m talking to you. Father has bid you to tell whatever marriage it is you boast of by which he will fall from power. And say it without being cryptic, every little thing as it is. Don’t force me to make two trips, Prometheus. You see that Zeus isn’t softened by such behavior. (944-52)

In the catalogue of accusatory names with which Hermes begins, he never addresses Prometheus as, say, “possessor of a knowledge of the future”. Given the combative context, perhaps it might be too much to expect an appellation that was not purely judgmental. But, then again, given all that has preceded in the play (Prometheus making inconsistent predictions, complaining to the other characters, confusing them by partly revealing, partly concealing the course of events to come, rebuffing their attempts to help him), these names are also descriptive. So it is perhaps conspicuous that Hermes does not acknowledge the power of insight that Prometheus is known for, only rather his ability to manipulate knowledge (sophistēn), an ability in all likelihood subject to his overweening bitterness (ton pikrōs hyperpikron).

Hermes makes no programmatic assertion about Zeus here: instead of “Zeus has sent me to bid you…”, he launches immediately into “Zeus has bid you…” This may be a minor difference, but assuming the former (as, for example, Griffith does) means assigning a motivation to Zeus (like fear) where none is given. This, in fact, lends support to Hermes’ failure to address Prometheus by his far-seeing ability, for it does not concede the possibility that Zeus takes this ability or the knowledge it makes available seriously. We have, in other words, no clear reason why Zeus sent Hermes. The

392 Cf. Griffith (1983: 254 ad loc.): “[A] peremptory and belligerent mode of address, in sharp contrast to the customary civilities of tragic dialogue.”
framework of the play may well supplement that motivation, but the (absent) detail here is, I believe, key.

The substance, then, of Zeus’ command is to “tell whatever marriage it is you boast of by which he will fall from power.” This phrase is pregnant with subtleties. First of all, the non-specificity of this potentially fatal sexual liaison is here signified by the use of the plural *gamous*.

This could be, in other words, any number of “marriages” Zeus might involve himself in and not any single one ordained to bring about his downfall. The use of the indefinite pronominal adjective (*houstinous*) further reinforces the vagueness, broadening the scope of the threat to Zeus to “any such” marriages. But more than this, Hermes orders Prometheus to give up whichever marriages he is boasting about (*kompeis*), not any such marriages predetermined to ruin Zeus. And finally, Hermes describes the consequence of this sexual liaison in terms that exclude any reference to determinism; it is simply because of this liaison that “he will fall from power”. So the gist of Hermes’ request is: Tell us about these marriages, whichever they are, that you keep going on about, because of which Zeus will fall from power. This is a far cry from the language one might expect of someone truly at the mercy of fate.

Hermes’ words may well be the rhetorical equivalent of a pose of indifference, but it is strange that not a single one of them acknowledges either the threat posed by Prometheus’ secret or any impetus on Zeus’ part (a fear of the future, for example).

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393 LSJ seems to make no qualitative distinction between *gamos* and *gamois*.

394 One final thing is noteworthy in this passage: Hermes asks Prometheus to divulge his secret without riddle (*mēden aînichtēriōs*) and not force him to make two trips down to him. Hermes implies, first, that one trip is all it takes for Prometheus to change his present misfortunes; Zeus will be willing to unchain him if he cooperates. And second, that Hermes would be willing to make two trips means that Zeus would likely be open to renegotiation.
Perhaps then the pose of indifference on Hermes’ part is not a pose. The remainder of the episode, in fact, conveys that Hermes (and by association, Zeus) is actually indifferent. As I discussed in chapter one, the barbed stichomythia between Hermes and Prometheus following the above speech contains a handful of allusions to Zeus’ fall (from the mouth of Prometheus), but nothing else Hermes says (from his exhortations to Prometheus to think about his present misfortunes and not some mysteriously predetermined future, to his description of further punishments, to his warnings to the chorus) betrays any concern about the substance of Prometheus’ secret. This is a remarkable lack at the pitch of the dramatic action—the only action in the play, as it were—when Prometheus’ true commitment to this secret finally reaches the climactic moment of responsibility and consequence. Prometheus defiantly takes it with him to the abyss, but Hermes does not even bat an eye.

These passages, as I have shown, provide a strong basis for the reexamination of the discourse of Necessity in *Prometheus Bound*. But *PV* is not singular in its critical stance on deterministic models of historical vision. *Seven* and *Persians*, too, pose their own savage analyses. And it is one of the principal goals of this project not only to pursue the ways in which each play sets its tragic subject between his past and the wide-open potential of the moment of his decisions, but also to expose his feelings of being trapped by his past’s alienating necessities as the source of his suffering. And perhaps by reevaluating this fascination with the impersonal force of Necessity, we will be able to take Aeschylean studies out of the grip of its own past and toward a new and open future, just like Orestes.

191
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202

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