

## ΕΠΤΑ ΕΠΙ ΘΗΒΑΣ

I have demonstrated the nature of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Sophocles Theban trilogy as astronomical allegories which celebrate the Athenian Apollonian miracle as symbolised by the radiant moon, symbol of Apollo. The fifth century Greeks knew moonshine to be the reflected light of the sun, and so the bright moon lent itself readily to the dramatists as a symbol of the sun god. Similarly, I shall argue here that Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* (hereafter *Hepta*) is also an astronomical allegory, of the dawning sun. These two dramatists are, in this scenario, direct heirs of Homer, whose *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are astronomical allegories from beginning to end, as Edna Leigh has shown.<sup>1</sup>

In Sophocles' *Antigone* I have shown that Polyneices, leader of the attacking forces, represents the radiant moon, while his brother Eteocles is the dark moon. Given the evident close kinship of the two dramatists – Sophocles seems to have been privy to Aeschylus' allegorical strategy and tactics, perhaps as both were members of the Pythagorean brotherhood – this may point to the cognate allegorical values of the brothers in *Hepta*. The battle at the seven gates of Thebes would then portray the dawn, in which the moon is annihilated in the radiance of the sun (death of both brothers). A plausible interpretation of the number seven here is that it refers to the five visible planets plus the sun and the moon, the orbits of which seven bodies are all located within the band of the ecliptic (the apparent path of the sun around the earth), which is approximately 20° wide. Thebes, in this scenario, may represent the ecliptic itself; while the Chorus of Maidens may represent the zodiacal constellations, which are also located in the band of the ecliptic. Thebes itself is not destroyed, but endures: for the sky is transformed in the onset of day.

It is worth remarking here that the word 'Thebes' appears nowhere in Aeschylus' play. As Verrall tells us (p.xvi),<sup>2</sup> the city is 'the Cadmean city' (Καδμεία πόλις, v. 997), 'the city named after Cadmus' (ἑπώνυμος Κάδμου πόλις, v. 125), the people always 'Cadmeans,' the burghers or the descendants 'of Cadmus' (Καδμῆιοι, Καδμογενεῖς etc., v. 1 and passim). Verrall notes that, 'This is the more remarkable, because it is, I believe, entirely peculiar to Aeschylus.' This suggests that the city may have a role beyond the literal plane. Another feature which suggests a possible occult dimension of *Hepta* is the presence of a character – in fact, a leader of one of the seven opposing regiments – in the attacking army called Eteoclos, which is almost identical with Eteocles, defender of the city. The implication here is that attackers and defenders are one – that the battle describes a process of transformation in a single entity. Burket (1992) in this light is quite wrong:

Others [of the heroes] appear as stock figures to fill out the list. To call one of them Eteoklos, vis-à-vis Eteokles the brother of Polyneikes, appears to be almost the desperate invention of a faltering poet.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the books *Homer's Secret Iliad* and *Homer's Secret Odyssey*, by Edna Leigh's daughter and son-in-law Florence and Kenneth Wood.

<sup>2</sup> *The Seven Against Thebes of Aeschylus*, with an introduction, commentary and translation by A. W. Verrall (London and New York: MacMillan and Co, 1887).

<sup>3</sup> Walter Burket, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Harvard UP, 1992), p. 108.

In a similar tone, critics of the Shakespeare history plays accuse their author of getting his history wrong; but in fact, as I have shown, the changes are all to serve the allegory of psychic transformation which the plays conceal.<sup>4</sup>

Following the allegorical tactics of the *Oresteia*, the long (38 lines) speech of Eteocles which opens the play is likely to represent the as yet undiminished presence of the moon (with its dark side emphasised here) in the immediately pre-dawn sky. The second speech (at 38 lines the identical length of its predecessor) belongs to the Αγγελος Κατασχοπος ('messenger who looks down'). A likely allegorical value of this character is the planet Venus, the morning star, which at this time is of comparable brightness to the moon. The third speech in this opening scene is a choral ode sung by the Chorus of Maidens who, as I have proposed, may represent the stars of the zodiacal constellations – its greater length than its predecessors suggesting the larger number of heavenly bodies.

## THE SPY'S SPEECH

Il. 59-68

ἐγγὺς γὰρ ἤδη πάνοπλος Ἄργείων στρατὸς  
χωρεῖ, κονίει, πεδία δ' ἀργηστής ἀφρὸς  
χραίνει σταλαγμοῖς ἵππικων ἐκ πλευμόνων.  
σὺ δ' ὥστε ναὸς κεδνὸς οἰακοστρόφος  
φράξαι πόλισμα, πρὶν καταγίσει πνοῶς  
Ἄρεως· βοᾷ γὰρ κῦμα χερσαῖον στρατοῦ.  
καὶ τῶνδε καιρὸν ὅστις ὄκιστος λαβέ  
κάγω τὰ λοιπὰ πιστὸν ἡμεροσκόπον  
ὀφθαλμον ἔξω, καὶ σαφηνεῖα λόγου  
εἰδὼς τὰ τῶν θύραθεν ἀβλαβῆς ἔση.

'For near at hand already the whole array of Argives comes in a cloud of dust, and the plain is flecked with white foam blown from their steeds. Thou, like the good helmsman of a ship, bulwark thy fortress ere the hurricane of war bursts down; for their host, a sea upon the land, is beginning to roar. And thereto seize the speediest occasion. I after this shall have daylight proof of what I see; so shalt thou know by certain report the news from without, and shalt take no harm.'

The Spy (Αγγελος Κατασχοπος) confirms in the last sentence that the time of day is indeed the immediately pre-dawn period. It is the argument of this paper that the drama describes as allegory this very process. The Spy reports that whole approaching army is raising a cloud of dust on the plain (πάνοπλος Ἄργείων στρατὸς χωρεῖ, κονίει). This recalls the image used by the Chorus in *Agamemnon*, when they espy the herald approaching to announce the arrival of the king:

κήρυκ' ἀπ' ἀκτῆς τόνδ' ὀρῶ κατάσκιον

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<sup>4</sup> I have argued at great length that the genius behind the Shakespeare plays, though not author of their every word, was Sir Francis Bacon. For some reason this position seems to irritate the professional critics. See my book *Ugly Dick and the Goddess of Complete Being* (2003).

κλάδοις ἐλαίας, μαρτυρεῖ δέ μοι κάσις  
πηλοῦ ξύνουρος διψία κόνις τάδε ...

‘Yon herald comes from the shore, as I see by his shade of olive boughs ; and the thirsty dust, sister of the mire and neighbour, testifies to me this...’

Verrall is puzzled by what this dust could signify; but I have argued that it represents the aura of Regulus which is invading the night sky from below just prior to the dawn of the star. And so here, I propose that the dust betokens the first radiance of the sun which emerges from the horizon before dawn proper begins.

The other key image here is of the sea. The words ἀργηστής ἀφρός, ‘white wind-blown foam,’ are particularly evocative, as Verrall tells us:

ἀργηστής, akin to, if it be not identical with, ἀργεστής the white wind, occurs in Aesch. here and in Eum. 180, in both places of things in rapid motion. The whiteness signified seems to be that of wind-driven cloud or foam.

I propose that Aeschylus’ use of this metaphor here was determined by the allegorical value of the plain as, in fact, the sea, over which the sun will soon rise.

## THE CHORUS OF THE MAIDENS’ SPEECH

ll. 78-164

In this scheme, the Chorus of the Maidens represent the stars of the night sky. It may well be that we can specify them as the stars of the zone of the ecliptic, where are located the constellations of the zodiac. This is the longest speech of the opening scene. Similarly, in *Agamemnon* the opening speech of the Chorus of Elders, whom I have also identified as the stars of the sky, is at 235 lines the longest single speech in Greek drama. Aeschylus intended by this tactic to suggest the dominating presence of the some 2,000 [?] visible stars in the night sky.

The maidens have fled to the Acropolis, the highest part of the city. This is consonant with the allegory, as portraying the stars on high in the sky. Here again the motifs of the dust and sea are emphasised:

μεθεῖται στρατὸς στρατόπεδον λιπών.  
ρεῖ πολὺς ὄδε λεῶς πρόδρομος ἰππότας.  
αἰθερία κόνις με πείθει φανεῖσ’  
ἀναυδος σαφῆς ἔτυμος ἄγγελος.

‘the fore-running multitude of of horsemen flows toward us, a mighty stream. I know by the dust, seen high in the air, telling without voice a message plain and true.’

The word αἰθερία ('of/in the upper air, high in air, on high'<sup>5</sup>), as qualifying κόνις, 'dust,' is particularly evocative, suggesting the radiance of the early dawn penetrating into the sky. In a similar vein to what has gone before, the maidens liken the sounds of the plain to 'irresistible waters' (ἀμαχέτου ὕδατος).

The Acropolitan deities whom the maidens supplicate are Ares, Zeus, Pallas Athena, Poseidon, Aphrodite, Hera and Artemis. Might Aeschylus have had a purpose in specifying these particular deities? Edna Leigh described Homer's identification in the *Iliad* of the planets with Greek gods and goddesses, as follows:

Hera = Moon

Aphrodite = Venus

Athene = Jupiter

Ares = Mars

Apollo = Mercury at dawn

Hermes = Mercury at dusk

Poseidon = Saturn

In addition, Leigh identified Zeus with the sky as a whole. The almost flawless correspondences of these identifications with the acropolitan deities named in the maidens' speech lends powerful support to the allegorical scheme I have proposed. The only deficiency is the absence of Artemis among Leigh's identifications. Artemis of course is a moon deity, so she may be sharing in this scene the role of Hera. This point remains to be clarified. The absence of Hermes as the planet Mercury at dusk is not a deficiency, as the time specified in *Hepta* is dawn, so that the presence of Hermes would have been inappropriate;<sup>6</sup> and Apollo correctly represents Mercury here.

## STICHOMYTHIA: ETEOCLES AND THE CHORUS OF MAIDENS

Eteocles indulges in a long rant against womankind. This recalls the germane anti-female content of *Agamemnon*, for example in the Watchman's derogatory remarks on Clytemnestra in the opening speech. I have commented on ὠδε γὰρ κρατεῖ/ γυναικὸς ἀνδροβουλον ἐπιζὼν κέαρ, that γυναικὸς, 'of woman,' refers on the literal plane to the queen, but on the plane of allegory to the Great or Mother Goddess. There is a note of contempt on Aeschylus' part here for the Goddess-dominated world of old, which he had helped defeat, physically, on the plain of Marathon, and now continued to combat, philosophically and dramatically, in the *Oresteia*.

Similarly, Eteocles' vehement derogation of womankind ('While she is strong, she is too insolent to live near, and when she takes alarm, mischievous to house and to town yet more')

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<sup>5</sup> Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon, 7ed.

<sup>6</sup> This is consistent with the mention of Hermes in the very first line of Aeschylus' *Choephoroe*, where the time is dusk.

and so on) may indicate that the stars of the belt of the ecliptic, and by extension of the sky as a whole, may plausibly also represent the Goddess-worshipping pre-Hellenic civilisations, of which Persia and Egypt loom largest in the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles. It would follow from this that the star-annihilating sun bears the allegoric value in *Hepta* of the Athenian Apollonian miracle. This remains to be confirmed.

Eteocles begins with a longish speech (164-84) in response to the Chorus, then he and the Chorus exchange a series of 3-4 line speeches (185 ff.), and then finally a series of single lines (231-49). We have noted this technique many times in Aeschylus and also Sophocles, of the stark presence of a heavenly bodies being suggested by a long speech, and then their gradual growth or diminishment, as the sky lightens or darkens, being represented by a stichomythic (single line) exchange.

The gradual, step-by-baby step processes of the heavens are also suggested by these lines of the Chorus (356-61), which bring this scene to a close:

ὄ τοι κατόπτῃς, ὡς ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ, στρατοῦ  
πευθὼ τιν' ἡμῖν, ὦ φίλοι, νέαν φέρει,  
σπουδῇ διώκων πομπίμους χνόας ποδῶν.  
καὶ μὴν ἄναξ ὄδ' αὐτὸς Οἰδίπου τόκος  
εἰς' ἀρτίκολλον ἀγγέλου λόγον μαθεῖν·  
σπουδῇ δὲ καὶ τοῦδ' οὐκ ἀπαρτίζει πόδα.

‘Lo, friends, he that went to spy the host brings us, I judge, some fresh tidings thereof, and urges for haste the play of his returning feet. And see, the royal son of Oedipus himself will come at the instant to hear the man’s report. He too, like the other, hath not foot enough for his haste.’

This suggests the slowness of diminishment of both the radiance of Venus, the morning star, and the visibility of the dark moon, which is distinctly visible in the fullness of night, as the figure below shows, but becomes invisible as dawn progresses:

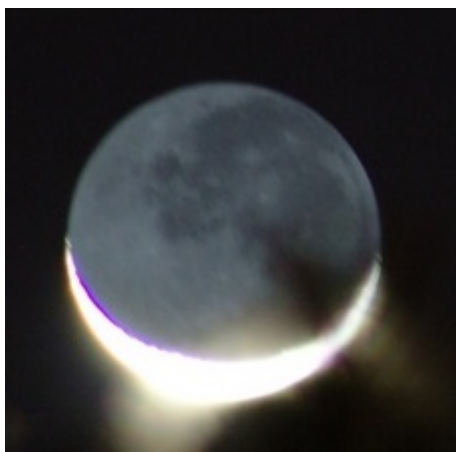


Fig. 1 The dark moon clearly visible at night

## THE GATES OF THEBES

Verrall remarks (p. xvii) Pausanias' statement that, 'Cadmus founded the city which retains to the present day the name *Cadmea*. When the city afterwards increased, the *Cadmea* became the acropolis to the lower city of *Thebes*.' (9. 5. 2.). We have seen that Aeschylus refers everywhere in *Hepta* to 'the Cadmeian city' or variants thereof. Further, there is convincing evidence that the gates were related to the acropolis (i.e. *Cadmea*) and not to the perimeter of Classical Thebes.<sup>7</sup> All of this would be consistent with a heavenly location of the conflict described in *Hepta* as allegory. Similarly, in Sophocles' *Oedipus in Colonus*, the dramatist at one point (ll. 195-6) has Oedipus crouch down low on the elevated edge of a shelf of rock, for the purpose, as I have argued, of suggesting the spherical form of the moon on high in the sky.

Aeschylus names six of the seven gates as Proetides, Electrae, Neistae, Athena Onca, Northern, and Homoloides, with the seventh gate, where the two brothers Polyneices and Eteocles will slay each other, remaining innominate. Burkert (1992, pp. 106-114) summarises evidence that the historical Thebes at the time of Hepta (late Bronze Age, just preceding the sack of Troy) could not possibly have possessed seven gates, the more likely numbering three or four. He argues that this is a purely mythic theme; a theme which, further, was derived ultimately from Eastern sources. I propose that Aeschylus left the seventh gate unnamed to indicate that this is a new myth, the myth of the ascendancy of the Athenian Apollonian miracle, as represented by the vanquishing of the moon and night by the dawning sun. This interpretation is supported by Aeschylus' explicit naming of Apollo as the tutelary deity of the seventh gate (786). An assumption here is that the names of the other gates have mythic precedents, perhaps in the lost Theban cycle of the Homeric age, the contents of which are presupposed in several passages of the *Iliad*. Burkert highlights especially the Homeric formula 'seven-gated Thebes' (107). This would benefit from more investigation.

## THE SEVEN HEROES AND THEIR SHIELDS

The seven attackers and the designs on their shields, are highly suggestive of the allegorical theme I have outlined. They are as follows:

Gate no.	Gate name	Attacker	Description	Shield
1	Proetides	Tydeus	roaring with rage... in tones like a serpent's hiss at noon ... with [fastened on his helm] brazen bells of terrible clangour	A heaven a-fire with the lesser stars and conspicuous at the centre... the full bright moon
2	Electrae	Capaneus	A giant... and more than man in the arrogance of	A man bearing fire... a torch armed with flame, and

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<sup>7</sup> Noted in Symeonoglou, Sarantis, *The Topography of Thebes from the Bronze Age to Modern Times* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1985), p. 32.

			his vaunt, threatening peril to nothing less than towers... for whether heaven will or not, saith he, he will sack the town	speaking by signs of gold the words 'I will burn the town'
3	Neistae	Eteoklos	His horses strain against their headbands, as he turns them round and round, in their eagerness to dash upon the gate	A man in armour mounting the steps of a ladder to an enemy's fort which he would sack; and this man, like him of the other shield, proclaims by groups of signs that not Ares' self could expel him from the fortress
4	Athena Onca	Hippomedon	one who brings in other fashion his proclamation with him ... possessed with the spirit of war like a Bacchant he raves for battle with appalling scowl	The long circuit which ran around his shield... Typhon breathing through a fiery mouth a smoke shout with red gleams akin to fire
5	Northern	Parthenopaeus	he takes his oath upon a spear head... which he trusts more than a god for its sacredness and better than sight ... cruel are his thoughts	On the brazen buckler, whose round covers his body, is the reproach of our town, the flesh-devouring sphinx, a shining figure of beaten work, attached with bolts of cunning contrivance, whereby he moved it ... She carries beneath her a Cadmean man, and never before for a single prey did she fly through such a shower of missiles
6	Homoloides	Amphiaraus	He... pours upon Tydeus many a bitter name, styling him man-slayer, vexer of the public peace... summoner of the Fiend, minister of Murder, and suggester of evil to Adrastus now. Thy [Eteocles'] brother also, Polynices, he upbraideth in fit measure... "Let us fight; the rites of death I shall not lose"	a shield of plain brass without blazon upon it
7	[unnamed]	Polyneices	He prays that... if he may slay thee [Eteocles], die beside thee, of if thou livest, punish thee, his dishonourer and disenfranchiser, with like and equal banishment	A man of beaten gold, in guise of armour, is led by a female form, who goes modestly before, and says... 'I am Right, and I will restore this man, and he shall have a country, and come and go in his ancestral home'

The first three attackers described by Aeschylus, namely Tydeus, Capaneus and Eteoklos, and their shields, are highly suggestive of the initial condition (Tydeus = night), and then the supervening ascendancy of the sun at dawn (Capaneus + Eteoklos = sun rising in the sky). Capaneus' personal description emphasises his gigantic nature, his 'vaunt,' his threatening of the towers, and the inexorability of his sacking of the town. All of this supports the design on his shield, as indicative of the rising sun.

There is a distinct underworld character to the scowling Hippomedon and Parthenopaeus, whose shields bear the figures of Typhon and the Sphinx respectively. Just so does Aeschylus in the opening line of *Choephoroe*, which portrays as allegory the victory of the rising moon as symbolic of Apollo, have Orestes invoke Hermes, mediator god of the lower and upper worlds. Burkert (1992, pp. 108 ff.) summarises the considerable evidence that the seven heroes were originally demonic figures in older myths, perhaps ultimately deriving from the Akkadian epic of Erra, the plague god, attributed to Kabti-Ilani-Marduk. This epic came to assume magical properties, the text, or parts thereof, being written on amulets to protect against attacks of the plague which Erra represents. It may be that Aeschylus in *Hepta* was thinking along the same lines, with the health-giving power of Apollo deriving ultimately from an underworld source.

Of further interest in the shield of Parthenopaeus is that the sphinx is flying through a 'shower of missiles'<sup>8</sup> to abduct her prey. Such missiles, if spears or arrows, were of course symbolic of light rays, as implied for example in the epithet, 'the Huntress', of the radiant moon goddess Diana, who was often depicted with a bow. Supporting this attribution is the fact that Parthenopaeus 'takes his oath upon a spear head.'

The scene being portrayed in *Hepta* is then not of attackers vs. defenders, but is rather a unified process of transformation. Adversarial oppositions may apply on the literal plane, but not on the allegorical. I would argue that Amphiarus, with his antipathy toward his own side, thus confounding traditional notions of *parti pris* loyalty, supports the action on the allegorical plane.

I have argued that Polyneices, here as in Sophocles' Theban trilogy, bears the allegorical value of the radiant moon. This is supported by his description which suggests a close juxtaposition with Eteocles, with whom he will either die side-by-side (moon engulfed in radiance of sun, or whom he will banish (victory of radiant moon over dark in the monthly lunar cycle). On this shield, the female figure predicts Polyneices' re-ascendancy, and the fact that he will 'come and go,' just like the radiant moon in the monthly lunar cycle. 'Come and go' is Verrall's translation of δωμάτων τ'επιστροφας (635). Liddell & Scott informs us that επιστροφε means 'a turning about, twisting,' 'a turning or wheeling about,' 'a moving up and down in [a place].' So that it would have been an apt word for Aeschylus to choose to describe the movements of the moon.

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<sup>8</sup> This is Verrall's interpretation of an admittedly problematic passage



## THE FINAL SCENE

To reiterate: The ‘battle’ here represents a transformation taking place in a single space, where the dichotomy of attacker and defender is irrelevant. The successful ‘defence’ of the city announced in lines 777 ff. therefore should not be interpreted in dualistic terms; rather, as the accomplishment of a stage in the transformation.

There are in the remainder of the drama instances of techniques we have also found in the *Oresteia* and in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. The two long speeches of the Chorus beginning at lines 707 (69 lines) and 807 (113 lines) represent the starry sky, just as does, as we have seen, the Chorus of Elders speech – the longest single speech in Attic drama – in the second scene of *Agamemnon*. There follows a long stichomythic exchange between Antigone and Ismene, which portrays, as in all cases of this technique in Aeschylus, the gradual fading or intensifying of the visibility of a heavenly body. Here, it is the fading of the moon at dawn. Ismene has no more further lines after the end of this exchange at line 995, in contrast with Antigone. This is consistent with the allegory, as the dark moon disappears in the morning sun before the bright moon, which remains visible for some time. Just so does Pylades in *Choephoroe* have, as we have seen, no lines until near the end of the drama, as it takes place at dusk, with the reverse of the process obtaining: the dark moon becoming visible after the bright.

A plausible interpretation of the Herald who gives a speech of 20 lines beginning at line 996, is that he bears the same allegorical value as the Herald who announces the arrival of the king in *Agamemnon*: namely, the aura of the rising star (*Agamemnon*)/sun (*Hepta*). From the time of his first line, Ismene has no more to say. While the herald’s speech is of 20 lines, that of Antigone which follows it is of 15, reflecting, I propose, the relative luminosities of the solar aura and the moon in the morning sky. There follows a stichomythic exchange of 11 lines between the Herald and Antigone, to portray the gradual waxing of the aura and waning of the moon. Finally, the Herald disappears (the aura becoming the sun itself), while the Chorus prepares to leave the stage, with one half following Antigone, and the other half pursuing Ismene (stars and moon finally disappearing in radiance of sun).