A Libation of Blood.

Self-sacrifice as Pharmakon for the City

in Euripides’ Phoenician Women

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In his tragedy Phoenician Women (± 410 BC), Euripides reshapes the traditional Theban story by introducing a new motive in the third episode: the self-sacrifice of Creon’s autochthonous son Menoeceus as a ‘life-saving medicine’ for the city. The selfless rhesis of the young man stands in sharp contrast to the selfish motivations of the central characters. As Euripides in this speech incorporates contemporary discourse on Athenian citizenship, found in for instance Pericles’ funeral oration as quoted by Thucydides, he invites his spectators to recognize a representation of their patriotic ideal. This ideal is then called into question when from the libation of blood no immediate remedy follows, but instead further bloodshed among the citizens. The plot innovation thus serves to anchor in the legendary myth fifth-century civic values, which the tragedian critically debates by displaying a discrepancy between the ideal and the real in an age of warfare and sacrifice.¹

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INTRODUCTION

In Euripides’ tragedy *Phoenician Women*, which is based on the same story as Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes*, the city of Thebes is threatened by a civil war, which is instigated by the sons of Oedipus. When in the third episode the seer Teiresias finally reveals to Creon what the gods demand in order to put an end to this threat, the statesman’s response is utter shock (ll. 892-3, 913-4):

ΤΕΙΡΕΣΙΑΣ
πικρόν τε τοίσι τὴν τύχην κεκτημένοις
πόλει παρασχεῖν φάρμακον σωτηρίας (…)  
sφάξαι Μενοικέα τόνδε δεὶ σ’ ύπέρ πάτρας,  
sὸν παῖδ’, ἐπειδὴ τὴν τύχην αὐτὸς καλεῖς.
ΚΡΕΩΝ
τί φής; τίν’ εἶπας τόνδε μῦθον, ὦ γέρον;

ΤΕΙΡΕΣΙΑΣ
It will be galling to those who are touched by this fate that I should give the city its life-saving medicine (…) you must slaughter your son Menoeceus here, for the country’s sake: you yourself asked for your fate.

CREON
What are you saying? What tale is this, old sir?

In a play that centers around the strife between the two brothers, the focus suddenly shifts to a second family, whose legendary bloodline reaches back to the very origins of the city. According to the seer, the city got ‘sick’ at its foundation, when Cadmus, the first king of Thebes, slew the dragon and sowed its teeth (from which then the race of the Sown Men sprang). From this particular event onwards, the god Ares and the Earth have been bearing a grudge against Thebes. They can only be appeased when the dragon’s blood is repaid by the noble blood of one of the last pure descendants of the autochthonous Sown Men. The ‘life-saving medicine’ for the city, the ‘φάρμακον σωτηρίας’, that Creon is eager to find, appears to be his youngest son.

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2 For this and all following passages from Euripides’ *Phoenician Women* the translation by Kovacs 2002 is used.
Up until this particular scene, this character has as such been unattested in the extant Greek drama (and in fact in any other literary genre). By bringing Menoeceus on stage and including his subsequent self-sacrifice in this tragic retelling, Euripides seems to have reshaped the Theban story. With Creon, the late fifth-century Athenian audience of the tragedy must have wondered ‘what tale this is’.

In this paper I will first discuss the innovation of the plot, and the way in which it is anchored in the mythological and theatrical tradition. Then I aim to show how the tragedian, by means of this new motive, anchors in his staging of the myth a critical perspective on the contemporary issue of citizenship values in a time of war.

INTRODUCING A NEW MOTIVE: SELFLESSNESS

Menoeceus’ entrance is a poetical reference. The character is initially introduced as a mute character, a dramatic element that Aeschylus was known (and mocked) for. Since he does not answer the question that is addressed to him in line 841, the audience might have assumed that he would remain silent all along. When, after 150

3 For the character of Menoeceus as an Euripidean creation see O’Connor-Visser 1987:82-7. Both Aeschylus (Seven Against Thebes, ll. 473-9) and Sophocles (Antigone, ll.1302-3) do refer to a son of Creon who goes by the name of ‘Megareus’. Griffith 1999 ad S. Ant. 1302-3 concludes that the stories of E.’s Menoeceus and S.’s Megareus are thematically almost identical and perform essentially the same function. Jebb 1928 ad S. Ant. 1303 and Vian 1963:208-14 more radically state that Menoeceus is identical to this Megareus (which is also noted by scholiasts at S. Ant. 1301-5 and E. Pho. 988). Yet the reference to Megareus in A. Theb. presents a fate that is incompatible with that of Menoeceus (as one of the seven Theban champions he either dies or brings victory), and the interpretation of S. Ant. 1302-3 (based also on ll. 993-5, 1058, 1312-3) seems too farfetched to draw this kind of conclusions (see Mastronarde 1994:29 contra Vian). Neither of the passages on Megareus implies suicide as the form of self-sacrifice (which Griffith 1999 ad S. Ant. 1302-3 does acknowledge as an Euripidean novelty), nor do they explicitly connect the fate of the autochthonous character to a communal guilt that has to be expiated in order for the city to be saved. If Euripides made use of pre-existing material (and this is plausible), he adapted it so as to introduce a character on stage that was essentially different from what the tragic audience had seen (or only heard about) before.

4 On this technique, see Mastronarde 1979:93. The audience’s expectation is strengthened by the fact that Teiresias’ other escort, his daughter, does remain silent (Luschnig 1995:222), as do all of the seer’s escorts in the tragic corpus. Aeschylus is mocked for his mute characters by the character Euripides in Aristophanes’ Frogs (who himself is blamed for making his characters talk too much, l. 905ff). References are made to two plays that are now lost (Niobe and The Ransoming of Hector). A good example of this Aeschylean feature from an extant play is Pylades in Libation Bearers, who is on stage.
lines of presence on stage, Menoeceus unexpectedly breaks his silence, Euripides makes his character develop rapidly into a well-rounded figure with a decisive role. The use of this Aeschylean feature to introduce a previously unseen figure on stage highlights the fact that the tragedian deviates strongly from his predecessor’s treatment of the story.

In his first lines (l. 877ff), Menoeceus responds to another conscious deviation from the tragic tradition: the portrayal of his father. While the audience knows Creon (most notably from Sophocles’ Antigone) as a steadfast statesman who would never choose family over fatherland, his attitude here turns around immediately after hearing that the city’s well-being will be secured by the death of his son. He tells him to flee. By characterizing Creon in this way, Euripides created the opportunity to counter his stance with that of his patriotic son. While at first glance it seems as if Menoeceus simply sits in for the role that was taken from his father, the confrontation of attitudes is actually more complex. Creon always, although in this play very differently, deals with a tragic dilemma between family and fatherland. Here, he is confronted with this dilemma by Teiresias (ll. 951-2):

\[(...) τὸινδ’ ἐλοῦ δυοῖν πότμουν τὸν ἔτερον· ἢ γὰρ παῖδα σώσον ἢ πόλιν.\]

Of these two fates choose one: save your son or your city.

Menoeceus, on the other hand, opts for a good relationship to both family and fatherland, loyalties that, as Rawson pointed out, in his mind apparently do not contradict each other. This can be inferred from Menoeceus’ rhetorical question in lines 1003-4:

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for 800 lines before speaking no more than three lines himself. As with Menoeceus, the audience must have expected Pylades to be a κωφὸν πρόσωπον. See Taplin 1972:57-97 on Aeschylean silences.

5 Ll. 970-2. For Creon’s traditional attitude, e.g. S. Ant. ll. 182-3: ‘and him who rates a dear one higher than his native land, him I put nowhere’ (transl. Lloyd-Jones 1994). Before Creon receives the prophecy, he responds as expected (e.g. ll. 898/900: ‘Tell the city and its citizens how they may survive/How can I not wish to save my country?’). The chorus’ pointed comment in l. 920 applies both within and outside of the plot: ‘this man is no longer the same’.

6 Euripides does not let Menoeceus counter Creon’s stance right away: the surprise of Creon’s response is initially prolonged by his son’s apparent willingness to leave the country, which, as soon as Creon has left the stage, turns out to have been an act put up in order to facilitate his self-sacrifice (l. 991ff).

ἐγὼ δὲ, πατέρα καὶ κασίγνητον προδοὺς πόλιν τ' ἐμαυτοῦ; (…) 

And on the other, shall I betray father, brother, and my own city?

Euripides, with the introduction of an additional character, offers his audience an alternative attitude for this traditional dilemma, through which he then creates a sharp contrast with the attitude of the sons of Oedipus, who blatantly put private advantage above civic interest.

The rhetorical question is part of Menoeceus’ central rhesis, in which he argues for a self-chosen death (ll. 995-1004):

(…) τούμον δ’ οὐχὶ συγγνώμην ἔχει, προδότην γενέσθαι πατρίδος ἢ μ’ ἐγείνατο. ἀξιόν ἄν ἐιδήτ’, εἴμι καὶ σώσω πόλιν ψυχὴν τε δώσω τήδ’ ὑπερθανών χθονός. αἰσχρὸν γάρ’ οἱ μὲν θεσφάτων ἐλεύθεροι κοὐ κεῖς ἀνάγκην δαιμόνων ἀφιγμένοι στάντες παρ’ ἀστίδ’ οὐκ ὀκνήσουσιν θανεῖν, ἐγὼ δὲ, πατέρα καὶ κασίγνητον προδοὺς πόλιν τ’ ἐμαυτοῦ; (…) 

There would be no pardon for me if I betrayed the country that begot me. Know this: I shall go and save the city, giving my life for the country and dying for it. The contrast would otherwise be disgraceful. On the one hand, men under no compulsion from oracles or the gods stand by their shields and do not shrink from death. And on the other, shall I betray father, brother, and my own city?

The core argumentation consists of three different aspects: his duty towards the country, because he was reared by it; his belief that he is able to offer sôteria, because of his autochthonous background (as he was told by Teiresias8); and his responsibility towards the citizens, since they are fighting without the exhortation of any prophecy. While Eteocles and Polynices are caught up in their personal pursuit of power and Creon chooses exclusively for his family, Menoeceus is the very first male character in the entire play to mention and feel for the citizens. After

8 See ll. 933-9, cited on p.7.
Menoeceus’ death, the focus of the *Phoenician Women* shifts back to the family of Oedipus and again away from the Theban *politai*.9

Despite the thematic novelty of this third episode, the spectators are prepared for the solution to the civil war proposed in it by the way in which the plot is constructed. From the very beginning, the story of Cadmus, as briefly related in the introduction, is carefully woven into the plot. Although the origin myth was a well-known story, it had never before specifically been brought in connection with the Theban war (let alone was it made its cause). By highlighting this part of the myth, Euripides incorporates the Menoeceus-scene in the body of the mythological tradition.10

The spectators are furthermore prepared for the fact that the solution to the civil war turns out to be the sacrifice of Menoeceus, since Euripides makes Teiresias return from Athens, where he advised one of its autochthonous kings, Erechtheus, on sacrificing his daughter for the city’s sake, with positive result. With this reference, Euripides provides a direct analogy for the scene to come. Thus the image of Teiresias being escorted to the palace by Creon’s son and the following conversation between the seer and the statesman become poignant.11

**ANCHORING CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE: PATRIOTISM**

In addition to preparing the spectators for the upcoming scene, the reference to Erechtheus’ sacrifice also functions as a device to relate the action of the play to the Athenian society of the late fifth century. This age was dominated by war and civil conflict. The year in which the tragedy was performed, around 410 BC12, had just seen the oligarchic coup of Athens and several military disasters in the Peloponnesian War. In these turbulent times, the *polis* relied heavily on the loyalty of its *politai*. To appeal to the citizens’ duty towards their country and to boost their courage, their pure lineage (which had become a distinctive feature of the Athenian citizenship with the law of Pericles in 451/0 BC) was regularly addressed. An

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9 This scant reference to the citizens also deviates strongly from other plays on the Theban story, in which the citizens maintain a central role on stage/in the plot. Luschnig 1995:187.

10 The chorus shares its origins with Cadmus; in her outline of the history of the house, Jocasta starts with the arrival of Cadmus (prologue, ll. 1-87); several stasima refer to Cadmus, Ares, and/or the origin myth of the Sown Men (ll. 232, 638-75, 818-21; cf. Mastronarde 1994:5, *ad* 932, 659-61).

11 Euripides himself wrote a play on the Athenian myth (*Erechtheus*, 423/22 BC). Besides the dramatic effect described, the analogy strongly contributes to misleading the spectators in their expectation as they must have expected from Creon a response similar to that of Erechtheus’ wife Praxithea, who states that she could never hesitate to save the city for the sake of one life (quoted by Lycurgus in *Against Leocrates* 100). Mastronarde 1994 *ad* 854-5; Papadopoulou 2008:64. See n.5.

12 Mastronarde 1994:11-4 gives a concise overview of all arguments concerning the date of the play.
autochthonous myth was an integral part of the oath that young hoplites of Athens who had finished their military training took to serve their city, and, according to Loraux, origin myths like that of Erechtheus were employed in the *epitaphioi* or funeral orations.\(^\text{13}\)

In the well-known funeral oration of Pericles, which was allegedly delivered at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War and is presented thirty years later by Thucydides in its aftermath, the statesman commemorates the fallen citizens by commencing his praise with the ancestors’ remembrance (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.36.1):

> Ἀρξομαι δὲ ἀπὸ τῶν προγόνων πρωτόν· δύκαιον γὰρ αὐτοῖς καὶ πρέπον δὲ ἀμα ἐν τῷ τοιῷθε τὴν τιμήν ταύτην τῆς μνήμης δίδοσθαι. τὴν γὰρ χώραν οἱ αὐτοὶ αἰεὶ οἰκούντες διαδοχὴ τῶν ἐπιγιγνομένων μέχρι τούτε ἑλευθέραν δι᾽ ἀρετὴν παρέδοσαν.

I will begin with our ancestors. It is right in itself and also proper to the occasion that they should have the honour of first mention. This is a land occupied continuously by the same people through a succession of generations up to the present day and handed on as a free country, a bequest of their courage.\(^\text{14}\)

He then continues describing the *polis* by employing symbols of the *oikos*, thus implying that a good Athenian citizen maintains a healthy relationship to the fatherland as he does to the family.\(^\text{15}\) For the well-being of the city, he states, the citizens, who mirror their ancestors in valour, are of paramount importance (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.43.1-4):

> (...) τολμώντες καὶ γιγνώσκοντες τὰ δέοντα καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἑργοῖς αἰσχυνόμενοι ἄνδρες αὐτὰ ἑκτίσαντο, καὶ ὅποτε καὶ πείρα τοῦ σφαλείν, οὐκ οὖν καὶ τὴν πόλιν γε τῆς σφετέρας ἀρετῆς αξιόντες στερίσκειν, κάλλιστον δὲ ἔρανον αὐτῇ προϊέμενοι. κοινῆ γὰρ τὰ σώματα διδόντες ἰδία

\(^{13}\) Part of the ephebic oath is i.a. quoted in Lycurgus’ fourth century-work *Against Leocrates*. On the myth in the ephebic oath, see Loraux 1981:210. On the (cultural and political) appeal to the autochthonous identity of the Athenian citizens, see Loraux 1981, esp. ch.3, Loraux 1996, esp. ch. 2 and 3 and Blok 2009, who differentiates between the fourth- and fifth-century concept of ‘autochthony’.

Loraux 1981 covers the genre of the funeral oration.

\(^{14}\) For this and the next passage the translation by Mynott 2013 is used.

\(^{15}\) On the use of terminology from private life in public discourse, see for instance Strauss 1993 (212f on this interpretation of Pericles’ funeral oration).
τὸν ἀγήραν ἐπαινον ἔλαμβανον καὶ τὸν τάφον ἐπισημότατον, οὐκ ἐν ὦ κεῖναι μᾶλλον, ἀλλ’ ἐν ὦ ἡ δόξα αὐτῶν παρὰ τῷ ἐντυχόντι αἰεὶ (...)

Men of courage won all this, men who knew their duty and kept their honour in its execution; and even when they failed in some venture, they were resolved not on that account to deprive the city of their valour but to present it to her freely as their finest offering. They gave their lives to the common cause and so gained for themselves an enduring tribute and the finest tomb, not the one in which they lie but that in which their fame survives in eternal memory.

The statements in the funeral oration find resonance in Menoeceus’ selfless motivation for his sacrifice. He expresses his admiration for the citizens in the same terms as Pericles did in his oration (and as the women of the chorus will for his courage16). He takes on responsibility for the city and its citizens because of his pure bloodline, and in lines 942-3, Euripides makes Teiresias explicitly stress that Menoeceus fits the part because both of his father’s parents are descendants of the Sown Men, a notion that is reminiscent of the Periclean law17 (to Creon):

σὺ δ’ ἐνθάδ’ ἕμιν λοιπός εἰ Σπαρτών γένους ἀκέραιος ἐκ τε μητρὸς ἀρσένων τ’ ἀπο

You are one of the last remaining members of the Sown Men here, of pure lineage on your mother’s and father’s side.

Moreover, Menoeceus represents a new take on the tragic dilemma that now appears to correspond directly with Athenian values: the loyalties towards family and fatherland ought to coincide. With the character of Menoeceus, we now see that Euripides brought on stage a character that the audience might have recognized as a young Athenian hoplite. Since these hoplites swore their oath in the theater at the start of the Dionysian festival, the new scene about a young man who swears to serve his city engages directly with the context in which it was first performed.18

16 Ll. 1054-9, see n.21.
17 Craik 1988 ad 942. L. 944 (which is disputed) adds ‘οἱ σοὶ τε παιδες’ (‘and so are your children’).
18 Also Sluiter 2005:32. Goldhill 1990:97-129 argues that the rituals at the City Dionysia (or ‘preplay ceremonies’, incl. the parade of ephebes) were situated in the theater so as to consciously set up an ideological juxtaposition with the tragedies that were staged next.
DEBATING AN ATHENIAN ISSUE: SACRIFICE

Several scholars have argued that the character of Menoeceus strengthens the Athenian spectators in their civic ideology.\textsuperscript{19} Yet his identification as, so to say, ‘anachronistic patriotic hoplite’, does not comfortably confirm the Athenian ideal at all: it confronts it.\textsuperscript{20} For what is eventually the effect of the sacrifice? As I have mentioned before, the focus of the \textit{Phoenician Women} quickly shifts away from Menoeceus as well as the Theban citizens after the episode under discussion. Creon’s son is scarcely mentioned again\textsuperscript{21}, and from his self-sacrifice no instant remedy for the city’s sickness follows: the war goes on, and more blood is shed. Different from Aeschylus’ version of the story, in which the city is successfully defended with one fight, here two battles have to be fought. In his report from the battlefield, the messenger relates the miserable fate of the fighting citizens during the first battle in one sentence (ll. 1149-52):

\begin{quote}
πολλοὶ δ’ ἐπιπτὼν κράτας αἴματούμενοι, 
ήμων τ’ ἐς οὐδὰς εἰδες ἀν πρὸ τειχέων 
πυκνοὺς κυβιστητήρας ἐκπεπνευκότας·
ἐξῆραν δ’ ἐδευον γαίαν αἴματος ἱοῖσ.
\end{quote}

Many fell to the ground with bloodied heads, and you could have seen on our earth large numbers of divers, their life’s breath gone, before the walls. They dampened the thirsty earth with streams of their blood.

The description of this mass slaughter resembles the demand for Menoeceus’ single sacrifice as Teiresias described it in lines 933-9:\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{footnotesize}\textsuperscript{19} Balot 2014:286ff claims that the tragic genre generally confirms civic values. Ebener 1964, O’Connor 1987:85-7, Said 1998:294 see the Menoeceus-scene as a moral note/lesson.\textsuperscript{20} Cf. Goldhill 1990, who generally states that tragedians confront values; p.126: ‘tragedy again and again takes key terms of the normative and evaluative vocabulary of civic discourse, and depicts conflicts and ambiguities in their meanings and use’.\textsuperscript{21} Craik 1988:217. The chorus reflects on Menoeceus’ plan in admiration in the antistrophe of the third stasimon (ll. 1054-9). The messenger tells Jocasta of his act in ll. 1090-2, to which she responds briefly in ll. 1204-7. Creon might have entered the stage with his son’s corpse at l. 1310, but it is highly disputable that this mourning scene was part of the original play (Mastronarde 1994 \textit{ad} 1308 for discussion). In none of these cases Menoeceus is mentioned by name.\textsuperscript{22} Mastronarde 1994 \textit{ad} 1153 notes that the description of the battle of the soldiers in ll. 1149-52 recalls that of the ancient battle between the Sown Men (ll. 672-4: ‘it moistened with blood the earth that had
He must give the earth a libation of blood because of the ancient grudge of Ares against Cadmus: Ares is now avenging the death of the earthborn snake. If you do this, you will have Ares as your ally. And if the ground receives offspring in place of offspring and mortal blood for blood, Earth will be propitious to you.

The parallel that Menoeceus drew between himself and the citizens earlier in the tragedy, is silently taken up again in this unforeseen course of events: despite the fact that the citizens do not share in Menoeceus’ prophecy prescribing a libation of blood (and despite his intentions to prevent them from further bloodshed), they initially do have to share in his offering. By doubling the battle, Euripides creates space to show the suffering of the soldiers before giving room to the fraternal duel and the city’s eventual salvation (l. 1460ff).

Because of the allusive way in which the soldiers’ deaths are described, the question raised here is not only whether Menoeceus’ sacrificial act led to victory, but also at what cost this victory was achieved, and whether a ‘pure lineage’ was a necessary condition for it to succeed. Was Menoeceus’ noble death truly a pure libation, or, in hindsight, just another brutal slaughter?

These questions are of direct relevance to an audience who, in a time of disastrous warfare, was very well aware of the paradox that, as Said put it, ‘the mere existence (…) of a city has to be paid by the destruction of its members.’

brought them forth’), but does not notice the parallel phrasing in the prophecy (quoted here), which provides the missing link.

23 ll. 995-1004, cited on p.4.
are problematized by the (lack of) consequences of his act. By consciously obliterating the effect of the sacrifice, Euripides, together with his contemporary Thucydides, debates at the close of the fifth century how the ongoing hardships of the Peloponnesian War proved Pericles’ claim to be a failure: no selfless or ‘pure’ hoplite was able to fight the dominating force of the selfish strife for power, as exemplified by the leading oligarchs in 411 BC, and represented by Oedipus’ sons in this play.26 Furthermore, by consciously obliterating the citizens themselves from the stage and from the consciousness of any of the other central characters of the play, Euripides denies Pericles’ statement that the citizens’ memory would be ‘everlasting’: in Athens’ struggle to survive, their names might have been mentioned only scarcely, or never again.

CONCLUSION

With the third episode of his Phoenician Women, Euripides introduces a new motive in the mythological plot through which he anchors a contemporary civic issue in the legendary story. As he prepares his spectators for the self-sacrifice of Menoeceus with references to an internal and external autochthony myth, the tragedian invites them to recognize in this pure and valorous character a representation of their patriotic ideal in contrast to the Theban brothers’ selfish strife for power. Yet instead of confirming this ideal, he problematizes it. By showing the absence of an immediate result from Menoeceus’ act, which turns out to be anything but a ‘lifesaving medicine’, Euripides presents his audience with a discrepancy between the ideal and the real in a time of warfare, and, as this time is dominated by individuals putting private interests first, calls into question the appeal made to what are considered the core values of Athenian citizenship. Thus Euripides engages critically in and contributes actively to late-fifth century public discourse, and, by bringing it close to home, fully reinforces the story of a city under threat.

26 De Romilly 1965 (on topicality in Euripides’ Phoenician Women) shows that the contrast between public interest and private ambition became a focus of the fifth-century political discourse under the impact of i.a. the oligarchic coups. For Thucydides’ critical reflection on Pericles and his politics, see Foster 2010. For a discussion of the discrepancy between the ideal and actual Athens, see also Loraux 1981, esp. ch. 6.
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Bibliography


