

Re-Founding Thebes: Euripides' *Phoenician Women* and the Chorus' Song-Cycle

In Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, a chorus of Phoenician *parthenoi* are trapped in Thebes because of civil war. They represent a theoric chorus (Prodi 2018), headed to Delphi where they had hoped to travel to serve Apollo. The choral odes of *Phoenician Women* have long been discussed in terms of a “song-cycle” that offers a broader perspective of the events concerning the Labdacids, since the chorus narrate the remote mythical history of Thebes (e.g., Arthur 1977, Foley 1985). The chorus stress the dual foundation myth of Thebes (Berman 2004, 2007 and 2007a; Pache 2014), that is, the story associated with Cadmus, as well as that of Amphion and Zethos. In this paper, I argue that the choral odes, when examined within the context of *theôria* (sacred sightseeing) may also be seen to mark a metaphorical attempt to “re-found” Thebes. Just as historical Athenian *theôria* to Delos includes performances that reinforce Athenian history, identity, and colonizing narrative (e.g., Pindar *Paeon* 5; Rutherford 2013), so too in *Phoenician Women*, as the chorus of theoric *parthenoi* describe the colonization of Thebes by Cadmus, they simultaneously re-enact Cadmus' arrival to Thebes, since they too have traveled from Phoenicia to Thebes.

The chorus' presence in Thebes makes clear that the cultural practice of *theôria* is not functioning on an international level, given that they are unable to proceed to Delphi to serve Apollo. In their narration of the founding of the city by Cadmus, the chorus offer an account that centers the adverse effects of colonization in connection with the creation of a theoric site. According to the chorus, Cadmus, who arrived in Thebes in order to found a city because of oracular *theôria*, killed a dragon and, as a result, Ares is currently hostile. The Theban walls, which represent the foundation of the city, as well as the most famous landmark and theoric

attraction of Thebes, are imagined to be co-extensive with the dragon's cave at Dirke. The chorus' "song-cycle" demonstrates the problems related to Cadmus' simultaneous colonization and creation of a polis and theoric site in Thebes. By contrast, Apollo's destruction of the dragon (232) and creation of the theoric site of Delphi has resulted in no repercussions.

Thebes is portrayed as "sick"; it is a *polis* with a decidedly dysfunctional narrative past, and it perpetuates that narrative past in the present. Yet the outsider chorus fashion a counter-narrative by evoking the mythical Theban Amphion, an Orpheus figure, who was said to have constructed the walls of Thebes by means of his music. The chorus, however, construct not walls, as in the case of Amphion, but a competing narrative of Thebes. I connect the chorus' counter-narrative with the historical practice of choral *theôria* by means of which *poleis* define themselves (Kowalzig 2007). Like Amphion, who made rocks and trees move, I suggest that the chorus too make immobile things mobile – Antigone being the immobile thing – by means of their song, dance, and music. The chorus of Phoenician women, in effect, rub off on Antigone, a *parthenos* too, who ultimately shares many similarities with the chorus of Phoenician women and who leaves at the end of the play to go into exile with her father.

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