

**HEARD AND UNHEARD STROPHES  
IN THE PARODOS OF AESCHYLUS' *SEVEN AGAINST THEBES*<sup>1</sup>**

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In this paper I would like to suggest a metrical interpretation of the parodos of the Theban girls in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*. I shall begin with the metrical part, then I should like to take a closer look at the semantic impact of this interpretation and, instead of a conclusion, show how this proposal would fit into the whole context of the play.

**I Three parts of the parodos**

Editors agree that the third part, i.e. verses 151–180 consists of two pairs of iambo-dochmiac strophes and antistrophes. The underlines you find in the appendix drawn between corresponding units of the same metric structure should convince you that there is no reason to contradict this interpretation.

The same editors disagree completely about the second part: On one side, Mazon, Murray, Page, and West hold for a strophic interpretation<sup>2</sup>. They argue that there are too many corresponding and similar metrical patterns in verses 108–149 to consider them as a mere astrophic series, even if strophes are reconstructed at the cost of several textual changes. Others such as Kraus, Wilamowitz, and Hutchinson cannot accept this view because in their eyes strophic structure implies an almost complete identity of the corresponding cola and this is, as a brief look at the appendix will show, obviously not the case<sup>3</sup>. The letter *s* between the two stanzas means “similar but not identic”, the letter *d* means that the corresponding lines are of different metrical structure. As a good Swiss I will try to show that both sides are right.

As for the first part of the parodos there is a dispute over whether or not the text is to be distributed to different members of the chorus, but — and I am concerned with this — all scholars seem to agree that it is not shaped by any strophes at all, because iambs seem to appear at the end of the verses 87–107 only. I will try to offer some evidence for a modification of the latter statement.

I would like to convince you that the whole parodos is shaped by a crescendo of metrical repetition or, if you allow me to use this term, of strophicity. Let's begin with the first part. If we divide West's text into metrical sections we will see that line 78 has the same metrical structure as line 91: first U – – U –, the dochmiac considered as the most normal

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<sup>1</sup> The following text is based on the paper read at the Corhali colloquium in Ithaca NY/Cornell University, May 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Mazon P., Paris 1953; Murray G., Oxford 1955; Page D. L., Oxford 1972; West M., Stuttgart 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Kraus W., *Strophengestaltung in der griechischen Tragödie 1*, Aischylos und Sophokles, Wien 1957; Wilamowitz-Moellendorff U. von, *Griechische Verskunst*, Berlin 1921; Hutchinson G. O., *Aeschylus Seven against Thebes*, Oxford 1985.

one and, then, UUU – U – a rarer form. Another coincidence is to be found between the three dochmiacs following the first half of line 81 and the three after line 95. Both passages offer twice a “normal” dochmiac and one rarer type. Now, that frequent or even rarer dochmiacs occur twice is no argument for a strophic structure, but repeated series are less fortuitous and, finally, the fact that both repeated series would divide verses 78–109 into two halves of equal length and, at least partly, similar structure, is my first argument in favour not of what Hutchinson would call strophic organisation, but of a bipartition that behaves like strophe and antistrophe — less than the second part of the parodos, yet more than an astroptic series.

As for the text you find in the appendix, it is by no means meant to give any reconstruction. It has the aim to highlight the metrically corresponding units. With this intent I isolate some dochmiacs or iambs that actually belong to one single line. In the same line the text in the appendix is meant to illustrate that the transmitted text, without much conjectural filling, would fit two corresponding stanzas at least in their beginnings. And even in the lines that should correspond, but are of admittedly different metrical form, we can find other similarities such as the three unseparated dochmiacs in *ho leúkaspis órnutai láos eútrepés épi polín* (89) that would be opposed to the three iambs constituting an iambic trimeter (106) *o khrúsopélex daímon épid' epide polín*. Note that both lines (89 and 106) have in common a word (*polín*) as this is often the case in Aeschylean corresponding strophic cola. Nor am I pretending that (83) *hele m'áspidon ktupós ti khrímpsetai boá* forged on the transmitted text *heledemas pedioploktupos ti* and Headlam's conjecture *aspidon ktupos* is really the original text of the passage. I only would like to suggest that a iambic structure could well lie beneath the very corrupt text. If this were the case, then the repeated cola would not embrace three but five lines, the preceding lines being all similar.

This interpretation allows us to cast a new look at the second part of the parodos. For, from the point of view of the first part, that makes only a furtive attempt at being strophic, the second part is an improvement, but it is far from being a pure strophic organisation; on this point, I think, Hutchinson is right. Yet this second part can be interpreted as a development of the first part, as a passage that still reaches a high strophicity without the textual changes West introduces. When we go on, then, to the last part of the parodos, we observe that the first real pair of strophes has its imperfection, but in the second pair the metrical structures correspond perfectly. Therefore, I am proposing something to my knowledge unparalleled, but nevertheless possible in this very experimental play of Aeschylus, an increasing strophicity instead of a yes-or-no-alternative (strophes or no strophes).

## **II Increasing strophicity = increasing perceptibility**

Let us turn now to the text because the metrical interpretation can be supported by a semantic argument. The commentaries explain the unusual dochmiacs in the parodos as an expression of the fear that overwhelms the Theban girls and that would be set against the more temperate way Eteocles considers the state of affairs. Yet some, such as Thalmann (91), also highlight how the theme of seeing overlaps the theme of hearing in this passage. Thalmann maintains that the parodos represents the approaching army. The

girls begin with the dust they see in line 81, they describe it as a messenger who normally speaks; but this messenger is mute. Then they shift more and more to the impression of hearing as in line 100 ἀκούετ' ἢ οὐκ ἀκούετ', *do you hear or not?* Such a transition from not hearing, but seeing to an increasing noise expresses the approaching army.

Now you can see my point. Could it be that the increasing strophicity is related to the theme of increasing perceptibility of sound? In order to give an answer I would like to examine both the semantic and the metrical context of that phrase in line 100 *Do you hear or not?* The chorus is afraid and wants to pray to the gods. One can imagine that some members of the chorus are still reluctant to this idea. In this context *Do you hear or not?* would be an argument in favour of praying and should be interpreted in the following way: "Can you hear the army or not, If you can, pray now!" This could mean that the girls really hear the army, but the following lines and the metrical context suggest that they only think for a moment that they hear already plainly the noise. For the phrase *Do you hear or not?* occurs just after the first time a longer metrical pattern is exactly repeated and becomes thus more perceptible. We can therefore ask the question whether or not the phrase *Do you hear or not?* is an autoreferential indication of repeated metre. There is one evidence: the girls never clearly and explicitly say that they hear anything until the beginning of the real strophes, i.e. the third part where they are much more precise (151): "I hear the noise of the chariots around the city". Furthermore, when Eteocles blames the chorus for weeping, the girls give as a hard reason for their reaction neither the rising dust, nor the great number of spears, and that means: not what they thought to hear in the first part of the parodos, but the shrill noise of the wheels they heard in the exact strophes of the third part only.

The theme of hearing and the repeated metrical patterns could be paralleled in this way. Yet this would mean that in the first part of the parodos the girls actually do not hear the sound or only hear it without certainty; they would rather deduce the sound from what they see. This interpretation would not only fit the low strophicity of the first part but also the metaphor of the mute messenger (82), the imagination of an approaching sound in ποτᾶται, "it's flying" (84), or χρίμπτεται "it's approaching" (84), and the image, but only the image of a river in the mountains which evokes noise (85). The best evidence in favour of this reading is the strange, but unanimously transmitted phrase in line 103: "I have seen the noise," κτύπον δέδορκα. If, on the contrary, we assume that the girls already hear the sound of the spears, either we have to explain the oxymoron, with Rose<sup>4</sup>, as a synaesthetic blend of hearing and seeing, or we must change the text into κτύπον δέδοικα as do West, Murray, Hutchinson and many editors. I think we have less difficulties with the first hypothesis according to which the girls deduce the noise from what they see rather than that they hear it plainly; then, the transmitted perfect *I have seen the noise* would explain the phrase *do you hear or not* (100) as *you can hear it because you did see it*.

A subsidiary argument could be the ring composition we can read in or into the first part<sup>5</sup>. Within its net of semantic and lexical echoes *seeing of noise* corresponds to the mute messenger-theme, the image of the dust.

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<sup>4</sup> Rose, *Mnemosyne* 3, 1938.

<sup>5</sup> For the precise ring composition embracing the second and third part see Thalmann W. G., *Dramatic Art in Aeschylus' Seven against Thebes*, New Haven and London 1978.

1st half	ἀναυδος	82
	ἀσπίδων κτύπος?	83
	approaching	83/84
	ἰὼ	86
	θεοὶ θεαί	86
	ἀλεύσατε	87
2nd half	τίς ὄσεται	91
	θεῶν θεᾶν	92
	ἰὼ	96
	to hear or not to hear	100
	ἀσπίδων κτύπος	100
	κτύπον δέδορκα	103

This interpretation would support the weak strophicity of the first part that increases in the second part of the parodos and will be perfect in the third part when the girls hear plainly the army.

### III Does Eteocles refuse the girl's semiotics?

In the last part of my paper I would like to guess rather than offer evidence for what could be the function of this interpretation of the parodos in the context of the whole play. I would see this function within the context of Froma Zeitlin's interpretation of the *Seven against Thebes* as a play on Eteocles semiotics, a play that can be compared to the later *Agamemnon*<sup>6</sup>. I think the parodos of the girls displays another semiotic that would be in opposition to that of Eteocles. What then would be semiotics in the parodos?

Relying on metre and semantics I have introduced a distinction, sharper than that established by Thalmann or Hutchinson, between visible things and the sound they cause. I would like to focus on the visible but not yet acoustically perceptible sign of the dust. The girls take it as a sign and deduce from it the existence of sound. So this sign is not simply a sign. We can call it an index, a part of a whole thing, that can signify the whole thing by means of a convention. Such an index is different from the signs Eteocles reads, the images on the shields of the Argive generals, images that do not need a special convention to be read. Now, *Seven against Thebes* is not the only play where index and image are opposed semiotic features: remember how harshly the male chorus reacts in the *Agamemnon* as Clytaemestra interprets the beacon (according to a convention) as index of the fall of Troy. The chorus associates this semiotics explicitly to the fact that Clytaemestra is a *guné*. His own — and we infer: male — way of reading signs is very well exemplified in the parodos of the *Agamemnon*: they interpret oracular images such as the mother-hare killed by an eagle (*Ag.* 119ff.)<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Zeitlin F., *Under the sign of the shield: semiotics and Aeschylus' Seven against Thebes*, Roma 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Both Eteocles and the chorus of the *Agamemnon* prefer the assistance of a messenger to the interpretation of indexical signs.

We can confirm this association of *guné* and index by extending our inquiry to the *Odyssey*, a text very closely connected to the *Agamemnon*<sup>8</sup>: The *Odyssey* is shaped by many triple series of resembling situations (three times Telemachus asks for information about his father, three times someone is throwing an object on Odysseus and so on) and one of those are three pairs of related women and men trying to recognize Odysseus. The women always succeed by signs, the men fail, but are more sensitive to the feelings. Helena for instance recognizes Odysseus on the face of Telemachus, her husband Menelaos only perceives the stranger's sadness. Arete, the Pheacian queen, sees first what escapes her husband Alkinoos: that Odysseus is wearing clothes that he must have from Nausicaa. Alkinoos is only aware of Odysseus' tears. Finally, in spite of his hospitality, Eumaios fails to see Odysseus under the mask of a beggar, but Eurykleia, the corresponding female slave recognizes Odysseus by a *sema*, the scar. So, we cannot find the same *index-image* structure in the *Odyssey* as in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, but we can say that *gunaikes* are marked in both texts by the use of signs and rather indexical signs.

Let us conclude: In the *Agamemnon*, index seems to be the sign women are associated with, men seem to prefer images. And those men react harshly on the index-sign. In a play that precedes the *Agamemnon* Theban girls use such an indexical sign, and Eteocles uses images as signs, too. If this Eteocles, a man, reacts to the girls' lament by blaming them not for girlish but for womanish behaviour, then we are dealing not only with an opposition between the weeping discourse Nicole Loraux has described in *Les mères en deuil* and a male discourse exercised for instance in the symposium, but maybe with a semiotical opposition too. One of the reasons that oppose Eteocles to the girls could be their different way of reading signs. This also could explain Eteocles' irony when he concludes his first long speech in line 202 by a quotation of the passage in the first part of the parodos, where the girls began to transform seeing into hearing: *Did you hear or not?*

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<sup>8</sup> In the *Agamemnon* as well as in the *Odyssey* Clytaemestra is a contrasting foil of Penelope (that *guné* which demands signs) and when the guardian says in a very difficult passage (*Ag.* 8ff.) of the prologue that *the heart of a guné waiting for a male plan* (or: in a male way) *is strong by symbola* he could make reference to the Homeric structure.

## Appendix. Three parts of the parodos: increasing “strophicity”.

1					
78	<UUUU>θρέομαι φοβερὰ μεγάλ' ἄχη <u>μεθεῖται στρατός.</u> <u>στοατόπεδον λιπών</u>	s	τίς ἄρα ῥύσεται, τίς ἄρ' ἐπαρκέσει θεῶν ἢ θεῶν; πότερα δὴτ' ἐγὼ	91	
80	ῥεῖ πολὺς ὄδε Λεῶς πρόδρομος ἰππότας· αἰθερία κόνις <u>με πείθει φανείσ'.</u> <u>ἄναυδος σαφής</u> <u>ἔτυμος ἄγγελος.</u>	s s s	<πάτρια> προσπέσω βρέτη δαιμόνων; (ἰώ,) μάκαρες εὐεδροί ἀκμάζει βρετέων ἔχεσθαι τί μέλ- λομεν ἀγάστονοι;	95	
-	ἔλε μ' ἀσπίδων κτύπος τι, χρίμπτεται βοά ? <u>ποτάται, βρέμει δ'</u>		ἀκούετ' ἢ οὐκ ἀκούετ' ἀσπίδων κτύπον; πέπλων καὶ στεφάνων	100	
85	ἀμαχέτου δίκαν ὔδατος ὀροτύπου. ἰώ, ἰώ θεοὶ θεαὶ θ' ὀρώμενον κακὸν ἀλεύσατε. βοά ὑπὲρ τειχέων < ? > ὁ λεύκασπις ὄρ- νυται λαὸς εὐ- τρεπῆς ἐπὶ πόλιν	s s ? s d d d	πότ' εἰ μὴ νῦν ἀμ- φί λιτάν' ἔξομεν; κτύπον δέδορκα· πάταγος οὐχ ἑνὸς δορός. τί ῥέξεις; προδώ- σεις, παλαίχθων Ἄρης, τὰν τεάν; ὦ χρυσοπή- ληξ δαίμων, ἔπιδ' ἔπιδε πόλιν .	105	
90	διώκων <πόδα.>	d	ἂν ποτ' εὐφιλήταν ἔθου		
2					
109	θεοὶ πολιάοχοι χθονὸς ἴτ', ἴτε, πάντες. ἴδετε παρθένων ικέσιον λόχον δουλοσύνας ὕπερ. κύμα περι πτόλιν δοχολόφων ἀνδρῶν	d s s	σύ τ', ὦ Διογενὲς φιλόμαχον κράτος, ῥυσίπολις γενοῦ, Παλλάς, ὃ θ' ἵππιος ποντομέδων ἀναξ	127	
115	καχλάζει πνοαῖς Ἄρηςος ὀρόμενον. ἄλλ', ὦ Ζεῦ <φεῦ φεῦ> πάτερ παντελές, πάντως ἄρῃσον δαῖων ἄλωσιν.	s s	ἰχθυβόλῳ μαχανᾷ Ποσειδάν, ἐπίλυσιν φόβων, ἐπίλυσιν δίδου. σύ τ', Ἄρης, φεῦ, φεῦ, πόλιν ἐπώνυμον	130 135	
120	<u>Ἀργεῖοι γὰρ πόλισμα Κάδμου</u> <u>κυκλοῦνται φόβος δ' ἀρείων ὀπλων.</u> <u>διὰ δέ τοι γενύων ἰππίων</u> <u>κινύρονται φόνον χαλινοί.</u> <u>ἔπτά δ' ἀγήνορες πρόποντες στρατοῦ</u> <u>δορυσοῖσι σαγαῖς</u>		Κάδμου φύλαξον κήδεσαι τ' ἐναργῶς. καὶ Κύπρις, ἅτ' εἰ γένους προμάτωρ, ἄλευσον· σέθεν γὰρ ἐξ αἵματος γεγόναμεν· λιταῖς [σε] θεοκλύτοις αὐτοῦσαι πελαζόμεσθα. καὶ σύ, Λύκει' ἀναξ, Λύκειος γενοῦ	140 145	
126	πύλαις ἐβδόμαις προσίστανται πάλῳ λαχόντες.	s	στρατῶ δαῖω [στόνων ἀντᾶς]. σύ τ', ὦ Λατογένεια κούρα, τόξον εὐτυκάζου.		
3					
151	ἔ ἔ, ἔ ἔ, ὄτοβον ἀρμάτων ἀμφὶ πόλιν κλύω ὦ πότνι Ἥρα. <u>ἔλακον ἀξόνων βριθομένων χνόαι·</u> <u>Ἄρτεμι φίλα.</u>	str. α	ἔ ἔ, ἔ ἔ, ἀκροβόλων [δ'] ἐπάλλξεις λιθάς ἔρχεται· ὦ φίλ' Ἀπολλων. κόναβος ἐν πύλαις χαλκοδέτων σακέων· παῖ Διός, ὄθεν	160	
155	δοριτίνακτος αἰθῆρ ἐπιμαίνεται. τί πόλις ἄμμι πάσχει, τί γενήσεται; <u>ποῖ δ' ἔτι τέλος ἐπάγει θεός;</u>	s	πολεμόκραντον ἀγνὸν τέλος ἐν μάχᾳ. σύ τε, μάκαρ' ἀνασσ' Ὀγκα, πρὸ πόλεως ἑπτάπυλον ἔδος ἐπιρροῦ.	165	
166	<u>ἰὼ παναρκεῖς θεοί.</u> <u>ἰὼ τέλειοι τέλειαι τε γὰς</u> <u>πᾶσδε πυργοφύλακες.</u> <u>πόλιν δορίπνον μὴ προδώθ'</u>	str. β	ἰὼ φίλοι δαίμονες, λυτήριοι <τ' > ἀμφιβάντες πόλιν δείξαθ' ὡς φιλοπόλεις, μέλεσθέ θ' ἱερῶν δημίων, μελόμενοι δ' ἄλλατε·	175	
170	<u>ἔτεροφώνῳ στρατῶ.</u> <u>κλύετε παρθένων κλύετε πανδίκως</u> <u>χειροτόνους λιτάς.</u>		φιλοθύτων δέ τοι πόλεος ὀργίαν μνήστορες ἐστέ μοι.	180	

Note: *italics*: invented; underlines: of equal metrical structure; **bold**: word-repetition at corresponding metrical units; s: similar rhythm; d: different rhythm.