ORIGIN MYTHS: PERFORMATIVITY AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF MEANING

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ABSTRACT

Origin myths tell the founding of a place. They signify membership and locate in
time and space by providing a context and etiology for identity that is historical,
thetical, social, and geographic. This identity, however, does not remain static as
origin myths take on a performative quality because of the values they express. This
thesis seeks to explore what origin myths reveal about the human relationship with place
in an effort to understand the human values at stake in these myths.

As complex narratives, origin myths demand an analysis that accounts for their
density. This thesis applies Heath’s concept of centrifugal poetics to unpack the thematic
plurality of origin myths, focusing on Thebes and including both the Cadmus and the
Amphion and Zethus stories. My analysis exposes the human values embedded in those
themes and considers the implications of myth’s role in perpetuating these values.

This thesis starts with a survey of ancient Greek origin myths, finding they recast
the beginning of a place in the present through memory, meaning, and metaphor to tie the
contemporary character of a place to how it began. I then offer to reconcile philosophy
and poetry by arguing origin myths engender belief rather than reveal truth. Next, I
investigate the values exhibited in the foundation of Thebes. Finally, this thesis identifies
aspects of origin myth performativity alluded to by Aeschylus’ Seven Against Thebes.
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For Nora and William
Come, Mercury, by whose minstrel spell
Amphion raised the Theban stones,
Come, with the seven sweet strings, my shell,
   Thy “diverse tones,”
Nor vocal once note pleasant, now
To rich man’s board and temple dear:
   Put forth thy power, till Lyde bow
   Her stubborn ear.¹

- Quintus Horatius Flaccus

Odes, Book III, Poem XI

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INTRODUCTION

Horace’s bid for the lyre to seduce a reluctant maid resembles the power of stories to beguile. Stories as well have a seductive power. They seep into our discourse and frame our understanding of so many things. Stories about beginnings especially are potent because they address the start of something important. Stories don’t just describe what happened. They also tell us about who we are, who we are not, and maybe even more importantly who we will become. This thesis addresses a particular kind of story about the founding of a place through an origin myth.

Origin myths may be performative by the way they make claims on the past, locate meaning, and metaphorically reveal the present. They signify membership and locate in time and space. Origin myths engender belief by providing a context and etiology for identity that is historical, theological, social, and geographic to express values associated with the place depicted in the myth. These values shape the way we see ourselves and how we move into the future. We ultimately tell these stories for ourselves but at the same time they seem to emanate a power of their own.

From the widest aperture, this thesis seeks to answer the question: Why are we here? I don’t mean that question in the general purpose sense of why does the universe exist. Rather, I mean why are we – any of us – here in a particular place? Such a huge question demands an examination of how others have approached the same problem. Ancient Greek origin myths offer one way of thinking about what looks to be mostly an unanswerable question.
As humans, we encounter an ambiguous world every day. Our senses are limited. Our access to the past stands open to interpretation. The future remains completely inaccessible. Around these limitations, we impose structures to deal with all of the ambiguity and uncertainty. Those structures, however, are often given to us through education and enculturation. An exploration of origin myths requires thinking about antitheses that have persisted for thousands of years with little absolute resolution, like the tension between mythos and logos and the struggle between civilization and nature.

Recent scholarship on origin myths tends to focus on their historical value or on their socio-political relevance to then contemporary culture, but the surviving texts offer significant opportunity for further literary analysis. To address this opening, I use Heath’s concept of centrifugal poetics to analyze ancient origin myths to discover what these myths reveal about the human relationship with place in an effort to understand the human values at stake in the myths.

Heath’s idea of centrifugal poetics proposes the ancient Greeks sought narrative coherence through “thematic plurality” rather than through a single, unifying theme. Applying centrifugal poetics as a methodology offers an opportunity for an expansive analysis rather than demanding the narrow focus typical of more modern literary criticism. Heath contends the ancient Greeks understood thematic plurality as a unifying feature to create a composite greater than the individual components.

Moving on from my proposed methodology, I see this thesis providing specific value in these four areas: examining origin myths and the values they convey illuminates the richness of these stories; understanding a place’s origins enhances appreciation for
that place; suggesting the stories we tell about origins have performative power; and, demonstrating the value of a liberal studies approach to thinking about fundamental human questions without apparent answers.

Above all, this thesis addresses concern for human values. Although I do discuss particular values at times, addressing the worth of specific values is not my primary focus. The focus, rather, is to explore how values get portrayed and how we think about them especially within the context of origin myths and their influence on a place. Instead of focusing on what the values are, I am more interested in how they get communicated and perpetuated and what that means for the subject place.

Values can be elusive. Unless we think about where values come from and how they get expressed, we cannot begin to understand, let alone consider, their quality or influence. In this way, we can actively justify our beliefs instead of blindly believing, or at least acknowledge the uncertainty of them. Recognizing human values becomes critical for understanding value expressions because most often these values come infused in the social and cultural milieu in which we ourselves also float.

The milieu cannot always, if ever, neatly be parsed. This thesis is an inherently interdisciplinary project because origin stories themselves cross multiple fields. Thinking about issues involving the past cannot ignore history, although this is in no way an historical project. Mythology, philosophy, poetry, geography, and drama all offer an array of primary source material. The project raises philosophical, political, and theological issues, among others, all within a geographic context in each of its four chapters.
In Chapter One, I argue origin myths recast the beginning of a place in the present through memory, meaning, and metaphor intimately tying the contemporary character of the place to how it began. The chapter starts with an overview of the ancient sources of origin myths, explaining how reception and transmission probably have had a significant impact on the myths available to us today. I then provide a survey of origin myths to describe how they geographically locate significance, make claims on the past, and reveal the present. Finally, the chapter concludes with my reasons for choosing ancient Greece, and specifically Thebes, for this project.

Following this overview of ancient Greek origin myths, I contend origin myths engender belief rather than reveal the truth in Chapter Two to explain the theoretical framework for my thesis. I begin with a review of recent scholarship to highlight important contributions, especially postmodern, new historicism, and historical methodologies, to my understanding of origin myths. After this review, I explore the limits of philosophical knowledge and the purpose of myth and the human condition to understand what origin myths offer. The chapter concludes with a description for how I use Heath’s concept of centrifugal poetics as a framework for analyzing the myths about Thebes through what Mac Sweeney calls the origin myth discourse of a place.

I apply Heath’s idea of centrifugal poetics in Chapter Three to identify the thematic plurality of Theban origin myths and find the myths associate particular values with Thebes. First, I discuss Thebes’ mythological origins to review the extant Theban origin myths. The chapter then takes an in-depth look at some representative themes, including civilization, the gods, and family to pull out the embedded values such as
human thriving, heroism, and fraternity. Essentially, I compare and contrast the Theban origin myth discourse throughout this chapter to elucidate the value laden themes found in the different versions and variations of myths about Thebes’ origins.

I then suggest Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes* exposes the performativity of origin myths by considering how the play alludes to Thebes’ origins in Chapter Four. I begin the chapter with observations of how Aeschylus appears to focus on the power of language throughout the play. Next, the chapter asserts the specific allusions to Theban origins in the play to geographically locate the city and make selective claims on the past as a way of shaping the future. I then discuss the resounding values evident in the play associated with Thebes’ origins I identified in Chapter Three and conclude the chapter by showing how Theban origin myths prevail on Thebes’ future by reifying the metaphor of the place evident in its beginning.

To conclude this thesis, I offer some brief thoughts about why I think the four specific value propositions of this project outlined above matter. Thebes has a fascinating story, which helps to elucidate some of all that origin myths can contain. Examining the Theban origin myth discourse enhances an appreciation for Thebes by describing how people connected to the city. The Theban origin myths, however, may have performative aspects that anticipate the city’s unfolding. A liberal studies approach to the Theban origin myths offers a way of recognizing and dealing with the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding a place’s origins. Finally, Thebes itself reminds us of the contingency of actual places and the endurance of ideas about places.
CHAPTER ONE

ORIGIN MYTHS FROM ANCIENT GREECE

One cannot geographically identify the beginning of the universe, but one can identify with a fixed place on earth. Dougherty notes “the Greeks loved to speculate about beginnings.”¹ Origin myths always represent particular beginnings, a local beginning. They describe the beginning of a place one can find on a map or a place one can travel to or perhaps a place where one originated. Origin myths recount the beginning of Rhodes, Scheria, Cyrene, Naxos, Aetna, Lesbos, Sparta, Corinth, Thebes, and many other places.

Origin myths recast the beginning of a place in the present through meaning, memory, and metaphor intimately tying the contemporary character of a place to how it began. This chapter begins with a survey of the ancient sources of origin myths. I then discuss how meaning, memory, and metaphor work in specific origin myths. Finally, I provide a rationale for studying origin myths of the ancient Greeks and explain why I chose Thebes for an in-depth analysis.

Sources of Origin Myths

Reception and transmission probably has had a significant effect on the Ancient Greek origin myths available to us. Geographers and mythographers finally recorded written accounts of the founding of much earlier Greek cities, like Sparta, Corinth, and

Thebes only near the turn of the millennium. Prior, origin myths showed up in part and whole throughout Greek history in many different types of work. The stories, however, rarely stand alone as independent narratives but survive in variety of source material ranging across time and genre.

Many scholars have identified various sources of ancient Greek origin myths in ancient texts.² Like all Greek myth, origin stories probably come somewhere out of the oral tradition. Edmunds notes “the Greek poetry to which we have access in texts was itself oral.”³ The stories the Greeks would eventually write down started at some unknown time in the past. The Greeks perpetuated the stories by passing them on through successive generations. As they developed written language, the Greeks began to write poetry preserving these myths.

The Greeks did not only use language to spread myth. Edmunds explains “visual contact was [a] normal…daily occurrence in antiquity.”⁴ Vase paintings, coins, and other artwork all depicted mythological scenes. Some even depicted origin myths in particular, such as Tyre’s bronze coinage, a Roman city founded in the 2nd Century AD.⁵ The Greeks also preserved origin stories through public celebrations and the cult of local

² I have mostly used Graham and Dougherty’s separate research, for which I am especially grateful, for helping identity origin myths embedded in many texts by a range of authors. I have also relied on other scholars for their identification of other written origin myths and have located some myself that probably have been identified elsewhere. In all cases, I have consulted translations of the primary sources for my analysis in this effort so any misrepresentations are entirely my own.


⁴ Edmunds, 2.

founders, such as Oinopion, founder of ancient Chios. Pausanias wrote people still told stories about Oinopion and declared Oinopion’s tomb “a must-see tourist destination.” As fascinating as this is, I will primarily focus on written origin myths in this thesis to limit the scope of the project, to explore intertextuality, and to look at the most explicit accounts available.

Reception matters for understanding the perspective of origin myths. As Rosavich points out, myth does not perpetuate on its own but rather gets picked up by someone and spread through the current culture. This adds a deal of complexity to origin myths. Origin myths can change over time and be modified by a contemporary audience to incorporate new beliefs about what the culture’s origins mean for the contemporary society.

As I noted above, we only have written origin myths about earlier cities from long after they were founded. Geographers like Strabo writing in the 1st Century AD and Pausanias in the 2nd Century AD included origin myths in their descriptions of the Greek world. Mythographers like Conan writing in the 1st Century BC and the 1st Century AD and Apollodorus writing in the 1st or 2nd Century AD compiled many myths, including origin myths, in their work. Apollodorus’ Library, perhaps the most widely known,

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contains origin stories of varying detail amongst numerous accounts of ancient myth. Apollodorus doubtfully captures the origin myths precisely as they originally existed. No one would have had access to the original accounts even if that was the goal.

Pamius explains around the time of Apollodorus’ writing, myth had “been losing its social and political efficacy” and “no longer serve[d] the propaganda of the Greek cities or of the aristocratic families who asserted their mythological ancestors.”

Myth, then, had lost local value and had rather become important to the broader Greek and Roman identity. Apollodorus’ Library captures the “common cultural memory” not necessarily the stories as they happened or were known to have happened in the past but as a way “to put an artificial memory at the disposal of the Greek-reading public.” Perhaps this explains the chronicling of the origins of the more ancient cities that had so far mostly escaped treatment, at least for surviving texts.

Turning to transmission, the preservation of written material has no doubt impacted the availability of origin myths. Origin myths also exhibit intertextuality across time genre. For example, the historian Diodorus Siculus writing in the 1st Century BC included elements of origin myths in The Library of History, where he recounts the founding of Rhodes. This account echoes Homer’s and a similar one by Pindar that I

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10 Pamius, 53.

11 Pamius, 53.

will discuss in more detail below. While origin myths show up in some of the most significant texts surviving from the ancient world, strong evidence suggests many more whole stories and other details for those we received have been lost.

Homer’s work contains the earliest traces of written origin myths, as many scholars have noted. Pindar references origin myths in his 5th Century BC odes. Early historians, namely Herodotus and Thucydides, both writing roughly in the 5th Century BC, also included accounts of origin myths in their work. The Romans, too, took interest in origin myths, perhaps most famously with the origins of Rome itself.13 Not surprisingly given the intimate connections between Greek and Roman culture, the Romans also wrote about the origins of Greek cities. The mythographer Hyginus recorded origin myths in his catalogue of mythology and the Latin poet Ovid likewise includes Greek origin myths in his epic poetry, both writing around the turn of the millennium.

Despite the wealth of texts we have, so much more has been lost over time. The 4th Century BC historian Ephorus may have recorded extensive origin myths, but unfortunately only fragments of his work have survived.14 Ephorus wrote what may have been the first universal history that undoubtedly accounted for the origins of many places in the Greek world.15 While we have lost Ephorus’ History, some fragments survive with


explicit accounts of city origins, like Miletus.\textsuperscript{16} Strabo, who I noted above wrote much later, references Ephorus explicitly in his work, although Strabo doubtfully captures all of Ephorus’ contributions to the written record.\textsuperscript{17}

Dougherty observes origin myths may have even existed as a genre in the Hellenistic period. Dougherty points to Callimachus and his student Apollonius as examples of poets who wrote origin poems and even collections of origin poems.\textsuperscript{18} Callimachus famously wrote a poem entitled \textit{Aitia} probably sometime in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Century BC, which unfortunately only survives as fragments.\textsuperscript{19} Apollonius wrote poems about the founding of cities, like Alexandria, Cnidus, Dotion, and Lesbos, but only fragments of these works survive as well.\textsuperscript{20} Drawing on material from the past, these authors recorded the stories for a contemporary audience inventing the origin myth genre, according to Dougherty.\textsuperscript{21} Aeschylus may have written an entire play about the founding of Aetna that has not survived, in a final example of the range of genre working with origin myths.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{16} Mac Sweeney, \textit{Foundation Myths and Politics in Ancient Ionia}, 72-73.

\textsuperscript{17} Mac Sweeney, \textit{Foundation Myths and Politics in Ancient Ionia}, 139.

\textsuperscript{18} Dougherty, “Archaic Greek Foundation Poetry: Questions of Genre and Occasion,” 45.


\textsuperscript{21} Dougherty, “Archaic Greek Foundation Poetry: Questions of Genre and Occasion,” 45.

\textsuperscript{22} Dougherty, “Archaic Greek Foundation Poetry: Questions of Genre and Occasion,” 43.
Claiming the Past

Origin myths establish memory because of their inherent historicity. By their nature, origin myths always recall the past. The past, however, may not always simply be history. Claims to history may appear authoritative but often may be contested. This contest for claims on history shape memory in the present. As such, origin myths recast the beginning of a place as memory in the present intimately tying the place as it is to how it began.

Thucydides offers clear examples of how origin myths make claims on the past by establishing memory. For example, he provides a detailed and straight forward account of the founding of Heraclea in Trachis by the Spartans in Book 3 of History of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides writes the Trachians and the Dorians went to Sparta to ask them for protection from the Oeteans. The Spartans agreed to help, in part according to Thucydides, to establish a colony that would be well positioned against Athens. Thucydides identifies three Spartan founders of Heraclea and writes the Spartans consulted the Oracle of Delphi and then sent out settlers from Sparta as well as other nearby cities.23

Additionally, Thucydides recounts the founding of cities in much sparser detail such as Naxos and Syracuse in Sicily, among several other cities, in Book 6. Here, Thucydides describes only the barest details about the various city origins. Thucydides typically provides only the name of the founder and where the settlers came from, along

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with a time reference to fix the city’s founding. Nonetheless, recording founders’ names and settlers’ identities’ makes simple historical claims and establishes memory for the origins of those places.

Herodotus, on the other hand, provides two different accounts of Cyrene’s founding that make competing claims on the past. Herodotus recalls the founding of Cyrene in Book 4 of *The Histories*. Writing roughly around the middle of the 5th Century BC, Herodotus consciously provides two different accounts for the origins of Cyrene in Libya within the same text. These two stories probably would have been contemporary to each other and Cyrene would have been around 200 hundred years old at the time of Herodotus’ writing. Both stories share some common elements but diverge over reception of the Oracle.

In the first account, Herodotus writes the Thereans, Cyrene’s parent city, say Grinnus went to consult the Oracle at Delphi about an unidentified and unrelated issue and was told by the Oracle he was to found a city in Libya. Grinnus told the Oracle he was too old and pointed to Battus and asked for someone younger to be given the task. Grinnus does not set out to establish a colony and later it stops raining in Thera prompting another visit by the Thereans to the Oracle concerning the drought.

The Oracle then reminds the Thereans of the earlier direction to establish a colony in Libya. Taking the Oracle seriously this time, they set out to settle on an island named

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24 Thucydides, 6.3-6.

25 Graham, Dougherty (1994), and Mac Sweeney (2015) all note the conflicting accounts of Cyrene’s origins in Herodotus’ *Histories.*
Platea off of the Libyan coast.26 After floundering for two years, the settlers return to the Oracle for guidance and the Oracle insists they settle in Libya proper. The settlers return to the island to regroup and then relocate to the mainland where they lived another six years. The Libyans, then, convinced the settlers to move and take them to the place that would be Cyrene founded by Battus.27

The second account Herodotus relays comes from the people in Cyrene themselves. Most of the story overlaps, except for the involvement of Battus. Herodotus writes Battus himself initially sought guidance from the Oracle about his own speech impediment, according to the Cyreeneans. Similar to the Thereans’ telling of Grinnus’ inquiry, the Oracle ignored Battus’ solicitation and instead directed him to establish a colony in Libya. Battus similarly balked and returned to Thera where the people there continued to suffer and would seek out the Oracle’s guidance again. The Oracle again told the Thereans to follow Battus to found a colony in Libya. Battus and his settlers sailed for Libya, but attempted to return to Thera where the Thereans threw things at them refusing to allow the settlers to return. Battus and his ships returned to Libya to settle on the island of Platea off Libya’s coast, picking up where Herodotus’ first account by the Thereans leaves off.28

These two different accounts concerning the same place highlight the competition for memory. Herodotus perpetuates two distinct, and arguably competing, local histories

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27 Herodotus, 4.157-8.

28 Herodotus, 4.154-6.
side by side in his own larger historical project. For the people of Cyrene and their version of the myth, Battus obtains greater legitimacy as a founder if he directly received the Oracle. The Thereans, however, can still claim Cyrene as their own if Grinnus gets remembered as the one who received the Oracle in their version of the myth. Both variations recast the founding of Cyrene in the present by making claims to the past about the reception of the Oracle dictating Cyrene’s founding. Interestingly, Clarke notes “Battus’ tomb is still pointed out to visitors to Cyrene” even today, speaking to the staying power of origin myths and their effect on memory.29

Claims to the past are not restricted to historical time. For example, Pausanias writes about the origins of Corinth, stating Oceanus’ daughter Ephyra lived there before anyone else immediately setting the story in mythological or legendary time.30 He writes the Corinthians claim Corinthus as their city’s namesake declaring he was Zeus’ son. Marathon, a descendent of Helios, divided the land amongst his sons following the death of his own father and Ephyra became Corinth.

Whether the past gets set in historical time or even earlier before the human record of history in mythological time, origin myths about the past always persists as a function of memory in the present. Origin myths provide a way to seed the collective memory about a place but cannot be definitive in the objective, historical sense. The myths, rather, appeal to the past to describe why geography matters.

29 Clarke, 170.
30 Pausanias, 2.1.1.
Locating Significance

Origin myths locate meaning because of their essential geographic quality. Origin myths emphasize the local, create order, and establish a human relationship to a particular place. The connection between a locally identifiable place and the memory inherent in the origins of the place I discussed above geographically fixes meaning in the present. Origin myths potently locate geographic meaning because they invoke the place in a complex way that contemplates the very beginnings of that place and the meanings associated with those origins bound up in the context of the narrative retelling. The place becomes geographically significant in the present by close association with how the place began.

In contrast to creation myths that tell the story of the very beginning of everything, origin myths describe the beginnings of a specific geographic place. Origin myths are not as ambitious as creation myths because they do not describe the beginning of everything. They do not describe the universe coming to order out of chaos or where the gods come from or how the world materialized. Origin myths, rather, describe something much more particular and much more personal. Origin myths connect geographically to real places by bringing local order out of what would otherwise be wild space.

Both origin myths and creation myths describe order coming out of chaos. Hesiod’s *Theogony* explicitly describes the earth coming out of chaos into its ordered form as we know it.31 Some origin myths are more explicit about ordering the physical

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world than others. The origin myth of Scheria in Homer’s *Odyssey*, discussed below, explicitly describes the Phaiakian’s fleeing the Cyclops, who would have certainly made chaotic neighbors, to found a new home where they establish order by building a wall around their city, erecting temples, and portioning out the land. The founding of the colony represents the restoration of order for the mother city often in colonial origin stories.

Homer brings the origins of Scheria into the narrative of Odysseus exemplifying how origin myths locate meaning. In Book 6, Athena devises to help Odysseus by going to the Phaiakian city while Odysseus sleeps in a pile of leaves nearby. Athena, in disguise as a friend, encourages Nausikaa, the daughter of the current leader Alkinoos, to take her laundry cart to go find and help Odysseus. As Athena heads off to carry out her scheme, the poet indicates Nausithoos brought his people to Scheria and founded the place after leaving their previous home in Hyperia to escape harassment by the neighboring Cyclops.

Scheria’s origins appear to have nothing to do with the narrative of Odysseus' journey or really even of this particular instance of Athena's intervening on his behalf. This digression in the narrative serves to provide greater significance to the place where Odysseus finds himself. Auerbach, critical of Homer, would say this kind of digression

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34 Homer, *Odyssey* 6.6-10.
gets foregrounded over the predominate narrative. However, the digression enhances the meaning of the narrative rather than detracting. Odysseus isn't just sleeping somewhere along his journey at this time. He sleeps in Scheria and the digression informs readers about the significance of the specific place. The digression locates Odysseus seeking refuge in a pile of leaves in the land of those who fled the Cyclops. Indeed, Odysseus himself had fled the Cyclops earlier in his journey, a tale he will later tell in *Odyssey* 9.

Homer describes the founding of Rhodes when cataloguing the Greek ships that set sail for Troy in the *Iliad*. Tlepolemos, leader of the Rhodian forces bound for Troy, founded Rhodes after killing his father Heracles’ uncle. Following the murder, Tlepolemos fled by sea to avoid the revenge of Heracles’ other descendants where he then founded Rhodes. Homer, probably alluding to the three cities of Rhodes, says they “settled there in triple division by tribes.” All of Rhodes prospered because of Zeus’ favor, according to Homer.

In this famous listing of the leaders of the Greek ships that set out for Troy, Homer anchors the heroes of the Trojan War as depicted in the *Iliad* to actual places in the Greek world along with their genealogy. By recounting the specific origins of the place where a contingent hails, Homer associates further meaning with the place by identifying it with representative heroes. Here, Homer invokes Rhodes’ violent origins.

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while also adding to its mystic the heroic violence against Troy. Homer recalls Tlepolemos, a murderous descendent of Heracles, founded Rhodes and won Zeus’ favor. Homer perpetuates the myth by adding Rhodes participated in the war against Troy under the leadership of its violent founder.

Somewhat similar to the lines about Tlepolemos and Rhodes, Homer compares Meges, the leader of the Doulichion contingent, to Ares. Meges founded Doulichion after angering his father Phyleus. Homer develops Doulichion’s origin myth much less than the one about Rhodes, but it works in the same way to bring the particular place into the narrative and associate Doulichion with the Trojan War, all while associating their leader to the god of war and emphasizing his quarrelsome nature as the impetus for the origins of the city.

In a final example of how origin myths geographically locate meaning, Pausanias describes the founding of Sparta in his probably 2nd century AD Description of Greece. Pausanias recounts the history of Laconia citing what he calls the indigenous story as his source. The first king of the region, Lelex, who Apollodorus claims was an autochthon, had two sons named Myles and Polycoan. Myles’ son, Eurotas, succeeded him as king. Eurotas then left the kingdom to Lacedaemon, son of Zeus and Taygete, because he had

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37 For more about “Murderous Founders” and violent origins, see Dougherty, The Poetics of Colonization, 31-44; and, Mac Sweeney, Foundation Myths and Politics in Ancient Ionia, 44-79.

38 Homer, Iliad 2.625-2.630.

39 Pausanias, 3.1.1.

no male heir of his own.41 Lacedaemon also had married Eurotas’ daughter, Sparta. According to Pausanias, Lacedaemon changed the name of the people from the Leleges to the Lacadaemons and he then founded the city of Sparta, naming it after his wife.42 This story attaches to the place known as Sparta.

Naming a place perhaps is the most straightforward way of geographically fixing significance. Origin myths more broadly attach meaning to places in the world making local geography matter. The myths evoke local geography inside the story and enhance the significance of the place with the story’s retelling to become a place that matters. Stories about a place’s origins enhance the place through association with the past in the present.

Revealing the Present

Origin myths function as metaphor because of their etiological nature. The etiological value of origin myths can be simple, such as explaining why a place has a particular name like with the story of Sparta above. The etiological value becomes much more interesting when origins describe reasons for the contemporary character of the place implying causal comparison. This metaphor, or more precisely a root metaphor, recasts the beginning of the place through claims on history and geographic connectivity to associate and explain the contemporary place through the place’s origins.

Pindar uses origin myths as metaphor fairly explicitly in some of his odes. The metaphor works to enlarge the victor and bestow even greater celebrity on the place. As

41 Pausanias, 3.1.2.
42 Pausanias, 3.1.2.
with Herodotus above, two examples from Pindar below representing two different accounts of Cyrene’s founding highlight the reality of incompatible origin myths coexisting. Herodotus’ telling differs from Pindar’s precisely because he records the stories side by side explaining that two different groups of people claim the different stories. Pindar, on the other hand, uses two different origin myths for Cyrene in separate works to serve two distinct and specific occasions.

Like Homer, Pindar integrated origin myths into the larger narrative of his odes by referencing origin myths in his poetry to memorialize victors. Pindar compares victors to city founders and victory to great achievement like the founding of a city. Pindar creates a reciprocal relationship between the victor and their home city through these references. The victors, themselves great, hail from great places as evidenced by the place’s origin myth. In turn, the victor not only confirms the place’s greatness but enhances it through current achievement.

Pindar’s Olympian 7 contains elements of Rhodes’ origin myth Homer chronicled in the Iliad. Pindar wrote the ode for the boxing champion Diagoras in 464 BC. In the victory ode, Pindar links the champion Diagoras of Rhodes to the founding of his city by identifying Rhodes’ founder Tlepolemus as a descendent of Heracles, thus implying Diagoras’ own connection to Heracles through Rhodes. Pindar then goes on to recount

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43 Dougherty, “Archaic Greek Foundation Poetry: Questions of Genre and Occasion,” 42. For a complete analysis of Pindar’s Olympian 7 and references to origin myths, see Dougherty, The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece, 120-135.


45 Pindar, Olympian 7.20.
the founding of Rhodes within the ode through line 30, and as Dougherty points out, also to associate the celebration of Diagoras with the celebration of Tlepolemus as the founder of the city.\textsuperscript{46} Pindar ties the founding of Rhodes to Diagoras’ victory directly invoking the place’s meaning in the ode and perpetuating the story through its retelling while adding Diogoras’ victory to Rhodes’ legacy.

Pindar’s \textit{Pythian 5} provides another example of an ode containing elements of an origin myth, directly referring to the founding of Cyrene.\textsuperscript{47} Written for Arcesilas, the chariot race champion in 462 BC, Pindar links the victor Arcesilas to Cyrene’s founder Battus by declaring “the ancient prosperity of Battus continues.”\textsuperscript{48} Linking both Tlepolemus’ and Arcesilas’ victories to the origins of their respective cities draws out the significance of the city founding and associates contemporary victory with the historical event thereby fixing significance geographically in the narrative and tying the place to heroic achievement in the present. Pindar alludes to quite a different story of Cyrene’s founding in \textit{Pythian 9}.\textsuperscript{49} In this ode dedicated to Telesicrates, champion of the hoplite race in 474 BC, Pindar again links the victor to the city’s founding.\textsuperscript{50} Here, Pindar

\textsuperscript{46} Dougherty, “Archaic Greek Foundation Poetry: Questions of Genre and Occasion,” 42.

\textsuperscript{47} Dougherty, “Archaic Greek Foundation Poetry: Questions of Genre and Occasion,” 42. For a complete analysis of Pindar’s \textit{Pythian 5} and references to origin myths, see Dougherty, \textit{The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece}, 103-119.


\textsuperscript{49} Dougherty, \textit{The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece}, 136.

describes Apollo taking Cyrene off to Libya where she would have a city named for her declaring the city would be known for victory.51

A key difference in these two Pythian odes concerns their setting in time. Pindar refers to Cyrene’s origins in historical time in Pythian 5 but sets Cyrene’s origins in mythological time in Pythian 9.52 The former links the victor to the parent city, itself founded by Spartans, while the latter links Cyrene directly to the mythological world revealing something very different about Cyrene and her victors by making two very different metaphorical comparisons in the two poems. This difference in time setting and founding detail highlights how even the same poet can use variance in myth about a place depending on the circumstances of the myth’s telling.

Clarke notes that early recordings of city histories’ could be located “within either heroic or historical times.”53 Clarke goes on to argue the temporal context of a city’s origins may be related to the way the origin myth gets told. Local histories typically “present the earliest periods of a city or region’s history in the context of a wider mythological framework” whereas broader histories may tend to focus on setting origins in historical time.54 Historical accounts of origins would become more commonplace for later cities, especially with the increase in Greek colonial settlement, although some retained elements of mythology.

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51 Pindar, Pythian 9.70.
52 Dougherty, The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece, 136-152.
53 Clarke, 197.
54 Clarke, 198.
Hall, writing in detail about the foundation stories of Greek colonies in the Archaic period, builds off of Dunbabin’s earlier work delineating the origins of Greek colonies in recorded historical time and the origins of earlier Greek cities in unknown legendary time. The distinction being, real people settled the colonies, typically with a single founder around a generally known date whereas the founding of older cities may even be outside the reach of history as set in the mythological period. Clarke notes, however, even younger Greek colonies might claim ties to mythological antiquity or to the time of heroes as a way of asserting authentic Greek heritage.

Case for Thebes

I have chosen to focus on ancient Greece, specifically with a case study on Thebes in a later chapter, because both the context of ancient Greece and Greek mythology appears so far removed from our contemporary world. The Greek world provides a parallel universe for contemplating issues that in many ways remain unresolved today. Apart from the actual Greeks, the fantasy of mythology carries no historical pretense yet at the same time contains real worth signifying actual implications. The ancient city of Thebes makes an excellent case study because the myth of Thebes’ origins captures all of the difference, complexity, contradiction, etiology, and location and perpetuation of meaning as all of the myths I have surveyed in this chapter.

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56 Clarke, 199. For a complete discussion of origin myths depicted on Tyrian coinage, briefly mentioned towards the beginning of this chapter, as a way to tie Tyre to the mythological past and emphasize its self-identification as a Greek city, see Hirt, 190-210.
picked Thebes for further analysis for several reasons. First, the original Thebes no longer exists. Thebes also worked well for the Greeks and Romans as a city to provoke self-reflection. Probably because of this, a wide range of surviving written material offers great detail for analysis. In addition, other surviving works focused on Thebes making it possible to consider them in light of the origin myth to reciprocally enrich an understanding of the myth’s meaning.

Alexander razed Thebes in 335 BC after the city refused to acquiesce to his conquest, supposedly leaving only Pindar’s house standing.\textsuperscript{57} No one has any real stake in the veracity of Thebes' actual origins, apart from the important work of scholars trying to better understand what the ancient world was like, because Thebes has perished. Despite the vast distance in time and space, Thebes offers a compelling and relatable human story even though ancient Thebes appears so far away.

Thebes captivated both the Athenians and the Romans. As Zeitlin argues, Thebes represents "an other place" in Athenian drama.\textsuperscript{58} Zeitlin writes “Thebes…provides the negative model to Athens’ manifest image of itself with regard to its notions of the proper management of a city, society, and self.”\textsuperscript{59} Many tragedies are set in Thebes, like Euripides’ \textit{Bacchae} and \textit{Heracles}, Aeschylus’ \textit{Seven Against Thebes}, and Sophocles’ \textit{Oedipus}. Even with proximity in time and place to Athens, Thebes represented some

\textsuperscript{57} Daniel W. Berman, \textit{Myth, Literature, and the Creation of the Topography of Thebes} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 176-177.


\textsuperscript{59} Zeitlin, “Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama,” 131.
place distinctly different from Athens. Thebes made it possible for the Athenians to consider their own place while contemplating another.

The Romans may have used Thebes in a similar manner. Ovid wrote extensively about Thebes’ origins in *Metamorphoses* as part of the historical record of change, which I will talk about in depth in Chapter 3. Hardie asserts that Statius’s *Thebaid* represents an ‘anti-*Aeneid*.‘⁶⁰ Arguing something similar to Zeitlin about Thebes representing ‘the other’ for the Athenians, Hardie contends, however, Thebes represents a similarly other place in Statius’ work; Thebes explicitly is not Rome but eerily similar, offering a reflection of Rome by contemplating Thebes.

A wide range of source material about Thebes survives. Various detailed accounts of Thebes' founding arise in the different sources exposing the Thebes’ narrative to examination and analysis. Indeed, ancient authors from Homer to Ovid included elements of Thebes’ origin myths in their work. In addition to the availability of source material, the founding of Thebes represents a complex narrative. Scholars have identified two separate origin myths. These stories may have even been combined by later writers in different ways.⁶¹

In summary, Ancient Greek origin myths simply are stories about the beginning of a place and come to us from across the ancient world in a variety of genre. Origin myths connect with geography to locate meaning by creating a human relationship with a

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place in the present. They establish memory in the present by the claims they make on the past. Finally, origin myths reveal the present through metaphorical renditions of these historical claims and connections to geography that recast origins for the contemporary character of the place. The Greek world, and Thebes in particular, provides an intriguing place to look at how stories about beginnings work and what those stories convey.
Osbourne contends “there is no true story of foundations…no definitive history of foundations, or even foundation stories.”\textsuperscript{1} As I discussed in the previous chapter, the diversity of written origin myths that have survived over centuries in a variety of genres show definitive origin myths do not exist. How are we to think about origin myths, then, if they remain so elusive? Osbourne goes on to write that when considering origin myths “the lie was the truth” and “the other lie was also the truth.”\textsuperscript{2}

I would like to suggest, however, that getting to the \textit{truth} was never really the point. Origin myths engender belief rather than reveal truth. They affirm rather than expose. In this chapter, I propose using Heath’s idea of centrifugal poetics as a framework for analyzing origin myths. To make the case for a centrifugal approach to origin myths, I first review recent origin myth scholarship that has influenced my project, then examine the limits of knowledge, discuss the purpose of myth, and finally explain how I plan to apply Heath’s methodology to origin myths.

\textbf{Approaching Origin Myths}

I would like to begin this chapter with a review of recent methodologies for interpreting and understanding origin myths. Each one of these approaches provides great value for understanding origin myths and has significantly influenced my thinking about

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\textsuperscript{2} Osbourne, 232.
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origin myths. I will leverage each of them explicitly or implicitly in Chapter 3 when I apply Heath’s centrifugal poetics to origin myths of ancient Thebes.

Mac Sweeney’s concept of the origin myth discourse provides a particularly valuable framework for dealing with different versions and variations of origin myths, such as those about Thebes. Mac Sweeney edited a set of essays in *Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies* that collectively argued origin myths are best understood as a flexible discourse rather than as exclusive narratives. This postmodern approach to the study of origin myths posits that different stories about the same place can reveal more than looking at a single myth. Mac Sweeney and her contributing authors define discourse as “the sum total of several different myths together and the various relationships between the stories and the variants.”³ With this approach considering many origin myths, Mac Sweeney and her authors embrace the complexity of origin myths as an “ongoing process of mythopoesis and the continual dialogue between stories, storytellers, and their audiences.”⁴

Mac Sweeney writes “[o]ne notable characteristic of ancient foundation myths is their plurality.”⁵ As I highlighted in the first chapter, origin myths function as dynamic retellings of a place’s founding. Over time, different stories emerge along with the evolution of variants of the same story making for a rich record of beginnings reflecting the complex nature of the place itself and the ongoing rewriting of the definition of the

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⁴ Mac Sweeney, *Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies*, 7.

⁵ Mac Sweeney, *Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies*, 1.
place. Mac Sweeney later states “intertextuality is a crucial element in the dialogue between myths.”6 No single story about a place stands on its own but exists amongst all of the other versions and variations.7 As such, a deeper appreciation for the myths may be found by examining how the different versions and variations align and diverge with what they say to each other.

Mac Sweeney’s earlier work *Foundation Myths and Politics in Ancient Ionia* provides useful insight for understanding how origin myths about a place like Thebes would contribute to the place’s identity. Mac Sweeney’s work identifies how origin myths perpetuate ideas of cultural difference. Mac Sweeney writes “foundation myths are extremely potent tools for the construction of identity and the negotiation of cultural difference.”8 Mac Sweeney argues that origin myths serve as a mechanism for establishing identity both positively and negatively. The myths work positively to establish the identity of a people by signifying what it means to be a group of people from a particular place. They myth tells a people who they are. The myths also work negatively to exclude everything outside of the positive identity construction. The myth separates people from others by differentiating them through exclusion. Mac Sweeney’s theoretical framework focuses exclusively on social and political identity construction.

Further, origin myths carry significant weight because they represent the start of an exclusive identity. Mac Sweeney goes on to write that foundation myths’ “primacy,

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6 Mac Sweeney, *Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies*, 7.
7 Mac Sweeney, *Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies*, 8.
8 Mac Sweeney, *Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies*, 8.
their emotional value, and their structures of explanation all contribute to their extraordinary political power.”⁹ Origin myths are primary because they represent the start. They carry emotional value because the start initiates the very identity of the myth owners. Origin myths’ etiological utility as tied to the place’s beginning and the personal attachment between people and place inherent in the myth make them compelling vehicles for identity. The Greeks may have even developed a genre with an identifiable narrative structure for this vehicle.

Dougherty’s work provides an excellent framework for examining the narrative structure of origin myths. Dougherty takes a new historicist approach in The Poetics of Colonization specifically identifying her methodology of reading origin myths “within the larger critical framework of colonial discourse.”¹⁰ Dougherty reads origin myths as a function of ancient Greek colonialism. Focusing primarily on cities founded in the archaic period, Dougherty describes origin myths celebrating founders and new places as a way of creating a positive narrative out of something which essentially was a negative process.¹¹ Colonization, Dougherty contends, basically represents an alienating and violent event.¹² A parent city excises itself of a portion of its population and sends them off to civilize some other place primarily through violence.¹³

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⁹ Mac Sweeney, Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies, 8.
¹⁰ Dougherty, The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece, 4.
¹¹ Dougherty, The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece, 157.
¹² Dougherty, The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece, 157.
¹³ Dougherty, The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece, 158.
Origin myths, then, become a way of justifying this alienating excising and violent civilizing of some other place. This justification positively ties the colony to the parent city and the people of the colony to the place of the colony’s founding. Dougherty identifies a formula for the structure of origin myths that works to turn what would otherwise be a negative narrative into an ultimately positive one that I will describe in greater detail later in this chapter. From these origin myths, cities would celebrate the founder through cult practices, further reinforcing the positive aspects of the origin narrative all as a social and political effort to harmonize the violent reality of colonization with the brutal fact of living in a colony.

Despite any of this apparent narrative rationalization, Graham’s historical analysis of origin myths reminds us of the historical reality of places like Thebes. Graham approaches origin myths from a positivist perspective in *The Colonial Expansion of Greece*. Combining literary and archaeological evidence, Graham examines origin myths as a historiography of colonial Greece. Graham looks to the literary past as evidence for colonial foundations and finds “literary sources for the Archaic period present real historical evidence, even though they are partly contaminated by legendary elements.”14 Graham goes on to note Archaic period origin myths differ from earlier migratory period origin myths that “are all legend, even if a kernel of truth is concealed somewhere within them.”15

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14 Graham, 83.
15 Graham, 83.
Regardless of any fictionalizing, Graham’s methodology seeks to pull out the historically accurate from the origin myths and present real historical literary evidence of the origins of ancient Greek cities supported by archaeological findings. Origin myths depict foundations that occurred in the past. That they took place is historical fact. How those foundations came to be recorded, however, supplies a different story. While I will not be examining any archaeological evidence as part of this thesis, it is none the less important to recognize the historical significance of origin myths. They are indeed real stories about real places.

I would like to mention a final scholar whose work in the field of history has influenced my thesis along with the other helpful approaches to origin myths I identified above. Hayden White writes in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* that history as a field of inquiry that developed out of 19th Century Europe only pretends to be the objective, fact-based observation of the past. White writes “it is possible to view historical consciousness as a specifically Western prejudice by which the presumed superiority of modern, industrial society can be retroactively substantiated.”16 History becomes a product of the present not the past as it actually was.

White argues, however, that written history really exists as another form of storytelling with its own preferred form of narrative, pretending not to be a story but rather history as it occurred. White describes how even this history follows a particular narrative form and contends history cannot be written outside of some narrative account.

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History, as the discipline that we know it, provides only one way of making sense of the past. As Dougherty notes about White’s work, it is within this human constructed narrative the past has meaning.17 Greek origin myths, with their obvious pre-19th Century inception, in the same way give meaning to the past by making the past relevant for the contemporary audience. I therefore will look at origin myths as products about the past without attempting to impose historicity requirements on them, which as White points out may be somewhat artificial constructions anyways.

Epistemological Considerations

Origin myths convey understanding of something fundamentally unknowable because no one has direct access to the past. Since Plato, however, epistemological concerns have focused on the abstractly verifiable. Platonic philosophy has done much to establish the primacy of logic as the way of thinking and Plato himself did much to denigrate myth and the poets that worked with it. While Plato raises some valid concerns with poetry, Lincoln seems to suggest we have forgotten the value of myth.

Our contemporary preference for philosophy as logical abstraction may merely be an inherited feature of Western culture. Lincoln argues mythos and logos may not have always carried the same distinction by which we now know them today.18 The Greeks before Socrates and Plato, by Lincoln’s analysis, considered mythos the dominate form of persuasion while logos represented a weaker form of influence. It wasn’t until the rise of

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the philosopher that logos would come to be considered a superior form of reason and thinking. Lincoln writes mythos described “a blunt and aggressive act of candor, uttered by powerful males in the heat of battle or antagonistic assembly” in Homer and Hesiod.19

Plato, rather, reduces myth to “state propaganda, best suited for children and those incapable of adopting the discourse and practice of the ruling elite, within an emergent regime of truth that called (and calls) itself ‘philosophy.’”20 He even considers poets socially dangerous. Lincoln writes of Plato’s criticism of poets that “[a]t best, their poems are imitations, at worst falsehoods, and in either event they can be impious in nature or antisocial in their consequences.”21 Plato considers banning poets altogether in the Republic, but then allows them so long as they “are reduced to servants of the state” and “their myths are subjected to the scrutiny and censorship of philosopher-kings.”22 What was Plato reacting against?

Osbourne makes a compelling case for the fundamental nature of lies in ancient Greek poetry in his Epilogue to Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies.23 Lies, Osbourne contends, permeate Greek poetry from the very beginning of both written poetry and poetry about beginnings. Referencing Hesiod’s Theogony, Osbourne demonstrates that “Hesiod’s is a world of many muses and many lies, with various alternatives stories

19 Lincoln, 17.
20 Lincoln, 42.
21 Lincoln, 38.
22 Lincoln, 42.
23 Osbourne, 227-233.
always available.” Lies are not limited to the human imagination. In the Greek world, even the gods lie. Plato cannot tolerate lying gods.

Plato’s concern about lies, however, confuses lying as deception with creative fabrication in the face of the unknowable and dismisses them both outright. While I agree with the fundamental argument Osbourne makes, using “lies” implies someone could discern the veracity of an origin myth in some meaningful way. An origin myth does not necessarily conceal the truth, but rather conveys the story of something fundamentally unknowable and on its own becomes real by its telling. Osbourne nearly admits as much by noting “truth has been problematized” and when noting that the success of any lie depends on a receptive audience. Osbourne distinguishes between “social truth” that must contrast with something else I will call historical truth. Historical truth would be something like the objective facts or what really happened. But, the past always remains a mystery and what really happened stays an open question. Social truth, on the other hand, arises out of the social acceptance of the telling of what Osbourne calls a lie.

Osbourne calls this idea the “will to truth.” To be more precise, I would call this belief. That people accept a lie as true does not make it so or that they think a lie true does not make it true. Rather, people believe. Belief is a fundamental human concern. Belief underpins the memory I discussed in the previous chapter. People are compelled to

24 Osbourne, 227.
26 Osbourne, 229-231.
27 Osbourne, 231.
28 Osbourne, 231.
make sense of the past. If actual origins are fundamentally unknowable in the
philosophical sense because they are long gone, human need for comprehension will fill
in the gap. The story is no substitute, which would imply it was merely replacing
something else that itself could somehow be more true. The story itself, however,
becomes the real.

Poetry, then, has the power to extend belief where philosophy cannot reach to
address the kinds of questions philosophy cannot answer. Perhaps the poets simply
recognized the limits of philosophical knowledge or the philosophers were at times
overly optimistic. Even Plato could not ignore the power and necessity of belief
altogether, especially for his ideal city. In Book III of Plato’s Republic Socrates asks
Glaucon “How, then, could we devise one of those useful falsehoods we were talking
about a while ago, one noble falsehood that would, in the best case, persuade even the
rulers, but if that’s not possible, then the others in the city?”\(^{29}\)

Socrates refers here to his earlier discussion of lies at the end of Book II.\(^{30}\)
Specifically, Socrates identifies some instances where lies can be useful. Among some
possible pragmatic reasons for lying, Socrates lists “those stories we were just talking
about, the ones we tell because we don’t know the truth about those ancient events
involving the gods.”\(^{31}\) Emphasizing how ungodlike the poet, Plato writes a god would not


\(^{30}\) Plato, 382a-383c.

\(^{31}\) Plato, 382c-d.
“make false likeness of ancient events because of his ignorance.” At the end of this exchange, Socrates and Glaucon agree a god would not deceive and poets should not claim otherwise for fear of corrupting the youth not only elevating logos but discrediting mythos.

Returning to the passage in Book III, Plato has Socrates introduce the idea of a worthy falsehood or the “noble lie” as a way to engender belief in a city’s population. The noble lie appears necessary to give the city’s people some understanding of their own past as richer than reality in a way that promotes the ideals of the city and prescribes reasons for the presiding social structure of the city. At the beginning of this exchange, Plato clearly makes reference to Cadmus and Thebes by referring to a Phoenician story. Plato goes on to describe, through Socrates, the value of a belief in autochthony for the kinship ties of the people and their intimate relationship with their place, which I will address specifically related to Thebes in Chapter 3.

Plato then has Socrates introduce his famous concept of gold, silver, and bronze as a way to rationalize the social structure of the ideal city he and Glaucon build in their dialogue. This concept introduces the value of legitimized social difference within a population that would otherwise share no meaningful distinctions. Fearing social disorder otherwise, Socrates proposes an origin story of sorts to align loyalties to the city and

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32 Plato, 382d.


34 Plato, 415a.
inhibit social strife. The sameness resultant from autochthonous fraternity and difference described from the instilling of precious metals of the earth are supposed to develop allegiance to the city by all people over everything else.

Plato’s home city of Athens had its own stories of autochthony. Rosavich writes about the complexities of Athenian autochthony describing the etymology and development of the concept. The Athenians believed they were indigenous to the area and had always been there since the beginning of time. Rosavich contends these corresponding ideas developed much later than what was previously thought as scholars had assumed these beliefs came out of much earlier and rudimentary civilization.35

Plato must have been familiar with Athenian ideas about autochthony because “Athenians of the fifth and fourth centuries claimed with pride that their ancestors had always lived in Attica.”36 This history of the idea of Athenian autochthony would seem to justify Plato’s concerns about poets simply making up stories. It also exemplifies Plato’s concession about the civic value of these stories when sanctioned by a governing authority by promoting loyalty to Athens and explaining the superiority of citizenship.37 Origin myths can be all that Plato fears and they can be as useful as Socrates proposes to Glaucan.

Lincoln contends Plato recognizes the value of poets to discern “the nature of the gods” or “the soul’s fate after death – on which it is virtually impossible to achieve the

35 Rosivach, 294.
36 Rosivach, 294.
37 Rosivach, 303.
kind of certainty toward which philosophical inquiry aspires.” As Plato admits the limits of philosophical knowledge, he at the same time acknowledges the very human need for a useful discourse outside of philosophy. How do we deal with the unobservable or the unexplainable? In a way we create stories to fill this mysterious space, but that isn’t quite fair. These stories aren’t made up as pure fiction in the imaginary sense. They become something else altogether real.

Plato raises legitimate concerns about poetry and myth. Falsehoods are problematic and Plato’s sanctioned but concocted narratives even seem manipulative if not alarming, possibly undermining the value or authority of myth. That said, Platonic thought cannot address some of the most fundamental human questions. Recognizing the limits of philosophy and looking to an older form of thought, as Lincoln reminds us, provides an opportunity to interpret origin myths without attempting to rationalize them only to distort, if not destroy, their meaning.

Purpose of Myth and the Human Condition

Myth provides a mechanism for communicating belief about ambiguity and uncertainty. As a cognitive framework, myth can make sense of the world where philosophy cannot. Myth functions as a discourse and satisfies a human need for comprehension. Origin myths, working within this narrative discourse, also have their own unique structures and features. As a creative human endeavor, myth provides a

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38 Lincoln, 40.
systematized framework for identifying significance and communicating meaning about
the world that has real implications in the world.

For my purposes “myth” denotes a narrative that asserts significance. As Lincoln
points out, “myth” leaves much to the interpretation of the reader. Most readers probably
would agree that “myth” “regularly denotes a style of narrative discourse and specific
instances thereof.” 39 At the same time, the meaning can colloquially denote anything
from the significant to the inconsequential or to the absurd.40 Some scholars make
technical distinctions between myth and other similar genres, like folk tales. For example,
Frye makes the distinction that myth has “some exceptional significance in explaining
certain features of life” whereas folktales lack seriousness or importance.41 In a similar
vein, Ausband defines myths as “tales that are accepted, on the whole, as either true or
historical fact or as reinforcing and demonstrating society’s understanding of the truth
about natural phenomena, and which are treated seriously by most members of the
society.”42

Considering the limits of knowledge I addressed in the previous section, myth
serves to affirm belief where philosophy cannot reveal truth. Myth affirms belief by
making “the world coherent and meaningful by demonstrating or imposing order on it.”43

39 Lincoln, ix.
40 Lincoln, ix.
42 Stephen C. Ausband, Myth and Meaning, Myth and Order (Macon: Mercer University Press,
43 Ausband, 2.
Humans use myth to describe what cannot be seen and think about what cannot be known. As such, myth structures human perception of the world in a way that makes the world comprehensible. As Ausband contends, humans “uses myth, in one form or another, to think about [the] world – in order to give direction and coherency to [the] world.”\(^4^4\)

Myth satisfies a fundamental human need for coherency and understanding. “Human beings need to find some sort of order in their world, and the system of tales and traditions we call mythology is a primary way of reinforcing that order.”\(^4^5\) Confusion and disorder would reign in the absence of an explanatory mechanism for the world beyond immediate perception. Instead, humans use myth to make sense of what would otherwise be confusion and disorder. Calame writes “[t]hrough the passage from ancient societies to exotic ones, myth has come to transcend its status as narrative and has assumed the rank of a mode of human thought.”\(^4^6\)

Myth provides a way of thinking that conveys significance through narrative. Frye writes “just as pure narrative would be an unconscious act, so pure significance would be an incommunicable state of consciousness, for communication begins by constructing narrative.”\(^4^7\) In the ancient world, myth worked as a discourse with its own language and

\(^{4^4}\) Ausband, 15.

\(^{4^5}\) Ausband, 1.


\(^{4^7}\) Frye, 15.
rules. Ausband even declares “[m]ythology is, in a very real sense, a language.”
Further, Edmunds notes Greek mythology worked as a “system” with internal “variation.” As I noted in the previous chapter, origin myths show incredible variation. Despite significant variation, myth conventionally denotes a type of story. Frye describes myth as “a story in which some of the chief characters are gods or other beings larger in power than humanity. Very seldom is myth located in history: its action takes place in a world above or prior to ordinary time.” Myth always seems to have happened a long time ago, usually outside of recorded history. I would even expand this definition to include those kinds of stories that function as myth even though they are set within recorded history.

That origin myths can operate within the legendary mythological timeframe or within a more historical framework stands outside of this study. Despite any temporal setting, origin myths are narratives about beginnings. History, itself, as White notes, functions as a discourse within a narrative construct. This narrative construct serves many of the same purposes as myth. In more modern stories or histories, larger than life people can take on the role of heroes or gods within recorded history all while serving the same function as myth.

Humans affirm belief through myth. Frye writes “[a]s a type of story, myth is a form of verbal art, and belongs to the world of art. Like art, and unlike science, it deals,

48 Ausband, 18.
49 Edmunds, 3-4.
50 Frye, 15-16.
not with the world that man contemplates, but with the world that man creates.” Frye makes an important distinction. With myth, we are dealing with human creative concerns not mere physics or even abstract absolutes (like Plato’s forms!). These concerns may be too easily dismissed as fiction or lies by proponents of Platonic truth. As I talked about above, even Plato conceded some value in these kinds of human endeavors for explanation. Myth describes the unobservable by explaining the otherwise inexplicable.

Origin myths speak to a precise element of mythology and display specific patterned structures of their own. Origin myths fit at the beginning of the myth archetype. Frye explains that “[i]n the solar cycle of the day, the seasonal cycle of the year, and the organic cycle of human life, there is a single pattern of significance” that functions in four phases: the “dawn, spring, and birth phase”, the “zenith, summer, marriage or triumph phase”, the “sunset, autumn, and death phase, and finally, the “darkness, winter, and desolation phase.” Origin myths serve the first phase of a place. In other words, they function as the “dawn, spring, [or] birth” of a place.

Origin myths mostly exhibit a narrative pattern. Like most narratives that could conceivably fit into a genre, origin myths exhibit some, although imperfect, characteristic structure. As I noted above, Dougherty identifies the basic plot structure of colonial foundation stories. First, a crisis develops in the native city which causes the city to consult the Oracle in Delphi. Apollo, through the Oracle, then instructs the city to found

51 Frye, 31.
52 Frye, 15-16.
an overseas colony. This colony then resolves the parent city’s crisis. Finally, the founder of the colony gets remembered through cult and celebrated as a hero.\textsuperscript{53}

Hall, on the other hand, writes no typical foundation story for Greek colonies exists.\textsuperscript{54} Hall catalogues the foundation stories of 27 colonies as a representative sample and, for example, found that only 20 of the 27 had identified an \textit{oikist}, a seemingly key component of any narrative of a city founding.\textsuperscript{55} Although, he argues, “it is possible to detect some structural affinities within the corpus but there is less evidence for a broader ‘poetic’ that later shaped and structured such accounts to formulate a \textit{ktisis} genre.\textsuperscript{56}

McBreen illustrates what he calls an origin myth schema that overlaps with the plot structure Dougherty identified while allowing for a wider range of transition events. McBreen’s schema contains five stages. He calls the first the “opening formula” which essentially establishes the context for the story.\textsuperscript{57} The second, called the “event,” serves as the catalyst for the action of the story and can include “a battle, conflict, storm, death, plague, or murder.”\textsuperscript{58} Following the catalyst, the narrative then depicts a movement through exile, sea voyage, or consulting the Oracle at Delphi.\textsuperscript{59} The founding of a new

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\textsuperscript{53} Dougherty, \textit{The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece}, 15.
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\textsuperscript{54} Hall, 402.
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\textsuperscript{55} Hall, 389-399.
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\textsuperscript{56} Hall, 402.
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\textsuperscript{57} McBreen, 53.
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\textsuperscript{58} McBreen, 53.
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\textsuperscript{59} McBreen, 53.
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city, along with its naming or renaming, comprises the fourth stage. McBreen acknowledges not origin all myths exhibit all five of the stages he describes, reflecting Hall’s findings that stories are often incomplete.

Myth mattered in the ancient world and had real implications. Indeed, Wickersham writes “[a] myth and its polis possess each other.” As I noted in the previous section, even Plato conceded some usefulness for myth. It appears, though, that myth in the ancient world was more than just useful. By way of offering an example of the power of myth to affirm belief in the ancient world, I would like to briefly review an ancient land dispute that Wickersham analyzes in his work tying myth to civic identity. As Wickersham notes, this dispute was not only over land but over the possession of the very myth underlying the claims.

Wickersham argues the significance of “the power of myth and its importance for the polis” by recounting myth’s role in a legal dispute over possession of Salamis. Megara petitioned Sparta to arbitrate a dispute over possession of Salamis by Athens, which was not Salamis’ original owner. According to both Athens and Magera,

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60 McBreen, 53.
61 McBreen, 53.
63 Wickersham, 26.
64 Wickersham, 16.
65 Wickersham, 16.
Salamis rightfully belonged to the descendants of Ajax. The matter of dispute centered on who Ajax’s rightful decedents were based on his mythical exploits. While this argument focuses on the right of possession over Salamis between Athens and Magera, the same importance of “ancestral rights” applies just as well to origin myths.

Towards a Centrifugal Analysis

Mac Sweeney writes “[f]or an archaic or classical audience, truth may lie not so much in the details of the stories you told, but rather in the principles and ideas you communicated.” With this in mind, I use Heath’s concept of centrifugal poetics as a framework for analyzing origin myths, specifically Theban origin myths, in the next chapter. Heath’s concept of centrifugal poetics offers an opportunity to look at origin myths for the plurality of principles and ideas they communicate. I will analyze the origin myths of Thebes with this methodology to better understand the human values at stake in these myths.

Myths, especially origin myths, tend not to express a single theme representing a distinct discipline. Ostensibly about the founding of a place, origin myths contain any number of themes ranging across many disciplines. Frye writes “while myths themselves are seldom historical, they seem to provide a kind of containing form of tradition, one result of which is the obliterating boundaries separating legend, historical reminiscences,

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66 Wickersham, 18.
67 Wickersham, 18.
and actual history that we find in Homer and the Old Testament.” This key insight makes myth so compelling.

In *Unity in Greek Poetics*, Heath contends that ancient Greek literature adhered to a “centrifugal” conception of thematic unity whereas we read today with an expectation of “centripetal” unity. Heath claims that the ancient Greeks sought coherence of the whole narrative through understanding “thematic plurality” rather than understanding through a single, unifying theme. In this model, many themes come together within a narrative to greater effect than a single dominant theme woven throughout a narrative.

Heath proposes “we can reconstruct from Greek literary theory and criticism a concept of unity more liberally centrifugal than we are used to.” In other words, we ought not to think of locating unity as a winnowing down but as an expansive analysis. Heath explains modern literary criticism tends to focus on identifying a single, central unifying theme, which he calls centripetal unity. Heath argues the ancient Greeks could understand a plurality of themes as a unifying feature to create a composite greater than the individual components, which he calls “centrifugal unity.” This expansive view of unity can be disorienting at first for the modern reader because we are more used to central unifying themes.

Heath also provides three examples of problems for a single, thematic unity in Greek literature. First, the tendency for what would be main characters to appear or drop out of the narrative, such as Andromache in Euripides’ *Andromache*, represents a

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69 Frye, 31.

problem Heath calls “mobile focus.”\textsuperscript{71} Heath calls the second problem he identifies for thematic unity “extended action.”\textsuperscript{72} Heath writes “extended action” ties to the use of “contrasting material” where the action of a narrative never really resolves but instead tends to shift to an inversely related and different scene, as in Aeschylus’ \textit{Suppliants} when “the suppliant action begins pathetically and shifts to a mode of patriotic enthusiasm.”\textsuperscript{73} Digression within the narrative represents the third issue Heath cites. I referenced an instance of digression in the previous chapter when Athena plans to go to Scheria to assist the sleeping Odysseus in Homer’s \textit{Odyssey}.

Heath’s expansive view of unity centers on thematic plurality. The range of motifs within origin myths demonstrates their enlargement of theme. Considering even one theme evident in a particular myth exposes other, related themes, further demonstrating the thematic expansiveness of these myths. Further, the idea of centrifugal poetics aligns with my contention that origin myths engender belief rather than reveal truth. Instead of focusing in on a particular theme or attempting to discern truth, the stories instead move outwards to expand human comprehension.

If myth really engenders belief rather than reveals truth, or conveys more about the principles and ideas communicated than the veracity of details as Mac Sweeney contends, and really blends disciplines as Frye maintains, I expect to find a range of human values expressed through themes in Theban origin myths all grounded in different

\textsuperscript{71} Heath, 4.
\textsuperscript{72} Heath, 5.
\textsuperscript{73} Heath, 5.
authority. Heath’s centrifugal poetics offers a framework for identifying these individual threads that combine to make the stories whole. Additionally, I plan to analyze the Theban origin myth discourse as opposed to individual stories per Mac Sweeney as a way of illuminating similarities and differences that may not stand out when considering a single story on its own.

In conclusion, I have found the efforts of several recent scholars to have been immensely helpful to my understanding of origin myths. The works of Mac Sweeney, Dougherty, Graham, and White have contributed to my analysis of Theban origin myths in particular ways in the next chapter. Because origin myths engender belief rather than reveal the truth, the beliefs espoused by the myths demand a closer look. Heath’s methodology for centrifugal poetics offers a framework for discerning the values at stake in the myths and investigating how the stories work to argue for those values.
CHAPTER THREE
FOUNDATIONS OF THEBES

Origin myths “offered a rich language in which to articulate identities and negotiate politics,” according to Mac Sweeney.¹ The myths begin the story of a particular people. They are a starting point for a collective identity telling the people of a place who they are and differentiate them from others who they are not, providing both positive and negative political identity.² Origin myths signify membership tied to a particular place by providing a context and etiology that is at the same time historical, geographic, theological, and social.

I would like to extend Mac Sweeney’s notion about the identity claims of origin myths by adding themes in the myths express values associated with the place. In this chapter, I will compare the versions and variations of stories within the Theban origin myth discourse to unpack some of their thematic plurality. To do so, this chapter begins with a brief introduction of the myths and will then explore civilization, the gods, and family as three overlapping themes in the discourse. These are not the only evident themes, but are ones I consider important and exemplary because of the way they connect people to Thebes.

¹ Mac Sweeney, *Foundation Myths and Politics in Ancient Ionia*, 16.
² Mac Sweeney, *Foundation Myths and Politics in Ancient Ionia*, 16.
Mythological Origins

Thebes’ origin myths embody the mythological connecting people to Thebes in an historical way to the mythological past. The actual origins of Thebes remain mostly an open question, and one probably much influenced by the ongoing reinterpretation of Thebes as a city that did not make it intact through the millennium. Alexander razed the city in 335 BC, probably wiping out much of its own indigenous record. What survives may be as influenced by the world outside of Thebes as what came from Thebes itself.

Thebes has two known, distinct origin myths and ancient authors tell mostly similar variations of each version. Berman contends these two myths evolved separately and were only later chronologically combined by mythographers, noting that Pherekydes, writing in the 5th Century BC, may have been the first to put the two stories on the same timeline. Pherekydes recorded Amphion and Zethus as the original founders with Cadmus coming along some time afterwards. Apollodorus and others would later reverse this order making Cadmus the original founder with Amphion and Zethus building the city’s fortifications sometime later.

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3 I exclude Conan’s variation of the Cadmus myth in this chapter and my thesis more broadly because Conan explicitly attempts to separate fact from fiction to rationalize the story. About his own variation of the story, Conan writes “regarding Kadmos and the colonization of Thebes, this is the true account, but the rest is myth and the cunning witchcraft of report.” As I state elsewhere, I am focused primarily on what the stories reveal about a place by how they are told and retold and not in their historical accuracy. Malcolm Kenneth Brown, The Narratives of Konan: Text, Translation and Commentary of the Diegeseis, (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2002), 252-260.

4 Berman, “The Double Foundation of Boiotian Thebes*,” 2-6.

5 Berman, “The Double Foundation of Boiotian Thebes*,” 4.

For the purposes of this paper, I assume these two origin myths originated distinctly and probably even coexisted. Contesting the actual historical accuracy of these myths lies beyond the scope and purpose of this thesis. I intend, rather, to explore why origin myths matter in their retelling rather than arbitrate how closely they align to historical circumstances. More importantly, accepting the two stories as synchronous narratives as opposed to successive events allows for a discussion about the Theban origin myth discourse. As Mac Sweeney and her contributing authors explain, more can be revealed by analyzing an origin myth discourse rather than examining an individual myth alone.

The actual provenance of these myths is also mostly beyond the scope of this thesis for the same reasons, but some evidence suggests the Cadmus story we have could have been retrofitted over some earlier version of the story. Although mostly speculative, this speaks to the changing nature of origin myths and suggests influences on the Cadmus origin myth beyond its original conception. Berman makes a compelling case that the Cadmus myth “shows great affinity with foundation narratives of colonies prevalent in the archaic and classical periods” well after Thebes was actually founded, whereas the Amphion and Zethus myth appears “more indigenous.”  

The Amphion and Zethus story share similarities with other ancient origin myths involving local hero twins, like Romulus and Remus of Rome. The Cadmus story, on the other hand, with its single founder more closely resembles much later colonial foundation

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8 Berman, “The Double Foundation of Boiotian Thebes*,” 18.
Aligning this particular myth with Dougherty’s colonial foundation narrative structure further reveals how closely the myth compares to later origin stories of Greek settlements during the Archaic period. Although this suggests some later and possibly external influence on the myth, I will consider both of the stories to be genuinely about Thebes because I am primarily interested in the values evident in the myths, which ignores source concerns even if they are important under different circumstance or in other contexts. Now, let’s look at the Amphion and Zethus myth and then analyze the Cadmus myth using Dougherty’s narrative structure.10

The Amphion and Zethus myth is simpler than the Cadmus’ story, at least for the relatively little surviving text recalling this version of Thebes’ founding. There is no way to know if this was the extent of the myth or if what actually circulated in the oral tradition never was transcribed or if relevant texts never survived, or even any combination of these limiting factors. Nonetheless, this story provides significant value for considering the origins of Thebes precisely because of the similarities and apparent differences with the Cadmus story in addition to what it reveals in its own right.

Amphion and Zethus were the twin sons of Zeus and Antiope. According to this myth, the twins founded Thebes and built its famous wall. Most of the variation in this myth surrounds the wall’s construction. Homer writes that Amphion and Zethus “first established the foundations of seven-gated Thebes, and built the bulwarks.”11

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Apollodorus says the twins are responsible for the wall but appears to only credit Amphion with the effort by writing “the stones followed Amphion’s lyre.” Apollonius, like Homer, credits them both but goes on to describe “while Zethus seemed to stagger under the mountain peak upon his back, Amphion simply strolled along behind him and strummed his golden lyre, and a boulder twice as gigantic followed in his footsteps.”

Turning to the Cadmus myth, this story follows a more complex narrative than the Amphion and Zethus myth, making Dougherty’s colonial foundation narrative structure a useful tool for analysis. Cadmus first finds himself exiled from home, aligning with Dougherty’s first stage of the founding narrative, crisis. Cadmus faces the crisis of exile because his father had forbidden him to return home until he found his sister Europa, who had gone missing, and Cadmus cannot find her anywhere.

Cadmus, hopeless to find his sister Europa, turned to Apollo’s Oracle at Delphi for guidance. Cadmus’ visit to the Oracle aligns with the second stage of Dougherty’s narrative structure, which involves consulting the Delphic Oracle to resolve a problem. In Cadmus’ case, the Oracle instructs him to simply abandon the search for his sister and instead follow a cow to where she lies down. Cadmus, according to the Oracle, should then live at the place where the cow stops to rest.

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12 Apollodorus, 3.44.


Following the Delphic consultation, the third stage of Dougherty’s colonial narrative structure involves the foundation event itself. According to the myth, Cadmus followed the Oracle’s guidance and trailed a cow to the spot where he would found Thebes. Pausanias’ rendition of the myth stops “where the cow was going to sink down in weariness,” although it alludes to Athena’s later involvement in the story by describing “in the open an altar and an image of Athena, said to have been dedicated by Cadmus.” Other authors continue the foundation story to an incredible end.

After settling where the cow lay, Cadmus sent his companions to retrieve water to sacrifice the cow. While they collected water, a dragon guarding the spring killed Cadmus’ companions. Cadmus then slayed the dragon in a rage and sowed the monster’s teeth by Athena’s direction. Men, known as Spartoi, immediately began growing from the teeth Cadmus had planted in the ground. After emerging from the soil, the Spartoi fought and killed each other until only five remained. Those five would head the five families of Thebes thus establishing the city.

The fourth and final stage in Dougherty’s narrative structure represents the resolution of the original crisis and provides for the cult of the founder. Cadmus found a new place to live in Thebes resolving the exile that started with a hopeless quest to find his missing sister Europa. Cadmus’ crisis, however, does not resolve immediately. For

17 Pausanias, 9.12.2.
18 Pausanias, 9.12.2.
killing the dragon, Ares indentures Cadmus for eight years. Following this servitude, Cadmus received the favor of the gods with Zeus giving him Harmonia to marry. The myth does not grant or identify cult status for Cadmus, but the people of Thebes are forever referred to as Cadmeans in the same way the Spartans are called Lacadaemons, as I mentioned in Chapter One. At least as early as Hesiod, “the shield-carrying men of Cadmus” hailed from Thebes.

Contours of Civilization

Thebes’ origin myths carve a place for human thriving out of wild space geographically connecting people to Thebes. The theme of conquest of culture over nature runs through both the Amphion and Zethus and Cadmus myths. This conquest over nature depicts the founding of Thebes civilizing what would otherwise be a wild landscape. Before Thebes’ founding, the space “was covered over with woods.” No one lived there and the terrain was not yet marked by “tracks or paths over the wheat-bearing plain.” The two different stories portray the beginning of civilization at the same spot in very different ways towards the same effect revealing values of security, flourishing, and martial violence.

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20 Apollodorus, 3.24.


23 Homer, *Hymn to Pythian Apollo* 223-8.
Dougherty writes extensively about marriage as a metaphor for celebrating “the dominance of Greek culture over local nature” stating “marriage and colonization entail violence…to transform wildness and lack of cultivation into a state of fruitful civilization.” While Dougherty addresses archaic colonization narratives with this concept, it may apply to the origins of Thebes as well. I will address marriage specifically within the last section of this chapter on family but will now look at how Thebes’ founders’ encounter the wild they first find there.

Amphion and Zethus literally divide off wild space by building a wall in the origin myth crediting the twins with the founding of Thebes. Homer writes Amphion and Zethus “first established the foundations of seven-gated Thebes, and built the bulwarks.” The wall physically and symbolically manifests order. The wall physically contains Thebes, giving contour to the place and separating it from the space outside that is not Thebes. The wall, however, not only delineates Thebes from the surrounding area. Homer goes on to write “without the bulwarks they could not have lived, for all their strength, in Thebes of the wide spaces.” Even the sons of Zeus, one with the strength to move boulders by hand and the other with the magical musical talents to move boulders with his lyre, need protection from the wild. Amphion and Zethus’ wall with its famous

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26 Homer. *Odyssey*, 11.264-5.

27 Although Homer does not mention Amphion’s magical lyre, other later ancient sources like Apollodorus 3.43 and Pausanias 9.5.7 describe Amphion charming the stones with music.
seven gates resolves the problem of human security in a chaotic and unpredictable world and will go on to be emblematic of the city.

Cadmus’ story similarly features an imposition of order on the wilderness but in a very different, figurative, and more complicated way. After following a cow to where she lay at the place that would become Thebes, Cadmus decided to sacrifice the cow to Athena and “sent some of his companions to get water.”\(^{28}\) A dragon, however, guarded the spring and killed many of Cadmus’ companions when they tried to collect the water.\(^{29}\) Enraged at the death of his companions, Cadmus himself went to the spring and killed the dragon.\(^{30}\) By slaying the dragon, Cadmus pacifies the wild. Cadmus founds Thebes where the cow lies down but first he must conquer the local elements of chaos.

Cadmus conquering the local elements of chaos does not as neatly establish order for what will be the new city of Thebes as does Amphion and Zethus’ wall. Whereas the twins’ wall appears to immediately order the place out of the wild, Cadmus’ civilizing efforts continue to be problematic suggesting a more complex environment at work. The dragon Cadmus killed was not a mere dragon but was Ares’ offspring, which takes the story in its most peculiar direction.\(^{31}\) I will get into the specifics of Cadmus’ ongoing efforts later in this chapter, and only want to mention here that Cadmus “sowed the dragon’s teeth like seeds” by the direction of Athena to grow the Spartoi.\(^{32}\)

\(^{28}\) Apollodorus, 3.21.
\(^{29}\) Apollodorus, 3.21.
\(^{30}\) Apollodorus, 3.23.
\(^{31}\) Apollodorus, 3.22.
\(^{32}\) Apollodorus, 3.23.
Killing the dragon or building a wall cannot be enough. Security cannot be the ends of the wall or the death of the dragon. Security, rather, is a means to something more and something more valuable. Amphion and Zethus and Cadmus do not risk their own safety by engaging the chaotic wilds just to build a safe space. Instead, they establish a permanent place with room for human thriving by building a wall or ensuring safe access to water, a precious resource. Before turning to the value of flourishing in the Cadmus myth, it is necessary to look elsewhere for what Amphion and Zethus’ walls means for human endeavors due to the brevity of their myth.

This wall with its famous seven gates resonates through epic poetry, tragedy, and historiography. When Hesiod writes about Heracles’ shield, the wall and its gates separates flourishing Thebes from the danger and disorder outside. Hephaestus wrought the shield, with Fear at its center.\textsuperscript{33} From that grotesque middle, the design of the shield expands outwards through Tumult, Panic, Slaughter, and Strife.\textsuperscript{34} And then, beasts, monsters, violence and warfare dominate the landscape until “there was a city of men with goodly towers; and seven gates of gold, fitted to the lintels, guarded it.”\textsuperscript{35} Contrasting with everything outside the walls towards the middle of the shield, the people of Thebes flourish on the other side of the protective walls. They sing, dance, marry, farm, hunt, and compete in sport.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33} Hesiod, \textit{Shield of Heracles} 139-54.  
\textsuperscript{34} Hesiod, \textit{Shield of Heracles} 154-60.  
\textsuperscript{35} Hesiod, \textit{Shield of Heracles} 160-270.  
\textsuperscript{36} Hesiod, \textit{Shield of Heracles} 270-314.
Cadmus’ founding event likewise creates a place for human thriving, made most evident through a structural element of centrifugal poetics Heath identifies as “extended action.”37 After killing the dragon and the Spartoi’s fight, “Cadmos was in Ares’ service for an ‘eternal’ year.”38 The story then jumps forward eight years in time to the end of Cadmus’ sentence when “Athena arranged for [Cadmus] to have the kingdom, and Zeus gave him as wife Harmonia.”39 This scene of a wedding celebrated by the gods stands in stark contrast to the violence and disarray of the scene immediately before. Ovid presents very similar “contrasting material” by emphasizing the turn from exile to fortune with Cadmus’ marriage to Harmonia.40 Scenes of exile, desolation, and chaos contrast explicitly with scenes of a new city, a marriage celebration, and harmony. Cadmus has created, out of the wild, a place for human flourishing. Cadmus no longer wanders and instead has a place to live. Alone no longer, he now has a wife with the future of a family. Cadmus no longer fights dragons or recoils at the Spartoi but instead celebrates the promise of a new city on his wedding day with the gods.

Despite the human flourishing that reigns in the new place, the celebration of martial violence surfaces throughout both stories. Founding a city seems to entail violence, as I noted at the beginning of this section. In Thebes’ case, the founders do not encounter a native population that might violently resist their efforts, which Dougherty

37 Heath, 5.
38 Apollodorus, 3.25.
39 Apollodorus, 3.25.
writes “was very much a part of the Greek colonial experience.” The space before
Thebes was uninhabited, but martial violence persists as a value in the myths.

Amphion and Zethus literally scar the earth with boulders building their wall.
Amphion’s strength and Zethus’ cunning to carry boulders give testament to their
prowess. The twins’ early life also speaks to their martial abilities. Just after being born,
they were left in the wild but later found by a herder who would raise them. Hardened
by the elements and after they had grown, the twins would avenge the mistreatment of
their mother Antiope by killing her captors and tormentors, Lycos and his wife Dirce.

Similarly, Cadmus fights and kills Ares’ dragon. Ovid, in particular, depicts the
combat in graphic detail highlighting Cadmus’ fighting skills and warrior talents. After
planting the dragon’s teeth, Cadmus watches the Spartoi emerge from the earth in
frightened surprise. According to Ovid, their spear tips first push through the soil
followed by the plumes of their helmets. The Spartoi are born warriors and born
fighting. They fight and kill each other until the few warriors remaining will head
Thebes’ leading families. Creating civilization out of the wilderness necessarily is a
violent affair.

41 Dougherty, The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece, 67.
42 Apollodorus, 3.43.
43 Apollodorus, 3.43.
44 Ovid, 3.50-95.
45 Ovid, 3.106-8.
The violence stems from the tension between nature and culture.\(^46\) Nature unfolds according to its own design whereas humans, by definition, order culture.\(^47\) Nature dominates on its own authority when left alone.\(^48\) Humans, instead, impose their own rules when governing through culture.\(^49\) When humans come to impose their order on nature, as with the founding of Thebes, violence erupts because of the clash of authority and incompatibility of principles. The normative principles of culture displace the determinate principles of nature,\(^50\) because nature cannot be influenced only destroyed.\(^51\)

Encountering the Divine

Thebes’ origin myths establish human relationships with the gods theologically connecting people to Thebes. The gods feature prominently in both Theban origin myths, however, each narrative presents them differently. In the Amphion and Zethus myth, distant gods remain in the background but interventionist gods show up explicitly in the Cadmus myth to steer events. The gods in both stories intersect with heroic and patriarchal values.

\(^{46}\) Credit goes to my thesis mentor Professor Charles McNelis for steering me towards this antithesis in ancient Greek thought.


\(^{48}\) Burkert.

\(^{49}\) Burkert.

\(^{50}\) R. L. White, 4-9.

\(^{51}\) Burkert.
Distant gods remain in the background in the Amphion and Zethus myth. They take no part in the founding of Thebes and are noticeably absent from the narrative. The gods instead serve the narrative at a distance by establishing bloodlines and bestowing human skills that become important features of Thebes’ founding. Zeus fathers Amphion and Zethus by an illicit affair with Antiope.\footnote{Apollodorus, 3.42.} Hermes gave a lyre to Amphion,\footnote{Apollodorus, 3.42.} who learned to play remarkably from the Lydians and even added three strings to what was traditionally a four stringed instrument.\footnote{Pausanias, 9.5.7.} Each demi-god has supernatural capabilities, a blending of human accomplishment and divine inspiration. Zethus has the sheer physical strength to carry boulders, even mountains according to Apollonius, on his back.\footnote{Apollonius, 1.738-42.} Amphion, on the other hand, can move even larger boulders with his magical quality musical abilities. The gods remain distant as humans build Thebes.

In contrast, interventionist gods participate in the founding of Thebes in the Cadmus myth although the humans still do the work. Zeus’ philandering features in this story as well. The source of Cadmus’ exile and subsequent consultation of the Oracle at Delphi stems from his failed search for his missing sister Europa. Zeus, appearing as a “tame bull breathing forth the scent of roses,” had seduced Europa.\footnote{Apollodorus, 3.2.} He convinced
Europa to climb on his back and then rode with her into the sea to Crete.\textsuperscript{57} Cadmus will not find her and cannot return home. At a loss, Cadmus turns to Apollo’s oracle.

Apollo appears only through an intermediary in the Cadmus story. Apollo’s oracle tells Cadmus to abandon his futile quest and instead follow a cow, the symbol of sacrifice, to found a new place to live.\textsuperscript{58} As I noted above, consulting the Oracle is one of the structural elements for later Greek colonial foundation narratives. Dougherty further explains the consultation of the Oracle usually results from civic strife, frequently because of a murder that has disturbed the social order.\textsuperscript{59} The murderer typically gets exiled and founds a colony as penance.\textsuperscript{60} Cadmus shares parallels with this structure because murder, in a very literal sense, involves a missing person who will never be recovered. As Graham points out, “[b]y the Classical period Apollo was pre-eminently the colonists' god.”\textsuperscript{61}

In addition to Apollo, Athena shows up and interacts with Cadmus and takes the foundation of the city in its most peculiar direction. Athena turns what would otherwise have been a mostly rote foundation event, apart from fighting a dragon, into a supernatural affair by telling Cadmus to plant the dragon’s teeth in the ground.\textsuperscript{62} From the teeth grow the Spartoi making the people of Thebes autochthonous. Without Athena’s

\textsuperscript{57} Apollodorus, 3.2.

\textsuperscript{58} Apollodorus, 3.21-2.

\textsuperscript{59} Dougherty, \textit{The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece}, 32-33.

\textsuperscript{60} Dougherty, \textit{The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece}, 32-33.

\textsuperscript{61} Graham, 144.

\textsuperscript{62} Apollodorus, 3.23.
intervention, the story documenting the development of Thebes would not have tied the people of Thebes as intimately to the place.

Ares’ role is as critical as Athena’s if not as direct. The Spartoi, grown of the dragon’s teeth, become descendants of Ares by extension of Ares’ parental relationship with the dragon. 63 Not only does the dragon become the focal point for violence and conflict in the story, the monster also contributes to the unusual outcome of the story because of its uniquely fertile teeth, thus contributing to the autochthonous nature of Thebes’ founding. Ares may also delay Thebes’ flourishing by indenturing Cadmus for some time as punishment for killing the dragon, Ares’ child. 64 The gods, and several of them, participate in Thebes’ founding alongside Cadmus, the human who ultimately creates the place.

Moving away from the gods, when it came to fighting the dragon Cadmus was on his own and his isolation raises the theme of the hero. Cadmus alone fights and kills the dangerous monster that has just dispatched a number of his traveling companions. Ovid’s vivid account of the founding has Cadmus wearing “the skin of a lion” referring to heroic images of Heracles killing the Nemean Lion. 65 Ovid then goes on to describe the fierce fight where Cadmus prevails over the monster by chucking boulders and spears. Cadmus emerges from combat as a hero, a conqueror of monsters and founder of Thebes. The

63 Apollodorus, 3.23.

64 Apollodorus, 3.24-5.

65 Ovid, 3.53; David Raeburn, trans., *Metamorphosis* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 640. Ovid introduces a fascinating anachronistic detail with this reference. Heracles is himself of Thebes, but comes after Cadmus and Thebes’ founding. By tying Heracles back to the past, Ovid’s retelling of the myth includes later claims of Theban greatness to enhance the city’s beginning.
Greeks frequently bestowed hero cult on colonial founders, according to Dougherty, and may have explicitly stated so in some origin myths suggesting Thebes’ founders may have received the same treatment.66

Neither the Amphion and Zethus or the Cadmus myths indicate the establishment of a cult within the narrative. While the myths themselves preserve the memory of these founders of Thebes, the founders may have also been celebrated with cult even though not explicitly mentioned. As Berman points out, Pausanias reported the twins Amphion and Zethus’s tomb may have been located in a hill called the Ampheion.67 Xenophon also refers to the Ampheion and Aeschylus uses Amphion’s tomb as a geographic reference point in *Seven against Thebes* suggesting a monument to Thebes’ founders.68 This literary evidence combined with the myth itself strongly suggests some cult celebration for Amphion and Zethus. Cadmus, the slayer of a dragon and namesake of the Theban people probably was likewise celebrated as a hero.

The gods themselves seem to regard Cadmus as a hero, or at least bestow significant favor on him following his foundation of Thebes. Athena “arranged for [Cadmus] to have the kingdom [of Thebes], and Zeus gave him as wife Harmonia.”69 The marriage to Harmonia, Ares and Aphrodite’s daughter, brings a resolution to Thebes’ founding after Cadmus’ long indenture to Ares for killing the dragon. The wedding drew quite the audience. According to Apollodorus, “[a]ll the gods left heaven and celebrated

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68 Berman, “The Double Foundation of Boiotian Thebes*,” 8.

69 Apollodorus, 3.25.
the marriage feast in the Cadmeia [at Thebes] with much singing." This divine celebration formally installs Cadmus as the patriarch of Thebes.

Patriarchy runs through both the Cadmus and the Amphion and Zethus myths as a foundational theme. That the founders are all male is obvious: Amphion and Zethus, sons of Zeus, build Thebes’ famous wall; and, separately, Cadmus embarks on his quest to found the city. The patriarchy, however, does not simply manifest as male focused but rather focuses on the heroic male. Amphion and Zethus undertake a heroic effort using their own supernatural qualities to build their wall; Cadmus single handedly slays the dragon after a number of his companions were together overtaken by the monster as I noted above. The myths about the founding of Thebes celebrate these heroic feats of the founding patriarchs.

Indeed, the myths celebrate the heroes’ accomplishments more than they do the start of the city. In many ways, the myths only recall the founding by celebrating the founders. Thebes provides the landscape for their accomplishments, always in the background, making the place itself a heroic achievement and site for heroic achievement. The heroic achievement favored by the gods instills Thebes with theological meaning. At Thebes, the gods favor the founders to create the place out of the wild. Cadmus returns the favor by honoring the gods by building an alter to Athena further enshrining theological ties to the place. The founding event establishes an

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70 Apollodorus, 3.25.

71 Pausanias, 9.12.2.
intimate relationship between Thebes and the gods instantiating theological ties to the city while elevating heroic and patriarchal values associated with the divine.

Family Matters

Family features prominently in Theban origin myths socially connecting people to place. Indeed, fraternity plays a critical role in both the Amphion and Zethus and the Cadmus myths. This fraternity, however, is also fraught with rivalry. While Amphion and Zethus’ rivalry remains mostly benign, fraternity in the Cadmus myth leads nearly immediately to murder. The pervasiveness of fraternity in these two myths also intersects with values of autochthony and endogamy.

Fraternity in the Amphion and Zethus myth is obvious. In the literal sense, no closer fraternity than male twins exists. These twins, in particular, may share an even closer fraternal bond due to the unfortunate circumstances of their birth. Their mother, Antiope, abandoned them alone but together as infants to the world as she was being taken prisoner after her husband was killed.72 Fortunately, though, a shepherd discovered, rescued from the elements, and raised the boys.73 Antiope eventually escapes after what must have been many years later and finds her way back to her sons, who then avenge her captivity and restore the familial unit.74 Their brotherhood, however, also depends on difference.

72 Apollodorus, 3.43.
73 Apollodorus, 3.43.
74 Apollodorus, 3.44.
Despite the closeness of their genetics, Amphion and Zethus developed different qualities as they grew up precisely because they were not the same person. Amphion learned music and became a talented lyre player. Zethus, on the other hand, worked in the fields taking care of cattle. Emphasizing this difference in some retellings of their story, “Zethus had mocked Amphion’s playing but was now forced to admit that it was a more successful aid to building than his own great strength.” Amphion and Zethus’ fraternal rivalry seems to celebrate human difference in mostly a positive way, whereas fraternity in the Cadmus story becomes deadly.

Before turning to Cadmus, I would like to briefly linger on Amphion and Zethus’ ways in which their differences appear to highlight complementary aspects of humanity. Zethus, with his raw strength, embodies the brute work that makes life possible. Amphion, with his cultivated talents, personifies the art that makes life worth living. Interestingly, most of the variations of the twins’ myth emphasizes Amphion’s contributions Thebes’ wall over Zethus as I discussed earlier. Even Zethus admits as much as I noted above. Only together do they make Thebes possible at its beginning in complementary and necessary ways.

In Cadmus’ myth, fraternity features in quite a different way. The Spartoi are the brothers literally grown from the same seed sown by Cadmus. With these brothers,

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75 Apollodorus, 3.43.

76 Apollodorus, 3.43.


78 Apollodorus, 3.23.
however, violent and deadly conflict arises immediately. As soon as they come out of the
ground they begin fighting and killing each other until only five remain. Depending on
the variation of the myth, the party responsible for inciting the violence differs. The later
the author, the less complicit it seems Cadmus is in the fratricide. Apollodorus claims
Pherekydes said Cadmus threw rocks at the Spartoi causing them to fight each other.79
Apollodorus, on the other hand, simply writes “they killed each other” after growing
from the ground.80 Ovid writes Cadmus moves to intervene but the Spartoi tell him to
stay out of the way because the fight is a family affair,81 reinforcing the fraternal nature
of the conflict and internalizing the familial violence.

Spartoi fraternity also raises the issue of Theban autochthony. When considering
Mac Sweeney’s claim that origin stories establish the parameters of identity by
delineating a social group along with ties to a particular place, there probably is no more
of an exclusive, indigenous group than those that emerge together from the place’s very
soil. Thebans who retell the Cadmus story become descendants of people who arose from
the land of Thebes. This direct descent from a place geographically locates genealogy
with no space but only time in between a people and their place. The genealogical
rootedness at the same time creates fraternal implications for the descendants of the
autochthons by creating a civic fraternity.82 Citizens of Thebes are more than neighbors.

79 Apollodorus, 3.24.
80 Apollodorus, 3.23.
81 Ovid, 3.115-7.
82 Richard Rader, ““And Whatever It Is, It Is You”: The Autochthonous Self in Aeschylus’ Seven
Against Thebes,” *Arethusa*, vol. 42, no. 1 (Winter, 2009), 2, accessed June 25, 2017,
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/257996.
They are brothers. Amongst all of the fraternity in the Amphion and Zethus and Cadmus myths, I will now look at the importance of marriage in Thebes’ origins.

Dougherty writes marriage serves as a metaphor “to represent the act of city foundation itself as a union of opposites” and a way to describe “colonization as a peaceful and productive union of Greek colonists and native populations.” Amphion and Zethus are native Greeks, but come to a new place encountering no indigenous population. Cadmus arrives to Greek soil as a foreigner and likewise does not encounter a native population. They all, however, act as colonizers with marriage serving an important integrating function.

While autochthony does not arise in Amphion and Zethus’ myth, marriage plays a critical if small role in this version of Thebes’ founding story. Nothing precedes a place like its name, which symbolically represents all the place means because the name connects language to geography. The name Thebes results from marriage. After the twins build the city, they go on to marry: Amphion to Niobe and Zethus to Thebe, “after whom the city is called Thebes.” While this provides a nice etiology for the city’s name it also localizes the twin founders and their families to the place by the naming, linguistically reconciling their otherwise foreignness.

Marriage plays an essential role reconciling Cadmus’ foreignness as well in addition to tying Cadmus to the gods. As I mentioned in the previous section, Cadmus’

83 Rader, 3.
84 Dougherty, *The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece*, 69.
85 Apollodorus, 3.45.
marriage to Harmonia resolves the problematic founding of Thebes because Athena explicitly gives reign of Thebes to Cadmus and Cadmus implicitly reconciles with the gods through his marriage to Harmonia, Ares’ daughter. Although tying Cadmus to the gods, Cadmus’ marriage to Harmonia reintroduces Ares’ line of progeny into the founding myth of Thebes.

Marriage further serves as unifying function between the foreigner Cadmus and the native Spartoi. Indeed, Cadmus’ foreignness gets reconciled twice through marriage. First, Cadmus integrates with the local by his implicit marriage to the Earth, yielding the Spartoi. As Rader points out, this creates a problematic union by denying “woman’s procreative power” by substituting the Earth for a mother.86 Mother Earth, as depicted by Hesiod, may have birthed gods but never humans.87 Rader does not note, however, that Cadmus and the Earth’s union really is tripartite making it potentially even more problematic. Rader accurately reads the story with Cadmus as father and the Earth as mother but neglects to mention the seed that Cadmus plants in the Earth comes from Ares because it is his dragon’s teeth that Cadmus sows. The Spartoi in a way have two fathers.

This detail becomes more important considering the marriage between Cadmus’ daughter Agaue and one of the Spartoi, Echion, who Ovid writes is the one of the five remaining Spartoi who convinces the others to stop their birthday fratricide.88 Although their marriage formally integrates Cadmus’ line with the indigenous population, this

86 Rader, 3.
87 Hesiod, Theogony.
88 Ovid, 3.125-6.
marriage becomes problematic because the indigenous population also descends from Cadmus. Further, this marriage is doubly incestuous because both Echion and Agaue also directly descend from children of Ares. Despite the closeness of this family, fraternity will pose problems for Thebes as the Spartoi’s fratricide foreshadows the siege of Thebes under Eteocles rule when Eteocles’ bother Polynices, both born of Oedipus’ incestuous marriage to his own mother, led The Seven in a failed attempt to take Thebes.89

In summary, the Theban origin myth discourse presents opportunity to examine the two very different stories for overlap and divergence in theme. Themes surrounding civilization, the gods, and family overlap with one another and intersect with many other motifs contributing to the thematic expansiveness of Theban origin myths. These myths, both rooted historically in mythological time, portray values geographically, theologically, and socially connected to Thebes.

89 H. D. Cameron, Studies on the “Seven Against Thebes” of Aeschylus, (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 17.
CHAPTER FOUR
ASPECTS OF PERFORMATIVITY

Zeitlin writes “Thebes is a place where the past inevitably rules, continually repeating and renewing itself so that each new generation, each new episode in the story, looks backward to its ruin even as it offers a new variation on the theme.”\(^1\) Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes* portrays a cycle of Zeitlin’s repetitious history arresting Thebes. Indeed, the play contemplates the city’s end through reflections of its beginning. Thebes’ origins, however, do not mire Thebes in the past. Thebes, rather, emulates the same values exhibited in Theban origin myths driving it to a future that necessarily echoes Thebes’ beginning.

I contend Aeschylus’ play exposes the performativity of origin myths. This chapter begins with an overview of performative language in the play outside the context of origin myths to establish a baseline for the importance of language in the play. Next, I describe the allusions to Theban origins throughout *Seven* and explore the alignment of values between Thebes’ origin myths and the play and discuss their respective creative roles. Finally, I will explain how the metaphor of Theban origin myths prevails on the future.

\(^1\) Zeitlin, “Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama,” 153.
Power of Language

Stehle writes Aeschylus’ play “pivots on performative speech” but her argument tends to focus on the characters’ religious language. I would add the performativ power of language underlies much of the play indicating the totality of its forward looking tendency when it comes to the power of language. The plot hinges on performative statements. The characters, especially Eteocles, appear acutely aware of their ability to shape events with their words. Aeschylus as the playwright even seems to showcase the performativity of language in the way he constructed the critical shield scene.

Performativ statements drive the play’s primary tension. Two declarations made outside of the play but acknowledged within it create the force of the plot. First, Seven fundamentally unfolds towards actualizing Oedipus’ curse. Although the curse’s real meaning appears hidden to Eteocles, and presumably Polyneices, at the outset, the words spoken some time earlier by Oedipus foretell the brothers’ fate. Similarly, Eteocles’ exile of Polyneices explains the immediate circumstances of the siege (Sept. 638-41). Eteocles, Thebes’ king, probably verbally banished his brother rather than physically removing Polyneices himself. Eteocles words exiled Polyneices just as Oedipus’ words bring the brothers to their violent end.

Violent pronouncements within the play portray the danger Thebes faces. Polyneices may simply wish to depose his brother, but the other aggressors clearly intend

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to destroy the city. The scout indicates as much in his initial report to Eteocles, stating the seven leaders “swore an oath…that they would either bring destruction on the city, sacking the town of the Cadmeans by forces, or perish” (Sept. 42-51). Oaths are by definition performative. In the scout’s subsequent report to Eteocles where he identifies the seven aggressors outside each gate he identifies Capaneus outside the Electran Gate who “says that he will sack the city” (Sept. 427) carrying a shield that says “I will burn this city” (Sept. 434). The scout also reports that Parthenopaeus “swears by the spear he holds…that he will sack the city of the Cadmeans by force (Sept. 529-32). Again, swearing an oath indicates performative intentions. Swearing the oath to a spear emphasizes the violence of those intentions.

Moving on from performative statements, the characters in Seven themselves recognize the performative power of words. In the chorus’ first appearance, they directly appeal to the gods to protect Thebes from the Argives outside of the walls. Stehle observes the chorus in Seven would probably and uncharacteristically have been comprised of unmarried female citizens, “evok[ing] the choruses of public ritual.”4 The chorus hoped to influence the outcome of events through the language of prayer by “persuad[ing] the gods to be favorable.”5 In their hysteria, however, they may have violated social norms for engaging the gods.6

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4 Stehle, 103.
5 Stehle, 103.
6 Stehle, 103.
Stehle points out “Eteocles makes the efficacy of speech an issue by passing harsh judgment on the chorus’ language in the presence of the gods.”⁷ For example, the chorus says “…just like men when their city is captured” (Sept. 257) to which Eteocles responds “[s]aying ill-omened words again, are you, while touching the images” (Sept. 258).

Eteocles expresses concern that the chorus is saying the wrong thing in the presence of the gods. He worries the chorus’ negative exhortations will be realized. Touching the divine statues may even give their words more unintended power as if the gods will better hear them.⁸ Eteocles further implores the chorus to remain silent to keep them from saying something to unintentionally provoke the gods and prevent them from arousing further fear within the community (Sept. 263).

Eteocles exclaims “you are doing your very best to advance the cause of the enemy outside – the city is being sacked from within” (Sept. 193-5). Rader contends Eteocles responds in the play to the internal threats of chaos embodied by the hysterical chorus.⁹ Rader writes the “women’s behavior threatens to disunite (sic) the city, a possibility he cannot tolerate in dire straits.”¹⁰ The chorus’ language of grave fear foreshadowing defeat threatens to undermine the will of the people defending Thebes thereby creating through their verbal hysteria the very destruction they so dread.

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⁷ Stehle, 101.
⁹ Rader, 19.
¹⁰ Rader, 19.
Finally, Aeschylus appears to exhibit the performativity of language with his famous shield scene on which the play centers. Aeschylus inverts the typical messenger scene found in tragedy in this pivotal scene. Usually, the messenger appears to report to the audience action that has already occurred somewhere off stage that would have been too difficult to perform. Aeschylus, however, uses the messenger in the shield scene to foretell the action that will occur somewhere off stage following the scene.\(^{11}\)

The shield scene further emphasizes the power of language because the outcome depends on Eteocles’ verbal ability to match Thebes’ champions with their Argive opponents.\(^{12}\) Eteocles “fight[s] the battle in words.”\(^{13}\) The scout makes a point to describe the Argives’ offensive shields and report their violent exhortations, which Eteocles repeatedly calls boastful.\(^{14}\) Eteocles pairs the Argive braggarts with silent warriors “who hate boasting and value action over speech.”\(^ {15}\) “The speech act is truly performative” because “the privileged field of combat is semantic” throughout the scene.\(^{16}\) The emphasis on the silence of the champions may appear to contradict the significance of

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\(^{12}\) Stehle, 101.

\(^{13}\) Thalmann, 124.


\(^{15}\) Poochigian, 3.

language in this critical scene. It does not, however, because Eteocles needs their silence, which makes the scene’s staging important.  

The staging of Aeschylus’ shield scene has been subject to much debate. If, as Poochigian argues, Aeschylus intended the six champions to be on stage for the famous scene then their silent roles would underscore the importance of language for bringing about events, largely in this case by omission. The enemy has surrounded the walls and now threatens the gates. Eteocles dictates the future with careful narrative. Only the champions’ silence, by not interrupting Eteocles and saying the wrong thing, guarantees Eteocles’ words will decide the desired future.

Allusion to Origins

Seven alludes to Thebes’ origins to geographically locate the city and make selective claims on the past as way to shape the future. Cameron observes “[t]he story of Cadmus and the Spartoi typologically anticipates the story of Eteocles and Polyneices.” Origin myths make contributions to the play as a basis for a dynamically developing narrative as opposed to a static history. Aeschylus’ harmonious treatment of the two different origin myths sets the city in time and space for the unfolding of the play whereas Eteocles’ appeals to Theban origins set conditions for the desired future in defense of the city by emphasizing and omitting possibilities for meaning.

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17 Poochigian, 4.
18 Poochigian, 2-3.
19 Poochigian, 4.
20 Cameron, 87.
Harmonizing even apparently competing myths contributes to the historical coherence and physical instantiation of Thebes. Aeschylus’ play claims the whole Theban origin myth discourse by alluding to both the Amphion and Zethus and Cadmus myths throughout the play. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, later mythographers would separate these two stories in time. Aeschylus’ much earlier tragedy, however, suggests an active origin myth discourse at work. Berman writes “the physical instantiations of the two foundations stand literally side by side in space and time. Instead of contradicting one another, the two stories, in Aeschylus’ play are complementary.”

The complementary stories allude to Theban origins relevant to the circumstances of the siege. Amphion and Zethus’ walls highlight the stalwart physicalness of Theban origins like no other feature in the play. Any mention of Thebes’ famous walls is inseparable from their legendary construction. Amphion and Zethus’s walls with their seven gates feature prominently in the play’s action even though the audience never sees them. The walls define the play’s setting. Thalmann notes that “[t]he opposition between what is inside the city and what is outside is a major preoccupation of the Seven.” As if the prominence of the walls is not enough to tie the play to the Amphion and Zethus origin myth, Aeschylus identifies Amphion’s tomb in the scout’s description of the fifth gate (Sept. 527-37). Berman asserts “[b]y invoking this monument Aeschylus

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21 I am not suggesting any intentionality by Aeschylus in either explicit reference or thematic allusions to Theban origin myths but do contend these specific allusions can be found in the text.

22 Berman, “The Double Foundation of Boiotian Thebes*,” 10.

23 Thalmann, 38-39.

24 Thalmann, 39.
alludes to an aspect of the Theban tradition integral to his story: the legend of the builders
of the very walls stormed by the army of the Seven.”

Aeschylus alludes to the Cadmus myth to an even greater degree in the play
through the voices of the characters. If beginnings are important, as this thesis contends,
then the opening lines of Aeschylus’ tragedy would convey particular significance as has
been recognized by playwrights, theater goes, and scholars for centuries. Eteocles
begins his opening soliloquy by addressing the “Citizens of Cadmus’ land” (Sept. 1),
directly invoking the Cadmus origin myth by appealing to the collective memory of those
present. Eteocles’ immediate evocation of Cadmus is no accident or mere reference.
Throughout the play, Aeschylus never uses “Thebes” or “Thebans” but always refers to
the people of Thebes by their relation to Cadmus. Indeed, Aeschylus has Eteocles refer
to Thebes just a few lines later as “the city of the Cadmeans” (Sept. 10).

Cameron observes “one poetic function of this fact is to recall with the mention of
Cadmus the centrality of the story of the [Spartoi]” in the play. No doubt. In addition to
how Thebes’ origins contribute to the setting and plot, Eteocles uses the language of

26 Euripides’ later play Phoenician Women, mostly on the same topic as Aeschylus’ play, also
begins with similar allusions to the Cadmus origin myth. According to Haslam, the play originally opened
at line 3 with the first two lines being spurious later additions, moving reference to Cadmus even closer to
the start of the original text. Michael W. Haslam, “The Authenticity of Euripides, Phoenissae 1-2 and
27 Berman, “The Double Foundation of Boiotian Thebes*,” 10.
28 Jerome Mazzaro, “Memory in Aeschylus’ Seven Against Thebes,” Comparative Drama, vol. 18,
29 Cameron, 87.
those origins in the play to claim the past for the future. As Zeitlin points out, “Eteocles’s best defense against the curse of his father and on behalf of his own name is attention to language and control of the discourse.” Eteocles’ opening soliloquy invokes memory so he can gain control over claims on the past. Only by first retroactively seizing the narrative does he hope to direct the city into the future. By emphasizing and omitting aspects of memory to encourage cohesion around Theban identity, Eteocles shapes the narrative of Thebes of his present day in such a way as to lead it to a future inevitable victory against the Argives. Eteocles thus puts himself into “a feedback loop where anticipation of the future leads to action which creates that very future” from the outset.

Eteocles alludes to the Spartoi and Theban autochthony in his opening speech appealing to origin myth laden memory as a way of inspiring action towards a desirable future for saving the city. Eteocles, addressing the able bodied males before him, refers to Thebes as “your most loving nurse” who “generously accepted all the toil of your upbringing, and nurtured you to become her shield-bearing inhabitants” (Sept. 16-20). Eteocles’ speech appeals to Theban autochthony by both addressing the Thebans themselves and conjuring the original Spartoi. First, Eteocles refers to the people before him and their own literal upbringing in Thebes. Their parents reared them in their

30 Zeitlin, Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus’ “Seven Against Thebes,” 23.


32 Griffiths, 732.

33 Griffiths, 733.

34 Zeitlin, Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus’ “Seven Against Thebes,” 16.
homeland from when they quite literally were crawling and through adolescence until they grew up and learned to fight. At the same time, Eteocles calls on the very warriors that grew out of the ground where Cadmus had planted the dragon’s teeth. Eteocles needs the Spartoi now and arouses them to the city’s defense.

Memory, however, can be selective. Rader points out problems with autochthony that Eteocles ignores as he uses memory “to create political and civic solidarity.” Rader writes “[a]utochthony is, after all, a civic genealogical metaphor for the coincidence of family and earth/city, people and land.” As Rader notes earlier in his paper, “autochthony creates a responsibility for the bearer of its purity.” The autochthonous citizens of Thebes have a dual commitment to their city and Eteocles seems intent on reminding them of this. They are responsible to Thebes in both a civic and familial sense, making their obligations that much stronger.

On the other hand, the play also exposes a “disturbing vision of autochthony – with its connection to incest, rape, and the destruction of the city.” Indeed, Eteocles mentions nothing of the incest and fratricide also bound up in the Spartoi of Thebes’ origins. In choosing to suppress these aspects of autochthony when conjuring the Spartoi, Eteocles asserts particular aspects of Theban origins while denying others. Further, his incestuous family history also undermines his claim for civic genealogy. Eteocles’

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35 Rader, 33.
36 Rader, 28.
37 Rader, 15.
38 Rader, 33.
39 Rader, 33.
family does not descend from the Spartoi, yet he makes this appeal to both those really of
the earth and those sharing the same affinity by virtue of civic pride.\footnote{Mazzaro, 127.} Eteocles does not
let his own past interfere with the claims he makes on Thebes’ origins.

In a final note about Eteocles’ interest in claiming the past to control the future,
Eteocles’ conflict with the chorus may be as much a struggle over the narrative as it is a
quarrel over the role of the gods. Griffiths argues that “Eteocles’ attempts to stabilize the
situation are more widespread \[than merely normative efforts emphasizing Greek values\],
linked to control of \textit{muthoi}.\footnote{Griffiths, 728.} The fearful narrative the chorus expresses appears passive
and defeatist, especially to Eteocles. Eteocles, on the other hand, “has to believe that
there is some scope for human intervention.”\footnote{Griffiths, 728.} He thus proposes a narrative of strength,
where he envisions himself leading the effort to defeat the Argive armies outside the
walls even if his language violates in the same way he admonishes the chorus, as Stehle
contends.\footnote{Stehle, 114-115.}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Resounding Values}
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Values expressed in origin myths may influence the people who claim those
myths. The Thebes Aeschylus depicts in \textit{Seven} exhibits many of the same animating
values as those I identified with Theban origins in the previous chapter. These values,
however, may manifest differently than those in the origin myths mostly because they appear in excess in Aeschylus’ play.

*Seven* reminds us civilization remains contingent. On the edge of what may be Thebes’ violent destruction, Aeschylus alludes to Thebes’ origins as a violent struggle to establish order out of chaos by depicting the violent struggle to prevent chaos from obliterating order. Aeschylus especially illustrates this through references to Thebes’ walls and through an enduring nautical metaphor.

Amidst the cacophony of bronze spears, heavy horses, and violent exhortations, a hostile world threatens to destroy Thebes. Visually making the distinction between order and chaos, Eteocles draws an explicit line around the city saying “we have been besieged within our walls” (*Sept.* 22) alluding to the Amphion and Zethus origin myth. The walls that defined the contours of city at its origins now protect Thebes under Eteocles’ reign. As if to further differentiate the Thebans inside, Eteocles calls the Argives a “horde of foreigners” (*Sept.* 34) that have enveloped and threaten the very walls that once represented the start of civilization.

After evoking Cadmus at the very beginning of the play, Eteocles immediately ties Thebes’ founding with the contours of civilization by comparing the city to a ship in the next line where he sees himself “controlling the helm at its stern” (*Sept.* 2). The metaphor of a ship with its crew navigating an inherently hostile environment aligns well with the city and its inhabitants as civilization against the chaotic forces of a hostile
Sommerstein notes “the city is imaged as a ship” “often in poetry.” Aeschylus carries the metaphor throughout the play in what Cameron calls “the most extended example of the metaphor of the ship of state in ancient literature.”

This water metaphor is apt due to the centrality of water in Thebes’ founding with the deadly dispute between Cadmus and his compatriots and Ares’ dragon guarding the nearby spring. As I argued in the previous chapter, this conflict depicted Cadmus conquering wild, chaotic nature creating a space for human thriving. Thebes’ walls provide safety and security against a hostile world as a ship does for those aboard in one of the most hostile environments for land creatures like humans, the sea.

When it comes to the gods, the chorus appears to want to put the city completely at their mercy in an excessive theological take on the intimate role the gods played in Thebes’ founding, according to the Cadmus myth. Eteocles, however, wants nothing to do with that notion by seemingly perceiving the role of the gods to be more in line with the distant gods of the Amphion and Zethus story. Eteocles and the chorus’ disagreement over the role of the gods reflects the same discrepancy between the two different Theban origin myths I discussed in the previous chapter.

In the chorus’ first appearance, they make a dire appeal to seven successive Olympians: Zeus, Athena, Poseidon, Ares, Aphrodite, Apollo, and Artemis. At first

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44 Thalmann, 32-38; Cameron, 58-70. Both discuss at length the nautical imagery at work in Aeschylus’ play.

45 Sommerstein, 215.

46 Cameron, 58.

47 Mazzaro, 122. Mazzaro writes “If one accepts Bacon’s reading of line 152 as referring not to Hera but to Artemis as “mistress of wild beasts,” there are also seven deities invoked in the opening
appearance, these seven seem merely like a reasonable group of prominent gods to invoke for the salvation of any ancient Greek city. In the case of Thebes, however, these gods allude to the city’s origins. The five gods that feature prominently in the Cadmus story of Thebes’ founding are amongst these seven; all but Poseidon and Artemis play a role in the origins of Thebes.

Not only do the gods of Thebes’ founding significantly overlap with the gods the chorus invokes as saviors, but the chorus makes specific appeals to two of the gods precisely because of their involvement in Thebes’ origins. In their direct appeals to the gods, they address Ares “[a]nd you, Ares – ah, ah! – guard the city that bears Cadmus’ name, and make manifest your care for it” (Sept. 136-7). Here, the chorus makes direct reference to the Cadmus origin myth and again refers to Ares invoking his dual role in the story.\footnote{Zeitlin, Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus’ “Seven Against Thebes,” 16.} In the next lines, the chorus appeals to Aphrodite “[a]nd Cypris, you who are the ancestress of our race, keep them away from us! For we are born of your blood, and we approach you with cries and prayers that deserve a divine hearing” (Sept. 140-6). Ares and Aphrodite are Harmonia’s parents, who married Cadmus, making the “Cadmeans” descendants of Ares and Harmonia.

The chorus’ invocation of the gods also suggests meaning can be supplemented. In addition to the Olympians, the chorus also appeals to a local deity “blest Queen Onca, dwelling before the city, protect your seven-gated home” (Sept. 164-5). This local deity

chorus.” I would also note line 152 being read as “Oh, Hera!”, as in Sommerstein’s translation, stands out amongst the invocations of the other Olympians because the reference merely is an exclamation whereas the chorus refers to the other gods with context for specific appeal, such as lines 116-117 “Father Zeus, you who have supreme power over all, at all costs defend us from capture by our foes!”
would have had to come sometime after the founding of the city and as such stands outside of direct reference to Thebes’ origins. Onca, however, can only have a home in Thebes because Thebes is there at all. In both the historical sense and the literary sense, the chorus adds Onca to their enumeration of the other gods tied to Thebes’ founding. The local deity clearly associates intimately with the place and further connects the Olympians to Thebes by inclusion with the other gods.

Eteocles’s dispute with the chorus reveals the overt patriarchy in Aeschylus’ depiction of Thebes, loudly echoing the patriarchy found in Theban origin myths. Eteocles tells the chorus “out-of-door affairs are the concern of men; women are not to offer opinions about them” (Sept. 200-2). Just a few lines earlier, Eteocles decries the presence of women either “in trouble or welcome prosperity” saying “when a woman is in the ascendant, her effrontery is impossible to live with; when she’s frightened, she is an even greater menace to family and city” (Sept. 187-91). The patriarchy grounded in Thebes’ origins becomes misogynistic in Aeschylus’ Thebes.

Eteocles’ self-perceived role of the hero parallels Cadmus’ role in Thebes’ founding. Eteocles from the very first lines of the play envisions himself saving the city. Indeed, he will be Thebes’ hero, only its tragic hero. Eteocles, the Greek hero clad in his greaves carrying his sword leaves for the seventh gate to encounter both his brother and certain death. As Otis points out, “Eteocles does not know till the last moment that Polynoeices is to be his opponent,” although he sets himself up for the fight at the seventh
gate in dramatic fashion. As Cadmus killed the dragon to make Thebes possible, Eteocles will kill his brother to allow Thebes to continue. Eteocles, unlike Cadmus, must perish to become a hero.

In the previous section, I discussed Eteocles’ appeals to autochthony and mention it again to reiterate the value of autochthony present in the Cadmus origin myth and specifically tie that to the value of fraternity evident in both the Amphion and Zethus and Cadmus myths. Eteocles’ evocation of the Spartoi stresses Theban values aligned with both autochthony and fraternity in Theban origin myths. Fraternity, in Eteocles’ case, is a civic fraternity where everyone descends from the same mother, the earth, and will together face the Argives not just as compatriots but family. I have more to say about family, especially endogamy, but will save it for the next section to avoid repeating myself.

Reification of Metaphor

Theban origin myths appear to prevail on the future in Aeschylus’ play. Desirable and undesirable aspects of Thebes’ origins contribute to Thebes’ unfolding. The metaphor of Thebes’ origins influences a similar future in some cases because of human endeavor and others in spite of human intentions. Human activity preserves civilization, the gods have their own way, and incest and fratricide remain a problem.

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50 Rader, 2.
Only human effort can sustain civilization. As Amphion and Zethus and Cadmus were responsible for building civilization out of the wild, Eteocles and the other people of Thebes remain responsible for fending off the ever threatening forces of chaos. The chaos Amphion and Zethus and Cadmus closed out to create a place for human thriving did not go away altogether. The forces of chaos present in Theban origin myths continue to threaten the city by encroachment.

Griffiths notes the conflict of order and chaos as a major theme running through Aeschylus’ play. Indeed, in the most obvious sense the immediate crisis in the play involves the chaos surrounding the Thebes’ walls and threatening to overwhelm the order of the city with impending doom. Some of the threatening chaos also comes from the fear welling inside the protective walls in the form of the chorus. The walls are insufficient for preserving Thebes in both cases. In fact, stones twist from guarantors of safety in the form of a wall in Thebes’ origins to lethal projectiles hurled by the Argives (Sept. 159). Ultimately, humans remain the guarantor of civilization against both an ever hostile world and their own fallibility, and the stakes can never be higher.

The chorus makes a point to describe in detail what the fall of Thebes would mean for the place. Besides the obvious death, fire, slavery, rape, and general desecration, the chorus also highlights that “grain of every sort, spilled on the ground, pains the eye, having acquired unfriendly store-keepers” (Sept. 321-68). The chorus

51 Griffiths, 727.
52 Rader, 19.
53 Mazzaro, 122.
envisions the very grain that feeds and perpetuates the city losing all meaning. The city faces not only material destruction but oblivion.

The city ends and everything hoped for tomorrow becomes useless, literally for the actual grain and metaphorically for a people who consider themselves descendants of the Spartoi. Rader’s remarks on the metaphor at work in these lines are worth quoting at length:

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.⁵⁴

Death may be better than living through the onslaught. The chorus suggests “even the dead fare better than they do” in reference to young girls forcibly taken for a violent marriage before their time (Sept. 336-7). Death, the chorus claims, would be better than facing the corporeal and psychological horrors of surviving a sacked city.

The gods only appear as icons in the play and everyone appeals to them for their own ends, although it is not clear “that the gods were particularly interested in what happened to Thebes.”⁵⁵ The gods of Thebes’ origins, according to the Cadmus myth, actively cultivate the city but often for their own purposes: Zeus for Europa; Ares for his dragon; and, Athena for Cadmus. In both the myths and the play, though, the gods never answer to humans. Ares even enslaved Cadmus and takes Eteocles (and Polyneices).

⁵⁴ Rader, 32.
⁵⁵ Griffiths, 743.
Nonetheless, the gods appear to have some affinity for the place if not for particular people.

Comparing the Thebans to the Argives, Otis notes “the contrast between the two sides is evident: the one is invoking the good and just gods; the other the gods of war, panic, and destruction.”56 The leaders of the seven “swore an oath by Ares, Enyo and blood-loving Terror that they would either bring destruction to the city, sacking the town of the Cadmeans by force, or perish” (Sept. 47-9). The forces outside of the walls appeal to the gods for chaos whereas inside the walls the “Gods who dwell in this city” reinforce the order of Thebes (Sept. 108).

Otis rightly identifies the tension between Eteocles’ perception of the gods and the chorus’ stating “[n]either has any inkling of the true role of the gods, of the relation of the Erinys to the gods of the city or the Olympians.”57 Eteocles recognizes the importance of the gods but insists his actions must save the city. Eteocles exclaims “Be its defence! I believe I am speaking in our common interest; for when a city enjoys success, it honours its gods” (Sept. 76-7). The chorus, on the other hand, weeps and wails for the gods to save the city as if they themselves and the rest of Thebes are helpless in the face of the Argive attackers, especially as they cry “Oh, oh, you gods and you goddesses, keep off the surge of evil” (Sept. 87-8).

Humans can only make mostly failed attempts to understand the gods and their diving justice. As such, justice remains a complicated issue in Aeschylus’ play. Otis

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56 Otis, 156-157.
57 Otis, 159.
points out Amphiaruas’ “fate revealed the ambiguity of divine justice, the lot of all good men who suffer.” The future unfolds often in unpredictable ways even for the righteous. By pitting brother against brother, both in the wrong, Aeschylus offers a dilemma for contemplating divinity and justice. Eteocles exiled his own brother. Polyneices, in turn, raised an army to attack his own home. Both appeal to the same gods, those native to Thebes. The gods, however, do what they will as with Thebes’ origins. The city persists and the brothers perish.

Fratricide and incest remain a problem for Thebes. The chorus pleads “the death of two men of the same blood killing each other – that pollution can never grow old” when attempting to persuade Eteocles to send someone else to fight Polyneices (Sept. 682-3). This serves an obvious warning to Eteocles that he will pollute Thebes by killing his brother. In light of Theban origins raised throughout the play, however, the chorus’ statement is also an observation that Thebes already is polluted. And, because Thebes already is polluted the city will perpetuate more pollution precisely because “that pollution can never grow old.”

Polyneices, the unseen antagonist, fights to return home to Thebes from exile, recalling Cadmus’ exile as part of the city’s founding. Thebes resolves Cadmus’ exile as Polynceices expects it to for him. He appeals to “the ancestral gods of his fatherland to look favorably on his prayers in every way” (Sept. 643-4). These are the same gods Eteocles and the chorus beseech from inside Thebes’ walls and the same gods of Thebes’

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58 Otis, 163.
59 Otis, 169.
founding as I noted above. Like Cadmus, Polyneices faces deadly violence to claim Thebes. The resolution to Polyneices’ exile by coming to Thebes, however, gets perverted because he returns only to die on Theban soil.

Even on the surface of the play, Seven represents a clash between two brothers competing for the Theban throne. The brothers’ violent end, however, recalls the Spartoi and their own fratricide.⁶⁰ Eteocles’ appeals to civic fraternity, even appearing to allude specifically to the Cadmus myth as I discussed above, immediately brings the Spartoi to mind.⁶¹ Eteocles addresses the citizens of Thebes and calls for all men, including those who would be considered too young or too old for fighting to join the cause in defense of their city.⁶² Eteocles explicitly calls for them to come “to the aid of your Motherland” (Sept. 16-7). His unspoken implication is that the sons of Thebes are indeed brothers figuratively as the sons of the same city and literally because they descend from the same mother, the very earth.⁶³ Even though Eteocles chose to ignore the murderous aspect of Theban autochthony in his appeals to the citizenry, he cannot escape Thebes’ fratricidal origins and neither can Polyneices.

The incest of Thebes’ founding likewise persists and manifests through three different marriages raised in the play. The most alarming, and obviously problematic, marriage belonging to the play unites Oedipus and Jocasta as identified by the Chorus (Sept. 752-4). Their union yields Eteocles and Polyneices. Just before, the Chorus refers

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⁶⁰ Zeitlin, Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus’ “Seven Against Thebes,” 16.
⁶¹ Rader, 2.
⁶² Cameron, 94.
⁶³ Cameron, 94-95.
to the original problematic marriage between Laius and Jocasta in defiance of Apollo (Sept. 747-8). While not overtly incestuous, the marriage represents a violation. The chorus raises the third marriage much earlier in the play when they appeal to Ares to “guard the city that bears Cadmus’ name” (Sept. 136-7) and Aphrodite as “the ancestress if our race” (Sept. 140). Harmonia, Cadmus’ wife, is Ares’ and Aphrodite’s’ daughter.

The chorus seems to believe this was a positive union for Thebes, and in many ways it was. One thing not addressed in Seven concerning the Theban origin myth discourse, however, is the incestuous nature of its first generation. While Rader contends autochthony itself is incestuous, I would like to point out that even beyond the Spartoi, incestuous relationships persist in Thebes.64 As I discussed in the previous chapter, the tripartite parenting between Cadmus, Ares, and the Earth yields the Spartoi, one of whom marries one of Cadmus and Harmonia’s daughters putting both Cadmus and Ares in direct paternal lineage on both sides of that union. Descendants of Cadmus, the “Cadmeans” of Seven, were already incestuous before Oedipus arrived and even before Laius defied Apollo by marrying Jocasta.

Eteocles, Jocasta’s son, cannot escape the incestuous and fratricidal metaphor of Thebes’ beginning. “Running parallel to Eteocles’ personal narrative is the story of the city, and the city has a perspective of its own.”65 Eteocles, identifying himself with the city,66 sees the fate of the city tied to his fate when organizing the defense of Thebes.

64 Rader, 32-33.
65 Griffiths, 742.
Thebes, however, does not depend on Eteocles as he does on the city. Eteocles cannot distinguish the separate narratives nor understand his actual capacity to influence Thebes’ narrative and gets overcome by the persistence of the metaphor of Thebes’ origins. To borrow Aeschylus’ ship metaphor, Eteocles fails to realize that while the captain must go down with the ship, the ship goes on without the captain.

In summary, Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes*, with its own emphasis on performative language, provides a portrayal of a city influenced by its beginnings as its future unfolds. With allusions to both of Thebes’ origin myths and thematic parallels invoking many of the same values, Aeschylus’ Thebes suggests origin myths may metaphorically realize the city’s prospects. The real tragedy isn’t that Thebes is forever stuck in the past but that the original Theban values are corrupted such that they reverberate with the same implications into the future.
CONCLUSION

Horace goes on to recount the tragic story of the murderous Danaids in the rest of his poem I sampled at the very beginning of this thesis. They are doomed to forever fill a sieve with water and truly are stuck in time, incessantly repeating their futile days. Like Thebes, their troubled past portends their certain future. Unlike Thebes, however, their narrative remains circular. The Danaids carry water to pour down the drain because that is what they do for their crimes. The punishment results from the values they embraced not those they continue to live. Thebes, on the other hand, represents a complex place whose corrupted past continues to shape its unfolding future because of its lived values.

Origin myths, like those of Thebes, do not survive as mere relics. Although they make claims on the past to locate meaning at a particular place, they do so in service of the present for the future. They are less about what was than they are about what is and what will be. People tell these kinds of stories to engender belief not just for what once might have been, but for how they see themselves and who they we will become. The values contained in these stories, apparently about the past, reverberate into the future by providing coherency and structure that continues to influence human endeavor.

Rather than use this conclusion to restate in short form what I have just covered at length in my thesis, I want to use this space to expand on the value propositions of this project I outlined in its introduction. I stated these implications up front and have argued implicitly and explicitly for them in the previous chapters. Having done that, I would now like to editorialize a bit to explain why I think these four particular implications are important.
First, considering origin myths in the context of the values they propose reveals the richness of these stories. Ostensibly about the place, these myths can convey as much about the people telling the stories for what they mean about the connection between people and place. These stories represent much more than mythological fairy tales or simple histories, as I discussed in the previous two chapters about Thebes. The values describe the many ways myths connect people to places and provides a framework for thinking about how and why a place exhibits the particular character it does. The human values in these kinds of stories become animating features of the place, bringing me to my next concluding point.

Thinking about a place’s origins can enhance appreciation for that place. Stories about a place’s origins, like those of Thebes, offer a perspective on the place about what the place’s beginning means for the character of the place, contributing to our interpretation of the world. I would not limit this to cities but would suggest the notion can expand across geography to encompass the beginning of any kind of place or even the beginning of other human constructs, like social groups or cultural phenomenon. Any study of a place needs to account for the place’s beginning because the rest of the place emanates from there.

Emanation takes me to my third concluding point. The stories we tell about origins can have performative power. As I specifically discussed with Thebes, values portrayed in origin myths can shape the way the future unfolds by stressing and omitting possibility for meaning. This framing feature of origin myths, and perhaps other cultural narratives, requires careful consideration about the beliefs we embrace individually and
collectively. As citizens and free agents we have an obligation to engage with discussions about values at least to understand what we individually we choose to believe. These beliefs are not innocuous because of the power they hold over our future, possibly in even unexpected ways. The function of belief also asserts our own role in perpetuating values.

Finally, a liberal studies approach to thinking about fundamental human questions without apparent answers, like those origin myths attempt to address, both enriches and provides rigor for the human experience, something inherently uncontainable. I have found origin myths to be fascinating but epistemologically disconcerting. As I noted much earlier, Plato raised very legitimate objections to poetry and the beliefs poets as purveyors of myth propagate. So much about the human experience remains ambiguous. Ignoring ambiguity or pretending otherwise does not change the profound effect mere belief can have. Liberal studies can help to better recognize and appreciate the ambiguity of origin myths, to understand the variety of influences on belief, and discern the values associated with origin myths to identify the real effects of these stories.

Beyond these four implications, I would like to end with a final thought about Thebes. At the start of this thesis, I insisted it was not an historical project but Thebes reminds us of one undeniable historical fact: the actual Thebes no longer exists. That the actual Thebes has been lost emphasizes the contingency of places, especially civilization. The story of Thebes and its origins, however persist. Chaos, nature, and the hard physicalness of reality may claim human created places, but great stories and the ideas bound up in stories about places endure. Origin myths provide a starting point for exploring the ideas that reveal a place.


