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“Dream of a Shade”: Refractions of Epic Vision in Pindar’s Pythian 8 and Aeschylus’ Seven against Thebes

Gregory Nagy

This essay explores the idea of epic in relative rather than absolute terms, with specific reference to the image of a “dream of a shade” in Pindar’s Pythian 8 and Aeschylus’ Seven against Thebes.¹ In both form and content, these two poetic creations contain features that may be described as epic in nature. The main argument of this essay is that such features, as refracted separately in the two distinct genres of tragedy and victory ode or “epinician,” are in fact complementary in revealing a unified picture of epic as a genre in its own right.²

The problem is, we cannot even begin to piece together such a picture without a clarification of the idea of epic as a genre. So I offer this premise: that the genre of epic, as well as any other genre, cannot be defined absolutely, as if it belonged to Plato’s world of Forms (in the usage of Plato, the very idea of “Form” is expressed by the same word that means “genre”:

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¹ A point of convergence is seen by J. H. Finley, Pindar and Aeschylus (Cambridge MA 1966) 245: “In Pythian 8 Amphiaraus watching the young Alcmaeon from the grave feels only the beauty of his heroism though he knows him destined to die. Eteocles’ beauty in the Septem is more clouded, and the dry eyes of the Labdacid curse watching beside him declare a human inheritance from which peace is far removed.” I evoke his shining words as I dedicate this essay to his memory.

² On the optic metaphors of refraction, with special reference to the poetic image of refrain (from Latin refringere), see G. Nagy, Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond (Cambridge 1996) 23-24.
Rather, genre needs to be defined both historically - as it existed at a given time - and comparatively in relation to any other coexisting genres at that same given time. This essay, then, offers preliminaries to a reconstruction of the genre of epic as it existed in the first half of the fifth century BC, roughly the era shared by Aeschylus and Pindar, with specific reference to two other genres, tragedy and epinician, as represented by Aeschylus' Seven against Thebes (originally presented in 467 BC) and Pindar's Pythian 8 (originally presented in 446 BC). I will begin by considering in the most general terms the relationship of epic to the tragedies of Aeschylus and the epinicians of Pindar. Then I will proceed to examine specific features of the Seven against Thebes and Pythian 8 that complement each other in refracting an essential feature that typifies epic. That feature is the self-image of epic as a poetic vision.

In the case of Aeschylus, I suggest that we start by adopting a comparative perspective in considering the performances of his tragedies by professional actors (and by nonprofessional choruses) at the Athenian state festival of the City Dionysia - in light of the corresponding performances of the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey by professional rhapsodes at the Athenian state festival of the Panathenaia. Granted, information about the seasonally recurring Panathenaic

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5 See Poetry as Performance p. 81 for more on the “functioning institutional complementarity, in Athens, between the performance of drama by actors and chorus at the City Dionysia on the one hand and, on the other, the performance of Homeric epos - and of Homeric hymns that serve as preludes to the epos - by rhapsodes at the Panathenaia.” The most important references to the Athenian institution of rhapsodic performances of Homeric poetry at the Panathenaia are “Plato” Hipparkhos 228b-c, Lycurgus Against Leokrates 102, and Dieuchidas of Megara (4th century BC) FGH 485 F 6 via Diogenes Laertius 1.57. For a correlation of the information provided by these passages, see Poetry as Performance pp. 70-91. As for the references to the epē of Homer, as found in all three passages, I offer the working translation ‘verses’. More precisely, the epē are the poetic ‘lines’ of Homer (on epos as a distinct poetic unit or ‘line’, see H. Koller, “Epos,” Glotta 50 [1972] 15-24). For Aristotle, the epē of Homer become ‘epic’ by default, whence the term epoπoia ‘making of epic’, as in the beginning of the Poetics, 1447a: see “Epic as Genre” p. 27. The implicit preoccupation with ‘lines’ as the poetic units or building blocks of epē has to do with an ongoing question that engaged the ancient transmitters of the Homeric tradition: which ‘lines’ are genuine
performances of Homeric poetry is sparse, and there are many uncertainties: we cannot even be certain about the actual form of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as they would have been performed during the first half of fifth century in Athens, let alone elsewhere. Still, among the few surviving certainties we do find one that turns out to be vital for understanding the overall history of the Homeric tradition: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* eventually became the only epic poetry to be performed by rhapsodes at the Panathenaia, that most important of all Athenian festivals. To put it negatively: other epic traditions, known under the general heading of the “Cycle,” were eventually excluded from the official rhapsodic...
repertoire of the Panathenaia.\textsuperscript{8} Two of the most outstanding examples of such epics were the \textit{Thebaid} (PEG pp. 20-28, EGF pp. 21-26) and the \textit{Epigonoi} (PEG pp. 29-31, EGF pp. 26-27).\textsuperscript{9} The alternative epic poetry of the “Cycle,” as we can see clearly even from the fragmentary evidence concerning performance traditions sanctioned by the Athenian State in the first half of the fifth century BC, was absorbed into the tragic poetry of the City Dionysia, as in the case of the \textit{Seven against Thebes} of Aeschylus, which is evidently a tragic version of the epic \textit{Thebaid}.\textsuperscript{10} To that extent, I would say that tragedy became a kind of \textit{neo-epic}, though we should keep in mind the obvious differences in the earlier historical backgrounds of epic and tragedy.\textsuperscript{11}

In the case of Pindar, we may continue to take a comparative perspective as we look at the explicit references in his epinicians to epic as a genre, combined with explicit self-references to the praise poetry of the epinician as a realization or “actualization” of a prototypical

\textsuperscript{8} On the concept of the “Cycle” in the fifth and fourth centuries BC as the entirety of epic traditions - with the notable exception of the Homeric \textit{Iliad} and \textit{Odyssey}, see Nagy, \textit{Homeric Questions} (Austin 1996) 38. For editions of the “Cyclic” testimonia and fragments, see PEG = A. Bernabé, ed., \textit{Poetae Epici Graeci I} (Leipzig 1987); EGF = M. Davies, ed., \textit{Epicorum Graecorum Fragmenta} (Göttingen 1988).

\textsuperscript{9} For an appreciation of the epic \textit{Thebaid} as an esthetic rival of the \textit{Iliad} and \textit{Odyssey}, see especially Pausanias 9.9.5. The wording of Herodotus 5.67 suggests that the epic themes of the \textit{Thebaid} and the \textit{Epigonoi} may have been the basic repertoire for rhapsodes’ performances at the festivals of Argos and Sikyon: see E. Cingano, “Clistene di Sicione, Erodoto e i poemi del Ciclo tebano,” \textit{Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica} 20 (1985) 31-40, with reference to Herodotus 5.67. See also Nagy, \textit{Pindar’s Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past} (Baltimore 1990) 22n22.

\textsuperscript{10} We learn from the hypothesis of the \textit{Seven} that Aeschylus won first prize in 467 BC with the sequence of these four dramas: \textit{Laios, Oedipus, Seven against Thebes}, and \textit{Sphinx}. The close relationship between Aeschylus’ dramatic repertoire and the epic repertoire of the “Cycle” is stressed by J. Herington, \textit{Poetry into Drama: Early Tragedy and the Greek Poetic Tradition} (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1985) 139. I argue further for a complementarity between the “Cyclic” repertoire of the City Dionysia and the “Homeric” repertoire of the Panathenaia. In my view, even the representations of Achilles and Odysseus in early tragedy reflect the generally “Cyclic” repertoire and not the specifically “Homeric” repertoire of the \textit{Iliad} and \textit{Odyssey}. In terms of this argument, the “Homeric” \textit{Iliad} and \textit{Odyssey} are distinct because they became the sole epics of the Panathenaia. As such, the \textit{Iliad} and \textit{Odyssey} would have passed through a distinctly Athenian phase of evolution, not shared by the “Cycle.” Elsewhere, I have described the Athenian phase of Homeric poetry as the “Panathenaic bottleneck”: see pp. 271-272 of “Irreversible Mistakes and Homeric Poetry,” in J. N. Kazazis and A. Rengakos, eds., \textit{Euphrosyne: Studies in Ancient Epic and Its Legacy in Honor of Dimitris N. Maronitis} (Stuttgart 1999) 259-274.

\textsuperscript{11} On epic elements in tragedy, see in general Herington pp. 138-144, the section entitled “Aeschylus Homericus?” I note with special interest his remark at p. 139: “It should not be forgotten that (at least to judge by the \textit{Oresteia}) the running time of a trilogy could be more than a quarter of that of a full-length epic.”
function of epic - to make *kleos* ‘fame’.¹² These references imply that the genre of the epinician, as inherited by Pindar, is not only older than the genre of epic: more than that, the praise poetry of the epinician is pictured as the compressed origin of epic, which by contrast is pictured as an expanded derivation of praise poetry.¹³ In Pindar *Nemean* 8.51-52 - to cite the most relevant example - the athletic ordeals of the Seven against Thebes, as virtually celebrated by the genre of the epinician, are privileged as older than their wartime ordeals as actually celebrated by epic (and as attested by the surviving fragments of the epic *Thebaid*). In other words, the victory ode of Pindar claims that its “praise poetry was praising heroes even before the events recorded by epic.”¹⁴ Let me stress again: such self-references imply an even more important claim: that the compressed poetry of praise actually generated the expanded poetry of epic. Such claims, built into the epinician tradition, have a historical validity in the sense that the epinician is in some ways older than the epic in form (for example, in its metrical repertoire) while praise poetry is in general older than epic poetry in function (for example, in its conventions of reference to the present as well as the heroic past).¹⁵ For the moment, however, questions of historical derivation are irrelevant: the one point of relevance is simply the functional relationship of epinician and epic, as claimed by epinician. To that extent, I would say that the epinician is a kind of *micro-epic*, though we should keep in mind the obvious differences in the earlier historical backgrounds of epic and epinician.

Proceeding now from the general to the specific, let us explore the {101|102} wording of Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes*, as a “neo-epic,” and of Pindar’s *Pythian* 8, as a “micro-epic,” concerning the overall epic narrative about the *Seven against Thebes* and their sons, the *Epigonoi*. In parallel ways, both of these poetic creations picture this narrative as a *vision*.

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¹³ *Pindar’s Homer* p. 437 (summary).
¹⁴ *Pindar’s Homer* p. 192, with further examples and references.
¹⁵ *Pindar’s Homer* pp. 414-437.
In the *Seven* of Aeschylus, each of the seven heroes arrayed against the polis of Thebes is visualized directly, by way of direct speech as delivered by the messenger (to Eteocles as the chief defender of the polis); further, the identity of each hero is visualized indirectly, by way of a blazon on his shield, the word for which is *sēma* ‘sign, signal’ (lines 387, 404, 432, 491, 518, 591, 643); even further, the *sēma* of each hero is interpreted directly by way of the same direct speech delivered by the messenger.\(^{16}\)

Similarly in Pindar’s *Pythian* 8, the hero Alcmaeon is visualized directly by way of direct speech as delivered by his father Amphiaraus from the realm of the dead and as “quoted” by the epinician (lines 44-55); further, the hero is visualized indirectly by way of the blazon on his shield, the image of a *drakōn* ‘snake’ (line 46); even further, this blazon is interpreted directly by way of the same direct speech delivered by the hero’s dead father (lines 44-45). This parallelism of Pindar’s *Pythian* 8 with Aeschylus’ *Seven* is particularly remarkable in view of the epic identity of the hero Amphiaraus: he is one of the original *Seven against Thebes* and his son Alcmaeon is one of the *Epigonoi*. The parallel visualizations of Pindar and Aeschylus are conjuring parallel visions emanating from the epic tradition of the *Thebaid* and the *Epigonoi*.

In both form and content, Pindar’s poetic words “quoting” a dead hero’s vision of a living hero are the words of a *mantis* ‘seer’, as we can see clearly from the wording of the hero Amphiaraus, who is imagined \{102\}103\} as speaking from the dead when he envisions the blazon on the shield of his son, the hero Alcmaeon:


Pindar Pythian 8.45-47

Immediately preceding the “quotation” of the actual vision, the interpretation of the dead father’s mantic vision is likewise “quoted” by Pindar’s song:

φυᾷ τὸ γενναῖον ἐπιπρέπει | ἐκ πατέρων παισὶ λήμα

By inherited nature, the noble purpose [lēma] shines forth from fathers [pateres] to sons.17

Pindar Pythian 8.44-45

It is relevant that Pindar’s song claims to have received as a gift the manteumata ‘mantic crafts’ (8.60) of the seer Amphiaraus, who had appeared to the poet in an epiphany (8.56-60).18 Thus becoming mantic in its own right, Pindar’s song describes itself as a humnos (8.57) that can now duly reciprocate the mantic gift of Amphiaraus by celebrating Alcmaeon (again, 8.56-60).19

17 I have simplified my earlier translation, as printed in Pindar’s Homer p. 195.
18 The voice of the poet says that he “met” the mantic hero on the way to Delphi (Pindar Pythian 8.56-60): that is, the poet himself experienced the vision of a heroic epiphany, which is now the inspiration, as it were, of Pindar’s words. The theme of epiphany is connected to the mantic interpretation: ‘By inherited nature, the noble purpose [lēma] shines forth from fathers [pateres] to sons’ (43-44). It is also connected to what the voice of the poet announce later on, at lines 95-97, which we will consider further below. See also T. K. Hubbard, "The Theban Amphiaraon and Pindar’s Vision on the Road to Delphi," Museum Helveticum 50 (1993) 193-203.
19 This Pindaric association of humnos with the mantic arts of Amphiaraus at Pythian 8.57 may be connected to an epic theme concerning the heroic seer. According to the Herodotean Life of Homer 9 (PEG T 7 = EGF F 9) Amphiaraus himself had once upon a time composed humnoi to the gods which “Homer” later performed (ἐπεδείκνυτο) when he visited Neon Teikhos; another performance by “Homer” while he was there, besides his own poetry, was the exelasia of Amphiaraus to Thebes. What particularly interests me about this whole narrative is the idea that epic can appropriate the poetry of the seer.
Earlier, when the words of Pindar introduce the words of Amphiaraus by quoting them directly, the seer is said to speak in *ainigmata* ‘riddles’ (*ainissomai* 8.40: αἰνίξατο).\(^{20}\) \(^{103|104}\)

For the moment, let us focus our attention on the collocation of *theaomai* (Doric *thaeomai*) with *saphēs* ‘clearly’ in Pindar *Pythian* 8.45, where the sense of the word *saphēs* ‘clear’ conveys the visual clarity of mantic clairvoyance. The same clairvoyant sense is conveyed in the three occurrences of the same word *saphēs* in Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes*:

Line 40, near the beginning (second verse) of the messenger’s initial speech: ἥκω σαφῆ τάκειθεν ἐκ στρατοῦ φέρων ‘I have come bringing things that are clear from the army back there’; the messenger describes himself as a ‘viewer’, *katoptēs*, of the things happening there (line 41).

Line 67, at the second-to-last verse of that same speech: the messenger refers to the visions that he brings to Eteocles as σαφηνείᾳ λόγου ‘clarification [dative] of speech’.

Line 82, in the initial part of the chorus’ initial song: ἀναυδὸς σαφὴς ἔτυμος ἄγγελος ‘the clear and genuine messenger’ (with reference to the chorus’ actual vision of the dust rising toward the aether, as a sign of the oncoming doom).\(^{21}\)

Moreover, the messenger’s mantic visions had been preceded, as the words of Eteocles make clear at *Seven* 24-29, by the words of a professional seer, a *mantis* (24: νῦν δ’ ὡς ὁ μάντις φησίν; 27: μαντευμάτων), who had already interpreted for Eteocles the omens of birds that prophesied the coming of the *Seven against Thebes* (24: οἰωνῶν βοτήρ; 26: χρηστηρίους ὀρνιθιάς).\(^{22}\)

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\(^{20}\) Cf. Sophocles *Epigonoi* F 771 Radt, now supplemented by col.i of *Pap.Oxy*. inv. 87/110(a), to be published by Christoph Mülke, Corpus Christi College; also by H. Lloyd-Jones. The relevant verses: καὶ τὸν θεὸν τοιοῦτον ἐξεπιστάμαι | σοφοῖς μὲν αἰνικήτα θεοφάτων ἅξι | σκαῖρες δὲ φαύλον κὰν βραχεῖ διδάσκαλον.

\(^{21}\) Cf. G. O. Hutchinson, ed., *Aeschylus: Septem contra Thebas* (Oxford 1985) 46: “We hear of the attack first from the foreknowledge of the absent prophet, then from an eye-witness’s report, and finally from the chorus’s direct perception.”
The poetics of mantic visualization mark not only Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes* in particular but also the genre of tragedy in general, the vehicle of which is *theatron* (θέατρον) ‘theater’: this noun is derived from the verb *theaomai*, meaning ‘see, visualize’, with a suffix -tron {104|105} that actually designates the vehicle for the action of that verb.\(^{23}\) The mantic aspect of *theatron* is recapitulated in the compressed wording of Pindar *Pythian* 8.45, θαέομαι σαφές ‘I see clearly’, featuring the same verb *theaomai* (Doric *thaeomai*), where the subject is the hero Amphiaraus, speaking from the dead as he visualizes the image of the snake on the shield of his son, the hero Alcmaeon.

Not only is the word for ‘theater’ mantic. There is a word for the professional ‘actor’ of theater that is mantic as well: it is *hupokritēs*, derived from *hupokrinomai* ‘respond’ in the specific mantic sense of *respond to a vision*, where the vision is an omen that occurs in “real life” or in a dream.\(^{24}\) Of particular interest are idioms referring to the mantic practice of dream-interpretation or *Traumdeutung*, such as *opsin krinō* ‘interpret a vision’ (Herodotus 1.20.1) and *en-hupnion krinō* ‘interpret a dream’ (ibid.: the *opsis* ‘vision’ here is equated with the *en-hupnion* ‘dream’; cf. 7.19.1).\(^{25}\)

To sum up what we have seen so far: both the tragedy of Aeschylus and the epinician of Pindar define themselves as mantic. The explicit theatricality of Aeschylean “neo-epic” and

\(^{23}\) On the mantic connotations of the related forms *thea* (θέα not θεά) and *theōros* (θεωρός), see *Pindar’s Homer* p. 164. On *theatron*, see also Herington, *Poetry into Drama* p. 224: “It is sometimes forgotten that the word and concept *theatron* was by no means associated only with the drama; quite possibly, indeed, it antedated the drama.” He cites the use of the word in Herodotus 6.67.3 with reference to the Spartan festival of the Gymnopaidai. On Plato’s idea of *theatrokratia* (θεατροκρατία) ‘theatocracy’ as a new cultural force that erodes the differentiations of the old *eidē* ‘genres’ of songmaking and poetry (*Laws* III 701a), see *Pindar’s Homer* pp. 108-109. A question not addressed by Plato’s discussion is this: how does the “theatocracy” of tragedy as the prime genre of the City Dionysia affect epic as the prime genre of the Panathenaia?


\(^{25}\) Koller p. 101.
the implicit theatricality of Pindaric “micro-epic” - as compressed in the expression \( \text{θαέομαι} \) \( \text{σαφές} \ ‘I see clearly’ - can be explained in terms of this inherent mantic quality.

Now we turn to the epic of Homeric poetry. We are about to see that \{105|106\} epic narrative is not only pervaded by mantic visions: it is actually driven by them. Further, the poetics of mantic visualization can help clarify the theatricality of epic in its own right.

Let us begin with a Homeric example of \( \text{hupokrinomai} \), which is a key to understanding the mantic - and theatrical - potential of epic. It will be clear from this example that any given mantic vision has to be performed as a question - either by a character in the narration or simply by the narration itself - so that the interpretation of its “real” meaning may be performed as a response.\(^{26}\) The passage in question is \textit{Iliad} II 228, where \( \text{hupokrinomai} \) refers to a hypothetical situation: the verb, meaning ‘he would respond’ (\( \text{ὑποκρίναιτο} \)), has as its subject \( \text{theopropos} \) ‘seer’. The speaker in this context describes the generic \( \text{theopropos} \) as one who knows \( \text{sapha} \ ‘clearly’ \) the omens [\( \text{teras} \) plural] (XII 228-229: \( \text{θεοπρόπος ὃς σάφα θυμῷ εἰδείη τεράων} \)).

The speaker who is being “quoted” here by the Homeric narrative happens to be the hero Polydamas, a comrade of Hector. Polydamas has just interpreted a \( \text{teras} \ ‘omen’ \) in his own right (XII 209): it is the vision of a \( \text{drakōn} \ ‘snake’ \) (XII 202, 220), who stings an eagle carrying it, in midflight; once stung, the bird drops the snake amidst the ranks of the Trojans and flies off (XII 200-209). This omen is quoted directly by the words of Homeric narrative (again, XII 200-209). Then the meaning of these poetic words is interpreted by the likewise poetic words of the hero Polydamas, which are also quoted directly (XII 210-229). It is clear, according to Polydamas, that the Trojans in general and Hector in particular could potentially equate themselves with the snake - and thereby equate the Achaeans with the eagle - if only Hector

\(^{26}\) In the same forthcoming work as mentioned in note 24, I analyze all attested Homeric examples of \( \text{hupokrinomai} \).
would heed the omen (again, XII 210-229). The hero Polydamas is “quoted” as saying, at the conclusion of his words, that these same words of interpretation would be matched by the words of interpretation spoken by a hypothetical seer: the seer ‘would respond’, as expressed by the verb *hupokринομαι* in the optative (*ὑποκρίναιτο*), the same way as Polydamas has in fact just responded (XII 228-229).

In other words, what the hero here performs in epic corresponds to what a *theopropos* ‘seer’ could potentially perform if he responded to the same vision as narrated by epic. Thus epic poetry is declaring its \{106\|107\} control of mantic poetry. The question remains, though, whether the visions of mantic poetry can control epic.

The all-pervasiveness of mantic visualization in Homeric poetry is evident in the foundational *teras* ‘omen’ of the *Iliad* as epic, which takes the form of a primal vision interpreted by the seer Calchas. The *Iliad* “quotes” the seer himself as saying at II 324: ἡμῖν μὲν τὸδ’ ἔφηνε τέρας μέγα μητίετα Ζεὺς ‘Zeus the Planner made as a vision for me this great teras’. The *teras* ‘omen’, which is framed by the narrative of Odysseus (II 284-332) - which in turn is framed by the overall Homeric narrative - is the vision of a *drakōn* ‘snake’ (II 308) that first devours eight young birds and then the mother bird (II 303-320). The vision happened in the first year of the Trojan War, during a sacrifice on the occasion of the assembling of Achaean forces at Aulis (II 303). Next, we hear that Zeus, ‘the god who made the vision’, θεὸς ὃς περ ἔφηνε (II 318), proceeded to render this vision permanent and unchanging - by turning the snake into stone (II 319). In the words of Odysseus, the whole vision of the *drakōn* ‘snake’ (II 308) is a *sēma* (II 308), which we may interpret not only as a mental ‘sign’ but also as a concretized visualization. The petrified vision of the snake becomes a concrete work of the visual arts, a

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27 For an alternative situation, where Hector is compared to an eagle, see *Iliad* XV 690, to be discussed further below.

three-dimensional frozen motion picture. It is thereby a permanent monument, a landmark, of the original omen.

Just as this concretized vision of the story of Ilion - and of the *Iliad* itself - is imagined as unchanging and permanent, so too is the *kleos* or poetic ‘fame’ of epic that radiates from the words of the seer Calchas as directly “quoted” by Odysseus in *Iliad* II 323-332. In the words of the seer himself, as we already saw at II 324, ἡμῖν μὲν τὸδ᾽ ἔφηνε τέρας μέγα μητίετα Ζεὺς ‘Zeus the Planner made as a vision for me this great omen [teras]’. Then Calchas goes on to prophesy that the *kleos* of this omen [teras] will never perish:

ŏψιμον ὄψιτέλεστον, ὅου κλέος οὔποτ᾽ ὀλεῖται

[... this teras], late in coming, late in coming to fulfillment [telos], and its *kleos* will never perish

*Iliad* II 325

That was then, at Aulis, in the first year of the Trojan War (*Iliad* II {107|108} 303). Now, as Odysseus is “quoting” back those same words of the seer, it is the ninth year at Troy (II 295). Calchas was saying, back then, in the words that are now being “quoted” by Odysseus (II 323-332), that the nine birds are the nine years that the Achaeans will spend at Troy, and that the citadel will now be captured finally in the tenth year. After Odysseus “quotes” these words of the seer, he adds: τὰ δὴ νῦν πάντα τελεῖται ‘and they are now reaching their fulfillment [telos]’ (II 330).

Here the snake is a positive sign for the Achaeans. By contrast, in the earlier example of an omen calling for an act of interpretation as expressed by the mantic word *hupokrinomai*, we have seen another *drakōn* ‘snake’ becoming a negative sign for the Achaeans, insofar as it becomes a potentially positive sign for the Trojans (*Iliad* XII 202, 220).
Similarly, the *drakôn* ‘snake’ in Pindar *Pythian* 8.46 is a positive sign for the anti-Theban heroes who are sons of the original Seven against Thebes. In Aeschylus *Seven* 486-525, by contrast, the complex image of snakes and dragons on the shield of the anti-Theban hero Hippomedon is a decidedly negative sign for the pro-Theban heroes defending the seven gates of Thebes against the same original Seven. I will return to this image at a later point; for now, I simply draw attention to a relevant detail at *Seven* 503: the anti-Theban hero Hippomedon himself is compared to a *drakôn* ‘snake’ who menaces defenseless young birds. We may also compare the choral reference at *Seven* 291 to the seven anti-Theban heroes as predatory *drakontes* who prey on defenseless young birds. Moreover, at *Seven* 381, the anti-Theban hero Tydeus is said to ‘roar’ (βοᾷ) like a *drakôn*. In such contexts, the translation ‘dragon’ is even more appropriate than ‘snake’.\(^{29}\)

On the basis of the comparisons that we have considered so far, I offer this summary: the mantic visions of omens, deeply embedded as they are within the narrative agenda of Homeric poetry, make it clear that the genre of epic itself shares its poetics of visualization with the “neo-epic” of Aeschylus and the “micro-epic” of Pindar. But the argument can be taken further: I would even go so far as to say that the visual worlds of Aeschylus and Pindar can ultimately be described as epic in nature, and that the blazons visualized on the heroic shields of {108|109} their “neo-epic” and “micro-epic” creations are in fact a shining example of epic pure and simple. After all, the most complex and spectacular of all blazons is a creation of epic: it is the Shield of Achilles in *Iliad* XVIII. The mantic vision of this ultimate Shield is a microcosm that interprets - and is interpreted by - the macrocosm of the epic that frames it.\(^{30}\)

\(^{29}\) On homologies of snake / dragon in various myths of Indo-European provenience, see C. Watkins, *How to kill a dragon: Aspects of Indo-European poetics* (New York 1995), especially pp. 448-459 with reference to Typhon. At a later point in this essay, I have more things to say about this “dragon,” Typhon.

The argument can be taken still further: the Shield of Achilles, as an example of an epic sub-genre, is related to the epic sub-genre of the Homeric simile. Like the Shield, the Homeric simile can function as a “recasting” of mantic visions. Like the Homeric micro-narratives about the responses of theopropoi ‘seers’ to omens, Homeric similes become micro-narratives in their own right, deeply embedded within the macro-narratives of the Iliad and Odyssey. The mechanism of likening in the simile - that is, of saying that something from the outer frame of the narrative is “like” the inner content of the simile - is an act of interpretation. As such, the Homeric simile can be just as mantic as the response given by a seer to a given vision. What gets interpreted, moreover, is not only the vision of the simile, by way of its connectedness to the outer frame of the macro-narrative, but also the macro-narrative itself, which is deepened and thus enhanced by the embedded mantic vision of the simile’s micro-narrative.

By extension, then, we may even say that epic itself is pervasively mantic by virtue of interpreting - and being interpreted by - similes embedded within its narrative frame.

In this mantic light, let us take one last look at the vision of the shield of Alcmaeon in the “micro-epic” of Pindar’s Pythian 8. The visualization of the drakōn, which I have already quoted earlier, is seen as a positive sign in the words of interpretation emanating from the dead seer, which I have also already quoted. This time, however, I will quote simultaneously the vision and the interpretation that immediately precedes it: {109|110}

φυᾷ τὸ γενναῖον ἐπιπρέπει | ἐκ πατέρων παισὶ λῆμα. θαέομαι σαφές | δράκοντα
ποικίλον αἰθᾶς 'Αλκμᾶν' ἐπ' ἀσπίδος | νωμῶντα πρῶτον ἐν Κάδμου πύλαις

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32 I borrow the term from Muellner pp. 98-99.
33 See especially Muellner p. 68.
By inherited nature, the noble purpose \[lēma\] shines forth from fathers \[pateres\] to sons. I see \[thaeomai\] clearly \[saphes\] Alcmaeon, wielding the patterned \[poikilos\] snake \[drakōn\] on his blazing shield, in the forefront of the gates of Kadmos.

Pindar Pythian 8.44-47

As we can see clearly from the original Greek as printed above, the switch from the interpretation of the vision to the vision itself happens within a single colon and is marked by asyndeton: \[
\begin{array}{c}
\lambdaῆμα. \thetaαέομαι ςαφές | \ldots \ldots \text{purpose} \[lēma\]. I see clearly ...'. The postponement of the word that marks the subject of the clause, \[lēma\] ‘purpose’, all the way to the end of the clause accentuates the juxtaposition of this key word with the two words that signal the vision itself, \[thaeomai saphes\] ‘I see clearly’. The juxtaposition is further accentuated by the asyndeton.

Just as the sign on the shield gives a positive meaning to the \[drakōn\] ‘snake’ in Pindar’s Pythian 8, so also the interpretation by the seer gives a positive meaning to the \[lēma\] ‘purpose’ of the fathers.\(^{34}\) This positive meaning resurfaces dramatically near the conclusion of the Pindaric ode, as the voice of the poet declares:

\[
\begin{align*}
\epsilonπάμεροι \; \tau\iota \; \delta \; \tau\iota \; \delta' \; \omicron \; \tau\iota \; \sigmaκιας \; \omicron \nu\varphi | \; \alpha\nuθρωπος. \; \alphaλλ' \; \omicron \; \alpha\iota\gamma\lambdaα \; \deltaι\omicron\sigma\omicron\omicron\omicron\sigmaος \\
\varepsilonλ\thetaη, | \; \lambda\alphaπ\rho\omicron \; \varphi\epsilon\gamma\gammaος \; \epsilonπ\sigma\epsilonτ\iota \; \alpha\nu\dot{\delta}\rho\omicron \; \kappa\iota \; \mu\epsilonι\lambda\iota\chiος \; \alpha\iota\omicron\nu
\end{align*}
\]

Creatures of a day. What is a someone, what is a no one? Man is the dream of a shade. But when the radiance [\[aīgλε\]] given by Zeus comes, there is at hand the shining light of men, and the life-force [\[aiōn\]] gives sweet pleasure.

Pindar Pythian 8.95-97

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\(^{34}\) We may compare the positive meaning of \[lēma\] ‘purpose’ in Aeschylus Seven 616, with reference to Amphiaraus.
Here is what I have already written elsewhere about this passage: {110|111}

I interpret *skias onar* ‘dream of a shade’ as a recapitulation of the earlier words of the dead Amphiaraus about his living son. In Homeric usage the word *skia* can designate a dead person. I suggest that the shade of the dead person is literally dreaming - that is, realizing through its dreams - the living person. In other words, the occasion of victory in a mortal’s day-to-day lifetime is that singular moment when the dark insubstantiality of an ancestor’s shade is translated, through its dreams, into the shining life-force of the victor in full possession of victory, radiant with the brightness of Zeus. It is as if we the living were the realization of the dreams dreamt by our dead ancestors.\(^\text{35}\)

The benign vision here of the *aiglē* ‘radiance’ of Zeus seems to me metonymically connected to (and mantiically synchronized with) the radiant vision announced by the seer Amphiaraus when he says clairvoyantly *thaemai saphes* ‘I see clearly’ as he looks out from the shades of the dead and sees the image of the snake on the blazing shield of Alcmaeon. By metonymy, the image of the snake now shines with the radiance of Zeus. To understand the full power of this positive image in *Pythian* 8, we must now contrast it with the negative image of the snake at *Seven* 503 and elsewhere (291, 381).

As I have noted earlier, *drakōn* ‘snake’ is applied at *Seven* 503 as a simile to describe the anti-Theban hero Hippomedon, who menaces the Thebans just as a snake menaces young birds; moreover, as I have also noted earlier in passing, the blazon on the shield of Hippomedon is itself replete with negative images of snakes and dragons (*Seven* 486-525). But now we come to a further important detail: the snake on the shield of Hippomedon spews

\(^{35}\) Nagy, *Pindar’s Homer* pp. 195-196. This interpretation is not necessarily at odds with other interpretations that stress the presence of another theme in this passage: that human life is sadly ephemeral (for references, see further at pp. 195 notes 211, 212).
‘black smoke’ in the Seven (λιγνύν μέλαιναν 494): this monster, in fact, is none other than the fire-breathing Typhon (Seven 493 and 511; cf. 517). Typhon’s very name derives from the root *tuph-*, meaning ‘smoke’ (*τυφ-*). The legacy of this root *tuph-* tells its own story: historians of the Greek language have remarked on how far and wide its basic meaning of ‘smoke’ has spread, generating a spectacular variety of “words relating to obscurity, blindness, or else to the darkening of one’s wits, stupidity, or even to becoming blind to one’s own self, pretension, boasting, vanity.” Such an etymological inventory of Greek words derived from the root *tuph-* can also serve as a poetic inventory of the negative characteristics of the Seven against Thebes in Aeschylus’ drama by that name.

In Pindar’s Pythian 8 as well, the image of the Typhon fits these same negative characteristics (lines 15-18), though here the identity of the monster is kept separate from the positive characteristics of the snake featured on the blazing shield of Alcmaeon (lines 45-48). In the Pindaric ode, Typhon is named as the premier example of the kind of personality marked by excessive *bia* ‘violence’, matched by correspondingly excessive speech: such a person is *megalaukhos* ‘one who boasts grand things’ (line 15). We may compare this word with *megal’ epeukhetai* ‘he boasts grand things’ at Seven 452; such a person deserves to be smitten, says the chorus at 453, by the divine thunderbolt.

In Pindar’s Pythian 8, the negative image of Typhon is an effective foil for the positive image of the *drakōn* ‘snake’ pictured on the blazing shield. The non-vision of the dark Typhon is needed to achieve the vision of the radiant snake. Similarly, the *skias onar* ‘dream of a shade’ is

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37 Ibid.: “d’ou les termes relatifs à l’obscurité, la cécité, d’autre part ceux qui expriment l’obscurcissement de l’esprit, la stupidité, enfin ceux qui signifient l’aveuglement sur soi-même, la vantardise, la vanité.”
38 On Hector’s hybristic speech-acts involving *eukhomai* in the *Iliad*, as at XIII 54, see L. Muellner, *The Meaning of Homeric EYXOMAI through its Formulas* (Innsbruck 1976) 51. Note too the expression ἡξαφόν ἄνοι *he let out a far-reaching shout* at *Iliad* V 101, picked up by the participle of *eukhomai* at V 106 (I owe this reference to Philippe Rousseau).
39 See also the negative context of *eukhomai* ‘boast’ at Seven 633, where it is used synonymously with *araomai* ‘curse’. 
a foil for the ultimate aiglē ‘radiance’ of Zeus himself. But there is more to it: the seer sees the radiance from the shades, and in fact he is the shade. In my interpretation, the ‘dream of a shade’ is the actual medium of vision, of visualization, for the victorious athlete in the present to be seen by his ancestors from the past.

In order to validate this interpretation of the Pindaric expression skias onar ‘dream of a shade’, I still need to find some kind of formal parallel in the traditional poetic repertoire of epic themes. Such a parallel exists, I propose, in Aeschylus’ Seven. In this case, however, the context is decidedly malign, not benign. In response to the mutual killings of Eteocles and Polynoeis, the choral song of the Theban {112|113} women speaks of ‘the Lady, the shade [skia] of Oedipus, the black Erinys’ (976-977 = 987-988: πότνια τ’ Οἰδίπου σκιά, μέλαιν’ Ἐρινύς). The skia ‘shade’ of the dead Oedipus is pictured here as the living Fury that becomes the death of the hero’s two accursed sons.

The question remains: where, then, is the dream of this negative shade? At an earlier moment in the Seven, Eteocles speaks of the ara ‘curse’ of his father Oedipus (695), and the chorus speaks of this curse as an Erinys (700) that needs to be exorcised with the help of the gods (699-701); then there is talk of an unnamed force to which the chorus refers simply as daimōn ‘daemon’ (705), an entity that needs to be averted from acting on his lēma ‘purpose’ (706). The daemon needs to be averted because it is still ‘boiling’ (708: ζεῖ), says the chorus. Eteocles responds:

40 I follow most editors by printing μέλαιν’ at Seven 977, reflecting Porson’s emendation of the manuscript reading μέλαινά τ’. Note the comment of Hutchinson, ed., Aeschylus: Septem p. 205: “πότνια ... σκιά: the combination has an air of paradox. σκιά normally suggests weakness and insignificance, even when used of the dead. It is not absolutely necessary to identify the ghost [of Oedipus] with the Erinys by placing a weak stop, not a strong, after σκιά. However the identification is favoured by πότνια and by the significant echo of 70 Ἄρα τ’ Ἐρινύς πατρός ἀμεγαθενής. Cf. [Apollonius of Rhodes] 3.704.” Albert Henrichs reminds me that, in Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus 1299, Polynoeis refers to the anger of Oedipus as τὴν ὁμή Ἐρινύν ‘your [= of Oedipus] Erinys’ (see also 1434). For a striking parallel to Seven 976-977 = 987-988, see also Sophocles Oedipus Tyrannus 417-419; I owe this reference to Charles Segal.
ἐξέζεσεν γὰρ Οἰδίπου κατεύγματα

ἀγαν δ’ ἀληθεῖς ἐνυπνίων φαντασμάτων
dῴεις, πατρών χρημάτων δατήριοι

Yes, it [the daimōn] boiled over in wrath with the curses [kateugmata, from eukhomai] of Oedipus!

All too true are the visions [opsis plural] of apparitions-in-dreams [en-hupnia],
- visions of dividing the father’s property.

Aeschylus Seven 709-711

We may note too the choral description of the same Erinys at Seven 720-726: here the Fury, as the realization of the katarai ‘curses’ (725) {113|114} of Oedipus, is described as ‘a malign mantis who is absolutely true, the father’s prayed-for [euktaia, from eukhomai] Erinys’ (722-723: παναλαθῆ κακόμαντιν | πατρὸς εὐκταίαν Ἐρινύν). The malign mantis may be contrasted with the benign mantis of Pythian 8. Likewise, the malign lēma of the malign daemon at Seven 706 may be contrasted with the benign lēma of the benign ancestors in Pythian 8.45. The Fury of Oedipus is all-black (977 = 988: μέλαιν Ἐρινύς). In her absolute darkness, this Fury signals the total eclipse of radiance, which may be contrasted with the shining image of the radiant snake envisioned by Amphiaraurus on the blazing shield of Alcmaeon in Pythian 8 (46).

41 For other examples of negative eukhomai see note 39.
42 The adjectival en-hupnia ‘in-dreams’ describes the phantasmata ‘apparitions’.
43 In the Seven, the malign prophetic contexts of araomai ‘curse’ are generally parallel to the benign (or neutral) contexts of eukhomai ‘pray’; see note 39 above. With specific reference to the curse of Oedipus, the diction of the Seven corresponds closely to the diction that we find in the fragments of the epic Thebaid: PEG F 1 [=EGF F2].7-8, on Oedipus’ curse on his sons: ἐπαράς | ἁργαλεάς ἠράτο θοὴν δ’ οὐ λάνθαν’ Ἐρινύν. In the epic Thebaid, the curse of Oedipus is also expressed by way of eukhomai: PEG [and EGF] F 3.3 εὐκτο. With further reference to Seven 722-713, Charles Segal has shown me a striking point of comparison in Sophocles Oedipus Tyrannus: the chorus asserts that the discourse of Teiresias is awhichē ‘true’ at 299, and the seer himself reaffirms the assertion at 461; what follows at 463-511 is an ode about the mantic voice emanating from the god.
44 The climactically negative humnos of the Erinys at Seven 867 may be contrasted with the positive humnos in Pythian 8.57, as discussed at note 19.
45 Likewise, the ara ‘curse’ of Oedipus is all-black: Seven 695, 832.
The system of complementarity in the deployment of negative and positive images for snakes in Pindar’s *Pythian 8* and Aeschylus’ *Seven* brings us back, one last time, to the corresponding epic system of complementarity in Homeric poetry. As we have seen, the vision of the snake that menaced and then devoured the defenseless birds in *Iliad II* was ultimately positive for the Achaeans - that is, after Calchas the seer interpreted it for them. As for the vision of the snake that stung the eagle in *Iliad XII*, it was positive for the Trojans - that is, it was potentially positive, after Polydamas interpreted it for Hector. But the point is, this same image of snake and bird could ultimately become negative for the Trojans if they failed to heed its mantic interpretation. From the macro-narrative of the *Iliad*, we do in fact know that Hector fails to heed that interpretation: he consistently refuses to stay on the defensive, unlike the snake that stung the eagle. Instead, Hector consistently goes on the offensive, despite the repeated warnings of the clairvoyant Polydamas.

At *Iliad XV* 690, a climactic moment in the course of Hector’s playing the part of attacker instead of defender, he is actually given a simile that likens him to an eagle instead of a snake, and the epithet of this eagle is *aithôn* ‘blazing’.46 We may compare the epithet of the shield that pictures the snake in Pindar *Pythian 8.46*: *aithā* ‘blazing’. I see at work here a metonymy: the blazing of the shield is linked with the blazing of the snake. We may compare also the expression *aithôn ... lēma* ‘blazing in purpose’ in Aeschylus *Seven 448*, describing the Theban hero Polyphontes when he faces his Argive opponent, the hero Kapaneus; as the words of Eteocles prophesy, the fire-bearing thunderbolt of the gods awaits Kapaneus (*Seven 444-445*). Again I see a metonymy: the blazing purpose of Polyphontes is linked with the blazing force of the divine thunderbolt, which will smite Kapaneus. Clearly, the epithet *aithôn ... lēma* ‘blazing in purpose’ works for Polyphontes.

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46 For more on the narrative tension created by the anomalous context of this simile, see Muellner, “The Simile of the Cranes and Pygmies” pp. 69-72.
Will the simile of the eagle envisioned as aithôn ‘blazing’ at Iliad XV 690 similarly work for Hector? The simile is applied at a climactic point of the narrative: Hector is on the attack, moving toward the Achaeans as they stand guard over their ships on the shores of the Hellespont, and at this very moment the hero of the Trojans is compared to an eagle swooping down on flocks of defenseless geese, cranes, and swans as they feed on vegetation growing on the banks of a river (XV 690-691). The problem is, the Achaeans cannot be visualized as defenseless birds except in such a moment of testing, glimpsed by the micro-narrative, and that fleeting moment will ultimately be overwhelmed by the macro-narrative.  

The other problem is that the image of an attacking eagle suits Hector’s epic identity not nearly as well as a defending snake. Ultimately, Hector would have been better off if he had imagined himself as a snake caught in the claws of an eagle: the omen of the bird stung by the snake had made that clear. Even if the epithet aithôn works for the eagle, the image of the eagle in this simile fails to work for Hector. This image is intended to fail in the macro-narrative of epic. 

I conclude this essay by asking a similar question about the images on the shields pictured in the “micro-epic” of Pindar’s Pythian 8 and in {115|116} the “neo-epic” of Aeschylus’ Seven: do they work for the heroes they signify? In other words, is epic signification intentional? 

In the case of Pindar, the response is simple: yes. As I contemplate the blazon on the shield of Alcmaeon in Pythian 8, I see no contradiction of the art of epic imagery as idealized in that ultimate blazon, the shield of Achilles in Iliad XVIII. Pindar’s poetics are intentionally true to the Homeric ideal writ large, and I think it cannot be an accident that the last word of his Pythian 8 is “Achilles.” The “micro-epic” lēma ‘purpose’ (or ‘will’) of the ancestors in Pindar’s Pythian 8 seems to me linked with the “macro-epic” boulē ‘will’ of Zeus in Iliad I 5. In the case of Aeschylus, by contrast, the response has to be far more complex: here we have to reckon with

47 Ibid.
the “theatrocracy” of tragedy as a genre, which keeps testing the limits of epic as a genre.48
The poetics of Aeschylus’ “neo-epic” verge on becoming the “non-epic” or even the “anti-
epic.”

To bring up the topic of non-epic imagery in the Seven goes far beyond the limits of this essay - especially at this point, nearing the very end. Still, I need examples to show that the “neo-epic” of tragedy as genre is in fact open-ended. Here, then, are three such examples, confined to the smallest possible space for contemplating them.

First, there is the shield of the anti-Theban hero Eteocles, bearing the image of an
unnamed man attacking an unnamed city (Seven 456-471).49 Eteocles will fight the Theban hero
Megareus, a descendant of the Spartoi (474).50 If Megareus wins, says Eteocles, then he will
have captured two men and a city (477-479). This vision is a mirror image of what would
happen if Megareus and Thebes were captured: instead, Megareus will capture the named man
and, in addition, the unnamed man and the unnamed city in the picture, since the picture is on
the captured shield. To be sure, anonymity can be used in epic too for the shifting of signifiers,
as we can see from the two unnamed cities on the Shield of Achilles in Iliad XVIII. But the
difference is, we do not expect epic to split the signifier from its signified, as we see in the doubling of the captured men imagined by Eteocles.

Second, there is the shield of Polyneices, with its climactic diploun sēma ‘double sign’ (Seven
643). Here we see the image of an anonymous gunē ‘woman’ (646) who leads by the hand an
anonymous man toward a citadel. Polyneices interprets the gunē as the goddess of justice, Dikē:
she will install him, he boasts, as the rightful ruler of the polis (646-648). In the Seven, the word

48 See note 23 for more on the “theatrocracy” of drama over other genres in general.
49 As a name, Eteoklos (Eteocles) is a morphological variant of Eteokleēs (Eteocles). As a character, the anti-Theban Eteocles is a thematic variant of the Theban Eteocles by virtue of being substituted for the epic Adrastos: see Zeitlin, Under the Sign of the Shield p. 78.
50 The Spartoi, descendants of the Dragon’s teeth, are also the ancestors of the Theban hero Melanippos (412). Thus two of the seven Theban defenders are connected to “snakes.”
gunē applies generically to everyday ‘woman’, as at 197, 200, 256, 645, 712. In the last of these verses, the chorus of women tries to dissuade Eteocles from fighting the mutually fatal fight with Polyneices: they say peithou gunaixi ‘obey the women’. We may contrast 225, where Eteocles speaks of the goddess Peitharkhia, who is the very idea of ‘obeying authority’, as the wife of the Sōtēr ‘savior’. Finally, there is Antigone as generic gunē at 1038. The question is, then: whom to obey, the authority of the state or the women? If the chorus of women is right and Eteocles (along with Polyneices) is wrong in not ‘obeying the women’, then perhaps the anonymous woman pictured on the shield of Polyneices may remain simply that, a generic woman. Or at least she may become Antigone in her role as generic woman. As for the anonymous man whom she leads by the hand, he too may remain simply that, a generic man. Or at least he may become the citizen of a new polis that transcends the old citadel. Such doubling of what is human, by keeping the generic separate from the heroic, seems antithetical to epic.

Third, there is the shield of the seer Amphiaraus. It has no sēma on it (591), since he wants to be the best, not just to seem the best (592). Such splitting between hero and heroic image seems antithetical to epic. The mantic words of Amphiaraus, “quoted” at 580-589, can now take the place of an epic vision that cannot be there because it cannot be real. The new dramatic imagination is seeking to differentiate itself from an older epic vision. We see another kind of differentiation in the more old-fashioned “quotation” of Amphiaraus’ mantic words in Pindar {117|118} Pythian 8.44-55, picturing the shield of Alcmaeon. The image on this shield, that radiant snake, is seen as real not only because it had been heard in the epic of heroes. More

51 In the Seven, ‘obeying’ a woman is imagined differently from ‘obeying’ a man in authority. For men in this drama, the basis of persuasion is the threat of violence; for women, it is the fear and pity caused by the violence, especially as experienced by women captured in war (cf. 253, 326-327, 338ff, 764-765). Further, the emotions of fear and pity are equated with expressions of women’s songs, especially laments. We may contrast the command of Eteocles to the women of Thebes at 232, 242-243: do not lament! (See also the contexts of philostonōs at 279 and of merimnai at 289, 843, 849.)
than that, this image is seen as real because it had once been seen personally by the hero of epic himself, and thus the vision of its reality may keep shining through from far away, far off in the realms of the insubstantial shade that dreamed it.