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3

Ancestral Curses

MARTIN WEST

The Greek word for 'curse' is ἀρά or ἐπαρά or κατάρα. This suggests that a curse is a sort of prayer, ἀρή being one of the ordinary Homeric words for a prayer. It is still found with that general sense in Pindar and Herodotus, though in the fifth century it has mostly become specialized in the sense of 'curse'. A curse is a prayer that harm may befall someone.

But it is not as simple as that. Already in Homer we can see a distinction between a simple prayer for someone's harm and the curse proper. When, at the outset of the *Iliad*, Chryses prays to Apollo that the Danaans may pay the price for the distress they have caused him by taking his daughter, we cite this as a fine illustration of Greek prayer form, and we do not at all think of it as a curse. It stands in clear contrast to the two parental cursings recalled in book 9: the one where Phoenix's father Amyntor invoked the Erinyes to see to it that Phoenix should never have a son, and his prayers were answered by Zeus of the Underworld and Persephone;[1] and the other where Meleager's mother prayed to the gods for his death, crouching and sobbing and beating the earth with her hands as she called upon Hades and Persephone, and the pitiless Erinys heard her prayer from Erebos.[2] In both these cases the Erinyes, the powers of vengeance, and the gods of the Underworld are involved.

[1] *Il.* 9. 454–7, πολλὰ κατηρᾶτο, στυγερὰς δ' ἐπεκέκλετ' Ἐρινῦς, | μή ποτε γούνασιν οἷσιν ἐφέσσεσθαι φίλον υἱόν | ἐξ ἐμέθεν γεγαῶτα· θεοὶ δ' ἐτέλειον ἐπαράς, | Ζεύς τε καταχθόνιος καὶ ἐπαινὴ Περσεφόνεια.

[2] *Il.* 9. 566–72, ἐξ ἀρέων μητρὸς κεχολωμένος, ἥ ῥα θεοῖσιν | πόλλ' ἀχέουσ' ἠρᾶτο κασιγνήτοιο φόνοιο, | πολλὰ δὲ καὶ γαῖαν πολυφόρβην χερσὶν ἀλοία | κικλήσκουσ' Ἀΐδην καὶ ἐπαινὴν Περσεφόνειαν | πρόχνυ καθεζομένη, δεύοντο δὲ δάκρυσι κόλποι, | παιδὶ δόμεν θάνατον· τῆς δ' ἠεροφοῖτις Ἐρινύς | ἔκλυεν ἐξ Ἐρέβεσφιν ἀμείλιχον ἦτορ ἔχουσα. Cf. also *Od.* 2. 135, where Telemachus fears his mother's curse if he sends her away against her will.

The connection between curses and Erinyes is easy to understand. Most curses are uttered by someone who has been wronged and who has no immediate means of redress. The Erinys is the divine agent of vengeance who can be summoned in aid, or who is automatically called into life by the wrong, while the curse is the direct evocation of punishment for the wrongdoer. The two concepts are readily combined, so that the Erinys is thought of as the agent who brings the curse to fulfilment. When Antinoos hurls a footstool at the beggar who is Odysseus, Odysseus says, 'if beggars have gods and Erinyes, may death catch Antinoos before he marries'.[3] The curse itself may be conceived as a supernatural force which operates independently of other agencies, taking on the function of the avenger. Hence the Erinyes in Aeschylus can say to Athena, 'We are age-long children of Night, and in our home below the earth we are called Curses.'[4]

Gods of the upper world can also be invoked in curses. In the episode of the *Odyssey* which I have just quoted, Penelope hears what has happened and exclaims, addressing Antinoos though out of his earshot, 'Would that Apollo the archer would hit you likewise!' There is a fragment of Hipponax in which two people, probably a young man and a girl, are furious with each other. He says, 'Artemis destroy you!', and she retorts, 'And Apollo you!' *ἀπό σ' ὀλέσειεν Ἄρτεμις.—σὲ δὲ κὠπόλλων.*[5] Very often such imprecations do not specify a divine agent at all: one simply says *ἀπόλοιο*. There is still an analogy here with a prayer, because that too can take the form of a simple declaration of what one wishes for, without any god being addressed, as when Hipponax says *εἴ μοι γένοιτο παρθένος καλή τε καὶ τέρεινα*.[6] At the same time the idea of the curse as a self-sufficient, quasi-magical procedure is not far away, as if the act of pronouncing the proper formula may set in motion the process that will lead to the effect desired.

People who uttered curses or wrote *defixiones* must often have

[3] *Od.* 17. 475 f.

[4] Aesch. *Eum.* 416 f., *ἡμεῖς γάρ ἐσμεν Νυκτὸς αἰανῆ τέκνα,* | *Ἀραὶ δ' ἐν οἴκοις γῆς ὑπαὶ κεκλήμεθα.* Cf. *Sept.* 70, *Ἀρά τ' Ἐρινὺς πατρὸς ἡ μεγασθενής*; *Cho.* 406, where Orestes calls on the powerful *Ἀραί* of the dead (i.e. of Agamemnon) to take note of the present dismal situation of Atreus' line; ibid. 692, *ὦ δυσπάλαιστε τῶνδε δωμάτων Ἀρά*; Parker (1983: 196).

[5] *Od.* 17. 494; Hipponax fr. 25 West = 35 Degani.

[6] Hipponax fr. 119 W. = 120 Deg.

been disappointed. Here we must take note of an important difference between the prayers or curses of real life (or realistic fiction) and those of myth. In real life the Greeks are well aware that the fulfilment of a prayer of any kind is entirely at the discretion of the divinity. Man proposes, God disposes. This is reflected in Homeric narrative. When Chryses prays that the Greeks may suffer, Apollo hearkens to his prayer and takes prompt action. But when Theano prays to Athena on behalf of the Trojans, 'Lady Athens, guardian of the city, smash Diomedes' spear, and grant that he falls dead before the Skaian Gates', Athena nods backwards, meaning 'No'.[7] In myth, on the other hand—and we must be clear that those Homeric prayers are not part of the myth of the Trojan War, but inorganic elements in a poetic narrative constructed over the myth—in myth prayers and curses, like oracles and prophecies, are invariably fulfilled, because they are parts of a working mechanism, and they have to work. When Apollo pursues Daphne, and she flees to avoid a fate worse than being turned into a tree, she prays to Zeus for deliverance, and the merciful god administers a metamorphosis that does not extinguish Apollo's love but transmutes it from the carnal mode to the horticultural. Daphne's prayer is a functional element in the myth, and it can only be functional if it is answered; a prayer that was not answered would have been pointless. So too with curses. It was part of the myth of the sons of Oedipus, at least as early as the epic *Thebaid*, that their father was angry with them and cursed them, to the effect that they should not divide their patrimony in amity but by the sword. And so it had to be; the curse was inexorable.

I say it was part of the myth 'at least as early as the epic *Thebaid*', because myths develop and can be remodelled with an altered mechanism. There might have been an earlier form of the myth in which it was simply related that Polynices and Eteocles quarrelled over the division of their inheritance and fought and killed one another. The motif that they were doomed to do so by their father's curse enhances the story but is not essential to it, and may well have been a secondary elaboration. We shall see how such developments can occur.

Let us now consider inherited or ancestral curses. These have played an important role in the interpretation of tragedy, but the

[7] *Il.* 1. 35–43; 6. 304–11.

discussion has been bedevilled by looseness of conception, or at any rate of terminology. Critics have often spoken of an inherited curse when what they mean is inherited guilt, or some kind of genetic corruption, or persistent but unexplained adversity. Let us keep these things distinct.

What do we mean by an inherited curse? We mean a curse, pronounced by somebody, whose effects continue to afflict not only the immediate victim but also his descendants. Why should it? There are two possibilities in myth. One is that the original victim has the status of a prototype: he is the eponym of a people, or in some other way he stands as the representative of all who will follow him, so that his destiny determines theirs. When God discovered that Adam and Eve had been beguiled by the serpent into eating of the forbidden fruit, he pronounced curses on the lot of them. 'Because you have done this,' said God to the serpent,

> cursed are you above all cattle,
> and above all wild animals;
> upon your belly you shall go,
> and dust you shall eat
> all the days of your life.

To the woman he said,

> I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing;
> in pain you shall bring forth children.

And to Adam he said,

> Cursed is the ground because of you;
> in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
> thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you;
> and you shall eat the plants of the field.[8]

All serpents, all women, and all men consequently suffer these inconveniences, inherited from their prototypes. When Noah lay drunk and dishevelled in his tent, and then discovered that his youngest son, Ham the father of Canaan, had observed his nakedness and gigglingly reported it to Shem and Japheth, he said

> Cursed be Canaan;
> a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers.[9]

[8] Genesis 3: 14–18 (quoted after the Revised Standard Version).
[9] Genesis 9: 20–5.

Because of Noah's curse the peoples of Canaan were doomed to be subjected to the people descended from Shem and Japheth.

The other reason why a curse may affect the victim's descendants as well as himself is that the curser may specify so explicitly. In a world where a major concern was for sons to maintain and enhance their family's wealth and status, and thus their own fame, the infliction of hardship on one's enemy's descendants, or the prevention of his having any, was a cruel blow. And in a world where sons were expected to avenge wrongs done to their fathers, it was in the curser's interests to guard against danger from his victim's sons.

Let me quote an example from the eighteenth century BC. Hammurabi, king of Babylon, concludes the epilogue to his great Law Code with a lengthy series of curses on any future king or official who alters his statutes or effaces Hammurabi's name. Here is one of them:

> May the great gods of heaven and earth,
> the Annunakku in their totality,
> the Guardian Spirit of the temple, the Brickwork of Ebabbar,
> curse him, his descendants, his land, his soldiers,
> his people, and his army, with a morbid curse![10]

Similarly in the treaty between the Hittite king Mursili II and Duppi-Teššub of Amurru:

> Should Duppi-Teššub not honour these words of the treaty and the oath, may these gods of the oath destroy Duppi-Teššub together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, his land and together with everything that he owns.[11]

Such provisions are typical of Near Eastern treaty oaths. The parties to a treaty, in swearing their oaths, lay conditional curses upon themselves, to take effect in the event of their failing to uphold the terms. The extension of the curses to cover the oath-taker's descendants is matched in the Greek oath κατ' ἐξώλειαν. Inscriptions and the orators provide many examples of such oaths, in which one had to pray for destruction for oneself and one's whole family and house in case of violation.[12]

Apart from oaths and treaties, other curses too often included the

[10] Code of Hammurabi, li. 70 ff.
[11] Friedrich (1926: 24 § 21); trans. A. Goetze in *ANET* 205.
[12] References in Parker (1983: 186 n. 234; 201); cf. my notes on Hes. *Op.* 284.

victim's family in their scope. So, for example, in the public imprecations pronounced annually by magistrates at Teos and recorded in an inscription of perhaps *c.*470 BC: they are directed against anyone who uses *φάρμακα δηλητήρια* against the Teians, interferes with the import of corn, resists the authorities, betrays the city, practises piracy or highway robbery, or conspires with Greek or barbarian against Teos. The curse on each of these categories of malefactor is that he may perish, himself and his *γένος*. The motif can be followed down to the late Jewish tomb inscription which stipulates that any grave-violator shall be afflicted, together with his children, his descendants, and his whole family, by 'all the curses in the Book of Deuteronomy'.[13]

What is the role of the inherited curse in myth? In the case of the first of the two types I distinguished, the type where the victim of the curse is a prototype figure, its role is aetiological. It serves to account for permanent affliction or diminished status affecting a tribe, a sex, or a zoological species. In the case of the other type, it serves to make a link between the disasters which, according to tradition, affected a particular family in successive generations.

The paradigm case is that of the house of Atreus. In the generation of Atreus and Thyestes there arose a pernicious quarrel between the two brothers over the kingship. Atreus claimed it after a golden lamb was discovered in his flocks. Thyestes seduced Atreus' wife and got possession of the animal. He announced that the throne was now his, and vowed that he would never surrender it so long as the sun continued to rise in the west and set in the east. Zeus upset his calculations by reversing the sun's course. Atreus seized power again, murdered Thyestes' children, and tricked him into eating portions of them. One child survived, however. Aegisthus.

Atreus' son Agamemnon succeeded to the throne. He led the Achaeans against Troy, and in the process found it necessary to put his daughter Iphigeneia to death. While he was abroad, Aegisthus, having now become a man and put away childish things, seduced Clytaemestra, Agamemnon's wife, and they conspired to murder him. The royal power thus reverted for some years to Thyestes' line. But then Agamemnon's son Orestes appeared on the scene and, in

[13] Meiggs and Lewis (1988: no. 30); *MAMA* 6. 335 (Lattimore (1962: 114)); further references in Parker, loc. cit.

concert with his sister Electra, assassinated Aegisthus and Clytaemestra. Atreus' line thus finally triumphed.

Here is a dynastic saga of murders and other atrocities extending over three generations. Was there a thread linking them all together? One answer might be 'revenge'. In real life the vendetta can sustain a series of murders and counter-murders over generations. Orestes is certainly motivated by the urge to avenge his father, and Aeschylus represents Aegisthus as a conscious avenger of the wrong done to his father by Atreus.[14] However, in our earliest source, the *Odyssey*, there is no reference to this: Aegisthus appears to kill Agamemnon simply because he wants him out of the way so that he can keep Clytaemestra. The story was told more fully in the epic *Nostoi*, but the action of that poem was set at the end of the Trojan War: the tale of Atreus and Thyestes had no place in it, and we have no right to assume that any back-reference was made to it.

The fact is that it is not typical of epic to move across generations, and even less to make connections between events in different generations. So long as epic was the principal vehicle of the myths, we should not particularly expect the story of Atreus and Thyestes to be seen as belonging in a chain with the story of Agamemnon, or a causal link to be made. Such a linkage was more likely to appear with the more synoptic approach to mythology that we find in fifth-century lyric, tragedy, and the logographers. In particular we may think of the Aeschylean connected trilogy, in which successive plays dealt with a set of events which could be regarded as forming a series. The process of constructing a trilogy from these events naturally favoured the drawing and tightening of links between them. In certain cases the trilogy might cover successive generations, as in Aeschylus' *Oedipodeia*. We do not know that anyone ever dealt with the Thyestes story, the murder of Agamemnon, and Orestes' revenge within one trilogy, but the thing is at least conceivable.

At any rate it is in Aeschylus that we first meet the motif of the inherited curse linking these events. Aegisthus relates in the *Agamemnon* how Thyestes, on realizing that his children were in the stew, got into a stew himself, kicked the table over, and voiced a crisp curse to the effect that the whole race of Pleisthenes should be overthrown likewise.[15] Earlier in the play Cassandra has seen visions

[14] Aesch. *Ag.* 1223, 1582–611.

[15] Aesch. *Ag.* 1600–2, *μόρον δ' ἄφερτον Πελοπίδαις ἐπεύχεται,* | *λάκτισμα δείπνου ξυνδίκως τιθεὶς ἀρᾶι,* | *οὕτως ὀλέσθαι πᾶν τὸ Πλεισθένους γένος.*

of the Thyestean banquet, which gives the house the character of a charnel-house. But she has also detected the presence of a permanently resident band of Erinyes, drunk on blood, who cleave to the house and sing of Thyestes' adultery with his brother's wife as the πρώταρχος ἄτη.[16] This suggests that the curse at the banquet was not after all of unique importance as the link holding the saga together: the Erinyes, the spirits of the vendetta, were already established from the moment when Thyestes bedded Atreus' wife. The curse is introduced subsequently as an auxiliary unifying motif.

Aeschylus twice refers to the family as Pelopids (and once as Tantalids), but he does not trace its troubles back to Pelops' time. By the end of the fifth century, however, the motif of the inherited curse had been taken back to Pelops. The story went that Pelops, to win Hippodameia, defeated her father Oenomaus in a chariot-race with the help of Oenomaus' mechanic, Myrtilus, who sabotaged his master's vehicle so that it crashed. Pelops made off with the girl and Myrtilus, but presently disposed of the latter by throwing him out of the chariot into the sea. As he disappeared into the wine-dark waves, Myrtilus cried a curse on Pelops' family. We know that the drowning was related by the mythographer Pherecydes, who may also have been the source for the curse. In any case Euripides refers to it in the *Orestes* and makes it the origin of the family's troubles. Sophocles too traces them back to the drowning of Myrtilus, and although he does not speak explicitly of a curse uttered by Myrtilus, it is surely what he had in mind.[17]

Hellanicus had a different story of a Pelopid curse. According to him, when Pelops married Hippodameia he already had a son by a previous wife. The son's name was Chrysippus, and Pelops was very fond of him. Atreus and Thyestes, Hippodameia's eldest sons, were jealous of Chrysippus and murdered him. Pelops found out that they were the culprits and banished the pair of them with a curse to the effect that they and their descendants should perish at each other's hands. Thucydides also knows Atreus as a killer of Chrysippus.[18]

[16] Aesch. *Ag.* 1087–97, 1186–93.

[17] Pherec. *FGrHist* 3 F 37; Eur. *Or.* 988–1012, cf. 1548 (conjectural at *IT* 192); Soph. *El.* 504–15.

[18] Hellanicus *FGrHist* 4 F 157; cf. Thuc. 1. 9. 2. Praxilla (*PMG* 751) had yet another version of Chrysippus' end: he was abducted by Zeus (cf. Wilamowitz 1880: 611). What is common to the different stories about him is that he was beautiful and died (or disappeared) before marrying. One may guess that he was originally a figure of Peloponnesian local cult, similar to Hippolytus (and with the same horse in his name).

Comparison of these different versions makes it clear that the inherited curse was not a fixed, primary element in this mythical complex but an accessory motif that could be fitted in at various points, according to the changing horizons of individual authors.

Let us turn now from the Pelopids to the Labdacids, that other family that suffered a train of sensational disasters extending over three generations: 'das unheilbeladene Labdakidengeschlecht'. Again no epic covered the whole saga: the first part of it was the subject matter of the *Oidipodeia*, the second part that of the *Thebaid*. The first time they were brought together within a single frame, so far as we know, was in Aeschylus' prize-winning trilogy of 467 BC, consisting of the *Laios*, the *Oedipus*, and the *Septem*, followed by the Satyr-play *Sphinx*. The first play, the *Laios*, presumably centred on the killing of Laios by his unrecognized son Oedipus in the earliest reported instance of what is nowadays called 'road rage'. One of the fragments alludes to the exposure of a baby in a jar, and another to a homicide. From references in the *Septem* we gather that Apollo had warned Laios, not once but three times, that if he wanted Thebes to be secure from danger he should be sure to die childless; but Laios had allowed sensibility to prevail over sense, and fathered a son. The second play, *Oedipus*, will have dealt with Oedipus' discovery that he had killed his father and married his mother. The *Septem* portrays the fatal conflict between Oedipus' sons, whose mutual slaughter signifies the final extinction of the family.

Was there a single thread linking all these events? Were Laios and his descendants doomed by an ancestral curse? There is certainly one curse involved in the story: the one laid by Oedipus upon his sons. As I have mentioned, this goes back to the epic *Thebaid*. In fact it is rather embarrassing that two of the six verbatim fragments from that poem describe Oedipus cursing his sons on different occasions. In one he explodes because Polynices gives him wine in a gold cup that had been Laios', on a silver table that was also a family heirloom. His curse is that the two brothers should not divide their inheritance in friendship but fight continually. In the other fragment he takes offence at their sending him a leg of beef instead of

their customary shoulder, and he prays to Zeus and the other gods that they may die at each other's hands.[19]

In Aeschylus' version the occasion of the curse fell in the interval between the second and third plays, but the Chorus of the *Septem* supply the information, in terms recalling the epic, that Oedipus' anger was aroused by the way his sons were providing for him.[20] There is much emphasis in the play on this paternal curse as the force that drives Eteocles and Polynices to their deaths.[21] But as to the earlier misfortunes of Laios and Oedipus, there is no hint that these had anything to do with a curse. Aeschylus does indeed endeavour to present the whole saga as flowing from one original *ἀρχὴ κακῶν*, but when the women of the Chorus look back to it—'for I tell of an ancient transgression, soon punished, but abiding to the third generation' (742)—they tell us that it was Laios' disregard of Apollo's repeated warnings not to father a son, a disregard due to foolish fondness (*κρατηθεὶς ἐκ φίλων ἀβουλιᾶν*, 750). They go on to emphasize Oedipus' misguidedness in marrying Jocasta, and in cursing his sons; they have previously pointed out to Eteocles that he is in the grip of irrational urges. So what is highlighted as the common factor in the whole story is ill-judged, deluded behaviour, not an ancestral curse. When a Messenger brings the news that the brothers have slain one another, his verdict is that Apollo has brought Laios' old imprudence to its conclusion; and in the following ode the Chorus first sing of Oedipus' curse having done its work, but then they add, 'and Laios' disobedient choice has persisted throughout'.[22]

What does Sophocles make of the story? He did not treat it in a connected trilogy, so he was under less pressure to represent it as a connected tale. Nevertheless, in the earliest of his three Theban plays, the *Antigone*, he was still sufficiently under the influence of Aeschylus to include a choral retrospect similar to the one in the *Septem*.

[19] *Thebaid* frs. 2–3 Bernabé = Davies. Cf. Welcker (1849: 333–40); Bethe (1891): 102 f.); Davies (1989: 25 f.).

[20] Aesch. *Sept.* 785–90, *τέκνοις δ' †ἀραίας† ἐφῆκεν ἐπίκοτος τροφᾶς, αἰαῖ, πικρογλώσσους ἀράς, καί σφε σιδαρονόμωι διὰ χερί ποτε λαχεῖν κτήματα.*

[21] Ibid. 70, 655, 695–701, 709, 720–33, 766, 819, 832, 840, 886, 894, 898, 946, 955, 977 = 988.

[22] Ibid. 801 f., *ἄναξ Ἀπόλλων . . . Οἰδίπου γένει | κραίνων παλαιὰς Λαΐου δυσβουλίας*; 842 *βουλαὶ δ' ἄπιστοι Λαΐου διήρκεσαν.*

> Happy are they whose life has never tasted ills,
> for when a house is shaken by the gods,
> ruin unfailing advances through generations . . .
>
> Ancient are the woes of the Labdacid house
> I see breaking on woes of the dead,
> nor does generation relieve generation: some god
> batters away, and they have no escape.
> So now the light beamed over the last shoot
> in Oedipus's house,
> but down again it is mown
> by the bloody sickle of the gods of death,
> and folly, and the Furies of the heart.
>
> *ἀρχαῖα τὰ Λαβδακιδᾶν οἴκων ὁρῶμαι*
> *πήματα φθιτῶν ἐπὶ πήμασι πίπτοντ',*
> *οὐδ' ἀπαλλάσσει γενεὰν γένος, ἀλλ' ἐρείπει*
> *θεῶν τις, οὐδ' ἔχει λύσιν.*
> *νῦν γὰρ ἐσχάτας ὑπὲρ*
> *ῥίζας ἐτέτατο φάος ἐν Οἰδίπου δόμοις·*
> *κατ' αὖ νιν φοινία*
> *θεῶν τῶν νερτέρων ἀμᾶι κοπίς*
> *λόγου τ' ἄνοια καὶ φρενῶν Ἐρινύς.*[23]

Later the Chorus suggest to Antigone that she is paying for some trial of her father's—*πατρῶιον δ' ἐκτίνεις τιν' ἆθλον*—and she replies, 'you have touched on my most painful concern—the thrice-ploughed furrow of my father's doom and the fate of our whole Labdacid family'.[24] Neither she nor they know anything of a curse. They only know that the family has suffered a catalogue of disasters, and they can only speculate that 'some god' is set on its destruction.

In *Oedipus Tyrannus* the story begins with the oracle given to Laios, not warning him not to have a son, as in Aeschylus, but informing him that it was his destiny to be killed by his son. Nothing precedes the oracle. The only curse is the one laid by Oedipus on Laios' murderer and on anyone who shelters him; when Teiresias tells Oedipus that 'you will presently be driven out of this land by the double-edged curse of your father and mother', this is vatic language and does not refer to a literal curse uttered by Laios or Jocasta.[25]

[23] Soph. *Ant.* 582–603.

[24] Ibid. 856–62.

[25] *OT* 417 f. Similarly at Eur. *Phoen.* 1610 f., *παῖδάς τ' ἀδελφοὺς ἔτεκον, οὓς*

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, as in *Antigone*, the tribulations of the house are contemplated with baffled despair. Oedipus protests that his actions were unintentional errors; he does not see himself as the victim of any curse, but of the gods, who led him into trouble, perhaps (he surmises) because they had some long-standing grudge against the family. Again, the oracle given to Laios is treated as the start of the whole matter, and nothing prior to it is mentioned.[26]

Sophocles, then, is consistent. There is no question of a family curse going back to Laios. From the high incidence of calamities people infer some divine enmity, but they have no explanation to offer for it; they are unaware of any incident that could have provoked it.

Some modern interpreters know better. They aver that both for Aeschylus and for Sophocles Laios and his descendants laboured under an ancestral curse, whether in the proper sense of a curse or in the sense of a divine μῆνις; and that the reason for it was Laios' abduction and rape of Pelops' son Chrysippus, who committed suicide. According to certain ancient sources, this did in fact lead Pelops to pronounce a curse on Laios.

How old is the story? A line of scholars going back to Welcker has held that it appeared in the epic *Oidipodeia*, on the basis of an account found in a scholium on the *Phoenissae* and ascribed to one Pisander. Welcker took this Pisander to stand for a Cyclic poet, and Bethe and Wilamowitz claimed the account to be basically a summary of the contents of the *Oidipodeia*. Carl Robert took a much more sceptical view of it as a late piece of mythography drawn from various sources. Jacoby put it with other scholiastic citations of 'Pisander' to the credit of a Hellenistic prose author, and his view is now widely accepted.[27] That text certainly cannot be used as evidence for the presence of the Chrysippus story in the epic *Oidipodeia*.

As we have seen, there is no hint of it in the surviving dramas of

ἀπώλεσα, | ἀρὰς παραλαβὼν Λαΐου καὶ παισὶ δούς, there is no reference to an actual curse by Laios.

[26] *OC* 265–74, 521–48, 960–99, esp. 964 f. θεοῖς γὰρ ἦν οὕτω φίλον, | τάχ' ἄν τι μηνίουσιν ἐς γένος πάλαι, 969 f. (the oracle to Laios), 997 f. τοιαῦτα μέντοι καὐτὸς εἰσέβην κακά, | θεῶν ἀγόντων.

[27] Welcker (1865: 91–5); Bethe (1891: 4–12); Wilamowitz (1898: 499; 1899: 209); cf. id. (1900: 66 n. 1); Robert (1915: i. 149–67); F. Jacoby, *FGrHist* 16 F 10 with commentary and Nachträge (i.² 544–7); Mastronarde (1994: 31–8).

Aeschylus or Sophocles either. The idea that it formed the subject of Aeschylus' *Laios*[28] is hard to reconcile with the allusion in that play to an exposed child, who must be Oedipus; in any case it does not fit the references to Laios in the *Septem*. The earliest known source for the myth is Euripides' *Chrysippus*. For all we know, Euripides may have invented it. He might have taken his cue from some earlier source, but if so it does not seem to have been much noticed before him. Hellanicus and Thucydides, as we have seen, knew a quite different account of Chrysippus' fate.

It is sometimes thought that Euripides' *Oenomaus* and *Chrysippus* formed a connected trilogy with his *Phoenissae*. They might go well together, but the combination is speculative.[29] In the prologue of the *Phoenissae* Jocasta recites the history of the Labdacids, going right back to Cadmus. When she comes to Laios, the story is just as in Aeschylus. Being childless, he went to consult the oracle, which warned him not to beget a son, because if he did, that son would kill him. But Laios got drunk and yielded to desire. Chrysippus plays no part in her account.

We do not know whether Euripides' *Chrysippus* contained the detail that Pelops laid a curse on Laios following the boy's death.[30] Pelops was a character in the play, so it is quite possible. If so, Euripides might have been supplying *suo Marte* what the Labdacid saga had hitherto lacked, a real hereditary curse analogous to the one that Myrtilus laid on Pelops. However, we should note that only one of the late sources which refer to the curse suggests that Pelops cursed Laios and his descendants. According to the others, the curse was that he should not have a son, or that if he did, he would be slain by him.[31] In that case the curse merely served to connect the

[28] Lloyd-Jones (1971: 121) after Welcker and others. Criticized by Hutchinson (1985: p. xxiii); West (1991: 231); Mastronarde (1994: 35 f.).

[29] See Mastronarde (1994: 36–8).

[30] See Mastronarde (1994: 33 f.). Hartung's view that a hypothesis of the play is preserved in [Plut.] *Parall. min.* 33 (313de = Dositheus, *FGrHist* 290 F 6) is very attractive; see Wilamowitz (1893: 179–85). (*Contra*: Robert (1915: i. 410–12); Jacoby (as n. 27).) There Chrysippus is killed (not very efficiently) by Hippodameia, who frames Laios. Pelops is convinced that he is the murderer. But Chrysippus takes some time to die and is able to denounce Hippodameia and exculpate Laios. However, Pelops might have laid his curse on him before the disclosure, and it would then have been too late to revoke it.

[31] Hypotheses to *Septem* and *Phoenissae*: Smith (1972: 3. 16, 7. 2), Mastronarde (1988: 6. 5, 9. 2, 12. 25). The one that suggests an inherited curse is sch. *Phoen.* 60,

Chrysippus episode up with the better-known story about Laios. It was fulfilled by Laios' death, and there was no sense in which Oedipus could inherit it.

The idea of the ancestral curse exercises a dangerous fascination. It found its way by stages into myths where it did not originally belong; and interpreters of tragedy have persistently introduced it where it is not present. It has become, so to speak, one of the inherited curses of scholarship.

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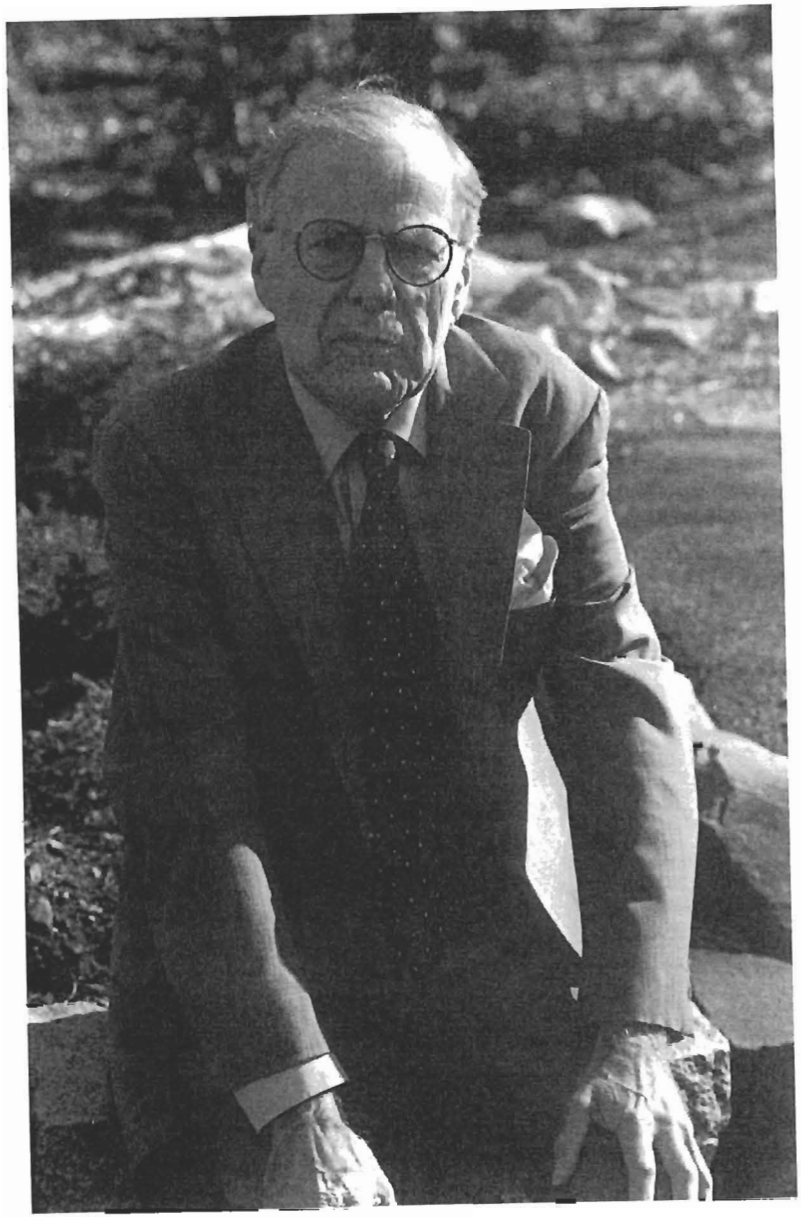
φασὶν ὅτι Πέλοψ Χρυσίππου ἁρπαγέντος κατηράσατο μέχρι παίδων εἶναι τὸ κακόν. The curious formulation looks like a distortion; it is used to explain Euripides' reference to *ὁ πάντ' ἀνατλὰς Οἰδίπους παθήματα*, although there is no mention there of inherited evil.



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