Seven against Thebes Study Guide

Seven against Thebes by Aeschylus

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Introduction

Seven Against Thebes was first staged in 467 B.C., as part of a *tetralogy* that includes *Lauis*, *Oedipus* and the satyr play, Sphinx. The first two plays in the trilogy have been lost, as has the satyr play. *Seven Against Thebes*, the story of the conflict between Eteocles and Polyneices, the sons of Oedipus, won Aeschylus a first prize at its initial performance. Aeschylus could count on his audience knowing the story depicted in the tragedy without his having to fill in a lot of details. Epic poems told the story of the Oedipus tragedy and the battle for Thebes, and Greek audiences would know these stories very well. The challenge was not in the details of the story but in the poetic depiction. Aeschylus is celebrated for the poetic beauty of Chorus, and indeed, in the Chorus has a major role, with more lines than any other character. The sounds of battle, which are often heard in the background, and the weeping of the Chorus, and later of the sisters, emphasize the tragedy that is unfolding, but these same elements also illustrate the strengths of Aeschylus's tragedy. The conflict between fate and justice is important for the Greek audience, for whom battle and honor are important characteristics of Athens's strength. Aeschylus was a deeply religious man who was concerned with ethics, hubris, and with justice. The Oedipus tragedy is very concerned with these issues and thus it provides a natural choice for Aeschylus's trilogy. Many early Greek poets saw themselves as the purveyors of moral and ethical wisdom. It is clear that with Seven *Against Thebes*, Aeschylus is fulfilling this role for his fifth-century B.C. audiences.

Author Biography

Aeschylus was born in 525 B.C., probably in Eleusis, just outside Athens. Few details are known of his childhood, but Aeschylus entered his first dramatic competition, the Dionysia, in 500-501 B.C. He enjoyed his first real success as a playwright in 484 B.C., but Aeschylus was more than a dramatist; he was also a soldier, having fought in several of the battles that marked the wars between Athens and Persia. The relative peace that followed these battles allowed Aeschylus time to focus on his plays.

The first of his tragedies appears to have been performed around 500 B.C. Aeschylus presented his tragedies as trilogies, each grouping having a common theme. The drama trilogy was then followed by a satyr drama, a comedy involving a mythological hero. Aeschylus is credited with introducing the second actor into Greek drama and with reducing the size of the chorus. These innovations allowed for a greater complexity of plot and dialogue. Aeschylus also made use of more frightening masks and costumes than had previously been used. He also introduced limited scenery. Aeschylus is said to have written between 80-90 plays; however, only seven are known to have survived. His plays won many awards at drama competitions, including several first prizes. Most dramatists were also actors, and so Aeschylus probably acted in his own plays.

Because of his own experience in battle, Aeschylus's battle scenes are particularly vivid, easily evoking the terror and sounds of death. Aeschylus died in 456 B.C., having lived through the greatest period of Greek theatre. He set a formidable example for other dramatists, such as Sophocles and Euripedes. After his death, Aeschylus received many honors, and is now known as the Father of Greek Tragedy. The seven plays that survive today are *The Persians* (472 B.C.); *Seven Against Thebes* (467 B.C.); *The Suppliant Women* (c. 463 B.C.); the three parts of the *Orestia* trilogy, *Agamemnon, The Libation-Bearers*, and *Eumenides* (458 B.C.); and *Prometheus Bound* (undated).

Plot Summary

Seven Against Thebes opens with Eteocles calling forth every man in the city, whether child or aged, to the fight and the threat, which is at hand. Everyone must be ready to defend the city in battle. At that moment, the Scout enters with news that the enemy is just outside the walls and is preparing for battle. There are seven commanders ready to attack the seven gates of Thebes. After delivering the news, the Scout departs, and Eteocles prays to Zeus for his favor in the battle to come. The Chorus, which has entered as the Scout has related his news, begins a lament as they hear the approach of the armies. They beg their gods to protect them and their city. Eteocles hears the Chorus' fearful pleadings as he enters and chastises them for their fear, which he says will not help their beloved Thebes. Instead, Eteocles promises that the Chorus will be stoned to death for their mindless fear, as their fear will incite the city's residents into an instinctive fear of their own, which will disable and defeat the city. But the Chorus is not appeased, and they continue with their warnings as Eteocles warns them of the risk they create with their wailing. Eteocles again warns the Chorus to remain inside and to hold back their panic. At their continued warnings and fearful exclamations, Eteocles responds with attacks on the nature of women, their weaknesses, and their fears. Finally the Chorus promises to restrain their fear and remain silent, and Eteocles again prays to the gods, with promises of sacrifices and trophies if Thebes is successfully defended. After Eteocles leaves the stage, the Chorus continues to voice their worry at the coming battle and the risk they face if they are taken and become slaves.

When the Scout enters, he brings news of who will lead the attack at each of the city's gates. At the news of each opponent's assignment, Eteocles assigns one of his men to defend that particular gate. When Eteocles is told that his brother, Polyneices, will lead the attack on the seventh gate, Eteocles decides that he will defend that gate. At this news, the Chorus warns Eteocles that he should not shed his brother's blood, but Eteocles is beyond listening to warnings. He acknowledges the curse of his father, Oedipus, but Eteocles says that fate will determine the outcome, and if the gods are determined that he shall be destroyed, then this will happen. The chorus is dismayed at Eteocles departure and cry out that if each bother slays the other, there will be no family to see to a proper burial. The Chorus then begins to remind the audience of the story of Oedipus and the curse that followed his father, himself, and now his sons. At that moment, the Scout again enters with the news that Thebes has crushed her enemy, and the city is victorious. Six of the seven gates have withstood the onslaught of the enemy's armies, but the battle at the seventh gate has ended in tragedy. Both Eteocles and Polyneices are dead, each at the others hand. The Scout reminds the Chorus that the city must mourn the death but also celebrate the end of the curse. The Chorus asks is they should mourn these deaths or celebrate the triumph of Thebes' victory. With the arrival of the brother's bodies, the Chorus acknowledges the tragedy that has unfolded. The bodies are followed closely by Ismene and Antigone, who have come to bury their brothers. The Chorus addresses the sisters, with grief and with sadness at the resolution of the curse. The two sisters respond to the Chorus with their own grief, as they lament the curse that damned both brothers. As Antigone wonders where they will

bury the brothers, a Herald enters with an announcement that the council has met. The council has determined that Eteocles is a hero and will be accorded an honorable burial. However, Polyneices would have laid waste to Thebes, and thus, his corpse is to lie unburied, to be picked apart by the birds of prey. Antigone promises that she will bury her brother, as she will not be bound by the Theban council's ruling. A brief argument with the Herald ensues, but Antigone will not be threatened, and finally, the Herald leaves to report to the council. The play ends with the Chorus divided. Half will accompany Eteocles to his grave; half will accompany Polyneices to his burial.

Background

Background Summary

Laius, King of Thebes, kidnapped, assaulted and murdered the young son of his friend Pelops. As punishment, the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi decreed that if Laius did not father any children, the city of Thebes would be safe: if he did have children, the city would be destroyed.

Laius had one son, Oedipus. The Oracle foretold that Oedipus would one day kill his father and marry his mother. This led Laius to injure the baby's feet deliberately so he would be unable to walk, and left him to die in the wilderness. Oedipus was rescued by a farmer and raised to adulthood.

One day on the road to Thebes, Oedipus' adopted father was killed by Laius, who is in turned was killed by Oedipus. Laius was regarded as a tyrant in Thebes, and so the people regarded Oedipus as a hero and made him their king. As king, Oedipus solved the Riddle of The Sphinx (a half-woman, half-lion) who had been terrorizing the city. Oedipus then married Jocasta (who was actually his mother), ruled Thebes and fathered several children – among them Eteocles, Polyneices, Antigone and Ismene.

Thebes failed to prosper under Oedipus' rule, and when it was discovered that it was the result of Oedipus' crimes (killing his father and having incestuous relations with his mother) Jocasta committed suicide and Oedipus blinded himself. Eteocles and Polyneices conspired to kill Oedipus in the hopes that the curse on Thebes would be lifted, but before he died, Oedipus cursed them.

After Oedipus' death, Eteocles and Polyneices agreed that they would rule Thebes in turn, for one year at a time. Eteocles ruled first, while Polyneices went to Argos and married a princess. At the end of the first year, Eteocles refused to give up the throne. Polyneices persuaded his father in law, the King of Argos, to join with him and win the throne of Thebes by force. The play begins as the armies of Polyneices and the King of Argos have begun their attacks.

Background Analysis

This play was the third in a trilogy of plays. The first two were called Laius and Oedipus, and although we cannot be completely sure (because the texts of Laius and Oedipus have never been discovered), it is reasonable to assume they told the story outlined above.

Any Greek citizen attending this play would already know this story. It is the same with any other Greek play: any citizen in the audience would know the story, or myth, that the play was based on. It was part of their background as a Greek. Just about every citizen went to these plays: they were produced as part of a religious festival, were the highlight

of the city's social, cultural and religious life and they reinforced the belief system of the time: that existence depended upon fate, or the will of the gods.

This particular legend resembles other Greek legends (which also became the basis for plays) in several ways. It is very violent; it involves generation after generation repeating a crime, and it involves parents and children killing each other. The theme of these legends is that giving in to human passion creates suffering, and that the after-effects of that suffering can last for generations, which means it's better to listen to the will of the gods and obey it.

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

The play is set in a public square in the ancient Greek city of Thebes. Statues of several Greek gods are in the center of the square. Eteocles, King of Thebes, addresses the male citizens of the city. He compares his position to being the captain of a ship, and accepts the responsibility for speaking the truth about the city's situation. That truth, as he sees it, is that if things go well for the city, it is the will of the Gods. However, if things go badly, it is his personal responsibility, and accepts that the people of Thebes will scream out his name in agony as a result. He prays to Zeus that this will not happen.

He then calls upon the man to fight to protect the land and city of Thebes, comparing Thebes and its land to "their mother" who welcomed them, nurtured them, and raised them to manhood so they could provide protection for her at moments like this. He encourages the men with the news that to this point the battle has gone well, and thanks the Gods. However, he says, that Teiresias the prophet has foreseen that the armies of Argos will attack again soon, and calls the men to take up arms and prepare to defend the gates, walls and roadways. He says that he has sent out scouts to find out the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy, and that "their reports will save me from all traps and deceptions."

One of these scouts runs on with the news that the seven powerful generals of the attacking army have performed a blood sacrifice, and have sworn to destroy and pillage the city of Thebes or die trying. He says that even though they wept as they set up a memorial to their families back home, they showed no compassion for the people of Thebes: their courage and passion showed in their eyes. He goes on to say that as he left, he saw the generals gamble for which general would the assault on which of the Seven Gates of Thebes, and that the generals are leading their armies to the city. He urges Eteocles to prepare to defend the city, and runs off, promising to continue to spy out the situation and report.

Eteocles shouts out a prayer to Zeus, the Gods and the Fury (a spirit of revenge whom he names as the manifestation of the Curse of Oedipus) to show mercy on Thebes and to not let the city be destroyed and its citizens become slaves. He claims to speak on behalf of all the citizens, who he says can only worship the Gods fully if they are free, and goes into his council chambers to prepare for war.

The chorus of women of Thebes rushes on in a panic, afraid of the sounds, sights and smells of the huge armies just outside the walls of the city. Praying formally, they call out to the gods and goddesses to defend them and save them from the horrors that women face during wartime: slavery, rape, pain and death. Their desperation causes them to run frantically from statue to statue, speaking to the gods whom they represent in turn, calling on them to intervene in their unique ways to save them. They return to the formal

prayers, and ask that the gods remember their faithfulness and protect them so they can continue to worship.

Part 1 Analysis

Seven Against Thebes is structured in the traditional form of Classical Greek Tragedy. The action alternates between scenes featuring individuals and scenes featuring only the chorus, a group of individual actors speaking with the thoughts, emotions and reactions of a single character.

Imagery based on ships and the sea appears throughout the play and shows up in several different ways. In this scene, in addition to Eteocles referring to himself as the captain of a ship, the Chorus refers to the attacks as waves crashing up against the walls of the city. The imagery in general represents a basic element of the Greek philosophy of existence: that human beings (i.e. the ship) have some freedom of choice, but ultimately their destinies depend upon the will of the gods (i.e. the ocean). This also relates to the theme of the play: that to go against the will of the gods, or to make them angry, is to risk destruction.

The image of Thebes being female and the "mother" of its citizens also show up throughout the play. In addition to Eteocles using such imagery to describe the kind of loyalty the soldiers should feel, the language used to describe the violation of the city throughout the play is similar to language used to describe the violation of women – the physical violation of rape; the emotional violation of seeing their husbands, sons and brothers killed; and the spiritual violation of being treated like treasure or other possessions and taken into slavery. The Chorus of Women uses this imagery as well, which makes them represent the city itself: when the Chorus prays, it is as if the city was praying.

The appearance of the Scout and his description of the armies is a typical device of classical Greek theatre. News of events offstage is usually brought in by a messenger or scout character. The news could be of an approaching army (as it is in this play), of the death of a character (as it is in several plays, including this one), or of the history leading up to a particular moment or scene.

In spite of being king illegally (having broken his agreement with his brother), Eteocles proves to have some qualities of a good leader in taking on responsibility for the well-being of his city. It is in the next scene that he reveals that he is not such a good man.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

Eteocles comes on and expresses his disgust with the chorus for giving in to their fears, saying it is an "outrage" to the soldiers going off to war. He accuses the women of bringing down the city's morale. He complains about women in general: that when they are brave, they are insolent and intolerable, and when they are frightened, they are rash and dangerous. He promises to put any citizen, male or female, in prison if they do not obey him and bravely face the danger. Eteocles asks if they think a sailor steering a ship runs away just because he is frightened.

The Chorus says they just came to the square to pray to the Gods to reach and defend the city. Eteocles suggests that instead, they should pray that the walls remain standing. The Chorus then prays to die before the walls are penetrated, as they (the women of the chorus) would be if the city fell. Eteocles accuses them of being disloyal. The Chorus responds that the Gods are the source of hope when human hope fails and that they have to pray to them. Eteocles tells them that they should go indoors and leave the fighting to the men. The Chorus is bewildered that Eteocles is so angry about their praying for help. Eteocles responds that the praying is not the problem, but the way they were praying: for safety for themselves instead of praying for strength for the soldiers.

The Chorus hears the sounds of attack from outside the walls and panics. Eteocles tries to calm them, tells them to back away from the statues and gives them a formal prayer to offer to the gods: if the city is saved, the temples of the gods will be decorated with sacrifices, the enemy's weapons and trophies of battle. He then announces that he is preparing to appoint six generals of his own to face the enemy's seven generals, and that he himself will be the seventh general. He goes out, leaving the Chorus alone.

The Chorus briefly gives in to fear, and imagines what will happen to the city if the enemy wins. They then calm down, and formally pray to Zeus and the other gods, asking them where they (the gods) would go if this beautiful land were destroyed. The Chorus' imagination takes over again as they imagine the city burned to the ground and the women of all ages themselves carried off, "their breasts exposed to the conqueror's view." In intense, vividly descriptive poetry, the chorus again describes the pain and grief of being conquered both as a city and as a woman.

Part 2 Analysis

Once again, the imagery the Chorus uses likens the destruction and violation of a city to the moral, physical and spiritual destruction of a woman – older, "white haired" women, "housewives," and young virgins are all described as being equal victims.

The principal contrast in this scene is between two kinds of noise: the noise of the battle outside the walls that frightens the chorus so badly, and the noise of the chorus' prayers

inside the walls, which makes Eteocles so angry. This contrast represents traditional male and female differences in thought about war: males generally are more concerned with the battle itself, while women are generally more concerned about what happens afterwards. Men see the act of combat itself as glorious: women see the pain such conflict causes.

Eteocles' reaction to the women is so extreme partly because of his angry determination to save and protect the city. It is also partly because his feelings go deeper than that. Remember that before the play begins, Eteocles refuses to respect his agreement with Polyneices (that they alternate being king one year at a time). This indicates he desires to possess and control the city, a deeper and more violent desire than just wanting to protect it. This leads Eteocles to instruct the Chorus to pray for strength, not safety.

It all goes even deeper than that. Because Eteocles and the Chorus all express themselves in imagery that describes Thebes in maternal terms, it makes Eteocles' story and actions echo the story and actions of Oedipus (Eteocles' father) who sexually, emotionally and politically possessed his mother – all of which is playing out the curse originally laid on Laius. This illustrates two aspects of the play's theme, and the theme of the whole legend that the play is based upon: that it is impossible to try to escape the will of the gods (fate, or destiny); and that, as the Bible says, "the sins of the father [are] visited upon the son."

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

The Scout returns with news of the armies outside the gates of Thebes and the generals leading them. Eteocles also returns with generals of his own. As the Scout describes each of the enemy generals, which gate he's set to attack, and the emblem on his shield, Eteocles decides which of his generals would be the best match, and sends each one off to do battle. After each general is decided, the Chorus prays to one of the gods to guide and inspire that general to victory.

The first general is Tydeus, extremely violent, eager for battle, and frustrated that a prophet (and fellow general) has forbidden him to cross a river outside the city because "the omens aren't good." His shield has an emblem of Hekate, the goddess of the night. Eteocles vows not to be afraid of Tydeus and then himself ridicules the prophet, charging him with "blindness" and "bad judgment." He sends Melanippus to face Tydeus, a general whom he describes as strong, faithful and reverent.

The second general is Kapaneus, a giant who says he will destroy the city whether it is the gods' will or not. His shield has the image of a man armed with a torch. Eteocles states that Kapaneus will feel the revenge of the gods for blaspheming, and sends his general Polyphontes, "killer of many."

The third general is Eteoklos (whose name is similar to Eteocles), who is described as leading a cavalry of horses, which makes an arrogant, inhuman noise. His shield bears the image of a man climbing a ladder and shouting (in words engraved on the shield) that not even Ares, the god of war will knock him off it. Eteocles makes no comment about this general but immediately sends out Megareus, who is "unmoved by the sound of snorting horses."

The fourth general is Hippomedon, whom the Scout describes as constantly shouting out his war cry and acting almost insane with blood lust. His huge shield portrays a fire-breathing monster called Typhon. Eteocles sends out Hyperbios, another loyal and true "son of Thebes."

The fifth general is Parthenopaios, young and with an almost feminine beauty but a vicious temper, who proclaims that he honors his spear more than he honors the gods. On his shield, a picture of the Sphinx, the half-woman half-lion terrorized Thebes in the time of Oedipus. Eteocles sends out a general named Aktor, brother to Hyperbios.

The sixth general is Amphiaraos, the prophet ridiculed by Tydeus, who apparently (according to the Scout) tried to convince Polyneices (Eteocles' brother) to call off the attack, saying that Polyneices is not just attacking his brother but his "mother." When Polyneices refused to call off the battle, Amphiaraos prayed to be protected from the evil that would result from the attack and headed for his gate. The Scout says there is no

symbol in his shield. Eteocles shows no respect for Amphiaraos' conscience, saying he is tainted with the same evil as those with whom he fights. He sends Lasthenes against him, an older, more experienced general.

The seventh general is Polyneices himself, Eteocles' brother, who has been vowing to either kill Eteocles or drive him into exile. His shield has on it a portrait of Dike, the goddess of justice, and Dike's promise that she shall "bring this man to his harbor, and he shall enjoy his father's city." Eteocles shouts out his anger at the curse on his family, proclaims that Dike is on his side, not his brother's and vows to stand in battle himself.

As Eteocles arms himself, the Chorus (which to this point had been praying to the gods for strength for each general) urges him not to "take on the violence of your brother." Eteocles resists the persuasions, saying ultimately that "if the gods [demand] evil, no man can evade it." He then goes out to face his brother in the final battle.

After he's gone, the Chorus has a long ode, or poetic song, that recounts the history of the family to this point: the original decree that Laius should not have children; his murder by Oedipus; Oedipus being caught up in a murderous, incestuous relationship with his father and mother; and the curse he placed on his sons that they would receive the reward of their betrayal of him with "cold steel". They conclude by expressing their belief that the time has come for Oedipus' curse to be fulfilled.

Part 3 Analysis

Because each of the generals attacking Thebes represents an aspect of Eteocles himself, they also represent the curse that will finally destroy the family.

Tydeus (and the night represented on his shield) represents Eteocles' own blindness and bad judgment: specifically, his decision to break his agreement about the kingship with is brother. Kapaneus represents Eteocles' stubbornness, while his shield (which displays a fire that is used to destroy as opposed to illuminate the truth) represents Eteocles' passions: to destroy his brother and possess Thebes. Eteoklos represents Eteocles himself and the war that Eteocles is fighting with his own will and ambitions (again, this refers to his keeping the throne from his brother). Aside from the similarity of their two names, the Scout's descriptions of Eteoklos trying to control his noisy horses sound a lot like what Eteocles did with the Chorus of Women earlier.

Hippomedon represents Eteocles' own almost insane rage (which we saw in the way he shouted at the Chorus earlier). Typhon (the image on his shield) is a god of the earth and the depiction of "the earth" as violent contrasts with earlier descriptions of the earth as maternal and nurturing. This contrast illustrates the contrast between what Eteocles says is his love of the city (his "mother") and the violent irrationality of his desire to possess her.

Parthenopaios, being described as having an almost feminine beauty and a vicious temper, represents one of the aspects of the family history that brought Eteocles to this crisis: the Sphinx, whose riddle Oedipus solved, which led to his wedding to Jocasta

and their incestuous relationship. Parthenopaios also represents the way that Eteocles (again, in continuing to hold onto the throne) has followed his own will which he honors more than he honors the will of the gods (the way Parthenopaios honors his spear).

Amphiaraos represents the voice of reason and faithfulness that Eteocles should have been listening to, but has not been.

Finally, Polyneices' anger, eagerness for power and belief that he is in the right are the same as Eteocles'. In going out to fight his brother, Eteocles is going out to fight himself, and thus fulfill the prophecy (in a metaphoric fashion) of the destruction of Thebes. Eteocles' vow that he is fulfilling the will of the gods is ironic, in that it seems clear to us that the situation of the play (the fight over the throne) is the result of his own willfulness and selfishness.

The Chorus again uses the imagery of a ship to illustrate the situation of Eteocles and his family, describing their fate as an angry ocean, with one wave after another attacking and battering them. This again illustrates the play's theme: that the individual is subject to the whims and will of the gods.

Part 4

Part 4 Summary

The Scout rushes on, and tells the Chorus of Women they have no reason to be afraid: the battle is over. Things have gone well, he says, at six of the gates – but at the seventh, the curse of Laius has come to its conclusion. When the Chorus asks what happened, the Scout tells them that Eteocles and Polyneices have killed each other. Before he leaves, he calls the moment an occasion for "both rejoicing and weeping" – rejoicing that the city is safe, but weeping that the kings have destroyed each other.

The Chorus then has a long dirge (a poem about death) as they raise a victory cry to Zeus at the same time as they raise a cry of grief at the death of Eteocles (whose name could be translated as "cause of weeping"). As soldiers bring in the bodies of Eteocles and Polyneices, the Chorus sings of how these deaths fulfill the curses placed on Laius and by Oedipus.

The younger sisters of Eteocles and Polyneices, Antigone and Ismene, come out from the palace, who join in the dirge. One third of the Chorus speaks to them, sympathizing with their grief: another third speaks of how the two brothers, who had been fighting so viciously for so long, are finally united in death; the final third speaks of how the city of Thebes has been torn apart by the rivalry between the two brothers. The Chorus joins back together to speak of Ares, the god of war and strife who by his actions in starting the war actually brought the two brothers back together. The chorus goes on to speak of the misfortunes of Jocasta, Oedipus' wife and the mother of the two kings, and how "unfortunate" she was. Finally, the Chorus speaks of how the final victory of this moment belongs to the Fury, or the power of the curse, whose influence is now fading because of the deaths.

Antigone and Ismene step forward, and speak a lament (a poem about grief) over the bodies of their brothers. Wordless cries blend with poetic language telling the story of how they finally struck down the Fury (the curse).

A messenger appears and announces that Eteocles will be buried honorably, but that the body of Polyneices (who betrayed both the city of Thebes and his brother) is to be thrown to the dogs: because he acted without honor, his body shall be gotten rid of without honor. Antigone announces that she is prepared to go against the will of the leaders of Thebes, take Polyneices' body away, and bury it properly. The Messenger, on behalf of the city, attempts to talk her out of it, but she will not change her mind. The Messenger takes her decision into the council.

Soldiers appear and gather around the bodies of Eteocles and Polyneices, preparing to take them away. The Chorus speaks of their indecision: who is right, Antigone for wanting to bury her brother, or the council of Thebes for wanting to punish a traitor. Half the chorus sides with, and supports, Antigone, going with her to bury him. "The grief for

kindred is the bond and link of mankind, common to all, unchanging." The other half of the chorus goes with Ismene and the body of Eteocles: "this one man most of all defended the city … kept the ship steady". The soldiers pick up the biers holding the bodies and go out. The two half- choruses, Antigone and Ismene follow them out.

Part 4 Analysis

When he brings the news of how the battle is progressing, the Scout again uses imagery of the sea, describing the city as a ship that has taken on no water and is sailing calmly. This continues the metaphor established at the beginning of the play.

With the deaths of Eteocles and Polyneices, the curse of Laius (that the city would be destroyed if he fathered any children) is metaphorically fulfilled. In classical times, and in classical writing, a city's ruler was often a symbol of his city: in other words, Eteocles was Thebes, and so was Polyneices, who was to have been Eteocles' co-ruler. Therefore, with their deaths, the city also dies (metaphorically).

Antigone and Ismene, being pure young girls, represent hope. In spite of being children of the same curse, in the same way as Eteocles and Polyneices are, their appearance raises the possibility that now the two brothers are dead, the power of the curse has been destroyed. Thebes can once again be a prosperous city, and the two girls along with the rest of the citizens can have a happy life. Audiences of the time, however, would have seen this as ironic: according to the legends, in later centuries Thebes was attacked by non-Greeks and destroyed, thus literally fulfilling the curse on Laius.

At the time the play was written, being buried without ceremony (as the Messenger says is going to happen to Polyneices) was just about the worst thing that could happen to a person. It was the ultimate punishment that society could offer, and in this moment, it is clear just how awful the citizens of Thebes thought Polyneices was and how honorable they thought Eteocles was even though he killed his father and his brother, he died defending his city and his kingdom. In vowing to give Polyneices a good burial, Antigone is making a huge gesture of defiance against the rules of society – so huge that plays (both classical and modern) were written about her. In this play, however, she is simply doing what she believes is right: acting out of respect for family, which she believes is more important than respect for the city.

The play concludes, as Antigone, Ismene and the two half- choruses follow the bodies of Eteocles and Polyneices off the stage, with one final piece of "ship" imagery. Eteocles is described as a captain who deserves praise for never letting his "ship" (the city) sink or crash on the rocks, but navigated safely through battle and the "swamping waves" of men who attacked it.

Characters

Antigone

Antigone is a sister to Eteocles and Polyneices. She appears briefly at the end of the play to mourn the deaths of her brothers. When she learns that Polyneices is to be denied a proper burial, she vows to oppose the state and follow her own conscience. She is brave enough to argue with the Herald and to promise defiance of the council's edict. Antigone exits at the play's conclusion with Polyneices' body, intent on burying him.

Chorus

The chorus of Theban maidens sings sections of the play. Their purpose is to explain events or actions that occurred previously and to provide commentary on the events that are occurring. As the play opens, the Chorus learns of the impending battle and attempt to seize the city. The Chorus is afraid that Eteocles will lose the battle and the city will be captured. Because they fear they will be made slaves, the Chorus is very loud in their lamentations. But finally, Eteocles manages to quiet them, but not without considerable effort and threats. When the Chorus learns of Eteocles' plan to defend the seventh gate against his brother Polyneices, they warn Eteocles that brothers should not shed one another's blood. They also worry that the brothers will have no family to attend to their burials. The Chorus functions to tell or remind the audience about the curse of Oedipus. They also serve to share in the sister's grief at the brothers' deaths.

Eteocles

Eteolcles, ruler of Thebes, is one of the surviving sons of Oedipus. As the play opens, he is preparing for battle. Eteocles is angered at the worries and fears displayed by the Chorus. He responds with threats to have them all killed if they cannot control their fear. When Eteocles learns that his brother will lead the attack at the seventh gate, Eteocles decides to lead the battle at that gate, himself. Eteocles ignores the warnings of the Chorus, pointing out that fate will determine his success.

Eteocles is stubborn and unwilling to listen to the concerns of the Chorus. He dismisses their worries as the hysteria of women, who have little worth. When Eteocles is killed, the council rewards his bravery with an honorable burial.

Herald

The Herald appears at the play's conclusion to bring word of the council's decision regarding the funerals of Polyneices and Eteocles. When Antigone announces that she will bury her brother in violation of the council's decree, the Herold argues with her. He

leaves to tell the council of Antigone's plans after it becomes apparent that she will defy their edict.

Ismene

Ismene is another sister to Eteocles and Polyneices. She appears at the end of the play to mourn her brothers' passing. She is not as strong at Antigone, nor as willing to defy the council's edict.

Polyneices

Polyneices is the second of Oedipus' sons. His body is seen at the end of the play, and he has no lines to speak, but his presence in leading the attack on the seventh gate is a significant cause of the deaths that follow.

Scout

The Scout (also called the Spy) has infiltrated the enemy camp, and it is he who brings news to Eteocles of the impending battle. The Scout's return with news that Polyneices will lead the attack on the seventh gate leads to Eteocles' decision to defend that gate. Without such precise information, Eteocles might have assigned another warrior to defend the seventh gate.

Spy

See The Scout

Themes

Anger and Hatred

Anger and hatred are emotions that can control the protagonist and blind him to his obligations and choices. Eteocles is a victim of his own anger. When told by the Scout of the planned attacks on the city gates, Eteocles quite rationally assigns one of his warriors to each gate, each matched to the skills of the attacker. But when the Scout relates that Polyneices is to attack the seventh gate, Eteocles assigned himself to defend that gate. The rational decisions, which provided the best possible defenses for the city, are forgotten in the hatred that he feels for his brother. Because Eteocles is blinded by his hatred, he and his brother die, and only the seventh gate is not successfully defended.

Choice and Fate

Eteocles recognizes that the gods are in control of his destiny. When the Chorus begs Eteocles not to meet his brother, Polyneices, in battle, Eteocles says that fate has already determined his future: "Why kneel to Fate when sentenced to death already? " This surrendering to fate allows Eteocles a way to escape responsibility for his actions. He may make bad choices, as he does when he decides to fight his brother, but he is not responsible, since the he is only fulfilling his destiny. This approach to fate relegates the gods to little more than puppet masters, who simply pull man's strings, and it means that man need not reason, need not be responsible, and need not search for a greater purpose in life. It is all decided by the gods anyway.

Death

Death has a significant role in Aeschylus's play because death is the fulfillment of the curse that doomed Laius, Oedipus, Eteocles, and Polyneices. But death does not result in the end of the tragedy. Seven Against Thebes ends with the decree that Eteocles is to receive a hero's funeral, but Polyneices, his brother, is to remain unburied, a target for the vultures to pick apart. His sister, Antigone will not allow the council's edict to stand unchallenged, and follows her brother's body offstage, where the audience knows she will attend to his burial. Antigone's defiance of what she will call man's law (to distinguish it from god's law), will result in her death and the deaths of many more people. The deaths of Eteocles and Polyneices do not end the curse, as it should, but instead leads to more deaths and a continuation of the tragedy.

Human Laws versus Divine Laws

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is a powerful, though forgiving and beneficent creator. Man views his relationship with God in a cause and effect manner, in which

good deeds and faith are rewarded with God's grace. But early Greek men had a different relationship with their gods. There were many gods, and man's relationship with these gods was marked by the arbitrary nature of each god. Whether or not a man was good, honest, or brave had no bearing on how the gods treated him. Instead, man's treatment depended on how the gods were feeling at any given time. If the gods were warring amongst themselves, they would quite likely inflict some revenge upon men, rather than on the offending deity. This very arbitrary nature of the gods meant that men could not determine their own fates, nor could they even assume responsibility for their own behavior. The relationship with the gods was without rules and dependent solely on whim. This created a very unstable and precarious world in which to live. The effects are clearly seen in this play when the two sons of Oedipus are doomed, even though the initial curse that governs their lives was promised to their grandfather, Laius.

Honor

In Greek life honor is the virtue that governs man's actions. As in the opening, Eteocles is calling upon all men, regardless of age, to join him in defending Thebes from the invaders. That all men would do so, unquestionably, is a function of honor. For Eteocles, honor is the one strength he thinks he possesses. He knows that the gods control his fate, and that the familial curse controls his destiny, but Eteocles finds his strength in honor, the only thing he can control. Eteocles's reply to the Chorus' pleadings against fighting Polyneices, is a statement that, "when misfortune and dishonor join as one, no worth fame results." There is no dishonor, he says, when evil intervenes, but there is dishonor in not succeeding. Eteocles is willing to die for his honor, as were many other Greek heroes.

Style

Audience

Audience is the people for whom a drama is performed. Authors usually write with an audience in mind. Aeschylus writes for an audience interested in drama as entertainment, but this is also an audience that would expect the playwright to include important lessons about life. Aeschylus also views this moral lesson as an important role for the dramatist and so he emphasizes important lessons in his plays. In there are lessons about the role of honor and of destiny, as well as lessons about hatred and facing death.

Character

A character is a person in a dramatic work. The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual's morality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multifaceted ones. Characters may also be defined by personality traits, such as the rogue or the damsel in distress. "Characterization" is the process of creating a lifelike person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who he will be and how he will behave in a given situation. In the characters have names that depict their characters. For instance, Polyneices means "full of strife," a name that reveals his role in the play.

Chorus

In ancient Greek drama, a chorus consisted of a group of actors who interpreted and commented on the play's action and themes, most often singing or chanting their lines. Initially the chorus had an important role in drama, as it does in *Seven Against Thebes* , but over time its purpose was diminished, and as a result, the chorus became little more than commentary between acts. Modern theater rarely uses a chorus.

Drama

A drama is often defined as any work designed to be presented on the stage. It consists of a story, of actors portraying characters, and of action. But historically, drama can also consist of tragedy, comedy, religious pageant, and spectacle. In modern usage, drama explores serious topics and themes but does not achieve the same level as tragedy. *Seven Against Thebes* is a traditional Greek drama, and as such, provides important lessons for men about their relationship with the gods.

Genre

Genre is a French term that means "kind" or "type." Genre can refer to both the category of literature such as tragedy, comedy, epic, poetry, or pastoral. It can also include modern forms of literature such as drama novels, or short stories. This term can also refer to types of literature such as mystery, science fiction, comedy or romance. *Seven Against Thebes* is a Greek tragedy.

Plot

This term refers to the pattern of events. Generally plots have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, but they may also sometimes be a series of episodes connected together. The plot provides the author with the means to explore primary themes. Students are often confused between the two terms; but themes explore ideas, and plots simply relate what happens in a very obvious manner. Thus the plot of is the battle for Thebes, which results in the deaths of two brothers. But the theme is how fate and destiny and the will of the gods must be fulfilled.

Setting

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The primary location for is the battle for Thebes. The action occurs within the city as Eteocles prepares his city for the impending attack.

Historical Context

Theater was an important part of Greek life, since it illustrated for the audience important lessons about morality and the function of the gods. The time during which Aeschylus was writing was known as the High Classical Period. During this period, the Greek city-states flourished, although war was a constant factor of Greek life. The Persian Wars, which occurred in 490 B.C. (First Persian War) and 480 B.C. (Second Persian War), were a contemporary event in Aeschylus's life, who had fought during the wars himself. The victory of Athens over the invading Persians was an important one, since the Persian force was significantly larger. The Athenian naval victory over the Persians provided the basis of Aeschylus's play, But most theater was based on the ancient myths and the conflicts between man and gods. The theater was considered an important enough feature of Athenian life that the state paid the actor's salaries. Wealthy patrons paid for the other expenses, staging the production and feeding everyone associated with the play. There were government officials to maintain order, but the audience attended because it was a serious civic obligation to attend. Of course, the plays were very entertaining, as was the competition between playwrights, which was also important.

Theater had its beginnings in Athens at religious festivals, which later began to include public competitions in drama. The drama contests were held outside in huge amphitheaters, with the Dionysus competition being held in a theater that seated 17,000 people. In this competition, considered to be the largest and most prestigious, three playwrights were chosen to present a total of twelve plays. The playwrights, actors, and choruses all competed for prizes. Women were involved only as spectators, boys played women's roles and men wrote the plays. Originally, theater began with just choruses that sang hymns or narrative lyrics. Over time, the first actor appeared. He was masked and entered into a dialogue with the chorus. Aeschylus introduced a second actor to the play, and this enabled him to create a more complex plot. The chorus, which consisted of six to twelve young men, wearing long, flowing robes and identical masks, also joined the actors. The two actors wore different masks, and oftentimes, elaborate costumes. They also wore platform shoes that made them taller and more imposing. Costumes were decorated and sometimes revealed the social status or position of the character. The sources for plays were past and sometimes more recent wars, but might also include familiar Homeric epics and stories of how gods treated mankind. Oftentimes, there was an emphasis on the power of gods, as well as their ability to use trickery. Other topics included man's response to fate or the hopelessness of man's dreams in the face of gods' desires. The story of Oedipus and his sons tells of how one mistake with a god can lead to disaster for all subsequent generations.

Plagues and famines were frequent problems for people of the ancient eastern Mediterranean world. These disasters were usually blamed on the gods, since people had no real understanding of how weather patterns functioned or of the earth's geological movement. Early Greeks believed that the gods were responsible for weather disasters, outbreaks of disease, or the occasional volcano erupting, and they believed

these events signaled a punishment from the gods. The Greeks believed in an orderly world, one in which the gods determined their well-being or success. When a significant disaster occurred, these early Greeks looked toward the one thing they could control, their behavior, for answers. In the Oedipus myth, Laius defied the gods. It was appropriate that he was punished, and it was not unusual for this punishment to be extended to all his offspring. Their acceptance of the punishment is seen in Eteocles's acceptance of his forthcoming death. It is determined by the gods as a fit punishment. It does not matter that Eteocles was not even born when his grandfather received the god's curse. The injustice of his death is not even a factor for the audience. This is the way Greek life functioned. Everyone in the audience would be aware of this story cycle, and they would be acutely aware that their own survival depended on pleasing the gods. Eteocles is fulfilling his duty and fulfilling a destiny determined long before his birth.

Critical Overview

Seven Against Thebes depicts the third story in the Oedipus trilogy. The first story in the trilogy tells of the curse that is visited upon Laius, which threatened Thebes if Laius had any offspring. In the second tragedy, Oedipus cannot escape his father's curse, and fulfills it with the murder of his father and marriage to his mother. When Oedipus discovers that he has fulfilled the prophecy, he blinds himself and promises that his sons will have to do battle over his property, thus setting up the actions of the third part of the trilogy, the fight between Eteocles and Polyneices. The story of *Antigone* and of her insistence on following her conscience, which she places before the laws of the state, is also the subject of a tragedy, Sophocles' s *Antigone.*

We do not know how Aeschylus's audience reacted to *Seven Against Thebes*, but we can assume that the reaction was favorable, since he received a first prize for the trilogy, of which it is a part. It is important to remember that Greek drama was not nightly entertainment, but was a part of festivals, which were staged only a few times during the year. Plays were not intended to hold up a mirror to life, but the playwright did hope that his play would touch the audience, forcing them to consider the implications of the behavior depicted on stage. Audiences listened very intently to the actors and the Chorus, even reacting with fear to an actor's persona, costuming, or mask. Tragedy was intended to teach a lesson, reveal a moral truth, or create an emotional response in the audience, such as pity or fear. In a particularly effective tragedy, the play would produce a catharsis of these emotions in the audience. The audience would learn that sometimes these emotions are destructive, and therefore, they would attempt to avoid them in their own lives. In *Seven Against Thebes*, Eteocles teaches the audience that hatred is destructive in its blindness. Eteocles and Polyneices should have united in strength; instead they opposed one another and so both died.

Aeshcylus' s plays are not often produced, since many directors find his works difficult to stage before a modern audience. However, there is still an occasional production, as one would expect, in Greece, such as a recent presentation of *Seven Against Thebes* in Athens in August 1995. Occasionally, productions are attempted elsewhere, as in a 1994 staging at the Macunaima Drama School in Sao Paulo, Brazil. There was also a 1996 staging at the Stagecraft theater in New Zealand. Of the latter production, a review by John Davidson mentions the difficulty in staging Aeschylus. In this performance, the director included a lecture on the mythical background and a staged conversation between Oedipus and Antigone, in which the two discussed their family history. These devices preceded the performance, but Davidson argues that "a straightforward delivery of the essential features of the story would probably have been more useful." Davidson also noted that the Chorus was unequal to the role, lacking emotional force. In spite of the problems of the performance, Davidson credits the actors playing Eteocles and the messenger as particularly effective. One addition that pleased the reviewer was a pageant of Theban champions, whose shields matched the descriptions delivered by the messenger. A too-small theater and uneven acting, according to Davidson, could not diminish the glimpses of the "raw power of Aeschylus." We cannot compare modern productions and the audience's response to how a Greek audience might have

responded to this tragedy. By the time the ancient Greek audience witnessed *Seven Against Thebes*, they had been following this familial tragedy through productions of the first two parts of the tetralogy. Since the first two plays have not survived, a modern audience will never experience these plays in their entirety. Nor is a modern audience as familiar with the myths that lie behind the trilogy. Aeschylus's audience was informed and attentive, with the events on stage having a meaning for the audience that is lacking in a modern audience. Davidson noted in his review that this production of was followed by a staging of The Persians with a production of *Agamemnon* planned the following year. Occasionally an audience is lucky enough to experience Aeschylus's work, and for a few moments, they are transported back to ancient Greece.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
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Critical Essay #1

Metzger has a PhD., and specializes in literature and drama at The University of New Mexico, where she is a Lecturer in the English Department and an Adjunct Professor in the University Honors Program. In the following essay, she discusses Aeschylus's depiction of women, as observed in the interactions between Eteocles and the Chorus in Seven Against Thebes.

A modern audience is at a distinct disadvantage in studying Aeschylus' s *Seven Against Thebes*. This tragedy is the third play in the tetralogy; thus to see or read only the third play is a bit like walking into a film as it nears its completion. The audience is in time for the denouement, the resolution of the plot, but the important information, the reason these events occur, is missing. The first two plays of Aeschylus's series relate the events of Laius' curse, the birth and abandonment of Oedipus, his discovery of his destiny, and his attempts to avoid his fate. Aeschylus's *Laiusand Oedipus* provide the background for the third play, the reasons behind Eteocles' decision to fight his brother, and they help establish why Polyneices would consider attacking his brother, who was also his twin. That missing information may also help illuminate Eteocles' harsh treatment of the Chorus in Seven Against Thebes. In truth, the cold, merciless manner in which Eteocles addresses the Chorus is more a function of his personal family tragedy, than a reflection of the way women were treated in Aeschylus's fifth-century B.C. Athens.

The female Chorus, with their loud laments and cries of fear, represent all women, and women have failed Eteocles. His relationship with his mother, who is also his sister, is enveloped in shame and destruction. Eteocles identifies all women with the woman who betrayed him.

The brief fragments of the first two plays in this trilogy offer little information as to the specifics of their content. The Oedipus narrative, his father, Laius' story, and the tale of the destruction of Eteocles and Polyneices were familiar legends to Aeschylus and to other Greek playwrights. Sophocles also used these legends as source material in his play, but we cannot know exactly what aspects of the legends Aeschylus chose as a focus. There are many different renditions, with slight changes, including different reasons why Oedipus cursed his own sons. It is sometimes reported that the curse resulted from the sons offering their father an inferior cut of meat. This might appear to be an insignificant cause to a twentieth century reader, but hospitality was a serious issue to ancient Greeks, since a traveler's life might depend on the level of hospitality received. Indeed, the initial curse on Laius and his offspring resulted from a violation of the laws regarding hospitality. The curse warned Laius that he should remain childless so that he might save the city of Thebes. But should he have a child, the gods prophesied that the son would murder his father and marry the mother. The son, Oedipus, did, in fact, murder his father, though unknowingly, and he did wed his mother, again unknowingly. As a result of his union with his mother, Jocasta, Oedipus fathers two sons who are destined to destroy one another: Eteocles and Polyneices. This is the story told in the first two plays of Aeschylus's trilogy. As a result of these events, the

relationship with his mother/sister, Jocasta, may lie behind Eteocles' animosity toward the female Chorus.

When *Seven Against Thebes* opens, his past and the family curse are recent events for Eteocles. The play opens with the sounds of battle, and as J. D. Conacher observes in his study of *Aeschylus' s early plays*, *Aeschylus: The Earlier Plays and Related Studies*, these are the sounds of "one of the great 'battle plays' in Western literature." All the battles occur offstage, and yet, their presence is so intrusive that the sounds of the fierce battle fill the stage and theatre with tension. The Chorus is frightened, nearly reduced to hysteria as they imagine the battle drawing closer, the threat more immediate. The cries of the Chorus, the images they create with their pleas to the gods, are intermingled with images of battle. Together, these noises pull the audience into the scene, involving them through sounds almost as realistic as the actual presence of war. Conacher points out that this use of sound and image creates for the audience," something of the terror of the offstage battle preparations." These sounds of the approaching army, according to Conacher, are what most frighten the Chorus. Aeschylus establishes through sound the noise and confusion of battle, and by transporting the audience into the sounds of battle, he passes that fear and tension to the listening spectators. Thus, when Eteocles enters to confront the Chorus, his attack appears even harsher. Eteocles addresses the Chorus as "you stupid creatures," and expresses the hope that "Whether it's hard times or good old happy days, / don't put me in with the women." It is the Chorus that Eteocles addresses as "bossy" and "mindless," and who he accuses of bringing aid to the enemy with their fear. This hysteria is what Eteocles says happens when "a man lives with a woman." He continues with a reminder that war and battles and sacrifices to the gods are the dominion of men, and women ought not to tell men what to do. Conacher mentions that this scene provides great theatre, with the contrast between "the strength and masculinity of the protagonist and the terror of the female Chorus." This is what Conacher labels a "piteous spectacle," which depicts the terror that awaits women in the face of war. The female Chorus has sound reasons for their fright, but Eteocles is unmoved by these images of feminine doom. In fact, Eteocles reacts with particularly fierce brutality to the Chorus' fear.

Of interest in this exchange between Eteocles and the Chorus is the threat of death that he adds to his chastisement to be silent. Anyone who fails to support him will be stoned to death, and Eteocles interprets the Chorus's fear as lack of support or belief in him. In her essay, "Language, Structure, and the Son of Oedipus," Froma L. Zeitlin suggests that Eteocles' ambivalence toward the Chorus is a manifestation of his relationship with his parents, particularly with his mother, Jocasta. Zeitlin first reminds her readers that "the women in the parodos [the ode] speak both for the city and for the family, sanctioning the norm by their appeals to the gods of both genders who hold sway in Thebes." Thus, the Chorus is fulfilling what females in this society are expected to do: voice their concerns for the well-being of the city and pray to their Greek gods for protection. And yet, their fulfillment of this duty compels Eteocles to threaten the Chorus with death. Zeitlin acknowledges that in chastising the Chorus, Eteocles may only be fulfilling his role as king of Thebes, maintaining order and protecting the best interests the population. But Zeitlin also suggests that Eteocles' "misogynistic tirade against all women for all time demonstrates precisely the status of Eteocles as a child of an

incestuous union." As the child of such a union, Eteocles has felt the abhorrence his parent's marriage has produced. The Chorus, too, is aware of the deviation from norms, since their pleas in the play's opening are for protection from the pillaging, and thus the rape and abduction that is too often the fate of women during war. As Zeitlin notes, "war and incest both interrupt the normal exchange of women, one in excessive exogamy, one in excessive endogamy." Consequently, women are deprived of the normal marital relationship they might reasonably expect, and instead, are forced to either mate with their captors or unite within their immediate family or tribe. The Chorus is aware of this risk to their chastity, and since their response to the implied threats of the battle is appropriate, it is worth considering why Eteocles' response to the Chorus' fear, including the threat of death, is so extreme.

During the fifth century B.C., women in Greece enjoyed extraordinary freedoms. According to Thomas R. Martin's study, *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic times*, Athenian women contributed to almost all aspects of Greek society, except in the political forum. Women contributed to their society in several ways, including the bearing of legitimate children, whose parentage was especially important. Greek women earned significant freedoms once they had supplied the desired, legitimate heirs. Women earned respect, Martin says, by obeying society's norms. There was significant pressure on both men and women to ensure that a woman's reputation remained chaste and pure. The events that surrounded Eteocles' birth, when revealed, resulted in a complete breakdown of the accepted social norms. Oedipus, having blinded himself, fled in exile from the city, and Jocasta killed herself. The shame of these events was significant, and not surprisingly, Eteocles reacts in a crisis situation with a condemnation of all women.

The modern audience can never know what Aeschylus had in mind when he provided Eteocles with such a cruel condemnation of all women. Since Greek society valued women and encouraged their role as significant contributing members of society, Eteocles' attack would be out of character for most Greek men. But Eteocles is not any ordinary citizen. He is a victim of his father's curse, his parent's incest, and his mother's shame. The female Chorus, with their loud laments and cries of fear, represent all women, and women have failed Eteocles. His relationship with his mother, who is also his sister, is enveloped in shame and destruction. Eteocles identifies all women with the woman who betrayed him. He will shortly fulfill the prophecy and his destiny; he will die, as will his brother. A rational response to the Chorus' hysteria is, perhaps, not to be expected.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, in an essay for Drama For Students, Gale, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, David H. Porter examines the parallelism of the play, believing that the main movement of the play "finds imitation at virtually every level."

There are many unresolved questions about Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*. Does the play fall into two imperfectly linked sections, the first dealing with the conflict between Thebes and the Argive invaders, the second with the effects of Oedipus' curse on his sons? Does Eteocles act with freedom of choice, or is he merely the unwitting agent of the curse? Does he make his selection of defenders as the play actually unfolds, or has he already made this selection before he appears for the great central scene? What is the precise nature of the curse which Oedipus has cast upon his sons? Is Eteocles' death to be seen as a sacrifice willingly undertaken in order to save the city? Are we to accept as genuine those portions which at the end of the play introduce Antigone and Ismene and the subject of Polyneices' burial? What was the relationship between the *Seven*, originally the final play of a trilogy, and the two plays which preceded it, the *Laius* and the *Oedipus*!

On one matter, however, most critics agree the basic movement of the play. The emphasis in the first half is clearly on the invasion that threatens Thebes a public danger posed by the enemy outside the walls; the emphasis in later scenes is just as clearly on the curse that threatens two individuals a private, family danger, one that grows, as it were, straight out of the soil of Thebes. The movement of the play is thus a movement from the war to the curse, from the collective to the individual, from the external to the internal, the foreign to the native, the public to the private, the *polls* to the *genos.* In the early scenes the chorus' lengthy odes express their hysterical fear over the threat of invasion, sacking, and rape at the hands of the foreign invaders, while in the equally long later odes their fears are for the fate of Eteocles and his family. Their concern at first is over the possibility that they themselves may become victims of war, at the end that Eteocles and his brother may become victims of the curse. One verbal motif, to which I shall return later, aptly sums up this dominant movement of the play as a whole. At the start we hear a great deal about the foreigners who are attacking the city; later, the foreigner repeatedly mentioned is the Chalybian stranger, that mysterious and haunting embodiment of the curse of Oedipus; thus we move from numerous foreigners threatening a whole city to a single Theban-rooted xenos who threatens the royal family.

There are other basic movements in the play, of course, and to one of these we shall return later in this chapter. But the most obvious and deeply ingrained is the progression just identified, a movement which finds imitation at virtually every level of the play within larger and smaller inner components, in the relationships between balancing sections, in imagery and verbal motifs. This ubiquitous parallelism of movement serves many functions in the Seven, as we shall see in the remainder of this chapter, among them, of course, that of contributing to the coherence of a play some have judged lacking in unity.

In what follows I shall analyze the play section by section, first showing how each section as a whole reflects the play's basic movement and then commenting on other reflections within those sections. I divide the play into five major parts [with line numbers referring to the original Greek text]: 1-77 (Eteocles' opening speech and his exchange with the messenger); 78-286 (the *parodos and Eteocles'* dialogue with the chorus); 287-791 (the great central scene, including the balancing odes which enclose the selection scene); 792-821 (the short dialogue between the messenger and the chorus); 822-1004 (the lamentation over the death of the two brothers).

The first major section of the play, 1-77, contains both a clear reflection of the basic movement in the scene as a whole and also several smaller, more subtle imitations within. The focus at the beginning and through most of the scene is on the collective enemy outside the city: note the emphasis on the size of the invading force, on the collective nature of the defense, and on the public nature of the threat (it is the city and the land which are threatened) From this stress on the war, its public nature, and the numerous individuals who will be involved, Aeschylus moves at the end to clear, if not yet emphatic, suggestions of the narrowing of focus that is to come to Eteocles' explicit (and somewhat surprising) mention of his father's curse; to the herald's emphasis on the degree to which Eteocles himself must now take charge...; and to Eteocles' personal acceptance of the responsibility placed upon him.

In passing we should note that in the two early sections (1-77, 78-286) the focus on the public, external menace of war dominates while the theme of the curse and Eteocles' personal involvement sounds only distantly and at the very end of the scenes, whereas in the last sections (792-821, 822-1004) the public issue of the city's safety appears at the start of scenes only to be swiftly overwhelmed by the now-dominant theme of the curse and its impact on Eteocles and Polyneices; in the great central panel (287-791) the two contrasting themes receive equal stress. This gradual shift of emphasis from scene to scene is, of course, yet one more reflection of the overall movement of the play.

As I have mentioned, even within the first section there are hints, albeit slight, of this same larger movement. Eteocles' address to the assembled Cadmeians and his generalizing hostis move rapidly, as will the play, to a focus on his own involvement; his description of the external threat to the city and his commands to the citizens as a group lead to his statement of his own, individual role; the messenger's speech itself moves from description of the invader to injunctions aimed primarily at Eteocles himself; and the messenger's focus on the foreign enemy is answered by Eteocles' emphasis on the native gods and land of Thebes, a movement that foreshadows the play's overall shift of focus from a foreign danger to an indigenous, earth-rooted curse.

The next section, 78-286, similarly contains parallel motion on several levels at once. Again it begins with the public, external threat of a large army. In the *parodos* the women as a group express their collective concern for the land as a whole, stressing the multitude and the foreignness of the invaders (multitude; foreignness) and repeatedly emphasizing the gods' obligation to protect the state. From this emphasis in the parodos on the many, the foreign, and the state, the last lines of the scene move to

Eteocles, the Theban individual who by his own actions will bring the curse upon himself:

I will take six men, myself to make a seventh and go to post them at the city's gates, opponents of the enemy, in gallant style, before quick messengers are on us and their words of haste burn us with urgency.

The scene thus ends, appropriately, with a far more ominous sounding of the "Eteocles theme" than that heard at the conclusion of the first section.

Several features within this elaborate section help foreshadow these final lines with their emphasis on Eteocles. For one thing, with the king's arrival at 181 attention shifts from an external to an internal danger. For just as the play as a whole moves from the threat of foreign war to the threat of the native curse, so this section moves from the danger posed by the foreign invader (in the parodos) to the danger posed by the Theban women.... Furthermore, whereas the women feared for the city, Eteocles perceives the women's hysteria as a threat not only to the city but also to himself, a fact emphasized by the very confrontation here between the many women and the one man. In the scene as a whole the opening section thus focuses on the external danger, the final section on Eteocles' own participation; and the intervening discussion effects a gradual and skillful transition from the many to the one, the foreign to the Theban, the public to the private.

There are again inner parallels as well. The *parodos* creates the illusion of an army that is coming ever closer, an illusion obviously related to the way in which, in the play, the focal danger moves from outside Thebes to within Thebes; and the chorus' cries contain another distant variation on the same theme in the repeated movement from description of foreign invaders to invocation of native divinities. With the central section of the scene we move from the domination of the many (i.e., the women) to the domination of the one (i.e., Eteocles), a shift underscored by the almost precise numerical balance of 181-202 (22 lines), which stress the collective danger posed by the many, with 264-286 (23 lines), which express Eteocles' reestablished dominance. Still smaller components also reflect the same pattern: Eteocles' speech at 181-202 moves from description of the collective threat posed by the women to emphasis on his own necessary dominance, the stichomythia at 245-263 from the women listening to the sound of the enemy to them listening to Eteocles, and Eteocles' final speech from his statement of what the women must do to his statement of what he will do.

As we might expect, the play's great central scene contains the climax not only of the play's action but also, both qualitatively and quantitatively, of its parallelism. Virtually every aspect of this vast scene displays clear reflections of the play's larger movement. On the most obvious level, one so obvious that little need be said about it, there is the movement from the chorus which opens the section to the chorus which closes it, with the former focusing almost exclusively on the collective danger of foreign war, the latter almost exclusively on the threat of the Theban curse to Eteocles and Polyneices (cf., for example, the fear of the army at the start of the first ode, with the fear of the curse at the end of the second)

We may note also that these two contrasting odes exemplify almost perfectly the principles which were our theme in the Introduction: the centrifugal thrust of balanced opposites on the one hand, the centripetal pull of motivic links and parallel structure on the other. For although the two odes point to the two contrasting themes of the play, they are bound together by numerous verbal motifs and by a clear parallelism of structure....

The climax of the relationship between the two odes comes in their final sections .... Both the events and the language in this section of the earlier ode carry strong connotations of Oedipus. Thus *domaton stugeran hodon* is reminiscent of the journey on which Oedipus met and killed Laius, a journey which we know was explicitly mentioned in the previous plays..., and the references to murder similarly recall the parricide; the description of new-born babes crying as they are torn from breasts reminds us of Oedipus' exposure, an event not explicitly mentioned in the ode at 720 f. but one certainly suggested by *ekbolan*, a word used in Euripides of an exposed child and a word which in the Seven corresponds metrically to *Oidipoun* in the antistrophe; the comparison of rapine in the city to the pouring of fruit on the ground not only parallels Oedipus' spewing of his curse on his sons but also reminds us of the frequent fertility language associated with Oedipus and his family. ..; the "bitter eye" of the stewards ... Oedipus' recalls destruction of his own eyes...; the wretched *eunan* of the captive maids recalls the wretched marriage of Oedipus (*athlion gamon*; and the final description of the fate of women captured in war is phrased so ambiguously as to suggest the marriages of both Oedipus and Laius:

elpis esti nukteron telos molein pagklauton algeon epirrothon.

Finally, the lines which begin this whole section of the first ode suggest Oedipus in a remarkable way: Man stands against man with the spear and is killed. Young mothers, blood-boltered, cry bitterly for the babes at their breast.

While the overtones of Oedipus and his family in the ode at 287 f. are fresh in mind, we should note that this ode itself contains yet one more inner reflection of the overall movement of the play. Just as the play moves from the war to the curse, from the danger to Thebes to the danger to the children of Oedipus, so this ode begins with the women's response to the war but moves to a conclusion filled with rich reminiscences of the curse and its effect on Oedipus and his family. Furthermore, the ode's progression from the women's generalized concern for the city to their more specific concern for themselves reflects in microcosm the play's movement from public concerns to private.

The principal function of the ode at 720 f. is to conclude as emphatically as possible the great movement from war (287 f.) to curse (653 f.) which shapes the central scene of the play. If, however, this ode as a whole contains only subtle hints of the play's dominant rhythm, its brief passages about Laius and Oedipus contain clear imitations in that both first focus on the safety of the city, then turn their attention to the family curse.

In the central episode itself, that involving the matching of the seven pairs of antagonists, the overall parallelism to the play's basic movement is again so apparent

as to require little comment. Just as the play as a whole moves from a focus on Thebes' foreign enemies to a focus on a Theban curse, so in the earlier parts of this episode the war and the danger to the state are uppermost in Eteocles' mind, but from 653 on the curse clearly dominates his thinking. .. . This shift of focus is not unprepared: in different ways Parthenopaeus and Amphiaraus, the last two champions before Polyneices and Eteocles themselves, begin to shift the emphasis from the collective to the individual, from the war to the curse, from a foreign threat to a native one, and from the state as a whole to Eteocles in particular.

Parthenopaeus, unlike the previous Argive champions, carries on his shield a distinctively Theban emblem, the Sphinx, an emblem which, moreover, has a special relevance to the curse-laden royal house of Thebes. He is also described in the language of fertility that is usually reserved for the Theban Spartoi and their kings. ... In addition, Parthenopaeus is more fully individualized than are the four previous champions. With him, and with Amphiaraus, we begin to focus less on a collective invasion and more on certain individuals, a movement which will reach its climax in the close-up focus on Eteocles and Polyneices at the end of the scene.

Amphiaraus brings us still closer. Again there is the distinctively Theban agricultural imagery, this time in greater profusion. Furthermore, Eteocles recognizes in Amphiaraus a kindred spirit, and the king's words about him bear an ominous, if hidden, relevance to himself:

In all man does, evil relationships are the worst evil... (tr. Daw son)

Finally, to underline the relationship, Amphiaraus, like Eteocles, is a man fighting a losing battle against a Theban-born curse.

Thus as we move from the threat of foreign invasion to that of the native curse, the foreign invaders begin to take on Theban characteristics, a movement that reaches its destination in the seventh Argive champion, Polyneices, who is not only himself a Theban but also, like Eteocles, the specific target of the curse. At the same time, Eteocles is becoming increasingly involved on a personal as against a merely strategic level, a movement that effectively begins at 282, that accelerates in the responses to Parthenopaeus and Amphiaraus, and that leads ultimately to the impassioned outburst at 653 f. At the end of the central scene, as at the end of the second section of the play, Eteocles is at center stage in dispute with the chorus, the one against the many, his mind focused on a danger that is Theban rather than foreign. This danger now, however, is not the collective danger of the Theban women's hysteria but the personal danger of the Theban curse.

I have already spoken of several of the smaller parallels within parallels that this great central scene contains. Suffice it to add that in the descriptions of the various pairs of opponents at the gates there are still more parallels: the movement within each pair, as within the play as a whole, is from foreign to Theban; and just as Eteocles' public generalship and even his words diabolically recoil upon himself in personal disaster, so,

through Eteocles' verbal manipulations, the public mission and the emblems and words associated with it recoil upon each Argive champion in turn.

For two reasons I shall deal but briefly with the concluding sections of the play. First, the text of these last portions is corrupt and in dispute at so many points that at best one can do no more than suggest their general movement. Second, while these scenes do contain clear reflections of the play's basic rhythm, these reflections do not possess the many-layered complexity found in the earlier sections.

As already mentioned, the dominant theme in these last scenes is that of the curse, just as the dominant theme in early scenes was that of the war. At the beginning of each section there is, however, a clear, if short-lived, recurrence of the war theme. Thus the fourth section (792-821) begins with the messenger's explicit reference to the city's victory in war (792 f.), a theme that soon gives way to his and the chorus' preoccupation with the curse-determined death of the brothers; and the long choral passage beginning at 822 similarly opens its lamentations over the brothers and the curse with a clear glance at the new-found safety of the city (825 f.)

Source: David H. Porter, "The Magnetism of Destruction: Aeschylus' Seven," in Only Connect: Three Studies in Greek Tragedy, University Press of America, 1987, pp. 1-44.

Critical Essay #3

In this essay, Zeitlin discusses autochthony in relation to Eteokles, as well as the structure and identity of his role in the play.

III. Mythos Polis/Genos: Autochthony/Incest

The climax of the drama, after the seventh shield, when the two codes, that of the city and that of the family, diverge, does not constitute a sudden reversal, as many have suggested, a substitution of one set of terms for another, but is rather the culmination of a process which has governed the logic of the text from the beginning. The relations of oppositions and homologies which underlie the text are strained to their limits by the inherent but unnatural contradiction of genos andpolis exemplified in the person of Eteokles who is always both the ruler of Thebes and the son of Oedipus. Thus the text resonates throughout in both registers, each voice dominant now in one part and recessive now in another. At times these voices reply to each other antiphonally; at times, they join in unison. This tension between the two codes is demonstrated on the structural level of plot in the complex relationship between the two major episodes, that with the women of Thebes inside the city and that involving the shields of the men outside. These two scenes are both opposites and doublets of each other. As a confrontation between two opposing attitudes, the first scene is, in fact, a rehearsal of the other; it is also its dynamic mover, since the conflict provokes from Eteokles his promise to include himself as the seventh combatant in the approaching battle.

Limitations of space do not permit the analysis of the role of the women of the chorus who carry the largest burden of the text, with whom and through whom Eteokles activates the doom which awaits him. Here I would point only to the operation of the sexual code, which, through its various inversions, establishes the proper norm for the city. That norm insists upon a dual allegiance to the general collective of the group as exemplified in the unifying myth of autochthony (origin from one, the mother earth) and to the individual family in its exogamous union of male and female (origin from two). The women in the parodos speak both for the city and for the family, sanctioning the norm by the nature of their appeals to the gods of both genders who hold sway in Thebes.

Eteokles, however, invokes only the myth of the autochthonous origin of Thebes. He appeals to this myth on the one hand, as a good general might, to serve the interests of patriotic ideology. For the resort to the myth of birth from the mother earth serves as a reminder of the absolute duty of her hoplite sons to defend their city. On the other hand, autochthony is a dangerously seductive model for Eteokles: first, he is not truly a Spartos, but the son of Jocasta and Oedipus, and hence he is not fully an insider in the city. His identification with the Spartoi therefore implies a potential misrecognition of himself and his own origins. Second, and conversely, since autochthony, like incest, posits a single undifferentiating origin, Eteokles all too easily transposes the pattern from one domain to the other and runs the risk of contaminating the city's myth of solidarity with the negative import of his own story.

For the city, single autochthonous origin is only a point of origin, one which precedes the next stage when different families are founded in Thebes. Ares, as the chorus indicates in the parodos, is the deity who makes this transition possible. For he faces in both directions, first, as the founder of Thebes through his connection with the Sown Men; second, as the consort of Aphrodite with whom he united to engender Harmonia who, in turn, was given to Kadmos. For the chorus, on the other hand, the city has two primordial mothers: Gaia (earth) and Aphrodite *promator*.

Return to the notion of a single origin excludes the circulation of females as signs of exchange who guarantee continuing differentiation within the system. Eteokles, when he attempts to silence the unruly women at the altars and insists upon the rigid antithesis between the sexes, is perhaps performing his proper military role in the interests of group morale and demanding from the women only what the social conventions expected from them. But the addition of his misogynistic tirade against *all* women for *all* time demonstrates precisely the status of Eteokles as child of an incestuous union, who knows only how to repress the "speaking signs" that are essential to the city for its genealogical diversity in favor of a homogeneous commonality ruled by a single principle.

The import of this repression is emphasized when the chorus in the first stasimon evokes the polar opposite of incest/autochthony, namely, the vision of the forcible rape and abduction of the city's women by the alien attackers. This is exogamy in its most negative form as unlawful appropriation of women which accompanies and is homologous with the pillaging of the goods of the city and its homes. When the violence of strife has entered the city, both extremes, that of excessive distance and that of excessive closeness, are correlated in the hidden mantic message of the choral ode. For war and incest both interrupt the normal exchange of women, one in excessive exogamy, one in excessive endogamy.

ENDOGAMY

within the city

autochthony/incest

single origin: same

unlawful appropriation

ENDOGAMY/EXOGAMY

within the city/without the city

orderly exchange

same/other

lawful marriage

EXOGAMY

without the city

rape/abduction

other

unlawful appropriation.

Eteokles' flight from woman, a refusal both of genealogy and generation, substitutes asexual autochthony for hypersexual incest, and replaces the biological mother with the symbolic mother of the collective city. But his antithesis of either/or cannot stand. Polarity is also analogy, for in the language of the Greek city, the woman imitates the earth and the earth imitates the woman. Each term lends to the other the appropriate metaphorical quality by which literal and symbolic stabilize one another in an integrative system of values. An attack upon one is, in truth, equivalent to an attack upon the other. Eteokles' dissociation of the two is paradoxically only the sign of their inherent relationship, since incest is the hidden paradigm of autochthony. The denial of this analogical connection between mother and earth can only encourage a false claim to autonomy; it will therefore establish a system in which reciprocal relations must take the form of antithetical violence, whether with the women inside or the warriors outside.

That analogy is already at work, for the curse of Oedipus was precipitated by the sons' neglect of *trophe*, the nurture they owed in return for their trophe, the same *trophe* owed in the language of autochthony to the mother earth as her Dike. The terms of the father's curse, when fulfilled, will perfect the paradigm, for the sons, as citizens of Thebes, will repeat the violation of *trophe*, this time against the mother earth, by Polyneikes' attack against it and by Eteokles' willingness to pollute the earth with fratricidal blood.

Eteokles' single adherence to *polls* in his appeal to the myth of the city's single origin can and does confirm a positive political ideology *for* the group. But when construed also as a defense *against genos,* Eteokles' appeal also reconnects *genos* to *polls* by invoking now the *negative* paradigmatic force implied by the terms of the origin myth. For when the brothers reenact the crimes of the father against one another for possession now of their father's goods and of his city, they are, at the same time, reenacting the regressive aspect of the city's founding myth, which first led to destruction before it culminated in solidarity. The fratricide of the sons of Oedipus follows the model of the Sown Men, who, springing up in autochthonous birth from the dragon's teeth in the soil of Thebes, slew one another in mutual combat, with the exception of five who survived to establish families in Thebes and to profit from the prestige of their indigenous origins. The city is saved, not for the first time, but for the second, when Laios proves to have died without issue. And the second time proves a repetition of the first time, when Eteokles is enrolled at last among the Spartoi only after his death. Autochthony, in its ambiguities in the political and mythic codes, is therefore the sign that Eteokles will function as the bridge between a defective model of city and a

defective model of family; he will serve as a negative mediator between the two. His is a monocular gaze whose partial vision will betray him in the reading of the signs on the warriors' shields.

IV. Hero: Structure, Sign, and Identity

If we can speak of the power of the family over its offspring as a "genealogical imperative," in the case of the family of Laios we can speak of a negative "genealogical imperative," which now decrees not life but death to its progeny and which regulates the text from its beginning to its end. From this perspective, Eteokles' defensive strategy, one might say, is dedicated both to preserving the integrity of the walls that protect the besieged city of Thebes and to preserving his unique singular identity. The encroachment of "no difference" heralds the fall into plurality with his brother and hence back into genealogy as the son of Oedipus.

On the one hand, Eteokles, who characterizes himself as "one" (*heis),* at the beginning of the play, only to juxtapose the term with/JO/MS ("many"), prophesies more truly than he knows that he alone, as the son of Oedipus, will be separated out from the many, those citizens of Cadmos' city whom he addresses. On the other hand, once the distinction between the two brothers fails, so does the line between singular and plural. Thus Eteokles will quite literally be absorbed into the pluralizing name of fofy-neikes. In other words, he will prove to be singular with regard to his fellow citizens and plural with regard to his brother when the two identities merge.

The potential loss of Eteokles' name carries a double jeopardy. In general terms, a name is the guarantee of identity and of existence, of difference from others in the world at large and at home. Surrendering one's name is a dangerous act, even in the interests of survival, as Odysseus well knows when he reasserts his name at his peril after he names/unnames himself as Outis, "No One," in the cave of the Cyclops. The name also attests to the legitimacy of the father's prerogative to name his progeny and to inscribe the bearer of that name together with his patronymic in the continuing line of the family.

In specific terms, maintaining a stable relation between signifier and signified in the name, Eteokles (truly famed, full of *kleos)*, offers another hope in the face of the shadow of negation that broods over the family. For the alternative to generation as the guarantee of immortality through the continuance of *genos* is the winning of individual *kleos*, of singular heroic renown in battle so as to survive through the memory of tradition on the lips of men. In the economy of praise and blame which structured archaic Greek society, Eteokles (*kleos* x fame x praise) and Polyneikes (*nelkos* x strife x blame) are lexical signs of the opposition itself. This dichotomy opposes positive (presence of praise) to negative (absence of praise), memory to oblivion, clarity to obscurity, the brightness of fame (to be named) to the darkness of ill repute (anonymity); in short, opposes immortality to extinction. But the fulfillment of the curse through fratricidal combat must inevitably defeat Eteokles' claim to moral and personal identity which his name represents and which he had hoped his virtuous allegiance to the city would protect. Instead, the deflection of heroism to fratricidal combat fulfills the hidden, sinister significance of his name, i.e., "truly bewept," or "true cause of weeping" [klaio =

weep, lament]. Thus, as Bacon persuasively argues, Eteokles' own name, like that of his father, functions as a riddle and prophecy of his fate, namely a death without kleos that will be truly bewept. The last stage of the drama will efface his name when both brothers are jointly characterized as Polyneifcm, the plural form of the singular, Poly neikes. The name, /Wyneikes, already contains within itself the notion of plurality ("much," "many"), and the grammatical plural redoubles, as it were, the annulment of Eteokles' name and identity.

Thus, in broadest terms, Eteokles' best defense against the curse of his father and on behalf of his own name is attention to language and control of the discourse. The best defense against the collapse into "no difference" is attention to the maintenance of the binary opposition. And, in thematic terms, as we have seen, the best defense against genos is exclusive adherence to polis.

No other play is as generous and as repetitive in establishing the competing codes and values at work in the system according to the fundamental dichotomies which regulate Greek thought: male/ female, enemy/friend, Greek/barbarian, inside/outside, self/other, man/god; and there is none that specifically elevates the task of making and unmaking binary oppositions to the level of a crucial and explicit action of the drama.

Binary opposition informs both the structure and content of the two major episodes in the play, the first when Eteokles encounters the unruly Theban women of the chorus, and the second, the centerpiece of the drama, the shield scene. There, through seven paired speeches between himself and the scout, Eteokles seven times pairs enemy with defender until the "barrier of the antithesis " that guarantees the opposition begins to break down when brother faces brother at the seventh gate. Polarized difference then yields to doubling homology, as the double progeny of a doubly seeded womb meet in a duel and collapse their single selves into the grammatical category of the dual. The enemy brothers thus act out on the synchronic level of fraternity (i.e., of the same generation) their status as offspring of the diachronic collapse of generational distinction that the two original acts of the father represented, i.e., parricide and incest. The erotic vocabulary of passion (eros) and desire (himeros) used to characterize Eteokles' eagerness to confront his brother in mortal combat, suggests the merger of Eros and Thanatos the conflation of the two transgressions that engendered the two brothers.

The shield scene, located strategically at the midpoint of the drama, acts as a model system that condenses, climaxes, and hypostasizes the problems of structure and language that inform the play from the beginning when war establishes the legitimacy of the polar opposition, and Eteokles, as the ruler of Thebes, determines to speak the proper words (legeln ta kalrld). Throughout, the privileged field of combat is the semantic field. The speech act is truly performative.

Semiotics, the study of the system of signs and how they communicate, can provide a hermeneutical tool for analyzing the synergetic system of relations that comprises Aeschylus' distinctive world view. In Aeschylean drama, nothing can come into existence before its name has been uttered. Concept is fully embedded in image, and figure is inseparable from idea. Conflict in the Seven is literally war, while the antithesis

is a pairing of opponents with antithetical names. Homology is the identity of kin (homolos/homalmori), the oxymoron is the enemy brother. Molra as fate is literally molra as portion, since the destiny of the brothers is the apportioning of the father's patrimony, and the equal molra of death will prove to be the equal molra of land for their interment. Above all, the shield devices, semata, are signs, iconic emblems, that speak and move within a system that is not only tactical (military), but syntactical (linguistic). Language is therefore action and action is language through which the "genealogical imperative" of the accursed family at last asserts itself. Eteokles will create a text which claims linguistic competence in the "langue," i.e., the public language of civic values, which will insure the victory of Thebes over Argos, but through which his own "parole" will "speak itself," the language upon which his personal identity rests, and which once discovered in wits signification, will constitute the language of curse and oracle.

Here then in the shield scene is a coded demonstration of the science of signs and how they operate within the social system in regard to the special status of tragic language in its necessary and intrinsic ambiguity. This demonstration, in turn, raises the more general question of language as a means of communication and as a guarantee of identity and truth. Literature has been defined as "a language, but a language around which we have drawn a frame" by which we "indicate a decision to regard with a particular self-consciousness the resources language has always possessed." From this formalist point of view, the language of the shield scene is doubly marked: first, by the artful frame of formal design which characterizes the scene within the larger structure of the literary text of the play, and second, by reason of its explicit oracular activity.

Oracles, by their nature and the mode of their operation, inevitably direct attention to the problematics of language and reality and point to the potential slippage in the sign between signifier and signified. Once personal identity becomes equivalent to the proper name and once oracle and riddle, as forms of speech, translate the problems of personal identity into those of the linguistic sign, the decipherment of language claims first priority as the hermeneutic way into those fundamental human issues which the dilemma of Oedipus (or his progeny) best represents. In a semiotic perspective, the case of Eteokles to an even greater extent than that of Oedipus, exemplifies the "power of the signifier to be both instrument of power and through the deception inherent in it, a cause of misfortune" and destruction. What then are the rules of the semiotic game? How and why do they function as they do?

Source: Froma I. Zeitlin, "Language, Structure, and the Son of Oedipus," in Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus' "Seven against Thebes," Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1982, pp. 13-52.

Critical Essay #4

Thalman looks at several facets of the city in Seven Against Thebes and regards the brothers' relationship as a microcosm of the city.

The Theme of Blood

One other persistent theme of the play ought to be mentioned here: the theme of blood. It is closely related to that of the family, though it is more relevant to the brothers themselves than to the city. Most of the occurrences of this theme have been noted in the preceding pages, but its development should be sketched. At first, blood is a feature of the war generally. The Argive Seven plunge their hands into a bull's blood and vow either to sack the city or to spill their own blood. Blood is prominent in the destruction of the city contemplated by the chorus in the first stasimon. During the shield scene the chorus fear that they will see the "bloody fates" of their *[philoi/friends or allies*]. They have, of course, general slaughter in mind, but that is just what they will see in the case of Eteocles and Polynices. The transition of this theme from the city to the brothers comes when the chorus urge Eteocles not to go to the seventh gate: This is a mark of how the scope of the war has shrunk; Thebes' involvement in the conflict is no longer the central concern, even though Polynices prays as a Theban. The incongruity of his invocation of the city's gods when he is the aggressor only draws attention to the fact that the actual issue is between the two brothers.

[But it is enough for Argives that Cadmeian men come to blows, for that blood is cleansing.]

Whatever the exact meaning of the last phrase, there is a clear contrast between the *haima/*blood\ of 680 and the blood shed in fratricide, for the chorus continue:

[But the death of two men of the same blood in this way is by their own hand, there no old age for this pollution.]

This kind of bloodshed is unlawful. There follow, later on, the references to the "bloody root" which grew from Oedipus's sowing and to the brothers' blood spilled and mingled on the ground. Blood is common to the members of a family: they are *homaimoi/of the same blood*. But in the blood of this family runs a curse. If the *Laius* contained a description of Oedipus tasting his father's blood, then this theme may have run through the whole trilogy.

The Gods

The city's ties with the land are important, but its relations with its gods are basic to its existence. In this case too, Aeschylus presents a picture of a normal pattern of life, from which the ruling family is excluded and which it threatens to overturn. Eteocles invokes this relationship in urging the citizens to defend the altars of their gods....

The gods are "native"; the implication is that Thebes has a special claim on their protection. The chorus therefore beg them for help in the parodos and first stasimon. One of the pairs of gods to whom the chorus appeal in lines 109-50 [in the Greek text] is especially "native," Ares and Aphrodite, parents of Harmonia and so the divine ancestors of the Theban race. Thus the chorus summons up the whole mythical past of the city as a basis for their prayers.

What binds the gods to the city and the city to the gods is a systematic interchange between them. This is clearly expressed by Eteocles at the end of his prayer in the prologue:

[But be our strength. I expect that I speak about the common good. For a city that fares well honors its divinities.]

This has sometimes been understood as a mark of Eteocles' cynicism in religious matters. But such a view ignores the fact that the chorus end their own pleas in the parodos by reminding the gods of sacrifices received from the city. Similarly, in the first stasimon, they claim that the gods could not depart to a better land than Thebes and promise them future honors in return for their aid. Sacrifices matter to the gods; the idea is at least as old as Homer. In the Iliad, Zeus grants Troy's destruction to Hera only reluctantly. The Trojans are dear to him, he says, for they have never failed to honor him by sacrifice. In the Seven this relation, systematized by ritual, is yet another sign of the "norm" which the war threatens to disrupt. The gory sacrifices performed by the Argives express a distorted version of this norm. Their gods are Eres, nyo, and Phobos. Moreover, Parthenopaeus reveres his spear more than a god; and, of course, the Argives' boasts, detailed in the shield scene, are hybristic.

Is Eteocles in any way impious? Golden, for example, considers his religious outlook "highly pragmatic. ... He is able to manipulate all of the doctrines of the conventional religion to suit his purposes and will." Certainly his relations with the gods are uneasy, but the case does not appear that simple. His words early in the play seem to indicate that passive trust in the gods is not enough to meet the present situation; military steps are also necessary. At the same time, Eteocles recognizes the limits of human endeavors, conceding that the final outcome will be decided by the gods. Yet the first episode, in its total effect, does tend to isolate Eteocles from the usual relationship between men and gods. As in the case of the earth, he apparently understands its value, but something prevents him from engaging in it fully. That can only be the curse. Rather than insist on a characterization of Eteocles, however, we ought perhaps to consider themes in the play which are associated with the gods.

The ambiguity of Eteocles' position is clearly brought out in the repetition of the word [telein/to complete or accomplish]. Like [krainein], it is a favorite word with Aeschylus and is always significant when he employs it in reference to the gods, particularly to Zeus. In the Seven, it is first used in the prologue, when Eteocles encourages the Thebans. From there, it can be traced through the chorus's fearful doubts, prompted by the war, in the parodos to a similar outburst of fright in the second stasimon; but here they fear that the Erinys will "accomplish" the curses of Oedipus. Finally, after news of

the battle, the chorus lament the completion of the curse. In this respect as in others, the play moves from the general to the specific, as the conclusion to be feared becomes no longer that of the war (for the gods do protect the city) but that of the curse which ruins the house.

A more direct statement of Eteocles' situation with regard to the gods is given in his prayer in lines 69 ff. There he appeals not only to Zeus, Earth, and the gods of the city, but also to the curse and his father's Erinys. This is in accord with his double role as political leader and accursed individual, and at this point in the play both aspects seem fused. But then he asks, "do not uproot the city at least... ."Is a distinction being made here between Eteocles and the city? Perhaps, instead, a distinction is being blurred, which only later becomes prominent. The curse at this point is threatening the whole city; private and civic are identified, and that may be why the curse is asked, along with the other gods, not to destroy the city. In the last pair of speeches in the shield scene, when it is becoming evident that the real conflict is the personal quarrel, a prayer of Polynices is reported, which forms an important contrast to Eteocles' earlier one....

Polynices calls upon the native gods of Thebes, much as Eteocles does. That is probably intended as a mark of piety; but the phrase [theous genethlious ... patroias ges] inevitably evokes the curse and the Erinys, the family's own divinities. Thus Polynices implicitly juxtaposes civic and individual gods as Eteocles did explicitly; but he does so to plead his case against his brother, not (like Eteocles) in the city's behalf. This is a mark of how the scope of the war has shrunk; Thebes' involvement in the conflict is no longer the central concern, even though Polynices prays as a Theban. The incongruity of his invocation of the city's gods when he is the aggressor only draws attention to the fact that the actual issue is between the two brothers. Thus Polynices' prayer seems to balance and shed light on the earlier one of Eteocles.

It is right at the break in the play, when Eteocles has learned who his opponent at the seventh gate will be, that the family's alienation from the gods becomes explicit, and the reason is the curse....

In the scene which follows, the chorus suggest to Eteocles that the curse can be appeased with sacrifice. Wilamowitz dismisses this idea as "die Gesinnung des Ablasskramers." But sacrifice is the expression of the city's relations with the gods, and on it they have based their prayers for safety. Eteocles rejects this course, however; the entire family is so deeply enmeshed in the curse that there is no way out. The gods, he has said, leave a captured city. Though they will not depart from Thebes, they have abandoned his family:

[We have already been abandoned by the gods somehow, and the boon from us perishing is admired, why then would we still fawn upon a destructive destiny.]

This is the rhetoric of desperation; the only favor the gods will accept from the family is its obliteration. The contrast with the city is sharply drawn.

If the city has its particular gods, so does the family. Apart from the Erinys, there are two gods with whom the family has a special relationship, and it is a vexed one. First there is Apollo. In line 691, the race of Laius is said to be "hated by Phoebus." As argued above, this is not because of Apollo's spite against Laius. In this line, [*stygethen/ hated thing}* recalls [*mega stygos/great hatred or abomination}* of line 653. The cursed family is hateful to all the gods, and to Apollo in particular; the nature of its fate is alien to his worship. In addition, he watches over the fulfillment of his oracle. His prophecies will bear fruit, not only in the case of Amphiaraus, but in regard to this family as well. The fatal battle takes place at the seventh gate under Apollo's supervision, and the number is appropriate, as line 800 indicates, for it is specially associated with the god. The Medicean scholiast explains that Apollo was born on the seventh day of the month. In fact, by Aeschylus's time consultations at Delphi took place regularly on the seventh of each month of the oracle's operation, to commemorate that event.

The other god whose position in the *Seven* is ambiguous is, of course, Ares. In terms of the war itself he has a double aspect. On the one hand he is the terrifying spirit of battle, throwing everything into confusion, the embodiment of imbalance and the particular deity of the Argives. They swear their oath by him. His blast drives the wave of Argives against Thebes. Hippomedon, like a Bacchant, is *[entheos Arei/possessed by Ares}*. And when a city is sacked, it is Ares who "pollutes reverence." On the other hand, he is the ancestor of the Thebans, *[palaichthon/ancient inhabitant*} who once loved the city well and to whom the chorus particularly appeal. It is symptomatic that these two facets of the god appear side by side in the parodos. To the Argives' Ares the city opposes its own special deity.

But Ares also appears in a third guise. In regard to the family, he is neither external threat nor beneficent ancestor, but the personification of internal division literal division, for he is the arbiter of the brothers' dispute. The *Seven*, then, is a "drama full of Ares" in several senses, and Benardete only slightly exaggerates when he says that "*the* question" of the play is "*Ti estin Ares?/what is Ares*?)"

The importance of Ares furnishes an example of how the various themes in the *Seven* are related to each other. In this case, the theme of the gods and the nautical imagery overlap. Early in the play, Ares is the source of the wind which hurls the wave of the enemy upon the city. Later, the wind which sweeps away the vessel of the family is its daimon or Oedipus's imprecations. Thus nautical language is applied to the family just as its true relations with the gods are made explicit. Ares himself disappears as the cause of the wind (that is, as the deity of warfare in general), but later reappears in a more specific capacity as the arbiter between the brothers. A third image, that of the lot, is thus brought into alignment with the other two.

Language of Debt and Commerce

The reciprocal relationship with its gods is one facet of the city's balanced life. It has a similar relationship with the earth. The latter is expressed at the beginning of the *Seven* in terms of a debt. The earth, says Eteocles, brought up the Thebans: *\pisto th' hopos genoisthe pros chreos tode/And that you be faithful in regard to this debt}*. Here

commercial language is an expression of the city's way of life; but it comes to have a more specific application to the fate of the brothers.

It is used in the shield scene in connection with the war. The Theban champions are called "guarantors of a debt" *(\pherenguoi})* who "stand before" the city to protect it. They are faithful to the obligation expressed in the prologue. Parthenopaeus, by contrast, is repaying his own debt of nurture to Argos and is no petty retailer of war.

Eteocles turns the boasts of Tydeus and Capaneus to advantage: [*Kai Twide Kerdei Kerdos allo Tik Tetal*/and another profit is born to the profit for this man}. This line evidently means that in Capaneus's case ([Kai Twide]) new profit (*[Kerdos allo*] Capaneus's arrogance, which will anger Zeus) is being added; with interest to the profit already in hand ([*kerdei*] Tydeus's boasts, which will be self-destructive). Eteocles is triumphant. The situation is different when he follows his exclamations over the fate of his family with the words:

[But it is fitting neither to weep nor to wail, lest a lamentation more difficult to bear be born.]

There is no longer any question of profit, but of interest accruing in the form of a still more serious cause for lamentation as in fact happens with his own and Polynices' deaths. In the subsequent exchange with the chorus, however, Eteocles does mention gain, and his language stands the whole notion of profit on its head. The curse sits near him: [*legousa kerdos proteron hysterou merou/saying profit [is] earlier than later doom]*. Winnington-Ingram plausibly suggests that [Kerdos] here should be connected with the same word in line 684 ([*monon gar Kerdos en tethnekosi/for there is only profit among the dead*], and that both refer to killing Polynices. "Kill him and then die" it is a ghastly reciprocity.

The only gain the brothers can expect, then, is each other's murder, for as members of Laius's family they have been under an obligation to the curse. The development of commercial language culminates when, after the death of the brothers, the chorus observe that Oedipus's curse has exacted payment of the debt owed it, and the influence of Laius's transgression is felt in the background:

[The votive speech from his father has exacted vengeance and has not failed; the disobedient plans of Laius have endured.]

The curse is the creditor, to whom the brothers' destruction has been due. It has shaped events, and any hope for gain on their part has been illusory.

But what of the city? Its guarantors have discharged their function faithfully, and it has not been ruined. When he announces Thebes' victory, the messenger's repetition of the commercial language associated with the champions contrasts sharply with the application of such language to the brothers' fate:

[And the tower protects, and we have fortified the gates with champions, giving their pledge and fighting in single hand-to-hand combat.]

Themes Associated with the War

The themes used to characterize the war can be treated more summarily. As the scope of the war narrows, they gradually focus on the brothers and on the final result of the play. But at first they are associated with the Argive army and with the reaction its attack provokes in the city.

From start to finish, the Seven is pervaded by discordant and terrible noise. There is, first, the sound of the Argives as they advance the clatter of their weapons, for example *([ktypos*], or the neighing of their horses. Eteoclus shouts ([boai]) his boast, silently but unmistakably, in the letters on his shield (line 468). Between the two extremes that these examples represent lie many other harsh noises which issue from the Argives and create an impression of terrifying force. There is a corresponding confusion within the city, and the sounds of the maidens' panic answer those made by the enemy. Their first word in the parodos is [*threumai*/I cry aloud], and the dochmiacs there provide a fitting and impressive medium for their cries of terror. These shrieks are, without question, dangerous to the city. But it is interesting too that the sounds both outside and within the city combine to give a total picture of the confusion wrought by war. Then, when the conflict narrows to the fight between the brothers, the sounds of war give way to those of lamentation.

Perhaps the following pair of passages illustrates this best. The city, threatened by the enemy, groans from its roots in the earth. . . . But after the brothers' mutual murder, the city, the towers, and the plain groan again now not in confusion or terror, but in sorrow. . . .

Similarly, the chorus's *[oxugooi litai/shrill-wailing prayers*] to the gods are replaced by the [*gooi/wailings*] of grief at the end.

In this play, Aeschylus often represents the sounds in terms of music. Haldane describes well his general use of this imagery:

Thus Aeschylus found in the various types of music and song practised in his day a convenient set of symbols, the significance of which would be immediately apparent to his audience. Around each clustered associations of occasion, atmosphere, and emotion which could be counted upon to awaken a definite, predetermined response. With skillful manipulation such images could be used to focus a climax, to highlight a moment of conflict or irony or, linked together from scene to scene, to underline the pattern of a drama.

This is certainly what he does in the *Seven.* The Argives have on their horses and chariots noise-making devices which produce a grotesque distortion of music and which are themselves described as musical instruments. The chorus's songs are anything but harmonious.... Eteocles tries to induce them to sing the paean instead, the auspicious song chanted by Greek custom before a battle. But just as his own well-omened words in the shield scene issue in the fulfillment of the curse, so in the end music is again

distorted. The chorus sing a lament over the brothers, and the curse raises its own shrill song of victory.

Related to the music is a strain of Dionysiac language in the play. The chorus depict their dirge in lines 835-39 as a Dionysiac song; it is actually an inversion of that cheerful music. Earlier in the play there are also traces of the Dionysiac. Hippomedon revels like a Bacchant, but he is inspired with Ares. Similarly, the chorus describe the noise of the Argives in words that are appropriate to Dionysus. [*Bremein/to roar*] and [*bromos/roaring*] occur several times. One of the titles of Dionysus was *Bromios.* They speak of the [o *tobos/din*] of the Argive chariots; the word is not inappropriate to the music of a flute. There is also a suggestion in line 214 that the chorus are like maenads ...; what goads them, however, is not ecstasy but terror.

This language is part of the more comprehensive theme of madness. The latter is used in the play to link all the stages of the family curse. It has been remarked already that Laius's error was due to ate resulting from the curse. Oedipus in turn was in a rage when he cursed Eteocles and Polynices; he was [*blapsiphron/deranged*], and he uttered the curse *[mainomenai kradiai/with maddened heart*]. In the third generation the curse has brought on the war; the Argives boast [*mainomenai phreni/with maddened mind*]. And in the ending of the quarrel, the brothers kill one another [*eridi mainomenai/in maddened strife*]. Eteocles refers to the letters on Polynices' shield with scornful alliteration . . .: And he describes his brother as a [*phos pantolmosphrenas/ a man all-daring in his wits*]. The chorus term his own determination to fight Polynices an irrational desire, a product of hate. It is, therefore, no accident that the iron which is to be the arbiter between the brothers is called *[homophron/savage-minded*]. The madness of war is but an external sign of a mental imbalance within this family which has infected the whole city. Finally, in the parodos the "spear-shaken *aether*" rages with the violence of war ..., but at the end of the play the chorus's hearts rave with grief.. . . This contrast marks the shift from general warfare to the curse's particular result.

Divination and Prophecy

The outcome of the war cannot be foreseen. But from the beginning of the play there is what seems to be an effort either to predict or to shape its course. Various forms of divination, for example, are mentioned. In the prologue there is the seer with his ornithomancy, who has informed Eteocles that the Argives are planning an attack. There is a sort of retrospective oneiromancy, as Eteocles realizes, in the light of his new situation, the truth of some dreams he has had. The mention of Ares' dice may be a reference to cleromancy; as will be argued in the next chapter, the lot plays an important role in the Seven.

Finally, cledonomancy, the gathering of omens from chance utterances, is prominent, especially in the shield scene. Words in the play are effective, as Cameron says, "in the need for silence at solemn moments so as to avoid ill-omened chance utterance, in the manipulation of chance utterances to the advantage of the one who accepts them, in cursing, and in the invocation or acceptance of the omen implicit in a name." Names are particularly important. There is a consistent feeling that a name ought to reveal

something about its bearer. This is a common Greek belief. But against this background there is special point when Amphiaraus emphasizes the component parts of the name Polynices, or when the chorus play on the names of both brothers....

Divination and attention to words are not, however, the only means in the play of straining toward *the* future. At several points, alternatives are posed which give what seem in each case the likely results of the action. These shift somewhat and become more specific as possibilities are gradually eliminated and the play moves toward *the* final outcome. Eteocles utters the first pair of choices in the prologue. Both of these possibilities come true in the end, though neither is an accurate forecast in itself. The outcome is really a third possibility not contemplated at the beginning of the play. Thebes *does* fare well, and at the same time Eteocles *is* "hymned" in mourning.

The Argives are more accurate when they vow either to sack the city or to spill their blood. The latter is what happens. Similarly, the second term of Eteocles' prediction in lines 477-79 is fulfilled in the event. Both of these examples refer to the war, and Thebes' survival can be in no serious doubt after the fourth pair of speeches in the shield scene. But as the play moves to its climax and the focus shifts to the brothers, Polynices utters his own oath:

[[He asks in prayer] to be brought together with you and in slaying you to die nearby, or if you live (you who drive one from his home and are in this way a dishonorer), to pay you back in the same manner with banishment.]

This is devastating accuracy. The natural alternatives would be "to drive you out or die in the attempt." Polynices, it seems, has slipped into a way of speaking which will turn out to have been prophetic.

The concern throughout the play with divining the future culminates in line 808, where the chorus, anticipating the news they are about to hear, exclaim, [*mantis eimi ton kakon*/I am a prophet of evil things}. Thus prophecy has focused on the specific horror of the result. Similarly, the Erinys of Oedipus has a particular kind of foresight, for a little earlier she was called [*kakomantis/prophesying evil}*. Like Apollo's oracle, the Erinys possesses her own logic, which is unimpeachable, though most easily followed in hindsight. Her inexorable procedure according to this logic is reflected in the imagery of allotment, which will be examined next.

Source: William G. Thalmann, "Imagery I: The City," in Dramatic An in Aeschylus's "Seven against Thebes," Yale University Press, 1978, pp. 31-61.

Critical Essay #5

Hecht and Bacon provide a brief history and summary of the play and the characters in this essay.

I

With some important exceptions, scholars and translators, from the nineteenth century onwards, have been virtually at one in their indifference to *Seven Against Thebes;* an indifference which has been deflected from time to time only into overt hostility and contempt. The play has been accused of being static, undramatic, ritualistic, guilty of an interpolated and debased text, archaic, and, in a word, boring. The present translators find themselves in profound disagreement with such assessments, and cherish a slight hope that the translation offered here which is also an interpretation, as any translation must be will help restore to the play some of the dramatic and literary interest it deserves to have even for those with no knowledge of Greek.

This translation has aimed at literal accuracy insofar as that was possible within the limitations of our own imaginations and understanding; our English text departs from the original mainly through that sort of extrapolation we have thought useful to a modern audience not likely to be acquainted with all the minor Greek deities, for example, or with their ritual attributes. Thus, where Phobos alone will do in the original, here he is identified as the god of fear. This kind of expansion, as well as complete independence from the Greek of the English lineation, has made our text some three hundred lines longer than the original. But we are confident as confident as our scruples and a certain fitting modesty will allow us to be that in this we have not violated the tone or dramatic intention of the play. A scholarly defense of such liberties as we may be thought to have taken will appear, as it ought to, elsewhere.

Still, it must be admitted that even to the most sympathetic of readers Seven Against Thebes suffers under a special handicap. It is the last play of a trilogy of which the first two plays have been lost. It is, of course, impossible accurately to reconstruct the enormous dramatic and linguistic forces that must have been contrived and set in motion to culminate in this play; but one may perhaps guess at the magnitude of the loss if one were to think of the *Oresteia* as surviving only in the text of the *Eumenides.* We do know the names of the first two plays of this trilogy: *Laios and Oedipus.* And what we know of the ancient legends and sagas of the Curse of the house of Laios, of the traditional lore concerning the founding of Thebes by Kadmos, and of the subsequent history of the city, may provide us with some of the background with which Aeschylus approached this final drama in the series.

II

Like the "history" of the Trojan War, Theban "history" was preserved in epic poems, now lost, but almost as familiar to fifth-century Athenians as the I*liad and Odyssey.* Aeschylus could count on his audience knowing not only his specific shaping of the

stories of Laios and Oedipus in the two earlier plays, but also the broad outlines of the whole story of Thebes as preserved in the poetic tradition. It is a story of violence and wrath from beginning to end.

Kadmos, the founder of the city and the royal house, came from Tyre seeking his sister Europa. He killed a dragon that guarded a spring at what would become the site of Thebes and, at Athena's direction, sowed the dragon's teeth in earth. The teeth sprouted as a crop of armed men who, when Kadmos pelted them with stones, began to murder each other. The five survivors of this fratricidal battle, the so-called "sown men" (Spartoi), were the ancestors of the people of Thebes. The lost epics went on to tell the stories of Laios and his descendants, but did not end, as the trilogy does, with the defeat of the Argive army, the death in battle of the army's leaders, and the fratricide of the sons of Oedipus. They pursued a narrative that took up the story again ten years later when, just before the Trojan War, the sons of the leaders of the Argives returned for their revenge at the head of another Argive army, and completely destroyed Thebes. This sack of Thebes by the Epigonoi, as the sons of the seven Argive captains were called, was one of the most firmly fixed elements of the tradition: among the famous cities of Greece, only Thebes is missing from the catalogue of the ships in the Iliad. Aeschylus' audience could not fail to associate the many hints of future disaster for Thebes appearing throughout this play with the total destruction of that city by the sons of the "Seven."

The principal mythological figures of *Seven Against Thebes,* Ares, the Fury, the Curse (also referred to in the plural as Curses, perhaps suggesting the separate words of the imprecation), Dike, and Apollo, interact in a context taken for granted by Aeschylus' audience, but which for us perhaps requires some explanation. Ares, the Fury, and the personified Curse of the house of Laios (the Curse of which Laios and Oedipus were the victims and which in turn Oedipus laid upon his two sons) represent the forces which are let loose when Dike, the personification of the fundamental principle of right and order, is violated. The trilogy dramatized a chain of outrages (outlined in this play in the third choral song, . . . the Fury chorus) starting with Laios' defiance of Apollo's word which said that if Laios refrained from begetting offspring the city would be safe. The traditional reason for this prohibition was that Laios had kidnaped, violated, and murdered the little son of his host and friend, Pelops. For this violation of the sacred tie of hospitality, childlessness was a fitting punishment. Like the banquet of Thyestes in *Agamemnon*, this, or a similar outrage, was probably the crime behind the crimes in Laios. To these acts of violence, Laios added the attempt to destroy his own son, Oedipus, the child of forbidden intercourse. And violence begets violence. Oedipus killed his father and married his mother; his sons, by an act of outrage against him (we do not know which of several versions of their crime Aeschylus used in *Oedipus*), provoked their father's Curse, and they then attempted to take possession of their mother city by violence (Aeschylus in the lament makes plain that Eteokles too has used force on Thebes) and ended by murdering each other. Dike represents the sanctity of the basic relationships between god and man, host and guest, parent and child, brother and brother, relationships which Laios and his descendants defied. When these are violated Dike is violated.

The Fury, wrath (her Greek name Erinys is derived from eris, wrath or strife), and *Ares*, violence and hostility, are the instruments with which Zeus comes to the defense of Dike, but they are in turn the cause of new outrages in an apparently endless sequence. The Curse is another expression of the same psychological fact. It is the prayer of a victim, which is implemented by Ares and the Fury in their capacity as enforcers of Dike. Where this complex of forces occurs Delphic Apollo will always be found as well, in his role as restorer of harmony and health, the purifier from all kinds of contagion. Only when the miasma of violated Dike has been cleansed away does the Fury cease raging and become the gentle cherisher that she is at the end of the *Oresteia*. Though in *Seven Against Thebes* she appears only as a destroyer, it should not be forgotten that she destroys in defense of the helpless and in order that life and the social order that sustains life shall be cherished. Her contradictoriness is the contradictoriness of woman the tender mother ready to kill in defense of those she cherishes. Several images and figures in this play express this enigmatic quality of the female the moon, Hekate, Artemis, the land of Thebes, the Sphinx. . . .

An Athenian audience would also have recognized the parallels in *Seven Against Thebes* with their own recent history, and responded to them with a special set of feelings and values. The return of an exiled ruler to claim his rights with the support of a foreign army, a not infrequent occurrence in Greece, was regarded with the same kind of religious horror as was felt toward attacks on parents. *Seven Against Thebes* was produced in 467 B.C. Twenty-three years earlier, in 490 B.C., Hippias, the exiled son of the tyrant, Peisistratos, and himself a former tyrant, landed at Marathon with the Persian army, prepared to be reinstated as ruler of the Athenians. According to Herodotos, whose account is later than our play and could even have been influenced by it, the night before the landing Hippias dreamed that he slept with his mother. At first he interpreted this hopefully, as a sign that he would pass his old age peacefully in Athens. However, when he landed there was another portent. He was seized with a fit of sneezing and coughing, and, being an old man, coughed out one of his teeth, which fell upon his native soil and could not be found again. He then said, "This land is not ours and we will not be able to conquer it. My tooth has my whole share of it." Herodotos adds that this statement was Hippias' interpretation of the dream. In this story, as in *Seven Against Thebes* , the attack on the parent land is equated with incest, and its consequence is that the attacker receives only a token share of his native soil. Hippias received as much Attic earth as his tooth possessed, Eteokles and Polyneices each as much Theban earth as it takes to bury a man. Whether this story of Hippias is older than Aeschylus' play, or came into being as a result of it, its existence suggests that the Athenians would have understood the play in the light of their own great national crisis. It also suggests that parallels between the crimes of Oedipus and those of his sons would have been more immediately obvious to the Athenians than they are to a modern audience.

III

The action of *Seven Against Thebes* we conceive to be profoundly unified and profoundly dramatic. It unfolds in four stages, of which the Fury is the organizing principle. In the first stage the Fury is set in motion when Eteokles calls on her in

conjunction with his father's Curse, to defend the city which is being attacked by one of her own children. In his prayer Eteokles seems clearly to assume that if any violation against Dike has been or is being committed it is by his brother, Polyneices; he seems to have forgotten or blocked out of his mind the earlier crimes performed jointly with his brother that brought down on both their heads their father's Curse; and seems as well to have forgotten that his exiled brother has as much right as he to be king in Thebes. In the second stage the Fury comes to the defense of Dike by implementing the Curse. She rages unchecked as Eteokles decides to meet his brother in single combat. In the third stage, Dike is temporarily re-established and the Fury seems to subside. The inheritance is justly divided when the brothers, in death, are apportioned their equal shares of Theban earth. The plays ends with a new outbreak of the Fury as the magistrates of Thebes reopen the conflict by refusing burial to Polyneices refusing him, that is, his just share of the inheritance and in so doing once more implicate the city in the fate of the house of Laios, edging Thebes and her entire population one step nearer to their ultimate destruction at the hands of the Epigonoi.

Modern scholars, with a few notable exceptions, regard this last scene, which dramatizes the final stage, as a fourth-century interpolation whose purpose is to bring the play into line with the popular Sophoclean version of the aftermath of the brothers' deaths. They see no justification for introducing a new speaking role in the person of Antigone, who raises what they consider to be a problem new to this play and wholly outside the dramatic unity of its action: the problem of the burial of Polyneices, after the conflict of the brothers has been resolved. Yet the scene is integrated with the entire design of the play; and to an audience familiar with the Theban epics, the second song of the Chorus, which visualizes the sack of the city, is not an unfulfilled fear but a prophecy of her ultimate fate. And that prophecy is brought nearer to its consummation in this final scene when the city brings upon herself the promise of total annihilation by repeating Eteokles' repudiation of Dike. The scale of the tragedy is enlarged, pity and fear intensified by this fresh outbreak of the Fury. It is not a new problem but a new stage and development of the old problem: how to allay the wrath let loose in Thebes by the chain of outrages stemming from Laios' original violation of Dike. It is a wrath that spreads from the individual members of the house of Laios until it includes, first, the magistrates of Thebes rising up to deny Polyneices his inheritance, and ultimately all the inhabitants of the city that is to be brought to destruction; a wrath that promises a countering wrath, a continued struggle to an exhausted and demolishing end.

IV

The language of *Seven Against Thebes* is markedly concerned with noise, and with two kinds of noise in particular: the noise of battle and the noise of lamentation, that is, of strife and of weeping. At the start of the play, the noise of battle is outside the walls of Thebes, and the noise of lamentation (in the form of the first choral song) within. By the time the drama is over, these two noises will come to be identified with the two contending brothers, Eteokles and Polyneices; and not merely because one has been inside and the other outside the walls, but because of their names and their fates, as will appear. Eteokles is more than merely "justifiably angered" by the fears and lamentations of the Chorus: he is enraged and unhinged by them, and proceeds to some quite

extraordinary calumnies upon womankind in general. His nominal grounds for wrath are that the Chorus, by their womanly weakness, are undermining manly courage and endangering military morale inside the city. There is a certain plausibility to this, to which, after all, the Chorus acquiesce. But Eteokles' rage seems so extravagant that we might at first suppose that he is himself afraid of losing his nerve. Since, in the event, this does not prove to be the case, there must be some other reason for it. And, indeed, as the drama unfolds, we come to see that this play is not merely the culmination but the terrible re-enactment of the tragedies of Laios and Oedipus, of disobedience, parricide, and incest. And Eteokles' misogyny might be not only an unconscious sense of his inheritance, but a fear that he is doomed to repeat it. He is determined not to. Nevertheless, he does.

As in the case of his father, he is called upon to protect Thebes from what appears to be an outward danger. And, as in his father's case, he seems to undertake this in a manly way. The city of Thebes and its outlying pastures and folds are consistently spoken of in maternal terms, in metaphors of a mother who nurtured, cherished, and brought up her sons, and who must therefore not be violated. The violent desire for exclusive possession of the mother is a tragedy Oedipus unconsciously acted out, becoming blind that he might see what he could not see with his eyes. The violent desire for the exclusive possession of the mother land, the unwillingness of either to be content with a lesser or equal share, drives Oedipus' two sons, who are also his brothers, to murder each other, each one blindly believing justice to be on his side. And each, by murdering his brother, sheds his father's blood. As in the case of Oedipus, a problem is posed, a riddle must be untangled, in order that the city may be saved. For Eteokles this is, in fact, not one riddle but seven. These are the devices on the shields of the seven champions who attack the city.

It may be worth attending to this scene in some detail, for it has often been singled out as one of the most tedious blemishes of the play, and it constitutes about a third of the whole. In hearing the report of the Scout and undertaking to construe in terms of magic and numinous power the nature of each of seven successive threats to Thebes, and in proposing a counter-magic for the defense of the city, Eteokles is taking upon himself the role of seer, as once his father did. Yet even before these seven opportunities for divination occur, Eteokles has several times been warned; what he is at pains to conceal from himself is precisely who he is, the nature of his inheritance, and the possibility that he cannot see everything clearly and for what it is. And while the Scout punctiliously addresses him as "most fittingly king of the Kadmeians," the Chorus, with more intimacy and greater point, address him as "son of Oedipus." Moreover, in their high-strung emotional debate with him, they defend their devotion to and utter reliance on the gods by observing that not only are the gods more powerful than men, but that the gods alone can assist humankind when its vision and understanding are obscured. These are implicit warnings against blindness and impiety, and they are augmented by the off-stage but telling presences of two genuine seers and diviners, who are also priests: Teiresias and Amphiaraos. Nevertheless, as commander of the defending troops, Eteokles does not hesitate to assume the role of seer.

There are seven contending champions, and therefore, seven riddles (though there is in addition one great and central riddle, concerning Eteokles' name, which lies at the very heart of the play, and which we will come to later). In general, it may be said that Eteokles conceives these riddles as applying purely to the fate of the contending champions and, by extension, to the fate of Thebes; never does he seem to suppose that the riddles might have any bearing upon his own fate. It may be added that with most of the defending champions he nominates, Eteokles takes pains to advertise the distinction of their genealogies as well as their military prowess and excellence of character. This is, of course, quite in accordance with heroic tradition. But in emphasizing the nativity the legitimacy, as it were of these local sons of the mother land, their title by birthright to be her defenders, he appears never to consider that this is a right he must, by the same token, share equally with his own brother. And the fact that two of the defending champions, Hyperbios and Aktor, are themselves brothers, does nothing to remind him of this.

1. The first of the attacking champions is Tydeus. We learn that he abuses and insults a priest of Apollo, Amphiaraos. Yet, while Eteokles does not hesitate to accuse Tydeus of impiety (as indeed he does in the case of every attacker but one and that one worth noting), neither does he scruple himself to abuse and insult Amphiaraos when later the priest, the true seer, presents himself as the sixth of the champions outside the walls. It is true that Eteokles cannot quite bring himself to accuse so unblemished a man as Amphiaraos of impiety; but the priest is charged with blindness and bad judgment, which Eteokles might do well to consider with respect to himself. And in abusing Amphiaraos, he is imitating the impious enemy, Tydeus. In addition to the dark night (ignorance, inability to see) which is Tydeus' device, the moon, associated with Hekate, goddess of the three ways, might serve to remind Eteokles of the beginning of his father's catastrophe, the curse of the house of Laios, the penalty for blindness. Tydeus' helmet is triple-crested, a part of the riddle to which we will return in due course. Most importantly, Eteokles proclaims that his defending champion, Melanippos, is a blood-relative of Dike, "goddess of all orders, of justice human and divine," and that she will favor him. If Dike is to side with the defending forces, she cannot at the same time side with the attackers, as from the claims of Polyneices it appears she does, unless she is to play some impartial role, and deal with the claims of both sides as being equal.

2. The second of the attackers, Kapaneus, the giant, is an enlargement, a grotesque exaggeration, of the impiety of Tydeus; he defies all the gods, and Zeus in particular. As opposed to Tydeus, whose emblem was darkness, Kapaneus' device is a naked man armed with a flaming torch (which is light and knowledge, the ability to see, to construe the truth), but this light has been perverted into a destructive weapon, intended to reduce the city to ashes (just as the Chorus has feared and prophesied). It might therefore be a warning to Eteokles in his self-assumed office of seer.

3. The third is Eteoklos, whose name is so close to the protagonist's as surely to invite a moment's thought. He is clearly "Eteokles Beyond the Walls," the attacking double of the defender; Eteokles, by this extension, is both outside and inside the city, and therefore it is folly to fear, to observe, to take precautions chiefly against the danger of what is outside. Here is a representation of Eteokles as his own worst enemy, and,

pointedly, he has nothing whatever to say about the character of this attacker. Whereas in every other case he is quick to bring accusations of blasphemy, impiety, and folly, here he moves swiftly to name his chosen defender, and makes unusually brisk work of the matter, turning instantly to the next contender.

4. This is Hippomedon, who bears Typhon, the earth god, on his shield. Now, from the very first speech of Eteokles, the earth has been seen as a nourishing parent, child-bearer, kindly provider. But just as the Fury has what seems to be a double nature, or at least two aspects of a single nature, so here is the earth transformed, represented by a monstrous offspring, "breathing fire, black smoke, sister of glittering fire, pouring from his mouth," the universal tomb. This is not unlike the earlier vision of the Chorus.

5. Parthenopaios, "savage-minded" but with a boyish beauty, himself suggests the two aspects of the Fury. And his device, the Sphinx, not only recalls the whole Theban and family saga, but specifically points it toward the problem of knowing who you are. It is declared of Parthenopaios that he reverses his blade "above god and his own eyes," which is to say that he puts violence, military glory, and ambition above piety and knowledge; and it recalls the theme of blindness.

6. The case of Amphiaraos is rich and complicated. He is, first, a priest of Apollo, the god who is foreteller, knower of what awaits, who long ago warned Laios of what would happen if he begot a child, and who warned the youthful Oedipus of his parricidal and incestuous fate. These facts are all clearly known to the Chorus, and therefore may be supposed to be known to Eteokles as well. As the god's priest, Amphiaraos is not merely a holy man, one who wishes not to seem but in fact to be the best, undeceived by appearances and undeceiving; he also has special access to the wisdom of the god. He clearly denounces the impiety, violence, and violation that Tydeus and Polyneices are about to offer the city, and in the most condemnatory terms; he speaks of this in the highly charged language and metaphor of rape and incest. Eteokles' answer to this riddle is noticeably weak and evasive. Perhaps that is because there is no device for him to perform magic with. But possibly the true piety and self-knowledge of this man has come home to him. In any case, he makes Amphiaraos guilty by association, and, while not doubting the priest's piety which, incidentally, consists in part in his refusal to attack the city all but calls him foolish and blind for getting mixed up with wicked men against his better judgment, that is to say, ignorantly. Yet if, as Eteokles himself says, Apollo does not lie, then all the prophecies of disaster which have been accumulating throughout the drama, and which Eteokles has now been given six chances to fathom and to attempt to avert, are obviously pointing to something he does not see, yet knows to be inexorable.

7. At last, the brother, mighty Polyneices. His claim is plain, violent and sexual.

He declares he will scale and bestride the walls, proclaimed lord and subjugator of the land.

He makes explicit his equality with Eteokles (which Eteokles has never acknowledged):

he will fight you hand to hand; and either, in killing you, lie dead beside you, or else drive you into dishonored exile just as you forced such banishment on him.

The insistence on "equality" in Polyneices' boast should be noticed. He does not propose, as he might, to kill his brother and take upon himself the kingship; rather he says that either they shall both die, or they shall change places with each other. And just as Eteokles has done, he calls upon the gods of the race of his own land, entreating their support. This exclusive claim to the motherland as a sexual possession is stated at its clearest in Polyneices' device.

A stately woman guides forward a warrior in full armor who is hammered out in gold. She says she is Dike goddess of all orders, human and divine and inscribed there are these words: "I shall bring this man to his harbor, and he shall enjoy his father's city, shall tumble and make free with his house."

The great blow, and the final irony, for Eteokles, is not that his brother should be revealed as a champion, for it was generally known that his brother was among the attacking troops, and no doubt the entire siege has been undertaken at his behest and with an eye to his restoration to the kingship. Clearly, then, he could have been expected to play a major role in the attack. What unhinges Eteokles is in part the claim that Dike is aligned with the forces outside the walls, and with his brother in particular, since he has already assumed that she has allied herself with the defenders. Her impartiality in this, as well perhaps as the discovery that Eteokles is not only inside but outside the walls in the person of Eteoklos, reveal to us at last the true equality of the two brothers in their inheritance, their fate, their shared guilt of origin and of ambition.

But this sense of equality Eteokles is determined to resist to the end, and while he feels he has been mocked and manipulated by fate, he goes to meet his brother in a frenzy of blindness, a man fully armed, turned into iron, himself a weapon. And the Chorus, perhaps recalling the warning that appeared with the very first of the attackers, the triple-crested helmet of Tydeus, proceeds, in the next ode, to recall the first of all the warnings to this blind family:

Three times the Lord Apollo in the midmost Pythian navel, the prophetic center, spoke: If Laios were to live childless, without issue, then the city would be safe.

And they echo the present storm outside the walls:

Like a plunging and storm-agitated sea, disaster drives the wave; first one wave falls, a second rises up, a third, three-crested, crashes at the stern of the city in angry foam. Between our perilous home and total jeopardy, our hull is the mere width of the city walls.

While it is clear enough that, in the first instance, these waves represent the hordes of attacking troops, they have also by this time come to refer to the three destructive and self-destructive generations of the house of Laios, each of which in turn put Thebes in peril, and were themselves the whole cause of her troubles, and, in effect, her attackers.

Like Oedipus, whose name means both "knowing foot" and "swollen foot," the sons of Oedipus have names which express their fates. The applicability of Polyneices' name, "full of strife," to his actions as the leader of a foreign army attacking his native city is reasonably clear. Amphiaraos, Eteokles, and finally the Chorus, all brood over it in the section of the play that leads up to Eteokles' climactic decision to meet his brother in single combat. The etymologically correct meaning of Eteokles is "justly famed" (from *eteos*, just, true, and *kleos*, fame), and in the argument with the Chorus about whether or not he will go to the seventh gate, Eteokles dwells on fame and honor as though, in deciding to confront his brother, he hoped to implement this meaning of his name. However, another possible meaning of Eteokles, "truly bewept" or "true cause of weeping" (combining eteos with klaio, weep), is fearfully suggested in Eteokles' opening speech, and alluded to with increasing dread throughout the play. It suggests to him a fate which he tries with all his powers to evade; hence his prohibition of weeping to the Chorus, and his own refusal to weep when he feels that fate has pointed him toward fratricide at the seventh gate. And just as the measures Oedipus took to avoid the fate spelled out for him at Delphi nevertheless brought about its complete fulfillment, so Eteokles' attempt to avoid the fulfillment of this second, more ominous meaning of his name results in its implementation; as even he himself perhaps begins to recognize when he says,

let the generations of Laios go down to the last man, blown wind-wracked along the weeping river of Hades.

In the act of killing his brother he finds the answer to the riddle of his own identity and fate, a riddle posed by the double meaning of his name. The second, or buried meaning, "true cause of weeping," "truly bewept," is literally acted out as the Chorus of Theban women, joined by Antigone and Ismene, perform their lament over the bodies of the brothers who have murdered each other. At this point it is clear that the names and fates of the brothers are interchangeable. Reconciliation and total equality are achieved together. Polyneices is just as "truly bewept" in this scene as Eteokles. In the preceding scene the Chorus warns Eteokles,

do not take on the violence of your brother of evil name and fame ...

But by the end of the scene Eteokles has done just that. In deciding to meet his brother at the seventh gate he becomes the counterpart of Ares, the emblem of strife in the house of Laios.

Both in imagery and action the play is an elucidation and dramatic unfolding of these two names. The storm of strife, presided over by Ares and the Fury, is realized in the Argive army outside the walls, and in the Chorus's fearful visualization of the final destruction of Thebes in their second song. The storm of weeping is realized in the Chorus's entrance song as well as in the final lament.

VI

There are many texts, both ancient and modern, that maintain, with elegiac eloquence, that it is the lot of mankind to be born, to suffer, and to die. However sagely we may assent to this universal condition of existence, no particular man likes to think that this is the governing limit of his own life; and when he speaks of his lot, though he may acknowledge it as a limited one, he is inclined at the same time to feel that it entails certain rights and prerogatives, that it is truly and only his, and not to be shared by anyone else. It is therefore associated most easily with what he comes to regard as his just due, his personal fortune, a wealth, either earned or inherited, though that wealth may be expressed in any number of ways, such as strength or courage or a gift for music or telling jokes.

Aeschylus takes the richest possible advantage of these ambiguities in *Seven Against Thebes*; and behind the ambiguities, of course, lie the unresolved problems of free will and justice. That is to say, does a man choose his lot, or is it chosen for him? Does he get what he deserves, and by what or whose standards? While these problems are woven into the background of almost every tragedy, in this drama we are made to take particular notice of them. The first speech of the Scout recounts the drawing of lots. It appears that both Eteokles and Polyneices, while realizing that a part of their inheritance must include their father's Curse, seem also to feel that it includes title to the kingship of Thebes. As for the Curse itself, Eteokles at least seems to feel, when at last he is brought to acknowledge that it cannot be evaded, that it is confined purely to the prophecy that the sons of Oedipus shall divide his wealth with a sword; that is to say, he thinks of the Curse as something laid upon his brother and himself by his father, not as something laid upon his grandfather, his father, and the two brothers in their turn, for the original and continuing violations and crimes of the house. The father's wealth, for which the brothers are prepared to fight to the death, is the city of Thebes, its land, its fecund, life-giving sustenance. What they actually win in their duel is just enough of that land to be buried in. Yet the land is truly a part of their wealth, and indeed of the wealth of all the inhabitants of Thebes; it is life itself. To the Chorus, who are women, this appears to be much clearer than it is to the two ambitious brothers. The Chorus sing movingly about the richness and fertility of the land, and the horror of its despoliation; and their sympathy with the land might perhaps derive from their sharing with it a common gender. At the same time, and perhaps for the same reason, they conceive human life itself as being a form of wealth:

Our city's wealth of men climbs to the battlements.

And, again, later

The city's wealth,

this heavy freight of men, this swollen horde

must, from the stern, now be cast overboard.

That, as in the Book of Jonah, a forfeit must be paid, some wealth rendered up to protect and preserve the remainder, the mariners on the ship to Tarshish or the

inhabitants of Thebes, appears to these women a natural if terrible part of the economy of justice; life must be paid out that life may be sustained. For the two brothers it means, with a disastrous, ultimate irony, that the wealth for which they fight is precisely what they must forfeit: their lives.

Source: Anthony Hecht and Helen H. Bacon, Introduction to Seven against Thebes, in Seven against Thebes, by Aeschylus, Oxford University Press, 1973, pp. 3-17.

Critical Essay #6

Tucker introduces the play by discussing its structure, as well as the history of the time.

Though we do not demand of a modern drama that it should convey a definite moral or political lesson, and though we should not be too exacting in this respect when we deal with the corresponding form of art in antiquity, it is nevertheless a notorious truth that the early Greek poet, and not least the dramatic poet, was commonly regarded and regarded himself as an exponent of religious, ethical, and political wisdom. In its primary purpose a tragedy was doubtless a composition of art, intended for the public entertainment on its more serious side; but it was meanwhile expected of the tragedian that he should 'improve the occasion' and play the part of teacher to the audience. The stage Euripides is not expressing simply his individual opinion, when he maintains in the *Frogs* of Aristophanes that poets can only claim admiration. . . .

The traditional [*sophia/wisdom]* of the poet is to show itself not merely in the varied lore for which he has to thank Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses, but also in the [*gnomai/opinions* and *paraineseis/exhortations*} which are to be expected of his more profound thought and keener insight. His function is not only [*To poiein/make poetry*}, but also [*To chresta didaskein/teaching good things]*. Most obviously valuable, and most readily appreciated, was wise admonition applied to contemporary circumstance. When Athens was in sore straits just before the end of the Peloponnesian war, Dionysus seeks to bring back a tragic poet from Hades.... And, when Aeschylus has been chosen and is departing to the upper world, the prayer is made that he may be the means of suggesting

[.. .good plans of good and great things for the city.]

In writing the *Septem* Aeschylus duly performs this function of admonisher. But while the general and permanent moral lesson involved in the fate of the sons of Oedipus is obvious, there was also conveyed a special political lesson with a contemporary reference, a lesson so little obtruded that it has apparently escaped the notice of commentators. When Dionysus asks in the *Frogs*

[and what did you do, Aeschylus, that you taught them to be so noble. Speak!]

the poet is made to reply

[I made drama full of Ares....]

that drama being

[.. .the Seven against Thebes, and when each and every man saw it, he would have loved to be destructive.]

And doubtless something might be caught of that *aura of* valour which so peculiarly pervaded the piece, and which suggested to Gorgias this apt description 'full of martial

spirit.' Besides dramatically enforcing his invariable warning against [*hybris/ pride*] and *[To agan/excess*] in any shape, Aeschylus does indeed stimulate Athenian manhood with the desire *[daioi einei/to be destructive*]. But he meanwhile 'improves the occasion' in behalf of a debated public policy, or one which at least required the spur. This was the policy initiated by Themistocles, continued by Cimon, and accomplished by Pericles; namely, the policy of fortifying Athens with such completeness that it might thenceforth be secure against assault, whether from barbarian or from hostile Greek. To suppose this purpose included in the 'wisdom' of the play is no idle fancy. The date of the *Septem* is B.C. 467. The date of the commencement of Cimon's wall of the Acropolis is B.C. 468. Themistocles had previously built the new (if hasty) *[peribolos/enclosure*] of Athens, had fortified the Peiraeus, and had probably devised a larger scheme, which was delayed, and doubtless in part discredited, by his fall and exile in B.C. 472. There were no doubt financial difficulties also. The spoils of the battle of Eurymedon supplied Cimon with the means to accomplish the work upon the Acropolis which is associated with his name. According to Plutarch he also commenced the building of the Long Walls, although the actual carrying out of that supremely important work was left for Pericles (B.C. 460-458).

It is manifest that for some time before and after the production of the *Septem* the question of the nature and extent of the fortifications of Athens was one of chief public prominence. Nor could it be otherwise. In B.C. 480 not even the Acropolis, much less the larger city, had been defensible against the Persians. The Athenians had been compelled to take refuge within their 'wooden walls.' In the following year Mardonius had completed the destruction of the city. No one knew when such an experience might be repeated. Nor was assurance against the Peloponnesians much greater than that against Persia. Far-sighted statesmen with the large conceptions of a Themistocles or a Cimon perceived what was necessary. But, as on similar occasions ancient and modern, the more far-sighted the conception, the more difficulty may be found in persuading the body politic to adopt it comprehensively. Especially is this the case when the execution involves heavy financial burdens. That the Athenians required no little pressure of persuasion is manifest, first, from the delay in carrying out the full scheme (whether it be due to Themistocles or to Cimon), second, from such indications as that afforded by Plato, who refers to a speech delivered by Pericles in favour of building the Long Walls. For the sake of brevity historians speak of Themistocles or Cimon or Pericles as doing this or that; yet these greater men were but agents of the will of the people, even though they may first have been the moulders of that will. It was but human nature that the eagerness displayed immediately after the Persian invasion should diminish as the younds of that invasion healed.

In the Septem Aeschylus is indubitably lending his aid to the formation of public opinion in support of the Cimonian policy of fortification. He is insisting upon the text 'Trust in the gods, but see to your walls.' Though the scene of the action is in Cadmea, the language is carefully adapted to Athens. If Athena Onca is implored to hold her protection over the Cadmea, it is easy to grasp the allusion to Pallas Athena of the Acropolis,.... If she is to guard her *[heptapylon hedos/seven-gated dwelling place*], the Athenian would at once think of the [*ennea pylon/ nine-gated one*]. These are occasional reminders, but at frequent intervals throughout the play the importance of the defences is emphasised.

The Cadmeans are bidden to man the [*purgomata/fenced walls*] ... and there to take their stand....

The Scout bids Eteocles

[And you, as a diligent rudder-turner of a ship, fortify the city, before the blasts of Ares rush down like a storm.]

To the Chorus the tutelary gods are [*gas tasde purgophylakes/tower-guards of this land];* they are besought not to 'betray the bulwarks.' When the Chorus surrenders itself on the Acropolis to a helpless passion of supplication, Eteocles bids it offer a prayer more to the purpose....

The Chorus itself in a [*stasimon/song of the chorus*] of some length describes vividly the fate of a captured city; how it is enslaved, befouled with smoke, and reduced to ashes. The allusion to the burning of Athens by the Persians is unmistakable. And this havoc, it is said, occurs when 'the defences fail' (332). The boasts and threats of the Achaean champions are addressed to the [*purgoi/towers*] of the besieged town, and, in answer, the Chorus prays that the enemy may never get within gate or wall, but may perish *prosthe pylan, purgon ektosthen/in front of the gates, outside of the towers*]. After the failure of the assault the Scout reports

[And the city is both in calm weather and has not taken on any bilge-water from the many blows of the wave.]

It would have been impossible for the poet to communicate his lesson more plainly without violating (as Euripides is so apt to do) the canons of dramatic art.

The action of the play is simple, and requires no further analysis than that which is supplied in the commentary. Whereas Homer infused into his epic *[mimesis/imitation or representation}* a dramatic life, on the other hand the dramatic *{mimesis/imitation or representation}* of Aeschylus, especially in its earlier stages, is wont to retain much of the epic character. Apart from its choruses the *Septem* is in a large measure epic put upon the stage. There is much description, there would be considerable scenic effect, but there is little action in the modern sense. As a study of *praxeis, pathe, and ethe/ actions, sufferings, and customs* } the play is apt to strike the reader as somewhat slender. Of the *melopeiia*} we have no information, but it would necessarily count for much. In [*opsis/appearance*} it may be readily imagined that the play would not be lacking. We have the burghers in the opening scene, the distracted Chorus amid the images, the armed champions, the funeral procession and the dirge, besides the dancing and acting. When we have supplied these to the best of our ability, we are called upon to allow for sundry differences between the Greek point of view and our own in regard to a dramatic creation and its performance. Our own conception of 'action' is not the same as the Greek conception of [*praxis/action*}. A passage of [elengchos/rebuke}, or a scene of argument in which a certain mental [*pathos/feeling*} is produced, removed, or changed, is sufficient in its 'action' for the Athenian, who loved these altercations, so long as the degree of *[dianoia/thought*} exhibited on either side

was sufficiently keen or solid to maintain his intelligent admiration. Meanwhile he experienced a lively appreciation of the dexterity or beauty of the language employed. 'Action' also is the 'keening' over the bodies of the slain brothers. To the Greek, with his lively sympathies and his ready response to a call upon his emotions, this formed an interesting chapter in the *[mimesis biou/imitation of life*} of the stage. It was not merely that he took as one modern sarcastically remarked of another 'a melancholy pleasure in the contemplation of a funeral.' It was that the attendant ceremonial of death and burial was to him a thing of real significance, for the simple reason that he entertained strong views of the vital importance of such duty to the dead.

If the function of tragedy is to evoke keen sensations of [*eleos kai phobos/pity and fear*}, we must estimate the success of a piece, not by the standard of our own social, moral and religious conceptions, but by that of the Athenians in regard to the same matters. If it seems easy for us to realise the tremors which might pass through an audience when the Chorus depicts the miseries of slaughter, desolation, and enslavement in a captured city, we still can hardly experience them with the same liveliness as a people who recognized their literal truth and to whom they were more or less imminent possibilities. If we can understand a shudder of horror at the impending slaughter of brother by brother, we nevertheless cannot experience it with precisely the same acuteness as a people who regarded the tie of blood from a far more superstitious standpoint, and to whom the Erinyes were dreadful and ever-present realities. The curse of a father is to us a deplorable and shocking thing from the point of view of sentiment, but we cannot regard it, like the Athenians, as an embodied and operative power which can work madness in the brain and relentlessly and irresistibly achieve its dire object. To a people accustomed to the enigmas of oracles and prophecies, prone to look for their fulfilment with awe, and keen to feel the irony when the language was interpreted by the event, there were thrilling sensations of apprehension and premonition which are scarcely realisable by a sceptical modern reader, to whom such riddling rede is apt to present itself in a less venerable light. The refusal of burial to Polyneices is to us a cruel and disgusting action, possible only to a stage of civilisation from which we have emerged. To the Athenian such a prohibition came nearer home; it moreover amounted to perpetual damnation of the departed spirit, and the situation is therefore one of much more crushing grief to Antigone and her sympathisers than we can now realise without considerable effort. To us therefore, who have little regard for Erinyes or Curses or cryptic utterances, who have minimised the interest and importance of obsequies, and who have shifted to a different plane our conceptions of the claims of kinship, the Septem must lose much of its tragic force. The particular motives of pity and fear which it employs, though not without their effect upon ourselves, have lost not a little of their edge. They have at least lost the peculiar quality of poignancy which they would possess for a Greek of the early part of the fifth century B.C. Not only do we miss much that the piece actually contained, together with the acting, [the *orchesis/dancing*, the *melopoiia/ making of lyrical music*, and the *opsis/appearance*}; we have also been taught by the romantic drama to look for something at which classical tragedy does not aim, to wit, rapidity of action in a plot more 'complex,' and subtlety of characterisation probing to greater depths of 'philosophy,' than even the writer of the *Poetics* would have contemplated. One thing, however, which no competent reader can miss is the Aeschylean power of language, with its extraordinary specific gravity, its magnificent

compression, and its brilliant figurativeness, by means of which the poet brings into the modest compass of a little over a thousand lines enough matter to have furnished forth as many more in many another writer.

The epic character of the play appears especially in the descriptions of the several Achaean champions with their accoutrements and their utterances. It is chiefly here that modern criticism, proceeding on a priori principles as to what is or is not dramatic, raises some question. Have these descriptions a legitimate place in drama? If so, are they seasonable in the mouth of the Scout? Is it, moreover, possible for the Messenger to have seen and heard all that he reports? It is not easy to act the *[lytikos/solver* to these *problemata/problems*], if we are to apply to ancient drama the strictest canons of modern realism. But though we are not called upon to undertake this impossible task, in view of the accepted conventions of the Greek stage, it may at least be answered that the criticism is largely misconceived. It is an entirely false notion that the Scout and the King are wasting time in talk while the enemy may be taking advantage of the situation. A point so obvious is not one which would escape so experienced a playwright as Aeschylus. At the very beginning of the Messenger's report we are told that the operations of the enemy are suspended

[And the seer does not allow him to cross the Ismenus passage, for the sacrifices are not coming out good.]

It is characteristic of Aeschylus that he does not elaborate this excuse. He is too good a dramatist to add 'and therefore I may proceed to give my account at leisure.' We may, if we choose, regard the device itself as not particularly convincing. Yet Aeschylus believed it to be sufficiently so for his audience. Here, as elsewhere, he credited that audience with the quick intelligence which accepts few words in place of many. Doubtless he often took that intelligence too readily for granted. But whether the device be an entirely natural one or not and there is at least nothing irrational in it if it is once granted, criticism falls to the ground. For how long, after all, does it take the Messenger to make this report and for Eteocles to answer it with his dispositions? The whole scene until Eteocles himself departs occupies 345 lines. Comprised in these there is no interval, and the time thus 'wasted' amounts to neither more nor less than it would take to deliver that number of lines upon the stage. It is not even the space of time which a modern critic spends in reading and pondering the lines, but the time which he might take, as a Greek of the date of Aeschylus, in uttering and acting them. This would be measured in minutes. To the spectators almost no time would appear to elapse. There are several single scenes in Shakespeare which are as long, and some which are longer. It can hardly be contended that the delay is rationally out of proportion to the justification offered for it.

Of two passages of Euripides which are supposed to be aimed at this scene in the *Septem,* one will be found on examination to have no such reference whatever. In the *Supplices* Theseus says to Adrastus.

[And I will not ask you one thing, lest I bring laughter on myself, whom each of these is joined with in battle or has received the wound from a troop of enemy spearmen. For

these words are empty, both those of the ones hearing and those of the one speaking, who, having gone in battle when a close-packed troop of spearmen is coming before his eyes, has reported clearly who is good.]

But what application has this passage to the Messenger's descriptions in our play? Euripides is simply ridiculing the man probably too frequently in evidence at Athens who pretends to know the full details of a fight in which he has been himself engaged. As every veteran acknowledges, the field of observation in a battle is limited to the soldier's own immediate neighbourhood, and sometimes he can render no very clear account even of his own experiences. But the Scout in the *Septem* has nothing to tell of any fight in which either he or anyone else has been concerned. It should be obvious that to force the lines into a criticism of his fellow-dramatist is to do an injustice to Euripides.

More relevant might seem the passage in the *Phoenissae*, where Eteocles says

[And these things will be: having come to the seven-gated city, I will arrange troop commanders before the gates, as you say, setting equals opposite equal enemies, and it would be a great waste of time to say the name of each while the enemies are sitting under the very gates, but I go, in order that I may not leave my hand idle, and may it happen for me....]

Though this particular [*rhesis/saying or speech*] is rightly suspected to contain a number of interpolations, and though it might be hoped, for the artistic credit of Euripides, that the dramatically unnatural because obviously forced passage \onoma.. .chera] is one such, we need not avail ourselves of that suspicion. It is enough to remember that the Phoenissae is of exceptional length, and that the poet has crowded into it (if it is all his) an unusual variety of matter. His lines here are no reflection whatever upon Aeschylus; they are a defence of himself. If anyone is criticised, it is the audience, which looked for such detail and description, but which Euripides does not this time propose to satisfy. The playwright is aware that he cannot spare room for this matter, and he accounts to the audience for the omission. The tone is not one of sarcasm, but of apology: 'I cannot name them now; it would take time, and the enemy are pressing us.'

It is sometimes further objected that the descriptions themselves are merely picturesque, and therefore undramatic. The same criticism would sweep away many a fine passage of Shakespeare. Aesthetic dogmatism is of little value unless founded on the facts of experience. That the Athenian audience was intensely interested in such descriptions pure and simple might doubtless be put down to that [astheneia/weakness] to which it was subject. The keen interest itself is beyond doubt. The same taste is met by Euripides. And if the strangeness to the modern reader lies not so much in the descriptions of the warriors as in the details of their shields and blazons, it is precisely here that the Greek appreciation was especially lively. How deeply ingrained in the Greek constitution was the love of skilful workmanship and of the contemplation of masterpieces in any kind, can scarcely be more conclusively shown than in the prominence given to verbal pictures of such things from epic times downwards. The shield of Achilles in the Iliad and in the Electra of Euripides; the shield of Heracles in the *Scutum* of the pseudo-Hesiod; the sculptures of Delphi in the Ion; the breastplate of

Agamemnon in Homer, the bowls in Theocritus, the [basket] of Europa in Moschus, the [diplax/double-fold] of Jason in Apollonius Rhodius, the chest of Cypselus in Pausanias, are a few of the instances in point. It was part of epic convention that a shield of more or less miraculous workmanship should be described, with a combination of sheer joy in decorative art and naive wonder at the marvel of craftsmanship. The earliest Hellenic invaders of Greece could never sufficiently admire the technical productions of their 'Aegean' predecessors or of oriental workmen. As warriors they would be especially concerned with such work upon shields, breastplates, and daggers. They would be eager to possess, and, if they possessed, they would hugely prize, accoutrements so distinguished. Their bards would magnify the possibilities of skill and dream dreams of wonderful inlaying and colour-toning. They would vie with each other in equipping their heroes with a shield of which, as of Nestor's, *\kleos ouranon hikei/fame reaches heaven}.* Of the shield of Achilles in the eighteenth book of the *Iliad,* Leaf remarks that 'though of course beyond the power of early Greek, as of any human art, to execute, it yet requires to explain it only such works of art and technique as we know to have been accessible to the Greeks, at least in foreign imports, in pre-Homeric times.' He illustrates by the dagger-blades found by Schliemann at Mycenae.

Exquisite inlaying was realised in fact, and so far there is nothing unreal in such instances as //. 18.474, where Hephaestus blends bronze, gold, silver and tin. . . . Nor is the tour de force in Scut. 233, of the Gorgon's head in a net, beyond execution. Greater marvels, such as of moving reliefs, belong to the fancy of a later age.

Above all it was the shield which lent most scope both for the execution and the display of such work, and hence no epic is complete without its highly-wrought 'shield.' Vergil cannot fail to supply his Aeneas with one of the type. It is practically certain therefore that both Aeschylus and Euripides are led to their descriptions primarily by the Thebais. Pindar had evidently found similar matter in the Epigoni. Nevertheless the artistic and technically wonderful emblazoning of shields was no mere convention of epic. Later times knew and admired such accoutrements among contemporaries, although miracle had been compelled to give place to more sober possibilities. We should take the sense literally when Mamercus writes.

[And we captured these shields, painted purple and overlaid with gold, ivory and amber by means of these worthless little shields.]

The contemporaries of Aeschylus were connoisseurs in work of the kind glanced at by Pindar. ... If therefore Aeschylus takes the hint for describing the shields from the epic Thebais, he is by no means to be charged with introducing matter into his play for no better reason than that it happened to exist in the epic. Rather he introduces it for the same reason which led the epic writer to employ it first, namely, because to the audience of the drama, as to the audience of the epic, it caused a whole-hearted delight.

Doubtless the question of dramatic fitness is not settled by this consideration. Though the descriptions may please the audience, are they sufficiently in place when addressed by the Scout to Eteocles? In other words, would a messenger in ancient Greece

conceivably render a report in such manner and kind? We may venture to hold that Aeschylus is incapable of a gross irrelevance. It is not merely that the Scout is himself carried away by the characteristic Greek gusto for the technical wonders which he has seen (although no Greek would be surprised at such behaviour on his part); it is also that his descriptions of the blazonry are part of his descriptions of the men. They mark the special temper and character, the insolence or self-assertion, which Eteocles is to confront. In effect the Messenger says in each case 'Such is the man; such are his boasts in word or blazon; it is for you to choose his antagonist.' In each case the king proceeds to select the opposing champion, and he either chooses him with some special reference to the blazon or draws some augury of victory from the temper which it betrays.

In one point we are apparently asked to accept a physical impossibility. It is difficult to convince ourselves that any scout could possibly see and hear all that the [*angelos/messenger]* reports. There are seven champions at seven different gates, and the Scout has observed them all at close quarters, heard their words, and even noted their expressions. He would presumably do this in making a circuit of the walls. In the *Phoenissae* Euripides employs the rather crude device of making his *[angelos/messenger}* the bearer of the [*xunthema/signal or agreement]* to the various [*lochoi/bands of armed troops*] concerned with the several gates. To name such a procedure is however, only to bring out its difficulties. Aeschylus, with more tact, glides over the exact proceedings of the [*kataskopos/scout or spy*]. We may be sure that, during the time of the performance, scarcely anyone among the audience would raise the question. It is one which only occurs after consideration or to the critical student. For the practical playwright this acceptance for the time being was sufficient. But while admitting that there is some violation of strict probabilities, we must again remember that pause in the assault which affords the Messenger time for observation. We must also remember the comparative smallness of the epic city. Nor are we, of course, to regard all the reported actions and utterances of the champions as synchronous. The Scout began his observations with the first approach of the Argives, and they would not all reach their gates at the same moment. These considerations do not indeed achieve an entire rationalising of the situation, but they go no little distance towards removing any very gross or palpable irrationality. As to the mere hearing and seeing of the besiegers by the besieged there is no difficulty whatever. When Sulla was besieging Athens taunts were hurled upon him from the walls. The same thing occurred to Maximinus before Aquileia. A proximity possible at such dates and in the siege of such cities was still more possible at the siege of a smaller town in epic days.

Source: T. G. Tucker, Introduction to *The Seven against Thebes of Aeschylus:* The Play of Aeschylus, in *The Seven against Thebes of Aeschylus: by Aeschylus*, Cambridge University Press, 1908, pp. xlii Iv.

Adaptations

There are no specific film productions of *Seven Against Thebes.* However, *Seven Against Thebes* does have a central role in an Italian film from 1998, Rehearsal For War, directed by Mario Martone. In this film, which depicts the war in Yugoslavia, theater rehearsals of Aeschylus's tragedy serve to illustrate the tragedy that is unfolding in the streets outside the theater.

The *Oresteia,* is a film production of Aeschylus's trilogy, consisting of three videocassettes (230 minutes). It was directed by Peter Hall for the National theater of Great Britain and was a production of Channel 4 (1990, 1983).

Topics for Further Study

The story of Oedipus' tragedy is an very old one and one that was the subject of several tragedies. Try to research this story and determine its origin and source. How old is the Oedipus tragedy? Under what circumstances did it originate?

Spend some time looking for Greek art that represents the Oedipus tragedy. What kind of things are depicted in art of 5th-century B.C. Greece?

Research the role of early Greek drama in Greek life. What lessons might 5th-century Greek men learn from this play?

Research 5th-century B.C. Greek society. What is the role of women in this society? Is Eteocles' reaction to the Chorus typical of the way men address the concerns of women?

Eteocles ignores the Chorus's warning, citing fate as the controlling factor in his destiny. What is the role of fate in the Classical Greek belief system?

Compare and Contrast

c. 467 B.C.: The Greeks triumph over the Persians and defeat the invasion of their country. The Persian force was significantly larger than the Athenian forces, and this victory infuses the Greeks with pride.

Today: Greece, which has been dominated by military coups and turmoil with neighboring Turkey since the end of World War II, is no longer considered a dominant military force.

c. 467 B.C.: The Greek poet Pindar moves to Thebes, where he composes lyric odes to celebrate triumphs at the Olympic games.

Today: Today's athletes are also celebrated for their victories, but the celebrations often focus on advertising contracts and endorsement contracts that make the athletes very wealthy. Few have poems written about them.

c. 467 B.C.: Alfalfa is grown by the Greeks, who were introduced to this grain by the Persians, and use this grain to feed their livestock.

Today: Grain is still useful as a by-product of war. Although the United States spent many years seeking military and economic victory over the Russians, when victory was assured, the United States began shipping wheat to the Russians to supplement their meager harvests.

c. 467 B.C.: The dramatist Sophocles becomes a major competitor of Aeschylus for the annual drama prizes at the Dionysus competition. The prizes are sought after, and for several years both dramatists will continue to challenge the other for the greatest plays.

Today: Drama competition continues with prizes for film and theater eagerly sought each spring. Winners of the Best Film at the Academy Awards or the Best Play at the Critic Circle Awards are assured of accolades and monetary rewards that will ease the production of subsequent work.

What Do I Read Next?

Prometheus Bound, by Aeschylus (undated), is the story of how Prometheus is punished for disobeying the god Zeus.

The Persians, by Aeschylus (472 B.C.), is a history play that recounts an event from the Greek and Persian Wars.

Oedipus Rex, by Sophocles (c. 430^26 B.C.), is the story of one man's attempts to escape his fate. This play tells the story of the events that precede *Seven Against Thebes.*

Antigone, by Sophocles (c. 441 B.C.), is aliterary and mythical sequel to *Seven Against Thebes.* This tragedy also deals with the problems of excessive pride and stubbornness. It also delves into the responsibility that all men have to bury the dead.

Bacchae, by Euripides (c. 405 B.C.), is often regarded as a condemnation of religious excess.

Further Study

Ashby, Clifford, *Classical Greek theater: New Views of an Old Subject,* University of Iowa Press, 1999.

This text is an examination of Greek theater, based on architectural evidence. The author has traveled extensively and examined many of the remaining theater sites in Greece, Southern Italy, and the Balkans.

Bovie, Palmer, and Frederick Raphael, eds., Sophocles, 1: "*Ajax," "Women of Trachis," "Electro," "Philoctetes," University of Pennsylvania Press*, 1998.

This book provides original and fresh translations of several of Sophocles' tragedies. The Penn Greek Drama Series intends that their new translations should make reading Greek drama accessible to any reader.

Gressler, Thomas H., *Greek Theater in the 1980s*, McFarland & Company, 1989.

This is a study of theater in modern Greece. The author focuses on the social and cultural influences on theater, discusses the history of theater, and provides a look at productions and the restoration of theaters.

Griffith, R. Drew, *The Theater of Apollo: Divine Justice and Sophocles's "Oedipus the King,*" McGill Queens University Press, 1996.

This is a reinterpretation of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex that focuses on Apollo's role in bringing about this tragedy. This book also attempts to recreate the play's original staging.

Rehm, Rush, *Greek Tragic Theater*, Routledge, 1994.

This book is helpful to readers who want to understand how Greek tragedy works. This author looks at performances of several plays and encourages readers to consider the context in which the plays were performed.

Walton, J. Michael, *Living Greek Theater*, Greenwood, 1987.

This text focuses on the staging and performance of Greek theater. The author attempts to integrate classical theater and modern theater, while providing a great deal of information about a number of the most important plays from this period.

Wise, Jennifer, Dionynsus Writes: The Invention of Theater in Ancient Greece, Cornell University Press, 1998.

This author discusses the relationship between literature and theater by examining the influences of a newly emerging literary world on drama. This text also provides some interesting ideas about the role of the oral tradition on theater.

Zelenak, Michael X., Gender and Politics in Greek Tragedy, Peter Lang, 1998.

This book offers some insight into the status of women in Greek culture and theater and provides interesting analysis of many women characters from Greek drama.

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Martin, Tomas R., *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times,* Yale University Press, 1996.

Slavitt, David R., and Palmer Bovie, *Aeschylus*, 2, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

Zeitlin, Froma L., "Language, Structure, and the Son of Oedipus," in *Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus's "Seven Against Thebes,*" Edizioni dell'Atenceo, 1982, pp. 13-52.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

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