

Introduction to Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*

Ἑπτ' ἐπὶ Θήβας [*Hept' epi Thēbas* “Seven Against Thebes”] from its first performance at the City Dionysia in 367 BCE, the third tragedy in Aeschylus’ first-prize winning tetralogy *Laios-Oidipous-Seven Against Thebes-Sphinx*,¹ has been widely recognized as an exceptional tragedy. Some sixty-two years later its fame was confirmed by Aristophanes in his wonderful comedy on the subject of tragedy, *Frogs*. Aristophanes has Aeschylus say for himself that everyone who saw *Seven Against Thebes* fell in love with the idea of a heroic warrior. Aristophanes’ character Dionysus, the god in whose honor Attic dramas were especially written and produced on the stage and for whom the principal Athenian theater, on the south slope of the Acropolis was named, calls out Aeschylus for doing a disservice to Athens, making the Thebans to be so brave in battle—a left-handed compliment to the tragic poet—Aristophanes’ comic character Aeschylus deflects by saying, in effect, the Athenians could have exercised those qualities, but didn’t. He goes on to add that his *Persians* (which really couldn’t have been a corrective measure since it was produced in 472, five years earlier) inspired Athenians. In fact, as Aristophanes in seriousness might admit, a strong point of Aeschylus’ dramatic poetry, like Homer’s epics, is that allies and enemies are portrayed as lifelike or equally larger than life, evenhandedly critical, not patently reductive of a whole cast of characters on the other side.

Aeschylus himself reportedly admitted a great debt to Homer.² Besides the stories of heroes and gods, he probably meant that as homage to Homer’s poetry and grippingly concentrated narrative techniques, including narrated scene development engaging the listeners’ imaginations: Aeschylus in *Seven Against Thebes* delivers the scenes of battle at the seven gates by great narrative delivered by the scout “messenger” who focuses on key aspects of the scenes at the gates, not least the shields of the leaders of the attacking armies, and the scout’s candid reports of what he has seen and heard during stage time and his characterizations of the adversaries. Much of the fighting action would have been very difficult or even impossible to effectively act out on the Athenian stage [*proskenion*], but Aeschylus wasn’t deterred by that: the poet places the characters in the city center and commands the spectators’ attention by the powerful speeches, dialogue exchanges, and choral odes—great poetry—and the actors’ movements to and from that central assembly place, with verbal prompts and cues for the audience to use their imagination to visualize the offstage action.

The plot of *Seven Against Thebes* is unveiled on a single fateful day, when the armies Polyneikes induced the rulers of Argos and other heroic-age heroes to join him and launch a military

¹ H.J. Mette, *Urkunden dramatischer Aufführungen in Griechenland* (New York –Berlin 1977) p. 12 (record of Aeschylus the *Didaskalos* (“Producer”) of our Theban tetralogy) and p. 85 (records of prizewinners, Aeschylus the first-prize winner with this tetralogy (p. 84 record of Aeschylus’ second prize in 499 BCE and first prize in 484—reconstructed Athenian *Didaskalia* records of Aeschylus’ victories indexed at p.200))

² Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 2, 262, 14 (Kaibel ed.)=Aeschylus Testimonium 112a (S. Radt, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* vol.3, p.69)

expedition against Thebes, then ruled by his brother Eteokles at the time. Curses of their father Oedipus against his two sons, Eteokles and Polyneikes, are a prominent feature of this core Theban legend (the story of the royal house of Thebes from the time of the founder Kadmos, down through the generations of Labdakos, Laios, Oedipus and his four children and grandson). In the background is, among other ill-boding things, Oedipus' rise and fall and the sons' coming to power at Thebes (consistently referred to as Kadmeia, or the city of the Kadmeians, in *Seven Against Thebes*): they were to share the power, each ruling in alternate years, but Eteokles did not want to endure interruption of his power. Consequently, Polyneikes built alliances with Adrastos and other sons of dead Argive King Talaos and, by trickery, Amphiaraios, bribing with the legendary necklace of Harmonia Amphiaraios' wife Eriphyle.³ Amphiaraios is the seer co-regent (with Adrastos), who, as in several epinikia of Pindar, comes off in Aeschylus as a most just and upright hero. With his brothers, relatives by marriage, and other allies to lead seven columns or divisions, corresponding to the number of gates in the Theban perimeter wall, Adrastos builds an army to attack Thebes with the goal of killing or banishing the regent Eteokles and restoring exiled Polyneikes to the Theban throne as the sole monarch for the rest of his days.⁴ This is the famous mythic expedition of the Seven Against Thebes which is depicted as having taken place in the heroic-age generation just before the generation of Trojan War heroes.

It opens with a speech of Eteokles, an authoritative call to armed defense of the city by all the able-bodied men. Eteokles shows himself to be a wise and prudent leader, calling on the citizens of his city to mount a strong counteroffensive defense for the salvation of the city and for the lives at stake (verses 1-38). The remainder of the Prologue (1-77) is composed of the speech of the scout who brings back to Eteokles his eyewitness account of the seven Argive armies surrounding the city, each army led by one of the seven Argive heroes at one of the seven named gates (39-68). Eteokles turns to the gods in prayer for the salvation of his city and its people (69-77).

³ Mentioned as husband-destroying by Pindar, *Nemean* 9, 16. Pindar and Aeschylus were contemporaries. The surviving refractions and fragments of the pre-Pindaric Amphiaraios-Eriphyle narrations are collected and discussed in Bruce Karl Braswell, *A Commentary on Nemean Nine* (New York -Berlin 1998) p.27ff. Braswell at p. 37 and n.38, who believed *Nemean* 9 was composed shortly before 470 BCE, characterizes *Seven Against Thebes* and *Nemean* 9 as "almost exactly contemporary."

⁴ Aeschylus has been said to have reduced the number of commanders of the Argive army from nine to seven, by not counting Adrastos in as one of the seven and leaving out Adrastos' brother Mekisteus. Cf. Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Epic* (Baltimore. Johns Hopkins UP 1993, paperback in 2 vols. 1996) pages 501-515 (citing Pausanias on this point). Aeschylus' seven fighting commanders, in the order described by Eteokles' Scout as standing at the gates are (1) Kalydonian Aetolian exile married to a sister of Adrastos, Tydeus (described in detail on a Theban embassy mission that seems to draw on an earlier epic version of "Seven [or some number of Argives] against Thebes," in a speech of Agamemnon in *Iliad* 4.372-400) at the Proitid Gate, (2) Kapaneus (Argive husband of Euadne, an Argive heroine and as daughter of Iphis a member of the Argive royal family) at the Electran Gate, (3) Argive Eteokles (listed in "Apollodorus" III,63 as a son of Iphis, who is at least related to Talaos, it seems, as Adrastos' sister Eriphyle is variously listed as descended from both, here Talaos, there Iphis) at the Neistan Gate, (4) Argive Hippomedon (according to "Apollodorus", said by some to be a son of Talaos, by others a son of Aristomakhos at the gate by the shrine of (Phoenician) Onca Athena, (5) Arcadian Parthenopaios at the North Gate by the Tomb of Amphion, (6) Amphiaraios at the Homoloid Gate, and (7) Polyneikes at the Seventh Gate (the Theban gate otherwise, as in "Apollodorus" III,65, known as the *Hypsistai*. or "Highest").

Enter the Chorus of young Theban maidens, mature enough to speak wisely and give Eteokles good counsel at turning points in the action. They deliver the first choral songs, the traditional Parodos (78-166)⁵ capped by short strophe and antistrophe (167-180). The structure of the remainder of the tragedy follows it would seem Aeschylus' Muse and sense of what comes next, rather than an ordinary pattern of clearly demarcated Epeisodia in speech verse and Stasima and other Choral Songs in lyrical meters. The following comments are offered by way of a non-exclusivist analysis: other breakdowns are defensible, but it is hoped that these divisions may be helpful to readers.

The first Epeisodion begins at verse 181 with Eteokles' addressing the Chorus. Eteokles does not respond well to the women's expressions of care and concern for their and the city's fate. His dismissal of the women's voices here gives the audience a hint of his ultimate downfall, that come from failing to heed the warnings, commands even, of the women. Although the Chorus, staged in this section as a dramatic character, not just voice of the community voicing commentary on the action of the drama, has many short groups of lines in lyric meters, the Epeisodion extends to verse 283, where Eteokles exits to inspect the city walls with its fabled seven gates.

The Chorus sings the first Stasimon (verses 287-368, followed by six lines in speech verse, iambic trimeter, transitioning to the second Epeisodion, 369-75, in which they announce the return of the Scout and Eteokles). The first Stasimon is a plaintive song expressing great fear and pity for Thebes and expanding vision of a dire outcome of the impending battle for the city, along with prospective captive women's laments.

The Second Epeisodion (verses 374-719) presents the results of the returning actors' surveys and especially the Scout's reconnaissance on the walls, with a sequence of seven subparts in which the Scout relates to Eteokles what he heard and saw, with especial attention to fighting words overheard and to the leaders' (Poyneikes' father-in-law Adrastos, the Argive ringleader who obviously stayed back, excepted),— the respective leader's individual locations outside the wall (by which gate, some named, others described by nearby landmark) and detailed descriptions of their shields emblazoned in all cases but one, Amphiaraios' (this hero's presence, overheard spoken words, and, interpreted, unmarked shield described at 568-596), with marvelous insignia [*sēmata*]. Following each report Eteokles dispatches a hero inside the walls to attack the leader described by the Scout. Between the exchanges the Chorus sings

⁵ The choral song delivered by the chorus during entrance into the orchestra. This and the other relatively set parts of Attic tragedies are given in Aristotle, *Poetics*, chapter 12, Bekker p.1452b14ff. Aristotle names the basic parts as *Prologos*, *Epeisodion*, *Stasimon*, and *Exodos*. *Stasima* ("standing-in-place songs") are the songs delivered by the chorus during the *Epeisodia* (acts between the *Parodos* and the last song of the chorus). The *Exodos* is the final act of a tragedy, the drama after the last song of the chorus. (The name is suggestive and may originally have meant the "chorus' exit-song".) Aristotle mentions another, optional, element—the *Kommos*, an antiphonal lament delivered by the chorus in the orchestra and actors on the stage. *Seven Against Thebes* includes a *Kommos* near the tragedy's conclusion. This taxonomy of "formal parts" of Attic Tragedy is somewhat reductive, as we observe transition and hybrid segments in the surviving Attic tragedies. Nevertheless, commentators routinely use Aristotle's terminology to the extent possible.

short reflections that punctuate the rhythm of the longest Epeisodion. Towards the end of this long act, the roles of Eteokles and the Chorus are reversed. The Chorus steps up to power and refuses to let Eteokles' inappropriate response to his brother's wing of the attack stand unchallenged—a response doomed to create pollution and bring himself and the city to ruin. In the telling line, verse 685, they address him a child. Later at verse 712 they tell him (the king who had bullied them in the opening Epeisodion) to listen to, and obey the women, the voice of reason. But the curses of Oedipus, praying for his sons' mutual destruction, a fixed element in the story of the Labdakidai since the *Thebais*,⁶ have cast a spell of madness and self-destruction [*atē*] on Eteokles. The seed of the royal family's ultimate ruin planted with Laios' disobedience to the Delphic oracle seems now to be coming to term in the third generation. The once proud helmsman of state, as he described himself in the Prologos, Eteokles exits the scene with an expression of defeatist resignation to a horrible fate, for himself, his family, and the whole Kadmeian city.

The second Stasimon of the Chorus follows at verses 720-791. This ode anticipates the fulfillment of the curses of Oedipus by Erinys and the stranger that came as a colonist from Scythia, Khalybos (steel). The recourse the miserable tale of the royal house of the Labdakidai, beginning with Labdakos' son Laios' defiance of the Pythian oracle, the doom [*moros*] Oedipus brought on himself—killing his father, marrying his mother—both of them mad—and now this wave of troubles like a sea with one wave falling and the next rising. It is a powerful choral ode that marks the catastrophe of the action, possibly the high point of the whole original tetralogy.

After the packed choral ode, the third Epeisodion (verses 792- 821) returns the Scout, as Messenger, to the stage. He relates the results of the battle. The Chorus responds with pensive dialogue, followed by the third Stasimon (822-956): prayers, laments, and somber reflections on the god of war (*Arēs*), steel (the sea-borne stranger issued from fire, sharpened), fateful curses [*arai*] and veering off-course and ruin [*Atē*].

There follows a Kommos (verses 857-1004), an antiphonal plaintive lament in which Antigone and Ismene, noted as appearing during the last Stasimon, exchange words expressing deep emotion and are joined in grief by the Chorus.

The remainder of the tragedy, as it has been received in the manuscript tradition, is in Aristotelian terminology, the Exodos. It begins at verse 1005 with the appearance of a second Messenger, who brings up new issues that exercise Antigone and Ismene. Different in tone, it gives the audience relief from an outer limit of sadness in drama reached by the time of the last Stasimon and the Kommos.

⁶ Scholion on Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1375 (line in the Sophoclean scene in which Oedipus “doubles down” on cursing Polyneikes) included in F.3 in Malcolm Davies, *The Theban Epics* (Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington DC 2014)(Appendix 2, p.138 f.)

Four fragments on different ancient papyri recovered from Oxyrhynchus suggest *Seven Against Thebes* was at least popular in postclassical Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity. In later antiquity, *Seven Against Thebes* was selected as one of a group of seven dramas of Aeschylus (out of at least seventy-three, perhaps as many as ninety titles including satyr plays, that would have been available in the Library of Alexandria), all tragedies, for an edition of selected dramas for reading and study (seven tragedies of Sophocles and ten tragedies of Euripides may have been selected about the same time. Following Wilamowitz, who surmised this happened in the second century CE, some think the same anonymous editor prepared select-play editions of all three major Attic tragedians for use in schools). Centuries later, apparently, another anonymous editor selected *Seven Against Thebes*, along with *Prometheus Bound* and *Persians*, as one of the three tragedies picked from the seven select plays (the “Byzantine triad” for Aeschylus). During Antiquity and during the Palaeologan Renaissance in Byzantium it was cherished by scholars and much read and studied in schools. Why was it so favored? We don’t have statements of the early editors, but one reason may have been that, like tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides included in corresponding Byzantine triads, it tells so much of the subject of the in Antiquity prized Theban epic *Thebais* (and *Epigonoí*, if that was a separate epic rather than a part of the *Thebais*), a highly praised lengthy epic poem attributed by Kallinos to Homer. *Seven Against Thebes* relates grippingly in a space of only about a thousand verses, many of them short cola of lyric verse, the last act of the House of Laios (sometimes named for Laios’ father Labdakos), at least according to Aeschylus’ version—in another version Polyneikes and his Argive wife Argeia had a son Thersandros (Pindar *Olympian* 2, 42-47) and in another version of the ancestry of Theron of Akragas, the tyrant descended from Eteokles (source: scholion Pindar, *Olympian* 2, 70f, Drachmann). *Seven Against Thebes* also contains choral reflections of the action that would have been presented onstage the same performance day in the first two tragedies of the tetralogy (three tragedies followed by the satyr play *Sphinx*). Today it is a great read (very moving in live reading in parts) both for the drama, including the characterizations of the heroes on both sides and the role-reversing character development of Eteokles and the Chorus of Theban maidens onstage, and for Aeschylus’ bold heroic poetry.

Correspondences with refractions in the tradition of the *Thebais* and with Euripides, Phoinissai, and with Sophocles, especially *Oedipus at Colonus*, have been reasonably explained by scholars as evidence of the Athenian poets’ drawing on the virtually lost epic *Thebais* for major features of the the stories dramatized onstage. Aeschylus follows the Thebaid tradition expressly when he has the Chorus causally connect Oedipus’ curses of his sons with the food they served him (verses 785ff.). The “Curses of Oedipus” or “Curse of Oedipus” became proverbial. The ancient proverb collector Zenobius⁷ includes Οἰδίποδος ἀρά [*Oidipodos arā* “Curse of Oedipus”] as a proverb variously explained, expressly, by Zenobius’ understanding of the *Seven Against Thebes* version (Zenobius echoes here the fragment of the *Thebais* preserved in the scholion to Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1375, and evidently less favored another version that accords more with Sophocles’ surviving *Oedipus at Colonus*). In all the surviving versions of the story,

⁷ Zenobius vulgatus V, 43 = Zenobius Athous 2,88, cited by Davies in F.3 of the *Thebais*, *op.cit.*

the curse(s) of Oedipus tell a cautionary tale of horrible endings coming of angry words and unforgiveness. In the *Thebais* the curse was uttered over the sons negligently serving a piece of shank rather than shoulder meat from a sacrifice, as was their custom, and the father feeling slighted. Ancient audiences of Aeschylus seem to have read *Seven Against Thebes* as following the *Thebais* closely on this point. The scholiast on the Sophocles scholion got the point that the old curse was over a trifle, but it spawned a huge catastrophe in the next generation for all concerned.