

# The Unity of the *Seven Against Thebes*

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THE OBVIOUS DIFFERENCE between the first (lines 1-652) and last (653-1004) parts of the *Seven Against Thebes* has been often discussed: yet the 'unity' or 'disunity' of the play is still in doubt. Two recent writers (Kitto, Harald Patzer)<sup>1</sup> illustrate the persisting disagreement. Kitto sees in 655f the 'sudden revelation' of the 'other side of Eteocles, his hatred of his brother, his inability and his unwillingness to control his mood and fatalistic leap upon his doom.' Patzer sees in the same lines Eteocles' *new* understanding of what the gods ordain: the duel with Polynices, impious as in one sense it may be, is yet divinely decreed; he now sees he cannot evade it. Both reject the older *communis opinio*<sup>2</sup> (Wilamowitz, Mazon, Snell, Pohlenz, Schmid, Murray, Méautis) that interprets 653-719 as Eteocles' own *free decision* to save the city and/or preserve his soldier's honor.

In this article I want, first, to outline the present situation of criticism or scholarship on the play and to suggest the lines along which, in my view, a sane interpretation of its 'unity' is now possible.

## I

One major milestone of modern criticism of the play was Solmsen's 1937 article on the "Erinyes in Aischylos' *Septem*."<sup>3</sup> Solm-

<sup>1</sup>H. D. F. Kitto: *Greek Tragedy* (1939) 51f; H. Patzer, "Die dramatische Handlung der *Sieben gegen Theben*," *HSClPh* 63 (1958) 97-119.

<sup>2</sup>Wilamowitz, *Aischylos-Interpretationen* (1914) 56ff; P. Mazon, *Eschyle* (Budé ed. vol. I [1931]) 104f; Pohlenz, *Die Griechische Tragödie* (1930) 80f; W. Schmid, *Griechische Literatur-Geschichte* v.I 2 (1934) 208f; G. Murray, *Aeschylus* (1940) 130f; G. Méautis, *Eschyle et la Trilogie* (1936) 100f; Snell, *Aischylos und das Handeln im Drama (Philologus, Supplementband XX Heft 1 [1928])* 78f.

<sup>3</sup>*TAPA* 68 (1937) 197-211.

sen here gave new emphasis to the radical shift in the character of the play after line 653 and showed the inadequacy of previous interpretation of the shift. He says: 'It is a mistake (amounting to a *petitio principii*) to think that his [*i.e.* Eteocles'] mode of behaving after 653 must be in some way foreshadowed in the preceding parts of the tragedy. On the contrary, the fact that previous to our scene Eteocles has all the characteristics of an ideal king and general adds to the tragic *ἔκπληξις* by making the onslaught of the Erinys all the more dreadful and appalling.'<sup>4</sup> It cannot, I think, be doubted that Solmsen here pointed to something that had been seriously neglected before. Wilamowitz<sup>5</sup> suggested the presence of two discrepant sources or traditions (one the first *Thebais* in which Eteocles is a Theban hero; another, the 'younger Epic,' in which he is the mere inheritor of an ancestral curse) and even of two different choruses (before and after line 653); and Croiset<sup>6</sup> saw in the earlier section of the play a deliberate and theatrically effective design to distract the audience's attention from the curse. But it cannot be said that most critics (*e.g.* Pohlenz, Murray, Snell) took the great 'discrepancy' of the play very seriously. By and large Eteocles remained for them the perfect hero whose decision after line 653 was in full harmony with his actions and words before that: 'Was ihn zwingt,' says Pohlenz, 'ist sein eigenes Pflicht — und Ehrgefühl.'<sup>7</sup> Between this and Kitto's view just cited there is an evident abyss. Pohlenz, in effect, sees no change in Eteocles' character, only the *decision* which this character imposes; Kitto sees a wholly new Eteocles — the mad avenger and hater — displacing the patriotic hero of the earlier part.

It is *prima facie* difficult to accept either view: there must be some reason for the apparent change of character, something that explains the evident truth behind *both* Pohlenz *and* Kitto. We cannot in other words explain the play simply by taking one part of it and imposing it on the other: if Aeschylus is not to be considered the grossest of dramatic bunglers, there must be some principle of unity which is broader and more inclusive than *either* part in itself.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.*, 202.

<sup>6</sup>M. Croiset, *Aeschyle* (Paris 1928) 118.

<sup>5</sup>*op.cit.* 66, 68.

<sup>7</sup>*op.cit.* (note 2) 91.

Perhaps the most considerable and well reasoned of very recent attempts to find such a principle of unity is the article of Harald Patzer already referred to. He starts by accepting Solmsen's more or less negative finding of disunity. The problem, he sees, is to account for the re-emergence of the Erinyes or Curse after line 653. He rejects (rightly I think) Kitto's view that Eteocles ruins himself before line 653 by progressively eliminating all alternative courses of action: *i.e.* when he makes the *best moral choices* for the first six gates, he fatally appoints himself to the seventh. Here Patzer accepts Wolff's thesis<sup>8</sup> that Eteocles has *already chosen* the defenders for each gate even before he could hear from the messenger who the corresponding attackers were. What therefore Eteocles learns from the messenger or spy is simply the true character of the curse which he had heretofore misunderstood or taken only in a general and impersonal way. He now sees (*i.e.* when he learns that Polynices is to meet him at his self-chosen post) that the *Curse* is unavoidably personal: he himself must fight Polynices and the gods themselves have decreed the *miasma* of fraternal murder. The chorus, of course, does not see the terrible reality, the fact that Apollo and the other Olympians insist on *this* fulfillment of the *Curse* as the only possible solution. The House of Laios must all go down in mortal destruction; as a result Thebes, the *polis*, will be saved. Eteocles is of course overwhelmed by his new and final understanding of the situation but he also accepts its necessity. He remains the patriot and warrior that he always was but his formerly uncomplicated patriotism is now shattered by the knowledge that his very duty to the *polis* requires the horror of fratricidal *miasma* and death.

I think myself that Patzer has here come close to a true solution of the problem of the play's unity. But he has not, I think, seen the

<sup>8</sup>Erwin Wolff, "Die Entscheidung des Eteokles in den *Sieben gegen Theben*," *HSCP* 63 (1958) 89-95. As Wolff shows, the language of Eteocles after l. 371 does not indicate that his choices for the gates have not been made but rather in fact have been made. The importance of this point is that it gives greater emphasis to the prophetic-interpretative element in the whole scene. Eteocles is not as Kitto thought, progressively eliminating all but himself from the seventh gate (and thus from the personal encounter with Polynices) but is rather constructing a prophetic justification of his own choices as he learns the identity of his opponents. But he does not realize what he is really doing until his own opponent is named.

full relation of the earlier to the later parts and particularly the crucial role of the gods in both parts. Though both Solmsen and Patzer have rightly insisted on the importance of the *Erinys* or *Ara* (Curse) in the second part (and in the whole trilogy), they have not seen the exact relationship of the Erinys to the Olympians and the City-Gods on which so much (as I see it) depends. Once we see that Eteocles is not only the champion of the *polis* and its gods but also the ordained victim of the Erinys, we can see the true conflict or *drama* of the play: it is, so to speak, a conflict of two rights which is resolved by the Olympians at Eteocles' expense. He, like Amphiaraus, is the good man who must die so that *dike* and the gods can prevail. But, unlike Amphiaraus, he is inextricably caught in a *miasma* which he cannot avoid even by dying. He could not under such circumstance accept with piety a dilemma so terrible. He could not 'flatter his fate' — *i.e.*, make pious professions of humble obedience to the gods — but he could and did accept it. In so doing, he raised, as Aeschylus intended him to raise, an acute theological problem: in what consist the justice and meaning of the Olympian gods? This is, I think, a perspective which enables us to make complete sense of *both* parts of the play, and to see its true unity and meaning.

## II

The prologue of Eteocles (1-38) shows us at once his attitude toward the gods:

4 εἰ μὲν γὰρ εὖ πράξαιμεν, αἰτία θεοῦ.

He is the King, the devoted, sleepless pilot of the city, but his 'success' is in the hands of the gods. His 'failure' would justly consign him to every possible opprobrium: 'from which may Zeus Preserver deliver the city!' (8-9). The impending struggle is one for everything dear and sacred: the city, the local gods, their children, their native Mother Earth. So far the god has been on their side (καὶ νῦν μὲν ἐς τὸδ' ἡμᾶρ εὖ ῥέπει θεός [21]): now the seer has prophesied the final great attack; it is a time for everyone's best, last effort.

Against this speech of patriotic piety, the Messenger or Spy now sets his report of enemy fury (39-68): seven furious (*θούριοι*) captains have sworn by Ares, Enyo and Phobos to take the city or die in the attempt. The contrast between the two sides is evident:

the one is invoking the good and just gods; the other the gods of war, panic and destruction.

To this report Polynices responds with a prayer (69-77):

69 ὦ Ζεῦ τε καὶ Γῆ καὶ πολιτισσοῦχοι Θεοί,  
 Ἄρά τ' Ἐρινὺς πατρὸς ἡ μεγασθενῆς,  
 μή μοι πόλιν γε πρυμνόθεν πανώλεθρον  
 ἐκθαμνίσητε κτλ.

His appeal is now to three sets of gods: (1) Zeus, (2) his own Earth and the city-gods, and (3) the Paternal Curse or Erinys.<sup>9</sup> The meaning seems to be clear: he is not praying to the *Curse* as to a simply beneficent divinity but to it, *along with the other gods*, for some help and concern for the city with which he (*μοι*) is wholly identified. Whatever the *Ara* may be or intend, it is to him part of that whole divine complex in whose power the city is. Altogether the gods cannot want to destroy a *Greek-speaking* city, a free land, Cadmus' *polis*! The thing seems, and is meant to seem, inconceivable in terms of any viable theodicy. *But Eteocles does not separate himself from the city or its fate.*

76 . . . ξυνὰ δ' ἐλπίζω λέγειν  
 πόλις γὰρ εἶ πράσσοῦσα δαίμονας τίει.

The phrase, *ξυνὰ δ' ἐλπίζω λέγειν* shows Eteocles as the very head and representative of the collectivity. It is almost as if he were saying to the gods: 'Help me because I can help you. I and the city are one.'

There thus seems no ground for supposing (as *e.g.* Méautis in particular supposes) that Eteocles, in here invoking the Curse, accepts his *own death* as the price of the city's safety. The *γε* in line 71 can hardly mean 'at least' in the sense that he separates the city's fate from his own, as if to say: 'Save *at least* the city, if not me.' Everything, on the contrary, indicates that Eteocles merges the city's fate in his own: he is the divinely sponsored king. So far from anticipating death, he expects to conduct the sacrificial

<sup>9</sup>On the nature of this Erinys cf. Solmsen, *Hesiod and Aeschylus* (Cornell Studies in Class. Phil. 30 [1949]) 186, 34. This Erinys is certainly not a symbol of Eteocles' conscience any more than the Erinyes of the *Orestia* were symbols of Orestes' conscience. It is a real deity as the fragment of the Cyclic *Thebais* (Allen, *Homeri Opera* V, p.113) also indicates:

αἴψα δὲ παισὶν ἐοῖσι μετ' ἀμφοτέροισιν ἐπαρὰς ἀργαλέας ἡράτο. θεῶν δ' οὐ λάθαν' ἐρινύν.

*τροπαίια* of victory and himself to bedeck the temples with the enemy spoils (271-78). It seems plain therefore that Patzer is right in supposing that Eteocles interprets the curse, that the brothers will divide their inheritance with iron (788-90), as a *general* prediction of strife between them. He does not grasp either its direct, personal meaning of fratricidal duel or its ominous application to the burial earth which the brothers at death will divide between them (732-3). Here as elsewhere in Greek tragedy, the prophecy remains ambiguous up to the moment of realization. Eteocles, rather, sees the curse operating against Polynices alone: by opposing his own *polis* and its gods, Polynices has forfeited the right to the support of either the Olympians or the paternal Erinys. The gods are here thought of by Eteocles as a unity whom he, as rightful king, represents.

The scene between Eteocles and the chorus (182-286) has sometimes been interpreted as evidencing harshness or even *hybris* in Eteocles: he certainly does not conceal his disdain for the yelling, panic-stricken women. But this is hardly tenable exegesis from the standpoint of a live theater. The women are simply beside themselves with fear: no true general or king could stand their cries and panicked exclamations, even their desperate invocations of the gods, without some reproof; it is not so much a matter of morale and discipline as of royal and military decorum. These women are, as Eteocles says, (186) *σωφρόνων μισήματα*. It is man's business to fight: theirs to keep out of the way. Yet here again Eteocles shows his complete misconception of his own role. 'Don't,' he tells them (223), 'be misguided (*μη . . . βουλεύου κακῶς*) in your appeal to the gods. Discipline (*πειθαρχία*) is the mother of success.' The chorus answers: 'Yes, but the God's power is greater still: often he succors a man plagued as by sudden storm in inextricable troubles.' And to this Eteocles replies:

230     ἀνδρῶν τὰδ' ἐστί, σφάγια καὶ χρηστήρια  
           θεοῖσιν ἔρδειν, πολεμίων πειρωμένους.  
           σὸν δ' αὖ τὸ σιγᾶν καὶ μένειν εἰσω δόμων.

He reveals here not only his concern for male as opposed to female prerogative: the word *ἀνδρῶν* reflects *himself* as opposed to *them*, reflects also his utter confidence in his own relationship

to the gods. He discounts the chorus' ominous reference to the *unexpected* action of the divine will; he almost gives the impression of having the gods under his own control. The *only* prayer he commends to the chorus is one for divine *alliance* (*συμμάχους εἶναι θεούς* [266]). Let the chorus sing in good Greek fashion the ritual litany of battle, the litany that makes courage and dispels fear. He himself will see to the fighting with his six warriors (282).

His decision to take one of the gates is surely not, as Kitto supposes, an 'alteration' of his original plan adopted as 'by-product . . . of the turbulence of the women'.<sup>10</sup> Nothing of the sort is even suggested and there was surely every reason for Polynices to participate actively in the defense. But the turbulence excited by the messengers (285) has definitely accelerated his schedule of action: he is now determined to appoint the six gate-defenders and himself, as seventh (283-6), before any more wild news or rumors can influence the people further. This seems to me a clear indication (in addition to the language, in itself rather ambiguous, of his later replies to the messenger) that he will make his decisions (as to the gates) at once, thus during the interval marked by the ensuing chorus (287-368) and *before* the great episode that begins at line 375.

The irony of Aeschylus in this Eteocles-chorus scene (182-286) is thus a most important indication of ensuing events. Eteocles stands out against the frenzied, emotional chorus as a supremely self-confident king and general. But his is a wholly misplaced self-confidence. Their insistence on the unpredictable character of events and the gods is far truer to the outcome than his stern self-reliance. Yet their weakness is as blind as his strength. Neither sees the truth or falsity of their own words. Neither has any inkling of the true role of the gods, of the relation of the Erinyes to the gods of the city or the Olympians. The fear of the chorus in the following stasimon (287-368) is only too justified, though the city will be saved. The action which Eteocles is so quick, even overquick, to take is the very fulfillment of that unexpected catastrophe which the chorus ignorantly dreads.

<sup>10</sup>*Op. cit.* 149.

## III

No episode of a Greek play, perhaps, has been more misinterpreted than that which runs from lines 369-718. Verrall,<sup>11</sup> Smyth<sup>12</sup> and (in his own way) Kitto are certainly correct in seeing here a crescendo of increasing horror as it becomes progressively clearer that Eteocles must face Polynices at the seventh gate. But this is the horror (or *ἔλεος καὶ φόβος*) of the audience, like the horror excited by the Cassandra episode in the *Agamemnon*. Eteocles does not know till the last moment that Polynices is to be his opponent. Yet it is not so much the gradual elimination of all alternatives to Eteocles' fatal self-assignment which is important as it is the gradual revelation of divine intention. As we have noted, Eteocles does not decide on the spur of the moment (as the messenger indicates *seriatim* the enemy's dispositions) where he will put his men: that has been already decided. But in both the enemy's dispositions (which were made by the lot, 55-6) and his own, he sees or attempts to see an omen or divine plan. He makes as it were a prophetic commentary — in a sense a theoretical disquisition — on each part of the messenger's speech. The terrible irony of the scene — indeed it is almost unbearable in its power — consists in his utter unawareness that he is thereby judging himself, decreeing, in effect, his own doom. He has set up, as it were, a schema of interpretation which he suddenly and horribly finds to be applicable also to himself. Yet the audience, as it watches, sees the whole frightful process coming to its inevitable conclusion. In a sense there is more tension here than in the Cassandra kommos itself: in both, Aeschylus makes us walk quite deliberately to the very edge of horror; no other dramatist has quite been able to bring off such an effect.

The scene begins with startling suddenness: Eteocles and the Messenger (or Spy) rush simultaneously into the orchestra. The Messenger now knows the correct dispositions of the enemy: Eteocles is naturally wildly eager to hear them (373-4).

The first five besieging captains (Tydeus, Capaneus, Eteoklos, Hippomedon, Parthenopaios) are much alike. Each reveals an

<sup>11</sup>A. W. Verrall, introduction to his edition of the play, p. xxx.

<sup>12</sup>H. W. Smyth, *Aeschylean Tragedy* (Berkeley 1921).



insolence, a *hybris* that disdains both men and gods. Against them, Eteocles finds it easy to justify his own corresponding choices (Melanippos, Polyphontes, Megareus, Hyperbios, Aktor). Aeschylus here was not concerned to bring out differences between the five members of each opposing set but to let Eteocles' self-assured role of prophet and moralist gradually establish itself. This part of the episode is, so to speak, the 'buildup' for the ensuing dénouement.

Tydeus, the first of the opposing captains, is the picture of unconsidered battle-fury: his harness, the bells on his shield, the emblem of the night-sky and moon, typify his wanton self-confidence. The gods (or omens) are clearly against him, but he bitterly reviles the warning of the good seer, Amphiaraus, and accuses him of 'flattering death and battle through his own cowardice' (σαίνειν μόρον τε καὶ μάχην ἀψυχία [383]). To him Eteocles opposes a warrior, Melanippos, 'who honors the throne of Shame (Αἰσχύνης) and hates haughty words.' Melanippos is a true Theban — a true offspring of the dragon's teeth. His success lies with the dice of Ares but he has been sent by his native *Justice* (Δίκη ὁμαίμων) to defend his motherland. As for Tydeus, Eteocles gives the obvious interpretation of his emblem: the night he brandishes on his shield forecasts the night of his own death. His very folly (ἀνοία) has thus made him the prophet of his own fate:

406 καὐτὸς καθ' αὐτοῦ τήνδ' ὕβριω μαντεύσεται.

Thus the despiser of prophecy is prophet *malgré lui*. Hybris, as usual, has blinded its victim.

We need not underline the irony here: Eteocles has now set up the pattern of interpretation which will have so fatal a personal application. He is of course no Tydeus (indeed it is the very enormity of Tydeus' hybris which enhances Eteocles' own sense of moral superiority) but he has enunciated the fatal principle that a man's destiny is revealed in his actions and insignia, blind as he may be to their true meaning. The gods (as Eteocles sees it) deceive the man whom they are about to destroy. On the other hand this principle also determines the choice and successful destiny of such a man's opponents. Eteocles here is *not* (as Kitto supposes) picking Melanippos on the spur of the moment and in direct reaction to the messenger's report (that Tydeus will lead the attack on the first

gate). Actually both choices (Tydeus and Melanippus) have already been made (as we learn from 55-6 and 283-6). Rather, Eteocles is *interpreting* the choices as prophetic indications of the future. He sets himself up so to speak, as the very mouthpiece of fate and the gods, so wholly has he identified himself and his own morality with that of the divine power guarding the destiny of Thebes.

Capaneus, the attacker of the second gate, is the true despiser of the gods. His boastfulness (*κόμπος*) takes the form of religious indifference: he will sack the city, whether the gods will or no. He likens Zeus' thunderbolts to the midday heat. His emblem is a naked man with a torch and the inscription: *I will burn the city*. Of course Eteocles gives the obvious interpretation: this mortal who sends such haughty words to heaven will himself be the victim of Zeus' fire. To him the God-fearing Polyphontes is fitly opposed. Again, Eteocles is blind to any personal application. Could the gods be against him? Can *he* be called a despiser of the gods? Has he ever boasted indifference to Zeus? This at least is the tacit or negative premise of his discourse, though such questions obviously do not enter his conscious mind at all.

The third hostile captain, Eteoklos, is not markedly different from Capaneus. He again boasts against the gods: 'not even Ares,' so speaks his shield, 'could hurl me from the battlements.' And against him is appropriately placed the modest Megareus whose *kompos* is in his hands, not mouth. But the fourth, Hippomedon — another gigantic and delirious devotee of carnage — bears the emblem of the monstrous Typhoeus, who is belching smoke on a shield girdled with interlaced serpents. And to him is opposed Hyperbios, whose emblem is the enthroned Zeus. Eteocles, at this, can hardly withhold an overt prediction of victory: it is surely Zeus against Typhoeus, the victorious against the defeated god:

515     τοιάδε μέντοι προσφίλεια δαιμόνων.  
           πρὸς τῶν κρατούντων δ' ἔσμέν, οἱ δ' ἠσσημένων.

But after the fifth comparison, of the impious Parthenopaeus with the modest Aktor, which raises Eteocles' expectation of deserved victory to a wish which is really a confident prayer:

550     εἰ γὰρ τύχοιεν ὦν φρονοῦσι πρὸς θεῶν,  
           αὐτοῖς ἐκείνοις ἀνοσίους κομπάσμασιν,

the pattern abruptly changes with the very first words of the Messenger:

568 ἔκτον λέγοιμ' ἄν ἄνδρα σωφρονέστατον.

Amphiaraus is the perfect man and prophet caught in the grip of tragic circumstance. He upbraids Tydeus, and in a remarkable speech reminds Polynices of his dreadful impiety to his native city and its gods. As for himself, he predicts honorable death:

589 οὐκ ἄτιμον ἐλπίζω μόρον.

His shield has no emblem: he wants to *be*, not *seem* a hero (*ἄριστος*). Of course, the irony is intense: in the very act, so to speak, of enhancing Eteocles' confidence by condemning Polynices and in effect predicting his defeat, Amphiaraus presents Eteocles with a prophetic analogy of his own fate. But Amphiaraus has mastered the difference between appearance and reality: Eteocles is still deluded. He does not see anything but the surface: to him Amphiaraus is simply the good man in bad company. When Zeus wills it, the one is dragged in the same net as the other:

614 Διὸς θέλοντος ξυγκαθελκυσθήσεται.

Amphiaraus knows, says Eteocles, that he must die if Loxias' oracles are to bear fruit (617-18). He is a seer accustomed to keep still or say only what is appropriate:

619 φιλεῖ δὲ σιγᾶν ἢ λέγειν τὰ καίρια.

It might almost seem that Eteocles should, at this point, have grasped the truth. But he is in fact blinded to it by his false premises. Identified with the *polis* as he is, he can see in all the signs which point toward Theban victory only *his* own victory as well. In this sense, Amphiaraus is the final, clinching confirmation of his hopes: here was a prophet predicting the defeat of his own side, justifying Eteocles' own position and reasserting the definite allegiance of the gods to Thebes. It was unfortunate that so good a man should be doomed by a bad cause — Eteocles was himself a good man who could appreciate Amphiaraus — but after all, it was also lucky for Thebes *and* Eteocles. That Amphiaraus' fate revealed the ambiguity of divine justice, the lot of all good men who suffer, and thus applied also to himself — of this Eteocles has no suspicion. He cannot, like Amphiaraus, separate himself from his cause. Nor does he see at all the difference between the true

seer who knows what he says and the 'self-made' prophet that he himself is. In fact he is a prophet who cannot understand his own (objectively true) prophecies. He has now been confronted with both the bad man (Tydeus, *et al.*) whose *hybris* invites his own doom and with the good man who in his piety and humility accepts his own doom. The one is deluded by fate: the other is not. But Eteocles is not warned by either example. Oedipus' curse, he thinks, is not to be put in the same category as Loxias' oracles. That Apollo might enact the curse and enact it against himself — of this he has no inkling at all. His identification of his own fate with that of his *polis* and its gods remained absolute and unshaken. The blank of Amphiaraus' shield is blank to him.

The great blow now falls upon Eteocles in a few bald words:

631 τὸν ἔβδομον δὴ τόνδ' ἐφ' ἐβδόμαις πύλαις  
λέξω, τὸν αὐτοῦ σου κασίγνητον . . .

Polynices, unlike Tydeus, Capaneus *et al.*, uses the language of piety and morality. He will either die in killing his brother or drive him into merited exile (636-7). His vengeance is just: he calls on the family gods of his paternal land (θεοὺς γενεθλίους . . . πατρώας γῆς) for help and his emblem is a female *Dike* leading a man-in-arms (himself) with the motto: 'I will bring back the man and he shall have his city and paternal home.'

Eteocles now sees the point. In three lines he expresses both his grief and his horror.

653 ὦ θεομανές τε καὶ θεῶν μέγα στύγος,  
ὦ πανδάκρυτον ἄμὸν Οἰδίπου γένος'  
ᾧμοι, πατρὸς δὴ νῦν ἄραὶ τελεσφόροι.

His father's curse, he *now* sees, involves his own death. Polynices has boasted that he will either die in killing him or will drive him into exile: the latter alternative clearly implies the prior taking and destruction of the city and thus constitutes no option for the patriotic Eteocles. Furthermore Eteocles had already chosen his position at the seventh gate: so the gods, by giving to Polynices the lot for this same gate, have clearly shown their intentions. The Destiny that Eteocles saw in the choices of Tydeus, Melanippus and the rest he now sees is applicable also to himself and Polynices. The curse is not to be resolved in the general conflict but in a hand

to hand death-duel between the brothers. The land they are to divide is to be, not the whole country, but only the space of their own graves. Finally it is not hard to 'prophesy' from Polynices' shield. Here the principle that the shield-emblems forecast their bearers' fates turns out to have a terrible personal application. If Polynices' 'justice' requires his return and Eteocles' exile or death, Eteocles' justice, the true justice of the *polis*, requires Polynices' defeat and death. Everything indicates the hand of the gods, of the Olympians as well as the family Erinys. All that remains for Eteocles to do is to kill Polynices and save the city: his own death is certain and is now taken for granted.

This speech (653-76) of Eteocles is thus *both* analogous to his former responses to the Herald (à propos of the preceding six sets of antagonists) *and* very different from them. The Herald leaves at 652 after quoting the boast of Polynices and exculpating himself from all blame: 'don't blame *me* for reporting the news,' he adds, 'I quote what *he* says: σὺ δ' αὐτὸς γνώθι ναυκληρεῖν πόλιν.' Thus Eteocles is no longer in a position to respond to the Messenger: it is even doubtful that his speech (653f) is to be taken as addressed to the chorus. It is rather his own inner response to his own fate. Characteristically he meets the terrible news with grim fortitude:

656 ἄλλ' οὔτε κλάειν οὔτ' ὀδύρεσθαι πρέπει.

The immense irony of Polynices' appeal to Δίκη strikes him first, that he, the least just of men, should appeal to justice! Then, in haste (for the point is now obvious enough), Eteocles makes the expected 'interpretation' of the emblem, that he himself is the truly *just* opponent of such perverted 'justice': τίς ἄλλος μᾶλλον ἐνδικώτερος; He savors the irony of his situation to the full: he as ruler, brother, enemy is altogether the *just* opponent (674-5). That Δίκη demands fratricide — that the Olympians and the Erinys both demand it — is now, he sees clearly, the ultimate truth which he must face. To read the speech, with Kitto, as mere fury or hatred of his brother is surely to miss its ferocious irony: it is not Eteocles' mad desire to fight his brother, but his tragic sense of the necessity and certain outcome of the conflict which drives him to such ironical bitterness. This, this, he finally sees, is *justice* — the justice which

he, in his triple capacity of ruler, brother and enemy, must now carry out!

But the chorus does not see what has happened. It urges Eteocles to refrain from the *miasma* of blood-guilt (680-2): his decision to fight Polynices is, as the chorus sees it, a *κακὸς ἔρωσ*, an *ὠμοδακῆς ἕμερος*; Eteocles must wait until the enemy calms down (705-8) or the gods are appeased by sacrifices (700-1). But Eteocles knows that his fate is unavoidable: if one can avoid an evil without shame, one should, for honor is the only glory one gains from death (683-5); but death with honor is now the only one possible course open to him. The paternal Erinys is poised to strike: the best thing is to die at once (697). He sees with a clarity quite denied the chorus that not only the Erinys but the gods are against him: all they want from him is his death and he will not fawn upon them in pursuit of an impossible security:

702     θεοῖς μὲν ἤδη πως παρημελήμεθα,  
           χαρὶς δ' ἀφ' ἡμῶν ὀλομένων θανμάζεται  
           τί οὖν ἔτ' ἂν σαίνοιμεν ὀλέθριον μόρον;

The nature of Eteocles' dilemma — and the one possible solution of it — is set forth in 718-19: the chorus asks him if he is willing to spill a brother's blood; he replies that one cannot escape the doom that the *gods* send:

θεῶν διδόντων οὐκ ἂν ἐκφύγοις κακά.

The ensuing stasimon (720-91) depicts and forebodes the total doom of the house of Laius. The *ὠλεσίοικος θεός*, the paternal Erinys, is not, as the chorus sees it, like the other gods (*οὐ θεοῖς ὁμοίαν*). It wills in its terrible harshness to fulfill the curse of the demented Oedipus. But all goes back to the ancient folly (*ἀβουλία*) of Laius when he disregarded the thrice reiterated oracle. The waves of disaster have grown with each generation and the city itself, Thebes, is threatened with its royal house. It is clear that the chorus has no understanding of the true situation, that the doom of the brothers will not bring on, but rather ward off, the fall of the city. It does not see what Eteocles has seen, that his death is decreed by the gods — not merely by the paternal Erinys — as the very condition of the city's safety. This in fact is the 'death with honor' of which Eteocles had just spoken.

The messenger now tells them the truth: Thebes is safe; Eteocles and his brother are dead. The grim curse has been fulfilled with the most terrible literalism: the property they have divided with Scythian iron is the earth of their own graves. It is now made clear who is finally responsible. All has gone well at six gates: at the seventh, Apollo has himself been the commander, *ἔβδομαγέτης*, and has himself avenged the ancient errors of Laius (*παλαιὰς Λαΐου δυσβουλίας* [802]). The 'unholy alliance' of Erinys and Apollo, of the dark family vengeance deity and the Olympians, has now been finally and completely revealed.

The chorus still does not grasp the meaning of what has happened: it is torn between joy for the god's saving of the city, sorrow for the terrible calamity of the house of Laius:

ὦ μεγάλε Ζεῦ πολιοῦχοι  
 δαίμονες οἳ δὴ Κάδμου πύργους  
 <ἔθελήσατε> τοῦσδε ῥύεσθαι  
 825 πότερον χαίρω κάπολολύξω  
    πόλεως ἀσινεῖ Σωτήρι;  
 ἢ τοὺς μογεροὺς καὶ δυσδαίμονας  
    ἀτέκνους κλαύσω πολεμάρχους  
 οἳ δῆτ' ὀρθῶς κατ' ἐπωνυμίαν  
 830 καὶ πολυνεικέϊς  
    ὄλοντ' ἀσεβεῖ διανοία;

But it is the sorrow which predominates: the play ends in a long *θρήνος* or lament for the fallen dynasty. The character of Eteocles is in fact finally overshadowed by the doom of his family. To the chorus everything is so charged with horror, that it quite fails to make sense of the whole tragedy. There is no attempt to penetrate the meaning of events, no approach to a true Theodicy. The role of Apollo or Zeus is left in a murky obscurity.

#### IV

If this interpretation of the play is correct — and it is seemingly borne out by the text — there can be no question of the play's real unity. What differentiates the patriotic Eteocles of lines 1-652 from the desperate man of the following part is simply his new understanding of his situation, of his true relation to both Erinys and

Olympians, which breaks upon him when he discovers who his own opponent will be. He sees and rightly sees in the 'chance' which puts Polynices at the seventh gate the very hand of both gods and Erinys. And this interpretation of the messenger's statement is, of course, reinforced by every other detail: the reported behavior, above all the shield-emblem, of his brother, especially when set in the prophetic context in which the previous shield-emblems have already been seen and interpreted, make the point unmistakably clear.

To resist such evident omens and even such a direct, personal challenge would not be prudence, but cowardice. Given his character as previously set forth, his devotion to the city and his responsibility as its ruler, he cannot do other than die with honor. It is not he who has sought or seeks the *miasma* of fraternal bloodshed: it is the *ara* which dooms his house and with which, he now sees, the gods have fully co-operated. Thebes and its gods no longer depend on his safety: *its* safety, on the contrary, demands his own destruction. The irony of the situation for a moment overcomes him, but his resolve is scarcely shaken. Under such circumstances, the chorus' plea that he wait until the Erinys shall relent or the gods may be appeased by sacrifices, can hardly be expected to impress him. He at least will not 'flatter' or wheedle his fate (704).

Yet in this very phrase (*σαίνειν μόρον*) there lurks an ominous note. Tydeus, as we have seen, accused Amphiaraus

383 *σαίνειν μόρον τε καὶ μάχην ἀψυχία*

because that seer forbade him to cross the Ismenos and begin battle: the offerings were unfavorable (379). So when Eteocles declares to the chorus that the only *χάρις* the gods want from him is his death and adds:

704 *τί οὖν ἔτ' ἂν σαίνοιμεν ὀλέθριον μόρον;*

he repeats in effect the taunt of Tydeus. We can, in a sense understand this grim response of Eteocles: the gods indeed have cruelly disappointed him. But was not Amphiaraus also as cruelly placed, doomed as he was to die in a bad cause with his eyes open? Yet he remained to the last the seer whose piety seemed not far from cringing servility to a man like Tydeus. The contrast between Eteocles and Amphiaraus is thus revealing indeed. We can say,



of course, that Amphiaraus *was* and Eteocles *was not* a professional prophet (μάντις) but there was also something in Eteocles which blinded him to the reality of his fate and thus made him misinterpret his true relation to the gods and the city. This is why his death lacks the tragic grace which is so evident in Amphiaraus' last words:

589      μαχώμεθ', οὐκ ἄτιμον ἐλπίζω μόρον.

It is the difference between angry defiance and pious resignation. Eteocles' error was excessive self-confidence and self-reliance: he had been too sure of himself, too convinced of his own indispensability as ruler or 'pilot' of the city. He had confused the will of the gods with his own will. And this is why, in his final disillusionment, he still remains self-willed, the 'master of his fate,' with only a sneer for the gods whose design he has so terribly misunderstood.

But we must not magnify this 'error' or *hamartia* of Eteocles. What Apollo punished at the seventh gate was the 'ancient error of Laius' (παλαιὰς Λαίου δυσβουλίας). There is no indication that Eteocles himself had committed any sin that deserved so terrible a retribution. Was he responsible for Oedipus' curse? Had he really maltreated his father? We do not know what the previous play, the *Oedipus*, had to say on this point. But the chorus of the *Seven*, at any rate, represents the curse as an act of frenzied senility (725, 781f). There may have been a fault but it seems obviously out of proportion to the doom which Oedipus called down upon Eteocles as well as Polynices. Had Eteocles been unjust to his brother and unfairly provoked his flight from Thebes? The answer of the *Seven* is, on the contrary, that Eteocles is a far better man than the impious Polynices (here the words of Amphiaraus, 580f, surely reflect the poet's own judgment on Polynices) and in no sense deserved the same doom. The fact seems to be that Apollo and the Olympians, in accepting and implementing the *Ara* of Oedipus, are condemning not so much Eteocles as his whole family. It is all the 'ancient error of Laius.' The gods' design was to save the city by destroying the family; to pacify the Erinys by exhausting its fury in the total destruction of the house of Laius. It is clear that this is in fact accomplished in the play that Aeschylus wrote. The subsequent (post-Aeschylean) addition of Antigone and the burial

question is of course quite out of place in a drama concerned only with the male line: in fact the joint burial of the brothers is taken for granted; they have finally divided their native earth between them!<sup>13</sup>

Nor can we, as we have already seen, suppose that Eteocles had any real option when he rebuffed the chorus and decided to face death at the seventh gate. The presence of Polynices there is the sign of his fate, of the gods' will. His disposition of the defenders had already been made: could he now change them because he sees his brother is his designated enemy? On the contrary he sees here both a true omen and a clear duty. He cannot withdraw without shame. The gods have placed him in a situation where retreat is impossible for anyone but a coward. And he is no coward. Here, as so often in Greek tragedy, character is a part of destiny.

In short, we cannot approach the *Seven*, especially the whole trilogy of which the *Seven* is the concluding part, simply in terms of the Aristotelian *hamartia*. Eteocles probably was overconfident but he is not doomed because of his overconfidence. The Olympians do not necessarily accept the morality of the *Erinys* or *Ara*. Indeed Aeschylus is at pains to emphasize its madness or irrationality (*τὰς περιθύμους κατάρως Οἰδιπόδα βλαψίφρονος*, [724-5]).<sup>14</sup> So the play, though indeed a unity as we have seen, reveals also a moral incompleteness. There is no true reconciliation of gods (the paternal *Erinys*, the Olympians) or rights (the Family, the City) but a temporary and rather 'unholy' alliance of different gods by which the destructiveness of one (the *Erinys*) effects the political purpose of the other (the salvation of Thebes). Eteocles is in some sense a victim or scapegoat.

This would not, perhaps, matter if Aeschylus were concerned only to give some color of guilt to Eteocles, as if, *e.g.*, he were really the erring but good hero of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Eteocles is not perfect: he presumes, as we have seen, on his position and overdoes his patriotic identification with the *polis*. But Aeschylus has, surely, much more than this in mind. He is a theologian as well as dramatist. The *Seven* has to be seen in a perspective whose terminus

<sup>13</sup>See the recent discussion of this problem by Walter Pötscher ("Zum Schluss der *Sieben gegen Theben*," *Erano*s 66 [1958] 140-154).

<sup>14</sup>Cf. also the account of the *ara* in the *Thebais* (Allen, *op.cit.* 113).

is the *Oresteia*. There the moralities of Erinyes and Olympians are sharply separated: there the *dike* of the *polis* embraces also the rights of the individual; there the theological problem (the opposition of Erinyes and Olympians) is worked out. But we can see some evidence of Aeschylus' development toward this solution in the plays which intervened (*i.e.* in the plays written between 467 and 458).

I do not wish, in this article, to debate again the question of the date of the *Suppliants*.<sup>15</sup> I shall assume that Lesky (and others) are correct in putting it at or about 463. I shall *assume* also that the *Prometheia* probably belongs somewhere in this period (*i.e.* between 467 and 458).<sup>16</sup> If these assumptions are correct, then it is certainly possible to see (without overstraining the texts) a rather evident development of ideas.

It seems clear (whatever else is not clear) that the *Suppliants* arrays two rights and two wrongs against each other: the sons of Aegyptus are obviously rash and insolent, both in relation to the Danaids and to the Argives; but the Danaids, in turn, are quite unreasonably opposed to marriage and Aphrodite, as the *Therapinae* inform them. Accommodation seems to have been possible without war, had both sides been reasonable or *sophrones*. At any rate, both

<sup>15</sup>See the brief bibliography of this question in Lesky, *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen* (1956) p. 59 (note) and the summary presentation in Mette, *Die Fragmente der Tragödien des Aischylos*, pp. 42-43. Emily Wolff ("The date of Aeschylus' Danaid Tetralogy," *Eranos* 56 [1958] 119-139 and 57 [1959] 6-34) has rediscussed the whole question at some length. Aside from the stylistic considerations advanced particularly by Earp, *The Style of Aeschylus* (1948), the other grounds for an early dating of the play relate, mostly, to the role of the chorus and the dramatic technique. All too little attention, in my opinion, has been given to the fact that, as compared with the *Persae*, the *Suppliants* is truly *dramatic*: not only the winning of asylum from Pelasgos but the sharp conflict with the Herald of the Egyptians show a tension and dramatic suspense quite absent from the relatively 'static' *Persae*. The domination of the chorus (and thus the 'lyric' character of the play) is explained by the chorus's dramatic role: it is the play's true protagonist. But perhaps most important of all as an argument for late dating is the conception of Zeus set forth ll. 85ff and 524ff.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Lesky's discussion of the literature (*op.cit.* 11 n.2). When all is said and done, we have *no* objective grounds for dating the play. That it shows a conception of Zeus later than that of the *Oresteia* seems to me as improbable as that it shows one earlier than that of the *Seven*. The purely *stylistic* peculiarities of the play do not really help us with the date. I think the most persuasive argument for dating the *Prometheus* very close to the *Suppliants* has been advanced by R. D. Murray Jr. (*The Motif of Io in Aeschylus' SUPPLIANTS* [1958] 48-55 and Appendix A pp. 88-97). The similarity of themes (especially Io) is close. I think also that Murray's whole argument (though perhaps overly schematic) is quite convincing.

the war and the nuptial murder which presumably ensues in the following play (*Aegyptioi*) are clearly great crimes. But the one innocent party, Hypermnestra, is defended by Aphrodite herself, presumably with the full support of Zeus. Here a family dispute involving great danger to a *polis* (Argos) is overcome through the support of human innocence by the Olympians. There is, so far as we know, no family curse (in the sense of the *Seven* or *Oresteia*) but there is at least a set of family wrongs which is overcome by a combination of human morality and divine assistance. There is a clear distinction of the guilty and the innocent and an equally clear theodicy.<sup>17</sup>

The problem of the *Prometheia* is concerned with gods rather than men. It seems evident by now (though there is never really such a thing as 'true' or admitted 'progress' in the understanding of the classics) that the *Prometheus Bound* is genuine Aeschylus and that he clearly did not intend (as *e.g.* Farnell thought) to represent Zeus as a simply immoral divinity.<sup>18</sup> He is however a 'new' god without (as yet) true compassion or true justice. We cannot strain the play to the point of eliminating the evident injustice with which Zeus has dealt with both Prometheus and mankind. Yet is it almost unimaginable that Aeschylus would have depicted Zeus in this way, had he not had in mind a moral resolution of some sort. The very emphasis of the *Prometheus Bound* — *e.g.* the obviously sympathetic

<sup>17</sup>See the reconstruction of the Danaid trilogy by Emily A. Wolff (*op.cit.*). This seems to me most doubtful at several places, especially in her tentative assumption that the 'reconciliation' with which the trilogy ends demanded no trial or 'punishment' of the guilty Danaids but a kind of 'kindly compulsion.' She misses the true point at issue when she says: 'With our modern attitude toward romantic love, we are apt to think of the bride-race as a punishment,' and then suggests that 'the Danaids are precious prizes for whom their suitors compete freely.' But the fact is that they commit a *crime* (by murdering their husbands) which cannot be left unpunished. Somehow the difference between Hypermnestra and the other Danaids had to be made clear.

<sup>18</sup>L. R. Farnell, "The Paradox of the *Prometheus Vincetus*" (*JHS* 53 [1933] 40-50). Cf. Kitto's reply to Farnell (*JHS* 54 [1934] 14-20) and Lesky, *op. cit.* 80-1. H. Lloyd-Jones ("Zeus in Aeschylus," *JHS* 76 [1956] 55-67) suggests that Zeus simply did a 'deal' with Prometheus and that there was no 'change' of character. But Lloyd-Jones' view of Aeschylus' Zeus and of Aeschylean ethics and religion is hardly tenable, as I think. He wholly denies that Aeschylus' conception of Zeus contains anything 'that is new'. In fact, to Lloyd-Jones Aeschylus is no different from Hesiod or Homer and all talk of Aeschylus' 'theology' is so much fatuity. There is a certain plausibility in Lloyd-Jones' argument: it is, we may say, an argument of the hard-boiled, no-nonsense variety. But it would reduce Aeschylus to a very mediocre figure.

way in which the Oceanides, Io and Prometheus himself are depicted and the obvious harshness of Hermes — point to the ‘problematic’ character of the whole trilogy: it is, in other words, a play about competing rights and wrongs which are, for that very reason, real rights and wrongs. Zeus, at the start of the play, is acting much like Chronos and Ouranos; despite the wise advice and aid of Prometheus, he still depends on force and brute power and scarcely at all on justice and morality. If he continues as he has begun, there seems to be no reason why the Curse (*Ara*) of the vanquished Chronos will not finally work his overthrow. Prometheus, in his turn, rejoices in this prospect: he envisages and desires no other future but that revealed to him by his mother Themis. He disdains the mediation of Oceanus. His knowledge of the secret of the curse (Thetis etc.) is thus his main weapon against Zeus’ brute power. There is, on neither side, the least concern with accommodation or a viable peace.

Evidently this is a situation which has to be radically changed. If Zeus was to escape the fate as well as the curse of Chronos, he had not merely to learn the Promethean secret but, first, to behave in such a way as to persuade or convert those who did know it. Force alone cannot accomplish this. This is what the *Prometheus Bound* has clearly shown. Thus there is a very good reason to believe that Zeus eventually changes his attitude and obtains by persuasion and justice what he cannot get otherwise. In that case Prometheus will also relent and will accept Zeus’ authority fully and freely; there will be no need to help mankind by defying Zeus since Zeus himself will have become both just and philanthropic. Justice then, as Aeschylus seems to see it, is a problem for *both* men and gods; there can be no human morality without a theodicy and no theodicy without a divine drama behind it. In other words: Aeschylus did not simply (like Pindar) deny the ‘bad’ side of popular religion and mythology or, like Hesiod, set ‘moral’ and ‘amoral’ conceptions of the gods in simple juxtaposition; he recognized in the religious traditions a genuine problem, which required a *dramatic* solution. This may not be the ‘development’ of character at which so many interpreters of the *Prometheia* have boggled but there is no reason why it can not be a dramatic change or decision

that in effect gives us a new Zeus, a Zeus whose authority no longer rests solely on force. Indeed it is difficult to see what else it can be.

So both the trilogy of the *Suppliants* and the trilogy of the *Prometheus Bound* supply us with a true theodicy: in the one case (the *Suppliants* trilogy), the only truly innocent character is recognized and saved by the Olympians; in the other, an ancient Curse is made the vehicle of a shift in inter-divine relations by which essential justice is done to both gods and men. The problem of the innocent or at least partially innocent victim is seen and solved in terms of Olympian morality; the problem of an amoral divine order is solved by the establishment of a moral divine order. In short, the *Suppliants* and the *Prometheus* are parts of trilogies which in effect give moral solutions to the tragic conflict which the *Seven* (and thus the whole trilogy of which it is the conclusion) leaves unsolved.

But was Aeschylus aware of this moral problem when he wrote the *Seven*? The ending seems to show that he was. Τάλαν γένος says one semi-chorus (992): τάλανα παθόν answers the other. The long θρήνος at the end expresses a perplexity at the 'doubtful doom' of man to which the poet as yet sees no answer. It is Ate, cries the chorus, who has pitched her trophy at the seventh gate: \*Ατας τροπαῖον ἐν πύλαις (956). Yet the chorus also knows that it is Apollo himself who has wreaked the havoc there (Messenger speech, 800-2). It is just this sense of frustrated theodicy that the *Seven* reveals and which in fact makes it a tragedy. Eteocles is the good man who wakes from false confidence to ruinous certainty. To Sophocles this was quite enough for a good tragedy and for Aristotle this is the very essence of a good tragedy. But for Aeschylus it was but the first halting step toward the satisfactory conclusion of a trilogy. The *Eumenides* is thus the goal of his dramaturgy but it is, for this very reason, no tragedy.

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