

Polis as Player in Aeschylus' Seven Against Thebes

This paper will focus on the city in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and argue that the city itself plays a prominent role not just in locating the action, but also in participating in it as a fundamental part of the curse on the house of Laius. Previous scholarship has focused on the absence of Polynices as a speaking character in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*: some have argued that his absence indicates Aeschylus' sole focus on Eteocles (Kitto 1966, 47), even denying any rightful claim to *dike* on Polynices' part (cf. Gagarin 1976, 122 n. 11). The implication of this stance is that Eteocles' death is predicated solely on Oedipus' curse on his sons (785-787) and is not caused by any wrongful action on his part.

Contrary to this view, I will argue that Eteocles' death is caused by his mistreatment of the city, and I will suggest that this type of mistreatment is the driving force behind the curse on the family. Aeschylus' emphasis on intergenerational misfortune is well-known as the basis on which his trilogies are built, and scholarly attention has revolved around human action and interaction as the manifestations of intergenerational conflict. I will argue that, in addition to the human players, the city of Thebes must also be understood as an active participant in and focal point of this intergenerational narrative.

This paper will explore the various personifications of the city, first as mother and caretaker in Eteocles' opening speech (10-15), and later more general ones that speak of the city as one entity (793, 803, 900) comprising its physical structures (795, 901). The characterization of the city in these lines is such that the city is one body, with one will and single purpose. Eteocles, although his intentions to protect the city seem admirable, errs by equating protection of the city with protection of himself. I will then argue that the personification of city as mother, along with the unusual prevalence of earth-imagery (cf. Thalmann 1978, 42-50; Zeitlin 2009, 15-

19; Cameron 1971, 85-95), suggests that the reference to Eteocles and Polynices' incestuous origins (926-932) deliberately conflates the city and Jocasta. This argument is strengthened by the subsequent reference to the brothers' consanguinity (ὄμαιοι, 940) as their blood mixes with earth. Furthermore, the stated reason for Oedipus' curse, τροφᾶς (786), evokes the city's role as nurse (τροφῶ, 16). This echo anticipates the repetitive language used by the half-choruses in lines 961-974 to express the symmetry of reciprocal violence and suggests a similar comparison between the city's nurture of the sons and their failure to respond in kind. The reference to Oedipus' curse is vague enough that a conflation of the sons' mistreatment of their father with some type of mistreatment of the city is not implausible. My final point will be that the personification of the city changes in lines 1042, 1046, and 1070, where the city represents the collective will of its citizens; the city, rather than a single character in its own right, now functions as a metonym for the collection of citizens that inhabit it. This shift in the nature of personification adds force to the argument against the authenticity of lines 1005-1078 (see Dawe 1978).

Recognizing the city as an active player in the curse on the house of Laius sheds light on the death of Eteocles, the reasons for which are more complicated than a simple fulfillment of Oedipus' curse. The survival of Thebes combined with the dual deaths of Eteocles and Polynices brings resolution to the trilogy and suggests the city's triumph over both of the brothers who have mistreated her.

Works Cited

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