

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Seven against Thebes (467 B.C.E.)

Aeschylus

### Story

The play opens upon Eteocles, one of the two sons of Oedipus, addressing his citizens, the citizens of Thebes, over the impending threat of an attacking army from Argos, an army led by his brother, Polyneices. (The audience will be abundantly familiar with the mythical material the play emerges from. Upon his death Oedipus, the father of Eteocles and Polyneices, as well as of Antigone and Ismene, has cursed his kingdom over to his two sons, declaring that one of them will rule Thebes every other year. The army advancing on Thebes, as the play opens, is under command of Polyneices, who has encountered a serious challenge to the inheritance left by Oedipus; Eteocles has refused to step down, and Polyneices has come to take Thebes, supported by seven powerful warriors from Argos.) The plot of the play revolves around the struggle between the two brothers, resulting in their mutual killing, their corpses being on stage at the end, in a dark finale which can only be taken as a harsh warning against fratricide. The greatest complexity, of what might otherwise have been a drama of unmitigated loss, rests in the identifications of the various warriors—from Argos and Thebes respectively—who appear at the gates of Thebes to battle one another. The highest drama of the play convenes on the inevitable meeting, at the seventh gate, of the two brothers themselves. So dark and unproductive was this finale that the play itself was rewritten fifty years later, to provide a new conclusion which would align with the conclusion of the highly successful *Antigone* of Sophocles.

### Themes

**Fratricide.** The impending struggle between the two brothers is built deeply into the mythological background of the play. Oedipus had cursed the fratricides with an everlasting rivalry, and dangled before them the short-lived promise of an alternate-years regency. Fratricide was the inevitable outcome of this temporary solution, and accordingly we see for what a short time it lasted.)

**Formality** Like Aeschylus' *Suppliants* and *Persians*, the present play (admittedly, we can only draw limited conclusions from a single play in a trilogy) is bare of plot complexities, and stark in its narrative formality. The theme is formality, strictness, *less is more*.

**Geometry.** Structure, both of narrative and of the enframing environment of the narrative, is foremost here. The play is all about the tension built into the description of the seven gate keepers, for each of whom the careful details of dress, emblems, and background are fastidiously sketched. By the time the two empty slots, for the final gate combatants, are filled, and the volcanic encounter of the two brothers has declared itself, the geometrical patterning of the play is complete.

### Characters

Eteocles. Son of Oedipus, Ruler of Thebes  
Antigone, Ismene...Sisters of Eteocles  
A soldier  
Messenger  
Chorus Leader  
Chorus of Theban Women

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Eteocles** Eteocles is the son of Oedipus, and brother of Polyneices. After Oedipus' death his inheritance bequeathed to Eteocles and Polyneices an alternate system of governing the city of Thebes. The first year of governance was given to Eteocles, who then refused to relinquish the power at the end of his first year. Of an autocratic nature, Eteocles promenades throughout his city identifying the enemy forces—the seven power-figures deputed by Polyneices to each of the seven major gates of Thebes—and identifying Thebes' most brilliant warriors as they take their places from within the citadel. Eteocles dialogues with the chorus, explaining his strategic reasoning to them, then building up, as a showman manipulating his audience, to the seventh gate, at which, he discloses, he observes the Argive army posting his own brother, Polyneices. As a showman and autocrat, Eteocles builds his narrative to the point where he becomes the occupant of the gate which will confront Polyneices. He folds himself up into his own narrative, for he is indeed going home in a body bag, as is his brother.

*Observant.* Eteocles peruses the posting of heavily armed heroes at the seven gates of Thebes; on both sides of the military conflict. He explains in complex detail the name and background of each antagonist, paying careful attention to the combatants' precise backgrounds.

*Surprised.* Eteocles is surprised when, in his recounting the assembling Argive warriors, he sees his own brother moving toward, then looming up in the seventh gate. He immediately starts preparing himself to meet the attack of Polyneices. The draw of the fatal is irresistible.

**Parallels.** *Seven against Thebes* seems not to have spawned the literary interpretations one might expect. There are no film productions based directly on Aeschylus' play, although the play does figure at the heart of the Italian film *Rehearsal for War* (1998), in which theater rehearsals for Aeschylus' play exemplify the tragedy that is taking place outside the movie theater itself. In ancient Greek literature, however, the legendary material surrounding the lugubrious history of the city of Thebes, the Fall of Oedipus, and the tragic outcomes for Oedipus' children were as widely read, discussed and interpreted as was the material of Homer's epics. Statius' *Thebaid* (90 C.E.), though lost, can be reconstructed in parts, and closely follows the narrative of Aeschylus' play, as well as of Euripides' *Suppliants*.

### Discussion Questions.

What kind of rewrite was added on to Aeschylus' play, fifty years after its composition? Why was the addition made? Can you fill out this interesting piece of literary history, by discussing the way in which texts were published, and made available to the public, in fifth century B.C.E. Athens?

The present play was the third in a trilogy. The remaining volumes are left in only a few fragments. And yet the present trilogy was popular at its time. As literary detective what would you do in order to reconstruct as much as possible of the present play?

What do you see as Aeschylus' own attitude in the present play? Is he proving to be a fatalist, acquiescent to destiny? Or does Eteocles prove to be a courageous leader, with ideals that deserve following?