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Of the Athenian tragedies, the Aeschylean are still the least accessible for students: Aeschylus' language is often considered more difficult than that of Sophocles and Euripides and, in spite of or perhaps as a result of this, readable commentaries or introductions to his plays for people who are less adept at Greek philology, do not abound. Isabelle Torrance (T.) has provided Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* with an introduction that is accessible for non-specialists of Greek tragedy and useful for more experienced scholars as well. The introduction may also be helpful for students (and teachers) as a starting point for a course on this play. T.'s book belongs to the *Duckworth Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy* series. Until now, introductions to seventeen tragedies have been published, some of which have been reviewed for BMCR.¹

T.'s book contains six chapters, each divided into sections. The first chapter, 'Play and Trilogy' (9-22), begins with an overview of the context of Athenian drama. Next T. reconstructs the other two tragedies of the trilogy in which the *Seven* was the final play, and the accompanying satyr-play. In her summary of the plot T. already touches upon issues of scholarly debate, such as the changes of tense used by Eteocles in the shield scene when dispatching the Theban defenders, and the question whether the play's ending is authentic. Finally T. gives an outline of the dramatic structure and the metrical patterns of the play.

Chapter 2, 'City and Family' (23-37), deals with the tension that exists in the play between city (*polis*) and family (*genos*). Eteocles is both the leader of the city, who needs to protect the Thebans against the Argive attack, and the child of Oedipus, who is in conflict with his brother Polynices. In the course of the play the focus shifts from the city to the family, though assuming a bipartite structure based on this shift would be too simplistic. T. analyses how the nautical imagery develops during the play. Her overview is based on views of others and presents new elements as well. This approach is illustrative of the rest of the book: T. explains the most important problems evoked by the play by referring to current and recent scholarly ideas and adding new observations of her own. Eteocles presents himself as the helmsman on the ship of state and focuses away from his own incestuous family history. He reproaches the chorus for endangering the city with their panic-stricken prayers and laments. By contrast, the chorus addresses Eteocles as 'child of Oedipus' several times, thereby emphasizing his ancestry. On the side of the attackers, the seer Amphiaraus rebukes Polynices for attacking both his *polis* and his *genos*. Eteocles compares Amphiaraus to a virtuous man on a ship with a god-detested *genos* of hot-headed men. T. discusses Eteocles' choice to fight his brother in terms of *polis* and *genos*. The chorus fears the devastation of the *polis* concomitant with the fratricide. T. poses the question whether the ship can survive without its helmsman and answers: "yes. A *polis* exists as a community, not as a dependency on its ruler." (34). She
rightly rejects the *Opfertod* theory, which sees Eteocles' death as a sacrifice for the city, but a discussion of the question whether the city can live with the pollution caused by the fratricide might have been appropriate here as well. T. argues that *polis* and *genos* are intrinsically intertwined until the fratricide makes the *genos* extinct and the *polis* can continue.

The third chapter deals with 'Divine Forces and Religious Ritual' (38-63). T. first discusses divine presences in the play in general and then turns to three divinities in detail: Ares, the *Curse* and the *daimon*. This beginning dovetails with the ending of the previous chapter and highlights the different levels of causation: the fratricide is first considered in terms of human motivation (Polynices and Eteocles both decide themselves to fight each other) and next the influence of divine forces is discussed. The destruction of Oedipus' house can be seen as the result of divine forces working in unison. The chapter also discusses the attackers' oath ritual, the different attitudes to prayer of Eteocles and the chorus, the religious concepts of reciprocity and piety, the importance of the numbers three and seven and of the etymology of names (although I acknowledge its relevance to the play, it is not clear to me why this section has been inserted in this particular chapter), and three ways of divine communication (oracles, prophets, and dreams). The end of the chapter has a summary concluding how both divine and human agency lead to the fulfillment of the Curse.

Chapter 4 (at 28 pages, the longest) is called 'Warriors' (64-91). The heroic ideology in the *Seven* recalls a previous age when the excellence of individual warriors was important. The play resembles the *Iliad* in this and in other respects. Most of this chapter is devoted to the famous 'shield scene' in the second episode of the play. T. refers to several theoretical perspectives and gives an analysis of each attacker and Eteocles' response, comparing and explaining the shield symbols and the warriors. She suggests that the shield of Polynices which depicts a man (Polynices) led by a woman (Justice) may have reminded the Athenian audience of the return of the exiled tyrant Pisistratus: he was led back to Athens by a tall woman who was said to be Athena. Furthermore she notes that unlike the Thebans, Argive attackers do not associate themselves with an Olympian power and points out the interesting combination of image and text on three shields, and the recurrent imagery of eyes and fire. In her conclusion T. makes clear how the attackers are associated with barbarians in several ways.

The role of the chorus is central in chapter 5, 'Women' (92-107). T.'s aim is to disprove the assumption that Eteocles' misogynistic treatment of the chorus is justified or appropriate. Eteocles rebukes the chorus for its behavior, which is informed by panic in the beginning, because it weakens the city and strengthens the enemy's spirit. T. explains the chorus' panic as natural for Theban girls.2 Another argument that the chorus' fear is not exaggerated but justified, is the fearful (though not hysterical) attitude of the scout in the second episode. I like T.’s reasoning but think that she goes too far in some of her conclusions, for example when she states about Eteocles' first speech to the chorus: "every aspect of Eteocles' speech here is excessive." (98). When T. argues that Eteocles' instructions to the chorus to utter a better prayer "acknowledge the importance of the female voice in a manner which ties into the gradual reversal of roles mentioned above" (102), she neglects the fact that he tells the chorus to sing a paean (*Seven* 268), a traditionally male genre. The chorus' final song is a lament that is remarkable for its content: instead of glorifying them, the chorus criticizes both brothers. T. may be correct in observing that the chorus undergoes a maturing process during the play, but her conclusion that "The end of *Seven* reveals the importance of female speech and the ultimate foresight of the Chorus... their predictions are revealed as true." (105) needs some
nuancing. The chorus' predictions have only partly come true: belying the chorus' fear (which is still present in the third stasimon), the city has not been captured by the Seven.

The final chapter, 'The Legacy: Fifth Century BC to Twenty-First Century AD' (108-129), shows the fluctuating popularity of the Seven in history. The play may have been revived in the fourth century in combination with Sophocles' Antigone and Euripides' Phoenician Women and was canonized as one of seven Aeschylean tragedies in the Byzantine period. After this it took a while before the play became popular again. Next T. gives a brief overview of critical approaches of the play in recent times (which could have been positioned earlier in the book or towards the end of this final chapter by way of a conclusion). T. discusses the reception history of Seven, remarking that it is impossible to separate this from the reception history of its dramatic myth. Later works dealing with the Theban saga are Euripides' Phoenician Women, Sophocles' Antigone, Oedipus the King and Oedipus at Colonus, several Roman plays by Accius and Seneca, and Statius' epic Thebaid. The myth is also treated in a few early Christian texts. The work Roman de Thèbes was written in the mid-twelfth century. T. also discusses three French dramatic treatments: Robert Garnier's Antigone ou la Piété of 1580, Jean de Rotrou's Antigone of 1637 and Racine's La Thébaïde ou les Frères ennemis of 1664. Modern performances of Aeschylus' Seven occur, though not frequently. Recurring themes in the reception are concerns of individual vs. community (genos vs. polis), religious issues, the horror of incest, the curse, the violence of war and the fratricide.

To conclude, T. discusses all the important issues in scholarly debate around the Seven in a clear and concise way with useful references. Possibly not all of T.'s interpretations will meet with her readers' approval, but these can be conversation starters for a class. Readers who like to go deeper into certain subjects can find many (recent) bibliographical references in the notes. The book contains a few black-and-white illustrations. At the end, a guide to further reading, a glossary, a chronology and an index are included. The book also has an extensive bibliography, which is frequently referred to in the notes. I found hardly any typos in the book. All quoted passages are in translation. Greek words occur rarely and are transliterated.

Notes:

1. For an overview of the published companions see Duckworth Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy series.
2. T. rightly rejects Delcourt’s argument that the chorus consists of elderly women who sing and are attended by a group of girls, as "untenable". Contrary to what T. remarks (140 n.5), Delcourt's argument has been followed by K. Valakas (1993) 'The First Stasimon and the Chorus in Aeschylus' Seven Against Thebes', Studi Italiani di filologia classica, 11.1-2: 55-86, at 56 n.2. In their commentary on the play, Lupas, and Petre (1981) 40 and 56 maintain that the chorus simply consists of women and refrain from making a more specific age distinction: according to them, the 'literal' conclusion based on Septem 109-11 that the chorus consists of girls, conflicts with lines 293 and 686, which fit older women better. For Delcourt's argument see Marie Delcourt (1932) 'Le rôle du chœur dans Les Sept devant Thèbes ', l'Antiquité Classique 1: 25-33.
3. I found only two small errors. 32, last paragraph: "Eteocles' responds" has mistakenly an apostrophe and should read "Eteocles responds". 117, last paragraph: "an comment" should be "a comment".