

Men, Women and Prayer in “Seven Against Thebes”

“Neither in evils nor in fair good luck may I share a dwelling with the tribe of women!” So says King Eteocles in exasperation as he opens his argument with the Chorus of Theban women in Aeschylus’ “Seven Against Thebes”. He has called up all the youths and old men to defend the city walls, and received the messenger’s report of seven Argive champions determined to sack Thebes. He has uttered a short prayer for the protection of the city, and now this crowd of women has arrived amidst the images of the city’s gods and has begun its own cycle of prayers to the same end, or so it would seem. The next two hundred verses comprise an argument between Eteocles and the women, in which several times Eteocles complains of the women’s behavior and laments “women” in general. “When she’s triumphant, hers a confidence past converse with another, when afraid an evil greater both for home and city.” (188) “All this you may have, for living with women.” (195) “O Zeus, what a tribe you have given us in women!” (256) The women eventually agree to be silent (263), yet they are not so, and continue as the one “voice” that runs through the entire play.

Rereading this play after studying “Persians” and “The Suppliant Maidens”, I began to wonder about Aeschylus’ interest in the feminine viewpoint. If indeed in Greek society “it is (women’s place) to be silent and stay within doors,” (SAT231) then why does Aeschylus feature women so prominently in his plays? In “Seven Against Thebes” specifically, why does he choose women as his Chorus? Is there something specifically feminine being explored here? Or is the femininity of the Chorus being used to highlight, by contrast, some masculine idea in the play?

According to Eteocles, his argument with the women concerns the effect of their “crying and howling” upon the citizenry of Thebes (190), but I believe it is actually about their approach to prayer, or their approach to the gods in general. This play is full of praying, and we can specifically observe the

prayers of men (mostly Eteocles) and women (the Chorus). Perhaps by contrasting these prayers we can discern a masculine and feminine type of prayer.

The first prayer is offered by Eteocles after receiving the report of the bloody oaths of the seven Argive champions, starting on line 69. He prays to “Zeus and Earth and Gods that guard the city” as well as to his Fury, “My father’s Curse, mighty evil spirit.” The prayer is not so much a prayer for the active assistance of the gods as for the gods to refrain from destroying Thebes. “Do not root out this city of mine, do not give her to ruin and destruction, do not give her to capture...do not bind her in slavish yoke.” (71-75) He sounds businesslike and detached; he is reasoning with the gods on the bases that the town speaks Greek, is currently free, and that a prosperous city honors the gods themselves. He is seeking only on behalf of the city, not on his own behalf.

This prayer is immediately followed by that of the Chorus, which strikes a decidedly different tone. The women confess their fears to the gods, whom they address passionately and personally. They address by name Zeus, Pallas Athena, Poseidon, Cypris, Apollo, Hera and Artemis. In line 105 they question Ares on the basis of his relationship to the land, “What will you do? Will you betray your own land?” They return to Ares in line 135, again addressing him by name and claiming a relationship: “You, Ares, protect the city...that bears your name.” They beseech Cypris on the basis of her being their ancestress (140). They also pray to the gods on the basis of both their own love for each god and his or her past love for them. “Beloved Artemis” (155) “Beloved Apollo” (159) “Beloved Spirits” (172) In line 107 they appeal even to Ares, the god of war, on the basis of his own former love for the city of Thebes. In the poignant last stanza of this their first prayer, the Chorus beseeches all the “beloved Spirits” to “show how much you love (the city)” and asks them to “bethink you of the public sacrifices. As we have thought of you, rescue us. Remember, I pray you, the rites with loving sacrifice

offered.” This is the language of devotion and established relationship. The petition is not merely to do no harm, but to actively rescue the beloved.

Eteocles will have none of it. He advises them to “pray that our towers hold off the enemy spears.” (217) This suggests the attitude that “the gods help those that help themselves.” The women argue that it is the gods who will “dispose” whether the towers hold. (219) Eteocles rejoins that, “The gods, they say, of a captured town desert her,” to which the women reply, “Never!” In lines 222 and following, Eteocles seems to argue that “nothing succeeds like success,” implying that the gods are favorable only to the strong and successful, that their favor follows success rather than causes it, and their disfavor falls upon the weak. The women argue that the gods will often rescue even the hopeless, that their intervention can bring reversal of bad fortune. (226) To this, Eteocles replies in terms of gender: “It is man’s part, the sacrifice, the consultation of the Gods, when the enemy assault us; it is yours to be silent and stay within doors.” (229) To this, the women again credit the gods, not man’s strength, for the survival of the city. “It is thanks to the Gods that we have our city...It is thanks to them that our towers reject the mob of foemen.” (232)

Eventually, Eteocles prevails upon the women to be silent, and then proceeds to instruct them how to “utter a better prayer.” (265) The prayer that follows shows the same businesslike approach as his first prayer, and is even more clearly a type of contract having an if-then structure. He does not address the gods by name, and does not argue any past or present personal relationship. Instead, he makes a vow, a motion originating from himself, that if the city is spared and all goes well, then he personally will dedicate trophies and spoils in their various sanctuaries. Having finished this brief and dispassionate prayer, he turns to the women and says, “For all such you will not escape your doom.” (281).

This last remark may provide a key to understanding Eteocles' approach to prayer. He does not really believe that prayer changes anything. Is this a male approach, or merely Eteocles' peculiar approach? Eteocles, after all, understands that he is under a curse, and has learned by the experiences of his grandfather and father that such curses will work themselves out no matter one's own efforts. Yet, it could be argued that it was precisely the fact that both Laius and Oedipus attempted to avoid their fates by their own efforts that brought home their curses. Would they have done better to take the women's approach, and beseech the gods on the basis of love and devotion?

After this discussion on prayer comes the assignment of the champions. As each opposing champion is assessed and a Theban champion assigned, we see Eteocles and the messenger, both men, making comments that give us clues to their approach to the gods. After each assignment the women also offer a short prayer. We see that Eteocles and the messenger consider the probable actions of the gods at every turn, but do not beseech them. Eteocles merely predicts outcomes based on the situation and what he believes to be true of each god's nature. So in line 415, "His deeds shall Ares with his dice determine," and in line 439, "Capaneus...against Zeus sends his words...I trust on him will come the bold that carries fire." "First Onca Pallas...will hate the fellow's violence and keep him off." (501) "No one has yet seen Zeus defeated anywhere." (515) He is aware that success is a gift of the gods (626) but does not himself beseech the gods with any fervor. The messenger says less about the gods, but a few comments, such as, "He is dangerous who reveres the Gods" (597) suggest that he also relates to the gods in an impersonal, objective manner. During these same assignments, however, the women continue to directly petition the gods with expressions of devotion and emotion.

When Eteocles hears that his brother is challenging the seventh gate, we discover a reason that Eteocles, at least, does not beseech the gods on the basis of devotion or love: he understands himself to be hated by the gods. "Our race, our race, the race of Oedipus, by the Gods maddened, by them greatly

hated!” (653) The women now beseech Eteocles in the same emotional manner that they beseech the gods: “O dearest son of Oedipus, do not be like (Polyneices)...What do you long for, child?” (676, 686) But Eteocles sees his fate as non-negotiable and fixed by the gods. “It is the God that drives this matter on...this wave of hell that has engulfed...all kin of Laius, whom Phoebus has so hated.” (688) The women argue that there is a way out, through the Gods. “Forth from your house the black-robed Fury shall go, when from your hands the Gods shall receive a sacrifice.” (700) But Eteocles sees himself as “already past the care of the Gods.” (705) The women try desperately to convince him that change is possible, that “perhaps the God may change and come with kinder breath.” (708) When he still resists, they in desperation urge, “Listen to women, though you like it not.” (712)

But he will not. He does not beseech the gods; he does not ask that the curse be deflected. His last words are, “If Gods give ill, no man may shun their giving.” (718)

This play perhaps does not allow a generalization about the male approach to prayer, insofar as the only significant male has a peculiar curse that would be expected to deeply influence his attitudes in this regard. I believe it does portray Aeschylus’ beliefs about the feminine approach to the gods. This approach is highly relational, involving descent, past devotional activities, past favors and self-identifications, and current feeling. It believes both that the gods care about the affairs of mankind, and that the future is not rigidly determined, so that one may appeal to the gods to forgive and to change the future. Eteocles, and perhaps the other males, see the gods as detached and operating only according to their own fixed natures. There is no personal relationship but rather a mechanical, relentless aspect to the gods’ activities in determining the future. Hence, for the males, the best prayer is simply that the gods leave one alone, and at least do no harm, leaving each man to his own strength and destiny. Does Aeschylus himself favor one view? Perhaps not. The gods do, after all, deliver the city, just as the women prayed. And Eteocles’ doom falls upon him just as he expected.