THE ENDING OF THE
SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

BY

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The appearance of yet another article on a play that has only recently been airily dismissed in the arts columns of one of Britain's more expensive newspapers as "this minor example of Aeschylus at his most glumly deterministic and undramatic" ¹) may well seem a waste of time and in view of the large number of first class articles on the subject even to require some extensive justification. But in the following article I hope I have not gone over the same ground as all the earlier scholars ²), except incidentally. So although the perceptive reader will notice a few places where I have briefly followed in my predecessors’ footsteps, for the most part I shall be venturing out into new fields, the bearing of whose cartography upon earlier drawn sketches of the play will have to be worked out by the reader himself. Any other approach, however desirable in itself, would obscure the main line of my own argument, which is probably difficult enough to follow as it is, and so distend the article as to make it a monster unpublishable even in the tolerant pages of Classical journals.

I suppose that anyone who wished to prove that the last scene of the Seven Against Thebes, by which I mean the whole of the scene between Antigone and the Herald from 1005 to 1078, is genuinely by Aeschylus would have to prove some or all of the following points:

1. That the sudden raising of a new issue at the very end of the

²) For a full bibliography, see the following: H. Lloyd-Jones, The End of the Seven Against Thebes, CQ N.S. 9 (1959), 114-5, P. Nicolaus, Die Frage nach der Echtheit der Schlussszene von Aischylos' Sieben gegen Theben (Tübingen 1967) and A. L. Brown, The End of the Seven Against Thebes, CQ N.S. 26 (1976), 206-219.
last play of a trilogy, an issue that points to events beyond the scope both of the play and the trilogy, is not a sufficient ground in itself to lead to suspicions that it is not genuine.

2. That, although the end of the play is unexpected, in that there is little or no preparation for or anticipation of it earlier, there is nothing untypical of Aeschylus in this.

3. That however new many of the concerns of the last scene may first appear they are in fact typical both of the earlier part of the play and the trilogy and that, without the last scene, both the play and the trilogy would be left 'hanging in the air'.

4. That, so far from being the unworthy thing some scholars have alleged, it is both spiritedly written and well constructed and makes a fitting, if controversial, climax both to the play and the whole trilogy.

Let me begin with the first point. It seems to me that many, if not most, of those who challenge the authenticity of the last scene, do so on the basis of a conscious, or unconscious, comparison with the end of the *Eumenides* 3). The argument could reasonably be precised as follows: in the only other extant last play of a trilogy, the problems of the whole trilogy are raised again for the last time and resolved; in this ending of the *Seven Against Thebes*, however, they are not merely not resolved—as they would be if the last scene were completely omitted—but needlessly complicated by the gratuitous introduction of minor, and hitherto unmentioned, members of the House of Oedipus, and a Herald, whose intervention prepares the way for still further disputes, disputes with no connection with either the play or the trilogy. Now all this sounds impressive. But the impressiveness is all on the surface. For, at one level, these arguments should pass muster as a piece of logic and, as logic, they are completely unsound. For what they are saying is formally as follows: there are two supposed members of a given class—the class of final scenes of last plays in trilogies—A and B; however B is not like A; therefore A must be genuine and B not.

3) This comparison is rarely made explicit. But its influence is not the less dangerous for this. It seems to underlie the thinking of most of the opponents of the last scene of the play from the time of Theodor Bergk in the *Griechische Literaturgeschichte* III (1884), 302 ff. — see in particular p. 303.