

The Pathos of Thebes in Aeschylus' *Seven*: A New Context for Homeric Spells

Once Athenaeus wrote that Aeschylus' tragedies were crumbs from Homer's banquet (8, 347e). Among Aeschylus' dramas, *Seven Against Thebes* is most emblematic of the Homeric legacy. Scholars have noticed various linguistic and thematic connections with the *Iliad*: the survey of the scene outside Thebes' walls, the description of the great shield and the maidens' graphic vision of the impending sack (Richardson 1957, Sideras 1971, Garner 1990, Vakalas 1993). While elements of continuity exist, in this paper I intend to highlight the rupture from the Homeric tradition. I will address the ideological transformation of Homer's legacy in Aeschylus and show how in the play epic imagery and language are transferred upon Thebes, turning it into a subject of pathos and, at the same time, radically changing the relation between the hero and polis that structured the *Iliad*.

I will focus on the theme of the descent into Hades, and the adoption of the adjectives *adamatos* and *asinētes*. In the first stasimon (*Se.* 288-368), envisioning proleptically Thebes' capture and its dreadful consequences, the chorus refers to the polis as a hero in the grip of death "For it would be piteous (*oiktron*) to throw an ancient polis to Hades in this way" (321-2). This expression doubtlessly echoes the beginning of the *Iliad* where the poet introduces the subject matter of the poem: Achilles' wrath that hurled down to Hades many brave souls of warriors (*Il.* 1, 1-4; 5, 190; cf. Garner 1990, Vakalas 1993). Yet, the context is completely new. In attaching this expression to Thebes, Aeschylus makes it a character subjected to pathos and vulnerable to misfortune. He also reshapes the relation between polis and individual that existed in the Homeric poem. While in the *Iliad* the death of Hector is an ominous condition for the fall of Troy, in *Seven* Thebes receives an autonomous existence. If she may die at the hands of one hero, Polyneices, Thebes is ultimately not compromised by the death of her defender, Eteocles. Not only does the death of Eteocles not lead to the fall of Thebes, but the mutual slaughter of the two brothers strengthens the polis and rescues it from the fatal outcome foreshadowed by the oracle of Apollo. The Homeric spell is visible also in the reference to Thebes as untamed (*adamatos*) and, later on, unhurt (*asinēs*) (*Se.* 338, 828). The two attributes—the 'being untamed' and then 'unhurt'—define the polis as a being who is still alive and strong, and yet evoke, by the denial of subjection and pain respectively, her inherent mortality. In the world of warriors depicted in the *Iliad*, subjection preludes death: for instance, Patroclus died once tamed "by the will of the gods, by the blow and the spear" (*Il.* 19, 9; cf. 16, 816). As for the adjective unhurt (*asinēs*), it appears in the *Odyssey* to qualify the cattle of the sun. From the prophecy of Circe they appear to lead a tranquil life, but will soon fall victims of Odysseus' companions' violence (*Od.* 11, 110; 12, 137; cf. Hdt. 2, 181).

In *Seven*, the appropriation of Homeric image and vocabulary is functional to a change of the relation between the polis and his men as found in the *Iliad*—unlike in the epic, the first survives, the last die—and reveals a new awareness of the polis as a living being, one that like tragic heroes is fragile and liable to violence and pathos, but whose existence ultimately transcends that of its heroic individuals.