

Eteocles's Patriotic Response in Aeschylus's *Seven against Thebes*

Aeschylus gives the audience, in his character of Eteocles, a portrait of an effective and patriotic leader. As a soldier who distinguished himself in the four major engagements of the Persian Wars, from Marathon (where his brother Cynegirus perished), to Artemisium, Salamis, and Plataea, Aeschylus knew of effective leadership. Furthermore, sixty-two years after *Seven against Thebes* was first produced, audiences still remembered it for its patriotism: in Aristophanes's *Frogs*, the fictional Aeschylus says that every single person who watched *Seven against Thebes* "was hot to be warlike" (1019–22). Unless Eteocles was perceived to be an effective and patriotic leader, it would have been unlikely that the play could have inspired audiences "hot to be warlike."

Eteocles's treatment of the chorus of Theban women has been seen as questionable at best, and misogynistic at worst. Through a concept recently popularized by philosopher, mathematician, and essayist Nassim Nicholas Taleb called "skin in the game," I will argue that Eteocles pursues a patriotic and effective strategy in his debate with the chorus (Taleb 2018). By investing the chorus with "skin in the game"—involving them with a share in the victory—Eteocles moves them away from their negative prayers (e.g. "May the enemy not slaughter us") to positive forms of prayer (e.g. "May the gods strike down our enemies"). His is a patriotic and effective strategy.

Eteocles's reduction of the Argive attackers into the "other" may also seem counterintuitive to modern notions of humanizing and understanding the enemy. Through the lens of sociobiology, a scientific discipline grounding human nature in biological origins proposed by biologist E. O. Wilson in the 1970s, I will argue that, by reducing the enemy into

the “other,” Eteocles activates primal and deep-seated behaviours of territoriality in the defenders (Wilson 1978). It is an ambivalent strategy that anthropologists can identify in cultures today from the Nyae Nyae and !Kung Bushmen to various fringe groups.

I will conclude by talking about how Aeschylus’s *Seven against Thebes*, in promoting the behaviour of patriotism, simultaneously highlights the problem of patriotism: too little patriotism and society fragments but, too much patriotism, and nationalism and racism rise, stalling the spread of culture and information. A character such as Lasthenes walks a thin line. Being “hateful to strangers” (*Echthroxenos*, 621), he is an effective sentry. His value, in peacetime, however, is debatable.

Patriotism highlights the limitation of biology, the problem of how to build a space age society from genes adapted to Stone and Heroic Age environments. *Seven against Thebes* is a most crucial play, as it provides a springboard into a broader discussion of patriotism, leadership, nationalism, and other critical issues we face in the twenty-first century.

Bibliography

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *Skin in the Game: Hidden Asymmetries in Daily Life*. Random House, 2018

Wilson, E. O. *On Human Nature*. Harvard UP, 1978