

SHORTER NOTES

A POSSIBLE DATE OF THE REVIVAL OF
AESCHYLUS' *THE SEVEN AGAINST THEBES**

This note presents a possible span of years within which the revival of the *Seven against Thebes* by Aeschylus took place, probably as a solitary play, by comparing two passages from the comedies of Aristophanes. In the *Lysistrata*, the *Seven against Thebes* seems not to have been given its unique name, but only a few years later, in the *Frogs*, it appears with the title known to us. The ancient claims that Aeschylus was revived at the Great Dionysia might be right.

In the *Frogs* 1021–2 Aristophanes refers explicitly to the *Seven against Thebes* by Aeschylus by using what was to become the traditional title (δράμα ποιήσας Ἀρεως μεστόν ... τοὺς Ἑπτὰ ἐπὶ Θήβας).¹ It was possible to do so early in 405 B.C. at the Lenaea festival; why then did Aristophanes in the *Lysistrata* of 411 B.C. not simply refer to that same play by this title, or at least by the title of the tetralogy of which it formed a part instead of the vague ὄσπερ, φασὺν, Αἰσχύλος ποτεῖ?² What I shall argue here is that at this point in time (early 411 B.C.) it was *not* possible to refer to the play by its traditional title. I was led to this idea by reading Alan Sommerstein: 'Probably when the play was originally produced, as part of a connected tetralogy, it did not have a separate title; in the later fifth century, however, it seems to have been restaged on its own (when it greatly impressed the rhetorician Gorgias³), and it was known to Aristophanes in 405 B.C. by its present name'.⁴

Irrespective of the reliability of a couple of late sources, which report that after the death of the poet the assembly passed a decree stipulating that anyone who wished to

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¹ On this title, see A. Sommerstein, 'Notes on Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*', *Hermes* 117 (1989), 432–45 at 436. On titles, see A.E. Haigh, *The Tragic Drama of the Greeks* (New York, 1968³), 395–9 and O. Taplin, 'The title of *Prometheus Desmotes*', *JHS* 95 (1975), 184–6.

² The title of this tetralogy consisting of *Laius*, *Oedipus*, *Seven against Thebes* and the satyr-play *The Sphinx*, is unknown. It was produced in 467 B.C. and won first prize.

³ On the relationship between the *Seven against Thebes*, Gorgias (fr. B24 from Plutarch's *Moralia* 715e) and Aristophanes, *Frogs* at 1021, see R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship* (Oxford, 1968), 46–8 and 281. But if Aristophanes relied on a single remark of the sophist Gorgias, who among the audience would know which play the character 'Aeschylus' was talking about, unless the play was known under this title by the public? Gorgias might have read a copy of the *Seven against Thebes* during one of his visits to Athens, or very hypothetically watched the same revival as Aristophanes witnessed. Plato's *Meno* at 71c suggests that Gorgias had been in Athens during the last decade of the fifth century, but we must not rely too heavily on the fictitious world of Plato's dialogues. Either way, it seems most likely that the title was a known title, which Gorgias knew some way or the other, and Aristophanes clearly expected his audience to know.

⁴ A. Sommerstein, *Aeschylean Tragedy* (Bari, 1996), 97.

reproduce his poetry should be granted a chorus,⁵ we must posit some kind of living Aeschylean tradition in order to explain how Aristophanes and presumably his rivals could assume that the theatrical audience would appreciate their quotations of and allusions to Aeschylus. It was, after all, probably only a minority of the audience which had themselves read or attended readings of his tragedies, if such were given in fifth-century Athens.⁶

It is true that one does not have to recognize all allusions to find pleasure in them, but sometimes it *is* this recognition which creates the enjoyment. Whenever a character in a comedy explicitly quotes Aeschylus, he runs the risk of being thought old-fashioned like Strepsiades in the *Clouds* or Euripides' relative in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, and this is a poetic means by which Aristophanes is able to oppose such characters to the depraved Euripides-fanatics, for example Pheidippides, and in such passages recognition of the citation or allusion is arguably of some significance.

But what is the point of the allusion to Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* in *Lysistrata*? And why does Lysistrata get the quotation wrong? The *Seven Against Thebes* was staged more than fifty years earlier than the *Lysistrata*, so it cannot have been present in the minds of that many among the audience, if any. The quotations from *Seven Against Thebes* in the *Acharnians* (966 πάλλει κραδαίνων τρεῖς κατασκίους λόφους ~ 384–5 τρεῖς κατασκίους λόφους | σείει) and later in the *Lysistrata* (406 τοιαῦτ' ἀπ' αὐτῶν βλαστάνει βουλευήματα ~ 594 ἐξ ἧς τὰ κεδνὰ βλαστάνει βουλευήματα) are probably no more than wrong wordings (tragic wordings) at wrong places (within the comedies), aimed at comical effect, which we might, in the words of Pat Easterling, call 'free-floating' echoes.⁷ First of all it must be stressed that Lysistrata at 188–9 does not claim to quote Aeschylus directly, as is done in the *Thesmophoriazusae* (134)⁸ and the *Birds* (807) with a κατά, but recalls something the poet once (ποτέ) said in one of his tragedies,⁹ which we, and the scholiast, agree must be the oath-scene from the *Seven Against Thebes*. Here the seven warriors sacrifice a bull and let the blood flow into a shield, which they touch with their hands – an altogether masculine and destructive oath quite the opposite of what Lysistrata needs here,¹⁰ as Calonice also reminds her. The scene was actually 'only' narrated by a

⁵ *Life of Aeschylus* 12: Ἀθηναῖοι δὲ τοσοῦτον ἠγάπησαν Αἰσχύλον, ὥς ψηφίσασθαι μετὰ τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ τὸν βουλόμενον διδάσκειν τὰ Αἰσχύλου χορὸν λαμβάνειν; Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* 6.11: ὅθεν Ἀθηναῖοι πατέρα μὲν αὐτὸν τῆς τραγωδίας ἠγούντο, ἐκάλουν δὲ καὶ τεθνεῶτα ἐς Διονύσια, τὰ γὰρ τοῦ Αἰσχύλου ψηφισαμένων ἀνεδιδάσκετο καὶ ἐνῆκα ἐκ καυῆς. This is also noted by scholia on *Acharnians* 10 and on *Frogs* 868. That revivals of Aeschylus could win first prize must mean that we have to date at least some of the revivals after the official competition including old plays, first recorded in 386 B.C. by *JG* II².2319–23, unless the revival at the Dionysia entered the contest instead of a new tetralogy; thus A.E. Haigh, *The Attic Theatre* (Oxford, 1907³), 72–3, but we have no evidence, to my knowledge, that whole tetralogies were ever revived in antiquity. On Aeschylean victories, Sommerstein (n. 4), 31.

⁶ On Aeschylean revivals, S.D. Olson, *Aristophanes: Acharnians* (Oxford, 2002), at 10–11. Recitations of tragic poetry seem to have been a sympotic feature, cf. *Clouds* 1364ff.

⁷ P. Easterling, 'Agamemnon for the ancients' in F. Mackintosh, P. Michelakis, E. Hall and O. Taplin (edd.), *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004* (Oxford, 2005), 23–36 at 30. The same could be the case for numerous other Aeschylean echoes in Aristophanes, e.g. *Acharnians* 478, *Peace* 991, *Birds* 313, 686–7. The 'Horsecock' of the Aeschylean play *Myrmidons* (fr. 212b Mette) evidently became a favourite 'tragic' creature: *Peace* 1177, *Birds* 800, *Frogs* 932.

⁸ Quoting from the *Edonians* (Aeschylus fr. 61), but using the title of the tetralogy (ἐκ τῆς Δουκουργείας), not the single play. On the ending -εία see A. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes: Frogs* (Warminster, 1996), 257 on 1124, but see Dover's scepticism in K.J. Dover, *Aristophanes: Frogs* (Oxford, 1993), 332 on 1124.

⁹ See J. Henderson, *Aristophanes: Lysistrata* (Oxford, 1987), 92 on 188–9a.

¹⁰ On this oath, see I. Torrance, *Aeschylus: Seven Against Thebes* (London, 2007), 48–51.

messenger, but it is evident from the plays themselves that the messenger-scenes and their 'diegetic space' had an immense impact on the imagination of the Greek audience.

Was this Aeschylean oath well-known to the audience? Had the audience watched a recent revival of this play? By which name had the *Seven Against Thebes* been called at this revival? Was it already known by its traditional name, as it surely was within a decade (*Frogs* 1021)? The vague way in which the *Lysistrata* refers to the date (ποτέ) and to the identity of the play (simply Αἰσχύλος), suggests that the *Seven Against Thebes* was not yet called by this traditional title; perhaps it had not yet been revived, at least not for a wider Athenian audience. Who are those who 'say' (φασίν) that Aeschylus once created this oath of the warriors? J. Van Leeuwen and U. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff claimed that it is simply Lysistrata who herself does not know the play.¹¹ That kind of realism, though, is not normal in Aristophanic comedy. Of course she had not seen *Seven against Thebes* herself, not many alive had, and it is surely not because she is a woman and was not allowed in the theatre. For she and the Spartan woman Lampito allude to tragedies elsewhere (to Sophocles' *Tyro* at 139 and Euripides' *Andromacha* at 155–6, both performed within ten years of *Lysistrata*), and the supposedly realistic passage at 1124–7 of Lysistrata's past shows itself to be made up of tragic citations.¹² The realism of the characters in Aristophanic comedy is unstable and unreliable,¹³ but Aristophanes aims not at the fictitious world of the comedy, but at his audience, to whom he communicates through his actors as clearly as possible, for example by telling them which play in this given situation they will have to think of. The 'φασίν' is thus simply a statement of *communis opinio* relating both to fictitious world and the real world of the audience.

Thus Aristophanes is not quoting the *Seven Against Thebes* verbatim. On the other hand it seems a little strange that Lysistrata and her companions are said to be μηλοσφαγούσας, when for all we know Aeschylus wrote ταυροσφαγούντες of the warriors. Is this an oversight by Aristophanes just as *Acharnians* 883 might be (πρέσβειρα instead of δέσποια)?¹⁴ If the play had been revived recently this would have been more embarrassing than fun, so it seems very unlikely. The point of the joke in these verses lies not in the exact wording, which, as noticed, only few would know anyway, but in the situation (enacting comically what was narrated in tragedy)¹⁵ exemplified by the shield (εἰς ἀσπίδ', the object of war; for example, *Acharnians* 279). Thus Calonice reasonably doubts that it will benefit their endeavour to bring peace back to the Hellenes. It might be argued that Aristophanes does not need to make a more precise allusion to the *Seven against Thebes* than this, but it would have been even more effective, more masculine, more martial and therefore more counter-productive to Lysistrata's own point, if the audience got a glimpse of these ladies as the ἄνδρες ἑπτά, θούριοι λοχαγέται. Instead the only thing which is used from the Oath-scene is the shield (εἰς ἀσπίδ' ~ εἰς μελάνδετον σάκος, a normal word instead of the poetic rendering), making way for a common symbolic play in the Aristophanic

¹¹ *Aristophanis: Lysistrata* (Leiden, 1968²), 31; *Aristophanes: Lysistrata* (Berlin, 1927), 134.

¹² Henderson (n. 9), 197 on 1124.

¹³ M.S. Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy* (Oxford, 2000), 229: 'It is, simply, characteristic that ... Aristophanes' recreative characters have no effective past'.

¹⁴ Thus G.O. Hutchinson, *Aeschylus: Septem contra Thebas* (Oxford, 1985), 49.

¹⁵ On this see M. Revermann, *Comic Business. Theatricality, Dramatic Technique, and Performance Contexts of Aristophanic Comedy* (Oxford, 2006), 126, 243–4. Henderson (n. 9), 93 on 195–7 notices a pun on apples, but this does not affect my point, as this pun could be recognized and enjoyed by the audience without anyone ever knowing the Aeschylean original.

universe, as mentioned above. A metatheatrical effect like this was not at all unknown to Aristophanes, as is shown in several colourful scenes of the other play of 411 B.C., the *Thesmophoriazousae*, e.g. (855–919) where the relative of ‘Euripides’ is playing the Helen of the Euripidean play, performed the previous year, and even says so (849–50). My point is that Aristophanes might have done the same in this situation, but he did not, and this might be explained by the lack of theatrical performance in recent times of the *Seven against Thebes*, in contrast to the plays of Euripides.

But even though this hypothesis may sound like an argument *e silentio*, the vagueness of the reference in the *Lysistrata* and the arguments above do suggest that the *Seven against Thebes* had not yet been revived in 411 B.C., and if this is accepted, we are able to date the revival of the play rather precisely: *Seven against Thebes* must have received its title¹⁶ – the only Aeschylean play-title named in an Aristophanic comedy deriving from a coherent tetralogy, unlike the *Persians*¹⁷ – and must have been removed from its tetralogy to be revived as a solitary play somewhere between 411 B.C. and 405 B.C. Perhaps this was the performance which used the ‘new’ ending, if the transmitted ending of the play is considered post-Aeschylean.¹⁸ The comedies of the year 405 B.C. (the *Frogs* by Aristophanes and the *Muses* by Phrynichus) suggest a growing interest in the evergreens of Athenian tragedy, possibly in the wake of revivals. Some plays of Aeschylus then *did* enjoy the privilege of revivals at one of Athens’ greater festivals, either the Lenaea or, as Philostratus writes, the Dionysia, and *Seven against Thebes* was one of them.¹⁹

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¹⁶ The title was in the fifth century probably more connected to the legendary event than the Aeschylean play, since the title is found among the lyrics of Corinna (fr. 397), Haigh (n. 1), 397.

¹⁷ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1026. Aristophanes’ claim that the *Persians* was presented after (μετὰ τοῦτο) the *Seven against Thebes*, has caused confusion e.g. Dover (n. 8), 320 on 1026. Perhaps Aristophanes was not wrong: the *Persians* was probably revived around the same time as the *Seven against Thebes*. Dionysus’ reference to a choreographic gesture with a *ὠδί* seems to require some knowledge of *some* performance of the play, and the enigmatic *ἰαυοῖ*, even though it has left no trace in the texts we possess, might have been sung by the chorus on this occasion. A revived performance may have inspired Timotheus to compose his *Persians*, or *vice versa*, but the date of this piece is unfortunately unknown; see J.H. Hordern, *The Fragments of Timotheus of Miletus* (Oxford, 2002), 15–17. D. Phillips, ‘Athenian political history’, in *Sport and Festival in the Ancient Greek World* (Swansea, 2003), 197–232 on 211–13, on the other hand, dates the first performance of Timotheus’ *Persians* to the Great Panathenaia of 410/9 B.C. In any case the text of the *Persians* of Aeschylus seems to have been in circulation within the last decade or two of the fifth century which Timotheus used. But then again, who among the audience did in fact care which of the two plays was performed first more than half a century ago?

¹⁸ Hutchinson (n. 14), 211 on 1005–78 and xlii–iii, concludes that the new ending must be later than the *Phoenician Women* of Euripides, that is 411–409, and that Aeschylus’ play was not revived before 386 B.C. The fifth-century revival, however, does not need to have been altered.

¹⁹ Concerning the *Choephoroi*, which H. Newiger, ‘Elektra in Aristophanes’ “*Wolken*”’, *Hermes* 89 (1961), 422–30 at 422 ff. thinks was revived before the revised edition of the *Clouds*, the lack of a title at that point in time (see n. 8), suggests that it had not yet been revived as a tetralogy, if that ever took place, nor as a single play (on this difficulty, Dover [n. 8], 332), but that the effect of the recognition-scenes, which were used by both Sophocles and Euripides, had had an impact on the audience, whereby the tradition was kept alive, somewhat similar to what happened to this Oath-scene before the last decade of the fifth century. On the other hand, it seems that the *Choephoroi* was also revived during this period around 410–405 B.C., seemingly as a solitary play, judging from Aristophanes *Frogs* 1124, perhaps even at the same occasion.

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