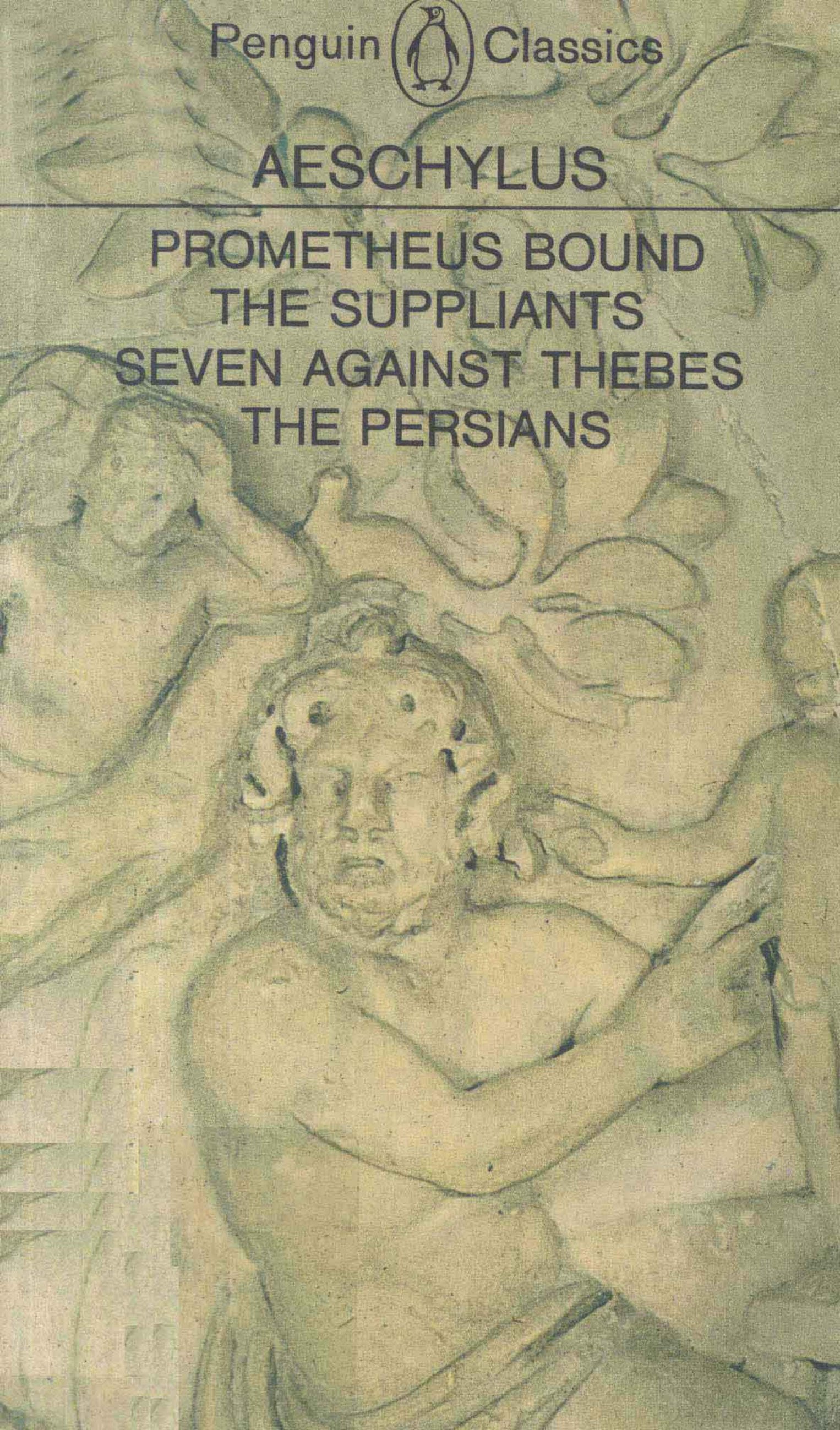


Penguin  Classics

AESCHYLUS

PROMETHEUS BOUND
THE SUPPLIANTS
SEVEN AGAINST THEBES
THE PERSIANS



THE PENGUIN CLASSICS

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AESCHYLUS was born of a noble family at Eleusis near Athens in 525 B.C. He took part in the Persian Wars and his epitaph, said to have been written by himself, represents him as fighting at Marathon. At some time in his life he appears to have been prosecuted for divulging the Eleusinian mysteries, but he apparently proved himself innocent. Aeschylus wrote more than seventy plays, of which seven have survived: *The Suppliants*, *The Persians*, *Seven Against Thebes*, *Prometheus Bound*, *Agamemnon*, *The Choephoroi* and *The Eumenides*. (All translated by Philip Vellacott for the Penguin Classics.) He visited Syracuse more than once at the invitation of Hieron I and he died at Gela in Sicily in 456 B.C. Aeschylus was recognized as a classic writer soon after his death, and special privileges were decreed for his plays.

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TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
PHILIP VELLACOTT



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INTRODUCTION

AESCHYLUS wrote altogether over seventy plays, of which seven have survived; and of these the Oresteian Trilogy probably came last, being produced within two years of the poet's death. This volume contains the other four; and the order in which they are given is probably the reverse of their chronological order. *Prometheus* is put first because it is the best known to English readers. Though its date is uncertain, the style suggests that it belongs to the mature period. *The Suppliants* follows because its story is foretold in *Prometheus*. It was until fairly recently regarded as the earliest of all; but opinion has changed and now places it among the later works, about 463 B.C. Both these plays belong to trilogies which, like the Oresteia, present a struggle between opposing rights or principles, and trace its course through successive crises to its solution in a rational compromise. *Seven Against Thebes* (467 B.C.) illustrates an earlier stage. The Oedipus Trilogy of which it is the last act shows the working-out of a family curse like that of the House of Atreus, but ends simply with the annihilation of the family; there is no reconciliation, no solution. *The Persians* is the earliest (472 B.C.) and was produced only eight years after the historical event which it records, the Battle of Salamis; and its subject-matter puts it in a class by itself.

PROMETHEUS BOUND AND THE SUPPLIANTS

'The kindness of the enthroned gods contains an element of force.' This phrase, the more striking because of its echo in the New Testament, occurs in the first great choral ode of *Agamemnon*, at the close of a passage which states in a few memorable lines the essence of Aeschylus' belief about 'the ways of God to man'. God, the playwright says, is concerned that man should learn wisdom, and has marked out the path; and it is a path of suffering. Men are in one sense free to learn or not to learn; but the painful condition of learning is inexorable. The nature of God, in other words, comprises two elements or principles, one harsh, the other gentle. The third play of the Oresteian Trilogy, *The Eumenides*, has for its theme the reconciliation of these two principles, of revenge with justice, of force with persuasion.

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Prometheus and *The Suppliants* both open, broadly speaking, the same theme. Each is the first play of a trilogy; and each presents the operation of violence. The second and third plays of both trilogies are lost; but the evidence available for guessing their contents suggests (at least in the case of *The Suppliants*) more or less what the analogy of the *Oresteia* would lead us to expect: that the second play showed the result of violence in breeding further violence, while the third brought two opposed sides together in a reasoned reconciliation. The second and third plays of the Promethean Trilogy were *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer*. Unfortunately the few remains of these plays are too fragmentary to give any clue to details of the way in which Aeschylus unfolded his theme. The two sequels to *The Suppliants* were *The Egyptians* and *The Danaids*; and the trilogy is usually referred to as the Danaid Trilogy. Here the probabilities are somewhat clearer, as will be seen presently.

The Eumenides presented the struggle between Violence and Reason as embodied in the heroes and gods of the Homeric age, though closely linked to living issues of the fifth century B.C. In *Prometheus* we are taken still further back, to the first phase of the same struggle, to a period which, historically, is that of the first appearance in Greece of the 'Olympian' gods, but which Greeks thought of as belonging to the most primitive stage of the history of man.

The transition from the primitive to the civilized world, from the life of nomadic tribes and village settlements to that of walled cities and organized states, was doubtless a gradual and barely perceptible process spread confusedly over several centuries and large expanses of land. Individuals who noted such change, however, must generally have associated it with some sudden or memorable event – an invasion, a siege, a massacre, a migration. So this stage in the development of Greek social order had its mythical counterpart in the story of a violent dynastic change among the gods.

In the primitive era Cronos was lord of all gods. During his time the human race was created, but was early recognized as a regrettable failure, and kept in a state of wretchedness and total subservience. Force ruled everything; reason and right were unknown. The Titans, sons of Earth begotten by gods, were a race of gigantic size and strength, and no intelligence; until in one of them, Prometheus, emerged rational and moral qualities, ranging from cunning and ingenuity to a

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love of freedom and justice. The knowledge that the future lay with such intangible principles rather than with brute strength, was a secret possessed by Earth, who imparted it to her son Prometheus. (The earth was in all centuries thought of by the Greeks as the prime source of foreknowledge and prophecy.) This certainty set Prometheus at the side of Zeus, son of Cronos, in rebellion against his father and the older dynasty; and by Prometheus' help Zeus and the other 'Olympian' gods won the day and thenceforward ruled the universe.

But Prometheus was not only an immortal; he was also a son of Earth, and felt a natural sympathy with the earth's mortal inhabitants. The race which Zeus despised and planned to destroy, Prometheus saw as capable of infinite development. He stole fire from heaven and gave it to them; and he taught them the basic mental and manual skills. In so doing he frustrated Zeus's plan to create a more perfect race. So when Aeschylus shows him punished for this presumption, the reader or spectator, judging between the antagonists, finds the scales nicely balanced. What wins our favour for Prometheus is largely the fact that he believed in, and wanted to help, the human race as it is, full of both noble achievement and pitiable squalor, honouring both goodness and wickedness; a race where virtue, if rare, is at least costly. But though in this play the balance of feeling is in favour of Prometheus, even the sympathetic Chorus rebuke him for pride: and it is clear that Zeus's case has still to be presented.

This must have been done in *Prometheus Unbound*. (Indeed it is hard to see what material was left for the third play.) There can be little doubt that by the end of the trilogy Zeus himself abandoned the use of force and opened negotiations with Prometheus, who then told him of the prophecy concerning the sea-nymph Thetis; that Heracles, with the permission of Zeus, set Prometheus free, perhaps first shooting the eagle with his bow; that the Centaur Chiron, longing for death in the agonies of the wound Heracles had inflicted, was allowed to lose his immortality and descend to Hades, thus 'taking on himself the pains of Prometheus' in fulfilment of prophecy (see page 51, and note, page 154); and that the final settlement recognized the supremacy of Zeus, the right of the human race to exist and develop, and the superiority of reason to violence.

The longest scene in the play is that in which Io, the virgin daughter of Inachus king of Argos, visits Prometheus and gains his sympathy as a

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fellow-victim of the tyranny of Zeus. This scene occupies more than 300 lines in the middle of the action. A large part of it is taken up with descriptions of the hazardous journeys which Io is fated to undertake before she finally becomes the bride of Zeus. Aeschylus lived in an age of travel and exploration, and it is natural that his writing, like Shakespeare's, should reflect his countrymen's intense interest in tales of distant regions and strange tribes. But the story of Io is used also to hint, even at this early stage in the drama, that there is another side to the character of Zeus, which time will reveal. Once Io reaches Egypt, Prometheus says,

Here at last Zeus shall restore your mind, and come
Upon you, not with terror, with a gentle touch.

Whether the end of Io's sufferings had any part in the two other plays can only be guessed; there is no evidence of it. But it is clear that *Prometheus Unbound* had for its leading character Heracles, the descendant of Io, whose fame as a benefactor of mankind rivalled that of Prometheus.

As the story of Io constitutes the background for the whole action of *The Suppliants*, it should now be told in full. As daughter of the king of Argos she was priestess in the temple of Hera, the patron goddess of that city. Zeus saw and desired her; and Hera, in this instance becoming aware of the attachment before a union had been achieved, used more than usual thoroughness in the steps she took to prevent it. She transformed Io into a cow; and provided an immortal herdsman, a giant named Argus (which means 'sharp-eyed'), to watch her day and night. Zeus commanded Hermes to kill Argus; whereupon Hera sent a gadfly to madden Io with its sting and drive her in torment from country to country. The prolonged and innocent sufferings of Io give her, in spite of the grotesque form they assumed, a special pathos, and a place of special interest among the many mothers of Zeus's children. At last, by way of Thrace, the Bosphorus, Asia Minor, and Phoenicia, Io reached Egypt. There Hera's cruelty ceased to pursue her; the madness induced by the gadfly left her; her human form was fully or partly restored – though versions of the legend vary. There too Zeus, whose love for her had been decreed by Fate for fulfilment, visited her, and made her pregnant by the breath of his nostrils and the touch of his hand. Again,

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it is not clear whether this unusual consummation is to be connected with Io's metamorphosis or regarded as a sensitive expression of tenderness towards an afflicted woman. Io bore Zeus a son, Epaphos, whose name means 'a touch'.

It is evident that this story is of great anthropological interest, and has connexions with early Egyptian religious ideas; but here we are concerned with its subsequent episodes, which provide the plot of the Danaid Trilogy. Epaphos and his descendants lived by the River Nile, where, three generations later, the family was represented by two brothers, Aegyptus and Danaus. Aegyptus had fifty sons, Danaus fifty daughters. The youths determined to marry their cousins; whereupon the daughters of Danaus (that is, the Danaides or Danaids) fled, under the guidance of their father, to Argos, the original home of their ancestress Io. The sons of Aegyptus pursued them; but the king and people of Argos gave them sanctuary and defied the Egyptians. At this point *The Suppliants* ends.

The outline of subsequent events as given by the legend says that Danaus finally persuaded his daughters to agree to the marriage – but there was treachery in the agreement, planned and directed by Danaus. He made all his daughters swear an oath together to murder their bridegrooms on the wedding night. All performed their oaths, except one: Hypermestra found the claims of love stronger than those of loyalty to the pact made with her sisters, and spared her husband Lynceus. To us, this is the point where the story becomes most interesting; but early tradition says as little about the further adventures of Hypermestra as it does about Orestes. This was fortunate for Aeschylus, as it gave him freedom in the construction of his trilogy; but how he used this freedom we can only conjecture. One considerable fragment survives from the third play, *The Danaids*. It is part of a speech by Aphrodite, and runs as follows:

The holy heaven is full of desire to mate with the earth, and desire seizes the earth to find a mate; rain falls from the amorous heaven and impregnates the earth; and the earth brings forth for men the fodder of flocks and herds and the gifts of Demeter; and from the same moistening marriage-rite the fruit of trees is ripened. Of these things I am the cause.

This speech, which clearly extols love as the essential principle of life

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in the universe, may be taken to show that Aphrodite defended Hypermestra's action in sparing Lynceus, and persuaded the forty-nine sisters to be reconciled to the prospect of marriage. Later writers, as might be expected, said that the Danaids eventually found husbands, whose natural apprehensions proved groundless; while Hypermestra and Lynceus became ancestors of the kings of Argos.

How does Aeschylus treat this exciting but intractable material? To begin with, he gives a clearly marked character to his collective heroine, the Chorus of Danaids. Whereas the sons of Aegyptus, by disposition and instinct, are more allied to their barbarian than to their Greek ancestry, being lustful, violent, and aggressive, the Danaids by contrast are civilized in their aspirations; though under stress of an emergency their thoughts are ready to embrace violence in a reckless and even impious form. Next, the character of Danaus, crafty and determined, is carefully prepared in the first play for the bloodthirsty and unscrupulous role assigned to him in the second; perhaps also for the fate he is to meet in the third, where he may well have suffered death for his conspiracy to murder. But, most important, Aeschylus gives a clearer and more relevant presentation of the central moral issue than that provided by the legend. The legend said that the Danaids regarded the proposed union as incestuous. Aeschylus mentions this view in the course of the play; but, since Athenians of his day felt no objection to marriage between cousins, he does not emphasize it, but transfers interest to another aspect of the matter, namely the aggressive behaviour of the sons of Aegyptus, who were proposing to take their cousins by force. Here, as in *The Eumenides*, reason and persuasion are put forward as the proper principles of civilized life. But they are principles which always find it difficult to defend themselves against the onslaught of violence. At the end of *The Suppliants* the Herald of the Egyptians declares war against Argos; and the Egyptian army has already landed.

A study of the text of *The Suppliants*, together with the fragment of Aphrodite's speech just mentioned, makes it possible to guess roughly what happened in the other two plays. It is probable that *The Egyptians* began with the defeat of the Argive army, perhaps the siege of the city.

* For ideas contained in these three paragraphs I am largely indebted to an article entitled 'The Danaid Trilogy', by Professor R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. LXXXI, 1961.

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It must have included the negotiations for the marriage, and had for its climax the plot to murder the fifty bridegrooms. The exodus at the end of the play may well have been a bridal march to the fatal marriage-chambers. The violence used by the Egyptians in the first play breeds the violence of their victims in the second. The outrage against Zeus God of Suppliants (*Zeus Hikesios*) is followed by the outrage against Zeus God of Hospitality (*Zeus Xenios*).

The third play must have opened with the discovery of the forty-nine murders, and the declaration of Hypermetra that she had spared her husband for love. This is a situation with which the State of Argos must deal; for the murder of the city's guests has brought pollution and will invite revenge. But Danaus and forty-nine of his daughters will certainly regard Hypermetra as the criminal and traitress, and Lynceus as the enemy. Decision must lie with the Argive Assembly, who in *The Suppliants* condemned the defiance of Zeus Hikesios, and will now surely condemn the defiance of Zeus Xenios. But if the Danaids are condemned for their crime, what of the pity which we felt for them in the first play, when they were helpless victims? What is to happen to them? It is this dilemma which requires divine intervention in the person of Aphrodite. How she solved it we do not know; but the solution most likely included both their reconciliation to marriage and their purification from blood-guilt; and illustrated again the belief that Zeus combines force with benevolence in teaching human beings the right path of life.

Before we leave *The Suppliants* a few minor points should be mentioned. First, the number of the Chorus. The legend said there were fifty Danaids. If there were fifty in this Chorus, there must have been fifty maids attending them; and the number of soldiers who came with the Egyptian Herald can hardly, in that case, have been less than twenty. That means that King Pelasgus must have arrived with a guard of at least thirty, if he was to appear easily able to overpower the Egyptians. Then Danaus' bodyguard must have been large enough not to look small beside that of the king. It is quite possible that a large crowd like this was the poet's intention; though it would seem more suitable at the end of a trilogy (as in *The Eumenides*) than at the beginning. Certainly when Tragedy first began the Chorus numbered fifty; and at an unknown date this number was reduced to twelve, as in *Agamemnon*. It was partly because of this that *The Suppliants* used to be thought a very

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early work; if, however, the true date is 463 or thereabouts, it seems unwise to be dogmatic about the number of the Chorus.

Whatever their number, when the Chorus-Leader is speaking of herself and her fellows, she follows the convention of Tragedy in using nearly always the first person singular. In the translation the first person plural has generally been used, except where the singular seemed suitable in the context.

The name Aegyptus needs a brief comment. Plainly he is an 'eponymous hero' invented as a father to the race of Egyptians. I have used the Latin spelling for his name, and the English spelling for the land of Egypt.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

The story of Oedipus and his family, which is best known from the Theban plays of Sophocles, belongs to the generation which preceded that of the siege of Troy. Like the story of Agamemnon, it traces the working-out of a curse which fell upon a family, and which renewed itself by the rashness and impiety of successive generations. Unlike the Oresteia, however, it bears no hopeful message of 'redemption from within'; the curse exhausts itself only with the extinction of the family.

When the play opens Oedipus is already dead. His two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, have quarrelled. We gather that there had been an agreement between them to share equally the kingly power inherited from their father; but Eteocles had contrived to seize sole power for himself, whereupon Polyneices had sought help from Adrastus king of Argos and six other kings, and had brought a large and mixed force to attack his native city.

But the brothers had quarrelled also with Oedipus before he died. The ground of this quarrel is not clear; but it had something to do with the way in which they looked after their father and maintained him from the day when the truth about his incestuous marriage was disclosed, and he blinded himself. Enraged at their attitude to him, Oedipus had cursed them; and included in his curse was the prediction that 'a stranger coming from the sea, born of fire, should prove a harsh divider of inheritance for them'. In the course of the play this riddle is expounded. The 'stranger' is iron, a metal newly imported from Pontus (*pontus* is a Greek word for 'sea'); and with iron, hardened in the fire and sharpened, Eteocles and Polyneices divide their inheritance.

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The curse goes back still further. It was first incurred by Laius, Oedipus' father. He had been warned by Apollo that a son of his would kill him, and commanded to live and die childless. His disobedience earned the enmity of Apollo. He tried to remedy his fault by getting rid of his infant child; with what result is well known, the story being immortalized in Sophocles' *King Oedipus*. In *Seven Against Thebes* Eteocles is deeply aware of the curse on his family, and in particular of the curse of Oedipus, which haunts him in dreams. In the activity and excitement of preparing for battle he forgets gloomy forebodings, and shows in his attitude to the enemy's threats a proper modesty and recognition of the gods. One by one he dispatches his six most notable warriors to meet the attack of the kings at six of the seven gates of Thebes.

When only he himself is left, the Messenger tells him that at the seventh gate the attack is led by his brother Polyneices. Both Messenger and Chorus appear to assume that Eteocles, to avoid shedding kindred blood, will send for another champion, or alter the disposition already made. His refusal to do so is not due merely to his fear of seeming afraid to fight his brother, nor to the loss of face entailed in countermanding his dispositions. It is due to his Greek sense of tragedy, to his conviction that destiny cannot be avoided. When he hears that his brother is at the seventh gate he feels that the curse has caught up with him. He tells himself that by a shuffle on this occasion he may avoid it; but it will find him again, perhaps in a still more terrifying manifestation. There is, there can be, no escape.

That is how Eteocles sees the situation. The Chorus see another side to it. If Eteocles will only exercise the modesty and piety he has hitherto shown, and change gates with one of the six champions, all may yet be well. The anger of the gods which now rages hotly may pass in time; to commit kindred murder now is to despair of any end to the curse, and to justify any doom which Heaven may bring upon the city. In other words, the Chorus feel that, though the curse is a reality, the fate of the house of Oedipus lies at this moment in the choice of Eteocles. He, being the man he is, and the son of Oedipus, will act impulsively and make the wrong choice; but the possibility of right choice exists, and justifies the gods. Aeschylus does not specifically pose this issue of free will, but it is surely there in the text, just as it is in *Agamemnon*.

There is very little action in the play. About one-third of its length

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is occupied by the scene in which the Messenger describes each champion of the invading army, his weapons, and his character. The first five are inordinately arrogant, and this gives Eteocles confidence that the gods cannot be on their side. The sixth, Amphiaraus, is modest, reluctant to take part in the war, and pious. This gives more cause for concern; but Eteocles appoints Lasthenes to meet him, and commits the issue to the gods. After this comes the climax, the revelation that Polyneices is at the seventh gate. That is as much as can be found of dramatic pattern in this long and static scene. However, not only is there much vivid imagery and moving speech in every episode, and in the choral songs, but in the play as a whole an added interest appears when it is realized that a current issue of Athenian policy is clearly and strongly dealt with. This is above all a play, as Aristophanes says in *The Frogs*, full of martial spirit, a play about the successful defence of a strongly walled city. It was produced in 467 B.C. only twelve years after the Persians had left Athens a desolate ruin. Far-sighted Athenian leaders had repeatedly urged their fellow-citizens at whatever cost to surround Athens with impregnable walls; for her rising power was already making enemies in Greece itself. There is little doubt that many phrases in the play would convey to the audience the poet's urgent warning to be wise in time. Within a year or two after its production the fortification of the Acropolis was begun in earnest.

Seven Against Thebes is the third play of a trilogy, of which the first was *Laius*, the second *Oedipus*. The brilliance and popularity of Sophocles' *King Oedipus* must account for the disappearance of Aeschylus' play on the same subject; but it is clear from references in this play that Aeschylus followed in general the outline of the story as we know it. Unfortunately the text of the play is not as Aeschylus left it. Fifty years or more after his death, when Sophocles' *Antigone* was among the most notable pieces in the Athenian repertory, a new ending was written for Aeschylus' play, introducing Antigone and Ismene, the proclamation forbidding burial to Polyneices, and Antigone's defiance. This spurious ending is well written, and an English audience might feel that it saved a dull play at the last moment. But the poet's intention was undoubtedly to end the play with the mourning over the two brothers. With their deaths the family is extinct and the curse fulfilled; and the sisters are irrelevant. Their scene, which introduces a new chapter in the story, can have no place in the third play of a trilogy.