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 ποταμὸς Αρεως μεστὸν ... τούς 'Επτερ' ἐπὶ Θῆβας).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 'ὤς περ, φασίν, Αἰαξύλως ποιεῖ?'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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* I wish to thank D. Bloch, T.H. Nielsen, J. Mejer, A. Sommerstein, O. Taplin and the anonymous referee of CQ for valuable suggestions.
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 κατασκέυα λόφους ~ 384–5 τρεῖς κατασκέυα λόφους | σείει) and later in the Lysistrata (406 ταίμαι’ ἀπ’ αὐτῶν βλαστάνει βουκλήματα ~ 594 εἰ τέ καθένα βλαστάνας βουκλήματα) 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: Ἀθηναὶ δὲ τοσοῦτον ἠγάπησαν Ἀισχύλον, ὡς φησίσαιται μετὰ τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ τῶν βουλήματος διάδοσεν τὰ Ἀισχύλου χρονόν λαμβάνειν; Philostratus’ Life of Apollonius 6.11: ἐν Αθηναίαι πατέρα μὲν αὐτὸν τῆς τραγῳδίας ἠγάπησαν, ἐκάλουν δὲ καὶ τένειμα ἐκ Διόνυσος, τά γὰρ τῶν Ἀισχύλου ψηφισμένων ἀνεδίδοσκεν καὶ ἐνεάτα ἐκ σαφῆς. 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 π. c. by IG 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, 1907), 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.


8 Quoting from the Edonians (Aeschylus fr. 61), but using the title of the tetralogy (ἐκ τῆς Λυκουργείας), 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.


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 Ἀλέξιάς), 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.1 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 μηλοφάγοισας, when for all we know Aeschylus wrote ταυροφάγοισας of the warriors. Is this an oversight by Aristophanes just as Acharnians 883 might be (πραξέοις instead of δίστοις)?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 ἄσπιδ’), 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 άνδρες έπτα, θυρίων σφαγέται. Instead the only thing which is used from the Oath-scene is the shield (εἰς ἄσπιδ’ = ἐς μελαίδερτον σάκος, a normal word instead of the poetic rendering), making way for a common symbolic play in the Aristophanic

11 Aristophanic: Lysistrata (Leiden, 1968), 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. Revenmann, 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 Thesmophoriazusae, 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 title -- the only Aeschylean play-title named in an Aristophanic comedy deriving from a coherent tetralogy, unlike the Persians -- 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. The other performance 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.

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doi:10.1017/S0009838808000700

6 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. Aristophanes, Frogs 1026. Aristophanes' claim that the Persians was presented after μετ’ ταῦτα 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 υδάθει seems to require some knowledge of some performance of the play, and the enigmatic ιναστ, 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. Horder, 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.