Seven Against Thebes: The Tragedy of War

by Thomas G. Rosenmeyer

This is a play about war, a play "full of Ares" as an ancient critic put it. Perhaps we should say: a play about *a* war, for the attack of the Argive champions on Thebes, the struggle of Greek against Greek, brother against brother, is a particular chapter in history. Aeschylus does all he can to remind us of the uniqueness of the event. But the nature of war is such that the chroniclers of particular wars always transcend their immediate focus and touch upon the archetype. . . .

How, then, does one go about writing a play about war? One way is that of Shakespeare, in whose Histories war is presented as an extension of diplomacy, the busyness and chicanery of royal intercourse brought to a boil. Political intrigue, council sessions, duels, flourishes, and soldiers groping in darkness: the panoramic range of the Elizabethan stage delights us with the sheer beauty of effort, of vital force clashing with vital force. What tragedy there is is almost forgotten over the bluster and the strainings on the field of battle. Homer provides us with the closest Greek analogue. Yet there is this difference that in the *Iliad* fighting is not only a thing of beauty but carries its own tragic moral. For Shakespeare, war is an extension, a pinpointing, and also a catharsis of the tragedy of human relationships; for Homer, war is the proof and authorization of life itself.

Another way is that of some recent playwrights who portray the fears and the miseries and the desperate gentleness of the common soldier. E. M. Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, conceived as a novel but experienced as drama, set the tone. The mood is unheroic, candid, lyrical, an Archilochean mixture of grossness and sensibility. In the film version of Remarque's book the hero dies while watching a butterfly. In this kind of play life stands still and death takes control. . . . There are no heroes in this war, only sufferers; their pleasures are such as can be eked out from death, the small inglorious

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pleasures of men condemned to die. Of this perspective brief flashes are to be caught here and there in Greek drama. Take, for example, the herald's speech in the *Agamemnon* (555ff., tr. Lattimore):

> Were I to tell you of the hard work done, the nights
> exposed, the cramped sea-quarters, the foul beds . . .
> We lay
> against the ramparts of our enemies, and from
> the sky, and from the ground, the meadow dews came out
> to soak our clothes and fill our hair with lice.

The herald goes on to recall the dying of the birds, the sea paralyzed into wavelessness, the dead men fixed in their graves. Hopelessness, revulsion, and death are the keynotes of this formulation of war.

Then there is the war lampooned by Aristophanes. His thoughtful clowns are brothers in the flesh to the Achaean soldiers encamped below Troy and fighting against dew and vermin. But in comedy it becomes possible for the sufferers to change into scoffers, to turn back death with a flick of the wrist and laugh him off the scene. Aristophanes achieves this by domesticating war; in the place of swords and helmets and breastplates, the paraphernalia of a heroic delusion, the comic heroes use cooking utensils to make battle. Thus war becomes both manageable and funny. Yet its horror continues to be felt, for the domestication remains a device, open for all to see. The device produces a moral, by posing a question: why not use the pots and pans for making porridge or soup? Why not use iron for ploughshares, atomic power for cancer research? It is the triumph of comedy that now and then, using the kind of material which informs tragedy, it can, by means of comic distortions and inversions, prompt the asking of specific questions and generate a directed response.

In most plays about war, it appears, the treatment is unified. War is visualized in a certain way, and the actions and responses of the characters are brought into line with that particular emphasis. It is not to be expected that Coriolanus feels about fighting as Virgilia does. For Agamemnon the Trojan War means one thing, to Clytemnestra it means something quite different. But within the imagination of the audience each play that deals with a war establishes a recognizable pattern, a unique impression of the specific quality and meaning of that war. . . . The status and appeal of the war are clearly defined, for a very good reason. For war, in these plays, is to serve as a matrix for the action or inaction of the tragic hero. The brighter, the better defined the foil, the more mysterious and affecting the individual heroism pictured against it.

The *Seven Against Thebes* of Aeschylus deviates from this norm, as it deviates from the attitudes toward war lightly sketched above.

In this drama war and the hero are not related to each other as the field of action and the agent. There is between them a reciprocal relationship, a mutually quickening involvement, which reduces the traditional schemes of free will, fate, and responsibility to irrelevance. The war shapes Eteocles, and Eteocles in turn shapes the war. What is more, the war itself is developed in terms of a daring counterpoint. Toward the beginning of the drama it is an impersonal mechanism, an irresistible brutal assault on the weakness of man, a senseless grinding pressure from abroad. Under its aegis beauty takes refuge in despair and heroism is cast out. Toward the end of the play, on the other hand, the machine aspect of war is long forgotten, beauty has reentered with the engagement of the leader, and heroism saves the day. Between the beginning and the end there is much subtle manipulation of the contrapuntal themes of tanks versus bayonets, of logistics versus courage, of Ares versus the Curse. As against Shakespeare's panorama of blood and fuss and thunder, against Remarque's portrayal of human frailty sustaining senseless bombardment, Aeschylus' image of war in the *Seven* is more complex and more comprehensive. It is also more real because it partakes of the ambivalence and the mystery which attach to the heroic achievement.

It will be useful to recall the facts. Laius king of Thebes was told that Thebes would flourish only if he had no sons. He flouts the oracle, begets Oedipus, exposes him after his birth, and is ultimately killed by him. The flouting of the oracle in combination with the parricide produces a curse which settles heavily on the royal house. Oedipus himself, crushed by the curse, revitalizes the Fury by cursing his own sons before he dies. Against this compounded curse the brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, attempt the feeble protection of a political settlement. Eteocles, the older, is to remain and rule in Thebes. Polyneices, the younger, is to go south and seek a kingdom of his own. Polyneices is lucky; on the strength of a dynastic marriage in Argos he gains influence and persuades Adrastus, the king of Argos, to march against Thebes and challenge his brother. As the play opens the siege has begun. Eteocles selects seven leaders from the Theban army to engage seven champions of the Argive forces at the seven gates of Thebes, arranging for himself to take up the position opposite Polyneices. The brothers kill each other, the city is saved, and the play ends with the sons of Oedipus being laid alongside their father in a holy grave.[1]

It is often said that Aeschylus delights in spectacle, in violent action on the stage, in vivid colors and extravagant gestures. The present play forms an exception to this rule. The setting is simple. At the back of the stage stands a large stepped altar adorned with seven divine statues, each of them representing the divinity presiding over one of the seven gates of Thebes. It is these seven images, clearly characterized as belonging to Athena, Ares, Poseidon, and so forth, which determine the stage action. Both the chorus and the actors focus their attention, as the progress of the play requires, now on this and now on that divinity, or on all of them jointly. . . . The constant referral to the gods clothes the proceedings in severity. The public character and the grandeur of the issues, at least so we are led to believe from the beginning, rule out intimacy and sentiment. Apparently they also rule out flamboyance and baroqueness. The stage is simple, the movements on it deliberate and repetitious, masks and costumes purposely subdued in color and design. . . .

[1] In spite of some recent objections, most scholars are today agreed that the play originally ended with line 1004. What follows in the traditional text are subsequent additions inspired by Sophocles' *Antigone*.

II

As the play opens, we face a public situation. Thebes is under attack, and the question is whether and how the salvation of the city can be worked out. Eteocles, the king, is charged with finding a solution to the problem. In this task he is disturbed by the presence of the chorus of Theban women. They break in on his calm and reasoned dispositions with an almost prophetic fervor, born from fear. In their excitement they visualize the enemy spilling over the city walls although the battle has not yet begun. Eteocles, the confident organizer, manages to break the hysteria of the women. Actually, . . . he strikes a compromise with them. He suggests that they go home. . . . But of course they cannot take his advice, for a chorus must remain on the scene. As women imperiled by war they symbolize the endangered city as a whole; and in this capacity they must be present to frame the composure of the king, and to justify his decisions.

Eteocles, it appears, simultaneously faces two different fronts. On the one hand there are the attackers, beyond the stage, outside of the city. They are the enemy, and his position as leader requires that he devote his undivided attention to counteracting that threat. At the same time, however, his mind is distracted, and his function complicated, by the women who are on the stage, within the city, visible to the audience. Standing between the two blocks he forms a connecting link between them; he finds out that he may have as much to fear from the one as from the other. In the end, in spite of some brave maneuvering to protect his rear, he is crushed between them. But this will not happen until the play has run its course. For the present we do not see the disaster, but take our visual cues from the

king. By alternately focusing on the aggressors outside the city and on the sufferers within, Aeschylus permits us to recognize the gulf which separates the two. In this we are helped along by the poetic elaboration of a network of crucial antinomies. On the stage we witness a segment of Greek culture, with its altars, its gods, and its demonstrations of freedom; beyond, there are barbaric rites, Titans invoked, and the threat of slavery. . . . On the stage we review solid fighters, relying on courage and modesty and little else; beyond, the instruments of actions are beasts and emblems and idle boasts. Here, soft women conveying the suffering that comes with war; there, shields and chariots and brazen bells, the glossy impenetrable impersonal equipment of battle. In Thebes, a reliance on Earth, the great mother, the giver of food and the shaper of feelings; outside, blood and fire and rootless barren monstrosity.

Let us look at some of the details of this antiphonal system of references. The conception that the Thebans are Greeks while their enemies are barbarians has of course no foundation in history or reason. What is more, for an Athenian playwright in the fifth century to intimate that an Argive army was less Greek than the Thebans is a diplomatic faux pas of the first order. And yet Aeschylus dares to risk the displeasure of an Athenian ally, and to fly in the face of familiar history, by unmistakably contrasting Thebes (71),

> a city which pours forth the speech of Greece

with (170)

> an army of another tongue.

For Aeschylus is a dramatist, not a historian. To point up the viciousness of war, and to deepen the gulf between the city and the forces beyond, he does not scruple to practice a deception and to paint his Argives with the colors of the Persians of recent historical memory. The result, at least to begin with, is a clearer drawing of the lines, a more crystalline hardening of opposites.

One reason why the enemies have to be barbarian in speech and character is their lack of a home. To be Greek, within the world of this play, means to be tied to the soil which your fathers have cultivated. . . . The loss of Thebes, beyond all else, would mean the loss of a living hoard of Greek tradition. The opponents do not share in this earth-bound culture; uprooted, uncommitted as they are, they are shown to practice a vain and vicious self-reliance, an *autarky* such as is exhibited by fools, villains, and barbarians. . . .

The Thebans have freedom, the opponents offer slavery. This constant theme, struck whenever the issue between Greeks and barbarians is raised, forms one of the major motifs developed in the choral songs.

The women fear enslavement, ending in concubinage. With vivid and pathetic colors they paint scene after scene of subjugation and humiliation. But at this point Aeschylus introduces a jarring note. Eteocles, at pains to calm their fears, suggests to the women that it is they, by their own behavior, who are liable to bring about their enslavement (254). . . . Perhaps he means to say only that their lack of control is interfering with an effective defense of Thebes. But I believe there is more in this than the forecast of a dreaded outcome. . . . Their behavior shows that they are unfree, they are jettisoning the dignity and the spiritual strength, the *sophrosyne,* which they should have absorbed. . . . Eteocles reminds them of their birthright and their obligations as free citizens. For the members of the chorus *are* citizens, whatever the status of women in Greek politics.

In this fashion Aeschylus averts what might have been a fatal flaw in his design. There is nothing more dangerous to the successful planning of a tragedy than a moral situation which is all black and all white. The treatment by antinomies which pervades the play brings it very close indeed to the line after which tragedy resolves into melodrama and audiences may hiss in comfort. . . . But this is, after all, a tragedy, and it can be that only because the antinomies are not allowed to stand without some subtle adjustment. Hence the characterization of the women who are not entirely free. The absence of Polyneices from the stage is a further touch to blunt the edge of the melodrama. It is true, of course, that he could have come on the scene only under the protection of a truce; and that would have meant proliferating the action in a way which Aeschylus, unlike Euripides, avoids. Polyneices, at any rate, does not appear; and a villain off stage can never be quite so effective in drawing upon himself the hatred of the audience as an adversary who faces the hero visibly and concretely.

But these are rather superficial measures. There are other, more incisive means whereby Aeschylus arranges to prevent the set contrarieties from degenerating into a moral paradigm. They are, principally, the dynamics of the selection scene, and the gradual self-revelation, completely unexpected, of Eteocles who in the end turns out to be and to have been quite different from what we had a right to expect. For, and this is part of the irony which restores to the action its tragic dimension, Eteocles winds up as one who "would seem rather than be."

The initial role of Eteocles is highlighted by one of those nautical metaphors which recur in many parts of the play (1):

> He must speak to the point
> who watches the course from the city's deck,
> his hand on the tiller and his eyes unsoothed by sleep.

Eteocles is the pilot of the state. There is no reason to doubt, during the first part of the play, that his chief business is to guide his crew. . . . About his soul, his private feelings, his hopes and fears as a human being we learn nothing at all. The public crisis requires a public official to cope with it according to the lights of his profession. . . .

The language of political authority has a ring all its own. It makes statements, it shouts commands, it never hedges or wavers or falters. Above all, it works through speech. Eteocles has no lyrics. His iambic trimeters consistently reflect the rational calm of his public commitment. The king, as king, has no music. Contrast the women; their utterance exhausts itself in exclamations and interjections and rhetorical questions. Theirs is the language of despair, or terror, of the imagination. . . . They sing and dance out their experiences, and the varying curve of their passions finds audible expression in the intricate texture of their musical rhythms. . . . Only toward the end, when Eteocles reverses himself, the shock causes the chorus to interrupt the continuity of this musical pattern and to lapse into speech. But this is a deviation which proves the rule. The antithetical positions of the leader and his flock are acted out through the antithesis between music and the spoken word. Particularly when they turn toward each other, to persuade or beseech, the "epirrhematic" alternation of song and speech (203ff.) carries an obvious moral.

We have noted that the mind of Eteocles works on the level of reason, while the women give themselves over to their emotions and their violent fancies. This is only another way of saying that it is Eteocles' role to think of others and for others, whereas the members of the chorus are wrapped up in their own fears and specters. At any rate this is true of the Eteocles and the chorus who are presented to us in the first half of the play. That the women should be so concerned with their own fate and their own sufferings, instead of helping to support high strategy, is only to be expected. It is not for nothing that the chorus consists of women. This is a play about war, and war's destructive power is felt most sharply by the women. Men brave the war, they enter into a partnership with it, the terms of the partnership being that if they win, they have the glory, and if they are killed, they have neither shame nor suffering. But women are the losers whatever the outcome. Driven by restless fancies the chorus contemplates only the worst, and some of Aeschylus' formulations have the keen edge of collective memories of pain . . . (333):

> Weep upon girls freshly plucked who, even before
> the cruel harvest of marriage rites, leave
> their home on an odious path.

> Nay, I say that the dead
> have a fate better than this. . . .

The picture is one of women wasted, violently and at random. Aeschylus merges this with another picture, a vision of foodstuffs recklessly spilled (357ff.). . . . As a portrayer of women's thoughts and feelings Aeschylus has few equals among the great writers of tragedy. He does not set out to create lifelike characters, to copy the bundle of significances and irrelevancies which constitute a specific personality. But he understands the important differences between the world of men and the world of women. This prevents him from ever conceiving his women as mere negations or parodies of masculinity, such as are occasionally found in the plays of Sophocles and Euripides. The dramatic situation is often contrived or abstract, but the variety of human responses which Aeschylus builds into his situations is drawn from a fountain of sympathy and discrimination. . . .

When the chorus, in their characteristic hallucinations, see the enemy vaulting the wall, the objects on which their inner eye dwells are many: horses, chariots, helmets, plumes, spears, bridles, shields small and large, and disembodied crashes and thunderings (100ff.). . . . Behind this imposing front of armor and equipment the men themselves are barely noticed. The concentration on the war machine, on the gear and the artillery, is deliberate. For it communicates the hard impersonality of war which Aeschylus wishes us to accept as the initial thesis of the play. Above all, there is the accent on the shields. The symbolic function of the shields in the selection sequence will be discussed directly. But long before that phase of the play, . . . the shield asserts itself as the principal image of the vision of war we have been discussing: war as a meaningless mechanism, as crude physical necessity and violence, as the impact of mass on mass. We need not rely on our own sense of metaphor to see how fitting the image is; archaic vase painting furnishes us with independent evidence. When the artist paints a duel, the contortions of the limbs, the tautness of the facial muscles are sharply individualized. Each fighter has his own posture and his own momentum; the contest is one in which two souls meet and clash. The arms, though an important part of the artistic design, are largely decorative, or at any rate subordinate to the contours of the heroic physique. But then there are the vases with serried ranks of fighters moving into battle or engaging an enemy host. In such scenes of mass fighting the soldiers are, as a rule, barely differentiated as men; their movements and their facial expressions form a repetitive design. Only their shields, reaching from chin to knee and allowing only the smallest margin to heads and extremities, are grandly distinguished, by their blazons. These

blazons—snakes and eagles and bull's heads and Gorgons and boars —form the real personalities, the true entities engaged in the battle. It is a battle of shields, not of men.

This is the formulation which Aeschylus uses in the first half of his play. The conception is essentially visual, invented by painters for their panels of mass war. Because it appeals to the eye, its use by Aeschylus is particularly effective. For it is important that a playwright should, at the beginning of a tragic action, supply his audience with a firm visual anchoring. The image of the shield permits us to follow the development of the theme with a full perception of the distance we are traveling. . . .

III

At the end of the *stretta* which concludes the exchange between the king and his people (245ff.) there is a momentary reconciliation. It marks the end of the exposition, of the setting of the stage for the tragic action that is to follow. The women are impressed with the warnings of Eteocles; they promise to behave themselves, to subject their anxieties to the military-political-philosophical discipline recommended by him (263):

> I hold my tongue; and bear the general fortune.

There are some critics who argue that Aeschylean *stichomythia,* the stiff alternation of single lines of dialogue, does not give us an insight into the shifting personal relations of the characters. It is their opinion that *stichomythia* serves only to further the plot. It is at best difficult to make so rigid a distinction between the development of the plot and the realignment of the characters. In any case, the *Seven Against Thebes* furnishes us with the prize example of a *stichomythia* in the brief course of which the relationships of the characters are significantly changed. At the end of the passage the chorus are launched on their slow road to political and personal salvation. There will be lapses into their old nervousness and trepidation, notably in the ode which follows immediately upon their apparent adjustment to the policy of Eteocles, after the king exits from the stage and leaves them to themselves. . . . But the first flash of a new spirit has been glimpsed, a token of the strength and the freedom which the women are to achieve before the play comes to an end.

More important, at precisely the same moment Eteocles begins to travel in the opposite direction. The reconciliation is no one-sided affair. To pacify the chorus and give them the confidence they need for their conversion, the king promises to relinquish his generalship and to become a fighting soldier. This decision to fight—though Adrastus,

the leader of the opposition, does not—is a concession won from Eteocles in his contest with the women. Ostensibly the move is not out of keeping with the military preparedness for which he stands. In reality it is in the nature of an abdication. Earlier, before the force of the choral frenzy exacted its toll, he had asked (208):

> How now, does the skipper, when his ship
> wearies against the sea swell, find a means
> of safety by leaving the stern for the bow?

With his announcement that he will share in the fighting (282), . . . he himself turns into a captain who leaves the stern, who gives up his post of command and joins the sailors in their undirected efforts throughout the length of the ship. The detached leader, the organizer, begins to be personally involved. At first the involvement is only on the surface; his fighting is to be primarily for show, to convince the women that there is nothing to fear. . . . He continues to regard himself as the pilot of the city, as if such doubling in brass were possible in the world of the city state. But administrative discipline is not the stuff from which heroes are made.

The chorus is calmed, Eteocles leaves. Now we expect the battle. But Greek drama shows no battles on the stage, just as it is reluctant to show deaths. Perhaps the writers feel that an enactment of dying, particularly of blood and wounds, would strain the nice tension between truth and illusion which is demanded in the theater. . . . Some suggest that the religious setting of the performance, the Dionysiac background, must be held partly responsible. Whatever the reason, the battle cannot be staged. It must be reshaped to fit the bounds of the tragedy.

Now what is a heroic battle? It is the measuring up of two men against each other. What counts is the comparative standing of the two parties. . . . Significantly in Homer the great duels are fought through the medium of oratory before they are decided by means of arms. Often we are made to feel that the fight is won when one of the heroes has managed to deflate the ego of his opponent through his superior art of boasting. The wounds inflicted afterward are merely the natural consequence of the power arrangement which the speeches of the men have rehearsed before our eyes. Thus, if we could look into the hearts of the people as they confront each other, . . . we might perhaps be able to catch the quintessence of the duel. We should perceive the form or idea rather than the phenomenon, which is stunted and disfigured by accidental detail. The confrontation of vital components is to be found already in the antiphonal symbolism discussed earlier. But now we need more than a thematic counterpoint. We need a concrete clash. . . . To furnish this is the purpose of the selection

sequence. We cannot have the paltry reality of a genuine battle; so the formal organization of speeches and counterspeeches, stately and deliberate and richly colored, gives us what we need to know about each of the fighters, to judge or to applaud. The sequence permits us not only to see the duels, as we might in a proper war, but to assess their worth and to reflect on the rights and wrongs of the fighters. Above all, it saves the duels from appearing either ludicrous or obscure. . . .

The sequence consists of seven double panels, each separated from its neighbor by a brief choral interlude in which the enduring fears of the women continue to be voiced. Each of the seven panels consists of two speeches; in the first the messenger describes the preparations of an attacker; in the second Eteocles arranges for a defendant to repel the enemy. At the end of Eteocles' final rejoinder the chorus does not add its usual sung comment but adopts the blank verse of the speakers. For once they respond with a remonstrance rather than a sentiment or apprehension. This suggests that the last panel is different from the others, and that perhaps it is the one which the others are meant to prepare. Indeed, before the choral ode which concludes the sequence there is an exchange between Eteocles and the chorus, parallel to the exchange which prompted the earlier reconciliation and obviously conceived as a complement to it. By purely formal means, therefore, we are given to understand that at the end of the selection sequence the king and the chorus once more find themselves at opposite poles, but in reverse, and that a new solution of their difference must be worked out. The reason for the new constellation of attitudes is supplied by the sequence itself. It turns out to be the dramatist's chief instrument for refashioning our vista of war, for guiding us from the impersonal horror of the machine and its extensions to the moral and spiritual substance of the heroic encounter.

If we compare the attackers listed by the messenger with the defendants sent against them by Eteocles, the latter are, for the most part, a colorless lot. They have to be, for color in this play is linked with wrong. The colorfulness of the enemies is part of their barbarism, their Orientalism; it is the visual confirmation of their boastful preening. Color is, as it were, the accompaniment of emptiness. Solidity and substance are persuasive enough without the surface thrill of an optic illusion. . . .

The aggressors are all the more interesting. First there is Tydeus. He is a beast; more particularly he is the proverbially roaring beast. He roars like a serpent—the context suggests that the bellow of a dragon rather than the hiss of a snake is intended. . . . The beast imagery and the impression of vocal compulsiveness carry us beyond the limits of good and evil. Tydeus lacks the moral dimension which

makes of a man a responsible human agent. He is part of the animated machine; through the turbulence of Aeschylus' verse we experience some of the terror spread by the inhuman howl of the monster.

Capaneus, the next man from Argos, though differently conceived, is of the same stuff: like Tydeus and all the other attackers but one he is a blasphemer (427). . . . But with him blasphemy is not merely an attitude, a partial symptom of his villainy; it is his very nature. His "gigantic" frame brooks no commerce with the gods; the lightning bolts of Zeus are to him only a mild discomfort to be shrugged off along with the midday heat. He is, or fancies himself, an irresistible and unfeeling bulk, an engine destined to hurl firebolts of its own and burn the city. Like Tydeus, then, Capaneus perpetuates the vision of war as a compulsive mechanical threat which is the play's point of departure.

Roughly the same is true also of the portrait of the third Argive warrior, Eteoclus, except that in his case the emphasis is less on the unfeeling mechanism than on the irrational nature of the monster (461):

> He wheels his mares snorting in their muzzle
> straps, eager to dash against the gate.
> The muzzles whistle with a barbaric ring,
> filled with a nostril-sniffing insolence.

This is all we learn about the person of Eteoclus (the embarrassing closeness of the name to that of Eteocles must mean that the myth on which Aeschylus draws is based on historical memories, however dim). . . . The personality of Eteoclus disappears behind the vicious energy of his horses. Once more we find ourselves stationed in a moral desert, in a fierce devilish stamping ground where good and evil have no meaning.

The horses of Eteoclus duplicate, with an increase in the brutality of it, the neighing of Tydeus. Similarly Hippomedon, the next aggressor to be described, may be called a doublet of Capaneus. But now the governing idea of automatic bulk is fully realized; the description comes to be completely divorced from the anatomy of the human body. . . . We gather that the eyes of the messenger are not fixed on the person of the man, or even on his "frame and huge design" (488), but on the shield. The shield, the symbol of mechanical war, has come to cover and hide the lineaments of the fighter behind it. . . . This enlargement and self-assertion of what should be an instrument in human hands contains an element of humor. Bergson reminds us that human beings who are shown behaving like machines are funny. Aeschylus, with characteristic courage and with a minimum of subterfuge, exploits the humor where it presents itself (489):

I shuddered as he wheeled his vast threshing-floor—
I mean, the round of his shield.

. . . The fact remains that the shield has now become an autonomous substance. As an image it is no longer merely basic, but also terminal. No further development of the initial conception of war is possible, unless the drama is to bog down in the species of humor which feeds on insistence and hyperbole. . . . The joke of the messenger, therefore, heralds a turn.

The first thing to be noted about the messenger's description of Parthenopaeus is its anonymity. He withholds the name till almost the end of his speech. . . . True, near the beginning of the passage there are certain pointers—"mountain-dwelling mother," "man-boy," and others—which an audience learned in mythology will interpret correctly. But it is a matter of interpretation, and for most of us, as for the majority of the ancient audience, the speech is a protracted riddle, whose solution, in this case the name, is held off until the personality has been cast into full relief. For now, for the first time, the messenger gives us a man, a complex human being, rather than a monster or a machine. Like the others he is a blasphemer (529):

He swears by the spear he holds, prizing it more
than a god, nay, higher than his eyes . . .

The terms of the comparison are revealing. He worships his spear; in fact he resembles the others. But in his vanity he makes reference to his eyes, and it so happens that these eyes belong to an unusually pretty face. The warrior has, we are told, an adolescent, girlish look—and in fact that is the meaning of the name as yet unannounced. But his spirit is by no means girlish, and his eye, set in a lovely ephebic face, is a true mirror of his spirit: a grim Gorgon eye. In short, Parthenopaeus is an angelic miscreant; charming without and rotten within, he exhibits a gross disparity between character and looks. . . .

It is clear that with the appearance of this man we have entered a new arena. He is not a beast, or a colossus, or a shield, or one of the other unnatural concretions which take us beyond the pale of pity and fear. He interests us as a person, for we know his type. . . . We have left the machines and the beasts behind us; from now on we shall be looking at men.

With the next messenger report, . . . the leap is complete. The sixth aggressor is Amphiaraus, a prophet. . . . He knows that the expedition will fail and that he himself will, by his death, enhance the power of Thebes (587). . . . He opposes the whole war and along with it the men who have carried it to the gates of Thebes. This is what we would expect from a hero who resembles Eteocles in being

temperate and controlled (568), who holds his shield quietly instead of whirling it (590), and who carries no design on the shield. For (592)

he means not to seem best, but to be,
and gather fruit from the deep furrow ploughed
in his mind where noble counsels grow and thrive. . . .

Amphiaraus is not easy to understand. The unorthodoxy of his position answers to the tension in his mind. His name-calling of Polyneices . . . points to a harsh sense of frustration. We should remember also that he is a prophet, a "man of curses" as his name says. His abuse has the force of crushing souls. After he has finished with Polyneices we can no longer believe that Polyneices has any justice on his side, or that he will be victorious. A good man who curses the aggressors; an enemy who helps to secure the salvation of Thebes: no wonder that Eteocles bursts out in sorrow and perplexity at the spectacle of Amphiaraus conjured up by the messenger. For the anomalousness of the position of Amphiaraus closely resembles his own. He also has found himself at odds with his friends; he also is in danger of being (614)

pulled down and smashed along with the rest, God willing. . . .

The goodness of Amphiaraus does something else. Earlier we commented on the artistic precariousness of a dramatic situation which is morally all white and all black. The presence of the prophet among the villains is yet another means of mitigating the risk. It appears that the attackers are wicked but not unexceptionally so. Eteocles has been inserted into the ranks of the aggressors, under another name, to redistribute the light and the shade, and to save the tragedy from becoming an open book. At the same time the device cannot fail to suggest that the comparison works also the other way round. Because Eteocles is like Amphiaraus we must be prepared for the possibility of his defeat. For the doom of the prophet shows that the good is not necessarily victorious.

But, to turn now to the last panel, Polyneices is a moral agent, a man, not part of the machine. He prays to Justice, and carries her image on his shield. To be sure, she is *his* justice, a fragmentary portion of justice of which Heraclitus would say that it is illusory like a dream. It is worse than illusory; being a relativist distortion of true justice it is more evil than moral indifference. . . . The audience knows that his departure from Thebes was voluntary and sanctioned by usage. He is in the wrong; but instead of simply drawing him as a villain Aeschylus has him indulge in a flight of ethical fancy which prompts us to reflect on the justice or injustice of his enterprise. . . .

And finally, the moral complexion of his character, itself prefigured by the virtues of Amphiaraus, helps to prepare the eventual shift of Eteocles. Thus the selection sequence turns out to have an important function in shifting our focus from mass war to personal engagement and the question of right and wrong, and in setting the stage for Eteocles' liberation from his role as detached manipulator.

IV

Through most of the selection sequence, Eteocles remains the master strategist. Each of the attackers, we are told, carries a shield with a telling blazon, all except Amphiaraus who prefers being to seeming. That is to say, the shields are conceived as outgrowths and manifestations of the hollowness of the aggressors. They need shields, and colorful and articulate shields at that, to conceal their own lack of substance and to frighten their opponents. Such shield magic, like the boasting speeches that precede a duel, serve the purpose of psychological warfare. It is up to Eteocles, in his capacity of general, to oppose the magic and to devise countercharms. The answers of Eteocles to the messenger's descriptions, therefore, constitute a display of magic at work. But this particular magic, unlike that exercised by the shields, is a magic of words, a protective wall of remedial oratory raised up in the face of monstrous shapes and blasphemous images. . . .

The shield of Tydeus carries a flaming sky with stars and a bright full moon. Eteocles' answer (403):

> If he should die, and night descend on his eyes,
> this arrogant device would rightly prove
> its nature and its name for him who bears it.

. . . Capaneus displays a naked man with a lighted torch in his hands and the legend: "I shall burn the city." Eteocles contrasts this torch with its divine counterpart (444):

> I believe he will be struck, inescapably,
> by the burning thunderbolt.

. . . Eteoclus' shield shows a fully armed man ascending the rungs of a ladder toward an enemy battlement, with the legend: Not even Ares will cast me from the ramparts. Eteocles' answer has the ring of a Socratic whimsy (478): the device will enable the defender Megareus to capture two men and a citadel. Hippomedon, the fourth attacker, has on his shield a picture of Typhon spewing black smoke from a fiery mouth. On this occasion Eteocles' rebuttal is ready-made: father Zeus, flaming weapon in hand, will fight on the side of Hyperbius

and win his ancient victory all over again. The refutation is so obvious that for once, and perhaps also for the sake of variety, rhetoric descends to the level of iconography, and Zeus is shown enthroned on the defendant's shield (512). But the next adversary, Parthenopaeus, is once more neutralized with the proper refinement and wit. His device, even more baroque than those of the others, is the voracious Sphinx holding in her talons a single Theban man (544). . . . The notion is that the Theban soldiers, faced with the prospect of injuring one of their own, would be reluctant to fight. Eteocles deftly exposes the ambivalence of the implied argument (560): it is the Sphinx herself, the arch enemy of Thebes, who will have cause to complain, for she will be much buffeted when she gets close to the citadel.

And so the battle is dramatized as a series of magic pretensions on one side and counter-arguments on the other. Both the magic and the dialectic are used toward an artistic objective, to let us see the power and the limits of the personalities posted for battle, to create and in turn unmake the characters participating in the attack. . . . H. D. F. Kitto reminds us that the characters in a Greek tragedy are constructive; that is to say, the Greek dramatic writers, instead of aiming at the flexible naturalism usually found on the modern stage, conceived of their characters as aggregates of significant features and behavior patterns required by the action of the play. The selection sequence grants us a glimpse into a workshop in which such characters are manufactured. . . .

Amphiaraus carries no shield design, hence no rebuttal is needed, only sorrow which comes from the reflection that good men perish indiscriminately with the bad (597). . . . Here, just before the curse begins to move him, in the very teeth of war, Eteocles injects a last and most emphatic note of human sympathy. . . . As suggested earlier, he senses in the fate of Amphiaraus a parallel to his own. The elegiac mood . . . is not the kind of thing we should have expected from the confident leader of the earlier part of the play. . . . In fact the whole speech of Eteocles, with its somber contemplation on the fate of man and with its formal division into general examples and specific application, has a decidedly choral quality. Eteocles has undergone a change. By itself the present scene is not sufficient to reveal the precise nature of the change. This much is clear, however, that the public function of the general has become overshadowed by the private ponderings of the man, and that his former sanguine assurance has given way to a new humor, to worry and despair. From a leader manipulating war he is turning into a man experiencing the war in himself. . . .

But there is one more shield-carrying enemy: Polyneices. His device is not symbolic in the same way as those of his associates. Rather it

conforms more closely to the reality with which we are already familiar. The image shows a woman decently leading a man in full armor (644); the legend says that she is Justice conducting her champion back to regain his native city. . . . By putting himself into the picture Polyneices shows it for what it is, a pictorial design which directly communicates the spoken announcement which it is meant to convey. . . . In the eyes of Eteocles this type of blazon must be the most dangerous of all. He has no countermagic, no deflecting whimsy, no refutation. All he can do is deny the claim. Simple negation is the only instrument left to him when an ethical claim takes the place of brute force. As it will turn out, negation is not enough.

In the case of Amphiaraus no magic was necessary because the prophet already knew his destruction; he had no need to have it invoked against him. In the case of Polyneices magic is equally out of place. . . . For now, at the end of the sequence, the contest is between two moral agents locked in meaningful combat. The stress is no longer on the device but on the men themselves and on their intentions. The men are seen as products of a development, as characters with a past; each has his upbringing and his achievements, almost in the Sophoclean manner. We note the biographical dimension of Eteocles' answer (662):

> If Justice, the maiden child of Zeus, had stood
> by him, in his deeds and thoughts, this might well be.
> But no, not when he escaped from his mother's darkness
> nor in his childhood nor in later youth
> nor even when his chin collected down
> did Justice glance on him or judge him just.

We cannot miss the undertone of regret and disappointment at a life of promise steered in the wrong path. . . . With the other aggressors, from Tydeus to Parthenopaeus, he has nothing in common. With Amphiaraus he is connected only by the tenuous link of a moral understanding. With Polyneices he shares a life, and a curse.

V

> Alas, the god-crazed towering hatred of heaven;
> alas, my clan, the tear-drenched clan of Oedipus;
> alas, my father's curses now fulfilled!

This is Eteocles' reformulation of the curse, of the divine hatred under which his family has labored for generations (653). A curse is something constant, a stain which cannot be expunged except under the most

unusual circumstances. And yet, so that it may retain its full force in the hearts of men, it has to be re-evoked periodically from generation to generation. This, at any rate, is what we find in Aeschylean and Sophoclean tragedy. A curse once pronounced goes into effect unto the third and fourth generation; the men affected by it turn into spontaneous victims, reasserting at crucial junctures their commitment to the curse. . . . With Eteocles' outburst we are thrust back into the living domain of the curse. No longer does the city occupy his thoughts; the war machine has vanished from the scene. Eteocles has ceased to be a general, sovereign and efficient, and turned into a hero, involved, committed, obsessed. To be a hero, whether on the Homeric battlefield or in Attic tragedy, means to be unreasoning, self-centered, surrendering oneself headlong to the needs and demands of an engrossing mission. . . . For such a man a curse presents a challenge and a scope.

The chorus recognize the shift (677):

> Do not, child of Oedipus, break our hearts
> by raving like an evil-spoken zealot.

Here we have an extraordinary development. The mention of Oedipus shows that the chorus perceive the workings of the curse. Moreover, in their judgment the brothers are now as one, for there can be little doubt that Polyneices is precisely such an "ill-spoken zealot." . . . Finally, as Eteocles rejects his public status and concentrates on his own person, on his needs and his fate, the chorus give up their own self-centeredness and begin to take thought of the hero. By an unparalleled crossing of lines the chorus assume the earlier role of Eteocles, the role of the unselfish warner. Formally also they authenticate their new position, for these lines are spoken rather than sung. Each of the preceding six tableaux of the selection sequence is terminated by a choral lyric; now, at the end of the final tableau, . . . the leader of the chorus takes over with a small speech of his own.

> Let not madness, filling the heart,
> spear-crazed, carry you away!

So sing the chorus, resuming their traditional lyric medium (686). And Eteocles answers (689):

> Since it is the god who activates the event,
> let it sail before the wind, straight to Cocytus,
> the whole Apollo-hated clan of Laius.

Such subservience to the gods . . . had once been the preserve of the chorus. Now Eteocles has adopted the perspective for his own. There

is more yet. A few moments before he rushes into the battle he states (710):

Too true the visions of nightmarish dreams . . .

We had hardly dared to suspect that Eteocles, like the chorus, might have his own hallucinations. His Platonizing homage to the intellect, his strictures on the women's turmoil, have proved a sham. Given the proper setting, in this case the catalyzing effect of war, man, whatever his position, will betray himself as the simple, raw, vulnerable organism that he is. . . . And vulnerability is the first condition of heroism. An administrator cannot be heroic, only an undisguised and unsheltered human being can, a man reduced to his essential condition by the curse.

The liveliness of the action has perhaps caused us to forget that there is a curse. The picture of a commander in chief issuing orders is not liable to remind us of the Furies hovering over the clan. And yet Aeschylus, in his own careful manner, does not mean us to forget. In Eteocles' second speech, near the beginning of the play, when the king calls on his divinities to protect the land and the city, . . . he prays to Zeus, Earth, the city's gods, and the (70)

Omnipotent Curse, the Fury of my father.

This first appeal to the curse is contemplative, almost gentle, quietly edged in. From then on each mention of Oedipus, each mention of the family of which Eteocles is a member, should prepare the audience with cumulative explicitness for the final explosion. Nothing else is to be expected in this third play of the Theban trilogy. A king is tied to his community; it glories and suffers with him. Laius had failed to do his duty and thereby brought ruin on city and house. The city remains in danger; she cannot be saved except by deflecting the curse so that it will come to rest entirely on the house. Only by meeting the curse head on, by identifying his fate with it, . . . can Eteocles hope to eliminate it. This is not to say that Eteocles recognizes the need for saving the city as he prepares to meet his brother. . . . But by allowing the curse to operate at full strength, by challenging its potency into the limited area of the fratricide, he makes possible the survival of the city. The achievement remains his, no matter that his original perspective, his concern for the community, has been cut off.

Sophocles, a generation or so later, was to show in his *Oedipus Tyrannus* that the evasion of a curse makes for an intensification of the doom. Conversely he demonstrated, yet another generation later, in his *Oedipus Coloneus,* that a man could, by submitting to the curse and uniting it to himself and his career, bring about an eventual release. Just so Eteocles, by rekindling and embracing the curse, brings

about the great cleansing and liberation with which the trilogy ends. Even with the fragmentary evidence available to us it is quite apparent that the proper ending of a trilogy is one in which conflicts are resolved and passion stories terminated. It does not matter whether the resolution is profound or superficial, whether it is achieved by reconciliation or adjudication or, as in our case, sacrifice. Sometimes, as in the *Oresteia,* the ending is happy; sometimes it hinges on a death. The important thing is that by the end of the third play the tensions and conflicts which are set up and manipulated in the trilogy have ceased to operate. . . . This resolution is usually climactic; it coincides with an act of heroism or a similarly impressive event underscoring the power or the littleness of man. In the present play the curse has produced a war, and both curse and war are terminated when Eteocles allows the Fury to seize him up and deliver him to certain death.

The curse is the theme of the choral song which follows after the exit of Eteocles. The ode begins and ends with the picture of hardened steel in the hands of the brothers (727ff. and 788ff.). . . . The iron is the special tool and substance of the curse, now fully materialized after more than a lifetime of hints and threats. More particularly the iron succeeds to the shield. Before personal involvement and private impulse undermined the relentless workings of the machine, the shield had served as the chief image of the war and of the attitudes taken toward the war. As such, characteristically, the shield was visualized as an autonomous entity, not suspended from the shoulder or held on the lower arm but, as it were, dwarfing the bearer and obeying an action or motion of its own. By way of contrast the steel rests in the brothers' hands. We can watch the physical effort, the specific turn of the body which gives to the weapon its aim and success. Thus once more the imagery helps us to follow the shift from the machine to the soul. . . .

The King is killed, but the city is saved. The two outcomes are reported and accepted side by side, in the order of their importance to the reporter and his audience. Both the messenger who enters to announce the events and the chorus who respond to the news first emphasize the salvation of the city (792ff. and 822ff.). . . . Only after this first spontaneous cry of happiness over the deliverance of the city do messenger and chorus turn to consider the death of the brothers, and to allow grief a place beside their joy. This grief, an unintricate, noble, calming grief is not for Eteocles alone but jointly for the brothers. With their death the curse has fulfilled itself and the community is restored to health. Hence the death emerges as a beneficent thing, and the question of justice or injustice pales before the simple act of self-sacrifice in which brothers share to an equal degree, no

matter what the intentions that lay behind it. The curse had set the brothers at each other's throats; the curse had drawn forth Eteocles from his isolation and made him come to grips with the war on terms of intimacy and wrath. Now the curse has bound the brothers together in a new union and wiped out the scores of guilt and resentment.

In their great hymn to the curse the women predict (734):

> When they die killing their own,
> their own victims,
> and the earth's dust drinks
> black-clotted murder-blood . . .

Earth, the giver of life and freedom and culture, is to be the arena of the final torture, the recipient of the sacrifice. But earth is to be something more than that. By an old magical Greek tradition the burial of a sinner, of a polluted man makes for a hallowed spot. . . . Just so the fratricide, in itself a monstrous act, is now absorbed by the earth and metamorphosed into an asset (947ff.). . . . In this manner the earth, "the demon having ceased" (960), contributes her own time-honored magic to help along with the "happy ending," the restoration of balance and the cleansing which we expect at the end of the play and the trilogy.

The exorcizing of the curse is above all the result of Eteocles' conversion. This is a fact; but the fact needs to be confirmed, ritually and aesthetically. Hence the dirge. The curse is rescinded once and for all by the lament of the chorus which follows upon the first shout of triumph for the delivery of the city, and which stretches over more than 150 lines to the end of the play. Its inordinate length and its lack of poetic interest have caused much dismay. It will help to remember, however, that the dirge was sung and danced, that the ritual exigencies of a funeral song rule out poetic venturesomeness, that the lament is designed to conclude the whole trilogy rather than merely one play, and, finally, that it serves a special function: it is a kind of binding song, analogous to the sorcerers' chant with which the Furies in the *Eumenides* try to overcome the resistance of Orestes. The burying of the brothers, vicariously enacted in the dirge, also becomes a burial of the curse, and thereby a storing up of pregnant treasure. To ensure all this the dirge must allow liberally for the repetitive formulae native to prayer. . . . Without an appreciation of the religious cast of the lament we cannot hope to understand the emphatic terminalism of the last scene.

Still, we cannot be entirely persuaded that the curse has been neutralized. In the course of the play we have seen the terror and gruesomeness and unintelligibility of war subjected to a process of refinement and subversion until only heroism and tragedy and finally

sacred blessings remain. Aeschylus asks us to pay tribute to war and to carry away the illusion . . . that war is manageable, that even at its worst it allows a man to exercise his most personal aspirations, to struggle for heroism and glory. But the terror, the brutal shock of the barbaric shield, the desolation of the sacked city are not completely muted. In spite of the resolution and of the allaying of the family curse, the antiphonal arrangement of the theme of war continues to echo in our ears and to release its ration of fear and disgust. The satyr play which followed—it is no longer extant but we know that it dealt with the Sphinx—would of course erase this echo, or cushion it with a soothing dose of harmless laughter. But the palliative is short-lived. When the whole tetralogy has been played through the sanguine finale is soon forgotten, and the tragic mood of the earlier plays is recalled in full. That this mood is not all terror and futility, that the dramatization of war which the play gives us leaves room for glory and dignity as well as horror: this is the special achievement of Aeschylus, an achievement equalled only perhaps by Homer's *Iliad*.

It is tempting to suggest that in mood, style, and objective the *Seven Against Thebes* is cast in the epic mould. Homer made it the business of the epic to formulate the manifold nature of war, to point up its beauty and its ugliness, its significance and its pettiness, its grandeur and its bestiality. But in the *Iliad* the complexity of the experience emerges from the successive highlighting of various isolated perspectives. Now we see the war through the eyes of Priam, now through the eyes of Achilles, now of Hector. Each one of the key figures catches the meaning and the spirit of the war from a specific angle which, despite minor variations depending on the situation in which the witness finds himself, is on the whole constant. . . . Everyone in the *Iliad* takes the war for granted and accepts the part in it which destiny has allotted him.

In the *Seven* the relation between men and war is not similarly fixed. For one, war is not seen as a necessary or normal thing, to be dealt with as best one can. It is an enormity, an aberration from the settled ideals of peace and culture and domesticity. More important, however, the view of war is not, as in the epic, a totality of singular views each of which admits of some sort of definition by itself. . . . Our play develops a portrait of war which is not a composite of perspectives at all, but an organic experience, growing under our very eyes. From the moment when Eteocles begins his address to the citizenry, with his cool appraisal of the military contingencies, to the point when the chorus lyrically re-enact the fratricidal duel, the picture of war undergoes a constant shifting. Its outlines never grow sufficiently firm to allow the picture to harden into a set of perspectives. E. Staiger has said about the lyric that in contrast to the drama

and the epic it does not deal with "objects" and therefore does not operate with perspective. The poet and his world are not sufficiently distinct to require the help of a perspective. Aeschylus' tragedy verges upon the lyric mood; the picture of war which it distills into us, to use a term of Staiger's, is a feeling rather than an image, an experience rather than the fruit of an illumination.

Neither Eteocles nor the chorus can be said to offer us a single identifiable formulation of what war means to them. Above all, the gradual incubus-like growth of war in the soul of Eteocles, the transformation of the planner into the enthusiast, permits us to focus on war in its full extent through the lens of a single life and a single commitment. This is an act of compression which cannot but enhance the power of the communication. In the epic, the understanding of war is fragmented; the audience is asked to bring the fragments together and weld them into a response of their own. In the *Seven* the representation of war is whole, evolving, natural. Driven by the vigor of Aeschylus' verse the audience must surrender itself to the comprehensive truth generated on the stage. To this extent, then, the play goes far beyond the epic, in spite of the epic touches of its language, and in spite of its echoes of the Homeric world of heroes. Unlike the *Iliad* it does not describe a succession of battles, it creates a war. It plants its disharmonies into our very hearts, with an urgency and a pathos which only tragedy can accomplish, and which is the special hallmark of the art of Aeschylus.

The *Suppliants*

by John H. Finley, Jr.

The *Suppliants* opens a trilogy of which the last two plays, the *Egyptians* and the *Danaides,* are known only conjecturally and in outline. Because the chorus consisting of the fifty daughters of Danaus has by far the chief part and its lyric and corporate tone contrasts sharply to the developed characterization of the *Agamemnon,* the play has been thought the first extant tragedy and from Aeschylus' early period. But this criterion which makes characterization the mark of his growth suggests nineteenth-century rather than Greek feeling. It is incompatible with the abstractness of the *Prometheus,* which has been argued to be the latest of the plays, and even with the *Eumenides,* which merges the individualism of the *Agamemnon* in the corporate light of the Areopagus and an ideal Athens. It is by no means clear that in his middle or late years Aeschylus could not have given chief weight in the older manner to the chorus, as he comes near doing in the *Eumenides.* A recently published papyrus[1] fragment of an hypothesis to the trilogy, stating that Aeschylus won with it over Sophocles, is likely to force revision of the older view.

The hatred for their cousins, the sons of Aegyptus, which drove the suppliant Danaids from Egypt to Argos and gives the setting for the first play, did not persist in one of them, Hypermnestra. The sons of Aegyptus, who are off shore at the end of the first play, landed in the second. Apparently after a battle in which the king of Argos was killed, Danaus expounded his famous scheme whereby his daughters shall marry their cousins and murder them on their wedding night. All do so except Hypermnestra, who spares her bridegroom Lynceus through love and is tried before a court in the third play, or possibly in the Argive assembly. The trilogy ended with her acquittal after a defense by the goddess Aphrodite herself,[2] part of whose speech is

[1] E. Lobel, E. P. Wegener, C. H. Roberts, *The Oxyrinchus Papyri* (London, 1952) XVI 2256, fg. 4.

[2] [Cf. A. F. Garvie, *Aeschylus' Supplices: Play and Trilogy* (Cambridge, 1969), 233—J. H. F., Jr.]

AESCHYLUS

A COLLECTION OF CRITICAL ESSAYS

Edited by
Marsh H. McCall, Jr.

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