

## ETEOCLES AND THE POSTING DECISIONS

During the Shield Scene of *Seven Against Thebes* (375–676) is Eteocles making the decisions that post his Theban warriors (as seems to be the case), or does he there merely announce postings made earlier (viz., at 286 ff.)? The latter interpretation, which has gained a respectable following, is based upon two textual features: the use of *τάσσειν* (284) and the heterogeneity of verb tenses used by Eteocles during the Shield Scene<sup>1</sup>).

I shall support the thesis that Eteocles does not post his men to their specific stations until the Shield Scene, (1) by suggesting a reading of *τάσσειν* at 284 that preserves the dramatic import of the Shield Scene and (2) by arguing that none of the verb tenses in the Shield Scene belies this import.

The point is not a mere nicety. Were the posting early, Eteocles would have no options in the subsequent pairing of appropriate Thebans against the Argive enemies named and described by the spy during the Shield Scene. In consequence, the spy's reports

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1) For the early posting thesis, see E. Wolff, *Die Entscheidung des Eteokles in den Sieben gegen Theben*, HSCP 63 (1958) 89–95 and H. Patzer, *Die dramatische Handlung der Sieben gegen Theben*, HSCP 63 (1958) 97–119. G. Kirkwood argued briefly against that view in *Eteocles Oiakostrophos*, *Phoenix* 23 (1969) 12–13. D. Cameron reasserted the early posting in *Studies on the Seven Against Thebes of Aeschylus* (The Hague 1971) 39 *et passim*. Although O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford 1977) 152–54, supported Kirkwood, W. G. Thalmann, *Dramatic Art in Aeschylus's Seven Against Thebes* (New Haven 1978) 105, observed of the action of the Shield Scene that “the process itself is somewhat uncertain”. Other critics have used language that either begs the question or fails to clarify, e.g., L. Spatz, *Aeschylus* (Boston 1982) 39, who says only that “the king announces an appropriate Theban defender.” R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Studies in Aeschylus* (Cambridge 1983) 24–25, allowing that it is dramatically preferable to have the actual posting decisions being made on stage, adopts a compromise position that some Thebans are assigned early, others during the Shield Scene. Most recently J. Herington, *Aeschylus* (New Haven 1986) 84–85, simply presumes the earlier posting.

The tenses used by Eteocles are two futures, two perfects, one aorist, and one present. G. O. Hutchinson, *Aeschylus: Septem contra Thebas* (Oxford 1985) 104–5, proposes a rationale for the order of tenses, suggesting that the changes of tense are intended to represent a corresponding fluctuation in Eteocles' confidence. Hutchinson also notes that the force of the scene requires that the Theban postings be made by Eteocles before the audience: “The audience must not think that the seventh gate has already been allotted.”

would be singularly otiose, Eteocles' status as a tragic agent would be substantially diminished, and the dramatic force of the Shield Scene would be subverted<sup>2</sup>).

*Lines 282–86*

ἐγὼ δέ γ' ἄνδρας ἐξ ἔμοι σὺν ἐβδόμῳ  
 ἀντηρέτας ἐχθροῖσι †τὸν μέγαν τρόπον†  
 εἰς ἑπτατειχεῖς ἐξόδους τάξω μολῶν,  
 πρὶν ἀγγέλου σπερχοῦς τε καὶ ταχυροῦθους  
 λόγους ἰκέσθαι καὶ φλέγειν χρείας ὕπο<sup>3</sup>).

There are two distinct stages to Eteocles' preparations: he must select those Thebans who will lead the defense of the gates, and he must decide to which gate each defender should be posted. Scholars have assumed that τάσσειν (284) covers both the selection and the posting, so that when Eteocles exits at 286, he would intend both to choose and to post his warriors immediately<sup>4</sup>). As a result, when the spy returns at 375 ready to present the Argive array, Eteocles would have already settled upon the deployment of his chiefs to specific posts.

We are not, however, obligated to read τάξω (284) as "I shall both select and post". τάσσειν has a broad range of senses: 'to marshal', 'to draw up', 'to order', or 'to appoint', for example. I urge that 'to appoint' is appropriate both to this specific context and to the relation of this scene to the Shield Scene<sup>5</sup>). Eteocles is yet awaiting the arrival of the spy who has been scouting the

2) Cameron, *op. cit.*, 39–40, asserts that an early posting "does not diminish the dramatic force" of the Shield Scene. I cannot agree. From the perspective of Eteocles and for the progression of the play, if the Shield Scene features little more than a roll call of opponents, then the litany of Argive ensigns is idle (albeit spectacular).

3) All Greek quotations are from D. Page, *Aeschyli septem quae supersunt tragoediae* (Oxford 1972).

4) See Wolff, *op. cit.*, 91 and Cameron, *op. cit.*, 34–39.

5) Forms of τάσσειν occur three times in *Seven* (284, 448, 570). The sense of the earliest two citations is here at issue, the third (570) clearly has the force of 'post'. Italic, *Index Aeschyleus* (Leiden 1955) 289–90, lists all three *Seven* entries under the glosses *collocare* and *de re militari*. But Italic does allow for multiple uses of τάσσειν in *Agamemnon*, where the verb has the force of 'assign' at 332 but that of 'select' at 1025, and in *Supplices*, where Italic gives the verb the sense of 'assign' at 986, but 'select' or 'appoint' at 504 and 977. Excepting the citations of *Seven*, out of twelve uses of τάσσειν only five obviously have the force of 'post'. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek–English Lexicon* (Oxford 1940), cite both *Eu.* 279 and 639 and *Pers.* 298 as uses of τάσσειν with the force of 'to appoint'.

Argive placements. In order to be prepared to post his warriors with dispatch when he learns the enemy's deployment, Eteocles intends to appoint six men to stand with him in readiness. In his last lines before he exits, Eteocles stresses the need for a speedy briefing from the spy (285–86). His interest at this point in the spy's information is not explicable unless he plans to utilize that information later in his posting decisions.

I submit that it is reasonable to suppose that at 286 ff. Eteocles is simply choosing his men. The spy arrives at 375, and his account is then germane to the postings that will be made during the Shield Scene. Reading *τάξω* (284) as “I shall appoint” or “I shall select” allows us to take it that Eteocles is, at this point, making only those appointments that are preliminary to the posting decisions of the Shield Scene.

### *The Shield Scene 375–676*

The interplay between Eteocles and his spy during the Shield Scene gives every indication that there is an actual posting in progress. This, at least, seems to be the spy's view<sup>6</sup>). Having supplied a description of a given enemy warrior, the spy exhorts, questions, or enjoins Eteocles regarding who is to be posted in turn. And, as the attackers are adduced, Eteocles muses over their characters and equipment, seeming to ponder which Theban to set as counterpart.

Eteocles announces his defenders for gates one, five, and six with language that clearly expresses immediate posting decisions<sup>7</sup>). The first Theban is named with a future verb (*ἀντιτάξω*, 408), the fifth with a present (*ἔστιν*, 553), and the sixth again with a future (*ἀντιτάξομεν*, 621). These tenses strongly suggest a posting during the Shield Scene and not before.

After the presentation of the second Argive, however, Eteocles uses a perfect tense to pronounce the defender (*τέτακται*, 448). This perfect has been read as indicating a decision long since finalized; but if we accept ‘select’ as the sense of *τάσσειν* at 284,

6) I follow Taplin, *op. cit.*, 153, on this point: “If this is what the Scout takes to be happening, the audience is not in a position to think otherwise.” *Pace* Herington, *op. cit.*, 89, who finds the spy ingenuous and misguided.

7) Wolff, *op. cit.*, 93, asserts that the futures do not indicate that Eteocles is making a decision to post on the spot, but that Eteocles is now sending his men along to take their positions. It requires less elaborate an interpretation, however, to read the past tenses as consistent with the futures and present than the reverse, particularly given that the sentiments of the spy and the tenor of the Shield Scene are compatible with the *prima facie* reading of the present and future verbs.

then it is reasonable and appropriate to take the same sense here. Thus, the force of Eteocles' remark is that the second Theban "has been selected" for the pool of combatants, and Eteocles now can post him against the proper Argive attacker<sup>8</sup>). The perfect form here is consonant with the sense of the present and future verbs above, as well as the tone of the scene.

The text of Eteocles' response to the spy's counsel concerning the third gate is as follows (472–74):

[πέμποιμ' ἄν ἤδη τόνδε, σὺν τύχηι δέ τωι]  
καὶ δὴ πέπεμπται κόμπον ἐν χερσοῖν ἔχων  
Μεγαροεύς<sup>9</sup>).

καὶ δὴ signals an emphatic context, which permits two readings of the perfect tense. *πέπεμπται* can be read as denoting an act virtually simultaneous with its utterance, that is, as the issuance of the command itself<sup>10</sup>). The perfect could even be construed as futuristic, anticipating an act not yet accomplished and emphasizing Eteocles' current readiness to meet the invaders<sup>11</sup>). Either reading is a reasonable analysis of the perfect verb, fully consonant with an actual posting process.

Against the fourth Argive Eteocles announces ἀνὴρ κατ' ἀνδρα τοῦτον ἠτοέθη (505). The aorist constitutes a problem only if we presume the *κατά* were so intimately tied to the verb that a delimited verb, *αἰρεῖν κατά*, results. But if the *κατά* is not read so directly with the verb, it can take a normal sense of 'with respect to' and the non-delimited verb *αἰρεῖν* can take the ordinary sense of 'to choose'. Eteocles' remark, then, has the force of "in the case of this Argive, a man was chosen who would be suitable to fight against him", that is, a man was chosen for the pool of defenders who can now be posted to a specific gate. The use of the aorist does not entail that posting occurred prior to the Shield Scene.

For the seventh gate there are no patent 'posting' verbs, as in

8) Kirkwood, *op. cit.*, 13, explains *τέτακται*, as well as the past tenses of 473 and 505, as showing "the readiness with which Eteocles can match, with superbly contrasted qualities, defender for attacker."

9) Line 472, bracketed in Page's edition, omitted by Fraenkel, is not necessary for my argument. If accepted, it would surely support my thesis by suggesting an act about to occur.

10) In this interpretation of *καὶ δὴ*, I follow Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (Oxford 1954) 250–1, who cites this passage as a non-connective use of the phrase, which use "signifies, vividly and dramatically, that something is actually taking place at the moment."

11) See Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956) 453.

the six previous cases. But even though Eteocles has yet expressly to post anyone to the final gate, the audience knows that he is the only Theban left in the pool. Indeed, the dramatic power of this moment lies precisely in such knowledge: the realization that the judiciousness of Eteocles' deployments has brought the final gate (and the confrontation with his brother) to him by default. The subsequent defeat of the enemy at each of the seven gates only confirms Eteocles' tactical acumen. At this point, however, the spy carries on as if this final pairing is yet Eteocles' to make (650–52), still pending; the spy does not know that Eteocles had decided to man a gate himself. He insists that Eteocles is the *ναύκληρος* (652), echoing a term he had used much earlier of his master, *οἰακοστροφός* (62). In the spy's view, Eteocles has not finished his task.

After pondering Polynices' ensign, Eteocles affirms that it falls to him to man the seventh gate (672–75), formally completing the final posting. I suggest that this announcement is not to inform the chorus and spy of a decision arrived at some four hundred lines earlier. Eteocles is, instead, reassuring his people of his willingness manfully to take on the task that has befallen him, and steeling his own resolve (673): *τίς ἄλλος μάλλον ἐνδικιώτερος*; Neither Eteocles nor the spy nor the chorus says anything to suggest that Eteocles' own posting has been foregone since 286 ff. Had Eteocles victimized himself by a previous set of postings blindly made, Aeschylus could have made it clear. He did not do so.

Springfield, Missouri

J. A. Johnson