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**Reviewed Work: *Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus' Seven Against Thebes* by Froma I. Zeitlin**

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At the time of publication, author Sheila Murnaghan was affiliated with Yale University. Currently, she is a faculty member at the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania.

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**Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Classics

**Comments**

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Froma I. Zeitlin. *Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus' Seven Against Thebes*. *Filologia e Critica*, 44. Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1982. Pp. 227. No price listed (pb.).

This "experiment in the decoding of an ancient text in the light of the findings and methods of modern semiotic theories" is not an introduction to those theories (which include structural anthropology and psychoanalysis as well as semiotics). Readers unfamiliar with them will not find much definition of terms or spelling out of principles. But Zeitlin's discussion illustrates her methods through example, and her terminology can easily be decoded by a willing reader, especially one who knows Greek. The book is not easy to read, but more because the argument is presented somewhat diffusely and repetitively than because it is fundamentally obscure.

Zeitlin maintains that language and human social and familial relationships are closely related symbolic systems which depend on distinctions basically artificial, and therefore always unstable. The *Seven* testifies to this link by making the collapse of a seeming distinction between enemy brothers its central action and by presenting this action in a wholly linguistic form: the central shield scene, an extended dialogue explicitly concerned with the power of visual and verbal symbols. Thus Zeitlin argues persuasively that Aeschylus' play itself highlights the issues addressed by contemporary theory and demonstrates that the *Seven's* displacement of its action onto a prospective dialogue in the shield scene is not simply a formal consequence of Aeschylus' early position in the development of drama, but has central thematic significance.

The heart of the book is a close reading of that scene situating its progression of matched warriors within several interlocking symbolic orders: Eteocles' progress towards his individual destiny also evokes the progress of human culture, the development of the individual self, and an increasingly complex use of signs and symbols; his discovery that his victory as a leader entails his personal destruction is paralleled by his ensnarement in the contradictions inherent in human social organization, in the definition of the self, and in language. Most readers will find some points strained or overstated, but should also gain a fuller appreciation of the rich significance of the scene from this searching and insightful analysis.

Zeitlin's concentration on the operation of symbolic systems leaves a vacuum in the place of those forces to which the motivation of the action is usually attributed. One is left finally with the question of how Zeitlin's stimulating reading of the *Seven* as a drama of collapsing distinctions might illuminate the cultural forces that made the spectacle of a man saving his city at the cost of destroying himself a central ritual of classical Athenian society.

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