

Interpretation

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The Political Theorizing of Aeschylus's *Persians*

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Abstract: Aeschylus's *Persians* dramatically represents the Athenian victory at Salamis from the perspective of the Persian royal court at Susa. Although the play is in some sense a patriotic celebration of Athenian self-government, it also functions as tragedy that generates sympathy for the suffering of its main character, Xerxes. Although scholars have argued whether the play is primarily patriotic or tragic, I argue that it holds in tension both kinds of elements in such a fashion as to invite its audience to reflect on the political ramifications of Persia's failed empire for Athens's own nascent Delian League, which at the time of the performance of the play was already showing hegemonic tendencies.

Keywords: Aeschylus, *Persians*, Imperialism, Athenian hegemony, Greek Tragedy

Aeschylus's *Persians* dramatizes one of history's greatest reversals, the Greek defeat of the Persian army and navy of Xerxes at Salamis in 480 BCE. The parodos of the play catalogs the "city-sacking" forces whose destiny the chorus of Persian elders and advisors claims is "conducting wars that destroy towered walls, clashes of chariots in battle, and the uprooting of cities" (104–5).¹ The exodus, by contrast, depicts the king and chorus bewailing the "triple-oared" (1075)—namely, the Athenian fleet, that "wall of wood" which preserved Athens even while its acropolis was sacked.² Between such

¹ Unless otherwise noted, parenthetical references within the text are to the Greek line numbers in Edith Hall, *Aeschylus Persians* (Oxford: Aris and Phillips, 2007). I generally follow the translation in *Persians, Seven against Thebes, Suppliants, Prometheus Bound*, trans. Alan Sommerstein (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), with occasional emendation.

² Aeschylus appears to have the Persian messenger (348–49) allude to the Delphic oracle's enigmatic claim that Zeus will give Athens "a wall of wood, which alone shall abide by the foeman" (Hdt. 7.141).

a beginning and ending is the representation of Xerxes's twofold attempt to yoke together Asia and Europe, Persian and Greek. By turning sea into land at the bridging of the Hellespont, Xerxes rashly sought to bring together two land masses and place a yoke upon the sea itself (72), an act which the gods themselves undo when they turn land into water (or melt the ice on the river Strymon), drowning the Persian survivors who retreated from Salamis (495–505). According to his mother's dream, Xerxes also naively sought to yoke together two siblings, the Greek and Persian peoples, for the betterment of each (189–96, cf. 50)—a question of hegemony that Athens herself faced following the liberation of Ionian cities in Anatolia in the years after Salamis.

Persians depicts the Athenian victory over Persia from the perspective of the Persian court sitting in Susa. From the court's perspective, the play begins with optimistic confidence about Xerxes's expedition against the Greeks. But a messenger conveys the terrible news of Persia's defeat along with a vivid account of how the battle at Salamis unfolded. The defeat is so horrible that the Persian queen conjures the shade of Darius so that he can offer fatherly advice to his rash son, who finally arrives on the stage at the end of the play, utterly defeated with quiver empty. The play closes with Xerxes and the chorus of Persian elders performing a *kommos* or extended lyrical chant of ritual lamentation. The play was performed as the middle play of a tetralogy which won first prize at the City Dionysia in 472, eight years after the sack of Athens and the battle of Salamis. Clearly, the play was composed and produced during a time in which the Delian League (founded in 477) was beginning to show hegemonic tendencies. As early as 480 Themistocles had indemnified, and brought under siege, Ionian cities such as Andros and Paros for failure to contribute to the Hellenic League, the alliance which preceded the Delian League (Hdt. 8.111–12). In the summer of 479, Greek forces defeated the Persian army at Mycale and precipitated the liberation of the Ionian Greek cities which would ultimately comprise the Delian League (Hdt. 9.106). Athens took control of Greek forces from Sparta following the successful siege of Byzantium in 478 and the Delian League conducted its first Athenian-led campaign at Eion in 476. In the early 470s or the late 460s the Euboean city of Carystus declined membership in the league and was subsequently besieged and plundered; Naxos's attempt to secede from the league resulted in the destruction of its walls and its reduction to subject status within the league.³

For quotations from Herodotus I generally follow *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

³ Although the precise chronology of the events at Eion, Carystus, and Naxos is uncertain (Thucydides 1.98 offers only the succession of events without a chronology), that they took place

Although *Persians* was performed against the backdrop of Athens's nascent hegemony, scholars are divided over the tragedy's political teaching about empire.⁴ At one end of the spectrum are interpretations which read the drama as patriotic praise of Athens's victory over Persia—in greater or lesser degree as jingoistic or chauvinistic. At the other end of the spectrum are interpretations which read *Persians* as a cautionary tale about imperialism, the beginning of a tradition—echoed in Herodotus and Thucydides—according to which “the story of an empire is a tragedy which ends in lament.”⁵ There is evidence supporting interpretations on both sides of the spectrum. Aeschylus clearly represents Salamis as a specifically Athenian victory, one which occasions pride for its victors. At the same time, it is hard to imagine the invocations of Persian suffering as producing no pity and fear or worries about Athenian hegemony.

Most scholars have sought to resolve this impasse by emphasizing either the patriotic elements or the tragic elements of the play. Instead, I would like to argue that the tension of *Persians* is purposeful. As Peter Euben points out, tragedy is different from other Athenian political institutions because of its “theoretical” character: tragedy “enabled its citizen audience to reflect on their lives with a generality denied them in their capacity as political actors. Alone among the Hellenes, the Athenians possessed an institution that, in its general rumination on the human condition and refusal to be partisan or programmatic, was theoretical in nature.”⁶ I take such “reflection” to be distinct from (although obviously connected to) deliberation about policy alternatives which political actors undertake. Viewers of a tragedy are put into the odd position of not having to make a choice even though a drama presents them with options and actions to evaluate. No doubt, the audience's responses to and evaluation of elements within a tragedy will influence how they deliberate when, for instance, in the assembly they are presented with arguments for and against alternative policy options. But theorizing

within several years' proximity to the performance of *Persians* in 472 seems clear.

⁴ Two of the more prominent interpretations are those of Thomas Harrison, *Emptiness of Asia: Aeschylus' "Persians" and the History of the Fifth Century* (London: Duckworth, 2000), 103–15, which presents a patriotic interpretation, and David Rosenbloom, *Aeschylus: Persians* (London: Duckworth, 2006), 141–46, which presents a tragic interpretation.

⁵ Rosenbloom, *Aeschylus: Persians*, 95; see also J. Peter Euben, “The Battle of Salamis and the Origins of Political Theory,” *Political Theory* 14 (1986): 359–90, and Kurt A. Raaflaub, “Herodotus, Political Thought, and the Meaning of History,” *Arethusa* 20 (1987): 221–48.

⁶ Euben, “Battle of Salamis,” 367.

introduces an element of reflection and even “make believe” that is simply absent from the actual deliberations of political actors.

I would like to apply Euben’s insight to Aeschylus’s *Persians* and argue that the play is theoretical in that it presents two opposing views of hegemony and refuses to adjudicate between them. Rather, *Persians* leaves it up to its Athenian audience to ruminate about the victory at Salamis and consider its ramifications for a policy of empire. The “theoretical” perspective of Aeschylus’s play is polyphonic and necessarily open-ended. Interpretations which exclusively endorse only the patriotic or the tragic elements of the drama fail to see that those elements are not mutually exclusive but ultimately, together, productive of thought.

Such an object of thought is decidedly political. Although *Persians* is a drama with cosmic overtones, I argue that the question which the play occasions is primarily political and concerns the direction which Athenian hegemony should take in its recently established Delian League. The last few decades have seen significant scholarly reflection on how to understand the politics of Athenian tragedy, and I follow Goldhill in viewing *Persians* (like Attic theater more generally) as “not so much a commentary on *ta politika* as part of it.”⁷ Yet it remains to determine in what way *Persians* is a part of *ta politika* of Athens in the decade following their victory at Salamis. Although at first glance the political systems of Athens and Persia are profoundly different, both faced the dilemma of whether to pursue hegemony within their region, and if so, what sort of hegemony.

To support the claim that *Persians* represents an exercise in Aeschylus’s political theorizing, the first two sections of my paper survey the elements of the play which I claim exist in unresolved tension. The first section examines the patriotic side of the drama; the second section argues that *Persians* should be understood as a tragedy which occasions fear and pity, including for its main character Xerxes. In the third and final section, I contrast my political interpretation of *Persians* with apolitical ones. The three sections jointly establish a claim for viewing Aeschylus as a political theorist of Athenian hegemony (among his other brilliant skills as a *didaskalos* or teacher of Athens).

⁷ Simon Goldhill, “Civic Ideology and the Problem of Difference: The Politics of Aeschylean Tragedy, Once Again,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 120 (2000): 35. D. M. Carter, *The Politics of Greek Tragedy* (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix, 2007), 21–63, offers an excellent overview of frameworks employed to interpret the politics of Athenian tragedy; A. F. Garvie, *Aeschylus Persae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xvi–xxii, surveys the question in the case of *Persians*.

PATRIOTIC ELEMENTS IN *PERSIANS*

In his *Frogs*, Aristophanes stages a contest in Hades between Euripides and Aeschylus concerning who is the more admired poet, and the standard of admiration consists in who makes people better members of their community (1008–9). Aeschylus responds that after producing *Seven Against Thebes*—a play which teaches valor in battle—“I produced my *Persians*, which taught them to yearn always to defeat the enemy, and thus I adorned an excellent achievement” (1026–27, trans. Henderson). Within the dramatic and political context of the *Frogs*, which was staged near the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404 and laments the decline in Athens’s military and theatrical excellence, the invocation of Aeschylus betrays nostalgia for an earlier Athens. But whereas Aristophanes’s Aeschylus appears to understand the inculcation of martial virtue as the unproblematic goal of the theatrical *didaskalos*, according to my interpretation, the Aeschylus who authored *Persians* has a far more sophisticated understanding of martial virtue, one which includes recognition of the limits of martial virtue. Although yearning to defeat one’s enemies may be a part of martial virtue, it cannot be the whole of it, since courage may also require coexistence with one’s enemies. More generally, true martial excellence discerns whether a city should (or should not) seek hegemony. Although a patriotic reading of *Persians* can account for Aristophanes’s more simplistic notion of martial virtue within the drama, only a theoretical reading of *Persians* can capture the more sophisticated notion of martial excellence which the drama aims to produce. It is only within that broader questioning framework that one can appreciate the context of his patriotic praise of Athenian martial excellence at the battle of Salamis.

The drama’s major objects of praise can be isolated in a thirteen-line exchange between the Persian queen and the chorus of Persian elders.⁸ The exchange runs as follows (231–45):

QUEEN:

There is something I wish to learn, my friends. Where in the world do they say that Athens is situated?

CHORUS:

Far away, near the place where the Lord Sun declines and sets.

QUEEN:

And yet my son had a desire to make that city his prey [*thērasai*]?

⁸ A point made by Harrison, *Emptiness of Empire*, 55–60.

CHORUS:

Yes, because all Greece would then become subject [*hupēkoos*] to the King.

QUEEN:

Do they have such great numbers of men in their army?

CHORUS:

And an army of a quality that has already done the Medes a great deal of harm.

QUEEN:

Why, are they distinguished for their wielding of the drawn bow and its darts?

CHORUS:

Not at all; they use spears for close combat and carry shields for defense.

QUEEN:

And what else apart from that? Is there sufficient wealth in their stores?

CHORUS:

They have a fountain of silver, a treasure in their soil.

QUEEN:

And who is the shepherd, master [*kapidespozei*], and commander over them?

CHORUS:

They are not called slaves [*douloi*] or subjects [*hupēkooi*] to any man.

QUEEN:

How can they resist an invading enemy?

CHORUS:

Well enough to have destroyed the large and splendid army of Darius.

QUEEN:

What you say is fearful [*deina*] to think about, for the parents of those who have gone there.

The stichomythia underscores three patriotic characteristics of Athens that are echoed elsewhere in the tragedy, namely, the preeminence of Athens among the Greeks, the preeminence of Athenian martial virtue, and the role which Athenian self-government plays in producing the former two characteristics. With respect to the first characteristic, it is telling that the queen

asks only about Athens and the chorus suggests that strategically, conquering Athens is the key to conquering mainland Greece. Although *Persians* alludes once to the decisive Spartan victory in 479 at Plataea which ended Xerxes's invasions (816–20), its audience could be forgiven for thinking that from the Persian perspective, their wars with Greece were reducible to the battles of Salamis and Marathon, namely, battles in which Athenian generals and forces were decisive (cf. 236, 244, and 475). Aeschylus appears to be echoing a story also found in Herodotus when he has both the messenger and King Darius state “remember Athens” (*memnēsth' Athēnōn*, 824, cf. 285). According to Herodotus, following the destruction of Sardis, Darius ordered a slave to repeat to him thrice daily “Master, remember the Athenians” (Hdt. 5.105; cf. 6.94). *Persians* suggests that the defeat at Salamis will let the king of an empire that stretched from Egypt to the Indus river finally remember the largely insignificant city that was early fifth-century Athens.

The chorus's claim that Athenians fight by spear and shield rather than by bow and dart plays upon Athenian pride in its martial excellence in juxtaposition with Persian forces who champion projectiles. Hoplite battle required courage, discipline, and even the social status that comes from being able to afford one's own armor; by contrast, the Athenians viewed Persian soldiers as less courageous fighters because of their use of bow and dart (see, for instance 85, 146–49) and Xerxes famously enters the stage wearing an empty quiver of arrows (1020–23). Elsewhere in the drama Persian forces are contrasted negatively with Athenians in naval battle: Athenian triremes emerge at first light in orderly fashion “with cheerful confidence” (*eupsuchō(i) thrasei*, 394) and with good order and discipline (*eutaktōs...kosmō(i)*, 399, 400), singing a paean or song praising their freedom. Although Persian forces, duped by the Athenian's deception, are initially characterized as “not disorderly” (*ouk akosmōs*, 374) under cover of night, once they are vanquished by Greek forces in battle, they flee in disarray (*akosmō(i)*, 422); the same is said of the Persian land forces composed of nobles who are butchered at Psyttaleia and of the surviving forces during the general retreat at Strymon (470, 481). Although the parodos of the play characterizes Xerxes's army as invincible—a great flood of men incapable of being controlled by a barrier (87–92)—by the time of the *kommos*, Persian forces are characterized as luckless in war (*duspol-emon*, 1013).

The claim that Athenians—while neither slave nor subject to any man—are nonetheless capable of defeating even Darius's army at Marathon plays upon a final patriotic theme found throughout the play, namely, the view that

Athenian freedom and self-government were responsible for their victory over Persian forces.⁹ To the Persian queen, Athenian freedom is an impediment to order; to the Athenians, it is the source of their strength. From the outset of *Persians*, the chorus claims that Persian forces seek to place “the yoke of slavery” upon Greece (50) and the queen characterizes Xerxes’s expedition against Athens as a “hunt” (*thērasai*, 233), as if the Greeks were animals.¹⁰ The Persian perspective is clearest in the queen’s ominous dream, which she describes on the eve of battle:

There seemed to come into my sight two finely dressed women, one arrayed in Persian, the other in Doric robes, outstandingly superior in stature to the women of real life, of flawless beauty, and sisters of the same stock: one, by the fall of the lot, was a native and inhabitant of Greece, the other a barbarian. I seemed to see these two raising some kind of strife [*stasis*] between themselves; my son, perceiving this, tried to restrain and calm them, yoked them under his chariot, and passed the yoke-strap under their necks. One of them, thus arrayed, towered up proudly and kept her jaw submissively in harness; but the other began to struggle, tore the harness from the chariot with her hands, dragged it violently along without bridle or bit, and smashed the yoke in half. My son fell out. His father Darius appeared, standing beside him and showing pity; but when Xerxes saw him, he tore the robes that clothed his body. (181–99)

The dream foreshadows the narrative arc of the remainder of the play, but most important is its presentation of Persian self-understanding of Greek and Persian polarity. From the queen’s perspective, both the Persian and Greek peoples—represented by the two sisters—are in need of obedience and mastery to eliminate their intrafamilial strife or *stasis* (188). Xerxes’s mission is to serve as “master, shepherd, and commander” (245) to both peoples, ultimately so that both peoples can realize their innate beauty and noble natures. Thus the queen’s amazement: how can a people without a master, shepherd, or commander field a dominant military force?

The freedom which the queen represents as the characteristic of an unruly sister, the Athenians represent as the cause of their victory.¹¹ The battle of

⁹ Freedom (*eleutheria*) is said to be what will undo the Persian empire when its soldiers will no longer wear the yoke of monarchy (591–95). Herodotus, writing a half century after Aeschylus, also claims that it was Athens’s transition from tyranny to democracy that began its ascent to military power (Hdt. 5.78).

¹⁰ The image is reversed in the description of the slaughter of drowned Persian sailors who were pummeled like a catch of fish (425).

¹¹ As Plato and Aristotle note, freedom is a defining characteristic of democratic self-government

Salamis commences when the Greek fleet rows out to meet the Persian vessels, crying, "Come on, sons of the Greeks, for the freedom of your homeland, for the freedom of your children, your wives, the temples of your fathers' gods, and the tombs of your ancestors! Now all is at stake!" (404–5). When the queen notes that the vanquished leader, Xerxes, will not be held accountable—will not be audited by his city (*ouch hupeuthunos polei*, 213)—she again underscores the difference between Athenians who democratically hold their leaders accountable and an unaccountable Persian king who "leads" his naval commanders by the threat of beheading (370–71).¹² It is difficult to imagine an audience, many of whom fought in the battle eight years earlier, viewing these scenes in the shadow of the acropolis (recently pillaged by Xerxes's troops) feeling anything except extraordinary pride for the victory at Salamis.

In sum, *Persians* repeatedly praises Athens in patriotic terms, both directly and by posing contrasts between Persians and Athenians. Athenian preeminence among other Greeks, its martial excellence, and its self-government based in democratic freedom are all showcased in *Persians* in an unblemished and patriotic form. No interpretation of the play can ignore or diminish these patriotic elements. And yet, *Persians*—as a dramatization rather than a retelling of history—at the same time holds out the events of Salamis as a cautionary tale about how hegemony can become overreaching empire. Aeschylus theorizes about politics by holding both of these elements of martial success side by side in a fashion which challenges his audience to consider the ramifications of the battle of Salamis for their own future course of action.

THE TRAGIC FUNCTIONS OF *PERSIANS*

Although *Persians*'s cautionary teaching on empire is juxtaposed with its teaching on the strengths of Athenian self-government, yet some have denied that the play presents any such cautions. For instance, Craig suggests that *Persians* is only nominally a tragedy and that in fact it functions more like an epinicion or victory ode.¹³ It is necessary, then, to argue that the drama exhibits not only the form of tragedy—namely, that it includes actors and a chorus, and is structured with episodes and stasima—but it also must function as a tragedy. Although identifying a univocal function for tragedy is

(*Republic* 8 557b–e; *Politics* 6.2.1317a40–b16).

¹² A Persian queen, unfamiliar with Athens, would hardly know of its political practice of auditing (*euthuna*). *Persians* ultimately claims that Xerxes is held accountable by Zeus the "stern assessor" (*euthunos barus*, 828), which is divine rather than political accountability.

¹³ J. D. Craig, "The Interpretation of Aeschylus' *Persae*," *Classical Review* 38 (1924): 98–101.

a Sisyphean task, certainly one function of tragedy is producing fear and pity in its audience. As Munteanu notes, although different classical tragedies produce fear and pity in their audiences in different ways, there is no dispute about the claim that tragedy's emotional production includes pity and fear.¹⁴ The sticking point for viewing *Persians* as tragic concerns whether the play could produce pity and fear in its Athenian audience. Scholars have denied that the play would have produced pity and fear on two grounds. First, some have argued that *Persians*, as the depiction of a historical event, falls outside the genre of tragedy.¹⁵ Second, some have argued that the proximity of the play's performance to the events it depicts would preclude an Athenian audience from identifying or empathizing with Persian suffering.¹⁶

In response to the first objection, which calls into question whether *Persians* can function as a tragedy because of its historical object of representation, I would like to argue first that although *Persians* is unique among surviving tragedies in taking as its object a historical rather than a mythical action, nonetheless there is ample evidence of Aeschylus's contemporaries writing other "historical tragedies." In choosing to write a tragedy based on a historical event, Aeschylus modeled his drama on Phrynichus's *Phoenician Women* (produced in 476) which also dramatized the naval defeat at Salamis and which Aeschylus alludes to in the opening lines of *Persians*. More infamously, in approximately 492 Phrynichus produced the *Capture of Miletus*, which depicted the siege and destruction of that Ionian city. According to Herodotus (6.21), the play's production caused the audience to burst into tears; Athens fined Phrynichus one thousand drachmas "for reminding them of their own evils" and ordered that the play never be performed again.¹⁷ Although "historical" tragedies are unusual in the surviving corpus, it is wrong to treat them as quasi-historical documentaries rather than literary productions. As Aristotle points out in his *Poetics*, although the poet is a maker of stories, "even should his poetry concern actual events, he is no less a poet for that, as there is nothing to prevent some actual events being probable as well as possible, and it is through probability that the poet makes his material from

¹⁴ Dana Munteanu, *Tragic Pathos: Pity and Fear in Greek Philosophy and Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ Craig, "Interpretation of Aeschylus' *Persae*," and A. J. Podlecki, *The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966).

¹⁶ See, for instance, Harrison, *Emptiness of Asia*, 51, and Munteanu, *Tragic Pathos*, 163.

¹⁷ See further David Rosenbloom, "Shouting Fire in a Crowded Theater: Phrynichos' *Capture of Miletus* and the Politics of Fear in Early Attic Tragedy," *Philologus* 137 (1993): 159–96.

them” (9.1451b29–33).¹⁸ Admittedly, Aristotle’s *Poetics* takes as its model Sophoclean rather than Aeschylean tragedy. Nonetheless, its inclusion of historical events within the domain of the tragic poet calls into question the claim that in principle the depiction of a historical event would preclude a play functioning as a tragedy.

A second argument against the claim that *Persians* does not function like a tragedy because of its historical object calls into question the accuracy of thinking of the drama as primarily “historical” rather than poetic. Although Aeschylus interjects moments of verisimilitude into the play (perhaps foremost in the messenger’s account of the battle of Salamis), viewing the drama as historical underestimates the poetic fictions which the poet incorporates into *Persians*, fictions which neither his Athenian audience nor the judges at the City Dionysia (who awarded the play first place) found problematic. Consider the following three instances of Aeschylus’s poetic license. First, Aeschylus depicts Darius as the voice of Greek wisdom and uses his character as a foil to Xerxes. Aeschylus has Darius criticize his son for bridging the continents of Asia and Europe and conducting military campaigns on the Greek mainland (745–51), but as an Athenian audience would know full well, Darius did the same during his own expedition into Scythia in 513 (which included the bridging of the Bosphorus) and his invasion of Attica in 490 (Hdt. 4.89, 6.102–4). A second instance of poetic license is Aeschylus’s depiction of the battle as including two equal parts, a naval component in the bay of Salamis and a land component on the island of Psyttaleia, which the messenger to the queen repeatedly emphasizes (433–34, 568, 676, 720, and 728). The parallel between land and sea components implies equal praise of Athenian naval and hoplite strengths and a humiliation of Persian nobles slaughtered at Psyttaleia. Nonetheless, Aeschylus’s depiction of the land battle on Psyttaleia appears to exaggerate its importance.¹⁹ Thirdly, the messenger’s depiction of an ill-fated retreat and destruction of the Persian remnant at the river Strymon allows Aeschylus to show the cosmic or divine reversal of Xerxes’s bridging of the Hellespont (495ff.): whereas Xerxes’s invasion began with the shackling and bridging of natural forces, it ends with natural forces destroying his retreating army. Nonetheless, the event appears to be Aeschylus’s

¹⁸ I have discussed this further in “Aristotle on the (Alleged) Inferiority of Poetry to History,” in *Reading Aristotle*, ed. R. Polansky and W. Wians (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

¹⁹ Barry Strauss, *The Battle of Salamis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 193–95, documents what historians know of the engagement at Psyttaleia. Herodotus devotes only a paragraph to the incident (8.95).

invention.²⁰ Aeschylus exercises poetic license in his “historical” tragedy, and it is a misunderstanding of dramatic verisimilitude to claim that such poetic license is precluded on “historical” grounds.

Aeschylus’s clear examples of poetic license also point to what I take to be one of his most provocative assertions about hegemony and empire. As Kennedy notes, Aeschylus’s juxtaposition of Darius and Xerxes establishes the distinction between Darius as “a fine model for a hegemonic leader of a volunteer league” and Xerxes as the overreaching face of empire.²¹ No doubt, the lesson of Xerxes is a cautionary tale about rash expansion. But the representation of Darius as the leader of a professional and voluntary multiethnic army presents Aeschylus’s audience with an additional theoretical question, namely, how one distinguishes between good and bad hegemony. The play’s “softening” of Darius must have been breathtaking for the *Marathōnomachoi* in the audience. Nonetheless, consistent with my claim about the “theoretical” nature of the play, Aeschylus does not argue for or against either forms of hegemony. He merely presents options for his audience to reflect upon.

In response to the second objection, which calls into question whether *Persians* can function as a tragedy for an Athenian audience because of the proximity of its performance to the events it depicts, I argue that the play depicts the universalization of a historical event in such a way that any audience can experience fear and pity for its objects. Fear and pity, of course, are major themes throughout *Persians*, but most relevant to my argument are the fear and apprehension which the chorus and the Persian queen feel prior to the messenger’s announcement of the fate of Xerxes’s army and the pity and mourning which the chorus and Xerxes express in the *kommos* of the play. Aeschylus’s challenge (which his victory in 472 suggests he met) is to allow his audience to see themselves in the Persian predicament of the play; they would need to feel fear for the prospects of the departed army, just as they would fear for their own soldiers on campaign, and they would need to feel pity upon learning of the fate of the departed army, just as they would feel pity at the destruction of their own departed army. I suggest Aeschylus accomplishes such a goal by highlighting the commonality of Greeks and Persians, on one hand, and, on the other, making Xerxes a more sympathetic character.

²⁰ See further Bruce Lincoln, “Death by Water: Strange Events at the Strymon (*Persae* 492–507) and the Categorical Opposition of East and West,” *Classical Philology* 95 (2000): 12–20.

²¹ Rebecca F. Kennedy, “A Tale of Two Kings: Competing Aspects of Power in Aeschylus’ *Persians*,” *Ramus* 42 (2013): 70, 79.

Admittedly, showing the commonality of Greek and Persian is complicated by the fact that the play at times represents Persians as “the other” with respect to language use, social institutions, clothing, and even the practice of lamentation in public.²² And yet, in the retelling of the queen’s dream (analyzed above), Aeschylus underscores Greek and Persian commonality by suggesting that the two peoples are represented by sisters and their fighting is characterized as *stasis*, or intracommunity warfare.²³ The passage suggests that the difference between Greek and Persian is the result of location and upbringing rather than some innate or natural difference. Their experience with different institutions has given the two sisters different temperaments, especially with respect to authority; and it is wrong for Xerxes to think that the two sisters can be together yoked to the same chariot. But the difference between the two sisters does not subsume their commonality and even natural resemblance: it is only their artificial garments which allow the queen to distinguish them at first (183–84).

Persians also appeals to the universality of fear which loved ones experience in the absence of their sons, spouses, and fathers who are at war. The parodos and the first episode repeatedly remark on the fear and subsequent mourning of the parents and wives of the Persian forces (10–15, 63, 121–25).²⁴ Rather remarkably, Aeschylus sets the depiction of the Athenian naval victory within the Persian royal city of Susa, a setting which minimizes Athenian rejoicing and emphasizes Persian suffering. Even before knowledge of the defeat, Aeschylus has the chorus proclaim that Persian

Beds are filled with tears
because the men are missed and longed for:
Persian women, grieving amid their luxury, every one,
loving and longing for her husband,
having sent on his way the bold warrior who was her bedfellow
is left behind, a partner yoked alone [*monozux*]. (132–37)

As Gagarin notes, “the image of the women alone in the yoke reinforces the feeling that the wretchedness of the Persian families at home is directly

²² Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 76–98, is the classic statement of this position; Erich Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 11–12, cautions against overstatement.

²³ In the parodos (76–78), Aeschylus also has the chorus allude to the tradition that the Persians traced their descent to the Greek hero Perseus (Hdt. 7.61, 7.150).

²⁴ Ippokratis Kantzios, “The Politics of Fear in Aeschylus’ *Persians*,” *Classical World* 98 (2004): 3–19, notes that words denoting fear, concern, intimidation, and terror (such as *phrontis*, *tarbos*, *deos*, *phobos*, and *tromos*) appear almost twice as frequently in *Persians* as they do in the rest of Aeschylus’s surviving corpus.

connected to the departure of the expedition in its attempt to yoke Greece, for which it must first yoke the Hellespont.”²⁵ Aeschylus shows that the political problem facing Athens, for instance whether it should expand its control over the recently freed Ionian poleis of Asia Minor, is also a domestic problem. Military expansion, however glorious its results, always imposes a domestic cost, one which Aeschylus knew quite personally, given the death of his brother at the Athenian victory of Marathon (Hdt. 6.114).

In addition to emphasizing the commonality of Greeks and Barbarians and the universality of suffering in wartime, Aeschylus also transforms the main character of the play, Xerxes, into a pitiable character. Just as Aeschylus’s poetic license recasts Darius, who invaded Marathon, into the character type of the wise father, so too does it recast Xerxes, who sacked Athens and destroyed the temples on the Acropolis, into the character type of an inexperienced and rash son trying to succeed in the shadow of his father’s accomplishments. Xerxes’s inexperience is underscored several times in the play. For instance, from the perspective of the queen’s dream, his desire to rule stems from his naive response to *stasis* between Greeks and Persians rather than a desire to exploit others (187–88). The drama criticizes Xerxes only twice for tactical errors: he fails to recognize Themistocles’s deception on the eve of the battle and he was mistaken to place Persian nobles on the island of Psyttaleia (361, 454; cf. 550–53). Although these were unfortunate decisions, they are not the marks of a hubristic or wicked tyrant.²⁶

Aeschylus also makes the character of Xerxes pitiable by attributing his mistakes to his rash (*thourios* or *thrasus*) character. Indeed, Aeschylus exploits the ambiguity of the Greek terms, which can have both positive and negative connotations (e.g., bold versus rash). The chorus first characterizes Xerxes positively as *thourios archōn* (74) or “bold leader” in charge of populous Asia, but following the necromancy of Darius, the queen twice refers to *thourios Xerxes* or (as the context makes clear) “raging Xerxes” (718, 744). Both the Queen and Darius also attribute Xerxes’s decision to bridge the Hellespont to his youth (754, 782) or a temporary sickness of mind (751; cf. 726, 749). The army which Xerxes leaves behind after he retreats from Greece, which will subsequently be destroyed at Plataea (817), is characterized as hubristic and godless (807–12), but Darius distinguishes the army from his son and blames

²⁵ Michael Gagarin, *Aeschylean Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 38.

²⁶ Although *Persians* makes reference to hubris twice (808, 821), Garvie, *Aeschylus: Persae*, xxxii, argues persuasively that it is simplistic to read the play solely as the condemnation of hubristic overextension.

them each for different failings. In the case of the army, which had plundered the sacred images of the gods, “because of the evil they have done [*kakōs drasantes*], they are suffering evil to match it in full measure [*paschousi... kakōn*]” (813–14). But the verdict is different for Xerxes. In his final invocation to the queen, Darius states that

Zeus, I tell you, stands over and chastises arrogant minds, and he is a stern assessor. With this in mind, please advise Xerxes to show good sense [*sōphronein*]; warn him, with well-spoken admonitions, to stop offending the gods with his boastful rashness [*huperkompō(i) thrasei*]. (827–31)

Darius believes that *sōphrosunē* is within Xerxes’s grasp if he were to moderate his rashness. In her dream, the queen foreshadows that Darius will feel pity for his son (197); the final scene enacts such pity. Aeschylus makes Xerxes a pitiable character by underscoring the dynamic between a powerful father and the son who tragically seeks to imitate his successes. That his errors stem from inexperience and rashness makes his character (although not necessarily the historical person) someone with whom an audience can empathize.

Aeschylus dissolves the Athenian inability to empathize with their foes first by emphasizing their common humanity, and second by characterizing the errors of the play’s “hero” as ultimately pitiable rather than loathsome. The poet’s license with historical details introduces an ambiguity which lies at the heart of his political theorizing, one which indeed seems embedded in the dramatization of politics. Politics, like history, concerns particular judgments in highly specific and complicated contexts. No country simply “goes to war”; rather, a specific political administration addresses strategic, tactical, political, and even biographical questions, and chooses to wage war with a specific foe. Aeschylean drama, by contrast, regularly employs historical references—not only with the use of the battle of Salamis in *Persians*, but also with the invocation of the Areopagus in *Eumenides* or the first attested invocation of *dēmokratia* in the *Suppliants*. But Aeschylus recasts such historical details poetically in the perfection of his tragic art. Aeschylean political theorizing plays upon such ambiguity between what is historical and what is poetic or universal. The Athenian who believes that the martial and political virtues of his city’s self-government insulate his city from “oriental” or “Persian” royal imperialism is forced, through a viewing of *Persians*, to question the distance between democratic martial excellence and imperial martial excellence.

THE POLITICAL NATURE OF AESCHYLUS'S THEORIZING IN *PERSIANS*

In *Persians*, Aeschylus transforms the historical destruction of the Persian navy and army into a family tragedy about a father, son, and—from a Persian perspective—their extended sibling or familial clan (which they have paternal responsibility to yoke and direct). Whereas the former is a particular event, the latter is a universal story about loss and suffering. A queen, who enters the play on a chariot, is transformed into a mother concerned about her son's survival on the battlefield. A king, who invaded Attica and sought to make Athens an example of the costs of disobedience, is transformed into a sagacious father who pities and advises his son. And a godlike conqueror is transformed into an inexperienced and rash son who incautiously fails to live up to the accomplishments of his father. The son's military conquest strikes fear into the hearts of his parents, the parents and families of his soldiers, and the parents and families of his foes. At the same time, that conqueror's army and navy is defeated by self-governing sailors and soldiers who alone stop the Persian advance into Greece. That Athenian army and navy sent the conqueror home to his mother, a tattered remnant of the river-bridging autocrat. The play simultaneously holds together tragic emotions of fear and pity and invocations of Athenian pride and patriotism.

It is understandable thus that scholars such as Harrison and Rosenbloom, preeminent proponents of mutually exclusive patriotic and tragic readings of the play's attitude towards empire, can make strong arguments supporting their positions. Invocations of fear and pity for Persian suffering *are* central elements within the play; Athenian celebration over their victory at Salamis *also are* central elements within the play. As noted at the outset, my paper is the application of Euben's insight that tragedy is theoretical insofar as it enables its viewers "to reflect on their lives with a generality denied them in their capacity as political actors."²⁷ Although there are numerous ways in which a tragedy may be "theoretical," I claim that *Persians* is theoretical in its refusal to resolve this tension. The play occasions the space for its audience or readers to be able to debate, to criticize, and to think about weighing the various competing elements which the work takes up. In the case of *Persians*, programmatic closure is ultimately antithetical to theoretical reflection. And the desire of modern scholars to seek closure in Aeschylus's *Persians* seems to push against the inherently ambivalent closure often found in his surviving tragedies.

²⁷ Euben, "Battle of Salamis," 367.

Consider what I take to be a parallel theoretical moment in Aeschylus's *Suppliants*. The play tells the story of Danaus and his fifty daughters who flee Egypt and the fifty sons of their uncle Aegyptus (who wish to force them into marriage) to find refuge as suppliants in Argos, their ancestral home. The play includes a passage which preserves two of the earliest surviving evocations of the term *dēmokratia*.²⁸ Pelasgus, the king of Argos, calls the people to assembly to deliberate over the supplications of the Danaid women. Danaus and the chorus of his daughters report the results (600–605, 609–14):

DANAUS:

A most decisive decree has been passed by the people [*dēmou*].

CHORUS:

Welcome, old father; you bring splendid news. Tell us what the final decision is that has been reached, and in what direction the majority of the people's sovereign vote [*dēmou kratousa*]²⁹ went.

DANAUS:

The Argives have resolved, with no divided voice...that we shall have the right of residence [*metoikein*] in this land of freedom, with asylum and protection from seizure by any person; that no one, whether inhabitant or foreigner, may lay hands upon us; and that if force be applied, whoever among these citizens fails to come to our aid shall lose his civic rights and be driven into exile in the community.³⁰

Such a patriotic defense of the democratic protection of the vulnerable needs to be balanced with the results of this democratic action: the Argive protection of the Danaids results in war with the sons of Aegyptus and apparently the death and overthrow of the king Pelasgus who had argued on behalf of the Danaids at the assembly. Like the *Persians*, the *Suppliants* presents a complicated and polyphonic view of democracy, one which simultaneously preserves both its pro- and antidemocratic elements. My brief examination of the parallel theoretical moment in *Suppliants* suggests that the kind of theoretical claim I attribute to *Persians* is not unprecedented in Aeschylus's surviving corpus.

²⁸ See V. Ehrenberg, "Origins of Democracy," *Historia* 1 (1950): 522.

²⁹ In the next stasimon, Aeschylus has the chorus claim, "And may the people, which rules the city [*to damion, to ptolin kratuneī*] protect well the citizens' privileges, a government acting with craft and foresight for the common good" (*Supp.* 698–700).

³⁰ Sommerstein translation in *Persians, Seven against Thebes, Suppliants, Prometheus Bound* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

If viewing the *Persians* as preserving a tension between patriotism and tragic aspects of empire is superior to viewing the play as elevating one side of that tension over the other, nonetheless there are competing interpretations of how the play incorporates both elements. I have argued that when *Persians* juxtaposes praise for martial virtues alongside cautions about martial overreach, Aeschylus leaves those elements in tension to excite thought in his audience members.³¹ The drama thus invites thought about how to inculcate and produce a martial society which avoids its pitfall.³² According to such a reading, Aeschylus's *Persians* is a profoundly political play—one which challenges an Athenian audience to look at and evaluate both their present and their possible future selves.

By contrast, some scholars preserve the tension between patriotic and tragic elements in the play, but do so by reading *Persians* as an apolitical expression of cosmic forces. Gruen, for instance, reads the play as a cosmic tragedy in which “Hellenic arms are little more than pawns in the scheme of the gods to drive home the lesson to mortals.”³³ I call Gruen's reading of the play “apolitical” because ultimately the political characteristics of those pawns—that they are members of a self-governing polis or the royal palace at Susa—are irrelevant to the outcome of the drama. Gagarin, by contrast, takes the play to illustrate “the general precept that whatever grows too great eventually falls.”³⁴ I call Gagarin's reading of the play “apolitical” because it too seeks a resolution of the play on a cosmic level in some sort of coexistence of opposites (Gagarin likens it to the paradoxes of Heraclitus)³⁵ that is distant from human action and particular human actors. Gagarin's Aeschylus is a *didaskalos* more like a Taoist sage than Aristophanes's maker of good citizens. No doubt, there are cosmic forces at play in Aeschylus's plays, and Gagarin offers an especially rich interpretation oriented by such phenomena. And yet something seems profoundly missing when an interpretation of Aeschylus's play loses sight of its civic and indeed even practical objectives, much less the

³¹ Although my own position is indebted to the insights in Euben, “Battle of Salamis,” and Simon Goldhill, “Battle Narrative and Politics in Aeschylus' *Persae*,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 108 (1988): 189–93, about political theorizing within the civic space afforded by tragedy to question institutions, neither article explains in detail how *Persians* accomplishes that theorizing.

³² Kennedy, “Tale of Two Kings,” 65, 76–78, correctly points out that *Persians* even raises the question whether all forms of empire are equally problematic.

³³ Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*, 19.

³⁴ Gagarin, *Aeschylean Drama*, 51.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

“questioning” and polyphonic character of a play in which Persian elders, a queen, and both living and resurrected kings speak.

Aeschylus's *Persians* holds out to its audience and readers views about actions that are in tension and thus in need of deliberation. Those actions seem unavoidably political in the sense that they concern choices which the Athenian polis needs to confront. A virtue of my reading of the play is that it preserves the significance of both its political and interrogative elements. I believe that *Persians*, somewhat like a Platonic dialogue, produces aporia in those who watch it or read it carefully, aporia that is theoretical insofar as it is productive of questioning. Whether other Aeschylean tragedies produce such a sense of aporia to the same extent and in a similar fashion is an open question relevant to the study of each play. But the interplay of conflicting views about the political phenomenon which *Persians* depicts and the tragedy's ultimate lack of closure on the advantages and disadvantages of martial excellence seems to go to the heart of what makes it a perennially powerful tragedy. Aristophanes was right to say that Aeschylus is a *didaskalos* or teacher who makes the citizens of his city better; but he was wrong to imply that Euripides alone helped people think by introducing critical reflection (*Frogs*, 971–75).³⁶

³⁶ An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Association for Political Theory in October 2012 as part of a working group panel, “The Politics of Drama, the Drama of Politics: Staging Ancient Political Thought,” which was organized by Jill Frank. I received superb feedback from panelists, including Jill, Arlene Saxonhouse, Steve Salkever, Joel Schlosser, Jeff Miller, and David McIvor, who commented on successive drafts of the paper. The paper received further comment on a panel at the May 2013 Northeast Political Science Association meeting from fellow panelists Stephanie Nelson, Jill Gordon, Liz Markovits, and Eleni Panagiotarakou. I am especially grateful to the editor and anonymous referees of *Interpretation* whose probing questions and challenges have improved the manuscript substantially.