

Dropping the Scepter: The Comparisons Between Agamemnon and Xerxes in Aeschylus'

Persians

Since antiquity, Aeschylus has been recognized as a disciple of “the Divine Homer” (*Ra.* 1034) and a purveyor of morsels from the poet’s “great banquets” (*Ath. Deip.* 8.347E). More recently, the *Persians* has been identified as the Aeschylean tragedy that includes the most borrowed Homeric language (Stanford 1942, 26). Though the drama is set in a foreign capital, has no Greek characters—or even the mention of any Greek individual by name, the *Iliad*, a touchstone of Hellenic culture, is the source of the archaizing language that pervades the tragedy (Saïd 1988, 326) and serves as the intertextual referent for several important moments on stage.

Despite this well-recognized association between the *Persians* and the *Iliad*, the role of Xerxes in the intertextual relationship has gone unrecognized. In this paper, I argue that, as a part of the extensive borrowing of Homeric language and imagery in the *Persians*, Xerxes is repeatedly compared to Agamemnon. Aeschylus makes the comparison in two ways. First, verbally; throughout the tragedy, Homeric tropes of leadership, as well as certain descriptors of Agamemnon in particular, are repeatedly applied to Xerxes. Secondly, thematically; Xerxes’ failings as a leader are made to echo those of Agamemnon, a resemblance which Aeschylus highlights by adapting episodes from the *Iliad* with the inclusion of Xerxes.

The verbal evocations of Agamemnon in the figure of Xerxes are numerous; he is referred to as ὄρχαμος (l. 129), an exclusively “Homeric term” for leader (Broadhead 1960, 63), and ποιμάνωρ (l. 241), a *hapax* that invokes the common Homeric trope of ποιμὴν λαῶν, “the shepherd of the people.” Xerxes is also called θούριος (l. 73), a Homeric epithet of Ares, and ἰσόθεος φῶς (l. 80), a common epic phrase that serves both to invoke the Homeric corpus and

suggest the divine (or divinely-supported) stature of the Persian monarchy (Griffith 1998; Kennedy 2013).

Xerxes is not only spoken of in terms befitting a Homeric king, but also bears an important emblem of Homeric royal authority: the σκῆπτρον. The Iliadic passage in which the genealogy of Agamemnon's scepter is laid out (2.100-8) serves unmistakably as the referent for the comparable passage in *Persians* (ll. 759-86). As in the case of Agamemnon, the provenance of Xerxes' scepter, hallowed by divine favor and ancestral use, belies how poorly the Persian king exercises his royal prerogative (Easterling 1989). Xerxes is the focus of several other passages that correspond to Homeric scenes; again like Agamemnon, who orders a rash assault on the basis of a dream in which a god impersonates a human (2.22-34), Xerxes' failure at Marathon is the result, in Aeschylus' telling, of a divine deception: a δαίμων taking the form of a Greek (ll. 353-60).

The series of comparisons between Agamemnon and Xerxes, I argue, serves to highlight the failures of the Persian King's leadership with a series of shorthand references that would have stood out prominently to the fifth-century audience. Xerxes' faults—his rashness, arrogance and disregard of the will of the gods—are further emphasized in his resemblance to Agamemnon. Aeschylus' evocation of the Homeric ruler places Xerxes at the contradictory center of two notional relationships; he becomes a foreign character who is thus partially assimilated to the Greek worldview, and a fifth-century ruler with one foot in the epic past.

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