

When Tragedy Became Drama: Time, Narrative, and Suspense in Aeschylus

In a scene in Terence Rattigan's play *The Browning Version*, the humorless Classics master Andrew Crocker-Harris scolds a pupil who has been a little too free in his translation of a significant passage of the *Agamemnon*. "I am delighted," he says to the boy, "of this evidence... of your interest in the rather more lurid aspects of dramaturgy, but I feel I must remind you that you are supposed to be construing Greek, not collaborating with Aeschylus." However much such discipline has its place in a lower fifth-form Greek classroom, it is nonetheless true that young Taplow speaks to the interests of many working scholars of Aeschylean tragedy, for whom aspects of dramaturgy, lurid and otherwise, represent many of the most pressing questions in the field.

One such question is the degree of realism in tragic performance—how naturalistic were the actors' performances, and to what extent was the song and dialogue supplemented with stage effects. As Oliver Taplin painstakingly showed in his seminal *Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, it is difficult to maintain a position of extreme naturalism in performance or the opposite, tragedy as *oratorio*. The presence or absence of dramaturgical elements like supernumeraries, stage props, and sound effects must be argued for on a case by case basis, and individual cases can lead scholars to reach quite differing conclusions (e.g. Poochigian 2007 arguing *contra* Taplin for the presence on stage of the Theban champions during the *Redepaare* scene in *Septem contra Thebas*).

If one thing is certain, it is that the conventions and resources of Attic tragedy were constantly evolving in the period represented by our surviving Aeschylus texts. This paper will make a fresh comparison of scenes in Aeschylus' earliest surviving tragedy, the *Persians*, with scenes from the *Agamemnon*, from the tragedian's final Attic festival competition in 458, in order to go beyond the current debates of fifth-century scenic conventions—to show that more than the number of actors and the capabilities of dramatic illusion had changed, but the very underlying poetics of the tragic genre itself. Using both narratological analysis of the plays and some frequently neglected comparative evidence from the dithyrambic narratives of Aeschylus' contemporary Bacchylides, I mean to show that the *Persians'* manipulation of temporality takes this most pageant-like tragedy further from naturalistic drama than

even its reputation suggests, and that Aeschylus' greatest innovation as a poet may not have been his spectacles but his deft deployment of simultaneity and retrospection in dramatic narrative.

Bibliography

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