

Homer in Herodotus & Aeschylus: Assimilating the ‘Other’

One can potentially interpret both the *Histories* of Herodotus and the *Persae* of Aeschylus as works intended to promote an understanding of the Persians. In order to achieve this goal, each author borrows phrases and ideas from Homer, the composer of one of the most equivocal works in Greek literature: the *Iliad*. While Homer is equivocal, he also represents the foundation of Greek literature and, as a result, Greek identity. By utilizing Homer, each author defines the Persians in Greek terms, furthering the level of understanding between these two peoples. In terms of scholarship, the influence of Homer on both authors is attested by writers such as Deborah Boedeker (Boedeker, 2002), Irene de Jong (de Jong, 2002) and Antonios Rengakos (Rengakos, 2006) with respect to Herodotus and Suzanne Saïd (Saïd, 2006) concerning Aeschylus. Furthermore, scholars such as Christopher Pelling (Pelling, 2013) and Michael Flower (Flower, 2006) have entertained the concept of Herodotus promoting a new level of understanding of the Persians while Suzanne Saïd, A.F. Garvie (Garvie, 2009) and Marsh McCall (McCall, 1986) have done the same concerning Aeschylus. However, scholars such as Edith Hall (Hall, 1989) see the play as establishing the idea of the ‘barbarian’ and disagree with the aforementioned reading of the tragedy. As a result, I will be grappling with her assertions as well in this paper. Overall, the point that both authors use Homer to create an increased understanding of the Persian ‘other’ is made tangentially by the scholars Boedeker, Flower, Saïd and Pelling; the purpose of this work is to flesh out this connection in greater detail.

I also suggest that both Herodotus and Aeschylus draw on Homer because they are trying to warn their Greek audience, and more specifically their Athenian audience, that they too are susceptible to a reversal of fortune. Herodotus allegedly died in 425 BCE, six years into the Peloponnesian War, and many articles have already been penned concerning the aspersions the

historian casts on post-Persian War Athens. On the other hand, *Persae* was originally performed in 472 BCE, a mere eight years after the Battle of Salamis, yet it still provides a warning to its Athenian audience, implying that fate is indeed a fickle thing. It is possible that, for Herodotus and Aeschylus, the blurred line drawn between ‘self’ and ‘other’ in their respective works could serve as a useful didactic tool to save the Greeks from themselves. Regardless, the connection between the Greeks and the Persians through the use of Homer as fostered by these two authors promotes the idea that the Greeks and the Persians are not so different after all, setting the agenda for future conversations regarding the authors’ intentions.

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