

κένανδρον μέγ' ἄστν: Waging War Abroad in Aeschylus' *Persians*

Aeschylus' *Persians* puts on display the homecoming of a king defeated at war; nevertheless, the play is in many ways a story of departure, not return—so much of the dialogue is consumed with recalling, reporting, and lamenting what has already happened. This paper considers how images of departure from the homeland and descriptions of suffering at the hands of the natural world reinforce a negative conception of war within the tragedy. War permanently tears apart the Persian society and the empire cannot recover, even with the return of Xerxes. Many scholars (e.g., Goldhill 1988, Hall 1989, and Kantzios 2004) have examined *Persians* with attention to the sociopolitical importance of Aeschylus' portrayal of a foreign people, emphasizing the contrasts within the play between democratic Athens and autocratic Persia. In the same vein as Hopman (2010), who suggests that the Chorus cuts through this binary by transcending time and space, I argue that *Persians* provides a more universalizing look at the experience of war than others have acknowledged, one that stresses the disastrous and widespread consequences of waging war.

The cycle of transgression and divine retribution commonly identified in *Persians* (e.g., by Anderson 1972, Wilson 1986, and Conacher 1996) is consistently entwined with waging war abroad. For example, when the Chorus exclaims three times that Xerxes is the cause of the Persian fleet's destruction (550-54), they follow this statement with a parallel one, this time repeating that it is the ships (and notably the ships of *both* sides of the war) that led the Persian men away and ruined them (560-564). The failure is not simply a matter of Xerxes' individual hubris. In addition, although the Chorus and Darius bemoan how the gods contributed to Xerxes' downfall after he yoked the Hellespont (65-72, 126-32, 738-53, 800-32), Darius also tells the Chorus that the Persians will do best if they no longer lead an army onto Greek land, an ally

(ξύμμαχος) to the Greek people (790-792). The image of the Greek land as a participant in war highlights the deep connection between peoples and their lands, while Darius also implicates the choice to wage war abroad in the Persians' downfall.

Aeschylus' portrayal of the natural world as unconquerable reinforces the universal dangers of traveling abroad for war. In the Messenger's account of the extensive journey towards Persia (480-514), those who die do not deserve their deaths nor are those who survive more heroic than those who perish. Hunger and thirst afflict all equally (502-3), and the "fortunate" ones (εὐτυχής) are those who have the good luck of dying swiftly (506-7). Similarly, those who reach Persia are called remnants (λοιποί), only happening upon safety (κᾶτυχον σωτηρίας, 508) rather than achieving homecoming through their strength and wits. A supremely unheroic return, the few survivors scarcely make it out after much suffering (509-10). In contrast to the lands crossed on campaign, Persia—described as "possessing a hearth" (ἔστιοῦχον, 511)—is the site of the home and all its comforts and protection. In showing a failed return, *Persians* stresses the dangers that indiscriminately afflict soldiers who leave their homes for war.

Finally, *Persians* presents the land itself as experiencing an irrecoverable loss, with the death of men equated to the death of the entire empire. War damages not only the soldiers abroad, but also the entire community at home. Aeschylus' abundant use of πᾶς underscores the totality of the Persian defeat, especially as Persia becomes empty of men (119, 549, 718). Furthermore, the image of Persia's flower having perished (59-60, 252, 925) reinforces how the loss of men in their prime at war contributes to an entire state's destruction. The personification of the land as a mourner extends the misery, as the Chorus describes the various Persian cities echoing each other in grief (115-25). The country groans for the loss of men (511-12, 922) and is

brought to its knees in anguish (930). Absence from the land remains the focus at the end of this homecoming story, as the land at home mirrors the destruction of war abroad.

### Bibliography

- Anderson, M. 1972. "The Imagery of *The Persians*." *G&R* 19.2: 166-174.
- Conacher, D. J. 1996. *Aeschylus: The Earlier Plays and Related Studies*. Toronto.
- Goldhill, S. 1988. "Battle Narrative and Politics in Aeschylus' *Persae*." *JHS* 108: 189-193.
- Hall, E. 1989. *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*. Oxford.
- Hopman, M. G. 2010. "Chorus, conflict, and closure in Aeschylus' *Persians*." In *Choral Mediations in Greek Tragedy*, edited by R. Gagné and M. G. Hopman, 58-77. Cambridge.
- Kantzios, I. 2004. "The Politics of Fear in Aeschylus' *Persians*." *CW* 98.1: 3-19.
- Wilson, J. R. 1986. "Territoriality and its violation in the *Persians* of Aeschylus." In *Greek Tragedy and Its Legacy*, edited by M. Cropp, E. Fantham, and S. E. Scully, 51-57. Calgary.