

Herodotean Variations on Aeschylus' *Persae*: Two Examples

Scholars since Hauvette (1894, cf. Pohlenz 1957, Immerwahr 1966) have cited a handful of passages in Herodotus' *Histories* as evidence for his familiarity with Aeschylus' *Persae*. I will take a closer look at two of these passages in order to demonstrate that Herodotus is not merely signaling his knowledge of Aeschylus as a passive recipient of the poet's influence. On the contrary, and as is typical of his engagement with poetic predecessors, Herodotus demonstrates his creativity by re-contextualizing and adapting Aeschylean material to suit his own purposes as *histor*.

Both passages occur in advisor scenes (a characteristically Herodotean scenario) that mark crucial stages in Xerxes' campaign against the Greeks. The first is the most obvious instance of Herodotus' verbal imitation of *Persae*, the advice given to Xerxes by Artemisia, female tyrant of Halicarnassus, before the battle of Salamis. Alone among the king's counselors, Artemisia urges him not to engage the enemy at sea; if Xerxes hastens to do so, she says, "I fear that the naval force, having been defeated, may damage the infantry as well" (δειμαίνω μὴ ὁ ναυτικὸς στρατὸς κακωθεῖς τὸν πεζὸν προσδηλήσῃται, 8.68.γ). This statement is a virtual quotation of the Aeschylean queen's summary of the Persian defeat, addressed to the ghost of Darius: "The naval force, having been defeated, destroyed the infantry force" (ναυτικὸς στρατὸς κακωθεῖς πεζὸν ὄλεσε στρατόν, *Pers.* 728).

Herodotus clearly echoes the queen's vocabulary and word order, but re-contextualizes her utterance through his choice of speaker and occasion, in addition to reframing the statement as a presentiment unique to Artemisia rather than a retrospective summary. In this way Herodotus confirms his introductory remark that of all the allies Artemisia gave the king the best

advice (7.99.3). Herodotus also invites us to ponder the relationship between Artemisia and Aeschylus' queen—what they have in common (as powerful Eastern women and mothers whose husbands are deceased) and how they differ from one another (above all in Artemisia's independent exercise of power, as both sole ruler of Halicarnassus and an accomplished naval commander). Thus Herodotus not only pays homage to Aeschylus but also underscores the unique status and achievements of his fellow countrywoman.

My second example is the conversation/debate between Xerxes and Artabanus at Abydos, which precedes the crossing of the Hellespont (7.46-52). Here verbal imitation of Aeschylus is less obvious but thematic echoes are strong (Michelini 1981, Pelling 1991). The corresponding Aeschylean passage is a trimeter exchange between the chorus leader and the ghost of Darius, who foresees future prosperity only if the Persians abandon plans for invading Greece (790-95). In this exchange Darius personifies the land of Hellas as the Greeks' ally (ξύμμαχος, 792) in warding off foreign enemies, and deprecates the excessive multitude (πλήθος) of the Persian forces, which has already proved disastrous at Salamis. Both of these features reappear in the debate at Abydos, where Xerxes and Artabanus reconsider the merits of the Greek campaign in exclusively human terms, disregarding the dream vision that previously sealed their decision.

Again Herodotus adapts his Aeschylean model in significant ways. First, he underscores the importance of these issues by raising them at a conspicuous moment in the narrative, immediately before Xerxes crosses the Hellespont into Europe. Second, Herodotus radically changes the dynamic of the Aeschylean encounter between the cowed chorus and Darius' awesome apparition. At Abydos, despite Xerxes' royal status, he treats Artabanus as a virtual equal in a genuine exchange of views that is unique among Herodotean warner scenes. Finally, Artabanus adapts the Aeschylean personification of "land as ally" in two ways—first, by

portraying the land as hostile to enemy forces rather than an ally of its inhabitants; second, by expanding its application to include another powerful natural force, the sea. Opposed by these “most hostile” (πολεμιώτατα, 7.47.3) elements, Xerxes proposes to increase the size (πλήθος, 7.48) of his army and fleet; in response, Artabanus explains in detail how the multitude of Persian forces will prove self-defeating on land and sea alike. Thus on the basis of a brief exchange in *Persae* that links the personification of land as a military ally with the disadvantage of an enormous military force, Herodotus articulates through Artabanus an extended and forceful argument against Xerxes’ expedition on purely human grounds. Here too Herodotus has adapted, elaborated, and showcased Aeschylean source material in a prominent advisor scene.

Bibliography

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