

History, Philosophy, and Mythology in Aeschylus's *Persians*

In a passage of the *Poetics* in which he examines plot as a dramatic element, Aristotle writes, “poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history; poetry tends to speak of universals, history of particulars.” For Aristotle a dramatization of Herodotus would still be history; the difference between the historian and the poet is that “the former relates things that have happened, the latter things that may happen” (1451b1).

Aristotle's contrast of the historian and the poet and his judgment that poetry is more philosophical than history raises some questions when one thinks about the existence, limited though it may be, of Attic historical drama. The practice of writing plays on historical subjects did not last long at Athens. Phrynichus's attempt to deal with contemporary events in *Capture of Miletus* written in 492 B.C. upset his audience and earned the playwright a fine and a prohibition on the revival of the play (Garvie 2009, Wright 2016). Nonetheless, Phrynichus seems to have continued to write historical plays, including perhaps a play about the Persians that seems to have inspired Aeschylus in writing his own *Persians* (Garvie 2009, Sommerstein 2010, Wright 2016).

However, while Phrynichus was notoriously unsuccessful in presenting a play about the conflict with Persia, Aeschylus's *Persians* won first place in the Dionysia in 472 B.C. While some critics such as Winnington-Ingram only begrudgingly grant praise to Aeschylus's *Persians* (Winnington-Ingram 1983), the majority of contemporary scholars see Aeschylus's extant historical play not only as good drama but as a play that articulates a tragic vision that presages full expression in the *Oresteia* (Taplin 1977, Herington 1986, Pelling 1997, Sommerstein 2010). Indeed, as Hogan noted (1984) the great prophetic speech that the ghost of Darius delivers

(*Persians*, 818 – 822) responds to the proud actions of his son Xerxes with a biological metaphor that plots out the cycle of prosperity (*olbos*) leading to pride (*hubris*) leading to ruin (*atē*), a pattern that one finds throughout Archaic Greek poetry (Herington 1986, Helm 2004). This essay argues that in *Persians* Aeschylus transforms history into myth and in doing so creates a space where the viewer or reader can engage in philosophical speculation about ontology and morality.

Bibliography

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