

While Aeschylus' *Persians* is among the Greek tragedies most often produced today, the interpretation of the original 472 B.C.E. production remains highly controversial (Rosenbloom 2006: 11). Some see it as a chauvinist celebration of Athenian superiority over the defeated enemy. Others understand it as an experience of empathy between Greeks and foreigners. In this paper, I argue that the plurality of voices and identities deployed by the chorus of *Persians* offered a complex emotional experience to the Athenian audience, registered their anger at and fear of the enemy, acted upon those emotions, and channeled them toward pity.

*Persians* is an unusual play. It is both our first extant tragedy and the only one that focuses on a historical subject matter. Subsequently, critics have paid comparatively little attention to its dramatic features. Earlier scholarship mined it for historical evidence about the Persian wars and the rivalry between Themistocles and Cimon (Podlecki 1966). Recent studies more productively treat it as a document of Athenian ideology but do not account for its combination of Orientalizing thinking (Hall 1996; Harrison 2000) and signs of sympathy for the enemy (Loraux 1999). In order to better understand the pragmatics of the play, we need to evaluate its political and ideological elements in relation to its structural and dramatic features. This paper contributes such an approach by bringing recent work on the polyphonic nature of the choral voice (Henrichs 1995; Nagy 1994-5; Calame 1999) to bear on the interpretation of *Persians*.

The first part of the paper argues that the chorus of *Persians* occupies a mediating position between actors and audience. Like all tragic choruses, it has a specific identity tied to the *hic et nunc* of the dramatic fiction (Gould 2001). Yet that specialized identity often "fades away" (Foley 2003: 24) to give rise to multifaceted and at times contradictory perspectives. The chorus symbolically outlines the whole play in the parodos but also grossly misinterprets the dream of the queen (*Pers.* 215-25). It alludes to the Persian disaster at Marathon (*Pers.* 244) but praises Darius' rule (*Pers.* 652-5; 852-61). Rather than reflecting a single viewpoint, the chorus responds to the information conveyed by the actors. Like the Athenian audience, it is engaged in an experience of progressively understanding the causes of the Persian disaster.

The second part of the paper explores the implications of the mediating position of the chorus for the final and climactic scene of the play. As Xerxes enters on stage, the situation of the chorus parallels that of the external audience. For the first time, both the Persian Elders and the Athenians are confronted with an actor impersonating a figure who has wreaked havoc for both groups. In that context, I argue that the evolution of the chorus channels and models the reaction of the implied external audience. As the final *kommos* evolves from angry questions (*Pers.* 908-1001) to a lament jointly sung with Xerxes (*Pers.* 1002-78), the Athenian audience is invited to transcend its resentment and partake in a universal experience of grief. Through the polyphonic identity of its chorus, *Persians* both articulates and goes beyond cultural polarities.