

Aeschylus' *Persians* disguises a discourse of power beneath a rhetoric of "freedom," a rhetoric that is fundamental to 5th century Athenian imperialist mentality and their expansionist agenda (Raaflaub, 2004 on the development of the concept of freedom in this context). "Freedom" in this play is constructed through the oppositional category of Persian tyranny: Attic and Hellenic freedom mean specifically not Persian tyranny. The argument here, however, is that the true opposition, hidden by the rhetoric of freedom, is between Athenian and other Greeks. This definitional strategy links democratic freedom to Athenian military power (Goldhill, 1988, 192) and uses that freedom to legitimize their growing imperialism.

Scholarship on the *Persians* has largely focused on the historical nature of the play (e.g. Podlecki, 1966 and Pelling, 1997). More recently, under the influence of Edward Saïd, scholars have focused on a Greek/Barbarian dichotomy constructed within the play (esp. Hall 1996). Goldhill (1988) has argued that *Persians* participates in this dichotomy by reading the play as one of the earliest documents to reflect democratic ideology. Rosenbloom (1995 and 2006) argues that the text questions Athens' growing hegemony by undermining the positive nature of naval power (whereas Goldhill understands the navy as being linked ideologically to the hoplite/military ideal). Rosenbloom alone specifically addresses the developing Athenian Empire in his interpretation.

The main arguments about a specifically Greek imperial ideology within *Persians* will be made through a close reading of the messenger speech at 353ff and Xerxes appearance at 908ff. Here I argue that *Persians*, rather than being a historical play, is fully mythologized in order to displace the negative aspects of imperialism onto Persia and Xerxes. Because this mythologizing gives structure to the varied emotions associated with the Athenian victory at Salamis, all Athenian gains are staged as loss by the Persians themselves and are thus distanced from the aggressive military actions of the late 470s. This allows for the reality of Athenian aggression against other Greeks to become erased by the representation of them as bulwarks of Greek freedom. The "idea" of freedom and the "idea" of a panhellenic identity are substituted for the imperialist project.

What this means, in the end is that the imperial project itself is co-opted into the drive for freedom. The opposition constructed between tyranny and democratic freedom is a false dichotomy. Freedom becomes the precursor to and a necessary element of tyranny. Thus Athens is truly capable of being positioned within this play as both Savior and tyrant by virtue of the fact that the name of tyrant has been displaced onto Xerxes. Only power remains, but because it becomes attached to the idea of freedom and a panhellenic identity, it is rendered useful and desirable. By rendering this power desirable, tyrannical though it is, *Persians* serves as a foundation myth for burgeoning Athenian imperial aspirations while parading as an anti-imperialist paean to freedom.