

# Narratology and Interpretation

The Content of Narrative Form  
in Ancient Literature

Edited by

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# Contents

Introduction .....	1
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## I. Ancient Predecessors of Narratology

Stephen Halliwell	
The Theory and Practice of Narrative in Plato .....	15
Richard Hunter	
The <i>Trojan Oration</i> of Dio Chrysostom and Ancient Homeric Criticism .....	43
René Nünlist	
Narratological Concepts in Greek Scholia .....	63

## II. Narratology – New Concepts

Irene de Jong	
Metalepsis in Ancient Greek Literature .....	87
Egbert J. Bakker	
Homer, Odysseus, and the Narratology of Performance .....	117
Deborah Beck	
Speech Act Types, Conversational Exchange, and the Speech Representational Spectrum in Homer .....	137
Jonas Grethlein	
Philosophical and Structuralist Narratologies – Worlds Apart? .	153

### III. Narratology and the Interpretation of Epic and Lyric Poetry

Evanthia Tsitsibakou-Vasalos Chance or Design? Language and Plot Management in the <i>Odyssey</i> . Klytaimnestra ἄλοχος μνηστή ἐμήσατο . . . . .	177
Marios Skempis – Ioannis Ziogas Arete's Words: Etymology, <i>Ehoie</i> -Poetry and Gendered Narrative in the <i>Odyssey</i> . . . . .	213
Lucia Athanassaki Narratology, Deixis, and the Performance of Choral Lyric. On Pindar's <i>First Pythian Ode</i> . . . . .	241
Georg Danek Apollonius Rhodius as an (anti-)Homeric Narrator: Time and Space in the <i>Argonautica</i> . . . . .	275
Evina Sistakou 'Snapshots' of Myth: The Notion of Time in Hellenistic Epyllion . . . . .	293
Theodore D. Papanghelis <i>Aeneid</i> 5.362–484: Time, Epic and the Analeptic Gauntlets . .	321

### IV. Narratology and the Interpretation of Tragedy

Francis Dunn Sophocles and the Narratology of Drama . . . . .	337
Marianne Hopman Layered Stories in Aeschylus' <i>Persians</i> . . . . .	357
Seth L. Schein Narrative Technique in the <i>Parodos</i> of Aeschylus' <i>Agamemnon</i> .	377
Anna A. Lamari Knowing a Story's End: Future Reflexive in the Tragic Narrative of the Argive Expedition Against Thebes . . . . .	399
Ruth Scodel Ignorant Narrators in Greek Tragedy . . . . .	421

## V. Narratology and the Interpretation of Historiography

Christos C. Tsagalis	
Names and Narrative Techniques in Xenophon's <i>Anabasis</i> . . .	451
Nikos Miltsios	
The Perils of Expectations: Perceptions, Suspense and Surprise in Polybius' <i>Histories</i> . . . . .	481
Christopher Pelling	
Seeing through Caesar's Eyes: Focalisation and Interpretation .	507
Chrysanthe Tsitsiou-Chelidoni	
History beyond Literature: Interpreting the 'Internally Focalized' Narrative in Livy's <i>Ab urbe condita</i> . . . . .	527
Philip Hardie	
Fame's Narratives. Epic and Historiography . . . . .	555
List of Contributors . . . . .	573
Bibliography . . . . .	577
General Index . . . . .	617
Passages Index . . . . .	623

# Layered Stories in Aeschylus' *Persians*

Marianne Hopman

Our earliest extant Greek tragedy and only preserved Greek historical drama, *Persians*, is one of the Athenian tragedies whose effect on its original audience is most debated. Current scholarship on its original reception falls into two groups. Some – most recently Edith Hall (1996) and Thomas Harrison (2000) – read the play as an Athenian auto-celebration suffused with chauvinist overtones and Orientalizing clichés. Others – notably Desmond Conacher ((1974) 1996) and Nicole Loraux (1993) – view it as a surprising vehicle for identification with the enemy whereby cultural and military polarities are overcome by a shared experience of loss and death.<sup>1</sup> Much is at stake here. Beyond the interpretation of the play itself, the debate impinges on the definition of tragedy as a genre and the relevance of the Aristotelian categories of fear and pity to its first extant example. In addition, the controversy raises psychological issues about the Athenian – and ultimately our own – ability to transcend personal resentment and hatred in order to embrace a larger human perspective on pain and death.

This paper reconsiders the pragmatic question through the lens of narrative structures.<sup>2</sup> Since tragedy is a narrative genre, my methodological premise is that its pragmatics largely depends on its progression as performance time unfolds.<sup>3</sup> To define the narrative structure of the play, I use some of the tools developed by structural narratology, espe-

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1 For a survey of the history of interpretation of the play, see Hall 1989, 69–73.

2 Recent analyses of *Persians* have paid strikingly little attention to its structure. Harrison 2000, whose thesis is largely based on the stichomythia between the chorus and the queen in the first episode, is characteristic of the trend.

3 Here and throughout the article, I use the term narrative in the broad sense of a discourse that – unlike argument or description – presents a story combining a set of characters, events, and a setting. For such a definition (which contrasts with Genette's restrictive use of the term narrative to epic), see Ricoeur 1983, 55–84 and Chatman 1990, 6–21 and 109–23.

cially the actantial model proposed by Algirdas Greimas (1966, 174–85 and 192–212) that breaks down an action around the positions of subject, object, helper, opponent, sender, and receiver.<sup>4</sup> This approach allows me to capture the oft-neglected dynamic progression of the play and to argue that *Persians* is organized around not one but two storylines, one centered around Xerxes' expedition against Greece and the other around the chorus' *pothos* – their desire to be reunited with the army (I).<sup>5</sup> The *pothos* story culminates in the identification of Xerxes as the chorus' opponent. In the second half of the final scene, Xerxes expresses longing for the dead youth and therefore moves from opponent to co-subject position (II). At the level of external communication, the *pothos* story actively engages the emotions of the Athenian audience and creates a complex experience in which anger gives way to pity and compassion (III).

### 1. War Story and *Pothos* Story

As Louis O. Mink (1970) and Paul Ricoeur (1983, 219–27) have emphasized, the interpretation of a narrative relies on a dialectic understanding of its plot. As we read a novel or watch a play, we develop provisional hypotheses about the nature of the main story that subsequently

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- 4 I do not attempt to use or even to transpose to tragedy the tools of formal narratology developed by Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal. As defined in *Discours du récit*, Genettian narratology focuses on the three parameters of time, voice, and mood that shape the transformation of a story into a narrative told by a narrator (Genette (1972) 1980). The distinction between story and narrative that is valid for epic can be applied to drama, especially with regards to the contrast between action shown and action told. In addition, the treatment of time is a fundamental parameter of dramatic storytelling, as recently demonstrated by Goward 1999 and Markantonatos 2002. Yet it is difficult to find a dramatic equivalent for the categories of voice and mood. Genettian narratology provides an elegant model and a powerful series of tools to describe the narrative semiotics of epic. One hopes that a similarly elegant and powerful model will be developed to discuss the narrative semiotics of drama. Manfred Pfister (1977) 1988 represents an important step in that direction. For a survey of various attempts to formulate a narratology of drama (with attention to the specificities of Greek drama), see Nünning – Sommer 2002. See also Francis Dunn, this volume.
- 5 Gagarin 1976, 29–56 and Hall 1996, 16–19 have remarked that *Persians* creates a tension between Greek and Persian, celebratory and mournful viewpoints. My analysis takes their observation from the thematic to the narrative level and discusses the combination of perspectives in terms of intertwined stories.

inform the relative importance we assign to the narrative's characters, actions, and events. According to a long tradition of interpretation, *Persians* tells the story of Xerxes' invasion of Greece, his defeat at Salamis, and his lonely return to Susa. It is summarized in these terms in the ancient hypothesis preserved in the tenth-century manuscript *Laurentianus*:

καὶ ἔστιν ἡ μὲν σκηνὴ τοῦ δράματος παρὰ τῷ τάφῳ Δαρείου· ἡ δὲ ὑπόθεσις, Ξέρξης στρατευσάμενος κατὰ Ἑλλάδος καὶ πεζῆ μὲν ἐν Πλαταιαῖς νικηθεὶς, ναυτικῆ δὲ ἐν Σαλαμῖνι, διὰ Θεσσαλίας φεύγων διεπεραιώθη εἰς τὴν Ἀσίαν.

The drama is set beside the tomb of Darius, and its argument is this: Xerxes conducted a campaign against Greece; his infantry was defeated at Plataea and his navy at Salamis, and he fled through Thessaly and crossed over to Asia. (transl. E. Hall)

This interpretation implicitly underlies the work of scholars who view the messenger's narrative as the climax of the play; of those who discuss the pragmatics of the play in the context of the rivalry between Athens and Sparta (the cities who played a prominent role at Salamis and Plataea respectively); and of those who connect it to the political prospects of Themistocles, the Athenian general who engineered the victory at Salamis.<sup>6</sup> According to this model, the play primarily narrates Xerxes' failure to conquer Greece; the reversal at Salamis coincides with the Aristotelian model for the tragic plot;<sup>7</sup> *Persians* follows, albeit in inverted fashion, the quest model identified as a basic narrative pattern by Vladimir Propp ((1928) 1968) and subsequently formalized by Greimas (1966). The defining moments of the war story match the semio-narrative schema of Manipulation (the necessity to carry on Darius' legacy), Competence (the crossing of the Hellespont), Performance (Salamis and, proleptically, Plataea), and Sanction (lonely return). In the vocabulary of Greimas' actantial model, the subject of the action is Xerxes, the object Greece, the sender Darius, the receiver Xerxes, the helper the Persian army, and the opponents – at least at a surface level to be reconsidered in part II below – are the Greeks.

The interpretative emphasis on the war story matches, and is supported by, the importance that stage characters attach to it. *Persians* offers no less than three narratives of Xerxes' crossing of the Hellespont: the first, which is told and sung by the chorus in the parodos (12–60; 65–91; 126–31); the second, which is reiterated in a symbolic mode

6 For such approaches, see especially Podlecki 1966 and more recently Harrison 2000.

7 On the linguistic and visual aspects of the reversal, see Saïd 1988.

in the queen's narrative of her dream (181–99); and the third, which is revisited in the queen's conversation with Darius (717–58). The events at Salamis, Psyttaleia, and the retreat are the focus of three remarkably detailed reports (353–432, 447–71, 480–514) and the longest messenger scene in extant Athenian tragedy (353–514). Xerxes' return is highlighted by anticipatory references to it by the chorus (νόστῳ τῷ βασιλείῳ, 8), the queen (529–31), and Darius (837–38).<sup>8</sup> The amount of performance time devoted to retelling the expedition makes it an important narrative component in the play.

In addition, the beginning and end of the performance approximately coincide with verbal or visual presentations of the beginning and end of the war story. Although Xerxes' departure from Persia is recounted and not shown, the action performed in the *parodos* (the Elders' entrance on marching *anapests*) thematically coincides with the narrated action (the march of Xerxes' army) and symbolically reenacts it (1–64). At the other end, Xerxes' entrance closes off the war story at the beginning of the *kommos* (907). Xerxes' rags visually confirm the messenger's report that the king had torn off his robes in view of the disaster at Salamis (468). In addition, as William Thalmann (1980) and others have stressed, the torn clothes (στολή, 1017) metaphorically signify the failure of the war expedition (στόλος, 795). With the exception of Xerxes' return and Plataea, all events in the war story have already happened when the play opens. Yet the performance unfolds to present a polyphonic narrative of the war story. In the terminology of Manfred Pfister ((1977) 1988, 283–84), tertiary fictional time (the duration of verbally-related background events) is projected into primary fictional time (the length of time covered by the action presented on stage).

Understood as a narrative of Xerxes' failure to conquer Greece, the 472 B.C.E. *Persians* performance belongs with the many discourses spoken or written in the 470s to commemorate the Greek victory over Persia.<sup>9</sup> It must be contextualized with: the dedicatory epigram inscribed on the most famous Greek celebratory offering – a gold tripod resting on a spiral-twisted column made of three bronze snakes and dedicated

8 The anticipatory references to Xerxes' return that construct the plot as a *nostos* story are carefully discussed by Taplin 1977, 123–27.

9 For useful surveys of the different modes of commemoration of the victory in the 470s, see Barron 1988 and Raaflaub 2004, 60–66. On commemoration and memory as themes and performance in *Persians*, see Grethlein 2007.

to Delphic Apollo by the Spartan Pausanias (Thuc. 1.132.2 = Simon. 17 Page); the inscription recorded by Plutarch as the dedication on the altar of Zeus Eleutherios at Plataea (Plut. *Arist.* 19.7); and the funerary epigrams (many attributed to Simonides) for those fallen at Thermopylae (Simon. fr. 6 and fr. 22b Page), Plataea (Simon. fr. 8–9 Page), and Salamis (Meiggs – Lewis (1969) 1988, no. 24 and 26 I). Most importantly, as emphasized by Oliver Taplin (2006), *Persians* must be contextualized with Simonides' elegiac and lyric battle poems. While very little has survived of the *Sea Battle at Artemision* (fr. 1–4 W<sup>2</sup>) and the *Sea Battle at Salamis* (fr. 5–9 W<sup>2</sup>), the publication in 1992 of POxy 3965, edited by P.J. Parsons, has significantly advanced our understanding of Simonides' *Battle of Plataea* (fr. 10–18 W<sup>2</sup>).<sup>10</sup> In Martin West's reconstruction of Simonides 11 (POxy 2327 fr. 5 + 6 + 27 col. i; + 3965 fr. 1+2), after a proemium praising Achilles (1–20) and an invocation to the Muse (20–28), the narrator relates the march of the Spartans from their hometown past Corinth and Megara (29–42). While POxy 3965.2 unfortunately disintegrates as the Spartans reach Eleusis, POxy 2327 fr. 27 col. ii suggests that the poem included a battle narrative (fr. 13 W<sup>2</sup>). Simonides' *Battle of Plataea* thus seems to have offered a narrator-based account of the Spartan advance and of the battle of Plataea. Similarly, *Persians* includes narrated accounts of the Persian march into Greece and of the battle of Salamis. The drama's embedded narratives thematize the same war story as the elegy, albeit from the opposite perspective.<sup>11</sup>

The generic comparison between *Persians* and Simonides' *Battle of Plataea* brings yet another point to the fore. Both the drama and the

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10 On the text and significance of the 'New Simonides,' see the essays collected in Boedeker – Sider 2001. The current orthodoxy that ascribes the 'New Simonides' to three separate poems (on Artemisium, Salamis, and Plataea) has been questioned by Kowerski 2005 who exposes the difficulty of arrangement in the papyrus fragments and proposes that the 'New Simonides' may in fact belong to a single poem that was multi-battle in perspective. If Kowerski is right, my use of the title *Battle of Plataea* to refer to Simonides' composition is incorrect. My more general point, that Simonides's narrator-based account of the Persian Wars is thematically and narratologically comparable to the war story told in Aeschylus' *Persians*, remains valid.

11 The date of Simonides' Plataea poem is unknown. If Simonides died in 468/7 (*Marm. Par.* 73), the poem's composition precedes *Persians* or shortly follows it. My argument does not depend on the relative chronology of *Persians* and the *Battle of Plataea*. Rather, I use the Simonides poem to reconstruct the horizon of expectations that informed the Athenian experience of Aeschylus' drama.

elegy offer narrator-based accounts of the war story. Yet telling stories is not a generic hallmark of drama. Since Plato and Aristotle, drama has been defined as a mode of storytelling that presents an action (πρᾶξις, πράγματα) through enacted imitation while epic presents its story through a narrative mediated by a narrator (Plat. *Rp.* 3.392d–394d; Arist. *Poet.* 1448a19–28). Both genres are in fact mixed; epic includes dialogue, and drama includes rheseis. Yet it seems fair to say that the story presented in an Athenian drama usually coincides with the actions performed on and off stage during the time of the performance. Aeschylus' *Suppliants* focuses on a series of events: the Danaids supplicate the Argives to give them asylum, the Argives agree to do so, the sons of Aigyptos arrive off stage, their herald attempts to seize the girls, and the king of Argos prevents him from doing so. In contrast, as N.J. Lowe (2000, 167) has stressed, with the exception of Xerxes' return, *Persians* presents the war story through embedded narratives. In other words, it confines the distinctively dramatic mode of storytelling – showing rather than telling – to actions and events that lie outside of the war story. Narrated accounts of the war are framed by, and subsumed to, a second action that is specific to *Persians*. *Persians*' generically specific contribution to the commemoration of the war lies in the actions shown rather than the narratives told.

Stripped of the embedded narratives, the actions and events shown on stage may be summarized along the following lines: the Elders and the Queen are waiting for the return of Xerxes and the army; they hear from the messenger that Xerxes has lost a large part of the army at Salamis, Psyttaleia, and in the retreat over Greece; they attempt to thwart further losses by offering libations to the dead and conjuring the ghost of Darius; they learn from Darius that further woes await the remaining troops at Plataea; the chorus confronts Xerxes; they mourn their losses with him. The characters in this story are impersonated by the actors on stage. Its duration – about an hour – coincides with the duration of the performance. Its location – Susa – is the space presented on stage.

At the core of the performed action is the Persian desire to be reunited with the army.<sup>12</sup> The theme is introduced at the opening of

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12 The few scholars who have focused on the performed action tend to analyze it in terms of an intellectual and emotional response to the reported events. In the fine analysis offered by Adams 1952, the play is structured in Aristotelian manner around the anagnorisis of the chorus and falls into three parts followed by a

the parodos. Immediately after their self-introduction, the Elders announce their concern for the return of the army (8–11). In the first episode, the chorus' longing is replicated and highlighted by the queen's parallel but more specific concerns about the duration of prosperity (164, 166) and about the return of Xerxes (167, 169). In its most extreme form, that longing takes the form of the erotic pangs of wives deprived of their spouses (ἀνδρῶν πόθῳ, 134; πόθῳ φιλόνορι, 135; ἀνδρῶν/ποθέουσαι ἰδεῖν ἄρτιζυγίαν, 541–42). Yet the use of words on the same ποθέω root in relation to the entire land of Asia (πόθῳ, 62) and the whole city of Susa (ποθοῦσαν, 512) makes it clear that the women's longing epitomizes a general feeling. Accordingly, the Elders proleptically enact the lament which they imagine the women will perform if the army does not return (115–25). The desire to see the army return is shared by the imagined women, the chorus, and the queen.

Although the chorus is limited in its power to act, its desires, hopes, and disappointments still unify the actions and events represented on stage. The messenger's entrance fulfills the longing for news expressed in the parodos (12–15). The libations poured by the queen (624) and the kletic hymn performed by the chorus (634–80) are motivated by the hope that Darius may find a remedy to prevent further losses (219–25, 521–26, 631–32). The Darius scene amounts to an attempt to find a helper able to perform on the chorus' behalf. In the first part of the kommos, as will be discussed in detail below, the chorus reacts to the character whom they have come to consider responsible for the loss of the army. In the second part of the kommos jointly sung with Xerxes (1002–1078), the dirge (μέλος, 1042) and mourning gestures ritually enact the loss and represent the end of the chorus' hopes. The staged actions not only respond to narrated news but constitute a sequence of events centered on the chorus' *pothos*. *Persians* combines two related but distinct storylines. The war story thematized in other

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'scherzo': Realization of Forebodings (parodos and first episode), Realization of Divine Wrath (messenger scene), and Realization of Hybris (Darius scene). While this structure nicely illustrates the hermeneutic function of the tragic genre, it does not account for the final scene, which it lists as a mere counterpoint. I believe that a fuller understanding of the dynamics of the play can be achieved by recognizing that the performed action is arranged around the chorus' desire to be reunited with the army. The importance of *pothos* in the action of *Persians* is suggested but not developed by Hall 1996, 19 and *ad* 61–2. Dué 2006, 57–90 analyzes it from a thematic but not a narrative viewpoint.

genres is told in embedded speeches. The *pothos* story that is specific to the play is shown on stage. *Persians* is remarkable not simply for its interest in the emotions and losses of the defeated party, but also for its combination of these emotions in a story that unifies the staged action.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Elders and King

Viewing the chorus as desiring subjects in the staged action, and not solely – as in later tragedies – passive respondents to embedded speeches, gives us a new point of entry into the play’s economy. In particular, it explains and highlights the increasing tension between the chorus and the king, whom they progressively come to identify as their opponent. Polyphony is of course a hallmark of drama. In *Persians*, while the characters agree on the brutal ‘facts’ of the war – the departure, the defeat, the lonely return – they offer diverging perspectives on the causes of, and responsibilities in, the Persian defeat.<sup>14</sup> Three models stand out. In other commemorations of the war, the valor and courage of the Greeks are singled out as the main cause for their victory. Simonides’ *Battle at Plataea* defines itself as a celebration of the Spartans who fought there and accordingly emphasize their ‘courage’ (ἀρε]τῆς, fr. 11.27 W<sup>2</sup>) and ‘immortal glory’ (κλέος] ... ἀθάνατον, fr. 11.28 W<sup>2</sup>). *Persians* alludes to that cause, but only indirectly and mostly in the first half of

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13 Intriguingly, the two stories that I have identified as war story and *pothos* story both are reminiscent of a Homeric epic, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* respectively. The Iliadic echoes of the war story have often be noted. Among many examples, the list of departing contingents in the parodos resembles the Catalogue of ships in *Iliad* 2 (Hall 1996 ad 21–58) while the inglorious deaths of the young Persian nobles in the messenger speech (δυσκλεεστάτω μόρω, 444) invert the Iliadic trope of the *kleos*-bringing death. On the other hand, the *pothos* story represented on stage shares many features with the *Odyssey*. The chorus labels it *nostos* in the parodos (8) and the story of a queen and people waiting for the return of their king echoes the plot of the *Odyssey*. Taplin 1977, 124 views the *Odyssey* as the most important archetype behind the dramatic plot of *Persians*. As will become clear below, my analysis suggests that the analogy may go even further than has previously recognized and that the problem of Odysseus’ reintegration as king of Ithaca (on which see e.g. Nagler 1990) has a parallel in the Xerxes scene of *Persians*. From an intertextual viewpoint, then, *Persians* combines and reworks the two main poems of the epic tradition.

14 For a comparative analysis of *Persians*, Herodotus’ *Histories*, and the Hippocratic corpus as reflections on the causes for the Persian defeat, see Jouanna 1981.

the play. In the first episode, the stichomythia between the queen and the Elders sets up a series of oppositions between Persian gold and Athenian silver (237–38), bow and arrows against spear and shield (239–40), and Persian submission versus Athenian freedom (241–42) that is connected to the Greek victory over Darius at Marathon (244). In the messenger speech, references to the organization and determination of the Greeks fighting for freedom contrast with the unarticulated clamor on the Persian side (384–407). Yet the messenger himself does not highlight Greek valor, but rather the intervention of a jealous *daimōn* as the cause for the Persian defeat. Accordingly, he ties the ‘beginning’ (ἀρχή, 350) of the disaster with the appearance of a ‘vengeful or malignant divinity’ (ἀλάστωρ ἢ κακὸς δαίμων, 354) and the queen responds to his account by blaming a ‘loathsome deity’ (στυγνὴ δαίμων, 472). Their interpretation of the disaster squares with the chorus’ foreboding that a mortal cannot avoid the ‘cunning deceit of a god’ (δολόμετιν δ’ ἀπάταν θεοῦ, 92). Up to and including the messenger speech – that is, throughout the first half of the play – the defeat is attributed implicitly to Greek valor or explicitly to a jealous *daimōn*.

The second half of the play devotes increasing attention to Xerxes’ responsibility. In the first stasimon, the Elders tie their grief to Xerxes’ actions. They emphasize his responsibility by hammering his name as the subject of destructive verbs in a threefold anaphora:

κάγῳ δὲ μόρον τῶν οἰχομένων  
αἴρω δοκίμως πολυπενθή.  
  
νῦν γὰρ δὴ πρόπασα μὲν στένει  
γαῖ’ Ἀσίς ἐκκενουμένα·  
Ξέρξης μὲν ἄγαγεν, ποποῖ,  
Ξέρξης δ’ ἀπώλεσεν, τοτοῖ,  
Ξέρξης δὲ πάντ’ ἐπέσπε δυσφρόνως  
βαρίδεσσι ποντίαις.

And I myself genuinely sustain deep grief  
For the fate of the departed.

For now the entire land of Asia mourns  
emptied out of its men.

Xerxes led them away, *popoi*,  
Xerxes destroyed them, *totoi*,

Xerxes wrong-headedly drove everything on in seafaring ships.

(Aeschylus, *Persians* 546–54, transl. E. Hall)

In the second episode, Darius further criticizes Xerxes. Revisiting the crossing of the Hellespont, the father denounces the incomprehension

(744), audacity (744), and mental sickness (750) that led his son to believe he could overcome Poseidon (744–50). In his third and last speech, the Plataea prophecy, the dead king develops a model of *hybris* and punishment based on a strictly retributive logic (ὑβρεως ἄποινα, 808). The religious exactions performed by the Persians on their way to Greece will result in no fewer tribulations for them (813–14). All Persian disasters, past and future, are now considered to be ‘penalties’ (τἀπιτίμια, 823) for *hybristic* behavior. The final admonition that Xerxes ‘behave temperately’ (σωφρονεῖν, 829) and stop ‘offending the gods’ (θεοβλαβοῦνθ’, 831) ties the defeat to earlier mistakes. Accordingly, in the second stasimon, Darius’ praise is emphatically contrasted with the present disaster (νῦν δ’, 904) and thus implicitly attaches blame to his son.

The increasing insistence on Xerxes’ responsibility bears important consequences for the dynamics of the final scene, when the chorus finally meets the king whom they now view as the agent of their loss. In terms of the actantial model of the *pothos* story, the subject confronts his opponent. I argue that the Xerxes scene is structured around a sequence of tension and resolution that redefines Xerxes’ actantial role from opponent to co-subject and therefore brings closure to the *pothos* story.<sup>15</sup>

The first half of the Xerxes scene is characterized by a tension between Xerxes and the chorus. Xerxes’s concerns at this stage are mostly self-centered. His lament emphatically connects first-person pronouns or verbal forms with epithets denoting misery (δύστηνος ἐγώ, 909; τί πάθω τλήμων, 912; ὅδ’ ἐγών ... αἰακτός, 931; ἰὼ ἰὼ μοι, 974). Unaware of his own responsibility, Xerxes puts the burden of the disaster on a hostile *daimōn* (911–12; 942) and asks the Elders to lament his fate (941–43). In turn, the chorus cares for the army (στρατιᾶς, 918; ὄχλος, 956). After an initial reference to the *daimōn* (921), they increas-

15 Obvious from the meter, the twofold structure of the Xerxes scene has often been noted (Broadhead 1960 *ad* 1002 ff.; Avery 1964; Gagarin 1976, 41–42; Hall 1996 *ad* 1002–78) but not satisfactorily explained. Avery’s idea that new clothes are brought to Xerxes and account for the change is interesting but highly speculative. As Taplin 1977, 122 n. 1 points out, it is unlikely that such a spectacular change would happen without being mentioned verbally. Taplin himself dismisses the change as a formal convention. This explanation is not satisfactory. Form and content should combine if the play is to be successful, as we know it was. My hypothesis – that the change is brought about by Xerxes’ new focus on the lost army (988) – relies on and confirms the importance of *pothos* in the dynamics of the staged action.

ingly emphasize that Xerxes is the one who killed the Persian youth (ἦβαν Ξέρξᾱ κταμέναν, 923) and 'crammed' Hades with Persian corpses (Ἄιδου/σάκτορι Περσᾶν, 923–24). Accordingly, the Elders angrily list the names of fallen Persians and ask Xerxes where they are:

οἰοιοῖ <βόα>, ποῦ σοι Φαρνοῦχος  
 Ἄριόμαρδός τ' ἀγαθός;  
 ποῦ δὲ Σευάλκης ἄναξ  
 ἢ Λίλαιος εὐπάτωρ,  
 Μέμφις, Θάρυβις, καὶ Μασίστρας,  
 Ἄρτεμβάρης τ' ἠδ' Ὑσταίχμας;  
 τάδε σ' ἐπανερόμαν.

*Oioioi* – cry it out; where are your Pharnouchos  
 And noble Ariomardos?  
 Where lord Seualkes  
 Or Lilaios of noble birth?  
 Memphis, Tharybis and Masistras,  
 Artembares and Hystaichmas?  
 I put the question to you again.

(Aeschylus, *Persians* 967–73, transl. E. Hall)

The catalogue is reminiscent of the lists of departing Persians in the parodos (21–58) and of the lists of fallen Persians in the messenger's report (302–30). Yet the form of the catalogue is now embedded in direct interrogative clauses introduced by the interrogative adverb 'where' (ποῦ, 967 and 969; cf. 956 and 957) that give it an angry significance.

The dynamics of the scene suddenly change in the third antistrophe of the kommos. For the first time, Xerxes participates in the chorus' emotions and expresses longing for the young men:

ἴυγγά μοι δῆτ'  
 ἀγαθῶν ἐτάρων ἀνακινεῖς,  
 <ἄλαστ'> ἄλαστα στυγνὰ πρόκακα λέγων.  
 βοᾷ βοᾷ <μοι> μελέων ἔνδοθεν ἦτορ.

You stir up in me longing  
 For my noble comrades,  
 Telling of unforgettable – unforgettable – and loathsome evils beyond evils.  
 My heart cries out – cries out – from within my limbs.

(Aeschylus, *Persians* 987–91, transl. E. Hall)

The erotic connotations of the word ἴυγξ (*LSJ* s.v.) parallel those of the chorus' and the women's *pothos* for the army. By expressing the same longing as the chorus, Xerxes moves from the actantial position of opponent to that of co-subject in the *pothos* story. Logically enough, soon after Xerxes' expression of longing, the chorus mentions unnamed *dai-*

*mones* – in contrast to its previous accusations on Xerxes – as the cause for the disaster (1005–7). Xerxes' longing for the army reintegrates him in the Persian community and confirms the pivotal role of *pothos* in defining the relation between the characters on stage.<sup>16</sup>

The second half of the *kommos* (last four strophic pairs) unites king and chorus in a joined lament for the lost army (1002–78). The meter switches from lyric anapests to lyric iambics. The antiphonic division of strophes between the king and the chorus gives way to a sung exchange of individual lines. Xerxes and the chorus now share the same grief and mourn the same losses. The second person verbs angrily used by the chorus to incriminate Xerxes (ἔλιπες ἔλιπες, 985) are replaced by verbal forms in the first person plural that construct Xerxes and the chorus as a single entity (πεπλήγμεθ', 1008 and 1009; ἐσπώνισμεθ', 1024). Instead of referring to the deaths of the recent past, the *kommos* now self-referentially describes the lament process including the arm gestures (1046), weeping, high-pitched voices, breast beating, plucking of hair and beards (1056), and tearing of robes (1060). From a meta-poetic or musical viewpoint, the king and the chorus now sing the same song. Xerxes sings instructions or introduces lexical items that are in turn taken up by the chorus (1038–78). As commentators have stressed, the antiphony is reminiscent of the Trojan laments in *Iliad* 24 and probably reflects the structure of primitive *thrēnoi*.<sup>17</sup> The lyric dialogue has become a *thrēnos* for the dead that is led by Xerxes. Taken as a whole, the Xerxes scene constitutes both the climax and the resolution of the *pothos* story that structures the staged action. Like the *Odyssey*, *Persians* ends with the return and reintegration of a king responsible for the death of the 'flower' of the land.

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16 Xerxes' evolution from self-involvement to communal sorrow is noted by Rehm 2002, 249–50. According to Kuhns 1991, 1–34, the plot follows the stages of psychoanalytic development and dramatizes Xerxes' progression through the stages of mourning. Although I do not share Kuhns' focus on character development, I think that he is right to stress the narrative importance of the mourning theme.

17 Broadhead 1960 *ad* 1002 ff.; Alexiou (1974) 2002, 10–14; Hall 1996 *ad* 1002–78.

### 3. Persian Chorus and Athenian Audience

How can we move from an analysis of the play's narrative structure to a discussion of its pragmatics? In what follows, I rely on two methodological premises. First, since tragedy is a narrative genre – as opposed to argument or description – and therefore constructs a double temporal logic, external (in the experience of the work) and internal (the fictional duration of the sequence of events), I assume that its pragmatics depends primarily on its narrative progression.<sup>18</sup> Second, I take it that the effects of a play (or any text or performance for that matter) on its audience depend on its specificity vis-à-vis contemporary discourses. Intertextuality, in other words, contributes to define the horizon of expectations and therefore the response of the audience.<sup>19</sup> Since the narrative specificity of *Persians* in the 470s – as opposed to the inscriptions or Simonides' elegies – lies in the chorus-centered *pothos* story represented on stage, its specific effects are to be found there rather than in the war narratives. This is of course not to deny that individual references to Athenian freedom (241–42) or to the paean sung by the Greeks at Salamis (402–5) would have caused the audience to beam with pride. I only wish to stress that the overall effect of the play would have arisen from the progression of the staged action.

A specific evaluation of the play's pragmatics requires some sense of – or at least some hypotheses about – the emotional condition of the spectators as they came into the theater of Dionysos to watch Aeschylus' drama. Pride in the Athenian achievements is usually considered the dominant mood (Barron 1988, 616). Yet Athenian emotions may have been more complex than acknowledged in official discourses and celebratory inscriptions. As Christopher Pelling (1997, 12) has

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18 For the distinction between narrative, argument, and description, see Chatman 1990, 6–21. My emphasis on narrative progression departs significantly from the approach to *Persians* pioneered by Edith Hall 1989. Hall focused on the polar oppositions that organize the characterization of Greeks and Persians throughout the play. Yet as Harrison 2000, 58–91 has argued, the play does not construct these stereotypes. Rather, they come from popular assumptions that also surface in Herodotus' *Histories*. *Persians* is a product of its time and can be used (as Hall does) to document the history of Athenian ideologies, but that project must be distinguished from the attempt to capture the specific pragmatics of the play.

19 About the notion of 'horizon of expectations' as a basic tenet of reception theory, see Jaub 1982a, 22–32.

pointed out, Persia was not a dead issue even after 480. The very foundation of the Delian league in 478/7 B.C.E. assumed that the Greek states still needed to join forces to repel Persia. It may well be that Persian preparations for the Eurymedon campaign were already starting in the late 470s and that Athenians were getting wind of them. As Rachel McMullin (2001) has argued, the charge of medizing that caused the fall of the Spartan Pausanias and the ostracism of the Athenian Themistocles suggests that fear of the Persians still loomed large in the 470s. In addition, the sight of the damaged temples left in ruins on the Acropolis, perhaps in accordance with an oath taken at Plataea, is likely to have incited feelings of resentment and anger toward the agents of the destruction.<sup>20</sup> Subsequently, it is likely that the Athenians who sat down in the theater of Dionysos to witness the performance of Aeschylus' play brought with them the complex emotional baggage of pride in their victory, anger at the thought of the destructions and losses caused by the enemy, and fear of further woes.

Since the staged action of *Persians* is centered on the chorus, our appreciation of the performance pragmatics largely hangs on the question of whether the chorus was, in the terminology of Malcom Heath (1987, 90–98), a 'focus' for the sympathetic attention of the audience.<sup>21</sup> The question is tricky. Edith Hall (1989) has argued that the Persians mentioned and shown in the play are constructed as the polar opposite of the Greeks. The fictional identity of the chorus – stressed by such visible signs as old age (1056) and long ceremonial robes (1060) – surely separated them from the Athenian ideal of youthful activity. On the other hand, since at least A.W. Schlegel, dramatic choruses have often been considered as the 'idealized spectator' and a model for audience response.<sup>22</sup> The chorus replicates the audience's hermeneutic experience of interpreting the often contrasting viewpoints voiced by the actors.

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20 For a full discussion of the historicity of the Oath of Plataea found on a stele at Acharnai, see Siewert 1972.

21 About the central role of the chorus in *Persians*, see Michelini 1982, 27–40.

22 Schlegel (1809–1811) 1966. Schlegel's idea has been more recently taken up by Vernant – Vidal-Naquet 1986 who viewed the chorus as embodiment of the polis. For a critical discussion of the Vernant – Vidal-Naquet model, see Gould 2001, 378–404. For the suggestion that the chorus of *Persians* replicates the hermeneutic experience of the audience, see Grethlein 2007, 373. Grethlein emphasizes the contrast between the chorus' and the audience's perspectives on the war story. I argue in turn that the progression of the *pothos* story brings them surprisingly close.

In this sense, the genre of Athenian drama constructs a formal analogy between internal and external audiences. The relevance of this argument to *Persians* is not definite. *Persians* is our earliest play and may differ from later tragedies. Yet it is important to note that the chorus is a distinct performative entity whose identity and voice may not be as clear-cut as those of the actors.<sup>23</sup>

The structure and diction of *Persians* suggests that the performance constructed an increasing proximity between Persian Elders and Athenian audience. In the parodos, the emphasis on the chorus' ignorance of the army's situation detaches them from the actors of the war story and casts them as victims of a story which unfolds beyond their will and knowledge.<sup>24</sup> The staging of fearful and powerless Elders rather than ambitious soldiers would have placated the fear and anger that the Persian empire may still have instilled in Athens in 472 B.C.E. Unlike the war story told in the speeches, the *pothos* story represented on stage does not include the Greeks in its actantial model. Its subject is the chorus; the object is the army; the opponent is – depending on the viewpoint and moment – the *daimōn* or Xerxes. The *pothos* story leaves the Athenian audience free to respond to the staged action and to focalize on the chorus in a relatively disinterested way.

As the play unfolds, the chorus expresses its *pothos* – in both senses of longing and mourning – in panhellenic or distinctively Athenian language. As shown by Casey Dué (2006, 57–90), the flower metaphor repeatedly used to refer to the Persian youth (59, 252, 925–27) goes back to the Iliadic imagery of plant-like young men who blossom beautifully and die too quickly (*Il.* 18.54–60 [Achilles]; 17.49–60 [Euphorbus]). In addition, Mary Ebbott (2000) has demonstrated that the list of the Persians fallen at Salamis carries some formal resemblances with Athenian casualty lists. In both instances, names are catalogued according to place of origin, function in the army, place of death. The chorus' *pothos* is articulated in terms that align it with panhellenic or Athenian expressions of longing and loss.

23 See Calame 1999 for an analysis of the different voices of the chorus and Foley 2003 on the fluid identity of tragic choruses.

24 The ignorance of the chorus is a distinctive feature that differentiates *Persians* from the *Phoenician Women* of Aeschylus' predecessor Phrynichus. We know from the hypothesis to *Persians* that Phrynichus' play opened with a eunuch's report of Xerxes' defeat. In contrast, Aeschylus delays the announcement of the event and devotes almost a fifth of his play to the representation of Persian fear and ignorance.

The confrontation with Xerxes in the kommos takes the connection between chorus and audience one step further. As I have argued above, the chorus at this stage views Xerxes as the prime cause for the Persian defeat. In actantial terms, the chorus now identifies Xerxes as their main opponent. The opposition between Xerxes and the chorus in the *pothos* story parallels and mirrors the antagonism between Xerxes and his Greek opponents in the war story. Common opposition to (or scape-goating of) Xerxes structurally aligns the chorus with the Greeks of both the fiction and the audience.

The actantial ‘Hellenization’ of the chorus is confirmed by its political stance vis-à-vis Xerxes in the final scene. From a political viewpoint, the questioning to which the chorus submits Xerxes is reminiscent of the practice of frank speech (*parrhēsia*) that defines Athenian democracy.<sup>25</sup> Earlier utterances in the drama construct frank speech as a practice that does *not* belong in the Persian empire and accentuate the traditional contrast between the unaccountability of Persian kings and the accountability of Athenian magistrates (Hdt. 3.80). In the first episode, the queen emphasizes that Xerxes is not accountable to his subjects (οὐχ ὑπεύθυνος πόλει, 213). In the first stasimon, the chorus fearfully evokes the end of tribute payment, the end of proskynesis, and the re-establishment of free speech (ἐλεύθερα βάζειν, 593) as concrete and impending manifestations of Xerxes’ defeat (584–96). The limitation of free speech in Persia is forcefully enacted in the Darius scene. After singing the kletic hymn that constitutes the second stasimon, the Elders find themselves incapable to speak to Darius face to face ‘on account of [their] old fear of [him]’ (694–96). As a result, most of the conversation with Darius is performed by the Queen who informs him of the recent disaster and of the circumstances of Xerxes’ expedition (703–58). The chorus’ abrupt questioning of Xerxes in the final scene represents a strong departure from the Persian practices described and performed earlier in the play. The evolution reflects the changes brought upon by Xerxes’ failed expedition and discussed in Part II. It also brings the chorus closer to the Athenian values of accountability and frank speech.

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25 About the practice of free speech as one of the parameters of the Athenian self-definition of democracy, see Monoson 2000, 51–63. About the critical attitude of the chorus and its overtones of *parrhēsia*, see Broadhead 1960, xxiv–xxvi.

The chorus' confrontation with Xerxes structurally and ideologically assimilates them to the Athenian audience.<sup>26</sup>

The Hellenization of the chorus in the first three strophic pairs of the lyric dialogue culminates in the final dirge led by Xerxes. As the choreutai depart and tramp the ground of the orchestra, they complain that 'the Persian earth is hard to tread' (*Περσὶς αἴα δύσβατος*, 1070 and 1074). The collocation of an ethnic adjective, the word for land, and a deictic gesture is reminiscent of the chorus' self-definition as 'the faithful of the Persians who have gone to the land of Greece' (*τάδε μὲν Περσῶν τῶν οἰχομένων/Ἑλλάδ' ἐς αἴαν*, 1–2) at the opening of the parodos. At the same time, the difference between the two passages captures the changing relation between chorus and audience across the performance. In the parodos, the Elders define themselves in relation to other characters. As foreigners and fictional characters, they are at a double remove from the audience. In the kommos, the Elders mention the Persian land while simultaneously pointing at the ground of the theater of Dionysos. Through the extra-diegetic deixis, the dramatic illusion breaks down. The dramatic space set in Susa merges with the scenic space of the theater – itself grounded in the reflexive space of Athenian landscape (Rehm 2002, 20–25 and 250). Subsequently, the action performed on stage takes on an extra-diegetic dimension. The Persian dirge spills over from the stage into the Athenian polis.

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26 My interpretation here goes against the idea that the kommos is formally marked as an un-Athenian, effeminizing song that constitutes the climax in the play's Orientalizing strategy (Hall 1996 *ad* 908–1078). Hall's argument rests on the idea that Athenian mourning practices had been effectively restricted by Solon's legislation and that laments were normally sung by women in fifth century Athens. Yet as Margaret Alexiou (1974) 2002, 22 points out, it is unclear that Solon's legislation was fully enforced. Plato's prescriptions in the *Laws* (Pl. *Lg.* 800e and 959e) and the sumptuary laws passed by Demetrius of Phaleron in the late fourth century, suggest the persistence of many forbidden practices. Second, the approach to tragic lament as a female-gendered activity that marked the past two or three decades of research on the topic is now being reconsidered. As Ann Suter 2008 has recently argued, male laments are not unusual in tragedy. Creon laments the death of his son in *Antigone* (1261–1346). Theseus mourns the death of Phaedra in *Hippolytus* (811–73). In Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, the kommos for the dead Agamemnon is sung by Orestes, Electra, and the chorus. The kommos that ends *Persians* does not fundamentally differ from other expressions of male grief in tragedy. It is an extreme, but not necessarily an alienating expression of loss.

The Hellenization of the chorus carries important implications for the pragmatics of the play. In particular, it raises the possibility of an audience response involving pity for the Persian chorus. Recent scholarship has emphasized the cultural specificity of emotions and highlighted the difference between Greek pity and our contemporary notions of sympathy (Konstan 2006a, 201–18). In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines pity in the following terms:

ἔστω δὴ ἔλεος λύπη τις ἐπὶ φαινομένῳ κακῷ φθαρτικῷ ἢ λυπηρῷ τοῦ ἀναξίου τυγχάνειν, ὃ κὰν αὐτὸς προσδοκῆσειεν ἂν παθεῖν ἢ τῶν αὐτοῦ τινα, καὶ τοῦτο ὅταν πλησίον φαίνεται.

Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon.

(Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1385b13–16, transl. W. Rhys Robert)

In terms of the Aristotelian definition, pity includes a moral judgment of whether the other's suffering is deserved or not. In addition, it requires a double condition of proximity and distance between pitier and pitied. The pitier must be close enough to the pitied to fear experiencing the same troubles but also distant enough to not be engulfed in the pitied's pain. The relation between Persian chorus and Athenian audience in the *kommos* meets these criteria. The Elders suffer undeservedly since they are not responsible for the invasion of Greece. Since they share the Athenian anger at Xerxes and enact the Athenian practice of *parrhēsia*, their behavior makes them enough alike that the audience may remember or think of their own losses, past or future, and feel pain in response to the chorus' grief. At the same time, the ethnicity of the Persian chorus keeps it distant enough that – unlike the spectators of Phrynichus' *Capture of Miletus* (Hdt. 6.21) – the audience does not burst into tears. The chorus' characterization in the *kommos* offers the exact combination of undeserved pain, proximity, and distance that are the conditions for Aristotelian pity.<sup>27</sup>

The emotional dynamics of the *kommos* may even take the implied Athenian audience one step further. If the spectators are encouraged to

27 It is debated whether the Aristotelian emphasis on unmerited suffering was or not shared by popular conceptions. Halliwell 1986, 174 stresses that it cannot have been a universal presupposition of Greek pity; Konstan 2006a argues that the criterium was widely shared. For an attempt to check the Aristotelian definition against 'folk psychology,' see Sternberg 2005.

pity the chorus (Part III) while the chorus reintegrates Xerxes in its midst (Part II), it follows that the chorus' mediation in the second part of the kommos encourages the audience to relate to Xerxes. The emotion aroused by Xerxes' grief would have differed from that aroused by the chorus. It does not qualify as pity in the Aristotelian sense since the kommos clearly emphasizes Xerxes' responsibility for his troubles. Yet while Aristotelian pity involves a moral judgment on the pitied, Aristotle mentions in the *Poetics* the possibility that the sight of deserved pain arouses an emotion that he calls *to philanthrōpon* (Arist. *Po.* 1453a2–6). Although its exact significance is debated, *to philanthrōpon* seems to denote a sentiment analogous to sympathy or human concern and would precisely apply to Xerxes' situation vis-à-vis the Athenian audience.<sup>28</sup> In my interpretation, then, the kommos of *Persians* would have performed remarkable emotional work upon its Athenian audience. Through the chorus' mediation, spectators would have been invited to first relive their anger at Xerxes, then transcend their anger and feel compassion for the enemy king. This trajectory parallels the Iliadic movement that brings Achilles from anger (μῆνιν, *Iliad* 1.1) to an emotion that Homer calls pity (ἔλεος) but which, unlike Aristotelian pity, does not involve a moral judgment and comes closer to the modern notion of compassion.<sup>29</sup> In book 24, the double anger caused in Achilles by Briseis' loss and later Patroklos' death gives way to compassion. Priam's appeal to pity (ἐλέησον, *Il.* 24.503) stirs in Achilles a grief that aligns him with the old king. Priam and Achilles weep together, one for Hector, the other for Peleus and Patroclus (*Il.* 24.507–12). Similarly, *Persians* performed the tour de force of inviting a Greek audience to feel compassion for a Persian king. The dynamics of the *pothos* story and the fluid identity of the chorus offered the Athenian audience the occasion to live an Iliadic experience.

Recent studies of the narrative semiotics of Greek tragedy have focused on its treatment of time (Goward 1999; Markantonatos 2002). I would like to suggest that two additional parameters – the contrast between staged and reported events and the narrative position and voice of the

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28 About the much debated significance of the Aristotelian concept of *philanthrōpon*, see Halliwell 1986, 219 n. 25 and Konstan 2006a, 215–18, with bibliography.

29 About the relation between anger and pity in the *Iliad*, see especially Most 2003.

chorus – define Athenian drama as a storytelling medium. Applied to *Persians*, these parameters allow us to better appreciate the position and function of Aeschylus' drama in the commemorative atmosphere of the 470s. *Persians* responds to other discourses by framing the war story told in embedded speeches in a *pothos* story enacted on stage. The *pothos* story builds up an increasing tension between the chorus and Xerxes that is released and resolved in the kommos. While the Darius scene and its model of *hybris* and retribution may be called the hermeneutic climax of the play, the emotions of the characters culminate in the Xerxes scene.

At the pragmatic level, the relegation of the war story to embedded speeches and the fluid identity of the chorus allow the play to engage the audience in a complex manner. We know from Herodotus that staging a historical tragedy in Athens could be a tricky business. In the 490s, Phrynichus' dramatic rendition of the capture of Miletus had caused the audience to burst into tears. Phrynichus had subsequently been fined for 'reminding the audience of their personal woes' (ἀναμνήσαντα οἰκῆια κακά, Hdt. 6.21). The structure of Aeschylus' *Persians* – and perhaps that of Phrynichus' own *Phoenician Women* – suggests that the point was well taken. By relegating the war story to embedded speeches, *Persians* stages an action that only indirectly engages the memories of its audience. The entrance of Xerxes, the only character involved in the war story and therefore the most challenging to the Athenians, is carefully and gradually prepared. The increasingly Athenian overtones in the chorus' voice allow the audience to project their emotions onto the Elders and to engage the Xerxes scene through the mediation of the chorus. When the war story and the *pothos* story finally intersect on stage in the last scene, the chorus' evolution from anger to shared grief offers a model for the evolution of the external audience. The combination of two storylines allows *Persians* to deeply engage and rework the emotions of its audience. This surely deserved first prize in the dramatic competition of 472 B.C.E.