

The importance of the chorus in aeschylus' presentation of the persian invasion



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The chorus was an integral feature of traditional Greek tragedy, which explains the high degree of importance placed on the chorus by Aeschylus in 'The Persians', used to reinforce the tragic elements of the plot, whilst also helping to create a sense of pity for Persian characters perhaps demonized by Greeks. Indeed, whilst Aeschylus certainly uses the chorus to draw out the differences between the social and military attitudes of the Greeks and the Persians, the speeches of the messenger figure are arguably more important to deepening this cultural divide which would have been felt acutely by Athenian audience members, many having experienced the on-stage battles only a few years prior to the production of the play at the Dionysius Festival.

Aeschylus' chorus plays a significant role in earning 'The Persians' status as a tragedy through aligning with many of the features commonly associated with traditional Greek tragic plays, therefore making it ore dramatic. Indeed, the very existence of the chorus within Aeschylus' play and that they enjoy a significant amount of speech within each section of the play aligns it with many tragedies of the era- such as Agamemnon and Electra- in which the chorus acted as an integral part of the fabric of the plot. The significance of the chorus as honing into traditional elements of tragedy is further displayed as they are used by the playwright as tool for conveying the dangers of the hubris/nemesis cycle, a common theme of tragedy which works to reveal how human folly and opposition towards the gods will eventually create negative circumstances against the individual: for example, the chorus repeatedly refers to their rulers as divine figures- initially commenting of Xerxes' status as a 'god' within the opening song, and then later labelling

Atossa 'mother of a god' as she enters the stage, which might be seen as hubristic actions which perhaps explain the apparent hatred of the gods for Persian characters, and this finds further expression as the chorus compels the queen to summon the ghost of Darius through occult practices, warning the Greek audience of the dangers of performing such anti-pious behavior as leading to such tragedy experienced by the Persians at the battle of Salamis: in this way, this scene developing both the tragic focus on the hubris nemesis cycle, and additionally into tragedy's doctoral purpose as aimed to teach the audience a lesson that can be applied to their daily lives, a message particularly key to a contemporary audience of Athenian citizens who, being heavily religious, would have certainly applied such messages into their everyday lives. Furthermore, the role of the chorus is able to reinforce the traditional structure of a tragedy: the chorus begin the play in an opening stasimon through describing the scene as grandiose and adorned with 'gold', and close the tragedy with an extended grieving sequence, mourning lost soldiers, thus marking out the key rise and fall of the tragedy into the denouement, and traditional Persian instruments paired with elaborate costume choices might have here exaggerated the extreme catharsis desired during these closing scenes; perhaps the chorus might have been doused in gold armor in order to remind the audience of the horrors of warfare, thus exaggerating an audience's cathartic response through reminding them of previous sorrow, and therefore by extension, reinforcing the tragic structure of the play as ending with a denouement in which the characters all experience extreme loss in both their personal and political life- whilst also reinforcing Xerxes' role as tragic hero due to the repetition of the chorus of his sounds of weeping. Therefore, the chorus is <https://assignbuster.com/the-importance-of-the-chorus-in-aeschylus-presentation-of-the-persian-invasion/>

proven deeply influential in developing the classical tragic structure of the play, through both the timing of their speech within the play, paired with their reaction to the actions of other characters.

Aeschylus, through characterization of the chorus is able to mark out significant differences in the military and cultural values of the Greeks and the Persians, and yet it is through the speech of the messenger that is most valuable in describing these differences. These contrasts are rapidly set up through the opening scenes in which the chorus provides a catalogue of references to Persian individuals, immediately presenting the Persian force as dis-unified and deeply disorganized, thus juxtaposing later presentations of the Greeks as working together as 'shapes of gloom'- used to characterize them as a unified and indistinct mass able to exert terror onto the Persian people. Nonetheless, it is the messenger's descriptions of the Greek and Persian forces within battle which most importantly develops the contrasting values of the two sides, for example the Greeks are described as moving as 'a single pulse' in contrast to the Persians whose ships move 'in swift disorder' unable to exert force over their enemy, and that the Greeks are singing 'battle hymns' further marks out the differences between the two sides as where the Greeks are unified both in the military and artistic sense, the Persians are not able to even organize their ranks for battle. Indeed, Hall claims that the Athenian male audience- many having fought in the battle of Salamis only 8 years prior- would have acutely recognized these differences as marking the Persians as 'other', thus exaggerating the triumph of their victory in the messenger's speech. Nonetheless, whilst the messenger successfully draws out military differences between the two

sides, the chorus is arguably more influential in creating a sense of cultural contrast between the Greeks and Persians: the Greeks are described as valuing a sense of unparalleled freedom as the chorus retorts Atossa's remarks through labelling them 'not servant to any man' whilst then suggesting that they 'once struck Persian arms a fearful blow', which contrasts dramatically with the oligarchical Persian system explored through the negative characterization of Xerxes as surveying his ships with 'one dread eye', a metaphor coloring the dictator's rule as authoritative and undeniable, in contrast with the Greek focus on the collective needs as opposed to those of the individual. The Athenian audience was seated in political factions known as demes and therefore the chorus' speech would have been vital in mirroring their own political viewpoints. Nonetheless, such political differences are similarly drawn out through the messenger's speech conveying Xerxes threat to 'cut off the head' of every Persian captain who allowed Greek ships to shield from destruction, suggesting that the Persians must place faith in the words of a single man, unlike the Greeks who unanimously cry 'move forward sons of Hellas' whilst entering into battle, suggesting that it is the concept of 'Hellas' or a shared Greek identity fought for rather than the desires of one individual. Therefore, whilst the speech of the messenger concerning the Battle of Salamis is clearly more important in drawing out marked contrasts between the political and military cultures of the Greeks and Persians, the chorus' characterization of both sides allows for these stereotypes to prevail throughout the play, so, their role is equally important in differentiating Greek and Persian forces from one another.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that Aeschylus' chorus is equally important in creating a certain amount of sympathy for Persian characters, encouraging audiences to experience traditional tragic emotions of pity and fear. The grief of the chorus becomes a motif throughout the plot, from their mourning for Persian loss of lives at Greek hands in the opening lines, to their decision to share Atossa's grief for her son- to copying Xerxes' devastation at the sorry state of his citizens in the play's denouement, and this increasingly climatic presentation of grief works to elicit feelings of sympathy within an audience for the deceased Persians lost at Salamis, and one can understand the purpose of a melancholic soundtrack of flutes and lyres used here to perhaps mirror the sounds of the weeping chorus, and encourage audience members to similarly pity the plight of Xerxes having lost his men. Furthermore, the Persians are characterized throughout the tragedy as gentle and effeminate beings in lines such as ' a swarm of soft skinned Lydians', and ' the flower of Asian youth', the latter metaphor working to characterize the Persian army as delicate and fragile: whilst some critics have deemed this an attempt at Aeschylus to mock the inexperienced ranks of Xerxes' army, a more compelling idea is that it further deepens tones of empathy within the audience through hinting at the underserved loss of human life; a beautiful and treasured thing. When this moment is immediately juxtaposed with the ' fear' and terror wrought by the approaching Greek forces, further sympathy is created for the Persians who have been humanized as deserving of respect by the chorus. Indeed, the ' soft' and delicate status of Persian characters is one which links soldiers and ordinary citizens within the speech of the chorus, as mothers with ' soft white hands... tear their veils in two' whilst sons with ' folded cloaks' perish

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in seawater: whilst the focus here on outward appearance might be read as a mocking jest at the Persian obsession with luxurious items, the shared effeminate status of characters both live and dead further deepens the viewer's tragic emotion of pity in suggestions that those mourning have lost people with shared values and characteristics of themselves. It is female grief that is honed into by the chorus in the middle episode, as they mediate upon the women grieving for their deceased sons- ruined by warfare- and this works to heighten the sympathetic nature of the production in an Athenian culture whose women so nearly met a similar fate through the incineration of Athens by Persian forces prior to the battle of Salamis. Thus, albeit it be in the beginning or end of the play, the chorus is undeniably important in coloring the Persians in sympathetic tones, encouraging an audience to pity the plight of the Persian army.

To conclude, it is clear that the chorus in Aeschylus' 'The Persians' is an important element to both the tragic structure of the play, and to developing characterization of both Greek and Persian characters. Whilst the chorus works to heighten the contrasts between the values of Greek and Persian characters, this serves not as a critique of the Persians as suggested by Hall, but as a method to allow a contemporary audience space to sympathize and empathize with the fallen Persian army.