

The suitability of style to subject matter in 'the persians' and 'the histories'



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Both historian Herodotus and playwright Aeschylus adopt the central subject matter of the Persian Wars- a series of conflicts fought between Greek and Persian forces, which roughly began in 499 BC, and ended in 480 BC in Greek victory at the battle of Salamis. Whilst Aeschylus ' The Persians' due to its status as a tragedy can be seen hyperbolise and dramatise events unsuitably, Herodotus' ' The Histories' exploits similar themes due to the descriptive prosaic style in which it is written. Nonetheless, it is the historical stance of Herodotus that allows for an objective and analytical take on the subject matter of The Persian Wars- one far more suitable than the intensely dramatic scenes of ' The Persians'.

Aeschylus' tragic structure arguably places excessive focus on the theme of hubris in exploring motives for ' Salamis'; as does the grossly descriptive style of Herodotus text- suggesting that the styles of both texts are inappropriate in accurately conveying the subject matter of causes behind wars. Traditional tragedies were largely aimed at warning audience's of the cycle of human folly and divine retribution; and this can be seen to conflict with Aeschylus' aim to accurately document the Persian Wars: This is demonstrated through Xerxes' presentation of Xerxes' hubris as he corrupts a divinely-created natural world through bridging the Hellespont with a chain of ships; and that this story is retold through the speech of the Chorus, Atossa, and Darius suggests that Aeschylus' play is inappropriate for telling a factual account of the war as he focuses excessively on the theme of hubris. Whilst it could be argued that the fact the word ' hubris' is merely repeated twice throughout the play holds alternative suggestions that Aeschylus' play is suitable for focusing on the genuine causes of the battle, a more

compelling idea is that this simply ' allows for the audience's understanding of the theme to develop'- claims Garvie; rallying them perhaps inappropriately in opposition to Xerxes and his fleet.

Whilst Herodotus' ' The Histories' is not a tragedy so does not encounter issues of whether to prioritise factual truth of a moral message of hubris, the intensely descriptive style of Herodotus' writing allows for the writing to remain equally unsuitable for conveying a factual account of the wars: Darius is characterised as bridging Bosphorus before Xerxes digs an extravagant canal at Mt Athos, before similarly bridging the Hellespont. Indeed, the detail in which such a scene is composed- in a hyperbolic style- places absolute focus on the severity of Xerxes actions as he lashes the river ' 300 times' and commands atrocities to be chanted at it. Clearly, there is no method in which such actions could have been verified as factually true by Herodotus; and therefore the style of extended narrative is inappropriate in conveying the sparse details of the scene of which the author might have known as fact. Tragedy is renowned for its focus on extravagant spectacle, and in this way the tragic style of ' The Persians' is responsible for depictions of Atossa's necromantic ritual in which Darius rises from his gravel a scene used to horrify an Athenian audience due to the polytheistic society they resided in. Such tragic style is inappropriate therefore for accurately conveying a scene which would have little historical relevance; as further demonstrated by extravagant props such as ' saffron shoes' and ' trousers' which Herodotus deems the Persians to wear, making the form of tragedy all the more unsuitable for conveying fact. Herodotus similarly blames the pitfalls of characters on their hubristic acts: Miltiades' injured thigh which leads to his

death is blamed on the desecration of a religious temple, and Cleomenes' decision to cut himself into pieces whilst imprisoned is explained in terms of his offence caused to gods: whilst it is arguably not the historic style of the narrative which causes such bias, such moments have led critics to label Herodotus' work a piece of 'prose epic' for such moments, in which he divulges into character's histories not to add to the history of the wars but to thrill and excite an audience; a method unsuitable due to the central subject matter of the Persian Wars.

Yet, the tragic nature of Aeschylus speech is inappropriate for conveying the subject matter of actual battle as it exaggerates the emotional appeal in order to add to the dramatic effect, in contrast to the more objective approach of Herodotus' style as a 'history' which is more appropriate. The climax of Aeschylus tragedy has been thought of as the messenger's speech in which the Battle of Salamis is described; and is Aeschylus intended this as the climax, it explains the unsuitably hyperbolic descriptions of battle within it: such is demonstrated as the Persians are presented as unable to control their triremes as they move in 'swift disorder' in contrast to the Athenians who move as 'a single pulse'; and the sharp juxtaposition is unsuitable for conveying the nuances of the battle. Whilst it could be argued that such moments- despite their dramatic contrast- are factually true, as Edith Hall points out, Aeschylus' own brother died at Marathon and therefore he would have likely exaggerated the folly and disorder of the Persian army out of spite. Indeed, the style of purple prose further hones into the Persian disorder, as they are characterised through metaphors such as 'netted tunnies' and 'a swarm of bees'- particularly inappropriate through marking

out the Persians as less than human; and yet correlating with audience perceptions of the Persians as a primarily barbaric force.

Herodotus similarly describes the opposing force in the style of extensive description; and yet such descriptions allow for far more nuance; perhaps due to the form of prose which is far less fragmentary than the dramatic style of 'The Persians'. The unity of the Greeks is similarly proven to juxtapose the disunity of the Persians, who during Salamis, are unable to communicate successfully to ships behind them of the unfolding action in battle; creating disunity among the fleet. In contrast, the Greeks demonstrate unity as they masterfully coax the Persians into the straits whilst chanting 'battle-hymns' to suggest both cultural and political unity. Whilst the dramatic style of these descriptions might render Herodotus' narrative inappropriate for conveying the facts of the scene, the historical and analytic approach adopted by Herodotus allows for him to bolster his claims with a catalogue of proofs: he holds a turbulent southern wind and lack of sleep due to extensive planning the night before accountable for the fragility and listlessness of the Persians during battle; suggesting that the analytic style is indeed appropriate for conveying the actions of the Persians. Furthermore, Aeschylus' decision to position the messenger's speech as central to the plot dramatises the emotional impact of it through allowing it to appear as if all other tragic moments of the play stem from this single catastrophe: the role of the messenger is to create traditional tragic emotions of pity and fear within an audience, demonstrated as he suggests that the Persians faces 'blench with fear', suggesting that Aeschylus' narrative is inappropriate due to its desire to correlate with tragic structure. In contrast, the extended narrative style of

Herodotus' text allows for it to encompass a far wider scope: Herodotus not only focuses on the Persian defeats, but additionally their victories at the sea-battle of Lade, and land battle at Thermopylae- conveying a far more accurate representation of the Persian army through adding both failures and successes to their national character.

Both writers constantly employ the style of dialogues to characterise central figures, and yet this allows their texts to become inappropriate as a significant degree of personal bias is thus injected into their accounts of the Persian Wars. This is demonstrated in Herodotus' presentation of debates between significant Persians characters- from the pre-Salamis debate in which Xerxes rejects Artemisia's sound advice, to the debate which begins book 7- in which a conversation is held between Artabanus, Xerxes and Mardonius as to whether Xerxes should invade Greece. Herodotus uses this speech to characterise Persians as foolish as prone to bribery and tricks- as Mardonius lies about Greek land deeming it fertile and fruitful; whilst also condemns Greeks as poor fighters: indeed, this paired with Herodotus' presentation of Xerxes as acquiescing to such 'love of mischief and adventure' reveals a degree of Greek bias as his desires to reveals faults in the corruption of Persian leadership and court underpin his central subject matter of the Persian Wars. Indeed, such is furthered as Herodotus fabricates Xerxes' speech as claiming he would have inflicted violence upon Artabanus for his logical reasoning anti-Mardonius if it were not for his status as his uncle.

In 'The Persians', Xerxes employs a similar narrative style of speeches between Persians in order to highlight the pitfalls of Persian monarchies; <https://assignbuster.com/the-suitability-of-style-to-subject-matter-in-the-persians-and-the-histories/>

thus deeming his text equally inappropriate for conveying the Persian army in accurate terms. Darius repeatedly condemns Xerxes through lexis ' foolish' ' Poor Fool' and ' folly' before asking is a ' God had robbed him of his wits' for his hubris; and this coupled with Darius' extended catalogue of references to the victories of prior kings bolsters his attack against the Persian system of government; through reminding an Athenian audience (who would have been seated in political factors of demes) of their dislike of the Persian system; and such is further demonstrated through the extended grieving sequences between Xerxes and the Chorus which closes ' The Persians'. Here, Aeschylus' tragic style reaches fruition as a feature of traditional tragedies- The Chorus- supports Xerxes' critique of himself as a ' pitiful outcast'; reflecting the rational views of the audience and coaxing them into further resenting Xerxes. Furthermore, the dialogue between Sperthias and Butis in ' The Histories' additionally focuses on the dangers of monarchy, as the pair of Spartans refuse to ' prostrate themselves... before a King'. Whilst it could be argued that the fact this dialogue has little influence in the plot suggests that it is symbolically suitable as marking out the differences between Greek and Persian governments, a more compelling idea is that it is equally unsuitable for allowing rational insight into the Persian government as we cannot historically verify such an event.

In their respective works, both Herodotus and Aeschylus use styles inappropriate for conveying an accurate depiction of the Persian Wars in ' The Histories' and ' The Persians'; as they give in to their biases as Greeks through styles of dialogue, tragedy and extended prose. Nonetheless, whilst Aeschylus seems to relish in this through his repeated use of spectacle and

purple prose, Herodotus' attempts to remain somewhat neutral through considering multiple perspectives of a debate deem his historical style more appropriate than Aeschylus' tragic style in accurately conveying the central subject matter of the Persian Wars.