

ON TEACHING AESCHYLUS' *PERSIANS*¹

K.O. Chong-Gossard

One of the more interesting recent developments in VCE Classical Societies and Cultures has been the decision to add Aeschylus' *Persians* (also called the *Persae*, in the Vellacott translation from 1961) to the list of prescribed texts for 2007.² The tragedy chosen for the previous two years was Sophocles' *Ajax*, and before then it was Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (which still remains a prescribed text for VCE English). Sophocles is a hard act to follow, but not impossible. This article is intended as a refresher for secondary school teachers who are not familiar with Aeschylus' *Persians*, or who need some advice on highlighting themes in the play that have potential resonance for modern Australian teenagers.

1. History and the Play

The *Persians* is a play about history, as well as a play that has a history of its own. It is the only surviving Greek tragedy whose plot is about an historical event rather than a mythical legend; it is also a play that was composed at a particular time, and in a specific cultural climate. When Aeschylus' play was first performed at the annual Dionysia festival at Athens in 472 BCE, only eight years had passed since the naval battle which the play narrates. Furthermore, only eighteen years (a mere generation) had passed since the battle of Marathon, that legendary battle in which Aeschylus himself was proud to have fought, when the Athenians (without the aid of the Spartans, who arrived too late) forced the invading Persian armies out of mainland Greece. Giving students a quick overview of the history of the play is an opportunity to share a brief history of Athenian politics in the early fifth century.

A good starting point for this history is the year 499 BCE, when the Greeks living in Ionia (modern western Turkey) were getting tired of being ruled by the Persians for the past fifty years. The Persians (and their king Darius) ruled a vast empire that included Asia Minor (i.e., modern Turkey), Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and many of the Greek islands (including Cyprus, Rhodes, Lesbos, Lemnos, Chios, and Naxos). The citizens of the Ionian Greek city of Miletos led a revolt against their Persian overlords and asked the Athenians for help. The Athenians were a unique choice as allies; back in 510 BCE, they had kicked out their tyrant Hippias and established a democracy. Furthermore, the Athenians had a bone to pick with the Persians, who a few years later had supported the exiled Hippias in his attempt to re-establish himself at Athens as a Persian vassal (a plot which failed utterly). So (as the historian Herodotus tells us at *Histories* 5.97), the Athenians sent an armada of twenty warships in 499 BCE to help the Milesians sack the city of Sardis, which was the Persian capital in the region of Lydia. The

1 This paper is based on a talk I gave on Aeschylus' *Persians* to secondary school teachers at an 'In-Service Day' held at Melbourne Girls Grammar on 2 March, 2007, sponsored by the Teachers Wing of the Classical Association of Victoria. My thanks to organiser John Tuckfield for inviting me to give the talk.

2 The announcement was made in a memorandum to schools dated 11 October 2006, and the list of prescribed texts was published in the November 2006 *VCAA Bulletin VCE, VCAL and VET* No. 43. There was clearly a war theme in mind, given that other texts were *Iliad* 1, Aristophanes *Lysistrata*, Vergil *Aeneid* Book 12, as well as the usual portions from Thucydides.

Persian king Darius was alarmed, and is said to have asked the infamous question, 'Who are the Athenians?' (Herodotus 5.105). Darius swore to get revenge.

And revenge he got. In 494 BCE, the Ionian revolt was crushed, and Miletos was sacked. The Athenians took notice, and in the very next year (493) the poet Phrynicus (a rival of Aeschylus) produced a play called *Miletou Persis* (*The Sack of Miletus*), which is said to have moved so many of the audience to tears that the Athenians banned its performance in the future (Herodotus 6.21). In 490 BCE Darius finally invaded mainland Greece, bringing destruction wherever he went; but at the battle of Marathon, the Athenians and Plataeans drove back the Persian invaders, killing 6,400 Persians and losing only 109 Athenians (or so says Herodotus 6.117). This they accomplished without the help of the Spartans, who arrived too late because they superstitiously did not want to march until after the full moon (Herodotus 6.120).

Ten years later, in 480 BCE, Darius' son Xerxes undertook his invasion of Greece to avenge his father's defeat. Herodotus' account of Xerxes is simply delicious, including his insane whipping and branding of the Hellespont, that strait of water that connects Asia to Europe, because his first attempt to build a bridge across the strait was destroyed by a storm. His second attempt succeeded when he tied his boats together to form a land bridge (Herodotus 7.34-35; Aeschylus mentions the same tale at *Persians* 130-31 and 744-50). Herodotus' narrative on the battle of Thermopylae (*Histories* 7.224 ff.), in which the three hundred Spartans under Leonidas (along with four hundred Thebans he was keeping as hostages) were killed in battle against the entire Persian army, is the inspiration for Frank Miller's graphic novel, itself the basis of the Warner Brothers film *300* (released in Australia in April 2007). The account of Xerxes' sack of Athens (*Histories* 8.51-55) is equally moving, as it vividly describes the hopeless efforts of those determined to defend the Acropolis. But Herodotus' crowning glory is surely his account of the battle of Salamis, in which the Persian navy was totally trounced, owing to the deceit of Themistocles, that democratic leader who had taken the initiative in building up Athens' navy. Themistocles is the man mentioned elliptically at *Persians* 355ff.

Xerxes began leading his forces back to Asia after the battle of Salamis, and his land army was summarily defeated in 479 at the battle of Plataea. In the next year (478 BCE), Athens established the Delian League, an alliance of about two hundred city-states pooling their resources against another Persian invasion. The treasury for this League was kept on the island of Delos (until 454 BCE, when the Athenians saw fit to move it to Athens), and all members pledged (and were later compelled) to donate either money or ships each year to the alliance. This was in contrast to a so-called 'Peloponnesian League,' which was a loose alliance of cities in southern mainland Greece (the 'Peloponnesus') headed by Sparta—an alliance which had existed for several decades before the Persian Wars, and which over time became opposed to the Delian League headed by Athens.

Why did Aeschylus wait until 472 BCE to write a play about the battle of Salamis? It is worth knowing that he was not the first to do so. In 476 BCE, only four years after the battle, Phrynicus (the same man who had been fined for his *Sack of Miletus* seventeen years earlier) produced a play called *Phoenician Women*. Its plot was also the battle of Salamis—although it remains anyone's guess as to what Phoenician women were actually doing there. Moreover (according to Plutarch's *Life of Themistocles* 5), the *chorêgos* for Phrynicus' play (i.e., the rich man who paid for the training of the choruses for the festival) was none other than Themistocles, the very man whose deception made the victory at Salamis possible!

What about Aeschylus' play? According to the *hypothesis* that survives in the medieval manuscripts of the play, Aeschylus produced his *Persians* under the archonship of Menon (472 BCE) along with two other tragedies on mythical themes (*Phineus* and *Glaucois Pot-neius*) and a satyr play, *Prometheus*. These mythical dramas, however, have not survived (the satyr play *Prometheus* is not the same as the surviving *Prometheus Bound*). The *hypothesis* tells us that Aeschylus quoted the beginning of Phrynichus' version; but whereas Phrynichus used a eunuch to announce the defeat of Xerxes at the start of his play, Aeschylus did something different: he used a chorus of elders to sing the prologue, so that the announcement of Xerxes' defeat is postponed. According to a Greek inscription (*IG*, II², 2318, 9, under 'Menon'), the *chorégos* for Aeschylus' *Persians* was Pericles, that amazing general who in future decades would dominate Athenian politics.

Why was the battle of Salamis still such a hot topic eight years after the event and considered worthy for dramatisation? There are two common 'political readings' for why the *Persians* was produced in 472 BCE. The first is that the play was intended to recall the role of Themistocles in the victory at Salamis. In 471 or 470 BCE, Themistocles was ostracised (i.e., chosen by the people to go into exile for ten years) and his political career ended. Given that Pericles was one of Themistocles' political supporters (both believed strongly in democracy, in contrast to the pro-Spartan and pro-oligarchical politician Cimon), and given that Pericles was the *chorégos* for Aeschylus' *Persians*, it is possible that the play was trying to make a political statement, ranging from polite barracking for Themistocles to outright propaganda.³

Another political interpretation of the play bears in mind that the Delian League, headed by Athens, had been in existence for only six years in 472 BCE. Since the *Persians* praises the role of Athens in the defeat of Persia, does it argue that the existence of the Delian League was justified? Was it propaganda in that sense? We know that the Delian League was initially successful; indeed, a few years after Aeschylus' *Persians*, around 466 BCE, the Athenians fought the Persians in the battle of Eurymedon (a river in Asia Minor) to curb Persia's control over the Phoenicians. This Persian defeat is often hailed by historians as the definitive end of the Persian threat to Greece, allowing Athens' control over the Delian League to transform into the Athenian Empire.

2. The Plot of the *Persians* (What happens?)

Aeschylus' play opens with a sombre song and dance performed by a chorus of Persian elders. It is worth reminding students that a 'chorus' is the defining feature of a Greek drama. It consists of twelve people in an Aeschylean play (or fifteen in Sophocles' and Euripides' time) who are all the same in terms of identity and social status, who are present on-stage for the majority of the action, and are therefore always in the background, witnessing all the events that affect the other actors in the drama. This omnipresence lends them an 'unrealistic' quality; after all, how often are you surrounded by twelve identical friends who watch everything you do and give you constant advice? Not often, I hope. Nonetheless, in Aeschylean

³ See especially Podlecki 1966. Scholars of an earlier age (such as Wilhelm Schmid and Otto Stählin, 1934, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur I*, 2, 174, n.5) suggested that the *Persians* actually depreciates Themistocles' achievement at Salamis, given that he is not mentioned by name, and the account of his 'deception' is so brief. Goldhill 1988 considers the political relevance of the chorus' explanations about Athenian governance (*Persians* 230-247).

drama, it is usually the chorus who is the main character (as in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*), or has the most lines (as in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*), or is a major character to be reckoned with (as in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*).

The setting of the play is vaguely in Persia, perhaps one of the capital cities, Susa or Ecbatana (indeed, both cities are mentioned at line 535 as cities which Zeus has shrouded in mourning). The elders inform us that the royal palace is nearby, as is the tomb of Darius, their previous king. The elders await news of their current king, Darius' son Xerxes, who has led an enormous army and navy against the Greeks. Xerxes' campaign has not gone well. The opening imagery of the play is that of Persia being unmanned; all that remains are old guys and women who are either worried about their sons or weeping for their marriage beds. There is much naming of lost Persian individuals from as early as line 21: Amistres, Artaphernes, Megabazes, and Astaspes. From line 30 onwards, we are bombarded with Artembares, Masis-tres, Imaeus, Pharandaces, Sosthanes, Susiscanes, Pegastagon, Arasmes, and Ariomardus. The sounds of these names are a mixture of the familiar and the strange; they are the names of Persian warriors, yet they are spelled in a Greek fashion to make them grammatically correct to the Greek ear. As the play continues, the Persians present themselves as more and more hauntingly familiar to a Greek audience. Not only do the Persians worship Greek deities, such as Zeus and Apollo; the chorus also hints that Persians and Greeks share an artificial kinship. At line 80, the elders refer to their king as 'himself the peer of gods, whose race was sown in gold' (trans. Vellacott). This refers to Perseus (the famous slayer of the Medusa), whose Greek mother Danaë was impregnated by Zeus who took the form of a shower of gold; Perseus married Andromeda, an eastern woman, and became ancestor of the Persians. Furthermore, if Martin West's emendation to the Greek text of 145f. is correct, the elders refer to 'Xerxes and all our nation named for the son of Danaë,' who was Perseus.⁴ This makes the Persians and the Greeks distant cousins! The chorus' song concludes with further interesting imagery of sounds, such as how the stones of the wall 'echo with frenzied groans of women for their dead' (121f., trans. Vellacott), and the noise of the departing army is likened to the buzzing of bees (129).

The elders feel a certain doom. They are both confident in the Persian strength, which is like a sea wave (87ff.), but they also feel concern for the gods' delusion (*apatê*, 93ff.). In keeping with these themes, Xerxes' mother the Queen (named Atossa in some translations, including Vellacott's) comes in at line 159, and is greeted with the awkward salutation:

Mother of a god (*theos*) thou art, and wife hast been—
Unless the Fates (a *daimôn*) today have turned their hands
Against us, and their ancient favour fail.

(*Persians* 157-58, trans. Vellacott)⁵

What Vellacott somewhat oddly translates as 'the Fates' with 'their ancient favour' is, in the original Ancient Greek, simply 'an ancient *daimôn*' (one that was favourable to the Persian army). In Ancient Greek, the semantics of the word *daimôn* range between 'a god' and 'a

4 Martin West's emendation is from the 1998 Teubner 2nd edition of *Aeschyli Tragoediae*. The manuscript tradition of 145-46 reads, 'Xerxes, the son of Darius, and all our nation named (for our ancestor)', which makes less sense. Vellacott was a bit florid in his translation of these lines: '...Xerxes, the royal heir of Perseus, founder of our Persian breed?'

5 In many of the translations in this article, I have supplied Greek terms in italics and parentheses. These Greek terms do not appear in the Penguin translation.

spirit' and 'luck'. The Greek adjectives *eudaimôn* and *dysdaimôn*, literally 'with a good *daimôn*' and 'with a bad *daimôn*,' essentially mean 'lucky' and 'unlucky' respectively. In Aeschylus' play, moreover, *daimôn* often has an amorphous and unspecific identity. There are exceptions—Darius' ghost, for example, is later referred to as a *daimôn*—but in general, a *daimôn* is a vague divinity or supernatural power that can both protect and destroy. This makes the Persians' defeat all the more eerie because they can never identify precisely the divine force that is against them; it also becomes very convenient for the Persians to blame a *daimôn*, rather than themselves, for their troubles. In most passages, *daimôn* is contrasted with *theos*, a god that one can name or worship; thus, in the passage above, the Queen is called the mother and wife of a *theos*, namely the king of Persia in his role as divine ruler. In other passages, however, *daimôn* and *theos* appear to be used interchangeably as synonyms.

The Queen is anxious to tell her dream. Her opening speech uses multiple words for fear (the translations are Vellacott's): *phrontis* ('anxious thought', 161), *deima* ('dread', 162), *diplê merimna* ('two thoughts born of fear', 165), and *phobos* ('fear', 168). Her dream was as follows: she saw two women—one dressed like a Persian, one like a Greek—who began fighting with each other. The Queen's son Xerxes yoked both women to his chariot, as one would yoke horses (190ff.). One of the women/horses was submissive, but the other broke free of the bridle and smashed the yoke. Xerxes fell out of the chariot, and his father Darius appeared to look down at him with pity—whereupon Xerxes began tearing his own garments. After the Queen woke up from this nightmare, she went to make an offering to the god Apollo, whereupon she saw a bird-omen (205, a hawk tearing an eagle over Apollo's shrine). The Queen begins to interpret these omens: 'If my son conquers, he will be all men's wonder; but, / If he should fail...' but then suddenly the Queen does not want to speak the alternative and make a third bad omen, so she goes on, 'no "State" can hold him answerable' (211-14, trans. Vellacott).

The elders, sycophants that they are, tell the Queen to make offerings at her husband's grave, and they assure her: 'we predict / That, be these omens good or bad, all will be well' (225, trans. Vellacott). (Yeah, right...) Then the Queen asks the million-dollar question, 'Where in the world is Athens?' (231; Vellacott translates, 'Where, by men's report, is Athens built?'). It is a neat echo of her husband Darius' exclamation, 'Who are the Athenians?!' according to Herodotus 5.105. The Queen and the chorus share words about Athens—which of course, the chorus has never seen, but they seem to know a lot about it (230ff.)—and here we are reminded of the Athenians' military prowess in hoplite warfare, and their unique constitution, specifically that they are slaves to no man (i.e., they are a democracy and have no king).

Then a messenger comes in. Oddly enough, the chorus say, 'That runner's undeniably a Persian courier' (247, trans. Vellacott). What they mean is that the man is running the way Persians do; one wonders precisely what that would be like! The messenger brings horrible news: the Persian fleet has been completely destroyed by the Greeks. The old men of the chorus immediately begin weeping, as does the messenger, who denounces the bay of Salamis: 'The shores of Salamis, and all the neighbouring coasts, / Are strewn with bodies miserable done to death.' 'What name more hateful to our ears than Salamis? / Athens—a name of anguish in our memory!' (272f., 284f., trans. Vellacott). The Queen at first says nothing, until she pipes up with the words:

Good councillors, I have kept silence all this while
Stunned with misfortune; this news is too terrible

ON TEACHING AESCHYLUS' *PERSIANS*

For narrative or question. Yet, being mortal, we
Must endure grief when the gods (*theoi*) send it.

(*Persians* 290-94, trans. Vellacott)

Now she insists that the messenger tell the whole story. What he narrates is the battle of Salamis, once again replete with names of Persians who died (Artembares, Dadaces, Tenagon, Lilaëus, Arsames, Argestes, and so forth, 302-08). And who is to blame? According to the messenger,

Do you say we entered battle with too weak a force?
No. The result shows with what partial hands the gods (i.e., some *daimôn*)
Weighed down the scale against us, and destroyed us all.
It is the gods (*theoi*) who keep Athene's city safe.

(*Persians* 344-47, trans. Vellacott)

In the Ancient Greek, the messenger blames 'some *daimôn*' for loading the scales, and the gods (*theoi*) for saving Athens. Both divine forces (one an unnamed force that tips the balance of power, the other a group of gods who protect a fellow goddess's city) are incriminated in lieu of laying responsibility on Xerxes. When the Queen asks how the naval battle began, whether it was the Greeks, or 'my bold son, exultant with his countless ships?' (352, trans. Vellacott), the messenger repeats himself:

Neither, my queen. Some Fury (*alastôr*), some malignant Power (*kakos*
daimôn),
Appeared, and set in train the whole disastrous rout.
A Hellene from the Athenian army came...

(*Persians* 353-55, trans. Vellacott)

Once again the messenger blames some vague vengeful divine force, but then segues into a narrative with a very human actor: Themistocles, whom he does not name, but instead refers to as 'a Hellene.' Themistocles pretends to be a traitorous informant, and tells Xerxes that the Greeks plan to escape the bay of Salamis during the night, and that Xerxes should move all his ships closer to the bay. What resulted, of course, was that the large Persian ships got caught in the narrow channel, and the Greek soldiers attacked with such force that the sea battle became a land battle. Then the messenger tells how Xerxes witnessed the whole event from his throne atop a hill (466ff.), cried aloud, tore his clothes, and gave orders for flight. This inspires the Queen herself to cry out to the hateful *daimôn* that deceived the Persians' minds (472; in Vellacott's translation, 'Oh, what malign Power so deceived our Persian hopes?'). Next comes the terrible news of the retreating Persian army, and how so many soldiers have died of hunger or heatstroke or frost on the way back to Asia (480ff.).

After the messenger's speech (which is arguably the highlight of the play), the chorus of elders sing a pitiable lament to vent their grief for what has happened. The ancient Greek text includes such exclamations as *popoi* (550 and 560), *totoi* (551 and 561), *pheu* (568 and 576), *ê-e* (569 and 577) and *o-a* (570, 574, 578, and 581). It goes on for sixty-six lines. At 598, the Queen comes back, having changed her clothes, and brings a variety of libations (milk, honey, water, wine, olive oil) to pour on the tomb of her husband Darius.

Then the chorus sings a séance-like chant (lines 628-80) to summon Darius' ghost. Suddenly everything becomes supernatural as they invoke the *daimones* of the underworld (what Vellacott translates as 'nether Powers,' 628) and call upon Hermes and Earth, and the god of the underworld—Hades himself—under his cult title Aïdoneus (650). They refer to Darius as a *daimôn* (in Vellacott's words, an 'august spirit,' 642), and at 658 they invoke him as '*balên, archaios balên,*' using a Phrygian word for 'king.' (Vellacott translates this as, 'King of old days, our Sultan!').

The paranormal result is that the ghost of Darius actually rises from his tomb and speaks! The ghost is rather funny in his impatience (as if he had important people waiting for him down below), shouting:

So, though the ascent
From Hades is no easy journey, and the Powers (*theoi*)
Of Earth are readier to receive than to let go,
Yet, since I share majesty among them, I have come.
Speak quickly, for I may not overstay my time.
What sudden burden of distress weighs Persia down?

(*Persians* 688-93, trans. Vellacott)

The old men are awestruck and protest that they dare not look at him or speak to him; this, of course, only makes the ghost angrier. At last, he calls upon his widow to explain things, and it is she who has the courage to speak with this man from beyond the grave. In discussing their son's misfortunes, these parents vacillate between blaming some external divine force and blaming Xerxes himself. They clearly have a mutual opinion of their son Xerxes, whom they describe as 'rash' (718) and a 'poor fool' (719). At the same time, they hold a *daimôn* accountable. The Queen says that when Xerxes yoked the Hellespont, 'Doubtless some god (*daimôn*) helped him achieve his plan' (724); but Darius adds, 'Some god (*daimôn*), I fear, whose power robbed Xerxes of his wits' (725). They also suggest it is the fault of some pre-determined fate. At 739ff., Darius understands Xerxes' failure as the fulfilment of an oracle from Zeus, which he does not give us many details about, except that he had hoped the prophecies would not come to fulfilment so soon. But no sooner does Darius mention oracles than he dismisses them, on the grounds that Xerxes is ultimately responsible for his own defeat, by attempting 'in youthful recklessness' (*neon thrasos*, 744) to battle natural forces and even overpower the god Poseidon himself. But the Queen tries to defend her son, insisting that Xerxes just had bad advisors who taunted him (753ff.). As some scholars have noted (e.g., Sancisi-Weedenburg 1983 and McClure 2006), the Queen is not demonised as an aggressive or domineering 'barbarian' mother in this play; if anything, she is more like a respectable Athenian woman whose outward concern for her son intensifies his eventual disgrace.

Finally, the elders of the chorus have the gumption to ask some questions, and Darius replies that the Persians should never try to attack Greece again, since the land of Greece itself is inhospitable to armies (790ff.; and he should know, given his defeat ten years earlier at Marathon!). Darius furthermore argues that the reason the Persian army will suffer calamities is its impiety:

Marching through Hellas, without scruple they destroyed
Statues of gods (*theoi*), burned temples; levelled with the ground

ON TEACHING AESCHYLUS' *PERSIANS*

Altars and holy precincts ['shrines of *daimones*'], now one heap of rubble.
Therefore their sacrilege is matched in suffering.
And more will follow; for the well-spring of their pain
Is not yet dry; soon new disaster gushes forth.

(*Persians* 809-15, trans. Vellacott)

Notice once again Aeschylus' habit of combining *theoi* and *daimones* in the same speech; this is the example where they appear to be synonyms for each other.

Darius predicts that the returning army will suffer another defeat at Plataea, thus confirming for us that we are supposed to believe these events are happening in 480 BCE immediately after Salamis, but before Plataea—but which in real time, in 472 BCE, is all history. Darius also puts a moral spin on Plataea:

On the Plataean plain the Dorian lance shall pour
Blood in unmeasured sacrifice; dead heaped on dead
Shall bear dumb witness to three generations hence
That man is mortal, and must learn 'to curb his pride' (*phronein*).
For pride (*hubris*) will blossom; soon its ripening kernel is
Infatuation (*atê*); and its bitter harvest, tears.

(*Persians* 816-22, trans. Vellacott)

Thus Darius winds up his speech with a philosophical musing on the causation of suffering, what Helm 2004 calls Aeschylus' 'genealogy of morals,' with folly and impiety giving birth to *hubris*, which begets rashness (*thrasos*, as at line 744) and ultimately leads to ruin (*atê*). At line 840 Darius finally returns to his grave, but first tells the Queen to get some fresh clothes ready for Xerxes. This upsets the Queen, who cannot bear the prospect of seeing her son in rags, so she heads off.

Amazingly, the remainder of the play is sung to music. At lines 852-906 the old men of the chorus perform a sadly nostalgic ode about the good-old-days under Darius. They name all the Greek islands and cities which Darius had conquered in his lifetime (including Salamis itself, apparently), and to top off the list, they mention: 'In Ionia too those rich and populous Hellene cities / Darius ruled according to his own desire' (896-900, trans. Vellacott). It is an interesting tribute to the cities whose revolt against Darius was the catalyst for the events leading up to Xerxes' invasion and ultimate defeat.

At long last, Xerxes himself arrives, indeed in rags, riding alone on a tented carriage, carrying an empty quiver, and singing.⁶ He first of all laments:

Weep for the deadly doom that Fate
Has launched against me unforeseen.
How bitter to our race have been
The blows of Heaven's savage hate!

(*Persians* 909-12, trans. Vellacott)

⁶ In typical Aeschylean fashion, attention is only gradually drawn to the particulars of Xerxes' appearance. He enters at 908, but not until 1000 is mention made of his tented chariot, and at 1020 he bewails his empty quiver and rags.

Vellacott's translation is more expansive than the Ancient Greek text. Michael Ewans' translation is more literal:

Oh! I am miserable, and there were no signs
to warn me of this wretched fate:
how savagely the *daimôn* has attacked
the Persians.

(*Persians* 909-12, trans. Ewans)

It is significant that Xerxes—the character we have all been waiting to see—is also not sure whom to blame for the disaster: himself, or some external force, or both. The elders respond in kind to his grief with an ‘ototoi!’ for the men ‘by gods condemned to deadly shame’ (920, trans. Vellacott: literally, it is the men ‘whom a *daimôn* has cut down’). As was the case with his parents, Xerxes’ concern for blame veers back and forth. One moment he holds a divine force accountable: ‘for now the *daimôn* turns / and veers back down upon me’ (942f., trans. Ewans).⁷ Yet a moment later he admits, ‘There by the shore of Salamis *I* left them’ (962f., trans. Vellacott), and ‘*I* watched the battle, speechless’ (1028, trans. Vellacott), then tore his robes as his witnessed the defeat in which he himself did not fight.

Aeschylus’ play concludes with a very long lament between Xerxes and the chorus (931-1077), a total of seven pairs of metrical responses that are called *strophe* and *antistrophe*.⁸ In this scene, certain thematic elements come full circle. While acting out this lamentation, Xerxes fulfils his mother’s dream; he rends his clothes, which are already rags. By invoking more Persian names, he echoes the verbal sounds of the drama’s beginning; this time, it is men who drowned: Pharnuchus, Seualkes, Ariomardus, Lilaeus, Memphis, Tharybis, Hys-taechmas, and Artembares (967-73), Alpistus, Parthus, and Oebares (981-84), Xanthis, Diaexis, and Ancharos (994f.). This string of names is reminiscent of the lament of Thetis and the Nereids at *Iliad* 18.39-48, where the incantation of random names (Glauke, Thaleia, Kymodoke, Nesaie, Speio, Thoe, Halie, Kymothoe, etc., all of which scan metrically in Ancient Greek) becomes a musical substitution for words of grief. It seems to me that when grief is so deep that all a person can do is sob, the recitation of names (like a litany) is a comforting intermediate stage between the irrational and the rational, between meaningless sounds and complete sentences.

The characterisation of Xerxes at the end of the *Persians* is completely unique. Students who have seen the Warner Brothers film *300* know a totally different version. In *300*, the king of Persia is a highly sexualised giant who is as terrifying as he is alluring. Wearing far too much mascara and bedecked with gold bracelets, necklaces and countless body piercings (but very little clothing), the seven-foot-tall Xerxes slithers with feminine grace but speaks with an eerie hyper-masculine, digitally enhanced demonic voice. The Xerxes of *300* struck me as a cross between Boy George and a dancing Shiva. His throne is atop an enormous set of white

7 Vellacott’s translation misses the point of the *daimôn* altogether: ‘Fortune and joy have left me, /and Sorrow takes their place.’

8 Seven pairs of responses might not seem like a lot, but consider that the chorus’ opening song has a section with only five pairs (lines 65-139); the chorus’ initial response to the messenger consists of three pairs (256-89); their lament after the messenger’s departure has a section with three pairs (548-97); their séance consists of three pairs followed by an ‘epode’ (633-80); and their ode on the good-old-days under Darius also consists of three pairs and an ‘epode’ (852-907). The exchange with Xerxes (931-1077) is therefore the longest musical moment in the play.

steps resembling something Dame Edna might waft down, and its lavishness is deliberately in stark contrast to the bland, no-frills (indeed, 'Spartan') architecture of the fictionalised Sparta. Xerxes is essentially a one-dimensional character in the movie, constantly describing himself as a god, demanding earth and water (i.e., submission) from everyone in his path. The Spartan king Leonidas does throw a spear at him, graze his cheek and draw blood, but that is the extent of any change in this Xerxes' 'character'.

I can hardly think of two more opposite portrayals of Xerxes than the deep-voiced king in *300*, and the grief-stricken, lamenting king-in-rags at the end of Aeschylus' play. Aeschylus' Xerxes is a broken man, not a demonic god-king. The *Persians* ends with the old men and Xerxes heading back to their homes, unabashed about crying and wailing. We do not see Xerxes' reunion with his mother, or the arrival of any surviving Persian soldiers; as a result, there is arguably no closure to Aeschylus' drama.

Thematic Issues (how is this play relevant?)

3. Barbarian versus Greek.

One immediately noticeable aspect of Aeschylus' *Persians* is that the battle of Salamis is told from the point of view of the losing side, but in a play performed for an audience of the winning side, and in the winning side's language. Students of Classical Societies and Cultures will recognise that it is a common feature of Greek literature to view the world from the fictional subjectivity of the 'other'. The *Iliad*, for example, is not exclusively interested in Greeks, but also focuses heavily on the point-of-view of the Trojans, who are supposed to be the 'enemies' of the Greeks. Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, too, shows the fictional point-of-view of women, the usually 'silent' half of Athenian society. What is perhaps more striking about the *Persians* is its exclusive focus on the barbarians' subjectivity and on their loss, not only in losing a battle, but also in mourning their dead and in the destruction of their young men.

Are the barbarians effeminate? The Xerxes of the Warner Brothers film *300* has a transgendered look that is very familiar from fantasy graphic novels. But it would be difficult to determine who is wearing more make-up: Xerxes, or his harem of deformed transsexuals.⁹ The gender-bending of an enemy or a cultural 'other' is a common feature in many periods of history; but our modern aesthetics of transgender are different from the supposed effeminacy of the Persians in Aeschylus' play. Some scholarship (such as Hall 1989) has argued that Aeschylus' Persian men are emasculated by engaging in extensive lamentations that Greeks would associate with women. Persian royalty also seem 'soft' because of their wealth, since they need not exert themselves and work for a living. They are also concerned about maintaining that wealth, so much so that the Queen's worry about Xerxes' rags seems almost comic:

O hand of God! [*O daimôn!*] My heart is sick with many griefs;
 Yet none more sharp than this, to hear how wretchedly
 My son is clothed, to his dishonour. I will go

⁹ A quick glance at the cast credits of *300* will reveal such coveted roles as 'Transsexual (Asian) #1,' 'Transsexual (Asian) #2,' 'Transsexual (Arabian) #3,' and 'Armless Concubine.'

And fetch clothes from the palace, and prepare my heart
To meet him, and not fail him in his hour of need.

(*Persians* 845-51, trans. Vellacott)

Given that the Persians had so recently been the greatest enemies of the Greeks, a certain amount of demonisation was surely still taking place in 472 BCE, so that Aeschylus may have had no choice but to make the Persians look, act and sound ‘weird’. But Aeschylus did have a choice when it came to juxtaposing this ‘weirdness’ against the Athenian audience’s capacity to feel pity for a tragedy that had befallen their enemies. If we accept that Aeschylus makes the Persians seem effeminate, either by their actions or their petty concerns for dress and status, students must then ask the next question: does that effeminacy detract from the sympathy an audience or reader has for the Persians’ loss, or does it increase or intensify one’s sympathy?

4. Grief.

The *Persians* is an acting out of communal lament; in one day, the world has changed for a nation. The response is not just wailing and tearing of clothes, but also abuse of the body, including the beating of heads and chests, and the tearing of hair and beards. Even more than sixty years after its performance, Aeschylus’ *Persians* was famous its over-the-top lamentations; or so says the character of Dionysus in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* of 405 BCE, when he judges the contest in the afterlife between the ghosts of Aeschylus and Euripides. The fictional Aeschylus boasts that when he produced his *Persians*, ‘by adorning (our) greatest achievement, I taught (men) how to be eager to conquer their rivals’ (*Frogs* 1026f.). But what Dionysus remembers of the *Persians* is how pleased he was when ‘the chorus straightaway clapped their hands a lot and yelled *iaui!*’ (*Frogs* 1029), the clapping of hands presumably being perceived as a Persian custom for expressing grief.

One of the curious things about the modern reception of Greek tragedy is that most Western readers have an awkward response to abject misery and lamentations. When a Greek tragic character or chorus begins to sing a lament after some misfortune, most young readers find the excessive emotion humorous. Passages such as the following are hard to take seriously:

Chorus: What can we say for comfort? (The Greek is: *papai papai!*)

Xerxes: No word can match my anguish.

Chorus: Twofold and threefold sorrow—

Xerxes: While those we hate rejoice!

Chorus: Our manly strength is crippled.

Xerxes: My chosen guards have vanished—

Chorus: Drowned in the sea that slew them.

Xerxes: Let tears drown every voice!

Go, go to your homes.

Chorus: Weeping we go. (The Greek is: *aiai aiai dua dua!*)

Xerxes: Cry aloud,

Beat your breast for me.

Chorus: Sad favour, sad request.

Xerxes: Join my mournful hymn.

Chorus: *Ototototoi!*

(*Persians* 1030-43, trans. Vellacott)

Most teenagers who try reading these lines aloud in class will burst into laughter; it all sounds too melodramatic. But the performance of lamentation in the ancient theatre surely served a serious function for the original Greek audience, creating a sense of community among the spectators. Part of the power of Greek tragedy is not just its ability to elicit pity and emotion from each of us as individual readers; tragedy also encourages and enables an audience as a collective body to share grief. Charles Segal (who died in 2002), Professor of Classics at Harvard, and one-time visiting professor at the University of Melbourne, expressed it best in a book about Euripides:

The theatre presents men and women with whom its audience can sympathise directly, emotionally, and communally. The *koinon achos* (common grief) is the emotion proper to a theatre that has become conscious of itself as a uniquely communal form, even when its characters are royal personages of the heroic age. Personal grief is lifted from the level of individual response to the level of self-consciously communal reaction.¹⁰

The reason many modern Australian readers find the excessive emotion of Aeschylus' *Persians* comical is because—unlike most Mediterranean cultures—we have no recurring cultural ritual that expresses communal grief. This does not mean that Australians—both men and women—are incapable at displaying their emotions; quite the contrary. But our communal grief is more noticeable at sports events (usually at a footy game when one's team loses), or at a time of great national crisis which comes unexpectedly, and which is likely to leave a lasting impression—perhaps a flashbulb memory—on our minds.

5. Memory.

In the language of contemporary psychology, a 'flashbulb memory' or 'flashpoint memory' is a peculiarly vivid memory which witnesses of shocking events (often of global importance) carry around with them forever after.¹¹ Such memories may not always be reliable, but they are strongly visual, and are often tied to sharp recollections of everyday actions that one would otherwise forget. In my mother's generation, the event for flashbulb memories was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy; everyone could remember what he or she was doing when the news broke that JFK had been shot. For the generation of my grandparents, who grew up in Hawaii, their flashbulb memories were of the Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor. For most people teaching in 2007, three typical flashbulb memories might be about the day Princess Diana was killed; or, about September 11th 2001 when the Twin Towers fell and the Pentagon was bombed; or, about the day of the Bali bombings. When we recall those events, we remember not only the general feelings of alarm and surprise, but also minute details of what we were doing when we heard the news (were we at home, or at school? Were

¹⁰ Segal 1993: 127.

¹¹ The term was coined by Brown & Kulik 1977.

we typing on a computer, or watching TV, or getting up from a nap?). We vividly remember aspects of our mundane lives that we would forget at any other time, and we can recollect how our routine was altered on those horrible days. Some of us might have stopped work and glued ourselves to a television set; others might have been travelling and got caught in an airport; others might have been desperately making phone calls to reach loved ones.

Was the battle of Salamis just such an event that created flashbulb memories for the ancient Greeks? We know that Aeschylus fought at Salamis, as well as at Marathon ten years before; many of the men in the original audience of the *Persians* probably fought at Salamis also. If the battle of Salamis was perceived as a globally significant event, we must then address a question that is equally important to us in the 21st century: why should we dramatize recent events? Consider the number of recent films about real-life flashbulb memories. *The Queen*, starring Academy-Award-winning Helen Mirren and directed by Stephen Frears, was released in September 2006 and dramatised the aftermath of Princess Diana's death in 1997. In addition, I know of at least three dramatisations of the events of September 11, 2001. There was *United 93*, directed by Paul Greengrass and released in August 2006 (it was nominated for two Academy Awards, one for directing, another for editing); but before that, there was the television drama *Flight 93*, directed by Peter Markle and released in the USA in January 2006 (it won an Emmy for Sound Editing). And then there was Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center*, starring Nicholas Cage, and released in Australia in October 2006. Most classicists remember (with mixed emotions) Oliver Stone's attempt at ancient history, *Alexander*, released in 2004. But Oliver Stone has also made a career out of flashbulb memory films: I remember watching *JFK* in December of 1991 with my aunt, who tried to convince me that the Warren Commission never operated like it did in the movie. Oliver Stone also wrote and directed *Nixon* (1995; the film's plot culminated in Nixon's resignation), and produced *The Day Reagan Was Shot* (released on American television in 2001, twenty years after the event; I myself have a flashbulb memory of that day from 1981!).

It is worth asking our students (as well as ourselves), why there is a market for these kinds of re-living crucial moments in our recent history? Why have a film about that eerie week after Princess Diana's death? Is it to preserve the memory for a new generation? Or to help with some kind of 'healing process' that is involved after a grand moment in history? Can these kinds of questions shed light on the power that the *Persians* must have had for the original Greek audience? A related question worth asking is, how many dramatisations do we need of the same event? Just consider the number of Titanic movies, or Pearl Harbor movies, made over the years!¹² Is three movies about September 11th in one year too many? And in the 5th century BCE, were two plays about the battle of Salamis (Phrynichus' and Aeschylus' versions, only four years apart) more than enough?

12 For Pearl Harbor, film buffs will remember Columbia Pictures' *From Here To Eternity*, 1953, starring Burt Lancaster, Deborah Kerr, Donna Reed, and Frank Sinatra; *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, 1970, a joint American and Japanese production starring Martin Balsam and Sô Yamamura; the television miniseries *Pearl*, 1978, with Angie Dickinson, Dennis Weaver, and Robert Wagner; *The Final Countdown*, 1980, a science fiction version of Pearl Harbor starring Kirk Douglas and Martin Sheen; and Touchstone Pictures' *Pearl Harbor*, 2001, starring Ben Affleck and Alec Baldwin. Movies about the Titanic include *Titanic*, 1943, a German film produced in Nazi Germany; 20th Century Fox's *Titanic*, 1953, starring Barbara Stanwyck, Clifton Webb, and Robert Wagner; *A Night To Remember*, 1958, with Kenneth More and Ronald Allen; the television movie *S.O.S. Titanic*, 1979, with Susan Saint James, David Janssen, Ian Holm and Helen Mirren; another television movie, *Titanic*, 1996, with George C. Scott, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Tim Curry, and Eva Marie Saint; and James Cameron's *Titanic*, 1997, with Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet. When is enough enough?

Of course, there is one glaring difference between re-living September 11th on film, and the experience of Aeschylus' *Persians*. I have mentioned it already. Aeschylus was presenting the point of view of the losers of the war (the Persians), not the victors (namely the Greeks who would have been in the original audience). A closer film analogy in recent times would be Clint Eastwood's *Letters From Iwo Jima*, released in Australia in February 2007, and winner of an Academy Award for Sound Editing (as well as three nominations for directing, screenplay, and best picture). It is a film written by Americans, but telling the story of WWII from the point of view of the losing side and their letters home to their families in Japan. In a very Clint Eastwood fashion, the film is not propaganda for the achievements of the Americans during the war, but rather a touching exploration of the human condition by recognising the old 'enemy' as human and not unlike 'ourselves'. It helps, of course, that by now, over sixty years have passed since the events narrated in the film.

Can one feel pity for the suffering of a defeated enemy, and simultaneously feel smug? This would have been of particular importance to the original audience of the *Persians*, if we believe a fanciful suggestion that was made back in 1941 by James Turney Allen (writing in the midst of a world war) that the wood forming the seats of the theatre of Dionysus in 472 BCE would have come from the timbers of Persians ships disabled or captured at Salamis! His argument rested on a passage from the 1st century BCE Roman author Vitruvius' work on architecture (*De architectura* 5.9), claiming that Pericles built the roof for his Odeum (built around 446 BCE) out of timber taken from the battle of Salamis. Allen argued that (if Vitruvius was correct in his anecdote about a situation that happened four centuries before his own time), in order for timber to have lasted over thirty years since the battle, it must have been preserved by being put to architectural use...so, why not the wooden seats of the theatre of Dionysus, which was restored in 479 BCE after the sack of Athens? I know of no one today who takes this theory seriously; but it was certainly attractive enough in its own times to inspire Eugene O'Neill Jr. (a professor at Yale, son of the Pulitzer-prize-winning playwright Eugene O'Neill Sr.) in 1942 to imagine the following romantic reconstruction:

On that day in the spring of 472 the matchless and magnificent magic of Aeschylus' poetry re-created for them the greatest moments of their lives—the moments in which they wrought, and became aware that they had wrought, the miracle of Salamis. The performance of the *Persae* must have been a splendid experience indeed for that fortunate audience. But if the seats on which they sat were constructed of timbers from the very ships they had defeated at Salamis, the play must have come even closer to home to them, with an immediacy that greatly fires the imagination even at this late date. [...] Thus, when the Messenger tells him [lines 418-20], he can feel under him the solid memorial of that hidden sea.¹³

We return to same conundrum. An original audience member might have felt nostalgic for the battle eight years prior when he defeated the invading Persians and sent them running back home. But Aeschylus' play encouraged (perhaps compelled?) that same audience member to recognise the battle as a tragedy for the defeated Persians, and to feel sympathy for them! Despite the moments when the messenger praises the Athenians' military might, does Aeschylus' play confront its audience with the 'humanity' of the enemy? This is truly the

13 O'Neill 1942: 427. Vellacott translates lines 418-20 as follows: 'Our vessels heeled / Over; the sea was hidden, carpeted with wrecks / And dead men; all the shores and reefs were full of dead.'

power of tragedy: to stimulate not only a personal reaction in an audience, but also a group reaction to another person's pain.

6. Is it *tragic*?

One thing that all Greek tragedies have in common (as Aristotle observed in his *Poetics*) is the reversal of fortune for one or more characters. Sometimes the reversal is from bad to good (as in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*), but more often it is from good to bad, or bad to worse. Is Aeschylus' *Persians* tragic, and if so, whose tragedy is it? Is Xerxes the 'tragic hero'?

Many readers of Greek tragedy assume that it must operate like a Shakespearian drama, that there must be a 'tragic hero' who has some 'tragic flaw' (usually pride, or some kind of ill-defined *hubris*) that leads to his or her ultimate downfall. But I would argue (as I have argued in other issues of *Iris*) that there is no such thing as a 'tragic hero' with a 'tragic flaw' in Greek tragedy. A misreading of Aristotle's *Poetics* is the culprit for the long-standing belief in the 'tragic flaw.' At *Poetics* 1453a.9, Aristotle argues that the best tragedies have plots concerned with a reversal of fortune due to a character's *hamartia*, which has been mistranslated as 'flaw' or 'sin.' In fact, Aristotle means 'error in judgment' by *hamartia*, rather than any moral deficiency. And in the same passage, Aristotle argues that the best tragic character is one whose misfortune is not brought about by vice or depravity at all.

Since Aristotle was writing about 125 years after Aeschylus' *Persians* was performed, and about sixty years after the deaths of Sophocles and Euripides, he was hardly a contemporary audience of the tragedies that survive to us. His *Poetics* reads less like the work of a scientist or philosopher than of a theatre critic. Aristotle is happy to outline what he considers the 'best' design for a tragedy (as if he planned on writing one himself), and eagerly gives details on 'bad' designs, including plays in which certain dramatic elements were handled badly (e.g., Euripides' *Medea* gets heavy criticism). Aristotle never mentions Aeschylus' *Persians*, but one gets the impression that Aristotle would have hated it. In Aristotle's not-so-humble opinion:

A perfect tragedy should [...] imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes: that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous, a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families.

(*Poetics* 1452b-1453a, trans. S.H. Butcher)

Notice that Aristotle talks about the 'perfect' tragedy, which implies that there were plenty of second-rate or not-so-perfect tragedies that had been written before his time, involving the kinds of characters that he outlines. Into which category would Aristotle have placed Xerxes, the barbarian king who invades Greece? One might argue that he is the 'utter villain' whose downfall satisfies the moral sense; but if Xerxes deserved everything he got from the Greeks, there should be no unmerited misfortune, and thus no pity. If Xerxes is a barbarian king, he is not a man like ourselves, and therefore arouses no fear. It would not be the 'best' tragedy according to Aristotle, but it would nonetheless still be a 'tragedy.'

There is an alternative argument, however. Even though Aeschylus clearly wasn't writing for Aristotle's benefit, Aristotle's theories about pity and fear might be a useful lens for looking at what Aeschylus achieves. When Aeschylus' Xerxes finally arrives on stage in rags, an audience already feels like they know him. Instead of being demonised as the barbarian invader by Greek characters, Xerxes has been discussed by his mother and father with sympathy mixed with the censure one expects from parents. Instead of a wholly evil Xerxes, Aeschylus paints an image of a young man, impetuous rather than vicious, rash and foolish rather than cruel and calculating, and even a bit of a victim of his own position; his mother, at least, in his defence says he was too gullible to envious advisors. Xerxes' warriors have a similar youthful rashness which crosses acceptable limits when they resort to defiling temples. This youthful passion is contrasted with the wise caution of the old men of the chorus, Darius, and the Queen, who represent the good old days of sense and wise judgment. Can one read Xerxes, then, as an Aristotelean perfect tragic character who is not eminently good and just, but neither exhibiting vice or depravity?

If we choose to read Xerxes as the tragic focal point of the play (the 'tragic hero,' if you will), Aeschylus does an amazing job of building up an audience's expectations. Contrary to what Aristotle would probably have preferred, Aeschylus waits until the very end of the play to bring Xerxes on to the stage, and when he does so, his sole contribution to the plot is to lead the lamentations, then clear the stage. Until then, Xerxes is described *in absentia*, and everyone is unsure where to place the blame for the defeat at Salamis. Much scholarship from the 1960s up to the early 1980s understood Aeschylus' play as distinctly 'theological', that is, conceiving the Persian defeat as caused by divine forces which exact a divine punishment.¹⁴ The constant invocation of a *daimôn* (some strange divinity that 'has it in' for the Persians) reveals that no one is willing to lay responsibility fully on Xerxes, despite the fact that he is the king. Only Darius (who is dead) has the analytical acumen to see Xerxes' defiance of the Hellespont as symptomatic of a *hubris* that leads to *thrasos* ('rashness') and *atê* ('ruin'; see Helm 2004).

I, however, prefer to read the whole cast of Aeschylus' *Persians* as the tragic focus of the drama, rather than search for single tragic 'hero'. There is a reversal of fortune for everyone: the chorus, the Queen, the ghost of Darius, Xerxes, and all the soldiers who died offstage. The battle of Salamis is a global event that affects the whole Persian nation. Individual characters come to their own individual realisations when their fears of disaster are confirmed. The Queen, for example, at her very first entrance, realises 'first, that a world of wealth is trash / If men are wanting; next, that men who have no wealth / Never find Fortune smiling as their strength deserves' (166f., trans. Vellacott). In other words, her fears about the war have taught her that wealth is all external show, does not indicate the essence of a person, and certainly

14 E.g., Kitto 1961: 33-45; Gagarin 1976: 46-50; Winnington-Ingram 1983: 1-15.

cannot guard against misfortune. It can all overturn in a day, which is what happens in this play. The chorus of elders are worried from the start; the arrival of the messenger confirms the disaster, and it is total. The entire nation of Persia has the hardest realisation of all: that they must go on living. Indeed, Gagarin 1976 argues that the finale of the play demonstrates how the Persians come to accept their disaster, and learn to live. The old men of the chorus have the final word, which is literally, ‘I will send you (home) with cries of grief’ (1077), which Vellacott fleshes out as follows:

Come now, our lord and master,
With tears we will escort you
Home to your mournful palace.

(*Persians* 1077, trans. Vellacott)

The defeated king returns to his country, and his people find the strength to take him home. Regardless of the translation, the ending is not just about lamentation; it is also about survival.

7. War in the *Persians* and war today

Are our students mature enough to discuss modern politics, and the relevance of ancient texts to modern political debates? It is surely no accident that so many ancient texts about war have been chosen for VCE Classical Societies and Cultures at the very time when Australian troops are still stationed in Iraq, dealing with the aftermath of the second Gulf War. Teachers are old enough to remember the series of events that led to the conflict; but our students might be too young to have a collective memory of those events, or might not yet be mature enough to understand or explain the politics of Australia’s continued involvement in Iraq. Nonetheless, one purpose of education is to teach students how to think for themselves, and Classical Societies and Cultures arguably accomplishes this better than any other subject. Maybe I am underestimating the intelligence and political acumen of today’s teenagers, and in fact they will rise to the challenge.

Aeschylus’ *Persians* may not provide an ‘answer’ to solving a modern political crisis, but it can certainly challenge our assumptions about what war is. War is devastating to Xerxes and his people. It may have been a rousing victory for the Greeks, but it is not the Greeks that we see dramatised. Instead we witness an overflow of weeping and indecisiveness about whom to blame. We also hear about thousands of Persian soldiers dead or drowned, immortalised merely by saying their foreign-sounding names, like those lists of victims read aloud each September 11 at the memorial service at Ground Zero in New York City. In the end, it does not matter whether Xerxes got what he deserved, or whether it was the Persians’ fault for invading Greece in the first place. The wounded Persians seem more human than barbarian as soon as that conflict known as war—what Thucydides called a ‘violent teacher’ (*biaios didaskalos*, Thucydides 3.82)—has enforced its harsh lesson on their entire people, even the innocent elders who, like most civilians, never saw the battlefield. In Aeschylus’ vision, the battle of Salamis is an event that will spark flashbulb memories for the whole Persian nation. It is a crippling disaster from which they will barely recover, and to which the only possible response is to weep, then go home and try to survive.

Bibliography for further reading

- Barrett, James. 1995. 'Narrative and the Messenger in Aeschylus' *Persians*', *American Journal of Philology* 116: 539-57.
- Brown, R., and J. Kulik. 1977. 'Flashbulb memories', *Cognition* 5: 73-99.
- Conacher, Desmond J. 1996. *Aeschylus: The Earlier Plays and Related Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).
- Gagarin, Michael. 1976. *Aeschylean Drama* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press).
- Goldhill, Simon. 1988. 'Battle Narrative and Politics in Aeschylus' *Persae*', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 108: 189-93.
- Ewans, Michael, trans. 1996. *Aischylos: Suppliants and Other Dramas* (London: Everyman). [Ewans' introduction to the *Persians* (pp. xxv-xxxi) is paired with substantial notes (pp. 169-185) giving extensive advice on staging and blocking.]
- Hall, Edith. 1989. *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition Through Tragedy* (Oxford: OUP). [Chapter 2 is specifically about the *Persians*.]
- Helm, James J. 2004. 'Aeschylus' Genealogy of Morals', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 134: 23-54.
- Kitto, H.D.F. 1961. *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen).
- , 1966. *Poiesis: Structure and Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press). [His chapter on *Persians*, though a bit outdated, is still the standard introduction to the play.]
- Lembe, Janet, and C.J. Herington, trans. 1981. *Aeschylus: Persians* (The Greek Tragedy in New Translations) (Oxford: OUP). [The introduction by C.J. Herington, pp. 3-29, is quite useful.]
- Lincoln, Bruce. 2000. 'Death by Water: Strange Events at the Strymon (*Persae* 492-507) and the Categorical Opposition of East and West', *Classical Philology* 95: 12-20.
- McClure, Laura. 2006. 'Maternal Authority and Heroic Disgrace in Aeschylus's *Persae*', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 136: 71-97.
- O'Neill, Eugene, Jr. 1942. 'Note on Phrynichus' *Phoenissae* and Aeschylus' *Persae*', *Classical Philology* 37: 425-27.
- Pelling, Christopher. 1997. 'Aeschylus' *Persae* and History', in C. Pelling (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford: OUP), 1-20.
- Podlecki, Anthony. 1966. *The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).
- Rosenbloom, David. 1995. 'Myth, History, and Hegemony in Aeschylus', in B. Goff (ed.), *History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 91-130.
- Sancisi-Weedenburg, H. 1983. 'Exit Atossa: Images of Women in Greek Historiography on Persia', in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (eds.), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London: Croom Helm), 20-33.
- Schenker, D. S. 1994. 'The Queen and the Chorus in Aeschylus' *Persae*', *Phoenix* 48: 283-93.
- Segal, Charles. 1993. *Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow* (Durham NC: Duke University Press).

- Thalmann, William G. 1980. 'Xerxes' Rags: Some Problems in Aeschylus' *Persians*.' *American Journal of Philology* 101: 260-82.
- Winnington-Ingram, R.P. 1983. *Studies in Aeschylus* (Cambridge: CUP).
- Xydas, Fotini. 2003. 'Representations of Persians in Greek Attic Vase Paintings: The Frontal Face of a Foreigner'. *Penn History Review* (Spring 2003): 61-86. [Downloadable online at < www.pennhistoryreview.com/archives/03/xydas.pdf>]