

The Yoke in Aeschylus' "Persians"

To my mind, the dramatic climax of "Persians" occurs when the ghost of Darius learns of Xerxes' defeat at Salamis and then foretells the utter defeat of his expedition at the battle of Plataea. It is at this point that the Persians fully realize the reversal of their fortunes, and recognize its cause in Xerxes' pride. It is followed by the denouement of Xerxes' arrival on the scene at the end of the play, confirming the worst and lamenting, together with the Chorus, the fall of Persia. These scenes are paralleled by the earlier scene in which the queen tells her foreboding dream to the Chorus, foretelling the defeat of the Persians, followed by the arrival of the Herald confirming the dream, at least partially, with news of the debacle at Salamis.

Both scenes feature an image of a yoke. Indeed, this image appears many times throughout the play, always associated with the Persians. It is a symbol of the Persian will to dominate and control, their organization of life into masters and slaves.

At the opening of the play, the Persian elders state, "The neighbors of Tmolus, they threaten to yoke in servitude the Hellas..." (P48) Later in the same speech, they boast that Xerxes "the destroyer of cities" is "yoking the neck of the sea...and the furious leader the herd of populous Asia drives..." (P70) At line 123, "All the horse and infantry like a swarm of bees have gone, crossing the yoke of the sea." As a result, Persian wives are "left all alone in the yoke" (P139), a premonition of the Persian woman in the Queen's dream.

In the Queen's dream, Greece and Asia are portrayed as equally beautiful, equally noble heiresses, both provided with their proper dwelling places. Their conflict begins before Xerxes' aggression, and his campaign is represented as an attempt to pacify an existing conflict by yoking both women together to a single chariot, driven by a single king. The Persian woman is portrayed as accepting the yoke, yet not in abject abasement but as rearing up in pride, as a fine horse would. There is a sense here that the yoking of this woman is seen as appropriate, as even ennobling, as only the finest horse would be yoked to the king's chariot. The Greek woman is portrayed as "annoyed", and will not accept the yoke but breaks it, and consequently also breaks the yoke from Asia and overturns the chariot. This is bad behavior for a horse, though fine behavior for a woman. The dream

suggests that, had Greece accepted the yoke, there would have been a type of glory, a type of beauty, as of beautiful paired mares pulling the royal chariot. This would be the Persian view. Yet as Greece and Asia are portrayed as women, there would be a horrible enslavement in their being yoked to any chariot driven by a single man. This is the Greek view.

There is nothing inherently evil about a yoke. It is a useful instrument for distributing a load upon one or more beasts of burden. It may even be rightly used upon men, provided they are carrying their own legitimate load, such as a canoe or a pair of buckets. It becomes an evil when it is applied unjustly, when the applier has no right to burden and control the one yoked. The Persians think in terms of a hierarchical society, with each segment yoked by the segment above, culminating in the single person of the king. They see no evil in the “yoking of Hellas”, and do not even seem to see a problem in Xerxes’ “yoking the neck of the sea” (P70) until Darius exposes his hubris in so doing in line 745. Even when they see the overweening pride involved, and realize that it was Xerxes’ downfall, they do not see anything wrong with his yoke upon themselves; in fact, they identify Persia with her king, with Xerxes himself. He must remain in the chariot; he is Persia, and if he falls, “Persia is destroyed” (P714) Even if he fails and returns broken, “Persia cannot hold him to account...He shall rule.” (P212) The final lament makes this obvious; there is no distinction between lamenting for Xerxes and lamenting for Persia. The Persians are Xerxes; Xerxes is the Persians.

In line 590 they lament, “No longer is tongue imprisoned kept, but loose are men, when loose the yoke of power’s bond, to bawl their liberty.” Thus are the Greeks. “They are slaves to none, nor are they subject.” (P243) There is no chariot here, no self-identification with a single monarch, not even with the physical city, which had been burned by the Persians. As the herald says, in response to the queen’s surprise that Athens had not fallen, “As long as there are men, the city stands.” (P349)