

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Orientation

Maybe the problem with interpreting and understanding *The Persians* is to be found in the fact that the tragedy of Aeschylus was preserved in written form (Maritz: unpublished).

The presupposition of this statement, which ignores the fact that the tragedy would not have been known to us, but had it been recorded in written form, is that a play is far greater than is implied by its written form.¹ In this sense, the written form of a play, whether modern or ancient, is considered to be a tool that assists in the construction or reconstruction of the performance for which it is intended. Few plays are written with the sole purpose of being read.²

In the same line of thought, Butcher (1904:177) provokingly states:

The people of all others who have done most for the intellectual progress of the race, whose literature more than once has roused the Western world by the shock of new ideas from lethargy to mental activity, knew but little of books, and looked with some suspicion on writing as of doubtful value for awakening thought.

This quotation is understood in terms of its emphasising the mental and scholarly distance between appreciating, viewing, reading or analysing a play in either its written, “pre-produced” form and its performed, “produced” form. The written version is not the “real thing” yet, the words have not been uttered, and the written version is incomplete,

¹ Reference to the written text also prepares for a distinction between the text of the dramatist, the text of the reader, and the text in its physical form. Eagleton (1988:77) refers to the process of reading for reception theory as always being dynamic. He considers Roman Ingarden, who calls a literary work “a set of schemata, which the reader must actualise”. A script or a play on paper is therefore only actualised once it is performed.

² See Swart (1990:6) on Greek drama that was possibly written to be read. This is also the place of drama as literature, how drama - especially tragedy - came to be studied and appreciated in the classroom and the study. See also Taplin (1978): a play is in essence the visual and oral experience on-stage (theatre). Only with the later recording of drama on paper did the literary study of drama commence. The theatre performance should thus always have primacy over the written drama, apart from plays that were intended to be studied in their written format. As Taplin notes (1978:2), Aristophanes and Plato took the audience directed nature of drama for granted. Taplin (1978) also confirms the fact that Aristotle is one of the first critics of read plays.

lacking enactment. Where it does not contain stage directions, it merely indicates dialogue. From this, the play must be constructed. Dialogue is only one aspect of a performance. The director's "vision" is of great importance too, as is the interpreter's knowledge and orientation to the play. The text of the production is enriched by more than the mere written text, or by deductions made from it. Furthermore, a correct understanding of a play would require cues where the audience laughed, cried, fell silent or became angry. The same text could have the different emotional responses, which the dramatist intends to manipulate. To deduce these emotional responses is a hypothetical art. At best different possibilities could be indicated, depending on an understanding of the play's intention.

It would be an exhaustive enterprise to differentiate between modern aesthetic appreciation and critical analysis on the one hand, and modern and ancient understanding of the tragedy on the other. The tracing of the development of drama critique would complicate a scientifically accounted-for reflection on the difference between the ancient and the modern approaches. Focus is placed on how the one led into the other, and how the plays being produced contemporary to the drama analysts influenced their appreciation of Greek Tragedy. The transition between ancient and contemporary is made with caution, not neglecting the history of the theory of drama, but rather emphasising and directing towards the ancient interpretations, with references to the contemporary as orientation.

It could be argued that it is prejudicial to refer to the period when Aeschylus first produced *The Persians* as "Ancient", other than in a temporal context for purposes of identification. In his own sense Aeschylus revolutionised an already established and refined approach to stage art. He was contemporary in his world. References to "Antiquity", "Ancient" and "Early Greek" are thus used cautiously, since orientation to what is said could then only be through a contemporary perspective, thereby indicating a critical distance in terms of the present reading of *The Persians*, and the performance the first audience experienced.

To come to a better understanding of the play, a key is needed. Unfortunately, all that is currently available is the text of the play, a reconstruction of the socio-political and religious setting, and fragmentary evidence of how tragedies were appreciated at the festivals. There must have been criteria according to which tragedies were evaluated, in

order for one competitor to be announced the winner. Text structure, grammar, language, poetic and circumstantial studies have their restrictions, but all make unique contributions to developing a holistic view of what happened before, during and after a drama production in antiquity. Though the judges' guidelines were not documented as such, through reconstruction from (for example) Aristophanes, a good idea of what was considered worthy can be deduced.

The theory of tragedy did not originate with Aristotle, nor with Plato. Each dramatist, member of the audience and judge had a theory of tragedy, a concept of what made a tragedy good and successful, or not good and unsuccessful. Each had an idea of what was required to produce a stage production, in terms of the purpose of the production: whether it was to be entertainment, didactic, for prestige and recognition, or to bring reverence to the gods. Though Aristotle is taken as the general orientation to Greek Tragedy, he is by no means the only reference nor the most exhaustive. He had his own concerns and understanding of a phenomenon that was at once far greater than what his writings gives testimony to (tradition and dynamism), and at the same time also a phenomenon that has fallen victim to poor production quality and reduced audience value, due to the poor efforts of imitators and dramatists who had little creative genius.

It is also important to look at different interpretation perspectives in terms of “what is happening in the tragedy?” in terms of political, religious, aesthetic and entertainment value considerations, from a biographic (diachronic), a textual (synchronic) and receptive point of view. Though one of these three fields tend to be emphasised in preference to the others, depending on the analyst, it is nevertheless important to pay attention to all three. Where this study takes its orientation in the textual aspects, the play is read in terms of how it was received, and from there to what was intended. The textual is used as basis for reconstructing the drama production - not the historical production itself, or testimony to the production, as would be required for an accurate reception critique,³ or production development notes, which would have helped in assessing production intention.

³ Reception critique has its orientation in hermeneutics, and is also known as “reception aesthetics” (Eagleton 1988:74). Where reception theory is normally applied to the reader of literature, it is considered in a broader sense in this study to also include the audience of a stage production. Thus, a reader of a written play could also be considered as “audience”.

Any study that wishes to be specific in its aims of necessity cannot be complete in an exhaustive sense. It is more important for a study such as this to open up more concerns and indicate issues that could be pursued in different, though related, studies. The restriction to a specific set of questions also ensures that an emphasis is maintained on the field of study, as specified, and not on stumbled upon problems. On the other hand, a fuller investigation of such problems could contribute to a more justified reading. Thus, where arguments are developed in deviation, it is to substantiate the main line of thought, and not to attempt an exhaustive treatment of the read tragedy.

1.2 Problem areas

What key could be used to understand the tragedy? No single character predominates in *The Persians* (Will, 1976:27). It seems as if this were also the case in another tragedy of Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*. Another key to unlocking the tragedy is thus required. The problem is that contemporary understanding of tragedy gives character central significance, especially in terms of the tragic hero, following a reading of Aristotle.

This approach to tragedy can be seen in the work of Gaither (1953:1), who formulates the second assumption underlying her study as follows:

The character chosen to represent the tragic action is a key to the understanding of the concept of tragedy itself, regardless of the dramatist's emphasis, whether it be on the character or plot.

This assumption is drenched in Aristotelian theory. It would be necessary to unravel the Aristotelian theory, the problems lying within the theory, as related to *The Persians*, regarding the definition of tragedy, and Aristotle's understanding of tragedy. The relation between Aristotle and Plato is thus also in contention, as are other non-Aristotelian understandings within ancient approaches to tragedy.

In the words of Will (1976:27) on *The Persians*: "The play bathes in a single mood of doom." As will be indicated, the destruction of the Persians is very apparent even in the attempted grandeur of the opening sequence. The tragedy is not concerned with an elevated subject matter, with either a mythological hero, or a god as such. Its subjects are the defeated enemy. Many members of the audience, present at the historical performance, fought in those battles. However, the play implies an elevated subject in its deeper structure, viz. that of Divine Providence. The play does not present a historically accurate account. This is reflected in the obvious deviations in comparisons

with other historians, but uses the historic situation as structure. For example, the appearance of Darius, Xerxes' dead father, also defeated by the Greeks at Marathon, could not be taken as factual; nor the numbers of the enemies, often exaggerated to ridiculous proportions. Why, and to what effect? A primary clue is to be found in the name clusters. Although the lists contain actual names of people who were involved in the war, these are not historic figures, but constructions within the dramatic structure of the play.

How are these lists of enemy names to be compared to those of the heroes, when no Greek is mentioned by name, nor has a direct speaking part? The silence of the Greeks could be seen as an attempt to objectivity on the part of Aeschylus. His heroes (actual), the Greek generals, need not speak. The chaotic enemy elevates them sufficiently. Only the reported deviance of a Greek "collaborator" is recalled, and the Greek call to enter battle. Further it is the cries and woes of the Persians that dominate the performance.

The Persian gods are not mentioned,⁴ nor do they have place in the play. Rather, the gods of the Greek audience are the gods the Persians revere. The majority of the place names are Greek islands. How do these place clusters contrast to the clusters of enemy names? These names have been Hellenised, retaining original morphological structures, but being pronounced in Greek thus raising the question as to their function, change in meanings, especially because the Greek phonetic equivalents are often humorously contradictory to the Persian grandeur.

A further problem related to the play is a tendency within tragedy research: *The Persians* is often considered a historical play in terms of contemporary criteria of history (as also ancient history, e.g. Homer, Herodotus and Thucydides), and not in terms of its dramaturgic intention. An alternative reading of the play would include an interpretation of the Greek experience of the Persian wars, and of how Aeschylus crafted his play to present the recently defeated enemy as the subject matter, on the surface, referring to the Persians primarily and to Xerxes on a secondary level. Xerxes is at no point presented as a worthy leader, thus causing particular problems in attempting

⁴ See 157. The Queen is considered θεοῦ μὲν εὐνάτειρα Περσῶν, θεοῦ δὲ καὶ μήτηρ ἔφυσ - "spouse of the Persian god and also mother of their god". Darius was no god, nor, as Murray (1939:79-80) points out, was there any consideration of a Persian leader being revered as a god. While Murray considers this "apparently one of Aeschylus' mistakes", it substantiates the religious construct being imposed upon the Persians, which was predominantly Greek in character.

to analyse his character and function within the play in terms of a “tragic hero”. The only “elevated character” could be Darius, who stands in service, as a messenger, of divine justice and providence. The religious aspects of the play should receive far more attention in order to better appreciate the play.

1.3 Problem formulation

The tragedy, *The Persians* by Aeschylus, cannot be understood in terms of later interpretations of Aristotelian drama theory. The play does not conform to the requirements for tragic hero, character, plot, or structure. The question is whether a comparison between more ancient witnesses could help reconstruct a plausible drama theory applicable to Aeschylus, which would also be sufficiently universal in nature to encompass Aristotelian theory. In essence: What is a tragedy?

A second problem relates to the nature of the tragedy: whether it is historical by intention, design or instrument. There are inconsistencies in historic facts, as compared to Herodotus, and textual, as in implied dreams and the appearance of Darius. Also, the formidable enemy of less than ten years before is now portrayed in sympathetic colour before an emotional audience. In essence: How real is tragedy?

The third problem this study will be investigating is how to appreciate the emphasis on the names of the enemy, where not one name of a Greek is mentioned - only names of islands. The names of the gods are Greek; the names of the enemy seem to be compounded Greek adjectives, contributing to the tragedy’s impact, sounding at once foreign and noting a cord of differing significance. What was the dramatic intention of including and emphasising the Persian names, and Greek islands? What dramatic effect do these names have on the play, and on its understanding? In essence: How does tragedy effect?

The historicity of the names is not disputed. It is contended that they take on a further significance in terms of their etymological potential, as expressed in their dramatic adaptation as compounded Greek adjectives. It is thus important to ask why Aeschylus selected the names he did, and what effect he wished to achieve through their placement within the various name clusters.

1.4 Hypothesis

The play is a tribute to the victory at Salamis, emphasised from the perspective of the enemy's defeat, but with a vital moral undertone. It thus employs a mythologisation of contemporary history with a didactic substructure, being instrumental in patriotic upliftment and emphasising the mortality of man at once. "Do not misinterpret the gods or anger them, or be rash, or be other than one's nature". The name clusters promote this understanding.

According to our hypothesis, understanding the name clusters and mention of Greek gods help to a better dramaturgic appreciation of the play – intention, presentation, reception, and reaction. Furthermore, the play falls outside the scope of Aristotelian theory of drama, as it is understood in terms of later interpretations. However, analysis of other ancient drama theories does not exclude Aristotelian theory in essence.

1.5 Methodology

This study of the tragedy is a textual analysis, thus being more a study in literature than drama (performance) appraisal. It is thus primarily concerned with the tragedy in its capacity to be a potential stage production. Stage performance and audience reception must be inferred from textual evidence from the text of *The Persians*. The study of the names, though based on a textual analysis, relates to an understanding of Greek drama as it was performed, using contemporary categories of pre-production, production and reception. These terms, in a literary context, refer to the development of the play, the performance, and the reception. The names are understood as an integral part of the text, structurally and in terms of historic significance, but also as dramatic device used to enhance performance, and generate response. An integrated approach is thus required covering three integrated, but often distinguished areas of specialisation: historic, literary (linguistic), and dramaturgic.

Criticism on the play can be divided into four groups, signifying four periods of response to *The Persians*: the first group would be the judges and first audience, who saw the original production; the second group would be the ancient literary and drama critics, commentators and observers (Aristotle, Aristophanes, Plato, Horace, and Longinus); the third group would be the scholars who "rediscovered" Aristotle and classic tragedy during the Renaissance; the fourth group would be modern structuralists

(either emphasising history, language, art of tragedy, whether sociologists, feminists, dramaticians, linguists, modernists or post modernists, philosophers or phenomenologists). Representatives of each group will be used to illustrate their approaches to the main concerns of this study. Attention will also be given to perspectives falling outside these categories, but which also serve to emphasise the need for a broader, more comprehensive approach to the reading of classic drama.

The study programme is reflected in the division of chapters of this manuscript. Each of the phases overlapped and was influenced by the insights reflected in the others: The introduction looks into the problems of reading and thereby understanding Greek Drama. The play was first read critically in the Greek, translated, and then the complexities of understanding it according to contemporary interpretations of Aristotle were investigated. The second phase concerns the historic context of the play, in its being categorised as a historic play, and in terms of its history of interpretation. The third phase pertains to the stagecraft, and draws attention to the importance of diction as communicator of more than mere story. The fourth phase, the actual subject of the study, uncovers the dramatic contribution of the names and name clusters to the appraised reception of the tragedy. The names and interpretation of the names need to be understood in a historic context, in their linguistic functions and how they are integrated into the structure and mood of the play, and how they function similar to set dressing, being descriptive, but also emotive in their intention and reception.

1.6 Conclusion

This study will indicate that the traditional views on approaching *The Persians* need to be reviewed. The close reading of the personal names in their phoneme and morpheme potentialities, and against the broader structures of names – of gods and places in *The Persians*, will show that the play is not as simplex as may be assumed with an initial reading. It is crucial to the play to understand it against the social background of its first performance, as well as the historic battle being alluded to. Furthermore, not only is a comprehensive understanding of Tragedy as a phenomenon paramount to appreciating *The Persians*, but an understanding of *The Persians* - being unique in its action (communicated via the messengers) and in its use of characters (communicated via the names) - contributes significantly to understanding the phenomenon of Tragedy more comprehensively.

Therefore, this study will close with a reading of selected passages from *The Persians*. However, before this is attempted, the play must be scrutinised in its historicity and social context. This serves as background to understanding the play, theoretically, ancient, intermediate and modern, as art form, production and performance, where this study gives particular attention to the audience's reception of the play, which is the intention of the dramatist – to evoke reaction.