

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORIC CONTEXT OF *THE PERSIANS*

In this chapter a preliminary overview of the historic context of *The Persians* will be given. The overview will serve as background for the discussion on drama theory in Chapter 3 and for the analysis of the names and name clusters found in this tragedy. An understanding of the names in *The Persians* is central to determining a historic orientation to the play.

This chapter indicates the relations, in historic context, between the history proper, history as reflected in tragedy (*The Persians*), theories on history, and the related history of drama theories.

2.1 Introduction

What is a defeat to some, is a victory to others. As a theme this idea is conveyed well in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where the witches mention "the battle lost and won" (I:I,4). This medieval tragedy comments on the phenomenon of the writing of the history of war, which normally contains a reflection on the loss of the opposition and an emphasis of the victory from own perspective, in cases where the historian sides with the victors. In the opposite case, where the historian is sympathetic with the losers, the historian's task is different, and thus emphasis is placed on aspects other than on the war itself, to lessen the impact of the loss, and to prepare for revenge. Cultural awareness, economic growth, and the establishment of international relations are emphasised. The Persians as a nation, under the leadership of Xerxes (who wished to avenge his father's loss at Marathon), serves as an example of a defeated people, whose fate was recorded and remembered by the victors, the Greeks - and especially so by the Athenians, who played a leading role in the victory at Salamis, under the leadership of Themistocles.⁵

⁵ Cartledge (1997:25) discusses the fate of Themistocles, the champion of the battle at Salamis and of early Athenian democracy at the time of the first performance of *The Persians*. At the time of the performance he was embroiled in a political battle, which eventually saw him leaving the *polis*.

The fate of Xerxes and Themistocles,⁶ the war generals, whether they were commemorated or not, depended on the outcome of the war. It was important for the dramatists to present their respective fates in perspective of the other, in line with Greek considerations for impartiality, which was made more difficult in *The Persians*, because a large part of the audience was involved in the battle.⁷ The formal presentation of impartiality in *The Persians* is expounded, in the words of Broadhead (1960:xxxii): “by the dramatist’s marked restraint in describing the Greek victory....”

A further distinction could be made on the theme of “battle lost and won”. In general terms, the outcome of a war would also affect the post war lives of the soldiers and civilians. For the victorious camp the initial benefits would be: economic growth; developments in education, trade and industry; a boost in national pride; and the general betterment of living conditions. Eventually the state of “well-being” would give way, as was experienced by Themistocles at the time when *The Persians* was first performed. A state of decadence would threaten the state of “well-being”, in terms of religious, moral and traditional values. There would be a rise in levels of corruption amongst army and political leaders, and the hunger for more power.⁸ Thus, the subject matter of *The Persians* is at once very daring, relevant and carefully presented.

More specifically, it appears as if Aeschylus were combining the two perspectives on war - that of a battle lost and won (victory to Greece),⁹ and that of a battle won and lost (after the victory the onset of decadence) - to reaffirm the notion that everything (far in the past, recent past and present) is influenced by the will of the gods, and that homage should be paid to these gods. Furthermore, a reminder is made not to contradict the nature the gods bestowed upon one.¹⁰ For the Persians this nature implied that they were

⁶ “... ‘It is not we who have done this,’ exclaimed Themistocles, the chief engineer of the victory, after his crowning success. ‘It was the gods and heroes striking down the pride and impiety of man’” (Herodotus VIII 109 in Murray 1939:7).

⁷ Themistocles is not mentioned in the play, nor is his presence implied by the text. However, indirect comparisons can be traced between himself and Xerxes as heroes or “failures”, especially regarding the political constitutions and the adoration of the followers: for Xerxes this would imply his mother and the chorus (see 852-906); for Themistocles this would imply the immediate audience.

⁸ Thucydides (Book 9) contrasts the inability and ability of different powers to gain greatness, esp. regarding the obstacles which the national growth encountered in various localities. He relates that “wherever there were tyrants, their habit of providing simply for themselves, ... made safety the great aim of their policy, and prevented anything great proceeding from them” (This apart from Sicily, which gained great power).

⁹ In the words of Xerxes, the tragedy (1027) is at once a disaster (1030) and a prize for our enemy (1034), which is Greece.

¹⁰ See Darius’ speeches (681-842).

destined to be the keepers of sheep, an honour bestowed by Zeus himself.¹¹ A further implication of Aeschylus' reminder is for leaders not to be influenced by poor advice, like Xerxes was.¹² The theme of nature, and going against one's natural "designation" is expounded further in Xerxes attacking Greece by both sea¹³ and land,¹⁴ when the ways of the sea he knew not (81-84 & 100-106).

Simultaneously, the post war boom, experienced by Athens after the victory at Salamis, also benefited the arts. In this period of political stability, tragedy, for example, was able to establish itself to a far greater extent than was ever possible before. *The Persians* could thus also be seen as a tribute to a war. The positive outcome of the war made experimentation in drama possible.

The historic perspective Aeschylus worked with would have been Homeric,¹⁵ being cyclic and not linear¹⁶ - making it more difficult for contemporary historians, schooled in views of linear history, to appreciate the cyclic views on time. Therefore, this chapter

¹¹ Cf. Speech of Darius (759-786). The ἔν' ἄνδρα πάσης Ἀσίδος (763) is emphasised in this speech, but directly after mentioning the original "pastoral" bestowal over the Ἀσίδος μηλοτρόφου ταγεῖν (763-4), Darius mentions the different Persian warlords, each time emphasising their virtues and vices in relation to the gods, except in the cases of Maraphis and Artaphrenes (778). According to the theory expounded in chapter 4, the Greek phonetic morphology of these names (Μάρα φῆς - φῆς and Ἄρτ[ι]αφρένης) could be translated as "he was dead" and "he who was foolish", which would emphasise the Persians' dependence on the wise conduct of their leader, contrary to the foolishness exhibited by Xerxes (782-786). See also the strophe and antistrophe 65 and 73-4, where the royal army, the city destroyers, and the impetuous lord, who drives his godly herd, is contrasted. See also contrasting allotment by Moira, who allotted the Persians the power to destroy towers in battles (93-99).

¹² Apart from the trickery by the Greek messenger Xerxes accepted rashly (355-363), he was easily manipulated by evil men (753-758). Compare this to the old queen who asks cautiously for advice from the wise, elder men (170-175) and to Darius who requests the aged city guardians to give good advice to Xerxes, who lacks good reason (829-838).

¹³ This results in him contradicting the allotment of land to the Persians (749-753).

¹⁴ The theme of the two sided attack is well explored by Aeschylus (65-70).

¹⁵ It is important to indicate that Homer does not present theories for either history (historic events) or for the writing of history. Homer's approaches to history and history writing are deduced from his writings. However, it may be inferred that his approaches were in line with the Greek world view contemporary to his times. The reference to Homer is made to indicate that the older Homeric history, rather than that of Herodotus and Thucydides, who wrote their histories later than *The Persians*, would have moulded Aeschylus' thought. Even for Herodotus and Thucydides, Homer was still the authority on the early history of Greece.

¹⁶ Christian scholars, who based their linear time view on the Jewish time view, introduced distinctions between linear and cyclic time views. For example, St Augustine is contrary to the classic Greek view, as is evident in the numerous fragments of Heraclitus. The study of Greek Drama by the Renaissance scholars would have been influenced through their understanding of Greek history in terms of a linear model, being superimposed over the cyclically structured Greek history (Homeric). During the second half of the ninth century, studying literature of antiquity become a focus once more. Scholars and churchmen in the circle of the patriarch Photius were involved in this revival (Cf. Zimmermann 1991:5). See also Hobson (1998:12-13) on linear analysis and history. Compare also to *Phaedo*, in which Plato sets out to prove that the soul is immortal, that life proceeds from death as death from life. See also De Romilly (1968) on *Time in Greek tragedy*. See also Jones (1962:80) on Judeo-Christian considerations.

will indicate that *The Persians* should be considered more akin to plays that are based on and interpret epic (Homeric) history, since their views on history would have been more similar. Caution is thus practised not to place *The Persians* historically without carefully studying Aeschylus' treatment of the recent historical events in light of Homeric history.

The history theories of the drama theorists are considered to have an influence on their appraisal of a tragedy, in terms of the individual play's historic placements, and of tragedy as an art form. A further factor, which complicates the assessment of the perspectives of drama theorists, is that drama theorists tend to incorporate and interpret their predecessors' theories to suit their own views and aspirations. An indirect result is that most of the contemporary theories on tragedy are based on the work of the Renaissance tragedy critics such as Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484-1558) and Lodovico Castelvetro (1505-1571) (Wilson 1980:314).

2.2 Views on history

Scholars' thoughts on the origin of tragedy have been found to be central to their treatment of history considerations on Greek tragedy.

Historically speaking, tragedies could be divided into two basic kinds (Wilson 1980:307): traditional and modern tragedy. Where modern tragedy would refer to plays of the past century, traditional tragedy would include works from several periods of the past. Wilson (1980:308) indicates the three noteworthy periods of history for the study of tragedy as: "Greece in the fifth century BC; England in the late sixteenth century; and France in the seventeenth century." This is a very general division, since, when the developments and different accentuations within the period of Greek tragedy is considered, and direct comparisons are made to alter-context tragedies of later periods, only very general observations could be made in determining common and universal characteristics.¹⁷

¹⁷ See Campbell (1904), who conducts a comparative study between Aeschylus, Sophocles and Shakespeare. Though he does do justice to the Greek tragedians, his orientation to them is made biased through his predilection to "promote" Shakespeare. Similarly, Cook (1967) sees the classic line continuing through from Homer, through Dante to Milton.

The distinguished forms of later tragedies were based upon models derived from tragedies of previous eras, while making use of contemporary tragedy theories. These critic-specific peculiarities are shrouded by claims to universality in drama. “Universal observations” are often made after the plays have been performed. As *The Persians* illustrates, there are sufficient inconsistencies between the universal rules as set out and observations made from the play, to require a reconsideration of the characteristics of Greek tragedy, which are normally used to help define traditional tragedy in its entirety.¹⁸ The basis for a reconsideration of these characteristics can be found in: historic reflection; theory and techniques of drama; and detailed play analysis.

2.2.1 The origins of tragedy

In contrast to other theorists of tragedy,¹⁹ Else (1965:2) considers tragedy, not in terms of “development”, as advocated by Aristotle (*Poetics* 4.1449a14), but as “the product of two successive *creative acts* by two men of genius”. These “two men of genius” would be Thespis and Aeschylus, and their “creative acts” would be the creation of *tragôidia* by the former and the creation of tragic drama by the latter (Else 1965:2). For the correct appraisal of tragedy, Else (1965:8) advocates the need to understand the circumstances and ideas which prompted its creation, rather than concentrating on the assumed and unfounded theories on the “development” of tragedy.

The different theories²⁰ on the origins of tragedy could be considered as mostly emphasising an origin in religion and then, more specifically, in religious cult:

Thus although the cults chosen for the purpose differ widely and the theories built on them more widely still, it is a fact that almost all the countless views put forward on the subject fix on some religious ritual – Dionysiac, Eleusinian, other agrarian, hero-cult, etc. – as the root of tragedy (Else 1965:11).

¹⁸ Wilson (1980:308) distinguishes between 4 characteristics: “... In traditional tragedy, the universe seems determined to trap the hero or heroine in a fateful web”; “The figures of tragedy ... face a tragic fate and must go forward to meet it”; “The hero or heroine shows a willingness and an immense capacity to suffer”; and “The language of traditional tragedy is verse”.

¹⁹ Modern theorists include Herder, Lessing, Kant, Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Bertold Brecht (Reedy 2000:1).

²⁰ Else (1965:12) classifies the theories on the origins of tragedy using three groups according to the presumed sources of tragedy: 1. The dithyramb – the cult of Dionysus, and mostly but not always the satyrikon (Aristotle & Wilamowitz); 2. Other orgiastic or mystery rituals (Gilbert Murray); 3. the cult of the dead (hero-cult) (Martin P Nilsson).

The root of tragedy does not help us to understand its temporal impact on audiences, or its performance in the competition. Even the development from the “goat song”, τράγος ᾠδή, to τραγωδία is not convincing. The argument rests upon an illegitimate etymological deduction of word origins, meaning development and language suppositions.²¹ Even so, an understanding of the distinction between dithyramb and satyr-play, being different genres, helps in the analysis and understanding of tragedy, because tragedy employs various genres to achieve its own specific goals. The presence of elements of both dithyramb and satyr in tragedy would therefore not be negated, only the adopted forms would now have to be considered within the context of the tragedy. It would also not be justifiable for the satyr and dithyramb to be evaluated against the background of the tragedy, since they belong to different categories.²²

Thus, the contributing and formative forces (as derived from the play intrinsically and from the immediate context) should be emphasised rather than an origin-historic construct. The emphasis on the historical limits an understanding of “the dramatic”.²³ The setting to one side of deliberations on the “origins of tragedy” opens the way to focussing on what Else (1965:33) calls the things of first importance: “things such as the mode of self-presentation and the sense of tragedy, without which the tragic drama never could have – never has – come into being”. The present analysis considers tragedy in terms of its presentation on-stage and representation of a motif as contributing towards its sense.

However, it is important to note that the views of history of the theorists of tragedy influenced their contemplation on the nature of the plays. It is thus important to review

²¹ Else (1965:15) proposes three reasons why “satyrikon” cannot be considered as an origin of “tragōidia”: 1. The connection was only made because the term “satyrikon” was mentioned in the *Poetics*; the connection of song of goats with tragedy via etymological deductions, and reductions; 3. the nature of the satyrs were of a non-serious tone, implicating a development from “gay to grave”. Where the second reason is exemplified in the main argument, all three postulations deserve more deliberation. The difference in tone between the satyr and tragedy indicates different forms. Historic differentiation does not imply historic development. Satyrs were later also included in the drama competitions in liaison to the tragedies. A closer reading of what Aristotle meant when mentioning Satyrs is also required, as is a reading of his references to dithyrambs.

²² Compare to a contemporary dance production, where elements of e.g. rumba (slow) and samba (fast) are combined within a single chorus.

²³ Else (1965:5) considers the different senses of “dramatic” and drama, both contemporary and ancient. It is possible to conclude that the acts these terms describe were presented and received differently, whether accompanied with action, implying it, or void of it; whether the action was in the person or in that being spoken or sung in the plot/story or in a movement on-stage, or being static.

the theorists' approaches to the origins of drama, in the context of their history views, to arrive at an appreciation of their contributions to understanding the genre "tragedy".

2.2.2 Views on history of drama theorists

The importance of considering the history views of the theorists of drama is to be found in the fact that these invariably, either influence their theorising on the historicity of the tragedies, or help to understand the theorists' concerns when contemplating tragedy. This consideration is appropriated to the fact that the revival of the study of ancient tragedy²⁴ was conducted primarily by scholars with a Christian theological training²⁵ and world view,²⁶ or were strongly influenced by it. On the other hand, being primarily Western European, such scholars were concerned with an attempted indication of the continuation between ancient Greece and modern Europe, regarding culture, philosophy, language, politics and art.²⁷

One of the important avenues to emphasising this continuation is the reading of Aristotle. For latter tragedy theorists, therefore, the *Poetics* is often read a-historically, to accentuate the universality of Aristotle's considerations, to thus confirm the continuation between Ancient Greece and modern Europe. One of the profoundest examples of such a tragedy theorist is Friedrich Nietzsche, who imposed his structure of history over the span of civilisation and cultural heritage, while basing much of his reasoning on Aristotle.

²⁴ The study of Tragedy in the West was stimulated by Aristotle's *Poetics*, which was "found" by the Italian Renaissance. The first critical edition with a commentary of *The Poetics* was Francisco Robertello's (1548) (Edwards 1967:157).

²⁵ This presumption is based on the grounds that late medieval universities, in their humanity faculties, specialised in theology, law and philosophy.

²⁶ For an interesting perspective on the relationship between language and worldview see Hobson 1998:214 & 215. The perspectives deal with the debate between Derrida and Benveniste. Benveniste argued that Aristotle's categories are an unconscious extrapolation from Greek grammar, an ontologizing of grammatical categories specific to Greek. Derrida reacted, pointing out that the fact that Benveniste ignores the historical localization of his own argument, is historically restricting the scope of Aristotle's. Whorf's is a further perspective treated by Hobson (ibid). The Whorfian position would state that a worldview is imposed on its speakers by a language and its determination of conceptions through grammar and lexis.

²⁷ Hobson (1998:1) indicates: "The putting together of arguments, even in a scientific tradition, is affected by the particular scientific tradition and the particular language, national and cultural context it is occurring in." The three primary academic "analysts" of tragedy (aesthetics; philology; drama), thus, would each have their own language systems which are at once determined by time, culture and language, and influenced by factors outside their field of expertise.

2.2.2.1 Aristotle

Without regarding the immediate historic context of Aristotle, or his views on history,²⁸ apart from his insistence on tragedy stemming from dithyrambs in contrast to comedy having its origin in phallic songs (*Poetics* 1449a9-11), it must be realised that Aristotle had his own designs for considering the development of tragedy:

τὸ μὲν οὖν ἐπισκοπεῖν εἰ ἄρα ἔχει ἤδη ἡ τραγωδία τοῖς εἶδεσιν ἱκανῶς ἢ οὐ, αὐτό τε καθ' οὐτὸ κρίναι καὶ πρὸς τὰ θέατρα, ἄλλος λόγος. γενομένη δ' οὖν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς αὐτοσχεδιαστικῆς καὶ αὐτὴ καὶ ἡ κωμωδία, καὶ ἡ μὲν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐξαρχόντων τὸν διθύραμβον, ἡ δὲ ἀπὸ τῶν τὰ φαλλικά ἃ ἔτι καὶ νῦν ἐν πολλαῖς τῶν πόλεων διαμένει νομιζόμενα, κατὰ μικρὸν ἠϋξήθη προαγόντων ὅσον ἐγένετο φανερὸν αὐτῆς· καὶ πολλὰς μεταβολὰς μεταβαλοῦσα ἡ τραγωδία ἐπαύσατο, ἐπεὶ ἔσχε τὴν αὐτῆς φύσιν.

To consider whether or not tragedy is even now developed in its types – judging it intrinsically and in relation to audiences – is a separate matter. Anyhow, when it came into being from an improvisatory origin (that is, both tragedy and comedy: the former from the leaders of dithyramb, the other from the leaders of the phallic songs, which remain even now a custom in many cities), it was gradually enhanced as poets developed the potential they saw in it. And after going through many changes, tragedy ceased to evolve, since it had achieved its own nature.

From this brief quotation it is evident that Aristotle is concerned with working with specific genres (τοῖς εἶδεσιν ἱκανῶς) as they make themselves manifest in current times in terms of their own specific characteristics (αὐτῆς φύσιν). It would appear that Aristotle is not as interested in the historic development of tragedy as he is in the format in which it was performed during his age. Although he does cover the history briefly, he takes selected aspects into consideration. These considerations were in turn developed, often representing the sum total of historic contemplation on the refinements and developments within the genre of tragedy. The developments chosen by Aristotle represent the formal considerations he requires to emphasise the coming to be of tragedy into its own form, thus implying that the early tragedies need not be considered as “real” tragedies in their “true” nature (*Poetics* 1449a15-30).

²⁸ Finely (1942:325) has pointed out that Aristotle called tragedy more philosophic than history, on the ground that tragedy was capable of revealing the inner relationships of human life, whereas history was not (cf. *Poetics* 1551b6). Finely assumes that Aristotle did not consider Thucydides!

Aristotle's design for *Poetics* is set out in his opening paragraph (1447a12), in which he states:

... ἀρχάμενοι κατὰ φύσιν πρῶτον ἀπὸ τῶν πρώτων.

... beginning, as is natural, from first principles.

This methodology, of systematic and analytic discourse, which sorts everything into categories and sources these to causes,²⁹ is characteristic of all his philosophical thought. It also provides a key to understanding the *Poetics* against the background of his *Metaphysics* and *Ethics*, as well as to his construction imposed on the history of tragedy. The question is how this search for the basic principles was affected by his view on history, and how this differed from other Greek thinkers. The assertion of this relation between methodology and world view is important, as is the reminder that *Poetics* is a construction and not an attempt to portray a linear chronology of tragedy's history. It is thus rather problematic to use Aristotle as a source for the chronological "development" of tragedy, without the reserve that he is working with categories, and not necessarily with facts.³⁰

2.2.2.2 Nietzsche

Where Else (1965:9) indicates that for Nietzsche tragedy stems from Dionysus and satyrs, Smith (2000:xiv) gives a clearer elaboration by considering Nietzsche's pursuit for origins within the context of Nietzsche's observation of the decadence of modern life.

Nietzsche had a primary concern for German culture where he wished to establish a continuation and link between Germany and Greece. Nietzsche thus used a model of history incorporating origin and consequence, where an emphasis on the origin could help fashion the present. Smith goes further than Else in indicating that Nietzsche sought a hidden or unknown origin behind the avowed or accepted one (Smith 2000:xxviii). For Nietzsche, tragedy originates in music, not in the chorus, and serenity

²⁹ Ἐοίκασι δὲ γεννηῆσαι μὲν ὅλως τὴν ποιητικὴν αἰτίαι δύο τινές καὶ αὐταὶ φυσικαί (*Poetics* 1448b)
 "It can thus be seen that poetry broadly came to be by two causes, which are both natural."

³⁰ This assertion also holds true for the duo ἔλεος καὶ φόβος (pity and fear), when considered as antonyms constituting two poles of emotion within the framework of Aristotle's *Ethics*.

is not the origin but simply a product of Greek culture (Smith 2000:xxviii). Tragedy is thus born from the spirit of music (understood in Wagnerian sense).³¹

Nietzsche's view on history³² is based on the antitheses of different typologies:³³ the Judaeo-Christian versus the Hellenic, the Semitic versus the Aryan, and the Romanic versus the Germanic. Smith (2000:xiv) indicates that these typologies "are translated by Nietzsche into the terms of the new typological opposition at the centre of the argument of *The birth of Tragedy* – that between the Apollonian and the Dionysian". Each of these typologies is a critique of the decadence of modern life, and is related also to the decline of tragedy, where Socrates played an important role (Smith 2000:xix), as did rationalism in current German culture (Smith 2000:xviii). A continuum can thus be identified in Nietzsche's history view, a development from the primitive to the sophisticated, where the primitive "was somehow more real, potent, *urwüchsig*" (Else 1965:11).

It is thus possible to discern why Nietzsche read tragedy in terms of the dichotomy of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, as derived at once from his historical frame and from his endeavour to create a basis for the upliftment of Germanic culture.

One philologist who reacted severely against Nietzsche's reconstruction of the history of Greek tragedy is Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, whom Reedy (2000:4) indicates, became the most famous classical philologist of his generation and one of the most famous of all time. Reedy (2000:4) notes that, "Scholars have noted the 'almost pathological tone of detestation, sometimes marked by personal abuse' of the attack". The creative reconstruction of the history of tragedy has received greater appreciation by Silk & Stern (1981:137). They consider *The birth of Tragedy* in four areas: music; customs and religion; literary and intellectual history; and the origin of history. Furthermore, Reedy (2000:4) proposes the consideration that *The birth of Tragedy* should be read like a myth, revealing Nietzsche's attempts to indicate the strong relations between Greek and German music. Silk & Stern (1981:137) find this idea

³¹ Wagner considered his own operas to be a "rebirth of Greek, especially Aeschylean tragedy" (Else 1965:110n2).

³² According to Smith (2000:160 n109) Nietzsche is applying the methods of historical research, which sought to provide an objective documented reconstruction of the past "as it really was".

³³ This antithesis is also considered in opposition to the maintained Greek harmony, Greek Beauty, Greek serenity (*The birth of Tragedy*: ch.20 – Nietzsche 2000:108).

preposterous. Thus German music (Wagnerian) could be considered (following Nietzschean thought) the cultural heritage of Greek tragedy.

2.2.2.3 Derrida and Lyotard

Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard are selected to represent twentieth century thinkers who have influenced the way Greek Tragedy is approached. They are also chosen as representatives of post modern approaches to history. Their inclusion in this study is an indication that the study of Greek Tragedy is relevant to twenty-first century literature and drama analysis.

Williams (1998:1) indicates that Lyotard's work is indispensable to any reflection on the most difficult problems of late twentieth century society and culture. According to his philosophy, testimony to difference and to fragmentation (the post modern condition) is made in art and in literature. Thus, Lyotard is as important for his theories on art as he is for his political and social theory. Lyotard uses Aristotle's study of time to show how the present is a moment that is always lost once it is represented³⁴ as a moment in time, that is, as the moment thought of in relation to the past and the future (Williams 1998:76). Williams (1998:77) quotes Lyotard to indicate how the latter uses Aristotle to indicate that we cannot capture the present moment – the “now” – in time:

Aristotle ... distinguishes time which, in universes presented by phrases, situates the instances constituting these universes in relation to each other (the before/after, the now), from the presentation-event (or occurrence) which as such is absolute (now). As soon as one phrases the latter, it is placed among the relations of phrase universes.

The present is distinguished from the past through the process of fragmentation, as opposed to the search for continuance, and discontinuance in history results. The recession from the event, though, “I believe”, helps in understanding the various spheres and relations between belief systems, events, myths, the interpretations of these and the language used to achieve this.

Derrida is known for his programme of “deconstruction” (Hobson 1998:189). Though being a philosophical programme, deconstruction also has applications for - and has had an influence on - language studies, linguistics and history.

³⁴ Lyotard also calls occurrences that go beyond our powers of representation, “events” (Williams 1998: 22).

Though the language is philosophical, the debate on history Derrida is involved in still concerns an understanding of 'time' - linear, and non-linear. Hobson is discussing the 'two infinities' in historical thought, that is: "moving towards an absolute, exceeding the world, seeing it as a totality by transcending it, unifying it momentarily into a totality and thus causing determinateness (and hence rigour) to appear" (1998:42); and secondly, the first movement is in "rhythmed interchange with a falling back into determinateness, into historical localization" (1998:42). Derrida rejects the alternatives: finite totality and positive infinity (finite structure and hyperbole). Rather, he uses these as two poles to determine an approach to historicity. Within this approach he is biased against the written recording of history, like Plato in *Phaedrus*, for its secondary and determinate attributes, wishing to represent a totality in finite language.

The problem of placing *The Persians* within the locus of 'history' can be elaborated upon using the distinctions between finite totality and positive infinity. The actuality of the play cannot be denied, but that it represents actual events can be questioned, because the representation cannot encapsulate the events. On the other hand, the play does represent the actual events, interpreting them within the finite understanding (world) of the audience (being non-linear view to history). In short, *The Persians* cannot be used as a reference to reconstruct the historic events of the battle at Salamis. It is a play that uses 'history' in that it relates to its audience the relations between the worlds of the gods and man (constitution), the status of the opposing sides (harmony), and the continuance between perfect past and continued past (destiny). Thus, *The Persians* is a history construct and not history as such.

2.2.2.4 History of drama: science or art?

Since the foundation of the Royal Society in 1660 (Gomme 1937:3), the philosophical, historical and philological sciences were neglected, and the "Physico-Mathematical Experimental Learning"³⁵ promoted. This one-sided emphasis led to the distinction between "science" and "arts", where the "arts" were considered of lesser worth, and mathematics, physics and chemistry of greater significance. The study of history, within the subject History, therefore, was evolved as much in a justification of its identity as it

³⁵ Quoted by Gomme (1937:3) from Royal Society Memorandum, November 28, 1660.

was with its field of inquiry, being history. A controversy came to be, which to Gomme (1937:7) always seemed barren, whether “history is a science or an art: a controversy that is surely only possible among a people which misuses the word science as we do”.³⁶ These are important considerations for the presentation of the “historical”, especially early Greek productions. This is because the presentations are conducted in competition with the natural sciences. A relevant consideration is the natural sciences’ quest for “objective exact truth”, and the “air of lesser worth”, experienced by the arts, where the Greek genius is relativised in pursuit of the justification of the own. The pursuit for “historic correctness”, or “truth” is conducted using own criteria, in principle.

A further consideration would be related to the Marxist theory of history (Scruton 1983:7), which in dividing the base from the superstructure (in society), thereby hopes to achieve a scientific view of both. Such a theory confines art to the superstructure, explaining its character in terms of the economic conditions under which it was conceived.

Within one of the early historians, Immerwahr (1966:5) sees the combination of educator, scientist, and writer as the chief characteristics of Herodotus, who would have been the first to discover history as a method of understanding the world as a whole.³⁷ Though certain technical chronological disputes could be raised on the issue of primacy between philosophy and poetry, Immerwahr (1966:5) indicates that Herodotus made history the equal of poetry and philosophy. However, the principal argument would appear to evolve around methodology, whether history of drama could be considered a science or art.

It is therefore important to consider the relation between “myth” and “history” and “truth” within both the constructs of the current “historical-scientific enquiry”, and the ancient “historic expression”. This will mean that Aeschylus’ creative genius in the historic organisation of *The Persians* is appreciated to value.

³⁶ Gomme (1937:7) uses the Platonic terms “art” and “skill” to qualify for scientific enquiry.

³⁷ Bury (1909:68) asks whether the plays of Phrynichus and Aeschylus had influenced the “solemnity of Herodotus’ documentation” of the Persian wars. Though Bury ascribes it to their glorification of the subject, I would like to suggest that it would have been due to Aeschylus’ “pathosic” (sic) treatment.

2.2.3 History and myth

To a large extent, these are more recent considerations, and the current distinctions between “myth” and “history” would not have been much of an issue to Aeschylus. He was working within a different history/historic context. The immediate question pertains to how Aeschylus managed to present a ‘recent to him historic event’, the defeat of the Persians (victory of the Greeks), within a mythological context (current to twenty first century thought). Akin to this question how should *The Persians* be read, being considered at once a history drama in twenty first century thought and a history drama within a Homeric construct. A principal argument is that the early tragedians were all interpreters of history, their history being considered myths today.

In a study that is concerned more with a religious understanding of history and myth than political, sociological or literary, Davies (1994:1) states:

Myth and history both involve ideas about time expressed through significant events and possessing an important bearing upon life. Myth and history reflect a characteristic search for meaning which is typically human, and which, in life at large, takes many forms from science to poetry.

This definition is representative of the broader understanding of these two terms in relation to each other. Myth is related to the ritual way of life (thus primitive and normally oral), providing an account of how things came to be and why certain values are important (Davies 1994:2). In contrast, history is considered in terms of written documentation.³⁸

Smith (2000:xv) shows that Nietzsche rejects the rational and factual approach to history, as was represented by his contemporaries such as Leopold, Ranke and Ernest Renan. It was important for Nietzsche to make what happened long ago relevant to his times, and thus, as Smith indicates (2000:xv): “Nietzsche suggests that the past should be remembered and celebrated through myths rather than history, since myths create a sense of spiritual community which analytic history only works to dispel.”

³⁸ David Diriger (quoted in Graham 1987:14) contemplates on the historian’s basic need for written sources. His one section is also entitled “Real history is based on written documents”!

According to Else (1965:38), Aeschylus, as an Attic poet, followed the example set by Solon in the writing of poetry. A feature of Solon's poetry, according to Else, is the total absence of mythology. Though no direct influence between Solon and Aeschylus can be established, this observation forms the basis of the argument where Else purports (1965:38):

This quasi-vacuum or low density of mythological tradition in Attica was perhaps in the long run her greatest asset for the development of a tragic drama based on myth; for it meant that her poets were free to choose those myths that best suited the tragic idea, without regard to their status in local tradition, that is, their pre-established appeal to Attic pride or piety. Thus Athens was uniquely fitted to become ... residual legatee and reinterpreter of the pan-Hellenic stock of myth for the whole Greek nation.³⁹

Reedy (2000:8) points out that there is no agreed definition of myth. He proposes a description, which he adapted from William Doty (1986:11):

Myths are culturally important stories conveying by means of metaphoric and symbolic diction, graphic imagery and emotional conviction and participation, the foundational accounts of the world and humankind's roles and status within it. Myths convey the values of a culture and often involve the intervention of suprahuman entities.

There is a definite mythical dimension in *The Persians*. Apart from the appearance of Darius' ghost, and the prevalence of the many gods (religious proportions), the style and language of *The Persians* is mythical. Aeschylus' tragedy, therefore, must be assessed differently from the history of Thucydides, of whom Bury (1909:81) says, has nothing mythical in his stories.

2.2.3.1 *Tragedy and history*

The distinctions between "history" and "tragedy" would appear to be more academic in nature than indicating intrinsic differences. This point is made clear by Plato's reference to Homer as the first tragedian (*Republic* 595C), as well as to Finley (1942:322) who finds Thucydides more in line with the tragedians than with Herodotus, when he sets about describing the great actions of the wars. An interesting point is made by Campbell (1906:38), who believes that Aeschylus' account (referred to as a poet by Campbell) is to be preferred to that of Herodotus, because Aeschylus was at Salamis, and his brother, Ameinias, "certainly took a prominent part in the engagement". The two accounts are

³⁹ Else (1965:63) points out that the standard tragic myths are not Athenian. It could be postulated that Aeschylus' choice of a "non-traditional" Homeric myth was in his endeavour to use an Athenian myth for reasons of appraisal.

difficult to reconcile on all points, but more importantly, the natures and intentions of Aeschylus' play and Herodotus' histories are different.

Before further elaboration on tragedy as an expression of history is made, a pause on the distinctions between chronicle and chronicle play, history and history play, would give further credence to the argument proposed, that tragedy, as an expression of history, is performed in a particular mode to enhance a multitude of reactions. When tragedy is considered from a history/myth point of view, it views myth/history in similar fashion to the way chronicles and historiography look at history, though their formulations, styles, and accentuations, intentions, differ tremendously.

A "chronicle" could be described as "a register of events in order of time, often composed contemporaneously with the events it records" (Cuddon 1998:135). A "chronicle play" is "also known as a History Play, and therefore based on recorded history rather than on myth or legend" (Cuddon 1998:135).

The Persians could be considered a "history play", being based on "recorded" historic events. But, as Webster (1942:5) illustrates, one reason why *The Persians* must be cast in mythological dimensions, is because poetry comes from the Muses, firstly; and secondly, "the knowledge of other times and other lands must come to the poet from outside, and the gods must be responsible". Though this is a rather romantic formulation, to a large extent denying the dramatist's poetic and artistic genius, it does indicate the close relation between a dramatist and the subject he is dealing with. There would need to be a close affinity if the resultant product were expected to "move" people. Such an understanding would be close to Plato, although he sees art differently.

For example (*Republic* 568C):

Τοιγάροισι ... ἄτε σοφοὶ ὄντες οἱ τῆς τραγωδίας ποιηταὶ ξυγγιγνώσκουσιν ἡμῖν τε καὶ ἐκείνοις, ὅσοι ἡμῶν ἐγγύς πολιτεύονται, ὅτι αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν πολιτείαν οὐ παραδεχόμεθα ἄτε τυραννίδος ὑμνήτας.

Wherefore ... being wise as they are, the poets of tragedy will pardon us and those whose politics resemble ours, for not admitting them into our polity, since they sing the praises of tyranny.

It is evident that Plato cannot consider the arts in isolation from politics, and that his appreciation of tragedy would be affected by its potential influence on audiences. Plato also considers tragedy in relation to the divine (*Republic* 597A-598A), when he comes

to the conclusion that tragedy is three removes from reality, and that it is phantoms, not realities that they produce (*Republic* 599A).⁴⁰ This is said in preparation for his criticism of Homer. Plato says Homer was not able to teach (*Republic* 600C). This is in contrast to his assertion that Homer was the first teacher of tragedy, as well as being “the beginner of all these beauties” - ἡγεμῶν γενέσθαι (595C).

Aeschylus has no such concerns. From the nature of the text it would seem that he has no problem in departing from reality, and modifying history to achieve particular dramatic effects. Aeschylus should be seen where he cast his play in an air of “myth-history” to ensure his audience’s favourable response.⁴¹ Campbell (1906:xv) states that Aeschylus’ treatment of legendary history is free, as is his treatment of mythology. He concludes:

Such instances afford strong illustration both of the unfixed condition of Greek heroic legend, and of the boldness of Aeschylus in his employment of it.

Gaster (1950:3), who is concerned primarily with the origin of drama, attempts to indicate the relation between history, myth and rituals:⁴²

Drama evolves from seasonal rituals. Seasonal rituals are functional in character. Their purpose is periodically to revive the *topocosm*, that is the entire complex of any given locality conceived as a living organism. But this *topocosm* possesses both a punctual and a durative aspect, representing, not only the actual and present community, but also that ideal and continuous entity of which it is but the current manifestation. Accordingly, seasonal rituals are accompanied by myths which are designed to interpret their purely functional acts in terms of ideal and durative situations. The interpretation of the myth and ritual creates drama.

Else (1965:63) reacts vehemently against the relating of myth and ritual, where he states that they “have got tangled up together in well-nigh hopeless confusion”. Else (1965:63) ascribes this state of affairs “in part to the ancient theories of an origin out of dithyramb and/or satyr-play, in part to modern developments in anthropology, psychology, etc”. In

⁴⁰ Graham (1987:34) indicates that education in Greece during the 5th century BC “revolved not around reading and writing but around ‘music, poetry and recitation’, and that literacy did not become widespread in Athens until at least the last third of the century”. Interesting, Aristotle is often taken to represent the moment of transition from primarily oral to primarily literate book culture (ibid).

⁴¹ Compare to Aristotle *Poetics* (1449a) on the emphasis on audiences: Aristotle says ... καὶ πρὸς τὰ θεάτρα, ἄλλος λόγος, and in relation to audiences, “[it is] a separate issue”, illustrating his emphasis rather on the intrinsics of a production than on its effect, which is a primary consideration of Plato.

⁴² See Heraclitus’ fragments on history and seasonal changes. For example: Fragments 15, 57: ὅστις ἡμέρην καὶ εὐφρόνην οὐκ ἐγίνωσκεν. ἔστι γὰρ εἷν (day and night are one; 62: ἀθάνατοι θνητοί, θνητοὶ ἀθάνατοι ζῶντες τὸν ἐκείνων θάνατον, τὸν δ’ ἐκείνων βίον τεθνεῶτες (Immortals are mortals; mortals are immortal, the dead [amongst] these are living and the life of these is ending [dying]); Also Fragments 51 & 67.

similar fashion to the model placing the origins of tragedy within the construct of development not being successful (Else 1965), Gaster (1950:5) considers the function of myth in drama. He considers myth within a contemporary understanding of the term; an understanding which would probably have been very foreign to the tragedians, who manipulated the myths within their own constructs. Gaster (1950:5) argues:

The connecting link between these two aspects, the factor which transmutes Ritual into Drama, is Myth. The function of Myth ... is to translate the real into terms of the ideal, the punctual into terms of the durative and the transcendental.

It would be best to consider myths, as employed within tragedy, from the perspective of the first audiences. They did not have a scientific understanding of the relations between myth, history and truth. In the world of Aeschylus, myth was history, and thus truth. This truth was not scientific in terms of exact correctness, but rather in terms of symbolic indication.

Even if he had adopted an approach such as Heraclitus did, the Homeric would still have been the rule.⁴³ Many Heraclitian elements can be traced in *The Persians* (Maritz 1997:7-8). Though this does not establish definite influences, certain tendencies can be indicated, which help to understand Aeschylus' understanding of history through his use and manipulation of historic data, and his careful construction of the various themes and harmonics.

2.3 The historians' histories

2.3.1 Herodotus and Thucydides

As ideas of history, its methods and meaning change (Immerwahr 1966:2), so also the appreciation of the historians.

Herodotus wrote his patriotic history in prose, and is often considered to be the victim of the traditions he worked with, where "his work appeared (to especially nineteenth century historians) a confused and rather untrustworthy collection of tales" (Immerwahr

⁴³ It is interesting, as Gomme (1962:16) indicates, that Homer's "*Iliad* is, as Aristotle saw, tragic: a μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας, a representation of noble action, of the action and suffering of noble men, the story logical and inevitable, the disaster caused by the noblest of them all, through a fault which is not a fault of vice or depravity...." See also Bury (1909:238), who substantiates the fact that Homer was the authority for Greek authors.

1966:2), compared to Thucydides, who is considered to be more objective in his consideration of history (following his own claims in his Introduction).

Where Herodotus expands significantly on the Persian camp, he continuously makes such references in light of Greece's supremacy. *The Persians* could be seen in the same light in its historic report on the supremacy of the Persian fleet which was defeated by an inferior Greek fleet. Persia is thus presented as a worthy enemy, though with its inherent flaws – as is made explicit in the Chorus' opening lines. Where Herodotus attempts to be accurate in his information, this is not a primal concern for Aeschylus, as can be seen in his report on the astronomical numbers.

Thucydides refers to the Persian wars in the context of the Peloponnesian War (I:118):⁴⁴

Μετὰ ταῦτα δὲ ἤδη γίνονται οὐ πολλοῖς ἔτεσιν ὕστερον τὰ προειρη-
 μένα τὰ τε Κερκυραϊκὰ καὶ τὰ Ποτειδαετικὰ καὶ ὅσα πρόφασις τοῦδε
 τοῦ πολέμου κατέστη. ταῦτα δὲ ξύμπαντα ὅσα ἔπραξαν οἱ Ἕλληνες
 πρὸς τε ἀλλήλους καὶ τὸν βάρβαρον ἐγένετο ἐν ἔτεσι πεντήκοντα
 μάλιστα μεταξύ τῆς τε Ξέρξου ἀναχωρήσεως καὶ τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦδε τοῦ
 πολέμου· ἐν οἷς οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι τὴν τε ἀρχὴν ἐγκρατεστέραν κατε-
 στήσαντο καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐπὶ μέγα ἐχώρησαν δυνάμειος....

After this, though not many years later, we at length come to what has been already related, the affairs of Corcyra and Potidaea, and the events that served as pretext for the present war. All these actions of the Greeks against each other and the barbarian occurred in the fifty years' interval between the retreat of Xerxes and the beginning of the present war. During this interval the Athenians succeeded in placing their empire on a firmer basis, and advanced their own home power to a very great height....

Thucydides accounts for the Persian wars (Marathon and Salamis) in abbreviated terms, and then only in the discussion on the strength of Hellenic ships, in light of the political models (tyranny and monarchy – Athens [naval] and Lacedaemon [military] - *The Peloponnesian war* I:17-19). Thucydides places the Peloponnesian war in the context of the whole history of Greece, from the state of Greece from the earliest times to his current situation. However, he only emphasises the conflicts. Further, his history is void of the Homeric heroes.

⁴⁴ According to Thucydides (I:18), this battle was fought primarily by the Athenians.

An important perspective on Herodotus' approach to and use of history, relating also to Aeschylus' treatment, is given in his account of the Persians' pre-war discussions by Artabanus, uncle of Xerxes (*Historiae* VII: 10:5-10):

ὦ βασιλεῦ, μὴ λεχθισέων μὲν γνωμέων ἀντιέων ἀλλήλησι οὐκ ἔστι τὴν ἀμείνω αἰρεόμενον ἐλέσθαι, ἀλλὰ δεῖ τῇ εἰρημένῃ χρᾶσθαι, λεχθισέων δὲ ἔστι, ὥσπερ τὸν χρυσοῦν τὸν ἀκήρατον αὐτὸν μὲν ἐπ' ἑωυτοῦ οὐ διαγινώσκομεν, ἐπεῖν δὲ παρατρίψωμεν ἄλλω χρυσοῦ, διαγινώσκομεν τὸν ἀμείνω....

Oh king, it is impossible, if no more than one opinion is uttered, to make choice of the best: a man is forced then to follow whatever advice may have been given him; but if opposite speeches are delivered, then choice can be exercised. In like manner pure gold is not recognised by itself; but when we test it along with baser ore, we perceive which is the better....

Artabanus, in his short recount of the war history between Persia and Greece, continues to encourage Xerxes not to attack Greece, because Greece is far superior. This is in miniature what Herodotus is doing with the Persians: he is presenting them as detailed as he can, to indicate the superiority of Greece, in terms of especially government, military skill and power. Herodotus allows the Persians to exalt Greece, as the Greeks cannot glorify themselves, with the emphasis placed on his wisdom in his warning that it is not good (VII:10,37-38):

...ἐπ' ἀνδρὶ γε ἐνὶ πάντα τὰ βασιλέος πρήγματα γεγενῆσθαι.

... that the king's fortunes depended wholly on one man.

Bury (1909:69) identifies three maxims of historical criticism in Herodotus: (1) suspect superhuman and miraculous occurrences which contradict ordinary experiences (Bury indicates that Herodotus' application leaves room for portent, and does not cover oracles and dreams); (2) when confronted by conflicting evidence or differing versions of the same event, an open mind is kept ("*audi alteram partem*" 1909:70); (3) autopsy and first hand oral information are superior to stories of second hand, whether written or oral.

In contrast, Thucydides was unprejudiced by authority and tradition, and applied logic to everything (Bury 1909: 75). It is important to remember that Thucydides was active during the rise of sophism, and the refinement of rhetoric, and thus his writing would display more of an argumentative nature than descriptive, though as has been indicated,

Finley (1942:322) finds Thucydides more in line with the tragedians than with Herodotus, possibly reflecting on either information or style source.

Immerwahr (1966:44) reports that both the *Histories* of Herodotus and *The Persians* have an oriental structure, by which the unity of viewpoint is manifest in the description of the effect of the Persian Wars upon the Persians themselves, rather than the effect of the wars upon the Greeks.

Herodotus continuously emphasises the brutality of the Persians. He tells a series of symbolic stories about Xerxes' retreat, stressing the change of fortune caused by the battle at Salamis, while Aeschylus tells of a similar retreat by Xerxes to emphasise the loss of purpose and direction (which he ironically never had, considering how he gazed at the grey haze of the [unknown] sea) and to emphasise self destruction. (Herodotus 8.115-20; *The Persians* 482ff).

2.3.2 The historic events

Athens had entered a new period of democracy, Solon (c.a. 630-560 B.C.), having introduced a new constitution. The reforms especially affected the legal proceedings. The political distance from monarchy was to be increased with the democratic reforms introduced under the rule of Pericles (c.a. 495-429 B.C.). *The Persians* could be seen to be comparing the two political models indirectly, indicating the weaknesses of the monarchy, while superficially exaggerating its strength. During the battle chaos, which halted the Persians and their allies, the strength of the Greek army and its political system of democracy could be implied. However, the play is approached, thematically, solely from a Persian perspective, thus from the point of view of the defeated enemy, and from a Greek religious perspective. The religious is interwoven into the historic. The constructs of the Queen's dream and Darius' appearance (besides the appointment of the aged guardians) make a reconstruct of actual historic events via the play rather fragile.

2.4 The story according to *The Persians* (synopsis)

The story of *The Persians* runs along rather conventional lines. There are two actions – on-stage and off-stage. The messengers relate and tell the story of the off-stage action (much like radio drama), while the chorus is always present to receive and respond to

the messengers' tales and reports, sometimes on behalf of and sometimes in opposition to the audience, depending on the point of view.

The play starts with the Persian elders, anxious for news about the Persian Army. They suggest, through doubts and misgivings, a vague pre-sentiment of impending calamity. The outcome of the war has been decided, and they are awaiting news about its outcome, and are expecting the worst.

The Queen (Atossa) appears on the scene. She relates the story of her ominous dream, and heightens the feeling of foreboding and apprehension for an outcome already determined. Then at length, a messenger from Xerxes' expedition appears, and the Persians are enlightened as to the outcome of the war. The audience (Greek) already knows the outcome, thus taking in a particular omniscient role as witness. The messenger describes the losses of the Persians, the defeat at Salamis, the massacre of Psyttaleia and the disastrous retreat.

The ghost of Darius then appears. After solemnly rebuking his countrymen for their pride and insolence, he foretells the crushing defeat the Persians would experience at Plataea. Xerxes, himself, and his attendants now appear on-stage. They are distraught and shred of all glory. Xerxes and his attendants join with the elders in an outburst of lamentation, and the play closes with this final and crowning picture of disaster (Haigh 1938:73).

The Persians has a particular point of view on the historic events of the battles which are neither predominantly Persian nor Greek military, but rather Greek religious. The next paragraph investigates the play as historic reflection in the light of Aeschylus' intentions with the play, as can be determined.

2.5 The play as historic reflection

The play does not merely want to retell the tale of the battle, nor evoke national pride at the expense of the Persians, regardless of how Aeschylus might feel towards them personally. Thus, this study proposes that more attention should be given to the dramatic intention and reflection of history in the play, rather than merely looking at the history. Apart from the contents, the genre should also be considered.

The Persians should also be interpreted in its historic-artistic context. In this sense it is a tragedy, which is a development of sacred choral entertainment. In this genre the choral song and music were occasionally relieved by the recitative of a single actor, or by dialogue between this actor and the leader of the chorus. Though character⁴⁵ stands separate from “actor”, the introduction of a second actor must have influenced, and enhanced characterisation of characters portrayed on-stage, because this addition would greatly have increased the scope and versatility the dramatist could apply to his production. This would enhance both the artistic aspects relating to the tragedy, and the entertainment value, and evoke response from the audience.

On the one hand, it could be considered that *The Persians* is “a magnificent dramatic song of triumph for the victory of Greece over the invading host of Persia” (Jebb, 1878:80), or as Bury (1909:66) thinks, the play could be seen to be a poetical form of the “self-flattering version of the war [which] had become a tradition at Athens”. However, this is not a complete rendition of the play’s magnitude, since it approaches the battle, victory to the Greeks and loss to the Persians, from a Persian perspective. Thus, it must be established that the historic situation of the play cannot govern reflection on the play. A further result of such an appraisal is that the play is considered in isolation of the drama contest and tragedy tradition (which would have placed scorn upon a “song of triumph” – though it is admitted that Aeschylus does play with his audience’s sentiment), without also regarding a closer reading of the text.

The following aspects, based on immediate observations, help to determine the play’s perspective: the lack of Greek names, but the Hellenisation of foreign names; the prominence of the Greek gods, and the absence of Persian deity; the elaborate and extensive hyperbole in the descriptions; the pronounced mention of places, mostly Greek, and mostly having emotional bearings for the Greek audience, or particular associations in both enemy and national place names.

Thus, rather than being considered a “historic play” as such, *The Persians* must be seen as an elevated political-religious play (tragedy), with recent history, in mythological dimensions, as its subject matter.

⁴⁵ See Gomme (1962:194-213) for a discussion on “Aristotle and the Tragic Character”, in which the basis for the character in tragedy is treated in universal proportions (Sophocles, Aristophanes and Shakespeare).

2.5.1 The audience

The audience of *The Persians* is taken to be Athenian, though as Sifakis (1967:1) rightly indicates, drama was known to other Greeks. Sifakis (ibid) indicates that, though the Hellenistic rulers failed to achieve political unity in the Greek world, a cultural unity was brought about as a result of the great expansion that took place. Here, Sifakis is referring to the third and later centuries BC, but this process was advanced by playwrights, such as Aeschylus, who travelled abroad with his plays. Travellers from elsewhere in Greece would also have been exposed to the theatre on their visits to Athens. Thus, Aeschylus would have been cautious not to offend other parties about the primacy of Athens in the battle of Salamis.

The principal audience of tragedy was male orientated (Hall 1997:103-104), tragedy being profoundly concerned with civic life.⁴⁶ Goldhill (1997a:54) makes an important point when he suggests that the Athenian audience also attended the law courts and the Assembly (the major political institutions of democracy). The theatre audience would therefore have been well versed in public performances by speakers.⁴⁷ Goldhill (1997a:54) concludes correctly that a discussion of the audience of Greek tragedy “must take as its frame not modern theatrical experience but both the pervasiveness of the values in Greek culture and in particular the special context of democracy and its institutions, where to be in an audience is above all to play the role of democratic citizen”.

Though the audience was made up primarily of Athenian citizens, other dignitaries and people were also present (Hall 1997:93-126). The first Athenian audience of *The Persians* saw the play prior to the Peloponnesian war. According to Herodotus (VII) the Greeks were divided as to their Persian testimonies. Thus, Aeschylus would have had to present the play in such manner as not to bring offence to any member of the audience. This point has greater pertinence in light of the presence of many veterans of the battle of Salamis in his audience. This would not have excluded veterans from the land battles also being present in the audience.

⁴⁶ Hall (1997:103-104) considers “the marginal space immediately outside the door of the private home” as the locality of tragedy, and not in the arenas of civic discourse – the council, assembly or lawcourts. Compare to Goldhill (1997a:54): “To be in an audience was not just a thread in the city’s social fabric, it was a fundamental political act.”

⁴⁷ Though Aeschylus is pre-sophistic and thus pre-rhetorical, the oratory excellence in *The Persians* and other contemporary tragedies must reflect on the quality of oration in the law courts and Assembly.

2.5.2 The dramatist

2.5.2.1 Aeschylus (the person)

Aeschylus (525-456 BC), the servant of Dionysus and votary of Demeter, was at once dramatist and prophet (Campbell 1904:135). He also had military experience, having fought at Marathon when he was a little more than thirty years old, and ten years later, was involved in the battle at Salamis (de Romilly 1968:59). Campbell (1906:xi) considers Aeschylus in more lustrous dimensions, referring to:

... the pride which Aeschylus took in the renown of Athens was associated with a profound religious feeling. The secret of her triumph was, as he regarded it, that principle of Right, which is the corner-stone of civilisation and alone makes national life worth living.

Furthermore, Campbell (1906:xi) indicates that Aeschylus was “first a soldier, and then a poet, although he is not for that reason less a poet”. This assertion is based on his epitaph (in Campbell 1906:xi):

This monument in Gela's fruitful plain
 Doth Aeschylus, Euphorion's son, contain.
 Of Athens he; - whose might the Mede will own,
 That met him on the field of Marathon.

2.5.2.2 The other plays of Aeschylus

It is difficult to relate to his other plays, and to draw conclusions from comparisons between *The Persians* and his other tragedies, because of the different treatments of tragedy, without falling into the trap of “dramatic action development”, as Else (1965) himself does, when proposing that “a creative achievement of the first magnitude was reserved for Aeschylus” (1967:78), where “Thespis and Aeschylus represent not so much two stages in a process of development as two successive acts of creation, the one of *tragôdia*, the other of tragic drama” (1967:78). In the next stage of his argument, Else unwittingly proposes development within the activity of Aeschylus' drama, thus restricting the creative genius of each individual tragedy, where he comments (1967:83-84):

He [Aeschylus] was above all a bold, imaginative experimenter, and tragic drama was the outcome, not the point of departure, of his restless experimentation.

The reader will have noticed that at this point I speak of ‘development,’ not merely of ‘creation.’ A modification of what was said previously about Aeschylus’ creative act is not intended. No great creative step in literature is limited to a single act at a single moment ... In any case fate has willed it that we now have, in spite of the tiny selection of Aeschylus’ work that is available to us, a datable sequence of plays leading to a climax.

A contradiction in argument is detectable, where Else mentioned earlier in his reasoning (1967:82-83):

Much though Aeschylus has been admired as the ‘creator of tragedy’,⁴⁸ the magnitude of his achievement as a dramatist has not been properly recognized. In part this springs from neglect, failure to study his plays carefully as plays; in part it springs from false premises, especially the *idée fixe* that tragedy was already dramatic before him and therefore all that remained for him to do was to enhance or refocus its dramatic qualities. On the contrary ..., it is more than simple justice to say that Aeschylus created tragedy as we understand it: that is, as tragic drama.

It is my opinion that Aeschylus’ tragedy, *The Persians*, from a drama history perspective, should be considered an experimental play, fully embedded in the traditional forms, as practised in the annual competitions during the Dionysian festivals. Playwrights who followed Aeschylus, such as Sophocles and Euripides - as well as Aeschylus himself, further refined these experimental drama techniques - in form and material, thus adding new status to Tragedy as an art form.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter consideration was given to various perspectives on history, concerning the context of the play, the understanding of history - as it has bearing on the interpretation of *The Persians* as a “history play”, and the relation between history and myth - distinguished today, but not in antiquity. Consideration was also given to orientations on the history of the drama theorists, as this influenced their interpretations of the historic orientation of *The Persians*.

⁴⁸ See Gilbert Murray, *Aeschylus, The Creator of Tragedy* (Else 1967:82).

This chapter, dealing with the historic context of *The Persians*, will serve as fundamental orientation to the next chapter, Drama analysis (stagecraft, production and cult setting), which will argue for the best approach to analysing *The Persians*, within a framework of the history of drama analysis.