

## Chapter 9. Edith Hall

### Aeschylus' *Persians*

#### via the Ottoman Empire to Saddam Hussein

*The Persians were the most powerful empire the world had ever seen.  
The Persians' army was the biggest war machine ever assembled.  
The Persians marched off to destroy their most hated enemies.  
The Persians lost the war and the world.*

*The revolution is about to begin... let us entertain you!*

#### 1. Introduction

These ominous phrases are calculated to make the reader equate ancient Persia with the modern USA, immersed in a grueling conflict in Iraq. They were written in 2005 in order to advertise the latest show -- an adaptation of Aeschylus' *Persians* -- staged by Waterwell Productions, an experimental New York theatre company. The ancient tragedy had been transformed into a new musical satire, *The Persians...a comedy about war with five songs*, directed by Tom Ridgely.<sup>1</sup> At almost every stage the production invited its audience to identify the ancient Achaemenids with their contemporary North American compatriots. This was achieved by combining elements from 'a reality TV show and nifty nightclub act.' The result was 'a sometimes jarring...but always mesmerizing indictment of the war in Iraq.'<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this is only the last in what has become, since a landmark 1993 production by Peter Sellars in which Xerxes was associated with Saddam Hussein (see below, section 6), a remarkable revival of interest in Aeschylus' play within both the USA and Northern Europe. The revival extends beyond theatre to, for example, Heavy Metal music.<sup>3</sup> This can only be explained

by the pervasive equation of the ancient defence of Greece against Persia with the two recent wars fought by the West against the Iraq of Saddam Hussein; Xerxes, indeed, is not the only ancient Achaemenid monarch to have been equated with the former Iraqi president: a British political cartoon published in 2004 configured Saddam Hussein as an archer-king facing aerial bombardment (**fig. 9.1**). The scene is partly inspired by the famous mosaic found in the House of the Faun at Pompeii, depicting Darius III struggling in battle against Alexander.

Just four years before *The Persians...a comedy about war*, the Greek tragedy also featured in *Erasure* (2001), a novel by Percival Everett, a notable African-American author. The novel is for the most part a satire on the ruthlessness and vanity of the literary market, and on the grim choice facing any writer who is black between effacing, signaling, or indeed exploiting his or her ethnicity. The hero, Thelonius Ellison, has written experimental novels on Greek myth, and also a *Persians*, which a fictional reviewer criticizes because ‘one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus’ *The Persians* has to do with the African American experience’.<sup>4</sup> The earnest reviewer, so anxious to dictate the themes proper to a black writer, is wittily sent up as being unaware of the place that Aeschylus’ *Persians*, at least since Edward Said’s seminal *Orientalism* (1978), has widely been accepted as holding in the annals of western racism. Here the Greek tragedy forms part of the postmodern archive of emblematic texts in the history of ‘identity politics’.<sup>5</sup>

Although it has attracted attention at some important historical moments, *Persians* has, however, hitherto hardly enjoyed the kind of cultural prominence in the post-Renaissance western canon that has been achieved, for example, by

Sophocles' *Oedipus* or Euripides' *Medea*.<sup>6</sup> Such third-millennial manifestations of interest in the earliest surviving Greek tragedy therefore require some investigation. This chapter traces some other episodes in the history of the reception of Aeschylus' *Persians* in order to discover the ancestry of such consciously relevant productions -- what theatre theorists are now labeling contemporary 'retopicalisations'. This exercise will show that these versions belong to a long tradition -- over four centuries old -- which has conflated the ancient victory of the Greeks over Persia at the battle of Salamis with the more recent confrontations between the West and its subject peoples, in particular the Islamic world. This in turn requires, in section 3, something of a detour into the era of the early crusades, in order to appreciate the cultural origins of the fusion of Achaemenid and Muslim in versions of Aeschylus' *Persians* in 1571 and especially in Shelley's 1822 *Hellas*. This poem, written at an early stage of the Greek War of Independence, set the seal on the corrosive Western identification of cosmic Freedom with the war against the Islamic faith. But the argument will also examine diachronically the influence exerted by Aeschylus' play, in order to reveal one of the more controversial shadows cast long over ensuing centuries by responses to Xerxes' invasion of mainland Greece. It argues that *Persians* has been profoundly germinative ideologically, from its first performance at Athens in 472 BCE until its revival in the postmodern theatrical repertory. It has helped both to create the dangerous ideology of Orientalism, and also, most recently, to find a new role in which it speaks less for the western aggressor than for a more humane and pacific world order.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Aeschylus' *Persians* in Antiquity

When Aeschylus' contemporaries first watched *Persians* in the Athenian theatre of Dionysus in 472 BCE, they were presumably not aware that it was destined to become the earliest surviving European drama, the only surviving Greek tragedy on a historical theme, and the only extended account of any of the battles of the Persian wars by an eye-witness (indeed, probably a Marathonomach);<sup>8</sup> it is even more certain that they were not to know that the text of the drama they were watching was destined to play an exceptional role in the history of the western imagination and its negotiations with race and empire. The theatrical representation of Persia was developed in early fifth-century Athens not only by Aeschylus in *Persians*, but by his near contemporary Phrynichus in a tragedy entitled *Phoenician Women* (on which *Persians* was to an unknown degree dependent).<sup>9</sup> But their plays also represented the foundational stage in a much more widespread tendency in Greek and Roman culture and indeed subsequent western culture -- the histrionic impersonation of Asiatic barbarians for exotic or comic effect.<sup>10</sup>

A statue of Themistocles' statue, with an attendant captive Persian, stood alongside those of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Miltiades in the theatre of Dionysus at Athens.<sup>11</sup> Memories of the Persian Wars did not disappear from the tragic theatre, since there were subsequent new tragedies on these themes, such as the fourth-century play which included a fragmentary dirge for Persian royalty (tr. fr. adesp. 685 *TgrF*), perhaps the same play that inspired the famous Apulian 'Darius vase' (Naples 3523).<sup>12</sup> The sole fragment of Moschion's third-century tragedy *Themistocles* is a vivid description of a battle (97 *TgrF* F 1), echoing

Aeschylus' *Persians*, and another Hellenistic *Themistocles* tragedy is attributed to the dramatist Philicus.<sup>13</sup> The narrative of the Persian wars, of Salamis, and indeed Themistocles' role in them, clearly underwent a process of canonization in the tragic theatre as well as in oratory and historiography.<sup>14</sup>

Something not dissimilar can be said for comic drama. The Sicilian Epicharmus and the Athenians Chionides and Pherecrates all wrote comedies entitled *Persians*. Aristophanes enjoyed bringing barbarizing Persians into the action of *Acharnians*.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the detailed familiarity of Eupolis as well as Aristophanes with Aeschylus' *Persians* strongly suggests that it enjoyed a second fifth-century Athenian performance, perhaps in 425, when we know Aeschylean plays were revived.<sup>16</sup> In *Frogs*, however, Aristophanes may have been the first to refract the famously patriotic text of *Persians* through an ironic prism in order to criticize the recent Athenian maladministration of the Peloponnesian war. There are some signs that he is using the status of Salamis as archetypal heroic *naumachia* in the repertoire of the Athenian democratic theatre precisely in order to provide a contrast with the recent terrible death toll in the highly compromised naval victory at Arginusae. This confrontation is derided by Dionysus' slave Xanthias as either 'the corpse-battle' or 'the run-for-your-life' battle (191), depending on which of the two MSS readings, both going back to antiquity, is favoured.<sup>17</sup> The useless rower Dionysus is 'unSalaminian' (*asalaminios*, 204), and Aristophanes' pompous Aeschylus proudly declares that he composed *Persians*, 'an excellent work, in order to make my audiences always long for victory over their enemies' (1026-7). Conspicuously ignoring the call to oars and arms, Dionysus retorts, 'Yes indeed, I really loved that bit about the

dead Darius' (1028), with a sly allusion, behind the reference to the invocation of the theatrical ghost of Darius I, to the historical Darius II, currently pouring untold resources into the Peloponnesian fleet.<sup>18</sup>

At around the same date, Timotheus of Miletus' less politically motivated citharodic aria *Persians* requires its star solo singer to impersonate a whole series of Asiatic barbarians, including Xerxes the King himself.<sup>19</sup> Such impersonations can be found in a slightly different form as late as the Second Sophistic, which enjoyed dramatic enactments of the arrogance and frivolity of the barbarian character, delivered during the course of showcase declamations. The repertoire of the sophist Scopelianus of Clazomenae, a famous declaimer, included speeches involving Darius and Xerxes (probably including the *Xerxes* composed by his own teacher of rhetoric, Nicetes); these histrionic enactments involved 'lurching around like a Bacchant' (Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists*, 519-20).<sup>20</sup>

Another of the several 'firsts' achieved by *Persians* is that it is the first Athenian play of which we know to have been exported and revived in another Greek city. It was performed in Syracuse, in 470 BCE, on the invitation of the Sicilian tyrant Hieron (*Life of Aeschylus* 18). The production was presumably connected with Hieron's fondness for equating his defeat of the Carthaginians and Etruscans in another *naumachia*, the battle of Cumae, with the mainland Greeks' victory over Persia (Pindar, *Pyth.* 1.71-6). This makes the Etruscans and Carthaginians the first of a large number of other *barbaroi* in world history to have been conceptually equated with the Persians in Aeschylus' tragedy. More surprising, however, is the use made of *Persians* in *Exagōgē*, a tragedy dating from the second century BC, by the Jewish writer Ezekiel, on the subject of the

Jewish exodus from Egypt (128 *TgrF*). The fragments include a speech by an Egyptian messenger reporting the parting of the Red Sea by Moses. His account of the Pharaoh's army is dependent upon military passages in Aeschylus' *Persians*.<sup>21</sup> Here the Jewish writer seems implicitly to identify the persecuted followers of Moses with the spirited, freedom-loving ancient Greeks, and the mighty Egyptian army with that of Xerxes the Persian king. But at the same time the picture of Moses seated on a mountain-top, counting the stars as they pass before him in review, and an apparent association of Moses' parting of the Red Sea with the Persian crossing of the Hellespont, suggest that Ezekiel is rather more interested in the aesthetic, poetic prototype than in making political points. The Moses-Xerxes parallel also becomes less remarkable when it is recalled that virtually the only *good* press Xerxes gets in the ancient Mediterranean world (outside of Persian royal inscriptions) is in other Jewish authors.<sup>22</sup>

Although the spectacular enactments of the sea-battle between Greeks and Persians commissioned by Augustus and subsequently Nero owed something, at least, to the tradition of representing Salamis in the theatre which had been inaugurated by Phrynichus and Aeschylus, specific uses of the tragedy *Persians* are thin on the ground under the Roman Empire. Aelius Aristides may provide one exception. In his archaising *Panathenacius* the Persian Wars narrative is based around a contrast between the wise old Darius and the senseless, arrogant Xerxes, a contrast rarely found in Greek authors other than Aeschylus (116-17). Specific elements in the picture of Xerxes also have unusually clear antecedents in Aeschylus, especially where he threatens to set fire to sanctuaries and destroy ancestral tombs (see Aeschylus, *Persians* 809-10 and *Panathen.* 166), flees after

seeing the sea brimming with corpses and wreckage, and sings a ‘recantation’ (see Aeschylus’ *Persians* 420, 465).<sup>23</sup>

One other significant trace of the cultural impact of *Persians* occurs in the epistolary novel *The Letters of Themistocles*, variously dated from the late first / early second century AD to as late as the 9<sup>th</sup> century, from which its manuscript -- *Palatinus Graecus* 398 -- dates.<sup>24</sup> This work is especially interesting if it really was written under the Roman empire, because it is an ambitious and complex piece of historical fiction unlike any other ancient ‘historical’ novel. The novel belongs to the considerable sub-category of Themistocles literature and art, devoted rather to the story of his later years -- his exile, experiences at the Persian court, and death, rather than to his role during the wars themselves (see, for example, **fig. 9.2**, and above, ch. 1, pp. 000). From the perspective of the reception of Aeschylus’ *Persians* it is nevertheless frustrating that so little is known about its author, because it presents Aeschylus himself (along with his father Euphorion and brother Ameinias), as one of Themistocles’ correspondents. Indeed, the very first letter is to Aeschylus, later described as ‘superior throughout his life in learning and good sense’ (11.5, *kata paideian kai sōphrosunēn diapherontos*). This does imply a distant cultural memory of *Persians*, as do the regular references to Themistocles’ benefaction to the Athenians, which had taken the form of victories in *naumachiai* (e.g. 13.1).

### **3. From Byzantium to the Renaissance**

If, however, *The Letters of Themistocles* is a Byzantine text, then it is a fascinating document of how the Persian Wars narrative was developed in a time



and a place which had its own ‘barbarians’ and its own issues with the maintenance of ‘Greek’ identity. For in the late Roman, early Christian and Byzantine eras the complexities of ethnic and religious identity surpassed anything that had gone before, as notions of Greekness, ‘Roman-ness’ (or *Rōmaiosynē*) and Christianity were constantly contested and redefined. This process acquired a fresh intensity after the Normans attacked Byzantine territory in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, and the supreme Others of the medieval Byzantines actually became the western Christians: Anna Comnena could even call them *barbaroi*.<sup>25</sup> Yet it may have been the earlier Byzantines’ need for texts reinforcing their own ethnic self-definitions that helped to ensure the place *Persians* earned in their Aeschylean ‘triad’, along with *Prometheus Bound* and *Seven against Thebes*.

It is nevertheless indisputable that Aeschylus was always much less popular than Sophocles and Euripides amongst the Byzantines because they, like everyone else before and since, had considerable difficulty understanding his Greek. Interest in him seems to have been first seriously reawakened in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, from when the earliest and best manuscript, the Codex Laurentianus (M) dates; in the 11<sup>th</sup> century Michael Psellus is to be found commending Aeschylus’ ‘obscure profundity’; by the 14<sup>th</sup> both Thomas Magister and Demetrius Triclinius were producing annotated editions of the triad.<sup>26</sup> Thereafter the attention of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was drawn to Aeschylus primarily through the first rudimentary Aldine printed edition (1518), the superior editions of Adrianus Turnebus (1552), and Petrus Victorius & Henricus Stephanus (1557), and Jean

Saint-Ravy's influential early Latin translation *Aeschyli poetae Vetustissimi Tragoidiae*, published in Basel in 1555.<sup>27</sup>

But these early editions of Aeschylus, and Saint-Ravy's seminal Latin translation, came into a world that had changed greatly since the triumph of Christianity, above all in the arrival as a world presence of the Ottoman Turks. Between 650 and 1100 Islam made strikingly little impact as an identifiable fact in Western minds, a situation which began to change rapidly in about 1100, just after the first crusade, which began in late 1095. The shedding of the blood of the Jews of Jerusalem was as much a cause for celebration as the victories over Islam, but it was indeed this crusade which made both the religion and the prophet-founder of Islam familiar concepts in the West.<sup>28</sup> The picture was therefore born in triumph after the Christian taking of Antioch and Jerusalem, and gave rise to the popular image -- comprising savagery, depravity, sexual profligacy, pagan darkness and satanic evil -- which has consistently resurfaced, in slightly modified forms, even to our day. It was born at more or less the same time as the romances of Arthur and Charlemagne, and contained as little truth value when it comes to the depiction of near-legendary foes. It formed the picture of the abominations practised under Muslim faith to be found in all the western epics and *chansons de geste* of this period, from the *Song of Roland* onwards; the Saracens are uniformly idolaters, and often seen as worshipping three gods -- Tervagan (or Termagant), Mahomet and Apollo (a picture formed in photographic negative to the Christian trinity).<sup>29</sup> But in other, similar epics they accrue concatenations of other gods -- Lucifer, Jupiter, Diana, Plato, and Antichrist -- a process which reveals an astonishing misunderstanding of the

essential monotheism of Islam,<sup>30</sup> suggestive of the reasons why ancient pagan Persian, and Renaissance Muslim, could subsequently be so easily conflated.

An additional factor was the identification, in a medieval poem entitled *Vita Mahumeti*, of the historical prophet Mohammed with a *magus*, or Asiatic magician forced to flee from Jerusalem in the late fourth century, during the reign of the Emperor Theodosius.<sup>31</sup> Mahumet uses his magic to influence Mamucius, a slave of the Libyan consul, who is strangled so that Mamucius can marry his widow. Mahumet's erotic magic ensures that she is suitably infatuated. Mamucius thus becomes ruler of Libya and the *magus* introduces the corrupting religion that threatens the Christian church.<sup>32</sup> This eleventh-century narrative clearly conflates the classical stereotype of the oriental wizard with intrigues worthy of the classical Ctesias' court harems and the crusaders' terror of Saracen abominations. The knots of ancient and medieval prejudice are becoming difficult to disentangle.

Even the appearance in 1143 of the first translation of the Koran into Latin, by the English scholar Robert of Ketton, did little to correct misperceptions.<sup>33</sup> The Franciscan scholar Roger Bacon may have thought that the crusades actually impeded the process of conversion to Christianity, advocating the peaceable use of persuasion instead. But in the seventh and final section of his *Opus Majus* (circa 1268 AD), an early attempt at comparative religion, Bacon discussed the Saracens, Tartars, pagans, idolaters (Buddhists), Jews, and Christians. He criticized the Muslims for the sensuality associated with Venus, and classified the Saracens as devoted to the end of pleasure -- the main in life according to Darius in Aeschylus' *Persians* (841), and Xerxes' central

objective according to Cicero (*De Finibus* (2.111-12)).<sup>34</sup> The increasing disputations and schisms within Christianity nevertheless actually led, by the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, to many intellectuals developing a far greater respect for Islam. Amongst Church reformers such as John Wycliffe, one of the major forerunners of Protestantism, it had become possible to compare the schisms of the West with the unity and cohesiveness of Islam, and the perceptibly devout way of life led by many Muslims with the perceived decadence of many followers of Christ.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the vices for which Islam was blamed were felt to be no less common in Latin Christendom, and Muslims (along with Greeks and Jews) were regarded as no further from salvation than many Latin Christians.<sup>36</sup> At this time the great Muslim authors were well respected in intellectual circles, and the Arabic translations of the Greeks were esteemed.

It is also remarkable to observe the ease with which doctrinal parallels with Islam could be found by Christians, provided only that it was to their military or political advantage, once the Ottoman Empire had advanced into the Balkans. In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century the Pope could meet the Sultan to ask for help in winning Venetian backing against the French; in 1497, Milan, Ferrara, Mantua and Florence financed an Ottoman attack on Venice. Francis I forged an alliance with Suleiman the Magnificent against Charles V in France. As late as 1588, Elizabeth I could inform Sultan Murad II that Spain was a nation of idolaters, and propose an alliance with him based on ideology -- strict monotheists against untrustworthy catholics.<sup>37</sup> In our current political climate it is worth dwelling on these vicissitudes in relations between Christianity and Islam when assuming that their polarization is either ancient, or permanent and ineradicable.

Indeed, the Turks, who were by the Early Modern period synonymous with Islam, were being given positions either within or outside the European ethnic fold by the kind of artificial genealogy then popular. Some said that the Turks were the descendants of the Trojans, indeed of Priam, which would legitimize Ottoman rule in Anatolia and **indeed** present the Ottoman conquests of Greece and the Balkans as retribution for the deeds of Agamemnon. Other westerners, more hostile to these non-Christians, argued that they were descendants of the Scythians and thus the obvious heirs to all the traits attributed to the ancient Pontic barbarians by ancient Greek and Roman writers. This xenophobic view legitimised constant military action against them -- not as a war against infidels but as a *bellum contra barbaros*: as Rodinson puts it in *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, 'to those Europeans brought up on Herodotus and Xenophon, this was an enticing notion'.<sup>38</sup>

But Europeans were destined to define what they had in common with each other 'against the recurrent threat of an Asiatic tidal wave that would engulf the entire continent', a threat that seemed all too real when the Turks arrived at the gates of Vienna in 1529.<sup>39</sup> Tragically, it became inevitable that it was the ancient Greek polarity, with all its attendant prejudices, that eventually prevailed. And this is the context in which Aeschylus' *Persians* first dawned upon the European Renaissance. Indeed, the earliest surviving Greek play to have been performed in antiquity became, appropriately enough, the first ancient Greek drama known to have enjoyed some kind of performance in the Renaissance. It was recited at an event which explicitly equated Achaemenid Persia with the Ottoman Empire, thus, for the first certain time in the western tradition, seeing

Aeschylus' *Persians* through a lens that was not only triumphalist but conditioned by Christian views of Islam. It celebrated the 1571 victory of a western naval alliance, including the Venetians of the Heptanesian islands and led by John of Austria, which had defeated the Ottoman fleet at the Battle of Lepanto. This feat has entered the European tradition as one of the defining moments in the creation of western liberty.<sup>40</sup>

The performance of *Persians* took place (possibly in an Italian translation now lost to posterity, more probably in Saint-Ravy's Latin), in the private house of a member of the Venetian nobility who then ruled the Heptanesian island of Zante (Zakynthos). Unfortunately a 19<sup>th</sup>-century earthquake destroyed the island's administrative office where the original records of this event were housed, so it is necessary to rely on secondary sources stemming from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>41</sup> But the reported event is unsurprising in the context of the increasing Italian interest in ancient Greek authors in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century: the dissemination of the text of Aeschylus' play to these western Greek islands would have been greatly facilitated by the channels of communication linking Greek intellectuals and Italian centres of scholarship. Michael Sophianos of Chios, for example, translated Aristotle, collaborated on the seminal 1552 edition of the tragedies of Aeschylus published by Francisco Robortello in Venice, and became a professor of Greek at Padua.<sup>42</sup>

Familiarity with the Latin translation of *Persians* may explain the apparent echoes of the Greek tragedy in the depiction of the oriental conqueror-antihero, along with his military processions and extravagant deeds, in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (c. 1588), a play which was

certainly reacting to the contemporary views of the Ottoman Empire. And for the Christian identification of Xerxes with everything in opposition to Christian doctrine, it is unnecessary to go further than Milton's outspoken comparison of Satan's bridge from heaven to hell in *Paradise Lost* book 9 with Xerxes' Hellespontine contrivance:

So, if great things to small may be compared,  
Xerxes, the liberty of Greece to yoke,  
From Susa, his Memnonian palace high,  
Came to the sea: and, over Hellespont  
Bridging his way, Europe with Asia joined,  
And scourged with many a stroke the indignant waves.

#### **4. The Tragedy of Romantic Hellenism**

Aeschylus suddenly became far more accessible in the late 18th century, when the first translation of his complete dramas into any modern language (the French version of 1770 by the Marquis J. J. Le Franc de Pompignan) was followed in 1777 by the much more influential English-language translation by Robert Potter.<sup>43</sup> Aeschylus had previously been unavailable to any reader without the ability or desire to read extended texts in either Greek or Latin. And it is revealing that the first artistic response to Potter's translation, some chalk pictures by George Romney drawn in the 1780s, the inspiration for the illustrations to *Persians* is plainly Turkish rather than Achaemenid (**fig. 9.3**). This is revealed in the costumes, the drapery, and above all the obeisant *salaam* of the chorus of Persian councillors. Romney had recently painted a portrait of Potter, and the chalk

sketches seem to have resulted from their conversations about the new translation of Aeschylus that took place during the sittings.<sup>44</sup> But his visual imagination plainly prefigured the uses which were to be made of the play by the time of the Greek uprising against the Ottomans in 1821. The late 18th century thus intuitively visualized the ancient Persians as contemporary Turks.

It must not be forgotten that the Ottoman forces were still attempting to besiege Vienna in 1683; they failed, but between that year and the treaty of Jassy in 1792 there were no fewer than forty-one years of war between Turkey and either Austria or Russia. The Turks made notable advances in the years leading up to 1740, and it was not until the 1760s and 1770s that the Ottoman Empire ceased to look like an immediately pressing threat to Christian civilization at large, and more like a promising pawn in Northern European superpower politics. The turning-point was the Russian-Turkish war of 1768-74, by the end of which the Austrians and everyone else agreed that that the Russians were a far worse threat to European stability than the Turks could now ever be. The possibility was considered of reviving the spirit of the crusades in order to re-**annexe** Constantinople, whose 1453 seizure by the Turks, and its status as the capital of Islam, had remained a constant irritant to western Europeans.<sup>45</sup> The sudden availability of *Persians* in accessible modern languages must also be set against a background of countless abduction plays and operas of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in which a Christian woman has been abducted and taken prisoner at the court of a Muslim monarch, to face threats of torture and sexual slavery.<sup>46</sup> The best known of these -- and **astonishingly**, one of the least xenophobic -- is Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, which premiered in Vienna in 1782, and in



which the janissary Osmin is as greedy, gullible, sadistic and lecherous a Muslim stereotype as ever walked the 18<sup>th</sup>-century stage.

The early stages of preparation for the Greek uprising of 1821 thus took place in a cultural environment that had new access to the plays of Aeschylus as well as a set of popular conventions for impersonating Ottoman Turks in the theatre.<sup>47</sup> Greek thoughts of independence seem always to be ideologically affected by the cultural presence of Greek tragedy. A French *Les Perses*, inspired by Aeschylus, was in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century dedicated to Alexandros Morouzis, Phanariot Prince of the Danubian principality of Moldavia, and may have been produced at his court in Jassy; Sophocles' *Philoctetes* – a profound statement of the pain of exile from the fatherland – had been staged in 1818 by the Phanariot community at Odessa.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, as Gonda Van Steen shows, below ch. 13, the partisan Comte de Marcellus, a Philhellene French diplomat to the Ottoman Porte in Constantinople, organized a recitation of *Persians* there on the eve of the uprising. This audience had come to this literary evening with an agenda: the play reading of the *Persians* served to sanction and strengthen ambitions of patriotic military action that remained subject to Ottoman-Turkish suspicion and retaliation.

It is likely that Shelley had heard about this Constantinopolitan reading when in Pisa he began work on his *Hellas*, which he himself described as 'a sort of imitation of the *Persae* of Æschylus'.<sup>49</sup> It was published in 1822 and dedicated to the Phanariot Prince Alexandros Mavrokordatos (who as a refugee from the Turkocracy in Pisa had recently been instructing Mary Shelley in ancient Greek). It was the result of a sudden inspiration, conceived and

produced when Shelley was intensely excited by the historical circumstances in southern Europe. His daughter-in-law Lady Jane Shelley describes this process:

The south of Europe had awakened from its lethargy into a state of high political excitement, and it seemed as if the age of liberty were dawning in several places. Spain and Naples had been revolutionized in the previous year; and the northern and central parts of Italy now endeavoured to follow the example... Greece declared itself independent of Ottoman domination; and these combined attacks on the general foe filled Shelley with the utmost enthusiasm.<sup>50</sup>

Shelley was, therefore, equally enthused by the promise of world Liberty suggested by the rebellions against autocratic monarchs within Catholic countries, and by the rebellion of the Orthodox Christian Greeks against Ottoman rule. It will become important to keep this in mind when the configurations of freedom and despotism within his poem are investigated.

Lady Shelley also recalls the extraordinary moment, earlier detailed in Mary Shelley's correspondence, when Mavrokordatos called on the Shelleys on April 1st 1921, to inform them that his cousin, Prince Ipsilanti, had in Odessa pronounced the outbreak of the War of Independence;<sup>51</sup> Mavrokordatos set sail for Greece in June. Shelley's interest in the Greek insurrection was therefore intensely personal as well as political. It was at this time that he completed the thousand-line drama, and it is scarcely surprising that more than a third of it involves direct commentary on the war between the Greeks and the Turks.<sup>52</sup>

Shelley's Preface twins the Aeschylean Greek tragic vision of the struggle for freedom with the 1821 uprising. Shelley writes,

...the Persae of Æschylus afforded me the first model of my conception, although the decision of the glorious contest now waging in Greece being yet suspended forbids a catastrophe parallel to the return of Xerxes and the desolation of the Persians.<sup>53</sup>

He therefore replaced the Aeschylean lament for the dead of Salamis with his captive Greek chorus's visionary account of the utopian future which the liberation of Greece might offer the whole world. It was in the Preface to this drama that Shelley made his famous declaration, 'We are all Greeks...our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their roots in Greece'; he seems to have been genuinely convinced that the world awaited 'only the news of a revolution in Germany to see the tyrants who have pinnacled themselves on its supineness precipitated into the ruin from which they shall never arise.'<sup>54</sup> The insurrection in Greece was for Shelley both emblem and most urgent example of a much more international and epochal revolutionary endeavour.

Shelley was drawing on a tradition already inaugurated by the time of Thomas Maurice's *The Fall of the Mogul* (1806), a tragedy 'attempted partly on the Grecian model', which borrows from the Sophoclean *Oedipus*, but also from Aeschylus' *Persians*. The latter play is especially apparent in Maurice's battle narrative and the laments of his mutinous choruses of Brahmin and Zoroastrian priests, who predict that the persecution their religions have suffered will become

worse under their newest Islamic ruler, Nadir Shah, before the subject Hindu and Parsee peoples will one day be liberated from imperial oppression.<sup>55</sup> The political thrust, Islamic principal characters, Indian slaves, eastern palace setting and transhistorical vision of Maurice's choruses directly anticipated those of Shelley's *Hellas*. Shelley also synthesized contemporary Turk with ancient Achaemenid Persian. His scene is set at Constantinople, in the seraglio of Mahmud II, who was the Ottoman sultan between 1808 and 1839. From our point of view, however, the poem marks a pivotal moment. It is now through a major canonical author that all the ideological weight of the Persian wars becomes associated not only with the Ottoman Turks' occupation of Greece, but with Islam as the enemy of western *liberty*.<sup>56</sup>

Critics do not agree on which is the most important point of difference between Shelley's *Hellas* and Aeschylus' *Persians*.<sup>57</sup> One significant alteration is the replacement of the chorus of male Persian elders in the Greek tragedy with a chorus of Greek captive maidens. The shift from masculine to feminine seems to allow Shelley to write much less warlike sentiments, thus creating an opportunity for more spiritual expansiveness;<sup>58</sup> this chorus' fundamental role is to translate the specific events unfolding in 1821 into events of diachronic and cosmic significance, in which the current struggle is emblematic of, and an important step in, the march of history towards a transcendental notion of human Freedom. In the fifth stanza of their first ode, while Mahmud sleeps on his couch surrounded by opium petals, they invoke the idea of Freedom, the mighty mistress; by stanza nine they are warming to the theme. 'In the great morning of the world, / The spirit of God with might unfurl'd / The flag of Freedom over

Chaos/...'. It turns out that Freedom's splendour first 'burst and shone' from 'Thermopylae and Marathon'. With this move, the ancient Greek resistance against Persia and the contemporary struggle are explicitly associated. In a truly memorable image, maternal Greece is figured as mourning at the funeral of the infant Freedom, whose bier she follows through Time.<sup>59</sup>

The nub of the problem is Shelley's stance on Christianity. Himself an agnostic moral idealist, with leanings towards the epistemological and metaphysical theories of George Berkeley,<sup>60</sup> in this poem he had the chance to divorce the question of the political domination of Greece from the religious conflict between Islam and Christianity. But faced with the history of monotheisms, he stepped back from such a radical step on its very brink. In the second long choral lyric, the famous 'Worlds on worlds are rolling over', the universe is run by the mysterious cosmic figure of 'the unknown God'. But this unknown deity, in Shelley's conception of the history of religion, has from time to time sent forth to humanity individual figures, including the 'Promethean conqueror', who trod the 'thorns of death and shame'. This chorus argues that Olympian polytheism died in the face of the star of Bethlehem ('Apollo, Pan, and Love, / And even Olympian Jove / Grew weak, for killing Truth had glared on them'). Islam subsequently arose, but will be shortlived: 'The moon of Mahomet / Arose, and it shall set: / While blazon'd as on heaven's immortal noon / The cross leads generations on'.<sup>61</sup>

All this is in the mouth of the Greek chorus. They are presumably Orthodox Christians, although they are endowed, like the chorus of *Prometheus Unbound*, with a vision that transcends their specific identity and place in space

and time. Yet their own religious stance can never offer a parallel to the eclectic, mystical and global spirituality of the better known, mythical poem, which was profoundly affected by Shelley's interest in both Platonism and Hinduism.<sup>62</sup> Shelley was well aware that in the issue of religion he faced a real problem in *Hellas*, for he appends an extensive note to this chorus, in which he attempts to explain what exactly it is that he means. Here he tries to have his agnostic cake and eat it; Christianity is on the one hand just another temporary and contingent manifestation of humanity's relationship to the supreme Being; but, on the other hand, it is was in the past superior to, and more truthful than, pagan polytheism; it is now superior to the Islamic religion, and will undoubtedly outlast it. He writes,

The popular notions of Christianity are represented in this chorus as true in their relation to the worship they superseded, and that which in all probability they will supersede, without considering their merits in a relation more universal.<sup>63</sup>

He continues in this note to argue coherently and precisely for the necessity for agnosticism: that 'there is a true solution of the riddle [of the universe], and that in our present state that solution is unattainable by us, are propositions which may be regarded as equally certain'.<sup>64</sup>

Yet in *Hellas* Shelley has found it impossible to configure the Greek War of Independence in terms solely of the human need for ethnic self-determination and political self-government. The true extent of Shelley's absorption of the

Christian imagery of the infidel emerges in the interchange between Mahmud and his henchman Daood. The Janizars have apparently not been paid, but Mahmud is unsympathetic: 'Go ! bid them pay themselves / With Christian blood! Are there no Grecian virgins / Whose shrieks and spasms and tears they may enjoy? / No infidel children to impale on spears?'<sup>65</sup> The poet has been unable to liberate his verse sufficiently from the contemporary stereotypes of Islam, and the Christian rhetoric of the crusade, in order to leave the notion of a religious war back in the medieval period where it surely belongs. This, to me, shows the extent to which the still stirring politics of and utopian idealism of *Hellas* are compromised by its complicity in the ideology of the Christian crusade. *Hellas* represents truly, from this point of view, the singular tragedy of Romantic Hellenism. It was certainly in imitation of Shelley's work that a whole tradition of patriotic Salamis texts was established in Victorian literature, including William Bennett's *The Triumph for Salamis*, a 'lyrical ballad' for twin choirs of young men and female virgins, whose imaginary setting is a circle on an Attic beach around the victory trophy. These young Athenians sometimes even forget that they are pre-Christian pagans, as when they execrate 'the fell barbarian', who was 'accursed of God', and lusted 'to crush the guiltless and the free'.<sup>66</sup>

## **5. Retopicalising *Persians***

It is not the point of this chapter to deny that Aeschylus' *Persians* has been adapted, revived or performed in relation to any conflict other than the west versus Islam. The tragedy has a reception history that embraces several other

wars. It may underlie, for example, Cervantes' play *La Numancia* (c. 1585), which portrays the plight of the Numantians when they had been defeated by the Romans under Scipio Aemilianus in 133 BC;<sup>67</sup> Cervantes had himself been wounded at the battle of Lepanto, so quickly associated with Salamis. Thomas Rymer considered redesigning *Persians* as a theatrical commemoration of the defeat of the Spanish Armada.<sup>68</sup> *Persians* was used to celebrate the defeat of Napoleon in the Battle of the Nile and the victories of the British fleet over the Chinese during the Opium Wars.<sup>69</sup> In the early twentieth century, Irish Republicans equated the spirit of the Greeks in *Persians* with their own rebellion against British imperialism.<sup>70</sup> Yet the same British imperialists, at the end of the First World War, identified *themselves* with Aeschylus' glorious Athenians, the persecuted citizens who had finally prevailed, when *The Times* newspaper of November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1918 published the part of Darius' speech in *Persians* about hubris flowering and reaping a crop of calamity;<sup>71</sup> at the very beginning of World War II, Gilbert Murray's translation of *Persians* was broadcast by national BBC Radio as the first in a series of 'great plays', and starred Sybil Thorndike as the aged queen. Germany (Nazi this time, not Prussian) was thus once again equated with Aeschylus' presentation of Persia.<sup>72</sup>

Yet between 1960 and 1971, three performances within different traditions created the type of theatrical reading which made possible the most recent wave of revivals of *Persians*, which can be dated to 1993 onwards. Although the play's patriotic sentiments have long since made it a favourite in Greece,<sup>73</sup> Karolos Koun's landmark staging of *Persians* was perhaps the first to use the play to criticize 'the barbarian within', the internal tyrant embodied in the hard right



wing of Greek politics; this famous production, which premiered at the World Arts Festival in London in 1966, achieved great fame and certainly helped to foster the philhellene sentiment that was soon to put pressure on the Greek dictatorship of 1967-74 (**fig. 9.4**). During subsequent revivals, the figures equated with the tyrannical Persian king become, paradoxically, Greeks themselves: the loathed dictators. In the German Democratic Republic a famous production by Mattias Braun, revived several times between 1960 and 1969, was partly an unusual (for the GDR) retrospective denunciation of fascism, and up to a point equated Xerxes with Hitler.<sup>74</sup> The play put the reaction of the 'people' at the centre, focusing on how a nation could allow its leaders excessive power.<sup>75</sup> And yet it was also interpreted at the time as an attack on American imperialism; it was perceived as a reaction to the Korean war, and subsequently, in the ensuing revivals, with ongoing American involvement in Vietnam. The Berliner Ensemble produced another version in 1983 in which the Persian court was the epitome of 'western' military decadence, identified more with the Latin American dictatorships of that era than with North America (Xerxes wore the khaki uniform of a junta commander and his mother a cocktail dress).<sup>76</sup>

In the Greek and East German traditions, therefore, precedent was set by the end of the 1960s for using *Persians* to criticize the government of the theatre company's own country, and to protest against western imperialism, especially the military policies of the USA. There is one further production that is required to fill out the picture, and that is Peter Brook's remarkable *Orghast* of 1970-1. Here Aeschylus' *Persians* was taken, almost certainly for the first time in history, to the land where it is actually set -- the heart of the ancient Achaemenid

kingdom of Iran, an architectural backdrop that had so frequently inspired the imagination of set designers in Greece and elsewhere (**see fig. 9.5**). The *Orghast* project, politically speaking, rested on uncomfortable paradox from the outset: Brook was combining *Persians* with several other texts, in an attempt to forge a whole new international theatrical language. But he was also taking the opportunity offered by the Shiraz-Persepolis festival, which had been founded in 1967 as a public-relations event, designed to display the advanced culture of what was then a western-facing country by the last Shahanshah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The festival's political and propagandistic dimension was undeniable, and yet it paled into insignificance besides the extravagant celebrations organized in October 1971 to celebrate the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire: the Shah was anxious to emphasise his countrymen's cultural ancestry in Achaemenid Persia, especially the connection he perceived between himself and Cyrus I.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the festival was culturally important as the venue for the last few major theatrical productions in Iran before the fundamentalist revolution of 1979.

Accepting the invitation, despite the poor reputation of the regime in the largely progressive and anti-authoritarian world of theatre artists, Brook developed his idea for a collaborative production that could discover a radically new medium of global theatre. His original decision to use as his venue the ancient Persepolis royal tomb of Artaxerxes II was certainly intended as a compliment to the earliest surviving Greek tragedy, Aeschylus' *Persians*, in which the ghost of Darius arises from his tomb.<sup>78</sup> But during the preparations for the production Brook drove the ten minutes out from Persepolis to Naqsh-e-Rustam,

the imposing mountain cliff where Darius I and Xerxes I (among others) are buried, and instantly decided that at least one performance of *Orghast* had to take place at this imposing site (**see fig. 9.6**).<sup>79</sup> In the end the play was divided; while Part I was to be performed in front of Artaxerxes' tomb at Persepolis, Part II was to be performed in what Brook regarded as the 'epic space' of Naqsh-e-Rustam, at the very site of the tomb of Xerxes. 'Here, the action was explosive, the sound declamatory'; five hundred lines (basically, all the choral and lyric sections) of *Persians* 'were chosen for their power', and delivered, in order to inject into them the maximum transhistorical emotional force, mainly by the actors who were themselves Persian.<sup>80</sup>

*Orghast* was Brook's first production as director for the Paris-based International Centre for Theatre Research, which used actors from all over the world, from Japan to Africa, the USA to France, in an idealistic attempt to discover theatrical means for transcending – if not entirely abolishing -- the barriers created by different languages.<sup>81</sup> *Orghast* used Avestan, a pre-Iranian sacred language, but in order to create a new phonetic dialect where sound took priority over meaning, Brook also confronted the actors with transliterated passages of Aeschylean Greek. The poet Ted Hughes, who collaborated with Brook on *Orghast*, had recently been working on Aeschylus. At first most of the Greek tragic language elements were derived from *Prometheus Bound*, but Hughes gradually turned to the text of *Persians* as he shaped both plot and aural impact.<sup>82</sup> Seminal phrases from *Persians* included lines from the antiphonal lament between Xerxes and the chorus, with all their phonetic cries (e.g. 1074-6), and long, aurally rich compound words such as *hippiocharmēs* (29).<sup>83</sup> The

performance thus attempted to erase even the linguistic distinction alienating Greek from Persian, as any one language group from any other.<sup>84</sup> The preparation of the actors included Brook exploring with them the emotions depicted in *Persians*; Brook wanted his actors to transfer the sensual power of the ancient Persians' experiences to the experience of *Orghast*. During rehearsals he said to them that the reception of the news contained in Aeschylus' play was 'a profound experience for the whole nation... Many strong, tragic things were the consequence... We have a chance of discovering what it meant to be the people who experienced it. We seldom go through experiences of this force.'<sup>85</sup>

The story they told in *Orghast* is a new invention, intended as an impersonal epic history of the human spirit, consisting of a massive complex of myths interwoven around a central story with several elements from the story of Prometheus and his Aeschylean tragedy. *Orghast* related the original violation of the natural world, and the revenge taken by the cosmic Creatress on the Violater, the mental tyrant, whose name was Holdfast. In Part II, Holdfast was held in the Underworld, where his ego gradually decomposed amongst his victims. His son Agoluz (a congener of Hercules as well as Xerxes), after returning to his mother, attempted to raise his father up. The action moved into ever greater despair when the Messenger from Salamis began to move across the valley, and the mother-figure Moasha became Atossa, lamenting the fate of Xerxes that she has seen in her dream. Death brought at the end of the performance an apocalyptic vulture-woman.

There are apparently no audio- or video-recordings of *Orghast*, and it was not created with the intention of producing a coherent, publishable script. It was

all along conceived as a one-off theatrical event, never to be repeated. But eye-witness accounts of Part II can offer glimpses into the scale of the production, and the way that it reworked *Persians*:

Fires were lit on the clifftops half an hour in advance. The action is announced by a slow drum beat, on the amplifiers. From the tomb of Xerxes, at the top of a ladder, the Vulture shrieks... From the distance comes the sound of Avesta... Moasha recognizes the voice of her son... Across the valley, on top of the low mounds, the other action begins. A Persian with a flambeau is crying the names of Xerxes's commanders at Salamis. A deep, apprehensive chant comes over the amplifiers, as the rest of the chorus, with flambeaux, rush across to him, through the audience. The procession forms up... the Persians sweep wildly through them, scrambling upon the carvings in the rock face, clamouring in Greek their terror of defeat at Salamis...<sup>86</sup>

Darius was brought forth from *his* tomb 'with Aeschylus' invocation of the great emperor', and his Aeschylean speech was delivered over the amplifiers, followed by more Avestan and percussion. Andrew Porter, the Financial Times reviewer, was awestruck by the choral invocation of Darius: 'when from the darkness of Darius's tomb-mouth the solemn shape stepped forth, the effect was overwhelming, and the impulse to fling oneself to one's knees along with the actors proved hard to master... The playgoer who has entered into *Orghast* has passed through fire, and can never be the same again'.<sup>87</sup> This only represents

about fifty per cent of the action of *Orghast* Part II, but it demonstrates that it derived from Aeschylus' text not only considerable chunks of its text, but the fundamental plot shape, the father-mother-son triangle, the ghost-raising, the theme of tyranny, the threnodic, bleak, apocalyptic ending, and the tombside setting.<sup>88</sup> Darius and Xerxes' presences are felt continuously, but 'as in a dream'; Agoluz 'becomes Xerxes at the moment when he is completely defeated'.<sup>89</sup>

In terms of the history of the reception of *Persians* this production represents a crucial turning-point for at least three reasons. By performing parts of the play in the ancient Persian archaeological setting, with the blessing of the Shah, it broke new ground in bridging the western and eastern perception of the ancient conflict between Achaemenids and mainland Greeks. It was the first significant production organized by a primarily English-language team, and since Peter Brook is probably the most influential director of his generation, *Orghast* was undoubtedly responsible for bringing the tragedy to the attention of avant-garde, experimental theatre practitioners in western Europe and North America. Most importantly, in attempting to use *Persians* to eradicate all ethnic distinctions in a new, international theatrical medium, with a global team of actors and performers, it adumbrated the wave of protest productions that was to be inaugurated at the time of the Gulf War.

## **6. Xerxes and Saddam Hussein**

This was the theatrical backdrop against which Aeschylus' Xerxes found his most recent *Doppelgänger* in the figure of Saddam Hussein. This equation was first made in Peter Sellars' new 1993 version of Aeschylus' *Persians*, written by Robert

Auletta, and staged in Edinburgh, California and Los Angeles. It fundamentally challenged the American image of the ordinary people on the enemy side in the Gulf War. Certain stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims – in particular relating to their perceived sensuality, effeminacy, and irrationality – had been increasingly exposed in the west, at least since the publication in Said's *Orientalism*, as fictive ethnicities belonging to the now obsolete ideology of imperialism. But the Gulf War (which unlike the 2003 war knew no 'embedded journalists' or live relays of footage of the Iraqi carnage to the west) showed how easy it was to fill the void, created in the western imagination by avoidance of authentic pictures of an Asian enemy, with conjured images of all Iraqis as inherently hard, tyrannical, cruel, militaristic, and above all terrifyingly *different*. This is what was so remarkable about the challenge to stereotypical thinking posed by the humanised Iraqis of Sellars' *Persians*.<sup>90</sup>

The action was transposed from ancient Susa to modern Baghdad, and the disaster the cast lamented was the bombing of Iraq by the USA in early 1991. The production was not remotely blind to the faults of the Iraqi regime -- indeed it emphasized the gassing of the Kurds, and it portrayed Xerxes, in his modern form, as a megalomaniac and narcissist perversely and personally intent upon defying America.<sup>91</sup> But the repeated insistence was that the casualties suffered by the Iraqis must have caused them terrible suffering and hardship; moreover, Auletta used the text of Aeschylus' *Persians* as a springboard for turning American propaganda on itself, when the chorus explain that the Americans 'are terrorists, you see. / Force always seems to work for them.'<sup>92</sup> The vision of Sellars and Auletta is simple enough: Aeschylus, whatever his own intentions,

allowed the voice of the ancient Athenians' defeated enemy to be heard, or at least impersonated, in the theatre. Although the tyrant Xerxes and Saddam Hussein are shown as sharing many unpleasant features, the play exposes the brutality and senselessness of US militarism. *Persians* can therefore be used to allow the West to *imagine*, at least, what it felt like to be a citizen of Baghdad under fire. That the 'message' of this production was addressed to advanced global citizens, aware of the need to abandon militarism and transcend ethnic and national loyalties, was fully demonstrated by Sellars' insistence on a fully international team of actors, and the use of traditions of performance and gesture extending from Javanese dancing to North African music and western deaf signing.<sup>93</sup>

It is certain the Sellars' production of *Persians* after the Gulf War made it more likely that, as the second war with Iraq began to loom, someone would again consider staging the play. There have been several significant productions in Europe, including, for example, a Greek realization powerfully updated through costume and acting style at Epidauros in 1999 (see **fig. 9.7**), a polemical and satirical performance at the Dresden Staatsschauspiel in 2002, a revival by the Istituto Nazionale Damma Antico at Syracuse, Sicily, in the ancient theatre in 2003, and an English-language production by the Pearl Theatre Company in New York in January-February 2004. But the most controversial and widely publicized has undoubtedly been Ellen McLaughlin's entirely new version, staged almost immediately after the end of the Iraq war of 2003 by the National Actors' Theater in New York.<sup>94</sup> In this deliberately timely and poetic revival, commissioned, according to McLaughlin as a 'response to a



crisis in American diplomacy' immediately after the outbreak of war',<sup>95</sup> Aeschylus' 'us-and'-them' polarity became dissolved in an unprecedented way. Although Aeschylus' criticism of Persian expansionism was relevant to Saddam Hussein's regime, the use of western clothes, and the harrowing performance of Michael Stuhlbarg as Xerxes (**see fig. 9.8**) brought home the identification of the Persian royal family with the American government. Auletta and Sellars had proposed an uncomplicated identification of the ancient Persians with the contemporary Iraqis, whereas in McLaughlin's interpretation, parallels to the international conduct of the USA are to be found on both sides of Aeschylus' ethnic divide. But in McLaughlin's interpretation both Greeks and Persians, Anglo-American forces and Iraqis, have contributed to the nightmarish suffering reported in the play.

One reviewer wrote: 'You can hear the audience at a performance of Aeschylus' 2,500-year-old play *The Persians* draw in its communal breath when one of the characters speaks movingly of the terrible consequences of a superpower making war just because "it was a thing we could do"'. The performance, wrote the reviewer, 'is a revelation to playgoers battered by the current debate over whether the United States was justified in invading Iraq earlier this year'.<sup>96</sup> It was in this production, which was described as possessing a 'docudrama flavour',<sup>97</sup> that the conflation of 'self' as Greek and 'other' as Persian, so fundamental to Aeschylus' play, had in the USA for the first time become completely inverted. With exception of Koun, hardly any other agent in the history of the reception of *Persians* has produced a version in which Xerxes' aggressive policies have been so unequivocally associated with those of the

adaptor's own country. McLaughlin's version was revived, very successfully, at the Aurora Theatre in Berkeley, California in the autumn of 2005. This followed close on the heels of a revival of the Auletta adaptation in the summer of 2005 by the Scena Theatre company, at the Tivoli Theatre in Washington, DC, directed by Robert McNamara; the revival seemed to the reviewer in the *Washington Post* to be artistic but thinly-disguised liberal 'agitprop'.<sup>98</sup> Together with *The Persians...a comedy about war with five songs* in New York, these revivals result in the remarkable position that three major versions of Aeschylus' long neglected play have played in North America during the year when this book went to press.

When in 1971 Peter Brook took inspiration from *Persians* and performed large sections of it at the very tombs of Darius and Xerxes, some of his contemporaries were concerned that their Persian hosts -- the Shah's administration -- might take offence at the play's emphasis on a Persian defeat.<sup>99</sup> Their fears were not realized, and the Shah had only eight more years to rule before he was ousted by the fundamentalist revolution of 1979, suffering a loss of empire and high estate that reminded more than one western commentator of the story told by Aeschylus' *Persians*.<sup>100</sup> Aeschylus' *Persians* has also recently (1998) – and probably for the first time -- been translated, apparently without any obvious polemical spin, into modern Iranian (**fig. 9.9**). The translator, Fuad Rouhani, was an urbane, western-facing and moderate Iranian citizen, who also translated Plato. He had a distinguished career in international law behind him by the time he was made first Secretary-General of OPEC, stationed at Geneva, in 1960, his tenure of which office was characterised by a naive determination to keep politics and religion out the oil business. He was a true cosmopolitan, which

may be the main reason why Rouhani chose this particular Greek tragedy to translate (rather than the kind of nationalist pride in the ancient Persian legacy exhibited by the last Shah). It is tempting to speculate on how long it will take for his translation of Aeschylus' *Persians* to find a performance in his own country, and on what type of interpretation it might be given. Who might be the chastened imperialists in any Iranian reading of the play? But this may be a day long in coming, for theatre is still not a safe occupation under the current fundamentalist government.<sup>101</sup>

Within Iran, however, there also been one striking consequence of either the recent international revival of *Persians* or the availability of Rouhani's version. This is the interest generated by Aeschylus' presentation of Xerxes' mother among Iranian campaigners for the liberation of women from the strictures imposed on them by Islamic law. A recent anonymous article in the online *Persian Journal* which is patently hostile to the fundamentalist regime, especially the oppression and veiling of women, has cited, in support of Iranian women's right to respect, the reverential titles bestowed on the ancient queen in Aeschylus' *The Iranians* [*sic*].<sup>102</sup> This is surely the first sign of Aeschylus' play being used in a critique of the internal regime within the very land once ruled over by the protagonists of his remarkable theatrical response to the Persian Wars.<sup>103</sup>

- 1 See <http://waterwell.org/>. The production opened in May at Under St. Marks, but proved so popular that it extended its run by transferring to the Perry Street Theater until the end of August. Copies of the script and other materials are housed at the Archive of Performances of Greek & Roman Drama, within the Classics Centre at Oxford University.
- 2 Barbara and Scott Siegel, "Persia on my mind", review of Waterwell Productions' *The Persians* in the *The Siegel Column* July 22nd 2005, last accessed on <http://www.theatermania.com/content/news.cfm/story/6375> December 2005 20th 2005.
- 3 There is a considerable amount of extravagant adaptation of the more warlike passages of *Persians*, including a dialogue between Xerxes and a messenger figure, in 'The Splendour of a thousand swords gleaming beneath the blazon of the Hyperborean Empire', the 7th track of an album released in 1996 by the Heavy Metal band Bal-Sagoth, *Starfire Burning Upon The Ice-Veiled throne of Ultima Thule*. This is available on London's Cacophonous Records label (available through Vinyl Solution). Thanks to Helen Tarbet for this reference.
- 4 Everett (2001), 2.
- 5 *Persians* is discussed in Said (1978), 56-7. For the political and psychological importance to Europe of its fantasies of Eastern despotism, see especially Grosrichard (1998). There is an excellent collection of papers both reacting to Said's work and placing it in its historical and intellectual contexts edited by Macfie (2000). Said himself felt that the ideological constructs he had criticized had become more, rather than less damaging and tenacious in the last years of the twentieth century. See Said (2003).
- 6 See, for example, Hall and Macintosh (2005), chs. 1, 3, 8, and 14.
- 7 There has been an almost exactly contemporaneous revival of another tragedy which has, since the early 19th century, been theatrically neglected: Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*. The historical reasons for that lie behind that revival are similar to those which illuminate the recent interest in *Persians*: see Hall (2005).

- 8 Ar. *Frogs* 1296-7; *Life of Aeschylus* 11. There has of course been a long-standing debate on whether *Persians* is dominantly patriotic and triumphalist in tone, or a remarkably humane and sympathetic delineation of a defeated enemy. The more nuanced recent discussions include Pelling (1997) and Griffith (1998). My own position (which tends towards the former view, while acknowledging the flexible potential of the form and content selected by Aeschylus) is laid out in Hall (1989), 56-100, developed in Hall (1996), and recently modified and elaborated in Hall (2006), ch.7.
- 9 See the hypothesis to Aeschylus *Persians* (= 3 *TgrF* F 8) with Hall (1996), 7-8, 105-6. Phrynichus also composed a tragedy called *The Sack of Miletus*, which may or may not have included barbarian characters in the cast. For a discussion of his history plays, see Roisman (1988).
- 10 See e.g. MacKenzie (1995), ch. 7, and, for cinema, Shoat (1997) and Nadel (1997).
- 11 See the scholion on Aristides 3, p. 535 in the edition of Dindorf (1829).
- 12 Naples 3523, see above, fig. 2.1 and Anti (1952).
- 13 See Bazzell (1932), 13-24; Hall (1996), 7-9.
- 14 There was even a satyr-play entitled *Persians* performed in the second century BCE. See Csapo and Slater (1995), 47.
- 15 See especially lines 100 and 104 with the comments and further bibliography in Olson (2002).
- 16 See Ar. Ach. 10 and Hall (1996) 113, 135, 151-6, 177.
- 17 *tēn peri tōn nekrōn* or *tēn peri tōn kreōn*.
- 18 See Sommerstein (1996), 5-6.
- 19 On which see Hall (1994), revised and updated in Hall (2005), ch. 9.
- 20 For a fine discussion of the mimetic elements in the performances of the orators of the second sophistic, and their attraction to themes from the glory days of the classical Athenian past, see Conolly (2001), especially 84-5.
- 21 See lines 193-242 in the edition of Jacobson (1983), who collects the echoes of *Persians* at pp. 136-41.

- 22 Here I am much indebted to Tessa Rajak (1974), vol. 2, 121 and to Emma  
Clough's dissertation (2003), 174-89.
- 23 Clough (2003), 349-40.
- 24 See Doenges (1981), 49-63, who argues for an early date.
- 25 Browning (2002), 270-1. For the Arab perception of the Byzantines at this  
time, see El Cheikh (2004).
- 26 See Hero (1991).
- 27 For an excellent discussion of the impact of the Saint-Ravy Aeschylus in  
terms of the reception of the *Oresteia*, see Ewbank (2005).
- 28 Southern (1962), 27-8.
- 29 Metlitzki (1977), 209.
- 30 Southern (1962), 28-33; Metlitzki (1977), 199.
- 31 See the edition of Huebner (1935), with Metlitzki (1977), 201-2.
- 32 Metlitzki (1977), 201-2.
- 33 Southern (1962), 37. It had been commissioned by Peter the Venerable,  
Abbot of Cluny.
- 34 On the medieval manifestations of 'Orientalist' thought in Bacon and other  
authors, see now especially Cohen (2001) and Ganim (2005).
- 35 Southern (1962), 82-3.
- 36 Rodinson (1987), 30.
- 37 Rodinson (1987), 34-5.
- 38 Rodinson (1987), 36.
- 39 Baudet (1965), 4.
- 40 See e.g. G.K. Chesterton's rousing poem 'Lepanto' (1911), in Untermeyer  
(1920), no. 91. The narrator peaks of the Christian captives let out of their  
prisons in the keel of the Sultan's ships, now 'White for bliss and blind for  
sun and stunned for liberty.' (133); this is followed by the refrain (134-7),  
Vivat Hispania! / Domino Gloria! / Don John of Austria / Has set his  
people free! Thanks to Walter Donlan for this reference.
- 41 See Protopapa-Mpoumpoulidou (1958), 9-11; Valsa (1960), 164; Knös  
(1962), 303, 654.

- 42 On Greek intellectuals at the universities and publishing houses of Venice and Padua, Geanakopoulos (1976), 63–6.
- 43 For Potter's impact see further Hall and Macintosh (2005), 209-11.
- 44 For another of Romney's illustrations to *Persians*, and his relationship with Potter, see Hall and Macintosh (2005), 209-10 with fig. 7.3.
- 45 Wilson (1985), 81-2.
- 46 See the excellent discussion in Wilson (1985).
- 47 On which see also Puchner (1996).
- 48 On the Jassy play, see Knös (1962), 656. For further bibliography on the Odessa *Philoctetes*, see Taplin (2004), 148 and n. 7. See also Hall and Macintosh (1995), 264-5.
- 49 In a letter to Mr John Gisborne from Pisa, dated October 22nd, 1821, quoted in Wise's preface to Shelley (1886), xii.
- 50 Lady Jane Shelley (1859), 148-9. For an extended discussion of the historical events preceding *Hellas*, see Cameron (1974), 375-7.
- 51 Lady Jane Shelley (1859), 149; see Cameron (1974), 378.
- 52 See Barrell (1967), 183-4.
- 53 Shelley (1886), vii.
- 54 Shelley (1886), x.
- 55 See Hall and Macintosh (2005), 266-7.
- 56 See especially Scrivener (1982), 292-7.
- 57 Important recent comparative discussions of *Persians* and *Hellas*, taking very different trajectories from this one, include Erkelenz (1997) and Ferris (2000), 108-13.
- 58 Hogle (1988), 293.
- 59 Shelley (1886), 6.
- 60 For detailed discussions of Shelley's religion and its presentation in *Hellas*, a complex matter involving Platonism, Reincarnation, George Berkeley's Epistemology, and Pantheism as well as the polarization of the cross and the crescent, see especially Barnard (1964), 85-95.
- 61 Shelley (1886), 12-14.

- 62 See Drew (1987), ch. 7: 'Shelley: *Prometheus Unbound* and a vale in the Indian Caucasus'.
- 63 Shelley (1886), 55.
- 64 Shelley (1886), 57.
- 65 Shelley (1886), 14.
- 66 Bennett (1855), no. 2, pp. 7, 12.
- 67 De Armas (1998), 86-93.
- 68 Rymer (1693), 11-17.
- 69 See the anonymous text *The Battle of the Nile: A Dramatic Poem on the Model of the Greek Tragedy* (1799) and the burlesque (also anonymous) of *Persians* entitled *The Chinaid* (1843).
- 70 See Macintosh (1994), 14-15 and Hall (1996), 1-2.
- 71 *Persians* 821ff.: 'For the grain / Of overweening Pride, after full Flower / Beareth a sheaf of Doom, and garners in / A harvest of all tears'.
- 72 The broadcast took place on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1939. Thanks to Amanda Wrigley for researching this production.
- 73 It was performed, for example, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the wedding celebrations of Crown Prince Constantine and the Prussian Princess Sophie (1889).
- 74 See Trilse (1975), 150-1.
- 75 Trilse (1975), 151-2.
- 76 See Kuckhoff (1987), 19-20.
- 77 See above, ch. 1, n. 000.
- 78 Aeschylus' play is actually set in Susa, where it incorrectly locates the tomb of Darius I.
- 79 Smith (1972), 104-6.
- 80 Smith (1972), 133.
- 81 See further Williams (2002), 41-2, 45, and Brook (1987), 108-10.
- 82 See Smith (1972), 48.
- 83 Smith (1972), 78, 121.
- 84 See Hall (2004a), 40.



85 Smith (1972), 122.  
86 Smith (1972), 182.  
87 This review was published in the *Financial Times* for 16th September 1971,  
and is here quoted from Smith (1972), 236-7.  
88 Smith (1972), 133.  
89 Smith (1972), 133, 214.  
90 For a detailed discussion of this production, see Hall (2004b), 169-85.  
91 See Auletta (1993), 33, 37, 47, 88.  
92 Auletta (1993), 33.  
93 Hall (2004b), 197.  
94 McLaughlin's translation has not yet been published; there is a copy at the  
APGRD in the Classics Centre in Oxford University. The production was  
directed by Ethan McSweeney.  
95 Quoted in Tallmer (2003).  
96 Anonymous review posted on United Press International, June 27<sup>th</sup> 2003  
last accessed through [www.quickstart.clari.net](http://www.quickstart.clari.net) in December 2005.  
97 Sommer (2003).  
98 See Pressley (2005) and <http://www.scenatheatre.org/so405.htm>.  
99 Smith (1972), 130-1.  
100 Raphael (1979): 'had the Shah read Aeschylus's "The Persians", he might  
have had the wit to save his throne'.  
101 The British tour by the tiny Iranian company Theatre Bazi in 2002, for  
example, was the first since the 1979 revolution. It is revealing that the  
director of Theatre Bazi is Attila Pasyooni, a survivor of anti-idolatry  
legislation, who worked with Peter Brook on *Orghast*.  
102 'Atossa, the celestial and terrestrial Lady of ancient Iran', in the 'Women'  
section of *Persian Journal*, November 13th, 2004. The article, which is  
anonymous, was last accessed in December 2005 at the address  
[www.iranian.ws/iran\\_news/publish/article\\_4461.shtml](http://www.iranian.ws/iran_news/publish/article_4461.shtml) .  
103 Versions of this paper have been read to the Ancient Historians of the  
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