

# The Mesode at *Persae* 93–100

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IN 1837 K. O. Müller insisted that the mesode at *Persae* 93–100 was out of place.<sup>1</sup> He proposed relocating it as an epode after line 114 because he felt that these lines in their traditional position disrupted the sense of the passage. Many commentators have accepted this new location for the mesode; however opinion is far from unanimous.<sup>2</sup>

The basic problems are these:

1. In line 93 the particle *δέ* must be appropriately translated.
2. In line 93 the phrase *δολόμητιν ἀπάταν θεοῦ* must be given a meaning which conforms with the events of the play and the attitude of the chorus.
3. In line 101 the word *γάρ* must be explained.
4. In line 115 the word *ταῦτα* must refer to something in the previous stanzas.
5. Finally, the meaning of the mesode in relation to the surrounding passages must be made clear.

Dr Broadhead accepts the transposition and interprets the passage in this way: the chorus expresses its confidence in the might of Persia's army and in the spirit of the Persian nation (65–92). Then the chorus explains how the Persians came to possess such might (93–106, his numbers): they were following a divinely appointed destiny in their successive conquests. In the course of their military development they learned to storm walls and overthrow cities and, in addition,

<sup>1</sup> Karl O. Müller, "Scholien zu den in diesem Museum Jahrg. IV H.iii s.393ff. von Herrn Dr. Dübner herausgegebenen Versen des Tzetzes über die verschiedenen Dichtungsgattungen," *RhM* 5 (1837) 369 n.11. I wish to thank Professor H. G. Edinger of the University of British Columbia for his useful comments as I was preparing this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Wilamowitz, Broadhead, Murray, Rose and Smyth transfer the passage, while Paley, Groeneboom and Sidgwick retain it in its traditional location. Even though I disagree with H. D. Broadhead on this point, I am much indebted throughout this paper to his excellent text and commentary, *The Persae of Aeschylus* (Cambridge 1960), hereafter cited as BROADHEAD.

to navigate on the sea and to have trust in the various devices which they developed for the transportation of their army. He continues: “This account of Persian exploits is succeeded by the forebodings of 107–14 (δολόμητιν δ’, κτλ.), which are given in general terms, to be followed immediately by their application to the present situation and to the peril of the Persian army.”<sup>3</sup>

This interpretation answers the basic questions. The particle δέ (Broadhead, 107) has an adversative meaning; the chorus turns from its account of the strength of Persia to its forebodings in spite of that power. The γάρ at line 101 (Broadhead, 93) appropriately introduces a strophe which offers proof of the preceding statements about Persia’s strength. The word ταῦτα (115) refers to the chorus’ thoughts of the trap into which a god may lead the great army. The god is characterized as crafty and deceptive because the Persian army and its commanders are too wise to be led into certain defeat. The god will have to lure them, and this prospect distresses the elders of Persia.

The difficulty in this interpretation is the loose connection between the account of Persian military excellence and the forebodings of future defeat because of the seductive enticements of the god. Commentators have attempted to cover the abruptness of this shift by saying (with Dr Broadhead) that the chorus finishes one theme and then it turns to another. Both themes—both the greatness and the worry—concern the Persian army; this would be the continuity of the passage. I do not feel, however, that the relocation of the mesode and the accompanying explanation are consistent with the intention of Aeschylus as revealed in the rest of the play.

Of primary importance to this study is the precise understanding of the mesode. Scholars who favor the transposition have interpreted it in two ways. Rose gives the sense of the passage as follows: “Once the transposition is made, all is clear, logical and poetically effective: ‘God has given Persia the mission of conquest by land; she has ventured also to attempt conquest by sea; has she been deceived into going too far, and is disaster to be the result?’”<sup>4</sup> This interpretation depends on the belief that the Persians have exceeded their authority in constructing a navy; the god formerly encouraged them to build

<sup>3</sup> Broadhead p.54.

<sup>4</sup> H. J. Rose, *A Commentary on the Surviving Plays of Aeschylus* (Amsterdam 1957) on lines 107ff.

up only their land forces. Such a view requires some personal additions to, if not modifications of, the text; I feel that Dr Broadhead has already adequately rejected this reading of the mesode.<sup>5</sup>

The second interpretation presents the god who humbles the prosperous: “great indeed have been the achievements of the Persians but long-continued prosperity and success are liable, sooner or later, to be shattered (on the familiar principle that *φιλέει ὁ θεὸς τὰ ὑπερέχοντα πάντα κολούειν*, Hdt. VII, 10, ε).”<sup>6</sup> This god, who traps all men, seems an unduly harsh and inscrutable divinity. The Persian elders would be implying that all individual striving, all power and all wisdom is useless. No man could live long in prosperity, not even the king of Persia with his fine army. Their special cause for worry at this time would be the opportunity for destruction—wartime and its attendant dangers. Accordingly, they sing that the possibility of willful destruction by Zeus (*ταῦτα*) tears their black-clad minds in fear (115f).<sup>7</sup>

This is not a very inspiring piece of dogma; in fact, it is totally alien to sentiments sung by this chorus in the first part of the play (1–248). It is legitimate to focus on the beginning of the play as a unit because after the messenger announces the defeat of the Greeks, there is no opportunity for free speculation on the possible courses of action which Zeus might take. After line 249 the elders need only accommodate Zeus’ action within their theology.

It is undeniable that this chorus does have a sense of foreboding about the army. In their opening words the elders state that they have come because their hearts prophesy evil (10f). They are worried because of the risk involved in warfare. At 244 they admit that there is good reason to think that the Greeks could defeat Xerxes; the de-

<sup>5</sup> Broadhead p.54.

<sup>6</sup> Broadhead p.58.

<sup>7</sup> Broadhead (on line 114) feels difficulty with a theology as stiff and unrelenting as this. He explains that the chorus is making a distinction between a state of mind in which delusion may enter and the consequences of the delusion. A man could escape infatuation, but not unscathed. He attacks the weakness of the repeated words *βροτόν . . . θνατόν* (98–100) as objectionable and emends the text, which is notoriously unclear in this passage. His arguments do not seem sufficient to me. The plain meaning of the two opening questions (93–96) and the *οὐκ ἔστιν* (100) is that *no* mortal can escape the snares of god. Later in this paper I will attempt to show that *θνατός . . . βροτόν . . . θνατόν* are intentionally repeated; see *infra* n.10. The religion in this passage is as rigid as I have indicated provided that commentators have understood the general religious sentiments correctly; I feel, however, that there is another interpretation of these lines which is more suited to the play.

feat at Marathon still lives in memory. At 59ff the Persian elders admit that the relatives of the men who are gone tremble at the lengthening time. In these passages there are only two reasons offered for the anxiety of the chorus: the risk implicit in warfare and the lack of information. Notice that there is no certainty in their minds that disaster has occurred or even that disaster must occur during this campaign.

In fact, destruction of the army by a god is so distant from the elders' minds that when Atossa tells them her gloomy dream, they quickly put her fears to rest. She first reveals her concern in words similar to the mesode (161-64): "Care tears at my heart; I will tell you my thoughts, my friends, which bring me fears, lest great wealth trip prosperity—which Darius collected with a god's aid—in its own dust." In the terms of the mesode she fears that some god, by enticing Darius to extreme prosperity, is working toward Persia's downfall. This would seem exactly the thought to rouse the chorus to mournful worry if they indeed had such serious religious forebodings about the fate of the army a few lines before. Then the queen relates her dream about the two women whom Xerxes tried to yoke to his chariot. This dream is reinforced by the sight of the eagle pursued by the hawk. Such omens should convince a chorus, which already suspected disaster, that their worst suspicions were about to be fulfilled. Not in the least; they lightly wish these signs away with advice to the queen to pray to avert the omens—if omens they be.

This is not a chorus which is morose and moody because it anticipates the destruction of the army; the elders have little interest in omens prophesying such a defeat. Rather this is a chorus which has only the customary anxieties afflicting any man when a member of his family has gone to war. They are supremely confident that the war has been well-planned and that the power of Persia is fully capable of winning an impressive victory; the fears of Atossa seem the mere agitation and anxiety of a weak woman. Symptomatic of their attitude is their greeting to the queen as she enters (157-58):

You are the wife of the god of the Persians;  
 You are also the mother of a god;  
 Unless the ancient divinity has now deserted the army.

They expect the army to return home in victory. The guardian divin-

ity of the Persians built the army and has always aided it before; they see no reason to assume that his protection has been withdrawn.

In view of their continued attitude of unclouded optimism it does not seem that the elders are plagued with forebodings which are as serious as commentators who favor the relocation of the mesode claim. Their characterization is more consistent when the mesode is left in its traditional position:

*Antistrophe β*: The chorus expresses its confidence in the power of the Persian army.

*Mesode*: They state that there is no mortal who can escape the hand of god. God's method is to lead that mortal into a situation where his destruction is accomplished. The situation may look appealing to him, but in fact the shrewd man could see that there is disaster ahead.

*Strophe γ*: Now the chorus explains the general moralizing which it has just proclaimed: "For it is a fate from god that has ruled over us from ancient times and has commanded the Persians" to learn the arts of war. The repetition of the word 'god' from the mesode is important. The chorus feels that god has established and encouraged the Persian army so that it can perform some religious function. The army is the agent of vengeance for the god.<sup>8</sup> When the chorus sang in the mesode of the mortal who could not escape the deception of god, it was referring to the various opponents of Persia. In this case the Greek nation is convinced that it can oppose Persia. This is the pleasant enticement of Atē; the Greeks, however, are actually entering into the nets of destruction by hoping to withstand the divinely-built might of the Persian army.

*Antistrophe γ*: This section continues the thought of the previous stanza: the Persians in pursuing the god-ordained development of their army have even mastered the sea.

*Strophe δ*: But then the chorus admits that the whole military campaign to Greece (τὰ ἅττα) is worrisome—not because of the vindictiveness of god, but only because war is a chancy affair.

This interpretation is not only more consistent with the attitude of the chorus, but it also solves the basic problems in this passage:

1. The particle δέ in line 93 marks a continuation of the previous

<sup>8</sup> Professor Edinger has pointed out to me that the chorus may have Xerxes in mind in the word θεοῦ (93). At 157 it addresses Atossa as the wife of a god and the mother of a god; Xerxes by his position as king would be joined with the effective gods of the chorus' theology.

description of the might of the Persian army which begins in Strophe  $\alpha$  at line 65. At line 73 there is a  $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$  as the chorus continues its description but turns its attention to the leader of the army; at line 81 there is a  $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$  as the elders go on speaking about Xerxes; at line 87 there is also a  $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$  when they return to the unconquerable strength of the army. Then at the beginning of the mesode there is another  $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$  when they continue to talk about the power of the Persian army; now they emphasize the religious dimension of this strength. Denniston calls this the 'continuative' as opposed to the 'adversative' use of the particle  $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ .<sup>9</sup>

2. At line 101  $\gamma\acute{\alpha}\rho$  introduces a section which explains the religious statements of the mesode. The elders set down a religious principle in the mesode, and now, as they return to strophic song, they show that their present military strength is an integral part of a divine plan. They believe that no man will escape god because god has made his mortal agent—the Persian army—so strong.

3. At line 115  $\tau\alpha\tilde{\upsilon}\tau\alpha$  refers solely to the expedition across the sea.

4. The phrase  $\delta\omicron\lambda\omicron\mu\eta\tau\iota\nu\ \acute{\alpha}\pi\acute{\alpha}\tau\alpha\nu\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$  shows how deluded the Greeks can be in fighting the Persians; Atē has enticed them into her nets of doom.

There is one further point to be considered: how this passage fits into the theology of the play. If the mesode were transferred to the new position, the chorus would be expressing its belief in a world where men are trapped and gods are willful tyrants. This theory is not seriously accepted by the chorus at any other place in the play before or after the announcement of the destruction of the great army.

If the mesode is retained in its traditional position, the theology of the passage is different. The important change is the immediate application of a general religious principle to a specific situation. As soon as the Persian army and its might are identified with the plan of god, the speech becomes praise for the army. God has great power and the Persians have a defined rôle as his helpers. The opening lines of the mesode are not: what mortal will ever escape the treacherous deception of god? Rather the passage takes on a different meaning: what man who is merely mortal will escape the crafty deception of god (as he works through his mortal agents in an historical process)?

<sup>9</sup> J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford 1959) 162f.

The contrast is between mortals and the god.<sup>10</sup> The Greeks—and other enemies—are merely mortals while the Persians have the might of god supporting their army. There is every reason for the Persian elders to feel supremely confident; no mere mortal could ever escape the plans of god.

Needless to say, this faith is unfounded and will shortly be proved wrong. The chorus trusts that Xerxes is the equal of a god and that no nation on earth can stand against him successfully (65–92); this is wrong. The elders feel that god is their leader and that they are sending out their men on a holy crusade in the service of god; later events show this also to be wrong. The tragedy in this drama is the shaking of the chorus' faith and the reinstatement of a more valid religion which adequately accounts for the results of Salamis. This is the learning which comes to them through their loss and suffering.<sup>11</sup> Ironically the principle of divine revenge is applied to them; but they do not understand the ethical demands of the god at the opening of the play.<sup>12</sup>

As the play progresses the confidence of the chorus is completely shattered. At line 554ff they no longer have a viable interpretation of the past; they ask why Darius was so secure. Their theological theory in the parodos had previously explained this, but now they recognize that their theory does not work. At line 631f they pray that Darius may know a cure for their evils. Their easy faith in the future has vanished. As long as the army continued to be successful, there was no need for them to doubt; but with the defeat at Salamis their belief in their god has been shaken, and they must ask for a new

<sup>10</sup> This explains the words *ἀνὴρ θνατός* (94); see *supra* n.7. The emphasis on mortality is not necessary if the mesode refers to any man; it is essential when the word *θνατός* points up a contrast to those men who have the support of the god. Later in the mesode the words *βροτόν* and *θνατόν* are repeated to stress this contrast.

<sup>11</sup> S. M. Adams, "Salamis Symphony," *Studies in Honor of Gilbert Norwood* (Toronto 1952) 46–54, has pointed out that Aeschylus "is delighting his audience with an imaginative conception of how the lesson of Salamis came home to the Persians, represented here by the Chorus. . . . The central figure is thus the Chorus. The drama is appropriately named for them. . . . The individual *dramatis personae* are introduced for their effect upon the Chorus and for their function in the simple mechanism of the piece" (47).

<sup>12</sup> Similar ironies have been noted in this parodos: for example, J. T. Sheppard, "Notes on Aeschylus' *Persae*," *CR* 29 (1915) 33–35, and W. B. Stanford, *Aeschylus in his Style* (Dublin 1942) 36 and 76—both on the irony of *οἰχομένων* in line 1; also M. Pohlenz, *Die Griechische Tragödie* (Leipzig and Berlin 1930) 47, on the irony of *περσέπτολις* applied to the army in line 65.

religious explanation. This explanation is given by the king whose epithet is 'the Wise', their old ruler Darius.

The mesode (93-100) should not be transferred to a position following line 114. The thought and characterization of the chorus is more unified and the theology of the play is more consistent when the mesode is retained in its traditional place.

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