

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Aeschylus

Loss

Preface. If Sophocles writes as a metaphysician, and Euripides as a social scientist, Aeschylus writes as a voice of an archaic age when transcendent voices declare fates, and man simply endures their grip, sometimes for the good of society, sometimes for the good of mankind, sometimes simply to pay the lesson for wisdom, as Xerxes discovered the danger of 'vain arrogant pride.' He endured hard reality, in the giddy risk taking of war.

The Persians. *The Persians* is an example of stark loss. The play situates itself in Susa, one of the capitals of the Persian Empire, first in the minds of a chorus of old men, then in the mind of Queen Atossa, the royal head of the Empire, after the death of her husband, Darius. The tone is somber, for everyone is anxiously awaiting news of the naval battle at Salamis (480-479 B.C.E.) in which Atossa's son, Xerxes, is risking the might of the Persian navy. In the midst of this anxiety an exhausted messenger arrives from Greece, to announce the loss and destruction of Xerxes' fleet. The suffering of the Persian army is frightful, as, it seems, is the suffering of the Persian Queen at her court. Everyone is dumb with the loss. Xerxes has gone too far. What we know of the other two dramas in this trilogy—which won Aeschylus first prize in the City Dionysia in 472 B.C.E.—support the impression that the entire trilogy concerns the dangers of *hubris*, of taking foolish risks. The play's concern with loss morphs into the salutary discovery that the gods will punish foolish risk taking.

Prometheus Unbound. Prometheus, the Titan who was able to rebel from the Olympian Zeus, and to confer wonderful gifts on mankind—fire, the ability to calculate for purposes of astronomy, navigation, the ability to work iron—suffers greatly for his audacity in challenging Zeus, and in making mankind out of clay, which was exactly against the will of the gods. But this rebel is dreadfully punished by being nailed to a rock in the Caucasus, where the icy winds are to batter him, age after age, and a fierce eagle is sent to chew his liver every day—as it grows back every night. The punishment of this Titan, whose loss of freedom and power is ultimately disabling, is absolute when he is dumped into the pit of Tartarus, to be removed from existence. He is embedded in loss.

The Eumenides In the final play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Orestes is assaulted by the Furies, who claim full revenge against him for having killed his mother. His revenge-taking, of course, has been starkly justified by the preceding actions of his mother, and he accepts responsibility as he acts. He must however live his way through the hell of his actions, and into the full retribution of Athena, before his loss is complete enough to justify the social changes under establishment in the *Eumenides*. Like Prometheus, who had had the guts to stand up to Zeus, and to 'steal fire' for mankind, but was then thrown into Hades, Orestes must endure the assault of the Furies, whose exhausting attacks overcome him—leaving him a raving victim, as we see later in the *Orestes* of Euripides, where we meet the figure of Orestes five days after the psychotic assault on his sanity. The world-loss for Orestes can only be replaced by his achievement, when we are given to understand that achievement as a strong basis of the institution of a new court of justice in Greece, where law will replace jungle killing.