HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Aeschylus

Fear

Preface. The human condition brings fear along with it, and where fear comes under control, something less and underlying, like anxiety, lurks where fear has been. These constitutional elements of human being alive are naturally at their most forcible when civil and social unrest most shake the stability of the state and its inhabitants. A condition of instability was pronounced in Greece during the fifth century B.C.E., and not only because war (Persian, 492-449) then Peloponnesian (431-405) was raging throughout the period of greatest artistic productivity, but also because Greek artistic and philosophic sensibility was at its most sensitive, to the alarming conditions under which human culture subsists. The great tragedians—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—were uniquely sensitive to the fear inherent to living in their own times. Three plays by Aeschylus, the earliest and most archaically sensitive of these creators, will show the Greek mind at work coping with the response to large scale social fear.

The Persians. *The Persians* foregrounds the defeat of the army of Xerxes at the Battle of Salamis. Fear pervades the narrative, which is experienced through the telling of Atossa, the Persian Queen Mother, the widow of Darius and the mother of Xerxes. The hybris of Xerxes, in taking on the Greeks far from his own home base, seems to portend calamity, and Persian fear overwhelms the court, when news is brought that the fleet of Xerxes has been wiped out. (The chorus of old men, from the Persian side, reinforces the lamentations of the Persians, in what to the Greeks seemed the 'oriental' atmosphere of dread and despair.) Finally, Xerxes himself returns, defeated and in tatters, to tell the whole story of defeat, and further hint at the retributive justice which is now impending on the defeated Persians. No one at court can assuage the rampant fear of a future which will soon descend on the Persian royalty.

The Suppliants. Like the Persians, the *Suppliants* opens on a scene of dread, as the daughters of King Danaus arrive at Argos one step ahead of their lustful cousins, who are pursuing them from Egypt. (While there is a legalistic basis in Egyptian law, for the cousins' claim on their relatives, the dominant drive behind this pursuit is clearly lust, and it is repellent to the girls. The narrative skillfully follows the course of events in Argos, where the girls' father prevails over the ruler of Argos, to provide shelter and protection for the lusty but not ready girls. The finest achievement of Aeschylus, in the construction of this play, is the creation of a sense of breathlessness, the palpable result of the girls' panic. We notice that fear-engendered panic pervades both the *Suppliants'* terror, and that of Queen Atossa and the old men's chorus in the *Persians.*

Eumenides. The same sense of fearful panic drives Orestes in the last play of the *Oresteia* trilogy. In that work we see the Erinyes attack the sanity of the slayer of Clytemnestra, who had followed his inner mandate, to the killing of his mother and her lover Aegisthus. Orestes is assaulted by waves of madness, in this play as in the

Orestes of Euripides, who is driven to insane arsonist fury at the peak of his dread. The panic fear that assails the *Suppliants* and Atossa, at the Persian court, is as it were a specialty of Aeschylus, who brings his own experiences, of living a war-torn time, directly over into his language. We can see this expertise, in the depiction of fear and dread, in the particularly vivid photos of Io, the miserable gadfly driven girlfriend of Zeus, whom jealous Hera pursues in hectic terror past the rocky crags where Prometheus is chained.