

TEACHING AND READING CLASSICS AFTER 9/11

by Nancy Felson

In the wake of the attacks on September 11, 2001, many academics, like me, struggled to find a public voice within the framework of our own discipline in order to try to make sense of the changed world. On campuses and at professional meetings, we engaged in discussions and turned to the texts we knew best. I sought inspiration in fifth-century Athens, hoping to identify some of the terms of analysis and debate that preoccupied participants in the first western democracy. What could these texts offer us now in such painful and uncertain times? I was teaching the *Persians* of Aeschylus, a tragedy produced in 472 B.C.E., just eight years after the Athenian victory at the Battle of Salamis. Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.E.) lived through a formative phase of Athenian democracy, when it was consolidating itself after the war, in opposition to the tyranny it assigned to Persia and other “barbaric” empires. His dramas spoke to a body of citizens acutely attuned to the principles of freedom and democracy. In that world, certain humbling sentiments, such as the vicissitudes of fortune and the precariousness of success, pervaded public discourse. With my students I marveled at how the Athenian playwright could, simultaneously, have fought in the Persian War and still empathize with his enemies, enough to represent their sufferings on stage.

Aeschylus made the characters of his historical play both “same” and “other” for his Athenian audience. He placed them at the Persian court, at a dramatic moment right after their defeat at Salamis. Through the ghost Darius, the previous ruler of Persia, he introduced the theme of the decline of a culture that betrays its own values. Darius, raised from the dead through the invocations of Queen Atossa, characterizes the defeat of his son Xerxes as “payment for his pride and godless arrogance” (806-807). He thus locates the defeat within the divine scheme of things, in which transgressors suffer a just requital. Invoking Zeus, the god of just retribution, he blames Xerxes for betraying the principles of self-restraint and due measure and for leading the Persians from civilization to barbarity – father attacking son in an inter-generational culture war. The fact that Darius describes

Xerxes’ excesses in Greek terms, as if these cherished Greek values are in fact trans-cultural, enables Aeschylus to present on stage the critical issues of his own day. Yet he does so indirectly, never raising the possibility of an eventual *Athenian* decline. And so his compatriots can safely empathize with their defeated foe and lament along with Atossa and Darius; they can affirm their superiority to Xerxes’ Persians and repudiate such hubristic behavior. By distancing the universal human experience of defeat, humiliation, and grief for a generation of warriors lost in battle from Athens, Aeschylus can freely stage for them what they have just narrowly escaped in the real world. The suffering in the play represents what could happen to the Athenians, if they were to behave autocratically, like the hubristic and tyrannical Xerxes, and betray their own emancipatory principles. Aeschylus prods his Athenians not to follow in the Persian pathway.

Ancient reports of debates on values and principles of fifth-century Athens illuminate issues of our times.

The world at Susa in the drama, because it is sealed off from contemporary Athens, can serve as a relatively painless image of what to avoid. It is a blueprint for the young Athenian democrats in the audience, warning them against a practice that will in fact come to prevail in the age of Pericles and thereafter, especially in the course of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.E.). The lesson has to do with how Athens conducts her foreign policy after becoming an empire: will the Athenians heed the warnings articulated by Darius? Indeed, the double standard of democracy at home and tyranny abroad was soon to become almost natural (and hence unquestioned).

Aeschylus’ *Persians* was produced shortly before Athens embarked on an imperialist track, which was so successful that, as Thucydides (460/455-ca. 400 B.C.E.), in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, makes Pericles say to the Athenians “. . . there is no power on Earth – not the

king of Persia nor any people under the sun – which can stop you from sailing where you wish” (2.62, trans. Rex Warner). Thucydides presents Pericles as a spokesman for the view that Athens was entitled to her empire, and in any case unable to give it up:

And do not imagine that what we are fighting for is simply the question of freedom or slavery: there is also involved the loss of our empire and the dangers arising from the hatred which we have incurred in administering it. Nor is it any longer possible for you to give up this empire, though there may be some people who in a mood of sudden panic and in a spirit of political apathy actually think that this would be a fine and noble thing to do. Your empire is now like a tyranny: it may have been wrong to take it; it is certainly dangerous to let it go. (2.63)

After expelling the Persians from Greece, Athens became the leader of a pan-Hellenic defensive alliance against the invaders but soon came to dominate her allies. By 454 B.C.E., Athens had made a unilateral decision to transfer the treasury of the League from the neutral island of Delos to Athens and began using it for her own civic purposes. Whenever an ally revolted, Athens punished this disloyalty by military conquest, imposing a government favorable to her policies. In one instance, following the revolt of Mytilene (428/427 B.C.E.), Athenians were so angry at the rebellion that they at first voted to annihilate the male population and enslave the women and children, as Xerxes had done over fifty years earlier to the Ionian Greeks of Miletus. Then, reconsidering, they recanted their vote, and spared the Mytilenians (3.36-49). But about ten years later we see how far Athens has fallen from her original principles when she brutally attacked the neutral island of Melos for refusing to support the campaign against Sparta. At this point Athens made not even a pretense of high-minded values. In Thucydides' account of the debate, the Athenian envoys tell their Melian counterparts why Melos should accept Athenian domination:

Then we on our side will use no fine phrases saying, for example, that we have a right to our empire because we defeated the Persians, or that we have come against you

now because of the injuries you have done us. . . . the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept. (5.89)

When Melos refused to become an Athenian ally, Athens, in a culmination of her imperialist policy, killed its men and enslaved its women and children.

Momentous events of 2,500 years ago, with their accompanying debates at critical junctures, offer parallels to what we experienced as a nation and as individual citizens on September 11 and continue to experience in its wake. While history and its stories cannot predict what lies ahead for us, they can make us reflect on how others – equally tormented and challenged, provoked, betrayed, and maligned – managed to live courageously under difficult and threatening circumstances. Tragedies such as the *Persians* of Aeschylus and those of the other great tragedians, as well as the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, can enlighten and deepen our own debates. As contemporary Americans, as citizens of a democracy at the height of its power (a superpower that often acts as unilaterally as the Athenians), we have new kinds of adversaries and daunting new challenges. Ancient reports of debates on values and principles of fifth-century Athens illuminate issues of our times. They speak to such topics as the use and abuse of power, cycles of violence and reactive rage and their containment, mediation and moderation, treatment of war captives (or “detainees”), and the resilience of democracy. These ancient Athenian voices guide us, if we are willing to listen, to a more profound, less facile understanding of the various forms of extremism that threaten our democratic society and our very lives.

Nancy Felson is Professor of Classics at the University of Georgia. She edited Semiotics and Classical Studies (Arethusa, Vol.16, 1983), which helped introduce classicists to the theory of signs. Her book Regarding Penelope (Princeton, 1994; reissued in paper, 1997) explores the complex web of possible and actual plots in the Odyssey and combines a narratological with a cognitive, reader-response approach to Penelope's character. Professor Felson is currently working on a book, Vicarious Transport in Pindaric Epinician Poetry, which uses deictic analysis to show how the poet transports his live audience from the performance site to various elsewheres, and then back again, and to what poetic effect.