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Hybris and hybridity in Aeschylus' Persians: a posthumanist perspective on Xerxes' expedition

In 2010, the artist Minty Donald conducted an on-site performance on the river Clyde in Glasgow:¹

“an attempt to lace together the banks of the River Clyde in Glasgow city center using over one mile of thick, heavy, black mooring rope. The rope was dragged back and forth across the river by a workboat, equipped with a mechanized winch and hydraulic arm, and tensioned between bollards on opposite quaysides to form a zigzag lattice.”²

Commenting on this experience, Donald adopts the terminology of new materialist and posthumanist theories: while performing *in collaboration with* the river, a “more-than-human” natural element, she perceived that humans, objects (the boat, the rope), and water were entangled and “enmeshed with tidal and meteorological forces”.³ The human intention was grappling with material objects as well as natural elements that “acted back”.⁴ As she recounts, this experience turned out to be more challenging than expected. The inherent quality of the rope (a “*predilection to revert to a state of unruly entanglement*”),⁵ the effects of tide, flow and wind direction greatly impacted (and even thwarted) the realization of the art project. She therefore defends the notion of a “fluid agency, based on reciprocal, yet not symmetrical, exchange between people and objects”, perfectly in line with the principles of new materialists.⁶ Her engagement for posthumanist theory arouses when she promotes an “ecological perspective that profoundly challenges anthropocentricity”⁷ and calls for “progressive paradigms for human/more-than-human interdependency.”⁸

¹ *Bridging Part 1*. Devised by Minty Donald, Nick Millar, and Offshore Workboats Ltd. River Clyde, Glasgow. 6 Nov. 2010.

² Donald 2014: 118.

³ Donald 2014: 119.

⁴ Donald 2014: 122.

⁵ Donald 2014: 122. Italics mine.

⁶ On this topic, Donald borrows from Bennett 2011 and Ingold 2011: (89-94).

⁷ Donald 2014: 130.

⁸ Donald 2014: 126.

Reading about Donald's *Bridging* on the river Clyde sparked in my mind an exploratory *bridge* between past and present. If her modern, arty performance can be analyzed with the lens of posthumanism, to what extent can one apply the same line of thinking to Aeschylus' re-enactment, through theatrical performance, of Xerxes' attempt of bridging the Hellespont during the second Persian war?

Tremendous material means were involved in the crossing of the Persian army from the Asian port of Abydos to the Thracian Sestos in 480 BC.⁹ Thousands of workers connected together more than three hundred war boats to form each of the two parallel bridges,¹⁰ with one mile long ropes of papyrus and white flax.¹¹ The six hundred and seventy-four boats were moored with anchors, themselves tied to anchor ropes whose length totalized more than three hundred kilometers according to modern reconstructions. The changing currents as well as the strong winds gusting the strait strongly affected the Persians' interactions with matter and nature. When the bridges were destroyed by a storm before the army had arrived at Abydos,¹² Xerxes, enraged, beheaded the builders. As is well-known, he also had the sea punished with three hundred whiplashes and fetters thrown into the strait.¹³ He then rebuilt the bridges and made his army cross (which took more than a week) before leaving the bridges behind, for them to be wrecked again by another storm.¹⁴

Herodotus' account emphasizes the shocking novelty in Xerxes' enterprise as well as the hybristic amount of material means invested in it¹⁵ – an excess which is connected with Xerxes' later downfall, according to a logic that resembles that of Aeschylus' tragedies.¹⁶ It is indeed in Aeschylus' *Persians*, a memorable tragedy produced in 472 BC, eight years only after Xerxes' defeat at Salamis, that the entanglement of humans, things, natural forces and physical environment caused by Xerxes' expedition, was re-enacted on stage. This is on this aspect of the play that I wish

⁹ Hammond & Roseman 1996.

¹⁰ Hdt. VII, 23-57.

¹¹ Hdt. VII, 36.

¹² Hdt. VII, 34.

¹³ Hdt. VII, 35.

¹⁴ Hdt. VIII, 117; IX, 114.

¹⁵ In particular in VII, 36. The Athenian people could actually have witnessed these extraordinary Persian ropes that were later dedicated as war spoils in Athenian sanctuaries, cf. IX, 121; Hall 1996 *ad. loc.*

¹⁶ For a recent re-assessment of the influence of Aeschylus on Herodotus through the historian's borrowing of the animal metaphor of the 'yoking' of the Hellespont, see Van den Eersten 2015. Another narrative device that seemed also borrowed from tragedy, is his way of connecting the crossing of rivers with man's arrogance and transgression. See Immerwahr 1966: 293; Lateiner 1989: 128-129.

to focus, arguing that Aeschylus invested Xerxes' bridging with ontological and ethical implications that have not been previously seen. The bridge literally links the two continents, Europe and Asia, but the *bridging* is also enacted at the deepest level of ontological categories. The connection between the two continents triggers close inter-relations and intermingling between humans, animals, objects, water and wind. Therefore, a posthumanist reading helps, I suggest, to illuminate the ontological interplay that characterizes Aeschylus' dramaturgy.

Does that amount to saying that Aeschylus' world is a posthumanist one? After all, such a claim would not necessarily be anachronistic. Katherine Hayles suggested that as humans, "we have always been posthuman."¹⁷ However, the entanglement of humans, objects and the natural environment actually has harmful implications in Aeschylus' play, especially when it comes to telling the story of Salamis, another climactic moment of the tragedy.¹⁸ The bridging of the Hellespont and the naval battle are two mirror passages, linked by linguistic and thematic echoes: the defeat at Salamis is explicitly interpreted as a punishment suffered for the hybridic former enterprise. Salamis epitomizes the Persians' loss, their human identity being devoured by revolted natural forces and material objects.

I therefore contend that in *Persians*, far from being idealized as the bright future of humanity, the hybrid humanity is connected with *hybris* and human alienation rather than liberation. However, Aeschylus' ambivalent representation of hybridity does not necessarily foreshadow the later humanist rejection of all that is organic, physical, animal, natural, mixed, from the definition of human essence.¹⁹ A posthumanist reading of *Persians* does not call for a *prehumanist* interpretation, **i.e., a reading that would make of Aeschylus a precursor of the humanist tradition.**²⁰ Rather, **his play seems to advocate for a cosmic humanism** that envisages human beings as living in a respectful companionship with objects, animals, natural elements and divinities. As such, **it strikingly resonates with some** modern trends of thought, such as Haraway's exploration of inter-species relationships.²¹

¹⁷ Hayles 1999: 291.

¹⁸ *Pers.* 272-514.

¹⁹ Marchesini 2017: 23.

²⁰ According to Marchesini (*id.*), the humanist tradition was developed much later than the 5th century BC.

²¹ Haraway 2003.

The bridging of the Hellespont and supra-humanity

In *Persians*, the choral ode of the *parodos* exalts the greatness and irresistible strength of the Persian army breaking like waves over Greece. The crossing of the Hellespont is the climactic achievement of this campaign: Persians have acquired new knowledge, techniques and power that enable them to unit two continents. Aeschylus' depiction assimilates them to supra-humans who impact the whole world around them.²²

The first mention of Xerxes' unprecedented action occurs in lines 69-70: Xerxes 'crosses the strait of Helle, daughter of Athamas' (πορθμὸν ἀμείψας Ἀθαμαντίδος Ἑλλάδας). The verb (ἀμείβω) means 'to cross' but also 'to change,' 'to exchange'.²³ In the whole song, the old men of Sousa admire how Xerxes' imperialist thrust *changes* the nature of places, beings and things. Assimilated to the mythological Helle, the sea is humanized and soon animalized too – like Asia and Greece, personified as two beautiful women, before becoming horses yoked to Xerxes's chariot, in the dream of the Queen.²⁴ Xerxes is said to have 'thrown a yoke on the neck of the sea':²⁵ the neologism ὄδισμα (from ὄδος) and the rare poetic epithet πολύγομρον ('with many bolts') underline the novelty of this literally path-breaking action through a human technique unheard of. As well shown by Dumortier, the metaphor of the yoke was probably not a common one before Aeschylus.²⁶ The subjugation of a natural element as if it were a domesticated animal is the initial gesture that precipitates a series of ontological blendings.

The Persian soldiers themselves oscillate between the condition of animals, humans and water particles. First named a 'divine herd' and a bee swarm, metaphors with a clear Homeric ring,²⁷ the army is then described as an indistinct 'great flood of men' (μεγάλῳ ρεύματι φωτῶν).²⁸ The men turned into a watery element cannot be fought (ἄμαχον) more than the waves of the sea.²⁹

²² *Pers.* 111-113, 130-132.

²³ For this meaning, see also *Pro.* 23; *Ag.* 729; *Cho.* 1267.

²⁴ *Pers.* 181-196.

²⁵ *Pers.* 71-72 (πολύγομρον ὄδισμα/ ζυγὸν ἀμφιβαλῶν ἀχένη πόντου).

²⁶ See Dumortier 1935: 12-26. Michelini 1982, 80-88 provides good evidence that this metaphor became part of the traditional rhetoric of orators recalling Xerxes' invasion (Isocrates, *Paneg.* 89-90, Lysias 2.29).

²⁷ *Pers.* 74-75.

²⁸ *Pers.* 88.

²⁹ *Pers.* 90.

This liquefaction is suggested in another respect, when the chorus laments on the deserted beds of Persian women, empty of men but full of tears.³⁰

Xerxes himself is given a hybrid, supra-human identity. Aeschylus activates the polysemic significance of traditional images. When naming Xerxes ‘a mortal, equal to the gods, son of the family born from gold’,³¹ he plays on three different levels: the conventional association of Persia with gold, a genealogical reference to Danae, the mythological founder of Persia who gave birth to Perseus from the union with Zeus coming to her in the form of golden rain; finally, this golden pedigree is also reminiscent of the representation of gods as radiant golden beings. This saturation of symbolism seems to transform the human king into a metallic hybrid being. The following lines also perform another type of hybridisation of Xerxes: he is assimilated to a *drakon* darting a ‘murderous snake look’ (λεύσσων φονίου δέργμα δράκοντος).³² In the next line, Xerxes fluidly evolves towards a mythological monster. The epithet πολύχειρ refers in the first instance to the ‘many arms’ of his irresistible army, but again, a double meaning points towards a supra-human dimension: Xerxes is a deadly serpent³³, but also like a Titan with many hands, a new Briareos, one of the Hesiodic Hecatoncheires (literally, primitive creatures ‘with a hundred hands’).³⁴

The conflict between Greeks and Persians then becomes a war between two different object-human ‘assemblages’. Greeks are called ‘men famed for the spear’ (δουρικλύτοις ἀνδράσι), whereas Persians are a dehumanized, divine force of war (Ἄρη) ‘taming with the bow’ (τοξόδαμνον).³⁵ Aeschylus uses two compounds (δουρικλύτοις and τοξόδαμνον) that are not as symmetrical as it may seem at first. Δουρικλύτος (or δουρικλειτός) is a laudatory homeric epithet that expresses the warrior force of the spears, without negating the human identity and individuality of their bearers.³⁶ Greeks remain men (ἀνδράσι) mastering their offensive weapons, and drawing from them the *kleos* that will make them (not the weapons) immortal. An Aeschylean neologism, τοξόδαμνος (‘taming with the bow’) carries a different symbolism. It is used three times in the

³⁰ *Pers.* 133-134.

³¹ *Pers.* 79-80.

³² *Pers.* 81-82. On the characteristic gaze of the *drakon*, see Ogden 2013: 237-238.

³³ In the *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra is also called a new Skylla (Ag., 1258, 1232-1234), a viper (*Cho.* 914), and is compared to destructive storms, meteorites and monsters (*Cho.* 585-601).

³⁴ *Theogony*, 624, 639, 714, 734-35.

³⁵ *Pers.* 85-86.

³⁶ *Iliad*, for instance V, 45, 55, 578; X, 230, etc.

parodos of *Persians*, as if it were a consubstantial attribute of the Persian army, first applying collectively to the Persian soldiers, then to one of Xerxes' generals, before qualifying the whole army as an indistinct, anonymous force (Ἄρη τοξόδαμνον).³⁷ As is well-known, the bow possessed negative connotations as the weapon of the cowards and the barbarians.³⁸ But what is interesting here, is that the compound τοξόδαμνος bestows a destructive force to the weapon itself, not to the men who manipulate it. The combination with Ἄρη actually erases the human component of this assemblage. Therefore, the attribution of posthumanist features may well overlap with a political strategy: in this battle between East and West, Greeks remain humans whereas Persians acquire non-human traits that contribute to their otherness.³⁹

Crossing the two continents, Xerxes breaches geographical but also ontological limits. At the end of the choral ode, the *leitmotiv* of change resurfaces when the verb ἀμείβω appears again as a compound (ἐξαμείψας).⁴⁰ With an effect of ring composition, the chorus dwells on the merging of two continents that are now made one.⁴¹ But does the hybrid world he creates open a beneficial posthumanist 'interconnection' between human and non-human elements?⁴² Is Xerxes among the "cosmic imperialists who by imposing 'subject/object' hierarchies somehow oppress inorganic elements, minerals, liquids, and gases as well as organic flora and fauna", as Edith Hall puts it?⁴³ Or should we acknowledge that the Persian soldiers depicted in Aeschylus' poetry, as well as Xerxes himself, whose status fluctuates between that of a god, a mortal, an infra-human animal or a monster, are indeed 'liminal beings', early examples of the 'hybrid humanity' which posthumanists call for?⁴⁴

Posthumanists actually reprove the use of technology as a means for domination,⁴⁵ and there are good chances that if asked, they would place Xerxes' crossing of the Hellespont on that side. Interestingly, this reprobation arises already in Aeschylus' play. The choral song is actually tinged

³⁷ *Pers.* 26, 30, 86.

³⁸ See Lissarague 1990: 31-32; Hamilton 1995.

³⁹ Therefore, I disagree with Gruen (2011 : 19) when he minimizes the cultural differences between Hellenes and Persians in Aeschylus' play.

⁴⁰ *Pers.* 130.

⁴¹ *Pers.* 131-132, the two continents now share the same 'headland' (πρῶνα κοινόν).

⁴² Marchesini (2017: 144) describes the posthumanist 'body' as 'a liminal film that can be interconnected – that is, a welcoming place.'

⁴³ Hall 2018: 206.

⁴⁴ Marchesini 2017: 145.

⁴⁵ Marchesini 2017: 146.

with apprehension here and there:⁴⁶ the old men suspect the goddess *Atè* of having inspired this staggering operation.⁴⁷ They wonder but also hint at a potential misuse of human technique. Persians, they say, ‘have learnt’ (ἔμαθον) to build new ways of crossing the sea.⁴⁸ One may wonder whether this verb could be filled with ironic undertones: in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, the chorus states that learning only comes through pain and failure.⁴⁹ Persians have learnt to be ‘confident’ (πίστυνοι) in ‘frail cables and man-conveying machines’ (μηχαναῖς), but were they right in doing so? The substantive μηχαναί easily takes on a deceptive significance in Greek tragedy (‘machinations’).⁵⁰ In these lines, an opposition between the formidable forces of nature (the sea and the wind) and the frailness of human’s inventions is creeping in. The *hapax* λαοπόροις (‘men-conveying’) also contributes to turn upside-down the expected hierarchy between humans and the material objects they produce. In carrying the human beings, the ‘machines’ (or ‘machinations’) elaborated by the Persians may take control over their actions. These machines operate a double displacement: they seem responsible for the men’s transport across the sea but may also displace their traditional role of main actors and commanders.

In fact, these fears anticipate on the painful reversal that Persians experienced at Salamis, as unfurled by the messenger’s account later in the play. At Salamis, the hybridization enforced by Xerxes is described as persistently growing to the detriment of humans. As ‘liminal’ beings,⁵¹ the Persian soldiers gradually lose their humanity whereas natural elements are invested of a greater power and personhood.

Infra-humanity at Salamis

Aeschylus’ *Persians* capitalizes on the powerful effects of symmetrical composition. To the tremendous catalogue of forces elaborated in the *parodos* responds the catalogue of dead Persian commanders, in the messenger speech.⁵² The defeat of Salamis is strategically construed as a

⁴⁶ *Contra* Garvie (com. *ad. loc.*, 74).

⁴⁷ *Pers.* 97.

⁴⁸ *Pers.* 100.

⁴⁹ *Ag.* 177-178.

⁵⁰ Michelini notes that “bridges and boats are both likely to rouse superstitious fears, since both represent a hazardous application of technical skills in the attempt to tame water” (1982: 84).

⁵¹ See the ‘liminal beings’ of Marchesini 2017:144.

⁵² *Pers.* 302-330.

scathing punishment: the *hybris* of Xerxes yoking the Hellespont is retaliated by his crushing debacle in Salamis, as is made clear in the speech of Darius' ghost himself.⁵³ The mirroring effects between these two dramatic moments, the peak of grandeur and the total collapse, encompass a 'cosmic' dimension, in its etymological sense: the messenger's speech offers a dreadful account of the radical and systematic inversion of the alleged human control over natural elements and inanimate objects.

The Persians were of course beaten by the Greek naval forces: Aeschylus, who probably served in the fleet which laid siege to Sestus in 479-478,⁵⁴ pays a tribute to the fighting spirit of his fellow-citizens. However, in his theatrical account of the battle, he confers a real agency to non-human elements. The earlier assimilation of the army of Persia to a flow of men as powerful as the sea, finds an ironic reversal in the defeat: the army is now envisioned as a flow of countless corpses which hides the surface of the sea (θάλασσα δ' οὐκέτ' ἦν ἰδεῖν).⁵⁵ The liminal, watery status I described earlier takes on a tragic twist when soldiers become floating corpses, soaked and devoured by the salty water.⁵⁶ This 'distributive agency'⁵⁷ is extended to the shores and islands: they are spoken of as animated places and active subjects⁵⁸ who jealously keep the corpses and deface them even after their death.⁵⁹

The Persian soldiers are plunged into infra-humanity, be they imagined as corpses bumping against the shores, like rams would knock with their horns,⁶⁰ or, when trapped by the Greeks in Psyttalia, defenseless tuna fishes dying under the blows of makeshift weapons – any oar or piece of wood available at the Greeks' hand, grim instruments that inflict an unheroic death on them, as I interpret it.⁶¹ They are also portrayed as drifting corpses, belonging to an unsettling in-between:

⁵³ *Pers.* 745-822; see below, 'epilogue'.

⁵⁴ Hammond and Roseman 1996: 94.

⁵⁵ *Pers.* 419-421; earlier, ῥεῦμα Περσικοῦ στρατοῦ (412) was reminiscent of μέγλωι ῥεύματι φωτῶν (30).

⁵⁶ *Pers.* 274-277. Rosenbloom (2007: 72) already noted that "the sea defies quantification, human control, and the imperialist urge."

⁵⁷ Bennett 2011.

⁵⁸ See lines 273-274 (πλήθουσι).

⁵⁹ *Pers.* 303, 307, 420.

⁶⁰ *Pers.* 310.

⁶¹ *Pers.* 423-426.

they are not really persons anymore but not really inanimate objects either.⁶² They gain another sort of liminality: the verb ἀμείβω is repeated here again when the bloodshed is assimilated to the purple dye (πορφυρᾶ βαφῆ) that ‘changes’ the color of the beard and skin of one Persian officer.⁶³ The metaphor merges together human and animal organic fluid (since the purple comes from the murex snail)⁶⁴ and reduces human beings to ‘things dyed’, empty envelopes or empty ‘sacks’.⁶⁵ At the end of this disastrous report, the immediate response of the Queen highlights, in a ring composition effect, the tragic reversal that transformed the powerful waves of men into a ‘great sea of pains’.⁶⁶

Finally, like the natural elements, inanimate objects also adopt a deceptive and almost rebellious attitude against Xerxes and his army. Even before hearing what the messenger has to say, the chorus laments on the failure of weapons which have been brought, ‘all mingled together’ (παμμυγῆ) in vain (μάτᾱν), as if these instruments were held responsible for the defeat – παμμυγῆ may hint at a disorganized mass unable to withstand the discipline of the Greek army.⁶⁷ The famous Persian bows have defaulted on their masters, the messenger adds.⁶⁸ In his vivid account that stimulates a perceptual recreation of the bloodshed, soldiers and commanders are slayed by unruly boats and weapons that seem to assault them as independent forces. For instance, Aeschylus refers to the anthropomorphic faces of Greek triremes, when alluding to their battering ram ‘with a bronze mouth’ (ἐμβολαῖς χαλκοστόμοις).⁶⁹ In lines 410, 415-418, ναῦς and δόρυ, ‘ships’ and ‘spears’, are the active subjects of verbs of attacks.⁷⁰ Earlier, the leader Dadaces, ‘struck by a spear’ (πληγῆ

⁶² Cf. Blanchot 1955: 345: “the one who has just died is first of all as close as possible to the condition of the thing - a familiar thing, which is handled and approached, which does not keep you at distance and whose malleable passivity does not denounce the sad helplessness.” (my translation). On corpses in Euripidean tragedy, see Wohl and Bassi in Telò & Mueller 2018 (17-34 and 35-48).

⁶³ *Pers.* ἀμείβων χρώτα πορφυρέα βαφῆ (317).

⁶⁴ The association of blood and purple dye was bound to take on an exceptional, multi-layered dimension in the *Oresteia*, *Ag.* 238-239; 611-612; 958-959; *Cho.* 1010-1013. Cf. Lebeck 1971: 74-79; Taplin 1977: 314; Noel 2013 (with more bibliography).

⁶⁵ Cf. Worman in this volume.

⁶⁶ *Pers.* κακῶν πελαγος ἔρρωγεν μέγα (433).

⁶⁷ *Pers.* 270-271.

⁶⁸ *Pers.* οὐδὲν γὰρ ἤρκει τόξα (279).

⁶⁹ *Pers.* 415. This anthropomorphic ‘bronze-mouth’ is a striking component of the Olympias trireme, a modern reconstitution of a 5th century Athenian trireme by the Hellenic navy (built in 1985-1987).

⁷⁰ See also the passive δαμασθεῖς and the material agent (279-280 : πᾶς δ’ ἀπόλλυτο/λεῶς δαμασθεῖς ναῖουσιν ἐμβολαῖς).

δορὸς) is said to have ‘leapt effortlessly’ from his boat.⁷¹ Moved by this external energy, the body appears again like a thing emptied of any inner vitality. In this chaotic scene, even simple, daily-life objects like clothes take on unexpected functions: Persian iconic mantles that encapsulate the oriental *truphè*, seem to betray their wearers when becoming morbid shrouds for their corpses drifting in the waves.⁷²

Epilogue

In a posthumanist world where all beings are inter-connected and attributed the same ‘ontological dignity’,⁷³ the logical result, as expressed by Dominique Quessada, is an ‘ontological anarchism,’⁷⁴ an absence of order where amorality presides over – since outside the domain of human morality. This starkly contrasts with the interpretation I propose of Aeschylus’ *Persians*. As in other extant works by Aeschylus, hybridity is morally loaded and connected with the representation of chaos and *hybris*.⁷⁵ When reflecting on his son’s defeat, the ghost of Darius reproves the yoking through the ‘machines’ (μηχαναῖς ἔξευξεν), as an impious and thoughtless act that was an insult to the forces of nature.⁷⁶ Darius not only alludes to the cables of the bridging but also the throwing of fetters into the sea, a fact that had been kept silent before.⁷⁷ He voices indignation against the enslavement of a ‘sacred’ river (Ἑλλάσποντον ἱρὸν δοῦλον), explicitly assimilated to a god (Βόσπορον ῥόον θεοῦ).⁷⁸ In recent years, some countries have passed legislation to recognize that rivers are moral, legal persons who have the same rights as human beings;⁷⁹ in ancient Greece, rivers were considered as divinities, which gives to the act of Xerxes an additional dimension of sacrilege. In Darius’ speech, the word ὕβρις itself, looming for some time, is eventually uttered at the opening of line 821, intimately associated with ἄτης at the same

⁷¹ *Pers.* 304.

⁷² *Pers.* 276-277.

⁷³ Quessada 2013: 228.

⁷⁴ Quessada 2013: 230-231 (“ainsi il y a un *an-archisme ontologique*, un chaos que l’on pourrait dire ‘essentiel’ ou ‘fondamental’”, i.e. since there is no hierarchy between beings made of the same material).

⁷⁵ The chaos of Aeschylus has been interpreted as a heritage of Hesiodic poetry, see Deforge 1986; Moreau 1985: 10-11. About hybridity in the *Oresteia*, see Noel 2013 (on the hybrid ‘net-cloth’ of Clytemnestra).

⁷⁶ *Pers.* 722, 744.

⁷⁷ *Pers.* 747.

⁷⁸ *Pers.* 745-746.

⁷⁹ See O'Donnell and Talbot-Jones 2018.

position in 822: Darius uses the case of his son to deliver a gnomic lesson about human arrogance and delusion.⁸⁰

The parallel reading of the bridging of the Hellespont and the defeat of Salamis therefore reveals a tension between two close but differentiated phenomena in this play: on one side, a co-dependence of humans and non-human forces, underlying in Darius' speech, that entails moral obligations of humans towards their natural environment; on the other side, unleashed hybridity seen as a hybridic mode of domination onto the world. Inter-connectedness is thus differentiated from non-separateness: humans are considered in extension with other elements, natural or machinic, they are affected by wind, water, animals, objects but this "heterogenous relationship", to borrow Donna Haraway's phrasing, does not obliterate distinctions and limits.⁸¹ In *Persians*, mixing, merging, and blending are no means of liberation *per se*: they rather lead to alienation; this warns us against hybridity as a false open-ness, a form of absorption that actually negates otherness. Therianthropy, the entanglement of human with animal, also praised by some posthumanist theorists,⁸² is represented as an estrangement (or a degradation) rather than an improvement of humanity.⁸³ Significantly, hybridity is conspicuously rejected onto the side of the Persians, in contrast to the preserved, bounded humanity of the Greeks. The posthuman qualities of Xerxes and the Persian army actually reinforce a clear opposition of cultures between East and West.

This interpretation of the play questions euphoric hybridity as a modern naïve utopia. It contradicts the upbeat terminology readily used by some modern posthumanist theorists when promoting hybridity and non-separateness. Advocating for an "ontological anarchism," Dominique Quessada hopes for an ontological "fraternity" or "solidarity" between all things while the artist Denis Baron has promoted a "jouissance of the state of hybridity and fluid identities."⁸⁴ Donna Haraway's own path of thinking interestingly shows distantiation from flat ontology.⁸⁵ In her *Cyborg Manifesto* she invited us to feel "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" and advocated

⁸⁰ *Pers.* 819-822.

⁸¹ Haraway 2006: 24.

⁸² Agamben 2004; Weil 2012; Marchesini 2017: 72.

⁸³ Moreau (1985: 9) comments on the animal metaphors along the same idea.

⁸⁴ Quessada 2013: 230-231. He defends ontological non-separateness as a way to achieve 'ontological fraternity' between 'beings of flesh and language, real and virtual beings (...), material and immaterial things.' Baron 2009: 41.

⁸⁵ On flat ontology, see for instance Bryant 2011 (245-290).

for cyborgs’ “pleasurably tight coupling with other beings”,⁸⁶ while distancing herself from the idea of “boundless difference” that does not allow to achieve “real connections” with alterity.⁸⁷ In the *Companion Species Manifesto*, her call for a human appreciation of inter-dependent development and co-habitation of species (her “kinship claim”) nonetheless goes with the acknowledgment of “irreducible difference.”⁸⁸ “Significant otherness” is about negotiating ethical “modes of attention” between species (humans, animals, plants, etc.) whose differences are not *flattened out* but, on the contrary, acknowledged as what must be preserved in respectful, asymmetrical “heterogeneous relationship.”⁸⁹

Aeschylus’ extant plays and fragments reflect a special interest in establishing such kind of “heterogeneous relationships.” An additional example would be his *Oreithyia*, a lost tragedy related to another event that occurred during the second Persian war. Shortly after 480 BC, the Athenians founded a sanctuary of the north wind Boreas, to thank *him* for having sent a storm to destroy the Persian ships that were approaching Artemisium.⁹⁰ Aeschylus’ *Oreithyia* brought an aetiological explanation for Athenians’ *friendship* with Boreas.⁹¹ The sole extant fragment gives speech to the wind itself who asserts his power to act on (and against) the human community.⁹² Negotiating harmonious relationships with this natural element was most probably at stake in this play: the “unending dance of distributed and heterogeneous agencies” was perhaps already there.⁹³

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⁸⁶ Haraway 1991: 292-293.

⁸⁷ See the theoretical introduction of this volume.

⁸⁸ Haraway 2006: 49.

⁸⁹ Haraway 2006: 24.

⁹⁰ Hdt. VII, 189.

⁹¹ Brulé 1987 (291-299); Hall 1996: 9; Parker 1996: 156; Finkelberg 2014. This play could have been a satyr drama, which often had, like tragedy, an aetiological function but favoured satiric humour and buffoonery over serious tone.

⁹² Aeschylus, *Oreithyia*, fr. 281. The wind threatens to blaze a fire and destroy the houses if he does not obtain satisfaction (presumably, the hand of Oreithyia, one of Erechtheus’ daughters). Cf. Brulé 1987: 298.

⁹³ Haraway 2006: 28.

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