

Pour One Out For the Perisan King:
Greek Magic and Depictions of Barbarian Witch Queens in Athenian Tragedy

Kristen Thompson

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Professor Gatzke

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In 431 BCE, the City Dionysia festival of Athens held the first performance of Euripides' tragedy *Medea*. The Athenian audience filling in the theater of Dionysus likely possessed some rough expectations of what the play would entail. Medea, a mythic woman about whom several past poets and scholars had written, was best known for her use of potions and relationship to the Greek hero Jason. The dominant narrative of her story before Euripides, while sometimes containing tragedy and death, had never depicted Medea in too much of an unfavorable light.¹ As the play started, Euripides' Medea would quickly shatter these preconceived expectations as she committed the greatest atrocities imaginable in the minds of the Greeks. The production would follow her quest for revenge against her cheating husband—which would lead her to murder her children and the Corinthian royal family through magical means.

This evolution of Medea's character from a neutral mythic figure to a murderous foreign witch was no coincidence. By the Classical period, depictions of foreign women as vengeful, destructive witches were ubiquitous in Athenian theater.² This portrayal stemmed from the growing anti-Persian sentiment of the Classical Period; the Persian Wars of the early fifth century BCE had left the Athenians with a strong resentment for anything foreign or barbarian (*barbaros*) in nature. The concept of magic had been introduced to the Greeks through Persian *magoi*, who were religious priests under the Persian empire, which resulted in a negative association forming between the practice and foreignness.³ However, this association did not occur equally along gender lines; Athenian plays depicted foreign women as magical far more often than they did foreign men. This gendering of magic reflected the feelings of "other"-ness

¹ Hesiod's *Theogony* mentions Medea briefly, but only to state she bore Jason two children. In traditional variations of the Corinthian part of her story, Medea's children die due to the goddess Hera's deceit. See more in Fritz Graf, "Medea, Enchantress from Afar," in *Medea*, ed. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston (New Jersey: Princeton University Press: 1997), 34-35.

² Kimberly Stratton, *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World* (New York: Columbia University: 2007), 46.

³ Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1997), 20.

Athenian men felt both towards barbarians and women. Athenians viewed *barbaroi* (pl. *barbaros*) as uncivilized, less-intelligent, and slave-like; women as emotional, incapable of rational decision making, and prone to evil.⁴ Barbarian women thus served as the intersection of these “other” identities, with their own “other”-ness manifested in the view that they subverted gender norms and assumed a more masculine position in their respective foreign societies.⁵ Playwrights such as Euripides used magical practices to intensify this notion since magic provided women a sense of agency otherwise unavailable to them.

As a medium, theater provided the Athenians with a means to conceptualize the non-Greek world. Edith Hall, an influential scholar on the depictions of barbarians in Greek theater, noted in her works that tragedy reflected Greek thought towards barbarian people through its use of political philosophy, cultural relativism, and Athenian xenophobia.⁶ This expression allowed playwrights to voice their opinions about contemporary social and political issues such as the role of foreigners and women in the Greek world. Depictions of foreign women as dangerous, masculine witches can thus be seen as a reflection of real Greek thought towards *barbaroi* women and the anxieties they created due to their perceived deviation from gender norms. Hall also wrote that theater provided a sense of “cultural authorization” for the Athenian democracy— that is, it unified and enforced Athenian cultural values through the representation of these social and political issues.⁷ These representations of foreign women thus serve as more than just a reflection of Athenian thought. They acted as an enforcement mechanism for the dominant cultural values of Athens, which enabled the Athenians to strengthen the resentment they felt towards both foreigners and women.

⁴ Dorothy I Sly, “Traditional Views of Women,” from *Philo’s Perception of Women* (Brown Judaic Studies, 1990), 20-21.

⁵ Richard Wenghofer, “Sexual Promiscuity of Non-Greeks in Herodotus’ ‘Histories’,” *The Classical World* 107, no.4, (Summer 2014): 526, 534.

⁶ Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition Through Tragedy*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1989): x.

⁷ Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, 2.

Past historiography on the depictions of barbarian witches in Athenian theater shows a scholarly focus on the works of Euripides. In Kimberly Stratton's book *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World*, Stratton uses Euripides' *Medea* to prove the connection between representations of foreign magical women and the fears Greek men held towards unrestrained expressions of female sexuality. In antiquity, Stratton argues, one way Greek men showed their masculinity was through the strict control of their women. Jason's lack of control over Medea shows both his weakness as a man and the danger unsupervised women pose.⁸ Other scholars, such as Hugh Parry and Fritz Graf, have similarly limited their analysis of barbarian witches in Athenian theater to *Medea*. This singular focus on Medea has caused other depictions of magical foreigners in Athenian theater to remain largely undiscussed by the scholarly community.

Scholars rarely consider the playwright Aeschylus in this conversation of barbarian witches on stage. Aeschylus, the oldest tragedian whose works survive from the Classical period, wrote his first play *Persians* in 472 BCE, seventeen years before Euripides would see his first production on the City of Dionysia stage. Despite *Persians* including a magical ritual completed by the Persian queen Atossa, little scholarship exists discussing the gendered dimensions of this portrayal of magic. The scholarly conversation tends to fixate instead on the degree of magic within the play and whether it reflects Athenian xenophobia during this period. Most agree that Aeschylus was less critical of foreigners than Euripides and other later playwrights.⁹ However, there is no scholarly consensus on how this view informs his depictions of magical foreigners or how an Athenian audience would have received these portrayals. Hall argued that the specific type of magic present in this play would have aligned *Persians* to older Greek practices

⁸ Kimberly Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 63.

⁹ Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2004), 276.

described centuries ago in Homer's *Odyssey*. This sense of Greek-ness would have caused an Athenian audience to positively receive the actions of the Persian queen within the play.¹⁰

Scholar Daniel Ogden disagrees with this argument and assumes the opposite stance. In his book *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, Ogden argued that the social conditions of Classical Athens which resulted in an association between magic and foreigners would have led an Athenian audience to view the play's use of magic in a negative light.¹¹ These arguments attribute drastically different significance to the presence of magic in *Persians*.

This paper seeks to fix this issue and analyze the role of magic as an "other"-ing force in Aeschylus' play *Persians*. This "other"-ing expands on previous scholarly thought and considers how gender factors into Aeschylus' representation of the Persian queen Atossa. Since the Athenians viewed women as inferior to men, one needs to consider Atossa's status as a woman to understand the function of magic within the play. The supreme power she commands as a queen highlights the foreignness of the Persians and affects how the Greeks would have received her performance of magic. Though the anti-foreigner sentiment in Athens would strengthen in the decades following *Persians*, the play's depiction of Atossa as a transgressive, powerful woman who engaged with magical practices directly reflected the sexist and xenophobic thought already circulating in the city. The role of theater as a force of cultural authorization allowed *Persians* to strengthen these thoughts and contributed to the growth of Athenian xenophobia in the later Classical period.

Defining Greek Magic

¹⁰ Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, 90.

¹¹ Daniel Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 95.

Before one can consider representations of magic in Athenian theater, the term “magic” must first be defined. The ancient Greek word for magic, *mageia*, originated from the Persian practice of *magos* (pl. *magoi*), which refers to both general and specialized Zoroastrian priests.¹² Herodotus, a Greek historian and ethnographer from the mid-fifth century BCE, surveyed the non-Greek world in the first half of his *Histories* and provided one of the first formal references to these *magoi* in the Greek consciousness.¹³ In his books about Persia, he uses the term *magoi* in two distinct ways. He first introduces the *magoi* as one of the tribes of the Median people, listing them along other groups such as the Arizanti and the Budii.¹⁴ Herodotus also used the term in reference to religious functions; he details that the *magoi* performed royal sacrifices and funeral rites, practiced divination, and interpreted dreams.¹⁵ In this context, the Greeks used *mageia* to refer to practices associated with these Persian religious specialists.

As the anti-Persian sentiment in Athens grew stronger following the Persian Wars this meaning would somewhat shift. The Persian Wars marked Athens’ rise to power as an imperialist force in the Mediterranean; the transformation of the Delian League reveals the development of the Athenian empire. The Delian League was first created in 478 BCE as an alliance between Greek city-states to fight off the Persians following the Persian king Xerxes’ attempt to conquer Greece. By 454 BCE, Athens had successfully turned most of these allies into its imperial subjects, cementing their dominance over the Mediterranean.¹⁶ Scholar Benjamin Issac explains

¹² Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1997), 6.

¹³ An older reference to the *magoi* may have come from Heraclitus of Ephesus, a Greek philosopher from the sixth century BCE. However, the only remnants of his work to survive come from *Protrepitkos*, a third century CE book written by Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria. Scholars remain divided over the authenticity of Heraclitus’ fragment in this work as it is unclear if Heraclitus actually spoke of the *magoi* or if Clement created false quotes to suit his own Christian-based agenda. Herodotus serves as a more reliable beginning for the Greek understanding of *magoi* and *mageia*. See more in Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 21.

¹⁴ Herodotus, *Histories* 1.101.

¹⁵ Herodotus, *Histories* 1.132, 7.19.

¹⁶ Ryan K. Balot, “The Freedom to Rule: Athenian Imperialism and Democratic Masculinity,” from *Enduring Empire: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*, ed. by David Edward Tabachnick and Toivo Koivukoski, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 2009): 57.

how imperialist agendas directly change a people's perception of the enemy. He argues that "the desire to defeat and conquer goes hand in hand with the perception of the enemy as weak, immoral, and contemptible."¹⁷ Since this imperialism occurred almost immediately following the wars with Persia, the Persians remained Athens' most threatening enemy in the minds of many Athenians. The distrust the Athenians felt towards the Persian people extended into their customs, with the Athenians viewing terms such as *mageia* and *magoi* as practices of the enemy. This negative view caused new associations to form between *mageia*, charlatanry, and deception.¹⁸

Before this, Greeks during the Archaic period did not possess a vocabulary for magic, though they did partake in many practices that would later come to be associated with *mageia* by the Classical period. As Hugh Parry explains in his book *Thelxis: Magic and Imagination in Greek Myth and Poetry*, Homer made no mention of magic or magicians in his epics, but he did describe drugs with special powers (*pharmakon*), incantations and charms (*epōidē*), and sorcery (*goēteia*).¹⁹ For the most part, these practices held neutral connotations. Someone who possessed skills with drugs, known as a *pharmakis*, could heal individuals with herbs or harm them with poison—the term alone did not carry any moral weight.²⁰ These terms could also be applied to a wide range of occupations; the Greeks believed *pharmaka* (pl. of *pharmakon*) could be used by formal medical doctors, folk-healers, poison specialists, or by the gods themselves.²¹ The variety in how the Greeks used these terms highlights how they had no singular definition of magic during this period and instead judged its use on a case-by-case basis.

¹⁷ Benjamin Issac, *The Invention of Racism*, 302.

¹⁸ Derek Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing: 2008), 54-55.

¹⁹ Hugh Parry, *Thelxis: Magic and Imagination in Greek Myth and Poetry*, (Lanham: University Press of America: 1992), 4, 7.

²⁰ Kimberly Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 26.

²¹ Kimberly Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 26-27.

Though these practices had long Greek histories, the development of Athenian xenophobia and newfound distrust of *mageia* following the Persian Wars affected how the Greeks perceived these native practices. In particular, the practice of *goēteia* gained a strong association with foreignness due to its similarities with *mageia*. The Greeks believed a *goēs* (a practitioner of *goēteia*) engaged with ritual activities and divination in similar ways that the *magoi* did.²² Gorgias of Leontini, an influential orator who lived between 485 BCE and 350 BCE, was the first to interchangeably use *goēteia* and *mageia* to denote some weakness of character. In his speech “Encomium of Helen,” he argued that *goēteia* and *mageia* both result in “errors of the soul and deceptions of opinion.”²³ The associations *mageia* had gained to charlatanry and deception thus extended into native Greek magical practices; the Athenians believed both to be misleading and harmful. This negative view strongly contrasts the more neutral sentiment Archaic Greeks held towards these practices.

To simplify the many terms and meanings associated with all of these practices, I will be drawing upon Christopher Faraone and Derek Collins’ definitions of Greek magic when referencing the term “magic” going forward in this paper. In his book *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, Faraone states that magic was “a set of practical devices and rituals used by the Greeks in their day-to-day lives to control or otherwise influence supernatural forces of nature, animals, or other human beings.”²⁴ This definition encompasses all of the terms listed above. The special powers of *pharmakon* could influence individuals through healing or harming them, the incantations of *epōidē* could alter the natural world or compel individuals to complete certain actions, and the practice of *goēteia* could control the souls of the living or the dead.²⁵ Faraone’s inclusion of the

²² Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 24.

²³ Gorgias, “Encomium of Helen” 3.11.

²⁴ Christopher A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1999), 16.

²⁵ Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 21-24.

phrase “day-to-day lives” is significant as well. Magic was, for the most part, mundane in the eyes of the Greeks due to their acceptance of divine intervention. If the gods could freely alter the world at any moment, then the effects of magic would have been indistinguishable from this power.²⁶ Material evidence of magical practices also points to it being used casually in the day-to-day lives of the Greeks since a great number of curse tablets and love spells survive from the Greco-Roman world, alluding to their common use in Greek society.²⁷

Derek Collins expands on this definition as he emphasizes the importance of social context to understanding magic. Social relationships give magic its power; if one believes a spell or curse tablet will negatively affect them, they will change their behaviors in response to this perceived threat. In this way, the actual power of the spell or tablet to harm is secondary to the belief that it will cause harm— the social power of magic gives it a causal effect.²⁸ This understanding of magic is crucial to the use of the term “magic” in this paper. Rather than debating whether these practices achieved their intended magical outcome, this paper focuses on the powers the Athenians would have believed practitioners of magic to possess. For the remainder of this paper, “magic” will refer both to this social belief and the day-to-day practices outlined by Faraone.

When discussing Greek magic and its representations in Athenian theater, one should also note that a huge disparity exists between Greek depictions of magic and how they actually practiced it. Though playwrights tended to characterize magic as a feminine source of power, scholars have discovered the opposite to be true on most occasions— men composed the vast majority of magical sources from antiquity. Faraone found that in a collection of 81 love spells,

²⁶ Derek Collins, “Nature, Cause, and Agency in Greek Magic,” 21, 28.

²⁷ Christopher A. Faraone, “Aeschylus' ὕμνος δέσμιος (Eum. 306) and Attic Judicial Curse Tablets,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 105, (1985): 150.

²⁸ Derek Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World*, 6.

69 were written by men and directed at women. These spells used aggressive and domineering language to painfully bind or control women.²⁹ In this way, the actual practice of magic upheld the Greeks understanding of gender. Men, the more dominant sex in the minds of the Greeks, used magic in the highest frequency and with the intent to control women.

The use of magic by women in Greek antiquity needs to be addressed to understand the fascination Attic tragedy held towards magical foreign women. Women undoubtedly practiced magic throughout all of antiquity, albeit at lower frequencies than men did. However, Kimberly Stratton argues that the theatrical representations of female magic had very little to do with how women actually practiced magic. Instead, she claims, these depictions tell us more about men and their relationships to power.³⁰ Magic was ultimately an exercise of individual agency to achieve a certain desire or effect.³¹ In Classical Athens, men severely limited the agency of women. All Greek women had a *kyrios*, a guardian who would represent them in public and legal settings. Though this guardian did not have complete control over the women they defended, their existence highlights how women of this period did not possess the same rights that men did; women could not defend themselves, vote, or speak at political assemblies.³² The use of magic thus provided women with a means to achieve their desires in a culture where men actively minimized their access to power. This agency resulted in a negative view forming around magical women, with Greek men conceptualizing them as dangerous, uncontrollable individuals who posed a threat to male authority. Athenian drama furthered these feelings through their portrayals of magical women as foreign, vengeful, and destructive.

²⁹ Christopher A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, 43.

³⁰ Kimberly Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 25.

³¹ Derek Collins, "Nature, Cause, and Agency in Greek Magic," 30.

³² Laura K. McClure, *Women in Classical Antiquity: From Birth to Death*, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons: 2020), 33, 88.

Aeschylus, Herodotus, and Atossa

Aeschylus, an Athenian tragedian who lived between 525 BCE and 456 BCE, wrote the play *Persians* eight years after the battle of Salamis in 480 BCE where he fought against Persian forces as part of the Athenian military. He had fought against Persian forces once before at the battle of Marathon in 490 BCE.³³ His involvement in these conflicts served as the basis of the characters represented in *Persians*. Darius, the king of Persia who holds a crucial role in *Persians*, led the attack on Marathon; Xerxes, Darius' son who features near the end of *Persians*, attempted to invade Greece in the battle of Salamis.³⁴ The story of *Persians* follows the direct aftermath of Xerxes' failed conquest of Greece. It centers on a conversation between elderly Persian men (represented through the chorus) and Atossa, Xerxes' mother and the wife of Darius.

The character of Atossa largely remains a mystery to historians in the field. The play *Persians* never explicitly mentions her by this name; the original text only ever addressed her as "queen."³⁵ The name Atossa comes from Herodotus' *Histories*, which serves as the only other depiction of her in Greek antiquity. Scholars have applied the name Atossa to Aeschylus' unnamed queen due to her family relations aligning with Herodotus' Atossa. In *Histories*, Herodotus explains that Atossa was the daughter of Cyrus the Great, wife of Darius, and mother of Xerxes.³⁶ Though *Persians* does not mention Cyrus the Great, Aeschylus states that the queen is the wife of Darius and the mother of Xerxes. These family relations line up with Herodotus' Atossa, making it likely the two represent the same historical figure.

³³ Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "Exit Atossa: Images of Women in Greek Historiography on Persia," In *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. by Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press: 1985), 24.

³⁴ Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 198-199.

³⁵ Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "Exit Atossa," 24.

³⁶ Herodotus, *Histories* 3.133.

Herodotus' account of Atossa warrants further investigation due to the close connection it holds to Aeschylus' representation of her. Herodotus first published *Histories* sometime between 426 BCE and 415 BCE, placing it several decades after the first premiere of *Persians*. Herodotus frequently drew from Aeschylus' play to inform his discussion of the Battle of Salamis and the Greek victory over Xerxes forces.³⁷ His account expands upon the play's events and provides insightful background information for many of its characters. However, one should note that Herodotus wrote *Histories* several decades after these events took place and thus had no access to any first-hand experiences himself. The information he provides on the play's characters, while useful to understanding their role in the Persian Wars, should be taken with a grain of salt.

Atossa appears only twice in the *Histories*. In her first appearance, Herodotus states she was the daughter of Cyrus the Great and the wife of Darius, which establishes her as a person of importance. He discusses a painful "growth on her breast" to which she turns to the physician Democedes for relief.³⁸ In exchange for this aid, Democedes requests that Atossa convince Darius to go to war with the Greeks instead of the Scythians as he had planned. Atossa successfully achieves this the next time the two share a bed, claiming that she desires a Greek handmaiden because of their good reputation.³⁹ Through this persuasion, Herodotus indirectly places the responsibility of the Persian Wars on Atossa. This sense of agency causes Atossa to gain a somewhat masculine role in *Histories* as her use of speech shapes the course of the war, a topic typically dominated by men in antiquity.

Though she does not physically appear again in the text, Xerxes references Atossa twice in Book VII of *Histories*. Here, Darius is confronted with a problem of succession: he has to

³⁷ Victor Parker, "Herodotus' Use of Aeschylus' *Persae* as a Source for the Battle of Salamis," *Symbolae Osloenses* 82, (2007): 3.

³⁸ Herodotus, *Histories* 3.133. Many scholars believe this is the first documented instance of breast-cancer in the ancient world.

³⁹ Herodotus, *Histories* 3.134.

choose which of his sons the Persian throne will go to after his death. Xerxes claims that he should be named heir due to Atossa's connection to Cyrus the Great— thus using her ancestry to gain a sense of legitimacy which his brothers lack.⁴⁰ Through this, Atossa's family connections give her power and cause her to stand apart from Darius' other wives. Xerxes later expands on this point, directly stating that Darius should name him his successor because Atossa is "all-powerful."⁴¹ Unlike his first point, this mention of Atossa refers directly to her as an individual; Xerxes sees Atossa as a strong woman who wields immense power.

Aeschylus' characterization of Atossa in his *Persians* remains consistent with this depiction of her as a powerful woman. She is the first character outside of the chorus to speak and the only character outside of the chorus whose presence in the play remains consistent from start to finish. Her first entrance in the play occurs in a grand fashion: a carriage brings her onstage as the chorus of elderly Persian men falls to the ground to display their reverence to her. As they do so, they cry out, "Here comes the mother of the King, my Queen, a light as brilliant as that which shines in the eyes of the gods! I fall down before her..."⁴² By kneeling before Atossa in this way, the chorus displays their subservience to her. They defer to her as a figure with authority over them. The comparison of her to "a light as brilliant as that which shines in the eyes of the gods" likens Atossa to a feature of the divine, further showing the high status she possessed and the respect she commanded.⁴³ Just as Herodotus' Xerxes declared Atossa to be an "all-powerful" woman, Aeschylus' Atossa displays her power from the moment she steps on stage.

⁴⁰ Herodotus, *Histories* 7.2.

⁴¹ Herodotus, *Histories* 7.3.

⁴² Aeschylus, *Persians* ll. 706-720 (trans. by Sommerstein).

⁴³ David Sider, "Atossa's Second Entrance: Significant Inaction in Aeschylus' *Persai*," *The American Journal of Philology* 104, no. 2, (Summer 1983): 191.

The Athenians, who possessed no equivalent women with high political power, would have perceived this entrance as barbaric. Classical Athenians often conceptualized foreign power as matriarchal; Hall noted that “...the more barbarian a community, the more powerful its women.”⁴⁴ This rhetoric of powerful, matriarchal foreign societies fills Herodotus’ *Histories*. A prime example comes from his book on Egypt, where he states the “customs and practices [of the Egyptians] are the opposite of those everywhere else.”⁴⁵ Unlike the Athenians, who kept their women in the private sphere of the home, the Egyptians let women go to the markets and complete public tasks. Egyptian men assumed the position of Greek women as they stayed in the home and spent their time weaving. This distortion of Greek gender norms displays the foreignness of the Egyptians, with their barbarian status emphasized through the lack of control they exercise over their women.

The Athenians would have seen the chorus prostrating themselves before Atossa as a subversion of traditional gender roles. The ideal Athenian women did not hold power over men. Rather, Greek men expected women to obey their *kyrios* (their male guardian) and show subservience to the men in their lives.⁴⁶ Atossa’s introduction reverses this expectation as she assumes a position of power over the male chorus. As scholar David Sider notes, the physical act of falling to the floor points to the “humiliating” aspect of this obedience.⁴⁷ The elderly Persian men defer to Atossa, a woman, for authority. This act would have caused the Athenians to view the Persians as weak, effeminate foreign men who lack proper control over their women.

The Persian government's status as a monarchy plays into the Athenian reception of this portrayal as well. Benjamin Issac explained that the Athenian democracy of the Classical period

⁴⁴ Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, 95.

⁴⁵ Herodotus, *Histories* 2.35.

⁴⁶ Laura K. McClure, *Women in Classical Antiquity*, 33.

⁴⁷ David Sider, “Atossa's Second Entrance,” 190.

looked down on monarchies since the Athenians believed monarchies reduced citizens to status slaves.⁴⁸ The philosopher Aristotle, who lived in Athens during the fourth century BCE, claimed that the Persian monarchy was evidence of their barbarian tyranny. Through this, he accused the Persian royalty of assuming power by force and against the will of their people.⁴⁹ This negative view of monarchies resulted in distrust towards kings and queens. The Athenian's understanding of foreignness connected these royal figures to acts of tyranny, which enabled the Athenians to feel superior in their democratic form of government. Atossa's status as a foreign queen who commanded power over men thus emphasized her barbarian features.

Atossa and Magic

Scholars often overlook the significance of Atossa's magic in *Persians* in this conversation about Athenian portrayals of magical foreign women. This lack of attention is due to the controversial nature of the magic present in *Persians*—scholars remain divided over whether there is any magic in the story or if the extraordinary feats within the play are purely religious. Magic and religion often went hand-in-hand to the ancient Greeks. As explained in the earlier section on defining magic, the gods themselves could engage in practices considered magical by the Classical period; there existed no stark division between magic and traditional religious matters. Derek Collins furthered this thought as he explained that ritual activity often went without a formal, explicit label in most of antiquity. The Greeks did not specify if an action was strictly magical or religious.⁵⁰ This lack of separation causes the scholarly argument against the presence of magic in *Persians* to fall apart. Since the Greeks did not consider magic and

⁴⁸ Benjamin Issac, *The Invention of Racism*, 302.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Politics* 5.1313a-b.

⁵⁰ Derek Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World*, 25-26.

religion to be mutually exclusive categories, the ritual activities contained within *Persians* can serve both religious and magical functions.

After her entrance, the first half of the play follows Atossa and the chorus as they discuss Xerxes' failed conquest over Greece. They ultimately decide to summon the ghost of Darius, former king of Persia, to inform him of what has happened to the Persian forces and to ask for his advice. This summoning has two key components: Atossa's offering of libations, a ritual where a mixed liquid is poured as an offering to the gods or the dead, and a choral prayer. Atossa clearly outlines this summoning in the text, with the play reading:

...I come here...bringing offerings for the father of my son, libations to propitiate and appease the dead—sweet white milk from an unblemished cow and splendid honey, distilled from flowers by the bees, with water from a virgin spring, and from their rustic mother earth I bring this unmixed drink....But you, my friends, should chant a choral song to summon up the spirit of Darius...⁵¹

Atossa's offerings of libations serve as the first part of this ritual. The Greeks commonly used libations as part of traditional funeral proceedings. These offerings often involved pouring a combination of milk, honey, and water over a grave to appease the dead.⁵² However, Atossa's use of libations does not align well with these traditional practices. Though she claims their purpose is to "propitiate and appease the dead," she quickly instructs the chorus to "summon up the spirit of Darius." She thus deviates from the standard funeral libation in a significant way; to the Greeks, the act of raising the dead was intrinsically tied to the practice of magic. The Athenians would have recognized this type of spiritual summoning as the practice of *psychagōgia*, a form of *goēteia* that one used to evocate the dead. The term itself translates to "spirit-raiser" or

⁵¹ Aeschylus, *Persians* ll. 706-720 (trans. by Sommerstein).

⁵² Sarah Iles Johnston, *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece*, (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1999), 52.

“soul-leader” and refers to a specific type of evocation where the deceased spirit returns to the earth for a brief period.⁵³

In addition, the Athenians would have recognized this use of libations as part of a *psychagōgia* ritual due to their similar function in Homer’s *Odyssey* to summon up the spirits of the dead. The *Odyssey* provides the oldest example of *psychagōgia* in Greek literature. In Book XI, Odysseus summons the ghost of Tiresias, a prophet whom Odysseus believes can advise him on how to get home. As he begins the ritual, the text reads: “I ...poured a libation to all the dead, first with milk and honey, thereafter with sweet wine, and in the third place with water..”⁵⁴ The libation Odysseus offers mirrors Atossa’s libation almost exactly— both pour milk, honey, and water. Atossa’s libation included olive oil as well, which the Athenians believed acted as a soothing agent to appease the dead.⁵⁵ Odysseus’ use of this libation to summon the dead proves they held a magical function and could be used outside of traditional funeral proceedings.

The chorus also plays a key role in the magical nature of this evocation. Following Atossa’s offering of libations, the chorus completes Atossa’s request of a choral chant to summon the ghost of Darius. Scholars have debated the chorus’ function in this summoning for nearly a century. In 1934, J.C. Lawson argued that the chorus served a purely religious function and the Athenians would not have recognized their prayer as a form of magic. He uses the absence of the term *magoi* in the text as evidence. Since Aeschylus did not explicitly refer to the chorus as Persian magicians, Lawson claims that the Athenians would have had no reason to

⁵³ Daniel Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, 107. Scholars remain divided on whether this aligns with our modern understanding of necromancy, a term often associated with communications to the dead. Ogden groups all Greco-Roman magical practices involving the dead as ancient necromancy. Others, such as Graf and Hall, worry that applying the term “necromancy” to any part of Greco-Roman antiquity is anachronistic. Because of the scholarly divide over whether *psychagōgia* can be considered a form of necromancy, I have refrained from categorizing it as such in this paper.

⁵⁴ Homer, *Odyssey* 11.1.

⁵⁵ Sarah Iles Johnston, *Restless Dead*, 51.

believe they possessed magical abilities.⁵⁶ This argument possesses several flaws. As this paper has discussed, it is problematic to categorize a feature of Greek antiquity as simply magical or religious—the Greeks would not have understood the world through this lens. To propose the chorus served a purely religious function denies the link between religion and magic.

Lawson is correct in his claim that the Athenians would not have necessarily viewed all the Persians as magicians (*magoi*).⁵⁷ As mentioned earlier, Herodotus' *Histories* listed the *magoi* as one of many ethnic groups of the region. One can thus reasonably assume that the Greeks did not view all the Persians as *magoi*. Some scholars on the pro-magical side of this debate falsely counter this argument. Daniel Ogden claimed that the Athenians would have recognized Atossa as “a queen of a magical race,” insinuating that all Persians possessed some innate magical power in the eyes of the Greeks.⁵⁸ Though the Athenians in the Classical period undoubtedly associated magic with foreignness due to their anti-Persian thoughts, it is unlikely they believed all of the Persians possessed magical powers.

Though Lawson is correct in this one regard, it does not necessarily mean that the Athenians would have seen the chorus in *Persians* as non-magical simply because it was never explicitly stated. The act of summoning the dead was a form of *goēteia*, a term that became interchangeably used with *magoi* by the fifth century BCE.⁵⁹ In addition, the chorus assumed a key function of Herodotus' *magoi*: they interpreted the dreams of Atossa. The *magoi* interpret five dreams throughout *Histories*, making dream interpretation their most common job in the Persian empire.⁶⁰ Before the news of Xerxes' failure reaches the characters in the play, the chorus

⁵⁶ J.C. Lawson, “The Evocation of Darius (Aesch. Persae 607-93),” *The Classical Quarterly* 28, no. 2, (April 1934): 81.

⁵⁷ J.C. Lawson, “The Evocation of Darius,” 81.

⁵⁸ Daniel Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, 139.

⁵⁹ Derek Collins, “*Magic in the Ancient Greek World*,” 59.

⁶⁰ Herodotus, *Histories* 1.107, 1.108, 1.120, 1.128, 7.19.

offers an interpretation for a strange dream Atossa had the night before.⁶¹ This interpretation would have caused an Athenian audience to liken the elderly Persian chorus to their understanding of *magoi*; even though the play does not explicitly name them to be magicians, their actions placed them in a magical role within the story.

Lawson offered one more counter to the magical nature of this evocation that needs to be addressed: he claimed the absence of animal sacrifice prevented the ritual from assuming a magical function.⁶² He uses Odysseus' model of *psychagōgia* as evidence for this claim. Following Odysseus' libations and prayer in the *Odyssey*, he slaughters a sheep and pours its blood into the earth, the text reading that he "...took the sheep and cut their throats over the pit, and the dark blood flowed. Then there gathered from out of Erebus the ghosts of those that are dead..."⁶³ The offering of blood serves as the final step of Odysseus' act of *psychagōgia*. Later representations of *psychagōgia* use similar animal sacrifices. Aristophanes, a comedic playwright in third century BCE Athens, joked about the philosopher Socrates being a *psychagōgas* (practitioner of *psychagōgia*) in his play *Birds*. Here, Aristophanes has his chorus say,

Far away...lies a swamp, where all unwashed Socrates conjures spirits.... For sacrifice he brought a baby camel and cut its throat, like Odysseus, then backed off; and up from below arose to him...[a ghost].⁶⁴

Aristophanes states that Socrates sacrificed the camel "like Odysseus"—clearly using Odysseus' sacrifice of a sheep as a model of *psychagōgia*. However, the two other features of Odysseus' ritual are notably absent: Socrates neither offers libations or a prayer to the dead. This absence indicates that all three features of Odysseus' summoning need to be present for one to represent a *psychagōgia* ritual.

⁶¹ Aeschylus, *Persians* ll. 212-231 (trans. by Sommerstein).

⁶² J.C. Lawson, "The Evocation of Darius," 82.

⁶³ Homer, *Odyssey* 11.1.

⁶⁴ Aristophanes, *Birds* ll. 1556-1562 (trans. by Henderson).

_____Another argument against the magical nature of Darius' evocation that needs to be addressed comes from Edith Hall. In her book *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self Definition through Tragedy*, Hall builds off Lawson's argument of the evocation being more religious than magical. However, instead of this sense of religion being its primary purpose, she claims that its main function was "dramaturgical"—that Darius' presence within the play served to heighten social tensions within the story and move the plot along.⁶⁵ Hall rejects the idea that Athenians would have left the theater with an impression that the Persians held a strong connection to magic. She cites the sense of reverence Greeks held towards the *Odyssey* to prove this point. Since the *Odyssey* is a Greek story centered on Greek characters, Hall argues the similarities Atossa's *psychagōgia* ritual hold to Odysseus' ritual serve a positive function. It causes the characters in *Persians* to engage with a native Greek practice, which Hall believes would make an Athenian audience view them in a flattering light.⁶⁶

This argument does not take into account the cultural shift that occurred following the Persian Wars. Though the Archaic Greeks of Homer's time may have seen a *goēteia* ritual as a Greek practice, the Classical Athenians with their strong distrust of foreignness would not have. The connection that had developed between *goēteia* and *mageia* negatively impacted how the Greeks viewed *psychagōgia* rituals. The philosopher Plato, who lived between 428 BCE and 348 BCE, likened those who practiced *psychagōgia* to "ravening beasts" who tried to take power away from the gods by charming the souls of the living and the dead.⁶⁷ Though Plato disliked all magical practices and criticized rituals outside of *psychagōgia*, his rhetoric reveals a negative stigma surrounding this form of magic in the later Classical period. This criticism aligns with Gorgias of Leontini's earlier comparison of *goēteia* to *mageia*. Since Gorgias believed

⁶⁵ Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, 90.

⁶⁶ Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, 90.

⁶⁷ Plato, *Laws* 10. 909a-b (trans. by R.G. Bury).

practitioners of *goēteia* partook in the same deceptive practices that the *magoi* did, he thought poorly of those who engaged with this form of magic. Plato's negative view of *psychagōgia* rituals shows how this connection between *goēteia* and foreign magic resulted in the Athenians distrusting all magical practices.

To understand whether Aeschylus intended Darius' presence in the play to be dramaturgical like Hall claims, one must first consider the representations of ghosts in Athenian tragedy. Outside of *Persians*, only two plays survive that contain ghosts in their stories: Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Euripides *Hecuba*. Aeschylus wrote *Eumenides* in 458 BCE (fourteen years after he wrote *Persians*) as part of the *Oresteia* tetralogy.⁶⁸ The four plays in this series tell the bloody story of Clytemnestra and her son Orestes, who were both members of the royal family of Argos. *Eumenides* takes place immediately following Clytemnestra's death at her son's hands. Her ghost appears early in *Eumenides* and only for a brief period. After a discussion between Apollo and Orestes about his matricide, the scene shifts to Clytemnestra in the underworld where she laments the poor conditions of her afterlife.⁶⁹ She never leaves the underworld for the duration of her speech, demonstrating that she lacks the power to return to the world of the living. Euripides' ghost of Polydorus in *Hecuba* follows a similar trajectory. Polydorus, the murdered son of the Trojan Queen Hecuba, opens the tragedy with the tale of his death. Like Clytemnestra, Polydorus establishes his location in the underworld and appears in no other location for the duration of the play.⁷⁰

Darius' ability to travel to the world of the living and interact with his people sets him apart from these other depictions of ghosts. He notes that he traveled up "from underneath the

⁶⁸ Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun*, 210.

⁶⁹ Aeschylus, *Eumenides* ll. 95-96 (trans. by Sommerstein).

⁷⁰ Euripides, *Hecuba* ll. 1-2 (trans. by Kovacs).

earth,” showing that he had previously been dwelling in the underworld.⁷¹ The *psychagōgia* ritual provided the means for Darius to travel from his location in the afterlife and return to Persia. Since Clytemnestra and Polydorus lack any sort of *goēteia* ritual to grant them similar powers, they remain in the underworld for the duration of their appearances on stage. The differences in these portrayals of ghosts prove that Aeschylus included the *psychagōgia* to serve a magical purpose within the play. Darius’ resurrection was not dramaturgical; if strengthening the sense of drama had been Aeschylus’ intention, he would have aligned Darius’ presence more closely to these other ghosts of tragedy who appear briefly to state their opinions. Instead, a magical ritual summons his spirit from the grave, clearly showing the power *psychagōgia* rituals commanded and *goēteia* held in controlling the dead.

Atossa and Other Barbarian Witch Queens

With the most frequent arguments against the magical nature of Darius’ evocation now refuted, one can not deny the presence of magic in *Persians*. By summoning the spirit of a deceased person, Atossa and the chorus assume the role of a *goēs*. The close association that formed between *goēteia* and *mageia* in the Classical period would result in an Athenian audience negatively viewing this use of magic as an indicator of foreignness. These cultural forces changed the neutral sentiment that Archaic Greeks felt towards magic; though Atossa and the chorus closely align with Odysseus’ ritual, the social context of Classical Athens altered how the Athenians perceived received *psychagōgia* rituals.

This use of magic places Atossa in the same category as many later depictions of magical foreign queens in Greek literature and theater. The most famous of these women is Medea, who Euripides popularized in his haunting portrayal of her filicide in 431 BCE. Additional examples

⁷¹ Aeschylus, *Persians* ll. 806 (trans. by Sommerstein).

come from the playwright Sophocles, the last of the three most renowned Classical tragedians. His play *Women of Trachis*, written sometime between 450 BCE and 425 BCE, features two royal women who partake in magical practices. The work mentions Omphale, a Lydian queen who forced the Greek hero Herakles into servitude, and Deinaria, a Calydonian princess who accidentally murdered Herakles through her improper use of *pharmaka* (drugs with special powers).⁷²

In his article, Lawson states that the Greeks would not have seen Atossa as belonging in the same category as these infamous drug-using-witches (*pharmakis*).⁷³ To some extent, this is true; Atossa was not a *pharmakis* nor did she use any *pharmaka*. However, this does not exclude her from holding the status of a barbarian witch queen. As discussed earlier, the Greeks believed many different types of practices fell under the label of magical. The use of *pharmaka* was one of several practices one could use that would result in an association with magic. Since the act of summoning the dead was also tied to the Greeks' understanding of magic, Atossa's practice of *goēteia* would have been seen as equally magical by the Athenians. Atossa's lack of notoriety compared to these other barbarian witch queens points to the unique circumstances surrounding her character more so than it does her not belonging in this category. As a real historical figure, Atossa lacks the strong cultural background mythic figures such as Medea and Omphale possessed.⁷⁴

Magic provided a means for barbarian witch queens to access power; it enabled them to gain a sense of control in their own lives. Atossa, whose son just led the Persian forces to their ruin, used magic to communicate with her husband and seek his advice. Medea's decision to use magic stemmed from the infidelity of her husband. As scholar Kimberley Stratton noted, this act

⁷² Sophocles. *The Women of Trachis* ll. 70, 1500-1505 (trans. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones).

⁷³ J.C. Lawson, "The Evocation of Darius," 81.

⁷⁴ Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "Exit Atossa," 24.

of cheating placed Medea in an incredibly vulnerable situation as she was “in the worst possible position for a woman—alone and without any legal protection.”⁷⁵ Her use of magic thus served to help her regain a sense of control and protection over her life. In *Women of Trachis*, Deinaria uses magic in an attempt to save her marriage. She infuses what she believes is a love potion into Herakles’ clothing to gain back his attention after he brought a war bride home from his last conquest.⁷⁶ Magic provided her with the means to solve her problems and fix the harmful behaviors of Herakles. In all three of these examples, magic was key to the power these women could wield and resulted in them subverting the Greeks’ understanding of gender. These women, who men believed should obey their male guardians (*kyrios*) and the men in their lives, chose instead to use their own power to ensure their security.

One notable difference between Atossa and these other barbarian queens is the role of violence and death in their respective stories. Medea’s use of magic to gain control over her life leads her to use *pharamaka* to poison the Corinthian royal family. Deinaria’s attempt at rekindling her marriage fails catastrophically when it is revealed her alleged love potion was actually a harmful poison.⁷⁷ The Lydian Queen Omphale degraded Herakles as she made him her servant, a status the Athenians would have viewed as slave-like. There is no equivalent violence that Atossa partook in; her magical ritual simply served to summon the spirit of her husband. The two have a lengthy conversation where Darius ultimately advises Atossa to comfort their son, Xerxes, when he returns from his failed campaign. Medea, Omphale, and Deinaria all cause harm to Greek men in their lives in a way Atossa does not.

Aeschylus’ stances on barbarian people explain Atossa’s lack of comparable violence. Benjamin Issac noted that Aeschylus often depicted foreigners far less negatively than Euripides

⁷⁵ Kimberly Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 75.

⁷⁶ Sophocles. *The Women of Trachis* ll. 740 (trans. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones).

⁷⁷ Sophocles. *The Women of Trachis* ll. 987 (trans. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones).

and Sophocles, who both began their theatrical careers decades after Aeschylus.⁷⁸ This difference does not imply Aeschylus' portrayals of barbarians were necessarily positive. As this paper has proven, his inclusion of magic and subversions of gender norms paints the Persians in a distinctly unflattering light. However, most of Euripides' and Sophocles' works were produced in the late fifth century BCE when the imperialist agenda of Athens was at its strongest. This increased imperialism resulted in harsher, more critical representations of the Persians and other foreign people. Euripides and Sophocles reflected this heightened xenophobia in their works through their depictions of magical foreign women as vengeful, destructive, and murderous. Since the Greeks conceptualized foreign societies as matriarchal, the power these women wielded signaled their status as barbarians. The depictions of foreign women as dangerous enabled the Greeks to feel superior in their own culture; it justified the strict control Greek men exercised over their women.

Conclusion

In Ruby Blondell's preface to her translation *Medea*, she reviewed the many stereotypes associated with Medea and claimed they were unsurprising since "the barbarian and the female were the primary categories of Other through which the adult Greek male defined himself."⁷⁹ In viewing women and barbarians as lesser individuals, Greek men were able to justify their feelings of superiority. For barbarians, this manifested in expressions of cultural supremacy and xenophobia; for women, it appeared in the sexist day-to-day practices of Classical Athens. The barbarian woman thus stood as the greatest "other" in the mind of the average Greek man, with

⁷⁸ Benjamin Issac, *The Invention of Racism*, 276.

⁷⁹ Ruby Blondell, Mary-Kay Gamel, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, and Bella Zweig, *Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides*, (New York: Routledge: 1999): 22.

their strangeness emphasized through theatrical representations that portrayed them as magical and often dangerous individuals.

The Persian Wars significantly impacted Athenian culture. The Persians, no longer just the Eastern neighbor of Greece, came to be seen as the chief enemy of the Greek people. This hatred caused the Athenians to demonize their practices, resulting in magic and its associated terms becoming insults signaling one's untrustworthiness. During Aeschylus' lifetime, this sentiment would still be in its earliest stages, though these hostile thoughts undoubtedly circulated the city-state. Aeschylus' *Persians* reflects these xenophobic ideas through its portrayal of Atossa, a magical foreign queen. Atossa acts as a powerful, transgressive woman throughout *Persians*. The chorus prostrated themselves before her as she entered the stage, and she both planned and participated in a magical ritual. This sense of agency would have caused an Athenian audience to negatively receive Atossa and her magical acts.

As a culturally unifying force, theater both reflected and enforced the dominant values of Athens. Aeschylus' negative portrayal of Atossa as a powerful, foreign woman thus aided in the development of Athenian xenophobia and contributed to the harsher depictions of barbarian women by later playwrights. As one of the oldest extant pieces of Greek theater, this places *Persians* in a far more influential role than scholars often give it credit for in shaping later depictions of barbarian witch queens.

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