3. Athenian drama (both tragedy and comedy) was part of the civic discourse on contemporary events. How might the *Persians* and *Lysistrata* be considered educational to the Athenian public? What do these plays tell us about how the Athenians viewed themselves in relation to non-Athenians?

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Identification through Commonality: the Effectiveness of Comedy and Tragedy

Athens: a global power, the masters of both land and sea, and such a powerful force of people that anything, or anyone, in the way seemed to be destined to fall. Many Greek writers, such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Aeschylus and Aristophanes focus on the rise and fall of the Athenian power over the course of ancient Greek history. Herodotus and Thucydides are undoubtedly adequate at recounting the tales of the wars and successes of the Athenians, but what they do not examine is the effect the Athenian domination had on other peoples: mainly the Persians and the women of Athens. This is where Aeschylus and Aristophanes dominate. Through their tragic and comic plays, both Greek playwrights were able to present the consequences of the Athenian aggression and critique the politics and moral system that drove Athens to desire more wealth and land. As a result of choosing different points of view, Aeschylus and Aristophanes had to choose different types of plays, in order to make their criticisms not only accepted, but also effective.

In the *Persians*, Aeschylus begins the play with the chorus' description of the history of Persian wars, noting "Persians are never defeated/the people tempered and brave./ For divine fate has prevailed since/It enjoined Persians to wage wars,/Which destroy towers and ramparts" (Aeschylus, pp. 52). Here, Aeschylus calls for the Athenians to begin to identify with the Persians; both groups of people have had histories of successful battles, and both sides believe they have the gods on their side. But, as

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the chorus notes later, “Deceiftul deception of god -/ What mortal man shall avoid it” (Aeschylus, pp. 52). With this line, it makes the reader recall the prominence of destiny and fate in previous works, such as Homer’s *The Iliad*. This commonality between the Athenians and Persians allows the audience to begin to think of the Persians less as strangers (which is the image we see by Aristophanes’ use of local dialect to portray the difference between the two groups) but more like humans – it is humanity, and, even more so, mortality, that binds the Athenians and Persians together at the beginning of the play.

Aeschylus continues the identification process with tears and lamentation, two other important themes we have seen in earlier Greek writers. The fact that “beds with longing fill with tears,/Persian wives in softness weep” allows not only Athenian men to identify with being away for war, but also Athenian women to sympathize with what the Persian wives were feeling at that time (Aeschylus, pp. 53). The proposed commonalities between the peoples allow the Athenians to identify with the Persians as well as enter into their mindset, while still maintaining their own identity.

The confusion that the Persians show regarding the Athenian culture and government serves not only to remind the Athenians of their own confusion about the other cultures and peoples they deal with, but also it shows them how abnormal, but lucky, they truly are. The fact that “they are slaves to none, nor are they subject” is the largest mental hurdle the Queen of Persia has to overcome – how, she wonders, can free men fight together in unity (Aeschylus, pp. 57)? Not only that, but how could they fight so well as to defeat the Persians? These philosophical hurdles that the Queen needs to overcome show the Athenians that other cultures see them as strange as well – the Athenians are not the ‘normal’ culture; their freedom is a rarity, and their unity, despite their freedom, is shocking to cultures who exist under a tyranny.

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But Aeschylus is not free from prejudices against the Persians; instead, it seems as if he is only masking his true thoughts, and these are momentarily revealed by the Persian herald on pp. 57: "…the flower of Persia falls,/And is gone. Alas! the first herald of woe,/He must disclose entire what befell:/Persians, all the barbarian host is gone." Here, it seems as if Aeschylus is losing perspective: Persia is, at first, considered a "flower," but then as a "barbarian host" (Aeschylus, pp. 57). This little slip of the tongue may have been accidental, or it may have been a reminder to the Athenians that one of their own people wrote it – to assuage any worries as to which culture was better. It also serves to reassure the Athenians that their political structure and culture is, in fact, superior. After all, how else would a small army be able to beat the large droves of Persians?

The poem continues in woe. The tragedy of the Persian defeat calls for heavy lamentation, which continues to serve as an identification technique; it shows the Athenians the consequences of their actions and the effect it has on another group of people. The Athenians might be proud of their victory (and rightfully so), but the open weeping of the chorus and characters in the play serve to remind the audience that their actions have an effect on other people: with their success comes another person's demise. This subtly hints at the idea of the end of the Athenian's own sort of manifest destiny – Aeschylus portrays the Athenians as lucky to have defeated a large army (helped, in part, by their freedom and unity), but also shows the hideousness of failure, which suggests that the Athenians might not be so lucky the next time.

Aristophanes, on the other hand, uses comedy to portray the effects the Athenian conquests has on other people. In this case, instead of examining the effects of the actions on other cultures, Aristophanes explores the effects of the Athenian wars on the women of the city, those left behind during each of the conquests. Rather than having to begin the play with identification (like Aeschylus),

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Aristophanes must begin *Lysistrata* with intention to show that this is a comedy: the situation presented is so hyperbolized that it is not to be taken seriously. But, at the same time, it makes the audience wonder, "What have we come to if this solution actually makes sense?" Even the characters in the play see the desperation in the actions, when Lysistrata declares "Only this: the hope and salvation of Hellas lies with the WOMEN!" and Kleonike retorts "Lies with the women? Now *there's* a last resort" (Aristophanes, pp. 352)

Aristophanes adopts the traditional view of non-Athenians: it is one that depicts them as strangers, and slightly inferior (due to the connotations of the dialects chosen in the translations). When the Persian women first appear in Athens, the women immediately begin to fawn over Lampito and Ismenia- inspecting them "like a heifer come fair-time" (Aristophanes, pp. 357). The distinction between Athenians and the newcomers is especially prevalent with the addition of local dialects (in Douglass Parker's translation, it is the accent from the deep South).

But despite the apparent differences, Aristophanes is able to emphasize unity (a traditional value of Athenians) through Lysistrata's pan-Hellenic abstinence to sex. The audience finds that not only do the women band together for a common goal for peace, but this unity of inferiors forces the unity of men: only after their situations progress to the point of debilitation do the two armies reconcile their differences. So, in fact, it is the women's unity that forces the men to make peace.

This play, much like Aeschylus', depends on identification between groups of people in order for the play to be effective. In *Lysistrata*, not only do the two armies have to identify with each other (through their similar predicaments), but the men and women must also find a common ground, in order to fully resolve the conflict at hand. It is only when the koryphaios of women removes an imaginary gnat from the eye of the koryphaios of men that reconciliation is in sight. This peace comes,

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much like in Homer, through the use of tears. As the koryphaios of men proclaims, "…now you've unplugged me. Here come the tears." To which the koryphaios of women responds, "I'll dry your tears, though I can't say why" (Aristophanes, pp. 438). It is only a short while later that "*the two Choruses unite and face the audience*" (Aristophanes, pp. 439).

Aristophanes, unlike Aeschylus, is able to produce two conflicts and solutions in the course of a short play: he presents the domestic situation in Athens and the clash between men and women in the family unit (which is, in turn, generalized to all of Hellas), as well as the larger battle between Persia and Athens. But in the end, like Aeschylus, these groups can only reconcile through the use of identification and commonality. Aeschylus primarily calls for identification with the enemy, the Persians, in order to show the consequences that Athenian battles bring to other peoples, while Aristophanes relies heavily on hyperbole and comedy to force the audience members to recall and identify with not only the 'strange' non-Athenians, but also with the opposite gender within their own society. In this respect, both playwrights are able to effectively dramatize and criticize the Athenian citizens on how their actions affect the different groups of people they come in contact with.