

Persians
(*Persai*)

of

Aeschylus

Translated by
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Persians

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Chorus of Persian Elders

Atossa, Queen, mother of Xerxes

Messenger

Darius' Ghost, late king, father of Xerxes

Xerxes, son of Atossa and Darius, King of the Persians

SETTING: Sousa, the capital of the Persian Empire, at the council-chamber. The tomb of Darius is nearby.

DRAMATIC DATE: 480 BCE, shortly after the Battle of Salamis

DATE OF FIRST PRODUCTION: 472 BCE. *Persians* is the earliest surviving Greek tragedy.

*Parodos*¹ (1–139)

CHORUS:

Of the Persians gone to the land of Greece
we who are left here are named the Trusted Ones,
guardians of the royal house, wealthy halls,
rich in gold²; because of our age,
our lord himself, Xerxes, the king, 5
son of Darius,
chose us to keep watch over the land.
For the king's return
and the army rich in gold
my heart within me, 10
is deeply troubled like a prophet of doom.
For all the might of Asia's heirs
is gone³ and there is braying at the young king.
No courier, no horseman⁴ reaches
the city of Persians 15
who left behind the ancient keeps
of Sousa, of Agbatana, and of Cissa,
some on horseback,
some in ships, others tramping on foot,
heavy forces of war for all to see. 20

¹The *parodos* is the entrance song of the chorus. Most Greek tragedies begin with a *prologue* spoken by one or two of the characters in the play, often a monologue followed by a brief dialogue (as in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* and many of Sophocles' and Euripides' tragedies). Lines 1–64 are anapests used for the procession of the chorus.

²5: Persian wealth and luxury is a theme in the tragedy. The adjective, “rich in gold” (*poluchrusos*) is used four times in the *parodos*: here, and at lines 9, 43, and 54. In popular Greek thought, Persians were known for luxury.

³The Athenians evacuated the women, children, and elders to the islands and to Trozen. The men manned the ships (the wooden walls) at Salamis. See Herodotus, *Histories* 7.21 for Xerxes' Pan-Asian ambitions. For Xerxes' review of his troops at Doriscus, see Herodotus 7.59–100.

⁴14–15: The Greeks were aware of the Persian courier system (the *angareion*) of messengers on horseback stationed at regular intervals on the royal road to bring news and dispatches (Herodotus, 8.98–9). When the messenger arrives, the chorus recognizes him as a courier from his gait.

Men like Amistres and Artaphrenes⁵
 and Megabates and Astaspes,
 commanders of Persian warriors,
 kings themselves, subjects of the great king,
 push on, leaders of a massive army, 25
 skilled archers⁶ and horsemen,
 awful to behold, daunting in battle,
 for their courage of glorious spirit.
 And Artembares warrior on horseback
 and Masistres, and the skilled archer 30
 noble Imaios, and Pharandakes
 and driver of horses Sosthanes.
 And others whom the great teeming
 Nile sent forth: Sousiskanes,
 Pegastagon, Egypt-born, 35
 and the ruler of holy Memphis,
 great Arsames, and the guardian of
 time-honored Thebes, Ariomardos,
 and the marshdwellers, oarsmen of ships,
 daunting in battle, numbers past numbering. 40
 There follows a horde of Lydians
 living in luxury, who hold sway over
 a people with no passage to the sea: these
 Mitragathes and noble Arkteus, royal commanders,
 and Sardis rich in gold sent forth to war, 45
 mounted on chariots past counting:
 in columns of four- and six-horse teams,
 a sight awful to gaze upon.
 Those who live by sacred Tmolos threaten

⁵ 22: Names and catalogues of Persian warriors. Aeschylus gives three lists of Persian warriors: beginning here, in the *parodos*, then in the messenger's speech, and finally in the *kommos* (the scene of mourning between the chorus and Xerxes) in the *exodos* (or final scene). The first list describes the emptying of the Persian kingdom as the men go off to war, as if the chorus is viewing a military parade (cf. line 20). A military parade with all its panoply seems invincible. What else is the point of such a massive display, and yet as time passes its absence causes foreboding: it implies the possibility of loss. The messenger gives names of heroes killed in battle with more personal descriptions, as if he were an eyewitness to their tragedies, as he is to some and others he would have seen lying dead. Finally, the chorus questions Xerxes about the missing men when he returns alone in rags. These are the men close kin to the king who would have been expected to be in his entourage.

⁶ 26: *Archers and horsemen*: the Persians were famous as archers and are often depicted on vase-paintings shooting from horseback. The Greeks are known as spear-fighters (lines 85--6).

to cast slavery's yoke upon Hellas: Mardon, Tharybis, anvils of the spearhead, and Mysian javelin throwers; and Babylon rich in gold sends forth a long line of mixed troops, men on ships and men trusting in archery's skill.	50 55
The sword-bearing host from all of Asia follows under the awful summons of the king. Such is the flower of heroes that is gone from the Persian land, for whom the whole land of Asia that reared them laments with a yearning so fierce, that parents and wives counting the days grow fearful with the lengthening time.	60
Strophe a The royal host, sacker of cities, has now crossed over to our neighbor's facing coast on a bridge of boats ⁷ bound with ropes of linen crossing the strait of Helle, daughter of Athamas, a well-riveted passage, cast as a yoke around ocean's neck.	65 70
Antistrophe a Teeming Asia's warlike ruler over all the world is driving his splendid flock of men divided in two, men on foot and men on the high seas, relying on his battle- tried commanders, a godlike hero, born of the golden shower. ⁸	75 80

⁷68: *Bridge of boats*: an attempt to yoke the ocean, seen by some as an act of *hubris*, but there also seems to be in the play a certain admiration for this feat of engineering. Phoenician and Egyptian sailors, using papyrus and flax (linen) for the cables, constructed pontoon bridges across the Hellespont (also referred to as the Strait of Helle, the present day Dardanelles) so Xerxes' army could cross into Thrace from the Asian side of the empire. See Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.36.

⁸80: *The golden shower* refers to the birth of Perseus, the eponymous hero of the Persians, whose mother, Danae, was raped by Zeus in (or appearing as) a shower of gold.

Strophe b

His eyes glancing the smoky
glare of a bloody serpent,
with many platoons and many warships
driving the Syrian chariot
he arrays a war god skillful with the bow
against men famous for spear-fighting. 85

Antistrophe b

No one is battle-tried enough to withstand
the massive surge of men
to hem in with strong barriers
the irresistible wave of the sea:
for the Persians' forces are
unassailable, the people brave to the core. 90

Strophe c

From ancient times by will of the gods
Fate has held the helm
and imposed on the Persians
to wage wars for tearing down towers
and battles
of war horses
and laying waste to cities. 95

Antistrophe c

They have learned 100
to look on the watery grove
of the sea's broad highway
white with foam in the blustery wind
trusting in their fine made cables
and devices 105
to deploy the hosts of people.

Epode

The wily deception of god⁹
what mortal man will evade it?
Who on foot is swift enough
lightly leaping this leap? 110

⁹107 ll: General reflection is very common in Greek choral songs. What is the point of this sudden change in tone and topic? Here is the beginning of the divine element in the disaster's causation. A constant theme in Aeschylus is the working together of the human and divine which reaches its culmination in the trial scene near the end of the *Oresteia*. However one may look at these things theologically, it does not make for good plot or characterization if the devil *really* made him do it.

For Delusion cheerfully
flatters a mortal into her snare,
from which it is not possible
to escape unharmed.

Strophe d

This is why my mind
mantled in black is torn by fear. 115
Woe! [oa] For the Persian army
lest the city learn
the great citadel of Sousa is empty of men.

Antistrophe d

And the fortress of Cissians 120
will sing its response
Woe! [oa] This word the thronging
crowds of women resound
and a rending hand tears at their dresses
made of fine linen.¹⁰ 125

Strophe e

For all the host astride horses
or trooping on foot
like a swarm of bees has left the hive
with the leader of troops
crossing the sea one side yoked to the other: 130
the sea's bridge
common to both lands.

Antistrophe e

Marriage beds in yearning for their men
are filling with tears.
Persian women are aching with grief. 135
In longing for the husband she loves
each one is left alone in wedlock's yoke
after seeing off her husband,
impetuous in war.

¹⁰Clothing (especially clothing falling to the ground) is a prominent metaphor in *Oresteia*. In *Persians*, the rending of fabric, the ruining of the wealth of the house contributed by women, is a metaphor for the breakdown of society. Wives lie unyoked in their linen marriage sheets; the king in rags figures the loss of Empire. Not only is Atossa concerned with her son's dignity of appearance, but Darius' last words to Atossa direct her to bring suitable raiment for their son (833–6). Clothing unites several themes: the different ethnic groups are identified by clothing, especially Greek and Persian. There is to be no restoration: even the chorus will be in rags from rending their clothing and defeated by loss and grief.

First Episode (140–531)

CHORUS LEADER

Come, Persians, let us take our seats 140
here under the ancient roof;
let us ponder well and deeply,
—there is great need for it—
on how king Xerxes fares,
son of Darius, 145
our people named Persians for his forefather.
Is the archer's skill vanquishing our foe
or has the strength
of the spear-headed lance brought us victory?

Look there: riding here in royal pomp is a brightness equal 150
to the eyes of the gods, the king's mother,
my queen. I fall down before her.¹¹
It is the obligation of us all
to address her with words of welcome.

Atossa enters in a chariot with attendants

CHORUS

Hail, my queen, most exalted of Persian women in elegance and beauty, 155
honored mother of Xerxes, hail, wife of Darius, hail.
Wife of the Persians' god¹² and mother of a god,
unless our ancient destiny has now abandoned our cause.

ATOSSA

That is why I have left the gold-decked halls
and the bed-chamber I shared with Darius to come here. 160
Anxiety tears at my heart. What a tale I have to tell you,
my friends, compounded by my own fear
that our great wealth, kicking its heels in the dust, overturn
the prosperity that Darius built up with the gods' help.
There are two concerns that are keeping my mind in turmoil: 165
a hoard of money is useless if the men are gone and then again
poor men do not get the break they need to give them power.
Yes, our wealth is abundant, but I have a blinding fear:
to me the light of the house is its master's presence.
That is the reason I ask you to be my counselors 170
in what I will tell you, loyal Persian elders:
since truly all my good counsels depend on you.

¹¹ 152: The chorus members lower themselves to the ground as an act of obeisance to the queen, a Persian custom, not practiced by the Greeks towards other humans, especially women.

¹² 157: The Persians revered their kings after death, but probably did not consider them gods while they were alive, though it might have been a Greek notion that they did.

CHORUS

Be sure, queen of our land, you don't need to ask us twice
to offer guidance in word or deed: whatever is in our power.
For we whom you call as advisors have your interests at heart. 175

ATOSSA

I have been visited by frequent nightly dreams,
ever since my son went off at the head of the army
intending to ravage the land of the Ionians.¹³
But never before have I seen one so clear
as during the night just past: I'll try to describe it for you. 180
There appeared to come into my view
two well-dressed women, one decked out in
Persian robes, the other in Greek; both were
in stature far statelier than women are today.¹⁴
In beauty they were flawless, sisters of the same kin. 185
But the fatherlands they dwelled in, one had been
allotted Hellas, the other our barbarian land.
These two, as they appeared to me, were carrying on
a dispute with each other. Then my son, learning of it,
tried to restrain and humble them, by yoking them 190
to his chariot and putting straps on their necks.
In these fittings one strutted about proudly
and kept her mouth submissive in the reins.
But the other writhed and with her hands tore up
the chariot's rigging and tugged at it with all her might 195
and, free of the harness, shattered the yoke down the middle.
My son was thrown from the car and his father stood
by him feeling pity for him. And when he saw him,
Xerxes rent his garments about his body.
This is what I'm telling you I saw during the night. 200
When I got up and dipped my hands in clear spring
water, performing the ritual with my gestures,
I stood beside the altar, intending to sacrifice¹⁵

¹³178: "Ionians" and "land of Ionians" is used throughout *Persians* to mean Greeks and Greece in general. The Persians were most familiar with the Greeks on the Ionian coast of Asia Minor and the nearby islands. Along with Persian dress and customs and the occasional Persian word, the use of "Ionians" gives the feeling that we are watching the Persian court.

¹⁴184: They were like heroic women of old or, perhaps, the archetypal eponymous women of each ethnic group.

¹⁵203: The sacrifice she was intending to make was of a *pelanos*, a heavy mass but still liquid enough to pour, mixed of meal, oil, and, honey, but which also often contains blood (LSJ). The word is used again in *Persians* of the bloody mass of Persian dead (816). In Euripides' *Alcestis*, Death is imagined as feasting on the bloody *pelanos* at the queen's grave (851). Atossa's second offerings, to appease the dead, consist of the earth's bounty (609–18).

to the gods, averters of evil, whose rites these are.	
But then I saw an eagle flying away to the altar	205
of Phoebus and, my friends, I stood speechless in fear.	
And afterwards I caught sight of a hawk at full speed	
rushing at it in flight and plucking at its head	
with its talons. The eagle did nothing but cringe and yield	
its body to the attack. These things were horrible for me	210
to see and for you to hear of. But you can be sure, if he should	
do well, Xerxes will be a man admired by all,	
but if he fails. . . well, he is not accountable to the state	
if he comes back alive, he will still be king of the country. ¹⁶	
CHORUS	
We do not want you, queen mother, to be too afraid	215
or too encouraged by our words, But approach the gods	
with supplication in case what you saw was a bad omen, beg them	
to avert it so that things turn out well for you and your children	
and the city and all you hold dear. And next you should pour	
libations to earth and the dead; and graciously ask this:	220
that your husband Darius whom you say you saw last night	
send blessings up to your son from beneath the earth	
into the light and keep their opposite down in the earth to fade away	
in darkness. This is my advice, given with goodwill, as a heartfelt	
prophet; we judge that all will turn out well for you.	225
ATOSSA	
Yes, thank you, as my dream's first interpreter, in making this	
pronouncement, you show goodwill to my son and my house.	
I pray everything turns out for the best and as you say we will	
arrange these things for the gods and our dear ones below the earth,	
when we return home. But first I want to know some other things,	230
my dear friends: where exactly do people say Athens is situated?	
CHORUS	
Far away in the west at the setting of our sovereign sun.	
ATOSSA	
And did my son desire to make prey of this city?	
CHORUS	
Yes, for then all Hellas would be subject to the king.	
ATOSSA	
Do they have a massive force of men-at-arms?	235

¹⁶205–14: Atossa associates the eagle, king of birds, with Xerxes of whose disorderly flight we will hear. He has already, in her dream, rent his robes and will do so again in the narrative told by the messenger.

CHORUS
 Their army is such that it did much harm to the Medes.¹⁷

ATOSSA
 Is it because they are distinguished for their skill in archery? [239]

CHORUS
 Not at all, but for hand-to-hand fighting and the use of shields.¹⁸ [240]

ATOSSA
 What else do they have? Is there sufficient wealth in their homes? [237]

CHORUS
 They have a fountain of silver, the earth's hidden treasure.¹⁹ [238]

ATOSSA
 Who is shepherd over them and master of their armies? [241]

CHORUS
 They are called no one's slaves and subjects of no one.

ATOSSA
 How then could they abide invading hostile forces?

CHORUS
 Well enough to destroy the grand army of Darius.

ATOSSA
 What you say is terrible news for the parents of our troops. 245

CHORUS
 Well, It looks like you will soon know the whole tale:
 for here comes a man, distinguished by his Persian courier's gait.²⁰
 He brings some clear news for us to hear, whether good or bad.

A Messenger enters on the run.

MESSENGER
 O cities of all the Persian land.
 O Persia, great haven of wealth. 250
 How great prosperity is lost
 by one blow, the flower of Persians fallen and gone.
 Alas [*omoi*], the first of evils is to report evils.
 Still I must unroll the disaster:
 Persians, the entire army of barbarians is lost. 255

Strophe a
 CHORUS
 Awful, more awful evils

¹⁷236: Referring to the Greek victory at Marathon, in 490 BCE during the first Persian invasion of mainland Greece. See also line 244.

¹⁸[240]: Refers to the formation of the close packed phalanx of hoplites.

¹⁹238: The fountain of silver is a series of rich silver mines at Laurion in southern Attica. The discovery of a new vein allowed for the building of the fleet.

²⁰247: On the Persian courier system, see Herodotus' famous passage, *Histories* 8.98.

dreadful, unheard of, alas, [*ai ai*]
where are your tears, Persians,
when you hear of this disaster?

MESSENGER

Yes, since all who went forth are destroyed utterly
and beyond hope or expectation I see the light of my return. 260

Antistrophe a

CHORUS

How far too long
this life of ours has gone on. Far too long
to hear of this unlooked for
calamity in our old age. 265

MESSENGER

There's no denying it: I was there and did not hear the tale at second hand.
I can give you an account of all the evils that were heaped upon us.

Strophe b

CHORUS:

Oh sorrow! [*otototoi*] In vain
our full panoply of weapons
went out of Asia's land alas [*ai ai*]
to the Greek territories only to meet with ruin. 270

MESSENGER:

The shores of Salamis and all adjacent places.
are full of the bodies of the ill-fated fallen.

Antistrophe b

CHORUS:

Oh sorrow! [*otototoi*] The bodies of our loved ones,
sea-tossed, drowned and drowned again,
lying dead, you say,
afloat in their flowing clothes. 275

MESSENGER:

Our arrows did not help, but the whole army is lost,
overwhelmed by ships ramming against each other.

Strophe c

CHORUS:

Cry out a mournful keening
for the ill-fated Persians, how
they are all destroyed,
alas [*ai ai*] for the army lost. 280

MESSENGER:

O cursed name of Salamis, most hateful to hear;
alas [*pheu*], how I cry out in pain when I think of Athens. 285

Antistrophe c

CHORUS:

Hateful, yes, Athens is hateful to enemies.
We can remember how they made many
Persian women barren
and their beds empty of men.

ATOSSA:

In my grief I have kept silent, long since astonished 290
by these evils. For this disaster is too huge
to speak of, our sufferings too great to question.
Still we humans must bear misfortunes when the gods
bestow them. Unwrap the whole casualty and tell the tale,
standing strong, even if you are in distress, speak still. 295
Who is there that is not dead? And which of the officers
must we mourn, stationed at their command,
who by dying left their posts unmanned?

MESSENGER:

Xerxes, first, is alive and looks upon the light.

ATOSSA:

What you say is a great light to my house 300
and a bright day from blackest night.

MESSENGER:

But Artembares, commander of ten thousand
is dashed against the rugged Silenian shores.
And Dadakes captain of one thousand, at the spear's blow
somersaulted gracefully from his ship; 305
And Tenagon, noble, mighty-born son of Bactrians,
haunts the sea-beaten island of Ajax.
Lilaios, Arsames, and third Argestes,
these men around the dove-teeming island
whirling around are dashed against the hard ground. 310
And of those who dwelt by the waters of Egypt's Nile,
Pharnuchus, and those who plummeted from one ship
to their death, Arteus, Adeues, and third, Pheresseues,
Matallus of Chryse leader of ten thousand in his death,
commander of thirty thousand Black Horse, 315
drenched his shaggy red beard in the sea
changing its color with the dark blood-red dye.
And Arabos, the Magian, and Artabes the Bactrian,
immigrant in a hard land, lie perished there.

Amistris and Amphistreus wielding the spear 320
full of toil, and the noble Ariomardos causing
grief to the Sardians, and Seisames the Mysian,
and Tharybis, commander of five times fifty
ships, Lyrnaian by birth, a handsome man,
unhappy lies dead, his luck deserted him. 325
And first in valor is Syennesis
ruler of Cilicians, one man inflicting
the most pain on the enemy, he died gloriously.
I have now accounted for the fates of such leaders;
of the many evils there I have told just a few. 330

ATOSSA:

Alas [*ai ai*], what I have heard is the epitome of evil,
a shame to the Persians and cause for high wailing laments.
But, tell me this: go back over it for me:
how large was the horde of Greek vessels
to make them think they could join battle 335
with the Persian army and its charging ships?

MESSENGER:

As far as numbers go you can be sure we barbarians
would have won with our ships. For the Greeks had
as their total number ten times thirty
ships and besides these a chosen squadron of ten; 340
but Xerxes had—I know this for a fact—a thousand,
a number he commanded, and those excelling in speed
were two hundred and seven: that was our count.
Do you think we were left outnumbered in this battle?
No, it was some divine spirit that destroyed the host, 345
weighting the scale with luck not evenly balanced.
The gods saved the city of the goddess Pallas Athena.

ATOSSA:

Does the city of Athens still stand unravaged?

MESSENGER:

Yes, for while their people live, their defense is safe.

ATOSSA:

What was the beginning of the assault, tell the story. 350
Who started the action? Was it the Greeks
or my son, confident in the number of his ships?

MESSENGER:

It was started, my queen, by an evil avenger
or a malevolent spirit appearing out of nowhere.

A Greek man from the army of the Athenians²¹ 355
 came and told your son Xerxes this tale:
 that when the darkness of black night comes on,
 the Greeks would not stand their ground, but leaping
 on the decks of the ships, one here, one there,
 would try to save their lives by stealthy flight. 360
 As soon as he heard this, not grasping the deceit
 of the Greek man nor the resentment of the gods,
 he proclaimed to all his commanders this decree:
 when the sun finishes lighting the earth with his rays,
 and darkness takes the sanctuary of the sky, 365
 to organize the ships in a close array of three companies
 to guard the sailing out on the paths of the roaring sea,
 and to station others in a circle around the island of Ajax.²²
 If the Greeks should escape an evil doom
 by finding some secret way out for their ships, 370
 everyone would lose his head: that was his solemn command.
 That is what he said in the happy confidence of his heart;
 for he did not know what was coming from the gods.
 And his men in good order and with obedient spirit
 prepared their dinner, and every sailing man 375
 fastened his oar at its lock, ready for rowing.
 And when the light of the sun faded
 and night came on, every man, master of the oar
 and every master of arms boarded his ship.
 Squadron encouraged squadron of long ships; 380
 they set sail as each was commanded and mustered.
 And all night long the commanders of ships kept
 the whole fleet of soldiers sailing back and forth.
 Now night was passing and the army of the Greeks
 at no time attempted to sail away in secret. 385
 When dawning day drawn by the sun's white horses
 took hold of all the land, bright light clear to see,
 first from the Greeks a resounding cheer
 rang out like a song of triumph and at the same time
 echo returned the cry from the rocky island 390
 and fear took hold in the hearts of all the barbarians,
 deceived in their judgment; for by no means in flight,
 at that moment the Greeks sang their solemn paeon,
 swarming into battle with valiant spirit.
 The blaring trumpet fired up their side. 395

²¹355: It is often noted that no Greek is named in the play. This story would clearly refer to Themistocles' ruse to put the Persians at a disadvantage. See Herodotus, *Histories*, 8.75.

²²368: The Homeric hero, Ajax, son of Telamon was born on Salamis. Like those of Heracles and Elvis, sightings of Ajax were common.

At once on command with the rhythmic pulling
of the plashing oars they struck beneath the surface
and swiftly they could all be seen clear as day.
First the right flank in good order was well
marshaled, and second the whole armada 400
came forth and at the same time we could hear
a mighty shout, “O sons of Hellas, come,
set free your fatherland, set free your children
your wives, the seats of your fathers’ gods,
the graves of your ancestors; now the fight is for all.” 405
From our side the sound of the Persian tongue
answered and there was no more moment to delay.
But at once the bronze beaks collided, ship against ship.
A Greek ship began the ramming attack,
and broke off the whole prow of a Phoenician 410
galley; one ship drove hard against another.
The first wave of the Persian army held out
against them, but when the mass of ships were crammed
in the narrows and there was no way to help each other,
they were struck by their own ships with battling 415
bronze beaks, they shattered all the rowing gear
and the Greek ships catching sight of it
hemmed them around in a circle and the hulls
of our ships were capsized and the sea could not be seen,
teeming with the wreckage and slaughter of men. 420
The shores and low-lying reefs are full of corpses.
Every ship was rowed in disorderly flight,
all that belonged to the barbarian armada.
As if they were tuna or some other haul of fish,
with splintered fragments of oars and pieces of wrecks 425
they kept striking them, hacking them through.
Cries mixed with blood-curdling shrieks filled the sea,
until the face of black night hid the view.
The fullness of evils, not even if I had ten days
to tell them all, I could not reach the end. 430
For you must know this, never in one day
has such a number of men met their death.

ATOSSA:

O woe [*aiai*]— a great ocean of evils has broken
on the Persians and all the peoples of the barbarians.

MESSENGER:

You can be sure of that and it’s not yet half told: 435
such disasters of suffering came upon them
that they outweigh these twice over.

ATOSSA:

And what fate could be more brutal than this?
Tell me what heavier disaster came upon

our troops weighting down the scale of evils. 440

MESSENGER:
 Those Persians who were at their prime of life
 most valiant in spirit and marked by good birth,
 and always first in loyalty to the king
 died disgracefully by a most dishonorable fate.

ATOSSA:
 O, friends, my spirit is crushed by this misery. 445
 By what fate do you say that they died?

MESSENGER:
 There is an island just off Salamis' terrain,²³
 a small place, unsafe anchorage for ships, where Pan,
 lover of dance, beats his feet upon the seashore.
 To that place Xerxes sent them, so that when 450
 the shipwrecked enemy would try to shelter on the island,
 they would cut down the army of the Greeks, easy pickings,
 and rescue their friends from the narrow straits,
 but he badly sussed the future. For the god gave
 the glory of the battle of the ships to the Greeks. 455
 That very day hedging their bodies in armor
 of fine bronze they leapt from the ships, and all around
 they encircled the whole island, so that our men were
 at a loss where to turn. Over and over they were pelted
 with rocks from enemy hands and from the bow string 460
 thick arrows kept pummeling them and laid them low.
 In the end rushing at them in one fell swoop
 they struck, butchering the limbs of the poor souls,
 until they had robbed them all of their lives.
 Xerxes cried aloud when he saw the depths of devastation, 465
 for he had a seat with full view of the army,
 on a towering hill not far from the sea shore.
 But tearing his garments and letting out a shrill cry,
 he gave abrupt command to his land army,
 and sent them off in disorderly retreat. In addition to 470
 the ones I told you about this is another misfortune to lament.

ATOSSA:
 O hateful god, how you have played false the Persians'
 plans! What a bitter revenge my son found
 on glorious Athens. They were not sufficient, 475
 those barbarians whom Marathon laid low before;
 for whose lives my son thought to exact retribution
 but instead he has heaped such a mass of suffering on himself.
 But tell me, the fate of the ships which escaped:

²³447: The island of Psyttaleia

where did you leave them? Can you give a clear report?

MESSENGER:

The commanders of the ships that were left, in a rush
took flight under the wind in disarray. 480

What was left of the army in the land of the Boeotians
perished, some suffering thirst for clear
spring water, others, fighting for breath,
made our way into the country of the Phocians 485
and the land of Doris, and the gulf of Malia, where
Spercheius waters the plain with kindly drink.

For there the soil of Achaia's land and the cities
of Thessaly received us in want of food
and there it was that most of us perished 490
from thirst and hunger—for we suffered both.

We reached the land of the Magnesians
and Macedonian territory and the crossing of Axios,
and the reedy marsh of Boibe and Mount Pangaus,
in Edonian land. But on this night a god 495
raised winter out of season and froze solid
all the stream of sacred Strymon. Anyone who
once thought there were no gods fell on the ground
then and prayed fervently to earth and sky.

When our army ceased its fevered calling on the gods 500
they tried to cross the river ford, rock solid with ice.
Anyone from our side who set out before the god's rays
were dispersed was actually able to reach safety.

But the shining orb of the sun beaming with his rays
passed over the middle of the passage, heating it 505
and the men fell on top of each other; he was the lucky one
whose breath broke free of his life quickest.

All who survived and escaped with their lives
after barely crossing Thrace with infinite toil,
arrived in their flight, at the land of their hearth, 510

no great numbers of men. Now the city of Persians
may lament in longing for the sweetest youth of the land.
My report is true, though in telling it I have left untold
too many of the evils god has hurled upon the Persians.

Exit Messenger

CHORUS:

O god, inflictor of trouble, how heavy, how heavy 515
you have planted your feet on the whole human race.

ATOSSA:

Ah woe [*oi 'go talaina*] for the devastated army!
O night's clear vision of my dreams,
all too clear was your revelation of disaster.
But you judged it all too lightly. Still, 520
since your words have suggested this,

I want first to make prayer to the gods.
 Then I will come bringing gifts, a sacrifice
 from my home, to Earth and to the dead.
 It is, I know, about what has already happened, 525
 but in the future something better may come about.
 And you must bring together your trusted counsels
 over the things that have been done and cannot be undone.
 And my son, if he arrives here before I return,
 comfort him and escort him home 530
 so no more misery may be added to his woes.

Exit Atossa back to the palace.

First Stasimon (532–97)

CHORUS:

O Zeus our sovereign, you have wiped out
 the army of the Persians, once proud,
 their numbers legion, 535
 and the city of Sousa and Agbatana
 you have hidden in dusky sadness.
 Countless women with gentle hands rending
 their veils,
 soaking their gowns, now drenched in tears,
 sharing the grief. 540
 Tenderly grieving Persian wives,
 yearning to see their newly wedded husbands,
 leave the finespun linens of their marriage beds,
 the delight of their delicate youth,
 and mourn in grief that knows no end. 545
 And I take up the doom of those that are gone
 with genuine sadness deep in my heart.

Strophe a

For now all the land of Asia, emptied
 of her people, is grieving.
 Xerxes led them out, *popoi* 550
 Xerxes lost their lives, *totoi*
 Xerxes managed it without concern
 in his sea-going ships.
 Why was Darius so
 blameless to the citizens, 555
 in those days, master of the bow,
 beloved leader to the people of Sousa?

Antistrophe a

Foot soldiers and sailors too,
 linen-winged and dark-eyed,
 the ships carried them onward, *popoi*, 560

the ships destroyed them, *totoi*
the ships with deadly ramming,
and the hands of Ionian men.
Barely did the king himself
escape, so we have heard, 565
along the wintry paths
that run through Thrace.

Strophe b

And the first to die, *feu*
had to be left behind, *ee*,
by the Kychreian shores, *oa* 570
are crushed— groan, now, and feel the bite,
cry out deeply
for the heaven-sent woes, *oa*.
Raise the cry full of sorrow,
unhappy sound. 575

Antistrophe b

Carded like wool on the tearing sea, *feu*
they are mangled by the voiceless, *ee*,
children of the undefiled deeps, *oa*.
Homes mourn bereft of their men
and parents now childless 580
mourn the woes sent by the god, *oa*
grown old,
they learn their grief in full.

Strophe c

Now through the Asian land the people are
no longer under Persian domain 585
no longer pay tribute
at their master's constraint,
nor fall prostrate on the ground
or stand in awe of the royal power
for its might is gone. 590

Antistrophe c

No longer the tongue of mortals
is under guard. For the people are free
to speak openly,
since the yoke of power is broken.
But bloody in its soil 595
the sea-washed island of Ajax
holds what once was the Persians'.

Second Episode (598–622)

Enter Atossa as a suppliant on foot, carrying offerings (with attendants)

ATOSSA:

Friends, anyone who has suffered misfortunes
knows that when a surge of evil washes over mankind,
every new worry is likely to unsettle them, 600
but when fortune flows smoothly along, they'll trust
that same fortune will always blow good luck.
Now there is nothing that does not seize me with terror:
hostility from the gods appears before my eyes,
and in my ears roars a noise far from a paean of triumph: 605
these losses fill me with a panic that shakes me to my soul.
That is why, leaving behind my chariot and earlier
luxury, I directed my course once more from the palace:
bringing to my son's father propitiatory
offerings,²⁴ which are meant to soothe the dead: 610
white milk good to drink from an unyoked cow,
and bright honey, distillation of the flower-busy bee,
along with a fresh offering from a virgin spring,
unmixed drink from our mother in the wild,
the ancient vine, this refreshment 615
and the fragrant fruit of the yellow olive
flourishing all its life without losing its leaves,
woven flowers, children of all-producing earth.
Come, friends, along with these libations to the dead
intone the sacred songs and call forth 620
the spirit of Darius, while I pour out
these offerings to the earth, honors to the gods below.

Second Stasimon (623–80)²⁵

CHORUS:

Queen mother, revered by the Persians,
while you despatch the offerings to the chambers beneath the earth
we will beseech with sacred songs 625

²⁴609–20: Atossa's offerings are almost a paean to human and natural cooperation in the stuff of life: pure white milk, golden honey, fresh water, unadulterated wine, olives ripening in their oil, and flowers, the earth's offspring, but they must have been woven into garlands by children in the city. This is the kind of life-giving sustenance (not blood as in the *Odyssey*) along with music that soothes the dead to return in good spirits. And besides Darius has deep respect for his wife.

²⁵623–80: The second stasimon is an invocation to Darius to rise up from the netherworld. Taplin calls it rather "an act-dividing song". The whole movement from the second entrance of Atossa to her exit (at line 851) which encompasses the Ghost scene might also be considered a single episode.

the conductors of the dead
to be kindly to us from beneath the earth.
You pure spirits of the netherworld
and Earth and Hermes king of the dead,
escort from below a soul to the light. 630
For if he knows any other cure for our evils,
he alone of mortals could tell us how to bring them to an end.

Strophe a

Does our blessed king,
equal of the gods, hear my
obscure barbarous sounds,²⁶ 635
sad-sounding cries, long drawn out,
cacophonous, chaotic.
Or must we shout out our wretched cries?
Does he hear me from below?

Antistrophe a

But Earth and you other 640
rulers of those below,
assent to his proud spirit
coming from his dwelling,
god of Persians, born of Sousa,
send to the world above such a man as 645
the Persian land has never before hidden in death's shadow.

Strophe b

The man was loved, his mound is cherished,
ways dear to us are buried here with him.
Aidoneus, may you conduct
him up from below, Aidoneus,²⁷ 650
give us our divine ruler Darian. *Ee.*

Antistrophe b

For never did he bring about the deaths of men
in mad destructive wars.
Divine counselor to the Persians
he was called, divine counselor 655
is what he was, since he commanded his army well. *Ee.*

²⁶634–7: in referring to “obscure barbarous cries”, “the chorus members refer to some sort of cries they have not been uttering. Because these are not evident in the text, it is probable that they were sound effects, now lost, accompanying the whole invocation scene. . . .” (William Scott, *Musical Design in Aeschylean Theater*, University Press of New England, 1984:153).

²⁷650–1: *Aidoneus*, a variant of Hades. *Darian* a variant of Darius, perhaps reflecting the Persian *Darayavaus*.

Strophe c

Ballen, our king Ballen²⁸ of old,
come, come to us,
rise to the pinnacle of the mound,
lifting the saffron-dyed slippers of your feet, 660
let the crest of the royal *tiara*
be seen by all.
Come, father Darian, who did no harm.

Strophe c

That you may hear now
sad strains of sorrow, 665
Lord of our Lord, appear.
Some Stygian darkness hovers above,
for all our youth
are now destroyed utterly. 670
Come, father Darian, who did no harm.

Epode

Alas, alas [*ai ai, ai ai*]
much mourned in death by those who loved you,
why, oh powerful lord, 675
have these things happened
through errors compounded of errors?
All our ships with their three banks of oars have perished,
ships: they are no longer ships, no ships are left us at all. 680

[*Third Episode*]

Ghost of Darius rises from the tomb

DARIUS:

O Trusted among the Trusted, peers of my youth,
Persian Elders, what trouble shakes our city?
The groaning ground is trampled down and furrowed.
Seeing my wife beside the tomb, affected as I am,
I have received her libation with gratitude. 685
But you, standing near the tomb, singing your threnody
and with high laments that summon the dead are
calling me piteously. The ascent is not an easy one.
They have their reasons and it's universally known
the gods below are better at catching than letting go. 690
Still, I hold some power among them, and have risen;
but you must hurry so I don't lose credit for the time away.
What heavy fresh calamity has fallen on the Persians?

²⁸ 657: *Ballen* from a Phrygian word for "king" perhaps from the Semitic god, Baal.

CHORUS:

I am in awe to look upon you.
I am in awe to speak face to face before you 695
because of my ancient dread of you.

DARIUS:

Well, since I have come from below, drawn by your laments,
do not drag out your story, but speak briefly and tell me.
Finish the tale, putting aside your ancient awe of me.

CHORUS:

I am afraid to gratify your request. 700
I am afraid to speak to you face to face,
afraid to tell hard news to one we once revered.

DARIUS:

Well, then, since age-old fear stifles your wits,
let the respected partner of my bed, my noble wife,
stop her tears and lamentations: speak to me and 705
clear this up. Human sufferings happen to us all,
many troubles come from the sea, many from the land,
whenever one's span of life stretches out too long.

ATOSSA:

By happy fate you surpassed all mortals in wealth,
and were held in envy as long as you saw the sun's rays. 710
You spent a life well-lived, like a god to the Persians,
and now that you are dead I envy you, because you do not know
the depth of our ills. I will tell them succinctly, Darius:
the affairs of Persia are in utter ruin. There. It is said.

DARIUS:

How? A sudden visitation of plague or rebellion in the city? 715

ATOSSA:

Not that. All our forces perished within sight of Athens.

DARIUS:

Which of my sons was it who led the army there, tell me.

ATOSSA:

Xerxes, the hot-headed one. He emptied the whole continent of men.

DARIUS:

By land or by sea did the wretch make this foolish attempt?

ATOSSA:

Both. There was a twofold front with two armed forces. 720

DARIUS:

But how did so large a land army make its way across?

ATOSSA:

He yoked the strait of Helle with mechanisms to achieve a crossing.

DARIUS:
 Did he really accomplish that? To close the mighty Bosphorus?

ATOSSA:
 That he did. A divine power joined him in his intention.

DARIUS:
 Alas [*pheu*], some mighty force came over him to ruin his wits. 725

ATOSSA:
 Yes, so that everyone can see how great an evil he achieved.

DARIUS:
 What happened to them that you lament them so heavily?

ATOSSA:
 The naval force met disaster and destroyed the ground army.

DARIUS:
 Has the whole host perished altogether by the spear?

ATOSSA:
 So far that the whole city of Sousa mourns its loss of men. 730

DARIUS:
O popoi, for our careful protection and defense of the army.

ATOSSA:
 The citizens of Bactria are all lost and gone, barely an old man left.

DARIUS:
 O wretched man! He has destroyed the youth of our allies.

ATOSSA:
 They say that Xerxes, alone and deserted, with only a few men —

DARIUS:
 Perished how and where? Or is there a chance he survived? 735

ATOSSA:
 Arrived to his great joy at the bridge, the yoke of the two lands.

DARIUS:
 And in safety reached this continent? Is this certain?

ATOSSA:
 Yes. A clear report established it. There is no dispute.

DARIUS:
 Ah [*pheu*], swift came the completion of the oracles²⁹ and
 upon my own son Zeus has hurled down their fulfillment. But I 740
 was confident that in the fulness of time the gods would act.
 But when someone is eager himself, the gods join in.
 And now a source of troubles has sprung up for all we hold dear.

²⁹739: This is the first mention of oracles in *Persians*, but they can always come up. Oracles are a constant in Herodotus, some true, some false. In literature they make it look as if things are going according to a grand plan that, once set in motion, can be postponed but not avoided. Darius knows what is to come, but not when. And he knows more: the slaughter at Plataea that has not happened yet (816–19). Xerxes' action (his *hubris*?) has brought about the swift fulfillment of the gods' will. *Hubris* is first used in line 808 and again, with more detail about how it works at 820.

My son in ignorance brought this about through youthful bravado,
 who expected to hold the sacred water of Hellespont 745
 like a slave with fetters, the Bosphorus, strait of the gods,
 and he tried to engineer the passage and casting around it
 hammered chains, he made a grand highway for his grand army.
 A mere mortal he thought madly that he would overpower
 all the gods, even resistless Poseidon. How is this not 750
 a sickness of the mind that possessed my son? I fear that
 the labor of my wealth will become plunder for other men.

ATOSSA:

These things impetuous Xerxes learned from associating
 with the wrong people. They kept telling him how you amassed
 great riches for your children at the point of the spear, but that he 755
 from lack of courage played the warrior inside but did not increase
 his father's wealth. Hearing this over and over from petty men,
 he planned this armed expedition against all of Hellas.

DARIUS:

That is why this enormous work has been carried out,
 past forgetting, such as never before 760
 fell upon the city of Sousa to leave it empty
 from the time when lord Zeus bestowed this honor
 that one man be ruler of all Asia,
 rich in flocks, holding the scepter of government.
 A Mede was the first leader of the army³⁰ 765
 and another, his son, completed his work.
 For his mind guided the rudder of his temper.
 And third from him was Cyrus, a blessed man;
 in his reign he brought peace to all his allies.
 He gained sway over the people of Lydia and Phrygia 770
 and all of Ionia he brought to submission by force.
 He was well-intentioned and the gods did not despise him.
 Fourth the son of Cyrus guided the army.
 And fifth Mardos ruled, a shame to his fatherland,
 and to the ancient throne; but with deceit 775
 noble Artaphrenes killed him in his home
 with men who were his friends and claimed this duty.
 [Sixth was Maraphis and seventh Artaphrenes.]³¹
 Then I attained the lot I desired. I led many
 military campaigns with many a host, 780

³⁰765 ll: it is a common feature in Greek tragedy to review the whole *chronos* (long time) of an action, a person, or even, as here, an empire, at the *kairos* (crisis or seeming end time). The long line of warrior kings who were successful justifies Darius' surprise at the devastating news.

³¹778: This line's authenticity is in doubt.

but I did not bring such disaster upon our state.
But my son Xerxes, being young, thinks like a child
and does not keep in mind my instructions.
You can be sure of this, my peers in age,
all of us, who ever held this power 785
cannot be shown to have caused such ruin.

CHORUS:

What then, king Darius? What is the purpose
of your story? How can we bring about what is best
for the people of Persia from this disaster?

DARIUS:

If you will not make incursion into the Hellenes' land 790
not even if the Medes' forces are greater.
For the land itself is their ally.

CHORUS:

What do you mean? How is the land their ally?

DARIUS:

By starving to death an excess population.

CHORUS:

But what if we raise a well-disciplined chosen force? 795

DARIUS:

Not even the troops remaining in Greek
territory will meet with a safe return journey.

CHORUS:

What have you said? Will the army of barbarians
not cross the strait of Helle back from Europe?

DARIUS:

Only a few of the many. If one may trust the oracles 800
of the gods, seeing all that has happened now.

For it is not that some have been fulfilled and others not.
And if they are right, he is leaving behind a chosen body
of the army, relying on empty hollow hopes.

They remain there where the plain is watered by Asopus' 805
streams, a welcome enrichment to the Boeotians' land.

What is left for them there is to suffer the utmost ills
as atonement for *hubris* and godless thoughts:
for in going to the land of Hellas they did not restrain from 810
despoiling the gods' images nor burning their temples.

The altars are in ruins and the statues of the gods
have been torn from their bases and thrown into utter chaos.
They have done evil and for that they suffer no less
and there is more evil to come: not yet has the fountain 815
of woes been drained, but still it gushes over.

So great will be the bloody mass of slaughtered men

on the fields of Plataea under the Dorian spear:
 heaps of corpses will give voiceless reminders
 to the eyes of the third-sown generation of mortals,
 that being mortal one must not aspire too high, 820
 for *hubris* blossoms and produces a crop of ruin
 from which it reaps a harvest full of tears.
 Seeing such punishment for these things,
 remember Athens, remember Hellas, and let no one
 looking in scorn at the present fortune, 825
 lusting for others' wealth, squander his own riches.
 Zeus, you know, is set over us as restrainer
 of thoughts too prideful, a tough corrector.
 With this in mind, take my son, who needs to tame his spirit,
 and admonish him with well-considered advice 830
 to stop offending the gods with his boastful bravado.
 But, you, revered mother of Xerxes, dearly loved,
 go into the palace and gather clothing that is
 suitable for him, and come to meet your son.
 For out of grief at the disaster, the tattered rags 835
 of his beautifully woven garments are torn to shreds.
 And soothe him with kind-hearted words;
 for I know you are the only one he will bear to listen to.
 Now I will depart and return to the gloom beneath the earth,
 and you, elders, farewell, though the times are evil, 840
 give joy to your spirits day by day
 since among the dead wealth does us no good.³²

Exit ghost of Darius, back into his tomb.

CHORUS:

I felt a pang when I heard of the multitude of troubles
 present and yet to come for the barbarians.

ATOSSA:

O god! How much grief has come upon me. 845
 Most of all this disaster bites:
 when I heard of the beggar's rags
 about my son's body, that now cover him.
 I will go now and bring the finest robes from the palace
 and try to meet my son on his way. 850
 For I will not forsake my dearest in his distress.

Exit Atossa, back to the palace.

³²842: "Death is long and without music,"(757: 29) ends Darius' part in Ellen McLaughlin's adaptation of *Persians* (Playscripts, 2011). The song the old dead king hears and the song he is in help restore him briefly to his loved ones. Death humanizes a person.

Third [Second] Stasimon (852–907)

CHORUS:

Strophe a

O *popoi*, we have led a long and good life
under civil authority
while the old
all-sufficient king 855
who did no harm, invincible
Darius, like the gods, ruled our land.

Antistrophe a

First we deployed armies of high esteem
and civil laws in the state
governed all things 860
and homecoming from wars
brought back to thriving homes
men trouble-free and unharmed.

Strophe b

How many cities he captured!
Never crossing the ford of the Halys river³³ 865
nor ever stirring from his hearth,
such as the cities on the Achelous
that are neighbors of the Strymonian sea,
dwellings of the Thracians. 870

Antistrophe b

And outside the Aegean, those cities
on the mainland with towered walls around them
obeyed him as king.
And those scattered on both sides of the wide 875
crossing of Helle and the recesses of Propontis
and the mouth of Pontus.

Strophe c

The islands near the Ionian promontory
washed all around by the sea 880
lying near our land
such as Lesbos and Samos
planted with olives, Chios
and Paros, Naxos, Mykonos,

³³865-6: the more famous story about the Halys is the oracle given to the Lydian King Croesus: “If you cross the River Halys, you will destroy a great Empire,” leaving it to Croesus to understand, too late, that it meant his own empire. But here, Darius is able to expand his empire through his military might without leaving his capital.

and Andros, near neighbor
to Tenos. 885

Antistrophe c

And those by the sea
between the two shores he ruled:
Lemnos and the settlement of Icarus, 890

Rhodes and Knidos: Paphos
and Soloi and Salamis
whose mother city is 895
the cause of our present grief.³⁴

Epode

And the wealthy and populous cities of the Hellenes
in the land allotted to the Ionians
he controlled through his wisdom. 900

He had the tireless strength
of armed men
and allies from all the diverse peoples.
But now without a doubt
subdued mightily by wars 905
we in turn bear these god-sent disasters
from battering on the sea.

Exodos (908–1077)

*Xerxes enters, alone, in tatters*³⁵

XERXES:

Alas, [*io*].
Oh misery, meeting
this hateful destiny I never guessed at. 910
How savagely fate has stomped on
the Persian people. What will become of me, poor wretch?
The strength of my limbs is broken

³⁴894–6: According to legend Salamis in Cyprus was founded by Ajax' half-brother Teucer when he was driven from his homeland by his father Telamon for not avenging Ajax' suicide.

³⁵908: Xerxes' entrance alone would be more dramatic than an entrance with a few tattered comrades, as if he were still the leader of those few remnants. He is unannounced: the chorus says "here comes the Queen," for example, and "look, a Persian courier," but not a word to say "here's Xerxes." He just walks on like a soldier or beggar, like the unknown Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. He is practically anonymous: anyone could utter "wretch that I am," "what am I to do?" "I wish I were dead." The chorus addresses him as "king" at 918, but see line 24 where they speak of the Persian commanders as "kings, subjects of the great king." At 923 they speak of him in the third person; their few lines balance the long ode on Darius' greatness.

when I see this elderly generation of citizens.
O Zeus, if only the fate of death had
covered me among the men who are lost. 915

CHORUS:

Oh woe [*ototoi*], king, for the brave army
and the great honor of Persian law
and for the glory of our men 920
whom now fortune has cut down.

The earth mourns the native youth
who died for Xerxes, the king who crammed
Hades with dead Persians. Gone to death
are many warriors, the flower of the land, 925
master archers, a dense

myriad of men has perished.
Alas, alas [*ai ai, ai ai*], for our trusty defense.
And the land of Asia, O king of our country,
is staggeringly, yes, staggeringly, 930
bent to its knee.

Strophe a

XERXES:

Here am I, alas [*oioi*], subject of lament,
pitiable, I was born a disaster
to my people and my fatherland.

CHORUS:

To welcome you home 935
we shall send forth an ill-sounding cry,
the voice of cacophonous keening
of a Maiandynian³⁶ mourner,
wails full of tears, this we shall let loose in the land. 940

Antistrophe a

XERXES:

Let loose a voice long drawn out
all-plaintive, harsh-sounding. For Fortune
is now turned against me.

CHORUS:

We will send forth the all-plaintive voice
respecting your sufferings 945
and sea-beaten shipwrecks,
mourners of the city's lost youth
we will cry, cry aloud

³⁶938: Maiandynians were a people of Bithynia known for their over-the-top lamentations. For a reading of the play, one might want to substitute a word like wild, wanton, primitive, desolate, or uncontrolled or some combination, like "wild, wanton."

an elegy full of tears.

Strophe b

XERXES:

An Ionian has destroyed us, 950
Ionian Ares, fenced around by ships,
giving valor to the other side
mowing down the night-time surface of the sea
and the ill-boding shore.

CHORUS:

Woe, woe [*oioioi*], cry aloud and search out all that is lost 955
where is the rest of the throng of your comrades?
Where are those that stood beside you in arms,
like Pharandakes,
Sousas, Pelagon, and Datamas,
and Agdabates, Psammis, and Sousiskanes 960
who set out from Agbatana?

Antistrophe b

XERXES:

I left them all behind dead,
some fallen from a Tyrian ship
on the beaches
of Salamis, dashed 965
on the hard rocky shore.

CHORUS:

Oh woe [*oioioi*], cry aloud. Where is your Pharnuchus
and Ariomardus the brave,
and where is prince Seualkes
or Lilaeus of noble birth, 970
Memphis, Tharybis, and Masistras,
Artembares and Hystaechmas?
This is what I need to ask you.

Strophe c

XERXES:

Woe, woe, woe is me [*io io moi*].
Upon seeing primeval, 975
hateful Athens, all in one stroke,
ah, ah [*ee ee*], hapless men gasped out their lives in the ground.

CHORUS:

Did you leave the finest of the Persians
your all-trusty Eye,
one who counts in tens upon tens of thousands, 980
Batanochus' son Alpistus,
and the son of Sesames, Parthus, the son
of Megabates, and mighty Oebares
you left them, really left them there?

Woe, woe [*o o*], for the tragic loss of life, 985
to noble Persians. You tell of evil beyond all evil.

Antistrophe c

XERXES:

Woe, woe [*io, io*], indeed
You stir in me strong longing
for my valiant comrades
reminding me of hateful evils never to be forgotten. 990
My heart cries, it cries within me for the lost souls.

CHORUS:

Yes, and there are others we long for:
Xanthes, commander of thousands
of Mardian men, and warlike Anchaes,
and Diaexis and Arsakes 995
captains of the horse,
Kegdadatas and Lythimnas,
and Tolmus insatiable of war.
I am astonished, truly astonished
that they are not following behind 1000
your caravan.

Strophe d

XERXES:

Yes, they are gone, the commanders of the army.

CHORUS:

They are gone, alas [*oi*], without a name.

XERXES:

Alas. Woe, woe [*ie ie, io io*]. CHORUS:
Woe, woe [*io io*], divine powers, 1005
you have inflicted unexpected devastation
for all to see, like the eyes of doom.³⁷

Antistrophe d

XERXES:

We are stricken for life by such a fortune.

CHORUS:

We are stricken. That much is clear.

XERXES:

By woe, by strange new woe. 1010

CHORUS:

With bad luck coming upon us
from Ionian seamen

³⁷1007: A. F. Garvie, *Aeschylus, Persae*, Oxford, 2009: ad 1002–7: 359, translates “how terrible is Disaster’s gaze,” or “Delusion’s [gaze],” in his citation of M. J. Smethurst, *The Artistry of Aeschylus and Zeami* (Princeton, 1989: 145).

the Persian nation faced calamity in war.

Strophe e

XERXES:

Yes, too true, I have lost so great an army. Oh woe. 1015

CHORUS:

Yes, that's so. Persia's power is greatly undone.

XERXES:

Do you see this remnant of my robes?

CHORUS:

Yes, I see it.

XERXES:

And this holder of arrows— 1020

CHORUS:

What do you say this is that is saved?

XERXES:

A treasure chest for missiles?

CHORUS:

Small remains from so much.

XERXES:

We are left with few defenders.

CHORUS:

The people of Ionia are not shy of the spear. 1025

Antistrophe e

XERXES:

They are heroic fighters. I have seen
this disaster beyond my worst nightmares.

CHORUS:

Do you mean the rout of our host shielded by ships?

XERXES:

Yes. I rent my robes over those casualties. 1030

CHORUS:

Alas, alas [*papai papai*].

XERXES:

And more than alas [*papai*], much, much more.

CHORUS:

Doubly so and even three times.

XERXES:

Grief for us, but joy for our enemies.

CHORUS:

And our might has been crushed. 1035

XERXES:

I am naked, stripped of my escort.

CHORUS:

Through the disasters of friends at sea.

Strophe f

XERXES:

Shed copious tears for the loss and go to your homes.

CHORUS:

Alas, alas, woe, woe [*ai ai ai ai, dua dua*].

XERXES:

Cry out now in response to me.

1040

CHORUS:

A sad gift of sad cries in response to your sad cries.

XERXES:

Cry out the lament, tuning it to mine.

CHORUS:

Ototototoi, woe upon woe!

This disaster is grievous.

And I grieve for it.

1045

Antistrophe f

XERXES:

Faster, faster, groan for my sake.

CHORUS:

I weep in mourning.

XERXES:

Cry now in response to me.

CHORUS:

It is our care, my king.

XERXES:

Raise your voices in lamentation.

1050

CHORUS:

Ototototoi, woe upon woe!

They are mingled, alas [*oi*]

with black, mournful blows.

Strophe g

XERXES:

Beat your breast and raise the Mysian cry.

CHORUS:

The pain, the pain.

1055

XERXES:

And for my sake tear the white hair from your beard.

CHORUS:

In deep mourning, with hands tightly clenched.

XERXES:

Cry a shrill cry.

CHORUS:

This, too, I will do.

Antistrophe g

XERXES:

And tear the folds of your robe with your hands. 1060

CHORUS:

The pain, the pain.

XERXES:

And pluck out your hair in mourning for the army.

CHORUS:

In deep mourning, with hands tightly clenched.

XERXES:

Wet your eyes with tears

CHORUS:

I am drenched in tears. 1065

Epode

XERXES:

Cry now in response to me.

CHORUS:

Alas, alas [*oioi, oioi*]

XERXES:

Crying woe, go to your homes

CHORUS:

Woe, woe [*io io*], the Persian land is hard to walk on. 1070

XERXES:

Woe [*ioa*] is heard across the city.

CHORUS:

Woe, woe [*ioa*] indeed.

XERXES:

Wail as you tread gently.

CHORUS:

Woe, woe [*io io*], the Persian land is hard to walk on.

XERXES:

Alas, alas [*ee ee*] for those who died
in the three-benched ships, woe, woe [*ee ee*]. 1075

CHORUS:

I will accompany you with sorrowful cries of woe.