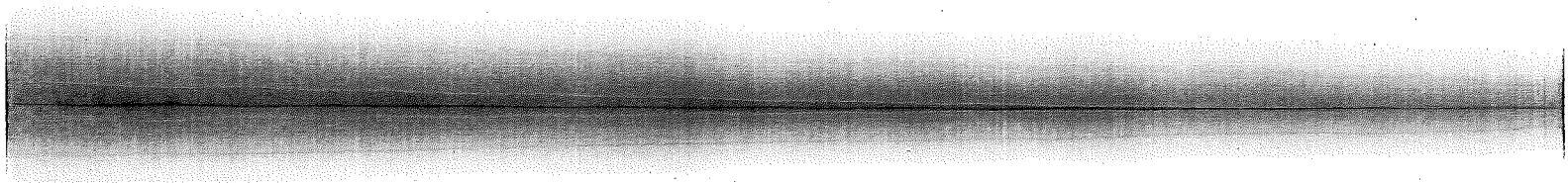


Persians



Persians

CHARACTERS

CHORUS of elderly and noble counsellors at the Persian court

QUEEN, widow of King Darius

MESSENGER from King Xerxes' forces defeated in Greece

DARIUS (a ghost)

XERXES, son and successor of Darius

There are mute parts for the Queen's women attendants.

Scene: near the royal council-chamber in the Persian capital of Sousa, by which the tomb of King Darius stands. The CHORUS enters the orkhēstra from one side, stepping and chanting to a regular rhythm.

CHORUS. We here, from the Persians who are gone
to the land of Greece, are called 'the faithful',
and guardians of the palace with its great wealth in gold;
in accord with our seniority, lord Xerxes himself,
the king, the son of Darius,
chose us to watch over the land.

As to the king's return
and his army's, with its many men,
my heart is already flayed raw within me, all too prophetic of
disaster;

for the whole might of Asia's people
is gone, noising anxiety for the young man;
and no messenger or any horseman

comes to the Persians' capital.
 Those men who left Sousa and Agbatana
 and Cissia's ancient bulwark behind them, and went,
 some on horses, some on ships, and those on foot
 making war's dense column as they marched—
 men such as Amistres and Artaphrenes
 and Megabates and Astaspes,
 the Persians' captains, kings subject to the great king,
 hastened as overseers of the army's host:
 they were invincible archers, and mounted,
 fearsome to see and terrible in battle
 through their spirit's brave confidence;
 Artembares too, the horse-knight, and Masistres,
 and noble Imaeus, invincible archer, and Pharandaces
 and the cavalry-marshal Sosthanes.
 Others were sent from the Nile, the great nourisher of many
 lives,
 Sousiscanes, Pegastagon born in Egypt,
 and great Arsames ruler of sacred Memphis;
 and Ariomardus governor of ancient Thebes,
 with marsh-dwellers as the ships' skilled oarsmen
 and in masses beyond number.
 Soft-living Lydians follow
 in a multitude, those who hold subject all the mainland peoples,
 whom Mitragathes
 and brave Arcteus, kings and governors,
 and Sardis with all its gold
 sent off riding in many chariots,
 squadroned by four or six horses,
 a fearsome sight to behold;
 eager in their threats to throw slavery's yoke upon Greece
 are those living near sacred Imolus,
 Mardon, Tharybis, anvils against the spear, and javelin-men
 from Mysia; and Babylon with all its gold
 sends a multitude all mixed in a long, sweeping column,
 with marine soldiers and men confident of their archery.
 The sword-bearing peoples of all Asia follow with them
 at the king's dread summons.

Such is the flower of men that has gone from Persia's land,
 for whom the whole region of Asia
 which nurtured them sighs in fierce longing,
 while parents and wives counting the days
 tremble at the time's lengthening.

*The CHORUS cease pacing through the orkhêstra and begin a solemn,
 sung dance.*

By now it has passed, the army of the king, city-sackers,
 over the strait to the neighbour, facing land,
 crossing the sea of Helle the daughter
 of Athamas, on a raft-bridge roped with flax,
 a roadway made with many nails,
 a yoke thrown round the ocean's neck.
 Furious for war, the ruler of Asia's many peoples
 drives his prodigious flock against every land
 from two directions, trusting the command
 by land and sea to stalwart, hard lieutenants—
 descendant of a golden line,
 a man born the equal of god!
 There is a black gleam in his eyes,
 the stare of a murderous snake.
 With many troops and many sailors
 he speeds his Syrian chariot on;
 against men renowned with the spear he brings
 the war of invincible bows.
 No one has the tested prowess
 to withstand the great tide of men
 and hold it back with sure defences—
 one cannot fight an ocean-swell;
 there is no resisting the Persian host,
 a people stalwart in their hearts.
 For Fate from god prevailed of old,
 imposing on the Persians
 the conduct of wars which splinter towers,

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Str. 2

85

Ant. 2

90

92

Str. 3

104

chariot-fighting with its tumult,
and overturning of cities.
They learned to cross the sea's domain,
the broad paths of the ocean
whitened by fierce gales; they put their trust
in thin-spun cables and devices
to carry their people across.

Ant. 3

110

Cunningly planned deceit by a god, however—
which mortal man will escape it?

Epode

94

Who is there who commands an easy leap over it, swift with his
feet?

113

Though friendly at first in fawning forward
Ruin decoys him into her nets;
over their top no mortal can flee in escape.

100

Therefore my mind wears mourning black,
lacerated by its fear—

Str. 4

115

'O-ah! Cry it out

for the Persian host!—

fear that the city, Sousa's great capital,
may hear this lament when emptied of men;

fear that the Cissian townsfolk too
will sing in thudding response

Ant. 4

121

'O-ah! Cry it out!;

and that women there,

thronging in numbers with this cry as lament,
may fall to tearing their fine-linen dress.

125

All the army, horsemen riding
and infantry marching,
has left and gone like bees in a swarm
with the commander of the host;
it has made its crossing over the headland
where the two lands are linked by a common sea.

Str. 5

130

Marriage-beds are filled with weeping
and longing for husbands;
Persian wives are softly lamenting,

Ant. 5

135

each in love's yearning for her man:
she sent off a husband furious for war,
and is now left alone in her marriage-bond.

The CHORUS now chant.

140

Come then, Persians!

Let us seat ourselves in this ancient chamber
and offer sound, deeply considered thought:
the need has come.

How in fact does King Xerxes fare,
and our race named after Danaë's son?

145

Has victory come from drawing the bow,
or have the strong spear-shaft and its point the mastery?

The QUEEN begins to enter from the side in a carriage; she is attended.

150

But here, approaching with a light in her eyes like that of gods,
is the king's mother, our queen!

I prostrate myself before her;

and all must address her with words of greeting.

*The CHORUS make obeisance as the QUEEN dismounts, then rise to
speak excitedly, setting a tone for the whole episode.*

155

O our Queen, supreme among deep-girdled Persian women,
revered mother of Xerxes, wife of Darius, greetings! You were the
bedmate of a god among the Persians, and mother too of a god—
unless our army's ancient fortune has now changed.

QUEEN. The very reason why I have come here and left the gold-
decked palace, and the bedchamber which I and Darius shared!—

160

and why anxiety tears my heart. I have a story to tell you in no way
my own; and I am not without fear, my friends, that great Wealth
may kick the ground into dust and overturn the prosperity which
Darius raised high, and with some god's aid. There is this twofold,
inexpressible concern in my mind: that massed riches should not
be held in respectful honour where there are no men, nor light
shine to its full strength upon those without riches. Wealth itself is

165

blameless, but there can be fear for its precious eye; for I consider the presence of a house's master to be its saving light.

This being so, please help counsel me, you Persians, faithful elders, about what I have now to say; for it is on you that all our safe resolutions depend.

CHORUS. Be sure of this, queen of our land: you need mention nothing twice, either word or action, in which I may give a willing lead; you are inviting us to help counsel you when you have our goodwill in these matters.

QUEEN. Many night-time dreams have been my company ever since my son equipped a host and has been gone, in his wish to sack the Ionians' land; but I never yet saw any such dream so clear as that of last night. I will tell it you.

Two women in fine clothing, one attired in Persian dress and the other in Greek, seemed to come into my view, both of them far superior in stature to women now and faultless in beauty, and sisters of the same descent. Of the two, one lived in Greece as her allotted fatherland, the other in the eastern world. These two, I thought I saw, were quarrelling with each other; and my son had learned of it and was trying to restrain and soothe them, putting the two of them to his chariot and placing the yoke-straps under their necks. The first stood tall and proud in the traces and kept her mouth submissive to the reins; the other struggled and tore the chariot's harness apart with her hands, wrenching all away violently, getting free of the bridle, and smashing the yoke at its middle; and my son was thrown. His father Darius stands by in pity for him; and when Xerxes sees him, he tears the robes on his body.

And that, I tell you, is what I saw in the night. After I had risen and put my hands in fine spring-water, I stood at an altar, sacrifice in hand, in my wish to pour an offering to the powers that turn away harm, to whom these rites belong. I saw an eagle fleeing to Phoebus' altar-hearth—and I stood speechless in fear, my friends. Later I saw a hawk flying to attack it in a rush of wings, tearing at its head with its claws; but the eagle only cowered and gave over its body.

Those are the frightening things I saw, and for you to hear; 210 for be certain of this: were my son to succeed well, he would be

admired, but were he to have had success—he is not answerable to the people, and if he is saved he is no less the ruler of this land.

CHORUS. We have no wish, our queen and mother, to alarm you by what we say or to hearten you too much either; but when you approach the gods in supplication, if you did see anything bad, ask them to avert it, and for good to result for you and your children, and for the city and all those dear to you. Next, you should have libations poured to Earth and to the dead; ask their favour, that your husband Darius, whom you say you saw in the night, may send a happy outcome for you and your son, up from below the earth into the light, and that the opposite may be kept in the earth and extinguished in darkness. My heart is my prophet here, and I encourage you out of kindness; our judgement of these things is that they will turn out well for you in every way.

QUEEN. Goodwill indeed, and from the first to judge my dream, with your firm interpretation for my son and house! May the outcome indeed be good! We shall arrange all this, as you urge, for the gods and our dear ones below the earth, when we reach the palace. Yet I have this I wish to learn from you, my friends: where do men say that Athens lies upon the earth?

CHORUS. Far away, near where the Sun-lord goes down when he fades.

QUEEN. And yet my son desired to capture this city?

CHORUS. Yes; for then all Greece would become subject to the King.

QUEEN. Have the Athenians so much the fullest numbers in its host, then?

CHORUS. Yes, and such a host as did the Medes great harm in fact. QUEEN. And what else besides do they have? Sufficient wealth for their houses?

CHORUS. They have a source of silver, a lode which is their land's treasure.

QUEEN. Are bows and sharp arrows prominent in their hands?

CHORUS. Not at all: they use spears to stand and fight, and carry shields in heavy armour.

QUEEN. And who is set over their people as shepherd and master?

CHORUS. They call themselves no man's slaves or subjects.

QUEEN. So how would they withstand enemies who come against them?

CHORUS. Well enough to destroy Darius' great and splendid army!
 QUEEN. What you say is truly frightening, an anxiety for the parents of those who go against them.

245

CHORUS. But I think you will soon know the whole truth from a report: (*pointing off-stage to one side*) this man's running marks him clearly as Persian, and he brings some definite outcome to hear about, good or bad.

A MESSENGER enters.

MESSENGER. O you cities of all Asia, O you land of Persia and great harbour of wealth, one blow has destroyed your great prosperity, 250 and the flower of the Persians is fallen and gone! Ah me, it is bad to be first with bad news! Still, I must unfold the whole disaster, men of Persia: the East's entire host is lost. 255

The CHORUS break into song.

CHORUS. Harsh news, harsh,
 both sudden and cruel:

Str. 1

weep, alas, you Persians, now you hear this woe.

MESSENGER (*who continues in speech*). Our whole cause in Greece is quite destroyed;—and I did not myself expect to live and see the 260 day of my return.

CHORUS. Our years seem
 somehow too long-lived;
 we are old, to hear this unexpected blow. 265

Ant. 1

MESSENGER. I was there, men of Persia, I did not hear others' accounts! I'll tell you the kinds of disaster that were brought on us.

CHORUS. (*lamenting loudly*) Useless,
 all that great and varied weaponry
 that went from Asia to attack
 Zeus' land, the land of Hellas. 270

Str. 2

MESSENGER. The corpses of our men destroyed in an evil fate fill the shores of Salamis and all the nearby places.

CHORUS. (*lamenting loudly*) Our friends' 275
 sea-buffed bodies all awash
 in death, you say, carried adrift
 in their doubled-over mantles!

MESSENGER. Yes, for our archery was not enough, and the whole host was destroyed, overcome by ramming ships.

CHORUS. Lament, raise a cry of disaster 281
 in deepest grief for Persian friends,
 since the gods have dealt us total ruin
 all round. Our army destroyed!

Str. 3

MESSENGER. Oh, the name of Salamis, most hateful to hear! Alas,
 how I groan in remembering Athens! 285

CHORUS. Yes, hateful she is, to her foemen! 285
 We may remember her indeed,
 since she has robbed many Persian mothers
 of sons, or made them widows.

Ant. 3

QUEEN. I have long been wretchedly silent, dismayed by our evil 290 losses; for this disaster is extreme, its pain beyond telling or asking. Mankind must nevertheless bear calamities when the gods give them. (*turning to the Messenger*) Despite your grief at our losses, 295 stay and unfold the whole of our pain; tell it us. Who has not been killed, and which of the people's leaders shall we be mourning? Any who was appointed to command and left his position unmanned when he was killed?

MESSENGER. Xerxes himself is alive, and sees the light of day.

QUEEN. Your words mean a great light of joy for my house, and 300 brilliant day after storm-black night!

MESSENGER. Artembares, however, the marshal of numberless cavalry, is being dashed along the hard shores of Silenaiæ; and Dadaces, commander of a thousand men, was struck by a spear and plunged from his ship in helpless fall; Tenagon, too, so brave, 305 a true-born Bactrian, drifts along Ajax's sea-beaten island. Lilaëus, Arsames, and Argestes—all three of these were losing fight as they

buffeted against the rock-hard land by the islet which breeds doves; 310
 so too Pharnuchus, neighbour to Egyptian Nile's streams, and
 Arcteus, Adeues, and Pheressues, all three thrown from one ship. 314
 Matallus of Chrysa, commander of ten thousand, drenched his 316
 great, full, black beard fiery red when killed, a bath of crimson
 changing his face's colour; and Magus the Arab, like Artabes the
 Bactrian, died there as an immigrant to a cruel land. Amistris
 too from Amphistra, wielding a spear which dealt much harm, 320
 and noble Ariomardus who has brought mourning to Sardis, and
 Seisames the Mysian; and Tharybis the admiral of five times fifty
 ships, a Lyrnaean by birth, a handsome man, lies miserably dead: 325
 he had no very happy fortune. Syennesis too, first in courage, ruler
 of the Cilicians, who singly dealt most harm to his enemies: he died
 gloriously.

That much I recount about the commanders; but of our many 330
 evil losses I report but few.

QUEEN. Oh, sorrow! What I hear is the very height of evil dis-
 aster, both shame and shrill wailing for the Persians. Go back
 again, however, and tell me this: just how large was the number
 of Greek ships, to justify their engaging and attacking the Persian 335
 fleet?

MESSENGER. In mass you must know that the Persian ships would
 have been superior; for the fact is, the Greeks' entire number came
 to three hundred, and a tenth of these were select and separate. 340
 Xerxes, on the other hand, massed a thousand (I know this as
 a fact) under his command, while the faster ships came to two
 hundred and seven; that was the count. We can't seem to you to
 have been inferior in the battle, can we? Yet some divine power
 destroyed our host, weighting the scale to unbalance fortune: the 345
 gods have kept her city safe for Pallas its goddess.

QUEEN. Then is the Athenians' city still not ransacked?

MESSENGER. Yes, for while its men live, its wall is secure.

QUEEN. Now tell what began the ships' engagement: who started 350
 the battle—was it the Greeks, or my son exulting in his mass of
 ships?

MESSENGER. The beginning of the whole disaster, my queen, was
 an avenging spirit or evil power which appeared from somewhere;

for a Greek man came from the Athenians' fleet and told your son 355
 Xerxes this: 'if black night's darkness once arrives, the Greeks will
 not stay, but leap on to their rowing-benches and scatter in unseen
 flight to save their lives.'

Immediately he heard this, with no comprehension of the Greek 360
 man's trickery or the gods' jealous anger, he made this proclama-
 tion to all his ship-commanders: as soon as the sun stopped burn-
 ing the earth with its rays, and darkness occupied heaven's domain, 365
 they were to position the mass of ships in three columns to guard
 the outward passages and straits of the noisy sea, and other ships
 in a circle round Ajax's island, since if the Greeks should escape an
 evil death by secretly finding a run for their ships, it was decreed 370
 for all commanders to lose their heads. His orders were that many,
 and very much in a confident spirit, for he did not know what the
 gods destined. With no indiscipline but obedient minds his men
 began preparing their meal; crews looped their oars to the sturdy 375
 rowing-pins.

When the sun's light died and night came on, every master of an
 oar went to his ship, and every man-at-arms. Oar-bank encouraged
 oar-bank on board the warships; and they sailed as each comman- 380
 der had been positioned. All night long the masters of the ships
 kept all their crews sailing to and fro.

Now the night was passing, and the Greek fleet made no attempt 385
 at all to sail out secretly. When, however, day with its white steeds
 filled the whole earth with light brilliant to the eye, first a cry rang
 out from the Greeks in joyful affirmation like a song, and at once 390
 its echo resounded piercingly from the island's cliff; and fear was
 in all the Persians now their judgement had proved wrong, for
 the Greeks were then singing a proud victory-hymn, not as if for
 flight but in eager haste for battle, their courage high. The trumpet
 set all on their side ablaze with its call; at once they pulled hard 395
 together with a froth of oars, striking the salty deep in time with
 the word; swiftly they all came on, clear to the view. First their
 right wing led the way in good order and discipline, and next the
 whole fleet came out for the attack. At the same moment a great 400
 shout was to be heard, 'O sons of the Greeks, go on! Free your
 fatherland, and free your children, your wives, and the shrines
 of your paternal gods, and the tombs of your ancestors! Now the

struggle is for all! And then!—from our side a clamour in the Persian tongue rose up in answer, and it was the moment for no more delay. 405

At once ship struck bronze ram against ship; the onslaught began with a Greek ship which broke off a Phoenician ship's whole ornate stern, and all drove their vessels everywhere against opponents. Now at first the Persian fleet's flowing advance held on; but when a mass of ships had become packed in a narrow space, and no help for one another was possible, they were hit by their own sides' bronze-beaked rams; they began to shatter all the fleet's oars, while the Greek ships circled round knowingly and struck them. Hulls of ships were overturned, and the sea was no longer visible as it filled with wreckage and slaughtered men. The shores and promontories teemed with corpses. 410

Every ship of the Persian fleet began rowing in disorderly flight, while the Greeks struck our men and broke their backs, like tunnies or a catch of fish, with splintered oars and fragments of wreckage. Groans and shrieking together took over the wide sea, till night's black eye made an end. The full count of our losses, even if I had ten days to tell them off in order, I could not completely give you; for you must understand that never in one day has so great a count of men been killed. 415

QUEEN. (*lamenting loudly*) A great sea of disaster has indeed broken upon the Persians and their whole people.

MESSENGER. Then know this too: the disaster was not yet at its middle point; such catastrophe and loss came upon them as to outweigh it in the scale twice over. 420

QUEEN. But what misfortune could be still crueller than this? Tell me, what was this further catastrophe you say came upon the host, inclining the scale for our heavier loss? 425

MESSENGER. All the Persians in their natural prime, those finest in courage and eminent in nobility, and ever first in loyalty to the king himself—all have been ignobly killed in a most inglorious fate.

QUEEN. (*again lamenting*) Oh, how I suffer at this evil disaster! How though did these men meet their death, do you say, and were killed? 430

MESSENGER. There is an island lying off this place on Salamis, tiny, a bad mooring for ships, on its seaward shore a haunt of Pan who

loves the dance. Xerxes sent those men here so that, whenever the enemy had ships wrecked and tried to reach safety on the island, they should kill this body of Greeks when defenceless but save their own side from the sea-ways—in this, Xerxes' study of the future was badly wrong. For when the god gave glory in the ships' battle to the Greeks, on the self-same day they clad their bodies in fine bronze armour, leapt from their ships and ringed the whole island, to put our men at a loss which way to turn, for they were much battered by hand-thrown rocks; arrows shot from bows hit and killed them; and at the last the Greeks rushed them in a single surge and struck them down, butchering the poor wretches' limbs, until they had destroyed the lives of all. 435

Xerxes groaned aloud on seeing the depth of the catastrophe; for he had a clear view of the whole fleet, seated on a lofty hill near the open sea. He tore his robes, keening and wailing; after passing word at once to his foot-army he lets it go in disorderly flight. There: such is the disaster, one truly to mourn in addition to the one before. 440

QUEEN. Hateful deity, you cheated the Persians of their wits, it is now clear! A bitter outcome my son found to his vengeance upon famous Athens! The Persians whom Marathon killed before were not enough: it was for them my son thought to exact penalty, but he drew on himself so many painful losses. (*to the Messenger*) But tell me: the ships which escaped destruction—where did you leave them? Do you know a clear account to give me? 445

MESSENGER. The captains of the ships which were left took hastily to flight in no good order, as the breeze carried them. The rest of the army was destroyed in the Boeotians' land, some in distress from thirst near fine spring-water, others (*text missing*); in exhaustion we crossed into the Phocians' land, the territory of Doris and the Melian gulf, where Spercheius waters the plain with kindly stream. From there the soil of the Achaeans' land, and the Thesalians' cities, received us now very short of food, and there in fact very many died of thirst and hunger; for both of these were present. We reached the land of Magnesia and the Macedonians' country, at the crossing over Axios; then Bolbe with its reedy marshes, and Mount Pangaeus, and the Edonian land. In the night here a god stirred winter into coming out of season, and froze holy Strymon's 450

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entire stream. People who before had held the gods of no account then began to entreat them in prayer, falling to revere Earth and Heaven. When the army ceased from its many calls upon the gods, 500 it started crossing where ice had frozen hard. Then any of us who had set out before the sun-god's rays were shed around, got to safety; for the sun's brilliant orb gleamed and burned, and its fire warmed and melted the centre of the crossing; men fell on top of 505 one another; and the one who broke off life's breath the quickest was fortunate indeed.

All the rest who achieved safety, barely got across Thrace, and through great effort; they have escaped and are coming—but only some few!—to their homeland and hearths. So the 510 land of Persia is to mourn, in longing for the country's dearest youth.

This is the truth; and in the telling I leave out many of the evil blows which god has launched upon the Persians.

The MESSENGER leaves by one side.

CHORUS. O you deity, so harsh in afflicting us! Too heavy your feet 515 in leaping on the whole Persian race!

QUEEN. Oh, I suffer for our army's destruction! O you vision in my dreams at night, so clear, how very surely you revealed disaster to me! (*to the CHORUS*) You judged it too lightly, however. Still, 520 since your advice was firm on this point, I am willing to pray first to the gods; then, as gifts to Earth and to the dead, I shall come from my house to pour an offering—over what is past and done, I know it will be, but in case something better may happen for the 525 future.

Over all these events, you must add faithful counsel to your faithfulness before; and as to my son, if he comes here before me, console him and escort him to the palace, so that he adds no further 530 woe to the woes we have.

The QUEEN leaves for the palace in her carriage. The CHORUS chant.

CHORUS O Zeus the king! Now (*a word missing*) you have destroyed the Persians' host

in its great pride and numbers of men; 535 the city of Sousa and Agbatana you have hidden in mourning's gloom. Many are the women tearing their veils apart with delicate hands; wet tears soak the folds on their breast as they share their pain. 540 Softly weeping the Persian wives miss husbands newly wed; marriage-beds soft with coverings, the joy of sensual youth, they have put away; they mourn in quite insatiable grief. 545 I too take up the fate of those who are gone; it is truly one for much mourning.

The CHORUS change to dancing and singing.

Str. 1

So now Asia's entire land 550 mourns aloud, emptied of men. Xerxes took them (*a cry of bitter grief*), Xerxes destroyed them (*a cry of despair*), Xerxes directed all things unwisely for the vessels at sea.

Why then was Darius so unharmed when he held the command, 555 his people's archer-lord, Sousa's dear leader?

Ant. 2

Our foot-soldiers, our sea-crews, 560 oars and dark hulls all alike—vessels took them (*a cry of bitter grief*), vessels destroyed them (*a cry of despair*), vessels were rammed in total destruction, at Ionian hands.

Our lord and king himself barely made his escape, so we hear, 565 across the Thracian plains, their ways all wintry.

Str. 2

Now these men were overtaken (*a cry of sorrow*) by their fate of dying first (*a cry of extreme distress*)

around the Cychrean headlands (*a wailing cry*)
[in shattered vessels]. Begin your grief
and let the hurt bite: cry deep-voiced sorrow
high to heaven (*a wailing cry*);
prolong your harsh-sounding
tones, loud with wretchedness.

Rock-torn dreadfully in the sea (*a cry of sorrow*)
they are gnawed by the voiceless (*a cry of extreme distress*)
children of the undefiled sea. (*a wailing cry*)
A house mourns when bereft of its man,
and childless fathers, wailing their sorrow
sent by heaven (*a wailing cry*),
become old on hearing
their now absolute loss.

But the people throughout Asia's land
a while since are no longer
ruled by Persia, no longer pay tribute
at a master's compulsion,
nor will they prostrate themselves
under rule; the power of our king
has been quite destroyed.

And no longer are the tongues of men
under guard; for the people
have been released, so that their speech is free,
with the release of might's yoke.
Bloodshed staining its ploughland,
the wave-dashed island of Ajax
holds what Persia was.

The QUEEN returns from the palace on foot, carrying items of sacrifice; she may be attended.

QUEEN. My friends, anyone with real experience of trouble knows how, when a surge of it comes upon them, they are apt to fear everything; but when fortune's tide is good, they trust that the same breeze will blow favourably for ever. And so it is with me:

everything now is full of fear; the gods' hostility is evident, and there is a cry shouting in my ears which means no healing. Such shock from our trouble terrifies my mind.

Therefore I made my way back here from the palace without the carriage and finery I had before, bringing libations to win the favour of my son's father, the things which appease the dead: from a sacred cow, milk white and sweet, and from the bee at work amid flowers its distillation of pure-bright honey, with water trickled from a virgin spring; and here an unpolluted drink from a country-mother, delight from an ancient vine; and from the pale olive, its leaves ever-flourishing with life, the fragrant yield is here to hand, and woven flowers, children of Earth the mother of all.

Come my friends, speak and sing good words over these libations to the dead, and call up the god Darius; while I shall offer these honours to the gods below, for the earth to drink.

As the CHORUS pray for Darius to appear, they begin circling the altar at the centre of the orkhêstra, chanting.

CHORUS. Royal Lady! Persian Majesty!

Send your libations down to earth's mansions,
while we will entreat the escorts of the dead with hymns
to be kindly below the earth.

You holy underworld powers!
Earth, and Hermes, and King of those below,
send up Darius' spirit from below into the light!
For if he knows any further cure for our troubles,
he alone of mortals might tell their end.

The CHORUS now begin a solemn sung dance.

Does our dear departed king, equal to god, hear me,
my Persian words clear,
uttered in changing, doleful lament?
My absolute grief and sorrow
I shall cry aloud
on all sides. Is he hearing me from below?

I entreat you, Earth and other rulers of the dead:
approve the coming

of his proud spirit up from your house,
the Persians' god born at Sousa;
escort him upward,
one whose like Persian soil never yet covered.

645

Dear friend indeed was the man, dear is his tomb;
for dear was the nature it hides.

Str. 2

Aidoneus, sender-up to earth, Aidoneus, send us up
our godlike lord, Darian—(*a cry of grief*)

650

for neither would he ever lose men to death
in war's mad and killing ruin,

Ant. 2

but the Persians called his mind godlike, and of godlike mind he
was,

655

since he led his armies well. (*a cry of grief*)

My shah, my shah of old, come to us, draw near;
mount to your tomb's high summit,

Str. 3

stepping up with your foot's saffron-dyed slipper;
display your royal tiara's crest.

660

Come, our father in safety, Darian (*a cry*)

... so you may hear of fresh and sudden sorrows.
Master! O master, appear!

Ant. 3

For a Stygian murk wings over us now,
and our whole youth has been destroyed.

666

Come, our father in safety, Darian! (*a cry*)

670

Sorrow, sorrow! ☞

Epeode

Your death so much lamented by your friends,
why, [why,] my master, my master,
these double, grievous failures for your land?
All its three-banked ships are lost in ruin,
are ships no more, ships no more.

675

680

The GHOST OF DARIUS comes into view.

DARIUS. Faithful among the faithful! Companions of my youth!
Persian elders, what labour lies upon this land? Its soil groans, it
has been stricken, and it is furrowed. I see my wife near my tomb,
and I am afraid, but I received her libations with favour; and you 685

stand close by the tomb lamenting, wailing high to summon up
my spirit and calling on me piteously. Yet there is no easy way from
below the earth, above all since the gods there are better at taking
than releasing. Still, I used my authority among them, and I have 690
come. Hurry then, so that I may not be blamed for delay.
What is the Persians' unexpected and heavy disaster?

CHORUS. (*chanting*) I am in awe to see you,
I am in awe to speak to your face,
from my ancient dread of you.

Str. 695

DARIUS. But since I have come from below at your lament's per-
suasion, make no speech at length, but be concise; tell everything
to its end, and leave aside your reverence for me.

CHORUS. I am in fear to please you,
I am in fear to say to your face
what is hard for friends to tell.

Ant. 700

DARIUS. But since your mind's ancient fear stands in your way,
(*turning to the Queen*) you, aged partner of my bed, noble wife,
leave off these tears and lamentations, and speak to me quite
clearly. Human suffering befalls mankind, of course; much woe 705
comes to mortal men from the sea, and much from dry land, if
a life already long is extended further.

QUEEN. O you who surpassed all mankind in prosperity through a
fortunate destiny! How you were envied while you saw the rays of
the sun and lived out like a god a life of years happy for the Persians! 710
So now too I envy you your death before you saw the depth of our
troubles.

You shall hear the whole story, Darius, in a brief space: total ruin
for Persian fortunes, nearly total.

DARIUS. In what way? Did some plague come to strike the city, or
feuding?

715

QUEEN. Not that at all. Our whole host has been destroyed near
Athens.

DARIUS. Which of my sons was leading the host there? Tell me.
QUEEN. Xerxes, furious for war; he emptied the continent's whole
expanse of its men.

DARIUS. Was it on land or by sea that he made this foolish attempt, poor wretch?

QUEEN. Both; two forces made a double front. 720

DARIUS. But how did so great a host on foot actually succeed in crossing?

QUEEN. He devised a yoke for Helle's strait, to have a way across.

DARIUS. And he achieved that—he closed the great Bosphorus?

QUEEN. Indeed so; but one of the gods must have joined in his resolve.

DARIUS. It was some great god who came, alas, to make his mind unsound. 725

QUEEN. Yes, since the disastrous outcome of his actions is to be seen.

DARIUS. And what actually did the men do, that you lament them so?

QUEEN. Defeat for the forces at sea destroyed the forces on land.

DARIUS. Have all the people perished so completely in war?

QUEEN. Enough for Sousa's whole city to groan for its emptiness of men.... 730

DARIUS. Oh, grieve, I grieve for our host, and its fine power of support!

QUEEN. ...and the Bactrians too are lost, their people all destroyed; none survives.

DARIUS. Wretched man, to have lost such allies in their prime!

QUEEN. Lonely and desolate, they say, with few companions, Xerxes...

DARIUS. What is the end of it for him, and where? Is he safe at all? 735

QUEEN. ... was glad to reach the bridge yoking the two lands.

DARIUS. And has he come safely to our continent? Is this true?

QUEEN. Yes, in this at least the report is firm and clear; there is no contradiction in it.

DARIUS. (*sighing*) Swiftly indeed came the oracles' accomplishment, and Zeus launched the prophecies' fulfilment upon my son. 740

I was confident myself, I suppose, that the gods would fulfil them after a lengthy time; but when a man shows haste himself, the god joins in. Here and now a fountainhead of woe, it seems, has been discovered for all those dear to me. My son achieved this in the ignorance of rash youth, in his hope to contain the flow of sacred

Hellespont with bonds like a slave, Bosphorus the divine stream. He 745
tried to alter the crossing, and by throwing hammered fetters over it, he achieved a great pathway for a great army. A mortal man, he thought to master all the gods—it was folly!—and Poseidon with them. A sickness of the mind possessed my son—what else? I fear, 750
my huge and hard-won wealth may soon be plunder for the first men who come.

QUEEN. The company of evil men has been Xerxes' teacher here, in his fury for war; they told him that you got great wealth for your children with your spear, but that he was unmanly and did his spear-fighting indoors, and made no increase in his father's 755
prosperity. When he heard such reproaches frequently from evil men he planned this campaign's path against Greece.

DARIUS. Therefore the action he carried out has been extreme, to be remembered always, such as never yet befell this city of Sousa 760
and emptied it of men, from the time when lord Zeus bestowed this honour, for one man to rule all of Asia rich in flocks, and to hold the sceptre of government.

Medus was the first leader of the people, and next to discharge 765
this task was his son, for good sense steered his heart. Third after Medus was Cyrus, a man blessed by god, whose rule brought peace to all his kin; he acquired the Lydian and the Phrygian peoples, 770
and ravaged all Ionia by force; the god was not his enemy, for he had good sense. Cyrus' son was fourth to govern the people. Fifth to rule was Mardus, a disgrace to his fatherland and ancient throne; 775
but he was killed at home in a plot by the noble Artaphrenes, with the help of friendly men for whom it was an act of duty. Sixth was Maraphis; seventh, Artaphrenes; and myself—but the lots fell out for me exactly as I wanted.

I too made many campaigns with a great host; but I did not bring 780
so large a disaster on the city. Xerxes my son is young and has a young man's rash thinking; he does not remember my instructions. For be very sure of this, my old companions: of all of us who 785
have held this power, none could be shown to have done so much harm.

CHORUS. So then, lord Darius, what consequence turns upon your words? How in the light of this should our Persian people still act for the best?

DARIUS. ... provided you do not campaign into the Greeks' space, 790
not even if the Median army may be greater. Their land itself is
their ally.

CHORUS. How do you mean? In what way, their ally?

DARIUS. Because it kills those who are too numerous, through
famine.

CHORUS. But it will be a well-equipped and chosen force we shall
send out, you may be sure. 795

DARIUS. But the army which has now remained in parts of Greece
will meet with no safe return, either.

CHORUS. How do you mean? Is not the whole Persian army to
cross the strait of Helle from Europe?

DARIUS. A few only, out of the many, if one is to have any trust 800
in divine prophecies when looking at what has now been done;
for they are coming true—not some, but all of them. And even
though they are, Xerxes has been persuaded by empty hopes to
leave behind a chosen number of his army; they remain where
Asopus waters the plain with its streams, precious enrichment of 805
the Boeotians' land. The worst of disasters are waiting there for
them to suffer, atonement for their aggressive and godless thinking,
men who went to the land of Greece and had no scruple in plun-
dering gods' statues or burning temples; altars have disappeared, 810
and holy shrines been uprooted from their foundations in scattered
ruin. For their evil actions, therefore, they suffer no less and are
destined for more; no solid floor yet lies beneath their woes, they
well up still. So great will be the clotting blood from slaughter by 815
Dorian spears in the Plataeans' land; heaps of corpses will declare
voicelessly to the eyes of men, even to the third generation, that
one who is mortal must not set his thoughts too high. Arrogance 820
in full bloom bears a crop of ruinous folly from which it reaps
a harvest all of tears. (*to the Chorus*) Such is its reward here; see
it, and remember Athens and Greece, and let no one despise his
present fortune and pour away his great prosperity from desiring 825
that of others. I tell you, Zeus, stands over thoughts which are
too boastful as their punisher; he is a severe auditor. Accordingly,
if you desire Xerxes to be moderate, correct him through rea-
soned advice to stop offending the gods through rash and excessive 830
boasting.

And now you, Xerxes' aged and loving mother, go into the house.
Fetch suitable fine clothing and go to meet your son; tatters of his 835
embroidered garments hang in torn shreds round his body, wholly
from grief at his disaster. Yet soothe him kindly with your words,
for he will bear to listen, I know, to you alone.

And I myself will go away, down into earth's darkness; but I wish
you elders well, despite the disaster: give your spirits pleasure day 840
by day, since wealth is of no use to the dead.

The GHOST OF DARIUS disappears.

CHORUS. It was truly painful for me to hear of the many evil blows
the Persians have already, and those still destined.

QUEEN. O you deity, how much pain comes over me at our trou- 845
bles! Yet this disaster most bites home now I have heard of the
indignity which surrounds my son, from the garments on his body.
I will go and fetch fine clothing from the house, and try to meet
my son at his approach; for I will not betray my dearest amid 850
troubles.

The QUEEN leaves for the palace. The CHORUS sing and dance.

CHORUS. Oh our pain now! In truth we had enjoyed Str. 1
a fine and good life in well-ordered cities,
when our king of old,
all-sufficient, safe in his cause, safe from defeat, 855
godlike Darius, ruled in the land.

In the first place, the armies we displayed Ant. 1
were famous, strong as towers in their formations
for every venture; 860
return from war brought them without toil, without harm,
[back home to] houses prospering well.

How many cities he took without crossing Str. 2
the river Halys, 866
or leaving his hearth!—
like those neighbouring Strymon and its seaway,
in the Thracians' Acheloid settlements, 870

and, away from the sea, those in dry places
with walls driven round
which obeyed this lord,
and those proud in their sites round Helle's broad strait,
with the inward Propontis, and Pontus' mouth,
and the wave-dashed islands near the sea-cape,
which sit closely by our continent,
such as Lesbos and Samos rich in olives,
Chios and Paros, Naxos, Mykonos,
and Tenos adjoining Andros its neighbour;
and he ruled those islands near the mid-coast,
Lemnos and the seat of Icarus,
Rhodes and Cnidus, and Cyprus with its cities—
Paphos and Soli, also Salamis,
whose mother-city now causes this sorrow;
and the populous rich cities of the Greeks
throughout the Ionian territory
he ruled in his wisdom.
Untiring strength was to hand
in his armed men, and his allies mingling all nations.
Yet now we in our turn endure
in our wars this reverse willed indisputably by heaven,
our great defeat through the blows at sea.

XERXES *enters from one side, alone. His robes are tattered; he carries only an arrow-quiver. He intones his grief, which the CHORUS briefly echo before changing to a full lyric lament in antiphony with him.*

XERXES. Oh, it is my misery to have met
this hateful destiny, beyond comprehension!
How ruthlessly the god has come down upon the Persian race!
What am I to do, poor wretch?
The strength in my limbs is undone
when I look at my aged countrymen here.
If only death as my fate had cloaked me too, Zeus,
together with the men who are gone!

CHORUS. Alas for our brave army,
the high glory of Persian rule, and the splendid men
whom the god has now culled.

The land bewails its native youth
slain for Xerxes, who crammed Hades with Persians;
for many heroes are gone to Hades,
the flower of the land, archers supreme,
a densely massed company of men; they have perished.
Oh, grieve, grieve for their fine strength!
King of our country! Asia's land
has been bent terribly, terribly, to its knees.

XERXES. Here I am, alas!, to be wept for;
poor wretch, I became an evil thing,
I now know, for house and fatherland.

CHORUS. As greeting on your return, I shall utter,
utter the cry of ill omen, the voice
which makes disaster its concern,
a Mariandynian's, a dirge-singer's voice,
with many tears.

XERXES. Pour out your lament, all of sorrow,
grief's voice; for my fortune in this thing
has turned itself round and against me.

CHORUS. I shall pour out grief indeed, quite certainly,
paying tribute to our army's defeat
and the land's heavy blow at sea;
the house's. I shall wail a grief-singer's cry,
all heavy tears.

[XERXES.] The Ionians' warfare robbed us of lives,
the Ionians' armoured ships turned the battle their way,
culling the death-dark sea
and the unlucky shore.

CHORUS. Cry out our loud grief, and learn all we may!
Where are the others, your multitude of friends?
Where are your close defenders,
such as Phrandakes was,
Sousas, Pelagon, and Datamas,

also Psammis and Sousiscanes,
when they left Agbatana?

XERXES. I left them behind me dead on the shores
of Salamis, lost overboard from a Tyrian ship,
many of them striking
on the hard rocky shore.

CHORUS. [Cry out] our loud grief! Where, if you know it,
are Pharnuchus, and the brave Ariomardus?
Where is the lord Senalces,
or the high-born Lilaeus,
Memphis, Tharybis, and Masistras,
Hystaichmas too, and Artembares?
I put such questions again.

XERXES. Oh, they have my grief:
after seeing that hated, ancient Athens,
they all of them through one stroke, poor wretches, on the dry land
have gasped their lives away. I sob, I sob!

CHORUS. You mean, the choicest flower of the Persians—
your always-faithful watching eye,
who put numbers to men beyond count, beyond count—
(*a name missing*), favourite child
of Batanochus

son of Seisames Megabates' son?
Parthus too, and great Oibares—
you left them—left them? Oh, the poor men!
You tell of woe, total woe for our noble Persians.

XERXES. I yearn, I do yearn
for my fine companions; you stir that up,
when you speak of [lasting,] lasting, hateful, utter evil.
My heart deep within me cries out, cries out!

CHORUS. And there are others too whom we long for,
Xanthes who captained Mardian men
beyond all count; also Arian Anchares,
and Diaixis and Arsaces
the lords of horsemen;
also Dadacas, and Lythimnas too,

960
Ant. 2

965

970

975
Str. 3

980

985

Ant. 3

990

995

and Tolmus unsated in war.
I am amazement, all amazement,
they are not following behind your tented carriage.

XERXES. Yes, those who were leading our host are gone. Str. 4

CHORUS. Gone, alas, leaving no fame.

XERXES. I grieve and lament, I grieve and lament.

CHORUS. Alas, you powers! You brought disaster
we did not expect, and so very clearly:
such was the look we had from Ruin. 1005

XERXES. Struck down, alas, from our life long fortune... Ant. 4

CHORUS. Struck indeed; this is quite clear...

XERXES. ...in sudden torment, in sudden torment... 1010

CHORUS. ...after our ill success in meeting

the Ionian ships and their on-board fighters.

War has been hard on Persia's people.

XERXES. For sure! And my host was so great
it is cruel that I was struck down! Str. 5 1015

CHORUS. But what is not lost, you great victim in our ruin?

XERXES. You see this remnant of my clothing?

CHORUS. I see it, I see it.

XERXES. ...and this arrow-holder ... 1020

CHORUS. What is this you say has been saved?

XERXES. ...my treasure-store of weapons?

CHORUS. Few things, though, from so many!

XERXES. And I lack men to support me!

CHORUS. The Ionian folk do not flee battle! 1025

XERXES. They are too warlike! I have seen
a harsh blow I could not expect. Ant. 5

CHORUS. The rout of our fleet, you mean, our strongly armoured
ships?

XERXES. I tore my robes as the evil fell. 1030

CHORUS. Oh alas, oh alas!

XERXES. No, much more than Alas!

CHORUS. Yes, for us twofold and threefold ...

XERXES. ...grief—but delight for our foes.

- CHORUS. Yes, our strength was shorn away . . .
- XERXES. And I am stripped of attendants.
- CHORUS. . . in ruinous defeat of our friends at sea.
- XERXES. Weep, weep at the blow; but go to the palace.
- CHORUS. Alas, alas! The torment, the torment!
- XERXES. Cry out then in loud response to me.
- CHORUS. It is woe's gift of woe to woe.
- XERXES. Wail, and join your tones to mine!
- CHORUS. (*a wail of extreme grief*)
Heavy indeed, this disaster!
- Alas, I do grieve for this, very much.
- XERXES. Beat, beat at your breast and lament for my sake! Ant. 6
- CHORUS. My eyes are wet, I am tears and sorrow.
- XERXES. Cry out then in loud response to me.
- CHORUS. Master, my care for this is here!
- XERXES. Raise your voice high then, in tears.
- CHORUS. (*a wail of extreme grief*)
Sorrow's blackness will be mingled,
alas, in the beating of our lament.
- XERXES. Strike your breast and cry out the Mysian way. Str. 7
- CHORUS. Oh, our deep pain, our pain!
- XERXES. And ravage, I ask, the white hair of your beard.
- CHORUS. Ceaselessly, ceaselessly, wholly in sorrow!
- XERXES. And wail out high and loud.
- CHORUS. This too I shall do!
- XERXES. Tear the folds of your robe with fingers and hands. Ant. 7
- CHORUS. Oh, our deep pain, our pain! 1061
- XERXES. And pluck out your hair in pity for our host.
- CHORUS. Ceaselessly, ceaselessly, wholly in sorrow!
- XERXES. And wet your eyes with tears.
- CHORUS. Look, they are streaming! 1065
- XERXES. Cry out then in loud response to me. Epode
- CHORUS. Oh, I grieve, I grieve!
- XERXES. Wail aloud as you enter the palace.
- CHORUS. O-oh, o-oh! 1070
- XERXES. Cry 'O-o-h!' through the city.
- CHORUS. Cry 'O-o-h!' indeed; yes, yes!
- XERXES. Lament as you go with soft tread.
- CHORUS. O-oh! Persia's soil is sad to tread.
(*two lines missing*)
- XERXES. (*a new pitch of lament*) Oh! the pain, the loss—our three-
banked . . .
- CHORUS. Oh! the pain, the loss . . . ships and their dead! 1075
- XERXES. Escort me then into the palace.
- CHORUS. I shall indeed escort you, my voice loud in harsh grief.
- XERXES escorted by the CHORUS in procession leaves by one side.

Greek tragic drama is set in the world of myth, and the tragedians' success depended largely upon their individual representations of it and upon the fresh meaning they gave it for their contemporaries. Euripides was the most varied, both benign and harsh in his view of man's condition under god; Sophocles in some plays, such as *Women of Trachis* and *Oedipus the King*, was even bleaker than Aeschylus in *Seven* and the greater part of the *Oresteia*. It is very difficult to see much of the poets' individual personalities behind the plays; ancient biographical anecdote and interpretation were based mostly on the play texts themselves, and we risk the same danger from incautious inference. For Aeschylus, however, we can have a certain confidence in linking the poet in his particular time with one marked aspect of his plays: their patriotic and political dimension. First, one of the firmest traditions about him was his pride in having himself fought against the Persian invaders of Greece, certainly at Marathon in 490 and possibly also at Salamis in 480; an epigram composed for his tomb in Sicily commemorated him only for this, not for his tragedies.⁵ Second, there is *Persians* itself, the only tragedy with a basis in history not myth. The choice of this play subject, seven or eight years, but not immediately, after the historical event, is evidence enough of Aeschylus' public voice upon the greatest issue of his day (see Introd. 2.1). Similarly, in *Eumenides*, the last play of the *Oresteia*, he 'changed' the myth to 'invent' history, when he moved the trilogy's climax from Orestes' Argos to his own Athens, and had Orestes judged by a jury court of its citizens, established by Athens' patron-goddess; at the same time he maintained the supreme control of the family's fate by Zeus and the gods which he had set out forcibly at the trilogy's start. Here he was lending art's support to the contemporary liberalization—or 'democratization'—of Athenian justice.⁶

5

⁵ 'At Gela, rich in wheat, he died, and lies beneath this stone:

Aeschylus the Athenian, son of Euphorion.

His valour, tried and proved, the mead of Marathon can tell;

The long-haired Persian also, who knows it all too well!

The ancient *Life of Aeschylus* 11 = T 162 in *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* 4, p. 107, as translated by Sommerstein, AT 24. The ancient attribution to Aeschylus himself is questionable.

⁶ For the *Oresteia* and contemporary Athenian politics, see Collard (2002), pp. xv–xx, and the bibliography cited there; add Pelling (Bibl. §.5, 1997), 167–88.

Third, there is the character of Argos' government in *Suppliants*: its king Pelasgus resembles a constitutional monarch, much in the style of King Theseus, the mythical founder of Athenian democracy (see the EN on *Supp.* 963, and Introd. 2.3). The apparent 'anachronism' is more striking precisely because Argos is not Athens, and Pelasgus is not Theseus. Even though the historical Argos of the mid-fifth century had a form of communal rather than fully democratic government, Aeschylus may well have styled his Argos and Pelasgus this way to put a contemporary political slant upon the timeless moralities of saving refugees from violence—and to offer support to Argos' government (compare the allusion to the historical Athenian Argos alliance of about the same time in lines 289–92 and 754–74 of *Eumenides*). In *Seven* too there is a distinctive portrayal of the Theban king, and his conscientious duty to the safety of all his people amid his preoccupation with his own.

These three early plays differ much from one another in matter and manner; but they have individually many features of dramaturgy, theatre, thought, and language which foreshadow the mature mastery of the *Oresteia*. By then, Aeschylus had developed and combined them to achieve a consistent grandeur of expression and a profundity of meaning at which only *Seven* of these early plays really hints.

2. THE PLAYS IN THIS VOLUME

2.1. Persians

[For a summary of the action, see p. xi. In this Section 2.1 all references to the Bibliography are to §7.1 unless stated.]

The *Persians* of 472 BC is the only surviving 'historical' Greek tragedy, but we know of at least two others inspired by the Greek–Persian conflicts of 500–480; both were by Aeschylus' approximate contemporary Phrynichus.⁷ In his *Capture of Miletus* Phrynichus had

⁷ *Capture of Miletus* (or *Persians*: title uncertain), which dramatized the Persians' sack of this place in Ionian Greek Asia Minor in 494 and was probably produced in the late 490s; it so distressed the Athenians that they fined Phrynichus and forbade reperformance (Herodotus 6.21). Aeschylus alludes in *Persians* to the subjection of Ionia, ll. 880–900; the Greeks at Salamis collectively fight above all to keep their freedom, 402–5. Also, Phrynichus' *Phoenician Women*, which had an Eastern setting and dramatized King Xerxes' defeat in 480, is recorded as having been adapted by Aeschylus for *Persians* (see also EN on l. 1); it was produced in 476 and financed by

made a Greek defeat into a Greek tragic drama; Aeschylus 'mythologized' history in *Persians*. He commemorated a Greek victory as extraordinary as the Persian attack had been unprecedentedly dangerous, in the triumph of a smaller, disciplined, and skilled force over huge numbers; but he represented the defeat of Persia entirely through the fears and distraught reaction of Persian characters. At the same time he was recreating history in a way vivid to the Greeks' and especially the Athenians' own remembered experience, and suggestive to their present imagination. Furthermore, *Persians* is almost certainly the earliest surviving tragedy of all; and it differs importantly from Aeschylus' other complete plays, all five of which were part of connected trilogies.⁸

The major interpretative issues it raises are the mingling of the factual and the contemporary with the universal (in this respect not unlike Aeschylus' later *Eumenides*); for the historian proper, the play's value as evidence;⁹ and Aeschylus' antipathy (or sympathy) towards the Greeks' great enemy before and after the Persian defeat.

An important thing to note is the interval of seven years between the historical events and the play's production.¹⁰ While the drama is one of retrospect, hostilities between Greece and Persia continued after 480, and the Athenians had inspired, and now in 472 led, a Themistocles, the great Athenian commander against Persia in 480 (as had been the *Capture*).

⁸ For the plays which accompanied *Persians* in 472, see the ancient *hypothesis* on p. 130.

⁹ The play's historical accuracy can here be treated only in passing. There are summary reviews by Broadhead and Hall in their commentaries (Bibl. §3.2, 1960 and 1988), and detailed analysis of the battle of Salamis itself, especially through comparison with Herodotus and other ancient historians, most recently by Lazenby (1988) and Wallinga (2005): see Map 3 (p. xcii). The Persians named in the play are considered by Ebbott (2000), and the whole historical and contemporary background by Sommerstein, *AT* 410–13 and, most widely, Harrison (2000); cf. also S. Said in Gregory, *CGT* 220–2 and P. Debnar, *ibid.* 7–9. Aeschylus omits mention of the earlier battles of 480, Artemision (sea: Greek defeat) and Thermopylae (land: Greek defeat); and he times Xerxes' return to Persia before its final defeat at sea at Mycale (479), also unmentioned; but the land-defeat at Plataea (also 479) is 'forecast' by Darius (l. 817; see EN on 681–851). For Aeschylus' knowledge of past Persian kings, and comparison with that of Herodotus and with the historical king Darius' own inscriptional record of them, see EN on 765–79.

¹⁰ See esp. Pelling (1997), 9–13.

defensive alliance of Aegean cities.¹¹ Despite its great defeat, Persia remained a great danger, and still occupied much of Ionia. Recent scholars in particular find an ideological purpose within the play which accords with this political time and need: to confirm Greek, and especially Athenian, superiority over an arrogant, aggressive, and culturally inferior foe. There is debate whether a seeming emphasis upon the Athenians as Persia's ancient and dangerous enemy (231–45, cf. 348–9, 473–5, 716, 824, 976) and upon their tactics and skill at Salamis (285), is unfair to the united Greek effort. In the other direction, the Greeks' ruse before Salamis, to split the Persian fleet, is known to have originated with the Athenian Themistocles (Herodotus 8.75–6), but Aeschylus attributes it to an anonymous Greek from the Athenian fleet (355–62); and the gods give victory to the Greeks collectively (454–5—as Persia's opponents are consistently named throughout 338–452). Scholars write of ethnic 'stereotyping', which contrasts Greek moderation with 'Oriental' extravagance, and collective and disciplined organization with individual, instant and authority. The Persians are shown as preoccupied with wealth and its acquisition (4, 163–4, 250, 252, 709, 755, 826—but they speak defensively of it at 168, 842). They are uncontrolled in its enjoyment (543), so that when riches and lives are lost they collapse into excessive, unmanly grief, both their women (135, 541) and their men (1072, cf. EN on 943). The long, antiphonal lament which the Chorus of elders and Xerxes share (908–077; see EN) becomes ever more extreme in a form of grief which the Greeks accepted principally from their women alone (e.g. at *Seven* 874–1004).¹² And yet: the play is no less a retrospective tragedy, because everything is presented as the defeated Persians perceived it. The Greek victory shines brightly at first, and the Messenger observes Xerxes' failure to foresee deception or disaster (361, 372–3, 454). Aeschylus, however, from the start shows Persian fear of the human cost (93–137, the end of the Chorus' entry-song) and its anguished realization (249–330, etc.); he

¹¹ The Delian League (a modern name), dependent originally upon mutual support by sea, Athens' natural hegemony after Salamis soon became what was perceived as its 'empire', Thucydides 1.96, cf. 97.2, 118.2, etc.

¹² For such cultural polarities in the play, see esp. Hall (Bibl. §3.2, 1988), 5–6 and (1989), esp. 76–98; Goldhill (1988); Pelling (1997), 13–19; Harrison (2000); all with further literature.

qualifies disparagement of the Persians with sympathy, stirring pity that they suffer and grieve so immoderately. Critics are torn between resistance to this plain implication of the play text, and recognition that pity is intrinsic to tragedy as one of Aristotle's chief postulates for it (*Poetics* ch. 6).¹³

The victory of the heavily outnumbered Greeks (337–44) indeed shines, on a day of appropriately brilliant sunlight (386–7; see the end of this Section 2.1, at n. 22). They deceive the Persians into splitting their fleet, anticipate Persian plans to deny them safety on land, and deploy and move their ships with boldness and superior skill (355–464). The Persians expect victory from their mere numbers (341–4, cf. 89–92), but their mass prevents responsive manoeuvring (412–6); they obey an absolute king (369–71), initially with sound discipline (377–83), but quickly lose self-control in defeat (423)—as does Xerxes himself (468–70). Their consequent disorder lasts into the army's land-retreat (481), compounding its destruction in a land and climate hostile by nature to invaders (480–512). Xerxes' misguided campaign has been faulty throughout, and until Darius appears this appears to be the only explanation of the disaster. It has been pointed out that Xerxes' conduct illustrates Aristotle's doctrine of the fatal 'error' which precipitates tragedy (*hamartia*: the Greek word-root in fact occurs at 677, unfortunately in a badly corrupt text, immediately before Darius appears with his deeper explanation).

Extremes mark the Persians, not merely in their wealth and its enjoyment (above), their vast numbers (8–133, 337–44, etc.) and the immensity of their losses (251–5, 721, 728–32, 1014–15), but earlier in their aspirations for the widest possible conquest, both in their campaign against Greece (75, 102–7) and historically elsewhere (762–4). Xerxes' father Darius was hugely successful (852–902) and Aeschylus has the Persian mourners gloss over his defeats (652–6, 662, 722–5, 780–1, 855, etc.: see EN), even that by the Athenians at Marathon in 490 BC (474–5, cf. 236, 244). He may have wished to emphasize the supreme Athenian contribution to Salamis over the more distant and collective Greek victory (above); his clear intention is to make the son's disaster so far beyond Persian precedent (782–6), and so in contrast with the father's achievements, that Darius

responds by spelling out what has been implicit before the news of disaster comes. Xerxes had succumbed to reproach for cowardice and failure to increase his father's wealth, the Queen first tells Darius (753–8), but then became 'furious for war' (718, 754, cf. the Chorus earlier at 74) and overconfident in his numbers (352); he wished above all to punish Athens (473–4). Darius explains that the rashness of youth drove Xerxes to defy the gods (744); it was a 'disorder of the mind' (750–1; cf. EN on 722–5) which brought him to offend them by bridging their 'sacred' Hellespont and so 'enslaving' it (745–6: contrast the Chorus' earlier pride in this feat, 65–73). Another folly was the Persians' subsequent sacrilege in Greece (808–12, 831). Such extreme arrogance towards heaven has brought its inevitable punishment in ruin (821–3, 827; cf. *Intro.* 1 above, p. xviii), in the most shattering form for Persia's royalty, damage and loss to its great wealth (751, 826, cf. 163–4, 251–2). Persia's fortunes are inseparable throughout from those of its royalty. Anxiety for Xerxes individually begins the play (5–12, 144–9, 176–214); when the Queen is advised to seek Darius' help against her dream (215–25; see n. 14), her departure and return to hear his explanation are contrived (521–31, 598–626), so that the mother's concern for her son may be shared with the father (733–8). She does not, however, return in time to meet Xerxes, despite her intention (849–51, cf. 834 and the 'stage-direction' at 852), so that her son's misery in his isolation is total (1000–1, 1025; cf. 734). The contrast between the son's disaster and the father's unflinching success (above) has begun to dominate the play (548–57, 619–786, 852). Xerxes' almost first, broken words on return are an acknowledgement of the harm he has done to his country (932–3); in his grief, however, he is distressed as much by the misery he has dealt himself (908–10, 932, 943), signalled by the loss of retinue and by his now tattered garments (1019–37: see EN on 198–9). It is a selfishness which bears out his mother's intense concern for him from the start (168–9, 211–14, 299–300, 473–7, 529–31) and her shame for his impaired dignity— which Darius shares (832–8 before her 846–51).

Darius' explanation, the offence to heaven, appears to match the Persians' earlier and immediate attribution of the disaster to a 'divine power' which tilted things the Greeks' way (346, cf. 282–3, 294, 354, 373, 454–5, 472–3, 514, 515); the gods' support of the Greeks is perhaps implied in the naming of Pan as the deity inhabiting Salamis

¹³ See S. D. Goldhill's review of Harrison (2000) at *Classical Review*, 51 (2001), 10.

(449). From the start the Chorus have mixed their expectation of Xerxes' success with anxiety that a god too often deceives men's hopes (93–100, cf. 10). The Queen later speaks of a 'god' cooperating with Xerxes' wrong purpose (724–5, repeated by Darius at 742), and Xerxes names one too (911, 921, cf. the Chorus at 1005). The gods are also seen working through the Queen's dream that Xerxes may be thrown by a Greek chariot-horse (181–99) and through the following omen of an eagle attacked by a smaller hawk (205–10). Darius links the disaster with an old oracle predicting defeat for Persia (739–41, 800–2)—he means, the disaster was long foreseen, and perhaps brought about, by the gods.¹⁴ There is a gulf, moreover, between simple attribution by the Chorus, the Queen, and the Messenger to a malignant, hateful deity (354, 472, 515) and the reasoned combination of human fallibility and divine punishment which Darius offers as explanation (725, 742–51, 782–3, 808, 820–8). He identifies an older and deeper involvement by the gods which anticipates the manner of *Seven* and *Oresteia*.¹⁵

The play may seem largely static; and its even proportions help to express its measured emotional progression: fearful, disbelieving anticipation, culminating in the Queen's dream and anxious questions about Athens' power (1–245); confirmation of disaster (246–531); lamenting and searching for explanation and comfort

¹⁴ Dreams and oracles in Tragedy are usually omens of certain disaster; cf. esp. Clytemnestra in *LB* 32–41, 523–53, who tries to avert fulfilment of her dream, that she will be killed by her son Orestes in vengeance for his father Agamemnon, with offerings to her dead husband (44–8, 84–163, etc.), just as in *Persians* the Queen is invited to invoke the dead Darius' aid (215–25). With her bitter realization of her failure at *Pers.* 518–19, cf. Clytemnestra's at *LB* 928–9. Io's dream at *PB* 645–57 portends no disaster, although its inevitable fulfilment has that outcome. A vague dream of disputed interpretative importance is found at *Seven* 710 (see *EN* and n. 25 below).

Other intimations of the gods' will are given through oracles, consultation of seers, and divination (*Seven* 24, 230–1, 379, etc.; *Supp.* 450; *PB* 484–99). Darius does not state the motive for the Persian oracles, but at *Seven* 618 the seer Amphiarus has consulted his patron god Apollo when he misgives the attack upon Thebes. Laius sought, and then disobeyed, Apollo's guidance, *Seven* 747. Io's father had to consult many oracles after her dream—and this difficulty was itself ominous, *PB* 658–72.

¹⁵ Aeschylus has Darius uses the word arrogance (Greek *hybris*) of Xerxes' and the Persians' conduct, 808, 821, cf. 820, 827–8; see esp. Winnington-Ingram (1983), 8–13. The word's confinement to the Darius scene has been stressed by Garvie (1999), 30–4; but Conacher (1996), 6 n. 7 and 24–6 sees it as consistent with the general morality of Aeschylean drama, crystallized in *Ag.* 750–72. See *Introd.* 1 above, pp. xviii–xix.

(532–851); renewed, climactic lament (852–1077). The first three parts accumulate linked revelations: the Queen's dream (176–214); the Messenger's reports (349–514); Darius' explanation and prophecies (739–831); only grief can follow.¹⁶ The play is nevertheless strongly visual and theatrical.¹⁷ It calls for exotic costuming. All the individual characters make striking entrances and exits (the Queen twice); there is the Queen's initial entrance in a carriage, and then her sombre reappearance on foot and alone (*EN* on 607–8). The ritual summoning-up of Darius' ghost is vividly effective.¹⁸ The contrast between the luxury, the spectacle, and the ostentatious catalogues of Persian might, with which the play begins, and Xerxes' humiliation at its end, is complete; spectators and readers may, however, wonder whether his self-pity (above) impairs the pathos of collective tragedy.¹⁹

The play's language is aptly varied. It is sonorous and often exotic when describing the majesty and numbers of the Persian forces, especially in the Chorus' entry-song (1–139), in the roll-calls of their commanders both alive (21–53) and dead (302–28, 967–1001), and in the catalogue of Darius' conquests and tributaries (865–902). It also conveys extremes of distress and despair in the laments (548–83, 931–1077). All of those passages (except 302–28) are lyric, enhanced in the original by appropriate metre: solemn or elevated for much of the majesty paraded (65–101) and in imagining the deaths at sea (568–97), as elsewhere for the ritual summoning-up of Darius (633–72) and evocation of his conquests (852–907). The final lament (908–1077), despite its apparently uncontrolled emotion and extraordinary antiphonal effects, employs chiefly the much less complex metre characteristic of such scenes elsewhere (as in *Seven* 874–1004,

¹⁶ Cf. Michelini (1982), 72. Adams (1952) uses the analogy of a symphony for these three 'movements'. Other analyses of the play's structure, esp. built-in pointers to the disaster such as the intimation of deceit by the gods as early as 99–100, are examined by Conacher (1996), 15–16 and (the Chorus' prime function of articulating the tragedy), 160.

¹⁷ A point well made by Hall (Bibl. §3.2, 1988), 30.

¹⁸ How Darius' appearance was realized in the ancient theatre is discussed in *Introd.* 2.5 and *EN* on 623. This omniscent voice from the grave, in probably the earliest surviving Greek tragedy, inverts the function of gods 'on high' in many later ones, especially of Euripides; see Rehm (Bibl. §5, 2002), 246, citing Broadhead (§3.2, 1960), pp. xxviii–ix. For ghosts in Tragedy, see *EN* on *Pers.* 681–851.

¹⁹ On these last points, see Clifton (1963) and Said (1988).

for example).²⁰ Very colourful too, but often marked by precise ordering of detail, are the narratives of the Messenger (353–514; see EN on 290–514) and of Darius (759–838); more deliberate in language are the Queen's longer speeches (176–214, 517–31, 598–622). There are only two intense dialogues in stichomythic form, but they are of the greatest importance: the Queen's apprehensive interrogation of the Chorus about Athens after her dream (226–48; see EN) and Darius' questions to her about the disaster he has been summoned to explain (715–38); both are set, moreover, in scenes which use the rarer dialogue metre, apparently expressive of urgency, trochaic tetrameters.²¹

Amid the rich language some uncomplicated images and repetitions of vocabulary stand out (for the role of imagery in Aeschylus generally, see *Introd.* 3.4. below). Insistence on the Persian intention to yoke the Greeks into slavery (50; cf. 242) immediately precedes the literal yoking of the Hellepont (72, 130); and the Greeks' triumph in thwarting the first enslavement is reported before Darius explains the gods' hand in punishing the second, an 'enslavement' of their own 'sacred' Hellepont (745–6, cf. 722–5 and above). Note too the Queen's dream at 196, when Xerxes' chariot-yoke, broken by the Greek horse, symbolizes the larger disaster to come; so too her omen at 205–10 when an eagle is overcome by a smaller hawk. There is repeated emphasis on the multitudinous Persian fleet and army (126–9 they swarm like bees, 434–6 they are like a catch of tunny-fish beaten to death); many bare words for 'mass' occur (20, 366, 413, etc.) which magnify the enormous loss both of men (272, 329–30 ending the catalogue of 302–28, 431–2, 435–43, 508–10, 729–33, 800–3, etc.) and of huge wealth (250–2, 751–2, 826, etc.). The reports of Salamis are articulated by the day-night-day progress of the battle,²² the sun shines brightly for the Greek victory (386–7), just as later it melts the ice to cause the Persians' further loss of men (502–5). The Queen is the dominant and unifying figure of the play: images of motherhood and loss are appropriately frequent in her words.

²⁰ For these metres in *Persians* and other plays, see EN on *Pers.* 65, 532–97, 623–80, 852–907; for *Pers.* 908–1077 see EN on *Seven* 822–1004; cf. also n. 61 below.

²¹ Tetrameters are studied for *Persians* by Michelini (1982), 41–64; see also Section 3.2 and EN on 155–531.

²² See esp. Pelling (1997), 2–5. For the narrative strategies designed by Aeschylus to give the Messenger's reports transparency and authority, see Barrett (1995 = 2002).

2.2. Seven against Thebes

[For a summary of the action, see p. xii. In this Section 2.2 all references to the Bibliography are to §7.2 unless stated.]

An ancient record (see the start of EN, p. 160) states that *Seven* was the third play of a trilogy which began with *Laius* and *Oedipus*. These first two plays, which are lost, dealt, it is safe to say, with the tragedy of Laius, who defied Apollo's oracle that any child he had would kill him (*Seven* 741–9); but he fathered one. This was Oedipus, whom Laius then exposed but who was saved and grew up elsewhere, and in ignorance of his identity killed his father and had children by his mother (750–7). His later self-discovery and hideous realization brought him to curse his own two sons, that they should divide their inheritance, the kingdom of Thebes, with the sword (778–91). The *Laius* took these events as far as Oedipus' killing of his father, the *Oedipus* as far as the cursing; they are recapitulated in the third play by the Chorus at the places given; but this is only after fulfilment of the curse by Oedipus' son Eteocles has become inevitable, through his decision to duel with his brother Polynices (712–19). Further recapitulation and comment follow news of the mutual fratricide (822–47; see also the Chorus at 893–936).²³

The problem for us is to judge Eteocles' path towards his decision in the first two-thirds of the play (1–719). At its start Aeschylus shows him aware of the curse (70), but it then goes unmentioned while he plans the city's defence, and appoints seven champions, including himself, at its gates (282–4: see EN, and on the 'Shield-Scene' 369–676).²⁴ When he learns that the seventh attacker will be

²³ In the choral ode 720–91, ll. 734–57 link Oedipus' parricide and incest (also 779, 782–3) with the ancient transgression of Laius (744) in fathering a son despite Apollo's oracle that his own and Thebes' safety depended on his obedience (745–9, cf. 800–2); 744–5 state that the 'penalty... remains to the third generation'—the generation of Eteocles and Polynices. Eteocles' statement of the gods' hatred for the family (653) and of Apollo's (691, cf. EN) appears to relate only to this defiance by Laius. Mentions of the curse surround this central passage (724–6, 766, 785–7), but Oedipus' immediate motive is given as 'anger they had not sustained him' (786 and EN). There is no hint in *Seven*, and we know nothing of the *Laius* and *Oedipus*, that the whole family had been accursed since Laius' own lifetime: in some later mythology Pelops had cursed Laius for the rape of his son Chryseippus (see EN on 689–91, and Lloyd-Jones, *Bibl.* §2 [2005], 33).

²⁴ It is a mistake to find allusions to the curse when the Chorus address Eteocles with the formula 'son of Oedipus' (205, 372; they use it later, too, at 677), and in