

## 6.5. Aeschylus / from *The Persians*

This tragedy, the oldest surviving play in theatrical literature, was first produced ca. 472 BCE. It was part of a trilogy by Aeschylus that won the Dionysia festival. The following are part of the choral introduction (ll. 65–139) and a late scene in which the ghost of Darius emerges from his tomb, sensing the state is in distress (ll. 787–844).

Aesch. *Pers.* 65–139; 787–844\*. Source: Aeschylus. *The Persians*. Trans. Niall McCloskey and John Porter. University of Saskatchewan, 1995.

### *STROPHÊ A*<sup>1</sup>

The King, destroyer of cities, long ago now  
has driven his army against  
the neighboring land on the opposite coast,  
crossing the strait of Hella, Athamas' daughter,  
by means of a floating bridge, bound by cords of flax,  
a closely-bolted roadway,  
casting a yoke about the sea's neck.<sup>2</sup>

### *ANTISTROPHÊ A*

The raging lord of Asia with its many men  
over every land drives  
his god-like flock  
in two ways, both by land and by sea,  
trusting in his stalwart,  
rugged commanders,  
a man of golden birth, the equal of gods.

### *STROPHÊ B*

With the dark look in his eyes  
of a murderous snake,  
armed with many companies of troops and many ships,  
swiftly driving his Assyrian chariot,  
he leads against men famed for the spear  
an Ares skilled in archery.

### *ANTISTROPHÊ B*

No one is of such mettle as to withstand  
this huge stream of men  
or restrain with strong palisades  
the irresistible swell of the sea:  
the army of the Persians and its stout-hearted host  
is not to be withstood.

### *STROPHÊ C*

Fate, by decree of the theos,  
has held sway since olden times:  
she has enjoined the Persians  
to busy themselves with wars that destroy towers,  
with tumultuous clashes of cavalry,  
and with the overthrow of cities.

### *ANTISTROPHÊ C*

They have learned to look upon  
the sea's expanse  
when it is whipped white  
by the raging winds,  
trusting in the fine-stranded cables  
and the clever troop-conveying contrivances.

### *STROPHÊ D*

But what man, being mortal, will avoid  
the crafty deceit of the theos?  
Who, though with nimble foot he be  
†master of the lucky leap?†

### *ANTISTROPHÊ D*

For Atê, fawning in friendly fashion at first,  
entices a man into her nets,  
whence it is impossible for a mortal,  
leaping above, to escape.

### *STROPHÊ E*<sup>3</sup>

Pondering these things my heart, draped in black,  
is mangled with fear.  
Alas for the Persian host!—may the city, the  
great citadel of Susa,<sup>4</sup> not hear such a cry,  
emptied of men.

### *ANTISTROPHÊ E*

And the city of Kissa  
will sing an antiphonal cry—  
Alas!—the packed throng  
of women calling out,  
and rending will fall upon their fine linen robes.

### *STROPHÊ F*

For the entire host,  
both horse and foot,  
like a swarm of bees has departed  
with the army's leader,  
having crossed the common headland  
of the two continents,  
now yoked together.

### *ANTISTROPHÊ F*

But beds are filled with tears  
in longing for husbands:  
the Persian ladies, in womanish  
longing for their dear lords—  
each is left without a yoke-mate,  
having sent off the impetuous warrior  
who shares her bed.

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<sup>1</sup> This lyric section opens in ionics, an exotic meter that suggests the atmosphere of the Persian court.

<sup>2</sup> The reference here and below is to the famous bridge with which Xerxes "yoked" the Hellespont (compare Herodotus 7.33ff.).

<sup>3</sup> There is a shift in meter here, from ionics to more troubled trochaics, that reinforces the shift in the chorus' mood.

<sup>4</sup> Capital of Persia.

CHORUS

What then are we to think, lord Darius? Whither will you bend  
the conclusion of your words? How might we, the Persian host,  
still fare well—as well as possible—given what has happened?

GHOST OF DARIUS

By not marshalling a force against the land of the Hellenes,  
not even should a larger Persian force be raised.  
For Mother Earth herself is their stout ally.

CHORUS

What did you mean by this? In what way does she aid them?

GHOST OF DARIUS

By killing with famine forces that are excessive in their numbers.

CHORUS

Then we will raise a choice force, well-equipped.

GHOST OF DARIUS

Yet not even that army which now has remained in the land of Hellas  
will return to find safety at home.

CHORUS

What did you say? Will the entire army of the barbarians not cross the passage of Hella, leaving Europe?

GHOST OF DARIUS

Few indeed, out of many, will return—if, that is, it is at all right to trust the oracles of the theoi in considering the events just accomplished: for here is not a case of some being true and others false.

If they are true, Xerxes leaves behind a hand-picked mass of troops,

having put his confidence in idle hopes.

They remain where the Asopus waters the plains with its streams—a welcome source of fertility for the Boeotian lands—

where it awaits them to suffer the most abominable of evils as payment for their hybris and their godless thoughts.

For in coming to the land of Hellas they did not shrink in reverence

from plundering the statues of the theoi or to burn their temples.

The altars and the shrines of the daimones are no more to be seen,  
utterly overturned from their very foundations and scattered in confusion.

As a result, having acted evilly, they suffer evils as great or greater, while others are still to come, nor yet has the †foundation of their misfortunes been laid: it still must be capped off†—

such is the great libation of the blood of those slaughtered that will be poured

on the land of the Plataeans by the Doric spear.

The mounds of corpses will bear silent testimony to the eyes of mortals even to the third generation, warning that, being mortal, one must not have thoughts greater than

one's station.

For hybris, flowering to maturity, produces a blossom of Atê,<sup>1</sup> whence one reaps a harvest laden with tears.

Looking upon the impost assessed for these deeds remember Athens and Hellas, and let not anyone, despising his present daimon

and lusting for others, pour out great olbos.

Zeus, I tell you, stands as a chastiser over thoughts that are too haughty—a grievous corrector of men's minds.

With these things in mind, admonish Xerxes...

with sensible reproofs

to cease to offend the theoi with his haughty daring.

But you, dear aged mother of Xerxes,

go to the palace and, taking adornment that is seemly, go to meet your son. For in his grief at his misfortunes, there hang in tatters about all his body the shreds of his once splendid clothing.

In kindly fashion calm him with your words:

for—well I know—you alone will he endure to hear.

But I will go below, beneath the earth's gloom.

As for you, old men: farewell. And, though now amid misfortunes,

continue to find pleasure for your hearts from day to day, for ploutos brings no comfort whatsoever to the dead.

*[The Ghost of Darius descends back into his tomb.]*

CHORUS

Indeed, I have felt anguish hearing of the many sorrows for the barbarians—both those that are upon us and those yet to come.

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<sup>1</sup> [Greek] goddess of folly.