

# AESCHYLUS

## PERSIANS

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### TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In the following text, the numbers without brackets refer to the lines in the English text, and those in square brackets refer to the lines in the Greek text. Indented partial lines are included with the line above in the reckoning. All stage directions and footnotes have been provided by the translator.

In this translation, possessives of names ending in -s are usually indicated in the common way (that is, by adding -'s (e.g. *Zeus* and *Zeus's*). This convention adds a syllable to the spoken word (the sound -iz). Sometimes, for metrical reasons, this English text indicates such possession in an alternate manner, with a simple apostrophe. This form of the possessive does not add an extra syllable to the spoken name (e.g., *Xerxes* and *Xerxes'* are both two-syllable words).

### HISTORICAL NOTE

Aeschylus (c.525 BC to c.456 BC) is one of the three great Greek tragic dramatists whose works have survived. Of his many plays, seven still remain. Aeschylus may have fought against the Persians at Marathon (490 BC), and he did so again at Salamis (480 BC). According to tradition, he died from being hit with a tortoise dropped by an eagle. After

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his death, the Athenians, as a mark of respect, permitted his works to be restaged in their annual competitions.

Aeschylus's play *The Persians* was first produced in 472 BC. It is believed to be the oldest surviving play in our traditions. Originally the work was the second part of a trilogy: the first play was called *Phineus*, and the third *Glaucus*. These were followed by a satyr play, *Prometheus Pyrcaeus*. It is not immediately clear how the subject matter of the missing plays is related to the *Persians*.

Persian armies launched two famous invasions against the Greek mainland. The first (in 490 BC) was sponsored by Darius, king of Persia. It ended at the Battle of Marathon close to Athens with a Greek victory, in which the Athenians played the major role. The second Persian expedition (in 480 BC) was sponsored and led by Xerxes, son of Darius, who had succeeded his father as king, after Darius's death.

A major reason for these invasions was to punish Athens for its assistance to Greek cities in Asia Minor and on some of the islands close by, an important part of the Persians' sphere of influence. These cities had close ethnic links to the Greeks, especially to the Athenians, and resented Persian domination. Hence, they were a source of conflict within the Persian Empire.

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ATOSSA: queen of Persia, mother of Xerxes, wife of Darius.<sup>1</sup>

MESSENGER: a soldier with Xerxes's army.

DARIUS: a ghost, father of Xerxes, once king of Persia.

XERXES: king of Persia, son of Darius and Atossa.

CHORUS: elder statesmen of Persia.

[The action takes place in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire, in front of a large building.<sup>2</sup> The Chorus enters.]

CHORUS LEADER

We are here as trustworthy delegates  
for all those Persians who have marched away  
to the land of Greece. Thanks to our old age,  
we are the guardians of the royal home,  
so rich in gold, the men Xerxes himself,  
our king, son of Darius, has chosen  
to supervise his realm. But here inside,  
my heart has for a long time been troubled  
about our golden army's journey home  
and the king's return. It senses trouble. 10 [10]  
For all the power born out of Asia  
has gone, responding to our young king's call,  
and yet here in the Persians' capital  
no horseman has come back, no courier.  
Streaming out of Susa and Agbatana  
and the ancient parapets of Kissa,  
our forces moved away, some on horseback,  
some by ship, some on foot—a close-packed mass [20]  
prepared for war—men like Artaphrenes,  
Amistres, Pastas, and Megabates, 20  
commanders of Persia's warrior host,  
all kings and yet all ruled by our Great King,  
leaders of a vast army on the march,  
experts in archery and horsemanship,  
fearful to look at and terrible in war,  
their spirits steeled for battle. With them there  
is Artembares the charioteer, [30]  
as well as Masistes, noble Imaeus

<sup>1</sup>The name Atossa is not mentioned in the Greek manuscripts, but the name is well known.

<sup>2</sup>It is not totally clear from the text whether the building is the royal palace or a special council building or something else entirely.

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so deadly with his bow, Pharandaces,  
 and Sosthanes, who drives his horses on. 30  
 The fertile mighty Nile sent others, too—  
 Sousiscanes, Egyptian-born Pegastagon,  
 Sesame, great king of sacred Memphis,  
 Ariomardos, who rules in ancient Thebes,  
 and from the marshes men who row the ships,  
 a frightening horde in countless numbers.  
 And with them goes a crowd of Lydians, [40]  
 luxury loving men, whose force controls  
 all mainland tribes, warrior ranks sent out  
 with noble Arcteus and Mitrogathes, 40  
 a royal command, and gold-rich Sardis—  
 huge throngs of chariots streaming out,  
 row after row of three- and four-horse teams,  
 a terrifying sight!<sup>1</sup> And men who live  
 by sacred Tmolus now threaten to hurl [50]  
 the yoke of slavery upon the Greeks—  
 Mardon and Tharybis, with thunderbolts  
 for spears, and Mysians armed with javelins.<sup>2</sup>  
 And Babylon, awash with gold, sends out  
 huge columns of men of different kinds, 50  
 sailors on ships and other troops whose strength  
 relies on skill in fighting with the bow.  
 The sabre-bearing races also come  
 from all of Asia, following the king,  
 a fearful expedition on the march!  
 Warriors like these move out, the flower [60]  
 of Persian lands, while all of Asia yearns.  
 Their nurturing mother now longs for them  
 and groans with fierce desire, as wives and children  
 count the days and shudder at the long delay. 60

### CHORUS

Obliterating cities as it moves,  
 our royal army has already marched  
 to neighbouring lands on the facing shore,

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<sup>1</sup>The *mainland* referred to is Asia Minor (as opposed to the islands). Many cities in this region, especially along the coast, were part of the Persian Empire but inhabited by Ionians, that is, by Greeks closely related to the Athenians. The Greek cities resented Persian rule and had rebelled against it in the past. The *three- or four-horse teams* mentioned refers to the number of horses who rode abreast.

<sup>2</sup>Lydia is a region in Asia Minor. Tmolus is a mountain near the Persian city of Sardis. The Mysians came from northern Asia Minor. Greek traditions stressed the enormous size of Xerxes's forces. Herodotus's (no doubt exaggerated) claim puts the number of soldiers and army followers at over three million.

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crossing the Hellespont, that narrow sea  
which gets its name from Athamas's child,  
on a floating bridge tied down with cable [70]  
and throwing the yoke of a tight-knit road  
across the neck of the sea.<sup>1</sup>

Through every land  
the fiery king of a massive Asian horde  
drives on his men—a wondrous warrior pack— 70  
in a double formation by land and sea,  
with trust in his brave and stern commanders,  
our golden born and godlike king. [80]

His dark eyes burn  
with the glare of a snake aroused to kill.  
Soldiers and sailors massing behind him,  
he urges his Syrian chariot on,  
leading his archers like a war god's host  
to fight against men renowned for their spears.

No man has the strength to repel this force,  
this irresistible torrent of men, 80  
or with a strong bulwark to hold in check  
the overpowering surge of the sea. [90]  
For warriors fill our Persian ranks,  
our invincible force of fearless men.

By decrees of the gods since earliest times,  
Fate has ruled all and has always ordained  
that Persians wage war, knocking down towers,  
fighting in chariots, and demolishing cities.

By trusting their finely made cables and ships  
our men have now learned how to gaze on the deep 90 [100]  
when tempestuous storms from the howling winds  
whip white surface waters across the broad sea.

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<sup>1</sup>One of the two narrow straits separating Asia from Europe was named after Helle, a daughter of Athamas, who fell from the sky and drowned in the water there. Xerxes led his immense army across this obstacle on a bridge made of boats. The boats were tied together with cables and chains, and then planks and earth were placed on top to make a roadway. A Persian fleet accompanied the army.

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But what mortal man can hope to evade  
insidious deceit of the gods? What man  
with nimble feet can leap above that snare?

For fair Delusion, with her welcoming smile,  
spreads her nets wide and lures the man in.  
There is no escape—that trap she sets  
no man evades by springing back once more.

Such matters hang black thoughts around my heart      100  
and tear at it with fear. Alas for them,  
the soldiers of that mighty Persian force!  
May our great city Sousa never hear  
a cry like that or learn its men have died.

And Kissa's city folk will then all chant      [120]  
their own song in reply—Alas! That crowd  
of women screaming out will tear apart  
their splendid robes of linen.

For all our men—  
our horse and infantry—like swarms of bees,  
have left with the lord who leads our army,      110  
crossing the cape the two continents share,      [130]  
now Xerxes has yoked them both together.

Our marriage beds long for the absent men  
and fill with tears, as Persian women grieve,  
each one with a woman's heartfelt yearning  
for the fearless warrior she sent away.  
Her man is gone, and now she sleeps alone.

CHORUS LEADER

Come now, Persians, let us take our seats      [140]  
within this ancient place. Let us reflect,  
for at this time we need to turn our thoughts      120  
to wise and well-considered counsel  
about what is happening with our king,  
Xerxes, son of Darius. Have Persian archers  
drawn their bows and won, or have the Greeks  
with the power of their sharp spears prevailed?

*[Atossa enters with attendants.]*<sup>1</sup>

But look—the mother of our king approaches,  
like light streaming from the eye of god.  
I must prostrate myself before my queen,  
and all of you must show her your respect—  
salute her majesty with words of welcome. 130

*[The Chorus Leader prostrates himself and speaks to Atossa from his knees.]*

Hail to you, O queen, most illustrious  
of all deep-waisted Persian women—  
Xerxes' aged mother and wife of Darius,  
once the consort of Persia's god and now  
the mother of their god—unless perhaps  
the divinity they used to have of old  
has now abandoned Persian warriors.

ATOSSA

That is why I have left my gold-decked home  
and the royal bed I shared with Darius [160]  
and have come here. For worries rend my heart. 140  
My friends, I will confide in you—I am afraid  
that our vast wealth will quickly stir up dust  
and with its foot cast down the great success  
which—thanks to the assistance of some god—  
king Darius achieved. And that is why  
my mind is burdened with a double care,  
which I find difficult to speak about.  
The common folk do not respect great wealth  
unless backed up with men, and though the poor  
may have great strength, the light of their success 150  
will never shine. Now, we have wealth enough,  
but still I fear for what I hold to be  
our finest treasure, true riches in the home,  
the lord and master's eye. Since that is so, [170]  
Persians, you old trustworthy counsellors,  
advise me what to do, since all my hopes  
for level-headed guidance rest on you.

<sup>1</sup>Atossa's entry here is probably meant to be imperially splendid, with chariots and an impressive escort, in contrast to her entry later in the play. There is no sense that she enters from the building at the back.

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## CHORUS LEADER

You are our country's queen—so rest assured  
 you do not need to ask us twice for help,  
 for anything that lies with our power 160  
 to say or do. You have summoned us here  
 as counsellors in this affair, and we  
 are well disposed to serve your interests.

## ATOSSA

Many dreams keep visiting me at night—  
 all the time—ever since my son prepared  
 his army and set off, hoping to destroy  
 Ionian lands. But this past night  
 I had one more distinct than all the rest.  
 I will describe it to you. I seemed to see [180]  
 two women dressed in very lovely clothes— 170  
 one wore Persian robes, the other Dorian.<sup>1</sup>  
 They came in view—both of gigantic size,  
 much larger than the women of today,  
 and very beautiful. They were sisters,  
 of the same family line. One of them  
 lived in Hellenic lands, assigned by lot,  
 the other dwelt among barbarians.<sup>2</sup>  
 And as I watched, I seemed to see these two  
 begin to fight each other. Then my son,  
 once he learned of this, tried to hold them back 180  
 and calm them down. Around their necks he set [190]  
 a collar strap and yoked it to his chariot.  
 One sister carried her restraint with pride  
 and kept her mouth compliant in the reins.  
 The other one fought back—her hands tore at  
 the chariot harness and, freed from her restraint,  
 dragged it so hard she broke the yoke in two.  
 My son fell out headfirst, and Darius,  
 his father, who stood close by, was grieving.  
 Then Xerxes, when he saw his father there, 190  
 shred the garments covering his body.  
 That was the dream I saw during the night. [200]  
 When I got up, I went to wash my hands

<sup>1</sup>The *Dorians* were an ethnic group within the Greek people (and frequent rivals of the Ionians). They were commonly associated with Sparta, the most important Dorian city.

<sup>2</sup>*Hellenic* means Greek. The word *barbarian*, a term the Greeks used to refer to non-Greeks, is here a reference to Persia.



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in a flowing spring, and holding up a gift,  
I stood beside an altar, intending  
to offer sacrifice to those deities  
who ward off evil, with those rituals  
which are their due. But then I saw an eagle  
swooping down for safety at the altar  
of Apollo, and I was terrified. 200

My friends, as I stood there speechless, I saw  
a hawk racing up behind, wings outspread.  
Its talons clawed and ripped the eagle's head.  
The eagle did not fight but cowered down  
and left its body open to attack.  
Seeing this visions made me so afraid— [210]  
and hearing them you must be fearful, too.  
For you know well that if my son succeeds  
he will become a man men hold in awe,  
but even if he fails, those in the city 210  
cannot hold him accountable, for Xerxes,  
if he gets safely back, still rules this land.

CHORUS LEADER

Lady mother, we do not wish our words  
to make you fearful or offer you false hope.  
But if what you have seen is ominous,  
approach the gods with prayers, begging them  
to avert the evil and bring about  
what is of benefit to you, your sons,  
the city, all your family and friends.  
Then you must pour libations to the earth 220  
and to the dead, and with auspicious words [220]  
ask Darius, your husband, whom you say  
you saw last night, to confer his blessing  
from underneath the earth up to the light,  
on you and on your son, and to hold down  
what works against you and keep it buried  
deep within the earth, hidden in the dark.  
From what I understand of prophecy  
and as a friend I give you this advice.  
I sense that in these matters everything 230  
will turn out favourably for you.

ATOSSA

You are the first one who has offered me  
an interpretation of the dreams I had,

PERSIANS

and you have clearly shown in what you say  
your kindness to my child and family.  
May things all turn out well! When I return  
back to the palace, I will carry out  
those rituals for the gods and loved ones  
underneath the earth, the way you have advised.  
But, friends, there is one thing I wish to know. 240 [230]  
In what part of the world do people say  
this city of Athens is located?

CHORUS LEADER

Far away from here, where our Lord the Sun  
grows dim and sets.

ATOSSA

And is it really true  
my son desired to conquer such a place?

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, he did. For then all lands in Hellas  
would be subject to our King.

ATOSSA

And these Greeks—  
does their army consist of many men?

CHORUS LEADER

Their army has been strong enough before  
to have done much damage to the Medes.<sup>1</sup> 250

ATOSSA

Are their hands trained to fight with well-strung bows?<sup>2</sup>

CHORUS LEADER

No, not at all—they arm themselves with shields  
and fight in close with spears.

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<sup>1</sup>The terms *Mede* and *Persian* were, for the Greeks, synonymous. The Athenians were the most important element in the Greek force which had defeated Darius's expeditionary army at Marathon ten years earlier (in 490 BC). Some editors believe that two lines are missing immediately before this passage, another question from Atossa and an answer from the Chorus.

<sup>2</sup>I have followed some other editors in rearranging the lines slightly here to achieve a more logical sequence in the series of questions and answers.

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ATOSSA

What other things  
do they possess? Do they have wealth at home—  
all the money they need?

CHORUS LEADER

They have a mine,  
a fountain of silver—their country's treasure.<sup>1</sup> [240]

ATOSSA

Who governs them? Who commands their army?

CHORUS LEADER

People say they are no man's slaves or servants.

ATOSSA

Then how can they turn back a fierce attack  
when warlike men invade?

CHORUS LEADER

Well, they managed  
to destroy that great and glorious force  
which Darius had sent against them. 260

ATOSSA

For those whose sons have left, those words of yours  
are ominous to think of.

CHORUS LEADER

It seems to me  
you will soon know the truth of what's gone on.  
Why else would a Persian man be rushing here.  
He must be bringing news of some event—  
it's clearly something good or bad.

*[Enter the Messenger, in great haste. He falls prostrate before Atossa and delivers his first speeches from his knees]*

MESSENGER

O you cities throughout all Asian lands,  
O realm of Persia, haven of vast wealth, 270 [250]  
one blow has smashed your great prosperity—

---

<sup>1</sup>Attica, the region around Athens, had very profitable silver mines.

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the flower of Persia has been destroyed!  
Our men have perished! Alas! It's terrible  
to be first to tell disastrous news,  
and yet, you Persians, I must now provide  
a full report of that catastrophe—  
our whole barbarian army has been killed!

CHORUS

Such dreadful, dreadful news!  
So cruel and unforeseen.  
Alas! Alas! Weep now, 280  
you Persians, as you learn  
of this calamity!

MESSENGER

Yes, weep, for all those men have been wiped out, [260]  
while I look on this unexpected day  
when I have come back home.

CHORUS

For older men, this life of ours  
has been too long, it seems—  
we have to learn about  
this unanticipated grief.

MESSENGER

I was there—I did not hear what happened 290  
from other men—so, Persians, I can speak  
directly of the evil things we faced.

CHORUS

Aaaii! Our great host  
with all its different weapons  
set out from Asian lands in vain [270]  
to the mighty land of Hellas!

MESSENGER

The corpses fill the shores of Salamis  
and all the coasts nearby—our wretched dead.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Salamis is an island in the Saronic Gulf, close to Athens. It was famous for its sailors. Once Xerxes's army entered Greece, it was at first successful, moving past Thermopylae down into central Greece and raising alarm in Athens and elsewhere. The Athenians, placing their faith in their formidable navy, abandoned the city and moved to Salamis with their fleet.

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CHORUS

Alas! Such grief! You say  
the bodies of the ones we love 300  
are tossing in the surf,  
being driven back and forth  
and carried by the shifting waves.

MESSENGER

Our bows were no defence. Our men perished.  
The entire force was overwhelmed at sea  
when Ionian ships attacked our fleet.

CHORUS

Cry a sorrowful lament, [280]  
a pitiful dirge for our dead,  
those ill-starred Persian men!  
The gods bring all this evil! 310  
Aaaaiii! Aaaaiii!  
The army is now gone!

MESSENGER

That name Salamis—a hateful word,  
the most offensive to my ears. Alas,  
how I groan when I remember Athens!

CHORUS

Yes, Athens is hateful to her foes!  
We well recall how Athens made  
so many Persian women widows  
by slaughtering their men.<sup>1</sup>

ATOSSA

I have kept quiet for a long time here, 320 [290]  
struck silent by the news of this defeat.  
For this event is too calamitous  
to talk or even ask about the pain.  
Yet suffering is something mortal beings  
must learn to bear when it comes from the gods.  
So stand up now and speak. Give your report—  
and even if you groan at this bad news,

---

<sup>1</sup>This reference to the battle of Marathon emphasizes the vital role played by the Athenians in the combined Greek force which defeated the army Darius has sent.

describe the full extent of our defeat.  
 Who did not die? What about the leaders?  
 Which ones should we mourn? And of all those men 330  
 appointed to a sceptre-bearing post,  
 which ones have died and left a vacancy  
 among the ranks of our commanders?

*[The Messenger stands up.]*

MESSENGER

Xerxes himself survived—he is alive  
 and sees the light of day.

ATOSSA

What you have said  
 brings a great light of hope into my home, [300]  
 a bright dawn after grim black drapes of night.

MESSENGER

But Artembares, who led ten thousand horse,  
 is being smashed against the cruel shores  
 of Salamis, and Dadaces, who led 340  
 a thousand men, was hit by a spear  
 and with an easy leap fell from his ship.  
 Tenagon, the finest of that ancient race  
 from Bactria, now moves around the isle  
 of Ajax, a coastline pounded by the sea.<sup>1</sup>  
 Lilaïos, Arsames, and a third one,  
 Argestes, are washed around that island,  
 a breeding place for doves, as they are thrown  
 against its rugged shore. Of all those men [310]  
 living beside the springs of Egypt's Nile, 350  
 Pharnouchos fell, and three men from one ship,  
 Pheresseues and Adeues  
 and Arcteus. And Matallos from Chryse,  
 who ruled an army of ten thousand men,  
 as he died, stained his thick, dark, shaggy beard  
 and changed its colour with a blood-red dye.  
 Arabos the Magian perished there,  
 and so did Artabes from Bactria,  
 who led black horsemen thirty thousand strong

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<sup>1</sup>The name *Ajax* refers to the Greater Ajax, king of Salamis, who in the *Iliad* is the mightiest Greek warrior after Achilles.

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and now has settled deep in rocky ground, 360  
as well as Amistris and Amphistreus, [320]  
who held a deadly spear, and Ariomardus,  
a noble man whose death makes Sardis grieve,  
and Seisames from Mysia. Tharybis,  
commander of two hundred fifty ships,  
a handsome man, by birth a Lyrnaean,  
now lies in miserable death—his luck  
abandoned him. And Suennesis, too,  
who ruled Cilicians and by himself  
brought so much suffering to his enemies, 370  
for of courageous men he was the best,  
fought valiantly and died. I have listed  
these men by name, but we lost so many!  
What I have told you mentions just a few. [330]

### ATOSSA

Alas! Alas! I have listened to your words,  
the height of our misfortune—a disgrace  
to Persia, cause enough for screams of grief.  
But return to your report and tell me this—  
What was the number of the Grecian fleet?  
What made them confident enough 380  
to risk a fight at sea with Persian ships?

### MESSENGER

You can be sure that we barbarians  
would have overwhelmed their fleet, if numbers  
had been the only thing. For the Greeks had,  
in total, three hundred ships. Ten of these [340]  
were chosen as a special group. But Xerxes—  
I can confirm this—led a thousand ships,  
two hundred and seven of which could sail  
extremely fast. That's how the numbers stood.  
Surely you cannot think that when we fought 390  
we were outnumbered? No. Some deity  
did not weigh the scales of fortune fairly  
and destroyed our fleet. The gods protect  
that city of the goddess Pallas.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Pallas* is a reference to Athena, the patron goddess of Athens.

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ATOSSA

And so,  
the city of Athens remains unscathed.<sup>1</sup>

MESSENGER

Yes. While its citizens are still alive  
it has a fortress that will never fail.

ATOSSA

Tell me how the battle with the ships began. [350]  
Who was the first to fight? Was it the Greeks?  
Or was my son happy to engage their fleet, 400  
given the huge number of his ships?

MESSENGER

My queen, a demon or evil spirit  
appeared from somewhere and set in motion  
everything that led to our complete collapse.  
A man from the Athenian forces,  
a Greek, came to Xerxes, your son, and said  
that after night arrived and it grew dark  
the Greeks would not remain where they were now,  
but leap onto the benches in their ships  
and, by moving stealthily here and there, 410  
would try to row away and save their lives. [360]  
Xerxes did not sense the Greek man's cunning  
or the envy of the gods.<sup>2</sup> So once he heard  
what the man had said, he quickly issued  
the following orders to his captains:

"When the sun's rays no longer warm the earth  
and darkness seizes regions of the sky,  
draw up the ships into a triple line  
and block the exits to the roaring sea.  
With other vessels form a tight blockade 420  
around that isle of Ajax. If the Greeks  
escape their evil fate and somehow find  
a secret way to steal off in their ships, [370]  
my orders are that all will lose their heads."

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<sup>1</sup>The city of Athens had, in fact, been ravaged by the Persian army, which occupied the city, because the citizens had abandoned the town and gone to Salamis and Aegina.

<sup>2</sup>The phrase *envy of the gods* refers to the belief that the gods were jealous of a mortal being's success and punished him for it, especially when the display of his greatness became excessive.



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When Xerxes said these words, his heart and mind  
were fully confident—he had no inkling  
of what the gods had planned. His men obeyed.  
Their spirits showed no lack of discipline,  
as they prepared a meal and every sailor  
lashed his oar in place against the thole pin. 430  
Once the sun's light had disappeared and night  
came creeping in, each master of his oar  
and all the soldiers under arms went down  
into the ships, and as the long boats sailed  
to take up their assigned positions, row by row,  
the men called out to cheer each other on. [380]  
So all night long the officers and crews  
kept sailing back and forth on their patrol,  
yet as night passed, the Greek force did not try  
to slip away in secret. But when the day 440  
rode up with her white steeds and radiant light  
seized all the earth, at first we heard a shout.  
A resounding cry came from the Greeks—  
it sounded like a song—and right away  
the echo brought a clarion response  
reverberating from the island rocks. [390]  
Then panic struck the whole barbarian fleet.  
Our plan had failed, for at that point the Greeks  
did not call out their solemn holy cry  
as if they meant to flee. No. They sounded 450  
like men who meant to fight with courage  
in their hearts. And when a trumpet pealed,  
they all caught fire. Then, once the order came,  
with one united sweep their foaming oars  
struck the salty sea, and their fleet of ships  
quickly came in sight, all clearly visible.  
First of all, their well-organized right wing  
advanced in order. Then the entire force [400]  
moved up, and, as it did, we all could hear  
a mighty cry:

“You offspring of the Greeks, 460  
come on! Free your native home! Free your wives,  
your children, the temples of your father's gods,  
the burial places of your ancestors!  
The time has come to fight for all of these!”

PERSIANS

We responded with a confusing shout  
from Persian tongues, but by now the crisis  
left no time to delay. For right away,  
the ships began to use their bronze-clad prows  
to ram each other. In the first attack  
a Greek ship completely smashed the bow 470 [410]  
on a Phoenician boat, and after that  
both rival navies went at one another.  
At first, the bulk of the Persian forces  
held them back. But with so many vessels  
confined inside a narrow space, our ships  
could provide no help to other Persians.  
Instead their bronze prows rammed their own fleet's ships  
and smashed the banks of oars. Meanwhile the Greeks  
did not fail to seize this opportunity—  
they formed a circle round us and attacked. 480  
Our ships' hulls capsized, and the waves grew full  
of shattered boats and slaughtered sailors, [420]  
so much so we could not glimpse the sea.  
Beaches and rocks were crowded with the dead.  
As all the ships left in our barbarian fleet  
rushed off to escape in great confusion,  
the Greeks kept butchering men in the sea,  
hacking away at them with broken oars  
and bits of wreckage, as if our sailors  
were schools of mackerel or loads of fish. 490  
Groans and screams of pain filled the open sea,  
until night's shadowy eye concealed the scene.  
But I could not describe the full extent [430]  
of the disaster to you, not even  
if I spoke of it for ten entire days.  
For you must understand that never before  
has such an enormous multitude of men  
all perished in a single day.

ATOSSA

Alas!

An immense sea of evil has engulfed  
the Persians and our whole barbarian race! 500

MESSENGER

But listen—there is more. I have not mentioned  
half our troubles yet. For our men suffered  
evils twice as heavy as the ones before.

PERSIANS

ATOSSA

What troubles worse than what you have described  
could have hurt our army? Speak! You talked of  
some catastrophe. What could have happened  
to sink our scale of evil even further? [440]

MESSENGER

All those Persians in their prime of life,  
the very finest spirits, whose noble birth  
made them exceptional, the foremost men, 510  
who always had the trust of our Great King,  
have met a most dishonourable fate  
and died in shame.

ATOSSA

O my friends, this disaster  
compounds my misery! What kind of fate  
do you say killed these splendid men?

MESSENGER

There is an island in front of Salamis—  
a tiny place, but hazardous for ships.<sup>1</sup>  
Dance-loving Pan lives there, close to the shore.  
Xerxes had placed his finest warriors here, [450]  
so that, when our defeated enemies 520  
moved from the ships and sought a refuge  
on that island, his men could overwhelm  
the Grecian force where it was vulnerable,  
and they could save the lives of any friends  
trapped in the sea within that narrow strait.  
But Xerxes' judgment of events was wrong.  
For when some god gave glory to the Greeks  
in the battle out at sea, that very day  
they walled themselves in armour made of bronze,  
leapt out of their ships, and formed a circle 530  
around the island, so that our soldiers  
had nowhere to escape. Many of our men  
were hit with stones thrown by enemy hands [460]  
or died from falling arrows shot from bows.  
At last in one concerted charge, the Greeks  
attacked, hacking away at Persian limbs

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<sup>1</sup>The island was called Psyttaleia.

PERSIANS

until the lives of all those pitiful men  
had been utterly destroyed. From high up  
on a promontory right beside the sea  
Xerxes watched. He had an excellent view 540  
of his entire army, and, as he looked  
and witnessed the extent of this defeat,  
he groaned, tore his robes, gave out a shrill cry,  
and quickly issued orders to his troops,  
who ran away confused. This defeat [470]  
and the other one I talked of earlier—  
these are the disasters you must grieve.

ATOSSA

O hateful demon, how you have deceived  
the Persians! That famous city Athens  
has taken harsh revenge against my son— 550  
not satisfied with those barbarians  
she killed at Marathon in years gone by.  
By seeking retribution for those men,  
my son has brought himself a multitude  
of grief. What about the ships that got away?  
Tell me where you left them. And do you have  
a clear idea of where they might be now?

MESSENGER

Those in charge of our surviving ships [480]  
quickly fled away in great disorder,  
on whatever course the winds might take them. 560  
The remnants of our army was destroyed  
in lands of the Boeotians—some of them  
near a refreshing spring where they had gone,  
driven there by thirst. Others among us,  
exhausted and short of breath, kept marching  
into Phocian land—reaching Doris  
and the Gulf of Malia, where Spercheios  
pours his fresh waters on the plain. And then,  
desperate for food, we kept moving on  
to the Achaean plain, where we were welcomed 570  
by Thessalians in their cities. But here,  
most of our men died of thirst or hunger, [490]  
for we were suffering from both. From there,  
we reached the place where the Magnesians live  
and Macedonian land—the river Axios,  
Bolbe's reed-filled marsh, and Mount Pangaeon,

PERSIANS

on Edonian ground.<sup>1</sup> But during the night  
 some spirit stirred up winter before its time.  
 The stream of the sacred river Strymon  
 was completely frozen, and all those men 580  
 who had given the gods no thought till then  
 at that point offered up their solemn prayers  
 with supplications to both Earth and Heaven.  
 Once the army had finished calling out [500]  
 its many invocations to the gods,  
 we moved on across the frozen river.  
 Some of us, those who left before the god  
 could scatter his rays, crossed the ice in safety,  
 but once the brilliant circle of the sun  
 with his hot beams had warmed the middle part 590  
 and melted it with fire, then men fell through,  
 stumbling against each other. And the man  
 who lost the breath of life most rapidly  
 was truly lucky. The ones who got across  
 saved themselves by moving on through Thrace,  
 though not without much pain and suffering.  
 Not many of those fugitives escaped [510]  
 and reached their native land. Now is the time  
 our Persian city should lament its loss,  
 grieving for the most cherished youthful men 600  
 in all our land. What I have said is true.  
 But I have left out many dreadful things  
 which a god has hurled down on the Persians.

*[Exit Messenger.]*

CHORUS LEADER

O savage demon! With what heavy weight  
 your feet have stamped on all the Persian race!

ATOSSA

This overpowers me—the utter ruin  
 of our entire force! Those visions last night—  
 the ones I saw so clearly in my dreams—  
 how plainly they revealed these blows to me.  
 Your sense of them was far too trivial. 610 [520]  
 But nonetheless, following your advice,

---

<sup>1</sup>The defeated Persian troops moved north from Salamis, trying to return to Asia Minor by land via the Hellespont. The places mentioned are listed more or less in geographical order.

PERSIANS

I will begin by praying to the gods,  
and then I will return, bringing offerings  
for the Earth and for the dead—a libation  
from my home. I know I will be worshipping  
after all that has already happened,  
but I am hoping better things will come  
to us in future. Given these events,  
you men should demonstrate your loyalty  
by offering me trustworthy counsel. 620  
And if, while I am gone, my son arrives,  
comfort him, accompany him back home, [530]  
so no misfortune comes to trouble him,  
apart from those we have already faced.

*[Exit Atossa.]*

CHORUS LEADER

O Zeus, king, now you have destroyed  
the overconfident armed multitude  
of the Persian army, shrouding  
the cities of Susa and Agbatana  
in gloom and overwhelming sorrow.  
And many women share our grief, 630  
ripping their veils with gentle hands, [540]  
soaking their bosoms drenched in tears.  
With agonizing female cries  
the wives of Persia yearn to see  
those men they married only recently.  
They leave their wedding beds,  
the softly quilted joys of youth,  
and howl with grief that has no end.  
And I, in great distress, take on myself  
the dreadful fate of those who are now gone. 640

CHORUS

Now indeed all lands in Asia  
mourn their absent men!  
Xerxes marched them off to war, alas! [550]  
Xerxes, to our sorrow, killed our men!  
Xerxes, in his folly, took them all  
and set out with a seagoing fleet.  
Why then did Darius, while he lived  
and ruled our city's archer armies,

remain unhurt and so well loved  
by those who dwell in Susa? 650

Our troops on foot and sailors left  
in the dark-eyed ships—alas!— [560]  
and went away on linen wings.<sup>1</sup>  
Then other ships destroyed them,  
obliterating all with their assault  
at the hands of sailors from Ionia.  
And as we hear, our king himself  
escaped, but only just, through Thrace,  
on frozen paths across the plains.

Lament for those who perished earlier, 660  
abandoned by necessity—alas!—  
along Cychrean shores.<sup>2</sup> Such grief! [570]  
Scream out your sorrow, clench your teeth,  
let cries of anguished mourning  
climb the heights of heaven—alas!—  
draw out your long and piteous moans.

They are torn by the deadly surf—alas!—  
and gnawed by those voiceless children  
of the unpolluted seas—alas!  
The grieving household mourns 670  
its absent lord, and parents [580]  
whose children now are dead  
cry out against the heaven-sent pain,  
while the old, in sorrow, hear  
of those men's agonies in full.

Now other men in Asian lands  
no longer will abide by Persian laws,  
no longer pay the Persians tribute,  
under compulsion from our king.  
No longer will they fall down prostrate 680  
on the ground and worship him.  
For the power of our king is gone! [590]  
No more will people check their tongues,  
for now they have the liberty  
to speak their minds without restraint.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ships often had eyes painted on their prows to make them look like sea creatures.

<sup>2</sup>The phrase *Cychrean shores* is a reference to Salamis.

PERSIANS

The yoke of force has been removed,  
and on that isle where Ajax ruled,  
the blood-soaked rocks, washed by the sea,  
now hold the power of Persia.

*{Enter Atossa, this time without an escort.}*

ATOSSA

My friends, whoever has experienced disaster	690
understands that when a wave of trouble	
breaks over mortal men, they are inclined	[600]
to be afraid of everything, and then,	
when good fortune blows their way once more,	
they start believing that this same good luck	
will keep on blowing them success forever.	
In my case, all things now look full of dread.	
My eyes can see the gods are enemies,	
and in my ears echoes a sound that brings	
no note of joy. I am so overwhelmed	700
by these disasters—they have made my mind	
so anxious and afraid. And that is why	
I come here from the palace once again	
without my chariots, without that pomp	
I used to have before, bringing offerings	
for the father of my son, libations	
to propitiate and appease the dead—	[610]
sweet white milk from an unblemished cow	
and splendid honey, distilled from flowers	
by the bees, with water from a virgin spring,	710
and from their rustic mother earth I bring	
this unmixed drink, the delightful produce	
of the ancient vine, and this sweet-smelling fruit	
from the plant whose leaves are always green,	
the golden olive, with wreaths of flowers. <sup>1</sup>	
But you, my friends, should chant a choral song	[620]
to summon up the spirit of Darius,	
while I pour these libations to the dead	
and make an offering for the earth to drink,	
in honour of the gods who rule below.	720

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<sup>1</sup>These words suggest that Atossa's earlier entrance involves a display of royal magnificence, in contrast to her appearance now.



## PERSIANS

### CHORUS LEADER

O royal lady, whom Persians all revere,  
pour out your offerings to the earth beneath,  
down to the chambers of the dead, while we  
in song will beg those gods who guide  
the dead down there to treat us kindly.

O you sacred gods of the world beneath,  
Earth and Hermes, and you, O ruling king  
of those who perish, send that man's spirit [630]  
from down below up here into the light.<sup>1</sup>  
For if he knows of any further help 730  
in our misfortunes, of all mortal men  
he is the only one who can advise us  
how to bring that remedy to bear.

### CHORUS

Our sacred, godlike king,  
does he attend to me,  
as my obscure barbarian voice  
sends out these riddling, wretched cries.  
I will bewail my dreadful sorrow.  
Does he hear me down below?

But you, O Earth, and you others, 740 [640]  
you powers beneath the earth,  
release his splendid spirit  
from your homes—the divine one  
born in Susa, the Persians' god.  
Send him up here, that man whose like  
was never laid to rest in Persian ground.

The man is loved, as is his tomb—  
we love the virtue buried there.  
O Aidoneus, Aidoneus,  
who sends shades from the dead, 750 [650]  
send Darius up here to us,  
send back our godlike king.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>The ruler of the underworld is Hades, brother of Zeus and Poseidon. The spirit the Chorus wishes to conjure up is, of course, Darius.

<sup>2</sup>*Aidoneus* is an alternative name for Hades, god of the dead.

PERSIANS

That ruler never lost our men  
to ruinous death in war,  
and Persians hailed him as divine  
in his wise counsel, for, like a god,  
when he led his army out to fight,  
he planned things brilliantly. Alas!

O king, our old Great King,  
approach us now, draw near. 760  
Rise to the summit of your tomb,  
lift up the saffron slipper on your foot, [660]  
reveal the royal ornaments  
of your imperial crown,  
and come to us, O father Darius,  
who never caused us pain.

Come listen to our latest grief,  
the sorrow felt throughout this land.  
O king of Persia's king, appear.  
For over us the darkness spreads, 770  
a Stygian gloom, since our young men  
have just been utterly destroyed.<sup>1</sup> [670]  
So come to us, O father Darius,  
who never caused us pain.

Aaaaiii! Aaaiii!  
O you whose death was mourned  
so bitterly among your friends,  
O great and powerful king,  
[if you had been in full command  
who in this land would now be grieving 780  
such twin calamitous defeats?]<sup>2</sup>  
Our three-tiered ships—now ships no more—  
have been completely overwhelmed. [680]  
Our ships are ships no more!

*[The Ghost of Darius appears.]*

DARIUS

You loyal men in whom I placed my trust,  
you ancient Persians, once my youthful friends,

---

<sup>1</sup>The Styx was a major river in the underworld.

<sup>2</sup>The precise meaning of these lines is not altogether clear.

PERSIANS

what troubles are now threatening the state?  
The soil is beaten down and torn apart—  
it groans in great distress. I see my wife  
beside my tomb, and so I grow concerned. 790  
I have received the offerings she made  
with favour, while you men have been standing here,  
close to my grave, chanting your laments,  
as with loud cries to summon up the dead  
you have been calling piteously for me.  
But there is no easy path from down below.  
Beneath the earth the gods are much more prone  
to welcome bodies than to send them back. [690]  
Still, I do have some authority down there,  
and I have come. But you must not waste time, 800  
so I do not get blamed for my delay.  
What new disaster weighs the Persians down?

CHORUS

That fear of you I had in earlier days  
makes me too awestruck now to look at you,  
and reverence inhibits what I say.

DARIUS

But since I have responded to your cries  
and come up here from underneath the earth,  
you must ignore the awe that I inspire  
and speak. Tell me everything that has gone on.  
But keep the details brief—no lengthy story. 810

CHORUS

I am afraid to act on your request, [700]  
too full of fear to speak directly to you  
and say things hard to tell to those one loves.

DARIUS

Since ancient reverence affects your minds,

*[Turning toward Atossa]*

will you, noble and venerable queen,  
who shared my bed, hold back your tears and groans  
and speak quite frankly to me. We all know  
that mortal blows will fall on mortal men.  
Many from the sea, many from the land

PERSIANS

afflict all human beings, as their long lives  
keep stretching through the years. 820

ATOSSA

O you, whose happy fate made you surpass  
all other men in your prosperity,  
as long as you gazed at the brilliant sun, [710]  
you lived a fortunate life men envied,  
and Persians looked on you as on a god.  
And now I envy you, for you have died  
before you saw the depths of our misfortune.  
O Darius, you will hear everything.  
A few words tell it all—one might well say 830  
the Persian state is utterly destroyed.

DARIUS

How is this so? Has our country suffered  
from some foul pestilence or civil strife?

ATOSSA

No, not at all. But somewhere close to Athens  
all our forces have been overpowered.

DARIUS

What son of mine led our armies there? Speak.

ATOSSA

Impetuous Xerxes—he drained the men  
from our whole mainland plain.

DARIUS

That reckless wretch!  
Did he launch this foolish expedition  
by land or sea?

ATOSSA

By both. The double force 840  
proceeded on two fronts. [720]

DARIUS

How could the men,  
a group of infantry that size, succeed  
in moving past the Hellespont?

PERSIANS

ATOSSA

Xerxes

used a clever scheme to yoke the river  
and forge a way across.

DARIUS

He managed this?

He closed the mighty Bosporus?<sup>1</sup>

ATOSSA

He did.

Some spirit must have helped him with his plan.

DARIUS

Alas! Some mighty spirit came to him  
and stopped him thinking clearly.

ATOSSA

Yes. And we can see the result of that,  
the enormous ruin his actions caused.

850

DARIUS

Why do you grieve for them? What happened?

ATOSSA

The destruction of our naval forces  
led to the slaughter of our men on land.

DARIUS

And so the entire army came to grief,  
butchered by the spear?

ATOSSA

Yes. And that is why

all of Susa mourns—the entire city  
laments its missing men.

[730]

DARIUS

Alas for the loss!

The help and defence of the army gone!

---

<sup>1</sup>The Hellespont (now called the Dardanelles) and the Bosporus are the two straits which separate Asia from Europe in Asia Minor. For Aeschylus both names refer to the westernmost strait (i.e., the Hellespont). At its narrowest point, this strait is about half a mile across.

PERSIANS

ATOSSA

All those troops from Bactria are now dead— 860  
not even an old man remains.

DARIUS

O wretched Xerxes! So many allies!  
He has killed off all our youth!

ATOSSA

The people say  
he is now by himself, with few attendants.

DARIUS

How will this end? Do you have any hope  
he could be rescued?

ATOSSA

There is some good news—  
he reached the bridge that links two continents.

DARIUS

He returned to Asia safely? Is that true?

ATOSSA

It is. We have had news confirming it  
beyond all doubt.

DARIUS

Alas! Those oracles 870  
have quickly been proved true, and Zeus has let  
their full prophetic weight fall on my son.  
I had hoped the gods would somehow hold off [740]  
fulfilling them for several years. But then,  
when the man himself is in a hurry,  
the god will take steps, too. It seems to me  
a fountain of misfortunes has been found  
for all the ones I love. It was my son  
who, knowing nothing of these matters,  
with his youthful rashness brought them on. 880  
He wished to check the sacred Hellespont  
by tying it down with chains, just like a slave,  
and that holy river, too, the Bosporus.  
He built a roadway never seen before,

enclosing it with hammered manacles,  
 creating there a generous causeway  
 for his enormous force. Though a mortal man,  
 he sought to force his will on all the gods,  
 a foolish scheme, even on Poseidon.<sup>1</sup>

Why do that? Surely a sickness of the mind  
 possessed my son? I fear that our great wealth,  
 amassed by my hard work, may well become  
 the spoils of anyone who marches here.

890 [750]

## ATOSSA

Xerxes spent too much time with wicked men  
 and learned to be impulsive. They told him  
 how you had won great riches for your sons  
 by fighting with your spear, while he, in fear,  
 just used his spear at home and did not add  
 to the wealth his father left. Gibes like this,  
 which Xerxes often heard from evil men,  
 led him to organize this expedition  
 and launch an armed campaign against the Greeks.

900

## DARIUS

And so he has achieved his mighty deed,  
 the greatest of them all, truly immense,  
 whose memory will never be erased—  
 he has removed from Susa all its citizens,  
 something no man has ever done before,  
 not since the time our sovereign Zeus proclaimed  
 one man should have the honour of being king  
 in all sheep-breeding Asia and should hold  
 the sceptre of imperial command.

[760]

Medos was the first to lead its armies,  
 and then another man, his son, who had  
 a spirit guided by intelligence,  
 finished the work his father had begun.<sup>2</sup>

910

Third after him was Cyrus, a leader  
 favoured by the gods, for his rule brought peace  
 to all his friends. He added to his realm  
 the Lydian and Phrygian people

[770]

<sup>1</sup>Poseidon, a brother of Zeus and Hades, was god of the sea.

<sup>2</sup>That is, he succeeded in bringing a large part of Asia under Persian rule. The Greek word *Medos* may not be a proper name but simply mean “a Mede.”

and subdued all the Ionians by force.<sup>1</sup> 920  
 The god felt no hostility towards him,  
 because his mind was wise. A son of Cyrus  
 was the fourth in charge of Persia's armies,  
 and Mardos was the fifth, a man who shamed  
 his country and disgraced the ancient throne.  
 But noble Artaphrenes with the help  
 of comrades who undertook this duty  
 hatched a scheme and did away with Mardos  
 in his home. [Sixth in line was Maraphis,  
 and seventh Artaphrenes]. When my turn came, 930  
 I won the lot I wished for.<sup>2</sup> Many times  
 I led our mighty armies in campaigns, [780]  
 and yet I never brought such great disaster  
 to our Persian state. But my son Xerxes,  
 who is still young, has immature ideas  
 and does not bear in mind what I advised.  
 For you whose old age matches mine know well  
 that none of us who have held ruling power  
 was ever seen to cause such great distress.

## CHORUS LEADER

But then, lord Darius, these words of yours— 940  
 what do they imply? What do you conclude?  
 After these events, what should we Persians do  
 to serve this land the best way possible?

## DARIUS

You must not organize armed expeditions [790]  
 against Hellenic lands, not even if  
 the Persian force is larger than before.  
 They have an ally—the very land itself.

## CHORUS LEADER

What do you mean? In what way is the land  
 their ally?

<sup>1</sup>Lydia and Phrygia were areas in Asia Minor near the Mediterranean coast. The term *Ionians* here refers to the Greeks in Asia Minor and some adjacent islands. It does not include the Ionians elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup>These lines refer to the traditional story that when the Persian nobles who conspired against Mardos succeeded, they drew lots to determine the imperial succession. In different accounts of this event, the names of the conspirators and the succeeding kings differ. Line 778 in the Greek is generally considered an interpolation (hence the square brackets).



DARIUS

Those armies which are very large  
she kills with famine.

CHORUS LEADER

Then we will raise  
some special soldiers and supply them well. 950

DARIUS

But that army which is still in Greece  
will not get safely home.

CHORUS LEADER

What are you saying?  
Will all our forces of barbarians  
not make their way across the Hellespont  
and out of Europe?

DARIUS

Not very many—  
only a few of that huge multitude, [800]  
if, after those events we have been through,  
we still place any trust in prophecies  
the gods have made. For it is not the case 960  
that some will be fulfilled and others not.  
If the oracles are true, then Xerxes,  
convinced by empty hopes, will leave behind  
a specially chosen portion of his army,  
now stationed where the river Asopus  
waters the plains and brings Boeotian lands  
sweet nourishment. This is the place those men  
remain to undergo their punishment,  
the very worst disaster of them all,  
a payment for their pride and godless thoughts. 970  
For when they first arrived in Greece, those men  
did not display the slightest reverence  
but broke in pieces images of gods [810]  
and burned their temples. They ravaged altars  
demolished holy shrines, knocking them down  
to their foundations, leaving scattered ruins.  
And thus, given their acts were so profane,  
the evils they must suffer are no less—  
and others are in store. They have not plumbed  
the depths of their disasters—more troubles 980

will keep flowing yet. The mix of blood and gore  
 poured out by Dorian spears across the earth  
 of Plataea will be so great the dead,  
 the corpses heaped in piles, will still be there  
 when three generations have come and gone,  
 a silent witness to the eyes of men  
 that mortal human beings should not believe [820]  
 that they are greater than they are.<sup>1</sup> For pride,  
 when it grows ripe, produces as its fruit  
 disastrous folly and a harvest crop 990  
 of countless tears. So when you look upon  
 the punishment for how these men behaved,  
 remember Greece and Athens. Do not let  
 any man despise the god he follows  
 and, in his lust for something else, squander  
 the great wealth he possesses. I tell you  
 Zeus does act to chastise arrogant men  
 whose thoughts are far too proud, and when he does  
 his hand is heavy. So now that Xerxes  
 has shown he lacks the prudence to think well, 1000  
 you must teach him with sensible advice [830]  
 to stop being so offensive to the gods  
 through his presumptuous daring. As for you,  
 dear lady, Xerxes' venerable mother,  
 return back to the palace. Pick out there  
 some clothing fit for him, and then prepare  
 to meet your son. His grief at his misfortune  
 has torn to shreds the embroidered clothing  
 covering his body. Use soothing words  
 and gently calm him down, for I know this— 1010  
 yours is the only voice he listens to.  
 As for me, I am returning to the earth,  
 to darkness down below. Farewell, old men,  
 despite these troubling times, you should each day [840]  
 discover reasons to rejoice, for riches  
 bring no profit whatsoever to the dead.

*[The Ghost of Darius disappears.]*

CHORUS LEADER

To hear about the many troubles

---

<sup>1</sup>Darius is here referring to the great land battle of Plataea, in Boeotia, where the Greek forces led by the Spartans, who were of Dorian descent, defeated the Persian land armies, after the naval battle of Salamis.

we barbarians must face, the ones  
already here and still more yet to come,  
fills me with grief.

ATOSSA

O god, I am overwhelmed  
with so much bitter sorrow! But one thing  
more than all the others gnaws my heart—  
the disgraceful appearance of my son,  
the shameful clothing covering his limbs.  
But I will go and get appropriate robes  
and try to find my son. In this distress, [850]  
I will not abandon those most dear to me.

[*Atossa exits.*]

CHORUS

Alas! How glorious and good the life  
we loved here in our well-run city,  
when our old sovereign ruled this land, 1030  
our all-sufficient and unconquered king,  
who never brought us war or grief,  
our mighty godlike Darius.

For first of all, we then displayed  
our famous armies, and our traditions, [860]  
like towers of strength, ruled everything.  
Our men returning from a war  
faced no disasters—they reached  
their prosperous homes unharmed.

Darius seized so many cities 1040  
and never crossed the Halys stream  
or even left his home—places like  
the Thracian Acheloan towns  
beside the Strymonian sea.<sup>1</sup> [870]  
And cities on the mainland, too,  
far from the sea, well fortified  
with walls encircling them  
obeyed him as their king,

---

<sup>1</sup>It is not entirely clear what places these phrases refer to, since the meaning of the Greek word *Acheloan* is disputed. The Halys River in Lydia, the longest river in Asia Minor, marked (for the Greeks) the western boundary of Persia.

and so did places on both shores  
 along the spacious Hellespont 1050  
 and in the deep bays of Propontis  
 and where the Pontus flows into the sea.<sup>1</sup>

And islands close to coastal headlands,  
 surrounded by the sea, right next to us,  
 like Lesbos, Samos, where olives grow,  
 and Chios, Paros, Naxos,  
 Mykonos, along with Andros, too,  
 adjacent to its neighbour Teos.

He ruled the wave-washed isles, as well,  
 which lie far out at sea—Lemnos, 1060  
 the home of Icarus, and Rhodes,  
 with Cnidus, too, and Cyprian cities—  
 Paphos and Soli and Salamis,  
 whose mother state has caused  
 our present cries of anguish.<sup>2</sup>

And wealthy crowded cities of those Greeks  
 descended from Ionian stock  
 he ruled with his shrewd mind, [900]  
 and under his command he had  
 enormous armies of warrior men— 1070  
 all nations were allied with him.  
 But now we must endure defeats  
 in wars inflicted by the gods.  
 We cannot doubt the truth of this,  
 for we have been destroyed in war,  
 by massive disaster on the sea.

*[Enter Xerxes.]*

XERXES

O my situation now is desperate!  
 My luck has led me to a cruel fate [910]

---

<sup>1</sup>The Propontis (now called the Sea of Marmora) is a large body of water between the Bosphorus and the Hellespont. Pontus was normally the name of a region on the south shores of the Black Sea. Here it seems to apply to a river or rivers in the area.

<sup>2</sup>Icarus, son of Daedalus, attempted to fly away from Crete on wings his father, Daedalus, had made. But when he flew too near the sun, the wax holding his feathers melted, and he fell into the sea and drowned. The Icarian Sea in the eastern Mediterranean was named after him.

## PERSIANS

which I did not foresee! How savagely  
a demon trampled on the Persian race. 1080  
What must I still endure in this distress?  
As I look on these ancient citizens,  
the strength in my limbs fails. O how I wish  
a fatal doom from Zeus had buried me  
with all those men who perished!

### CHORUS LEADER

Alas, my king,  
for our brave force and the mighty honour  
of Persia's influence, those splendid men [920]  
whom fate has now cut down. The earth laments  
her native youth, the soldiers Xerxes killed,  
who filled all Hades with the Persian dead. 1090  
So many men—our country's flowers—slain,  
thousands perishing from enemy bows,  
a close-packed multitude, all dead and gone.<sup>1</sup>  
Alas! Alas, for all our brave protectors!  
O sovereign of the earth, all Asian lands  
are now upon their knees, a dreadful sight, [930]  
so dreadful. . . .

### XERXES

You see me here, alas, a sad  
and useless wretch who has become  
an evil presence for my race  
and for my native land. 1100

### CHORUS

For your return I will send out  
in these harsh-sounding tones  
a cry of ominous grief,  
one full of tears, a shout  
of Mariandynian sorrow.<sup>2</sup> [940]

### XERXES

Then let your sad lament resound,  
a harsh and plaintive cry.  
For the god has turned against me.

---

<sup>1</sup>Here the Chorus describes the Greeks as fighting with bows. Earlier in the play there has been a distinction between the Persians, who fight with bows, and the Greeks, who fight with spears.

<sup>2</sup>The Mariandynians were a Thracian people, famous for their funeral laments.

## CHORUS

Yes, I will sing my tearful chant  
 to honour the men who suffered so 1110  
 in that defeat at sea—a dirge  
 from those who mourn this land  
 and lament its slaughtered sons.  
 My doleful grief I voice once more.

## XERXES

Ionian Ares with those ships of war [950]  
 turned the tide of victory  
 and swept our troops away—  
 the Greek fleet razed the murky sea  
 and that fatal cliff onshore.<sup>1</sup>

## CHORUS

Aaaaii! Cry out your sorrows, 1120  
 and learn the tale in full.  
 Where are they now, that multitude  
 of other friends so dear to us?  
 Where are the ones who stood by you—  
 Pharandaces, and Sousas, and Pelagon,  
 with Agabatas and Dotamas,  
 Psammis, and Sousiskanes, [960]  
 who came from Agbatana?

## XERXES

I left them there. They perished,  
 tumbling out of their Tyrian ship 1030  
 by the coast of Salamis,  
 beaten against its rugged shore.

## CHORUS

Aaaii! Where is Pharnouchus, your friend,  
 and Ariomardus, that glorious man?  
 And lord Seualcus or Lilaïos,  
 descended from a noble line, [970]  
 or Memphis, Tharybis, and Masistras,  
 or Hystaichmas and Artembares?  
 I am asking you about them, too.

---

<sup>1</sup>This is a reference to the destruction of the Persians on Psyttaleia (see line 516 above).

## PERSIANS

XERXES

Alas! Alas! They caught a glimpse  
of ancient Athens, that hateful place!  
Now all of them at one fell blow—  
the pain of those poor wretches!—  
lie gasping on the shore.

1040

CHORUS

And did you really leave behind  
Alpistos, son of Batanochus,  
your ever-loyal Persian eye  
who tracked men by the thousands?  
[ . . . . . ]<sup>1</sup>  
The sons of Sesames and Megabates,  
with Parthos and the great Oibares—  
did you abandon them, as well,  
and leave them with the others?  
Alas, alas, for those poor men!  
You talk of catastrophic woes  
among our noble Persians.

[980]  
1050

XERXES

What you say truly makes me yearn  
for all my fine companions,  
when you bring up the evil times,  
that hateful woe I cannot bear.  
From deep within, my grieving heart  
howls out my pain and sorrow.

[990]  
1160

CHORUS

But there are other men we miss—  
like Xanthes, who as commander  
captained countless Mardian men,  
as well as warlike Anchaes,  
and Diaixis, too, and Arsakes,  
who led the cavalry,  
and Agdadatas, Lythimnas,  
and Tolmus, too, whose appetite  
could never get enough of war.  
I am amazed they are not here

1170  
[1000]

---

<sup>1</sup>The “eyes” of the Persian king were officials whose task was to keep him informed about what was going on among the king’s subjects. Some portion of the text is evidently missing after line 981 in the Greek.

PERSIANS

marching behind you in your train  
with your wheel-drawn carriage tent.

XERXES

Those leaders of our forces are all dead.

CHORUS

They are gone? Alas! And with no glory!

XERXES

Aaaaaiiii! The sorrow!

CHORUS

Alas! Alas, you spirits above,  
you bring us such disaster,  
so unforeseen and yet so clear to see,  
as if the goddess of folly, Ate,  
had glanced at us in this calamity.<sup>1</sup>

1180

XERXES

We have been hit by blows,  
smitten by unexpected blows of fate!

CHORUS

Yes, all too clearly stricken!

XERXES

New troubles, strange disasters!

[1010]

CHORUS

It was bad luck for us we ran into  
those ships and sailors from Ionia.  
The Persian race, as we can see,  
has had no luck in war.

1190

XERXES

How can that be? Such a mighty force!  
And I, a miserable wretch,  
have now been beaten down!

---

<sup>1</sup>Ate, the goddess of folly, caused people temporarily to lose all their judgment, so that they made decisions with disastrous consequences.



PERSIANS

CHORUS

And of our splendid Persian glory  
what has not perished?

XERXES

Do you see my robes—  
what's left of them?

CHORUS

Yes, I see . . . I see them now.

XERXES

And my quiver here . . . [1020]

CHORUS

What are you saying?  
Is this what has been saved?

XERXES

. . . this holder for my arrows?

CHORUS

So small a remnant from so many!

XERXES

We have lost all our protectors! 1200

CHORUS

Ionian troops are not afraid to fight.

XERXES

They are a warlike race. I witnessed there  
what I did not expect—a great defeat.

CHORUS

You mean the way they beat your warships—  
that massive fleet?

XERXES

When that disaster came,  
I ripped my clothing.

CHORUS

Alas! Alas!

PERSIANS

XERXES

And there were even more catastrophes  
to make one cry “Alas!”

CHORUS

Two and three times more!

XERXES

Crushing grief—but for our enemies great joy!

CHORUS

Our strength has been lopped off.

1210

XERXES

I am now naked—stripped of my attendants!

CHORUS

By deaths of friends who perished on the sea.

XERXES

Weep for that catastrophe! Let your tears fall.  
Then return back to your homes.

CHORUS

Alas, such grief!

Alas, for our distress!

XERXES

Your cries of sorrow—

let them echo mine!

[1040]

CHORUS

An answering cry of anguished pain  
from one grief to another.

XERXES

Cry out and link together our laments!

CHORUS

Aaaaiiii! Misfortunes hard to bear!  
For I too share your grief!

1220

PERSIANS

XERXES

For my sake beat your chests and groan!

CHORUS

My sorrow drenches me with tears!

XERXES

Shout out your cries to answer mine.

CHORUS

We will respond to you, my king.

XERXES

Now raise your voices high in your laments. [1050]

CHORUS

Aaaaaiiii! Once more  
we mix our song of grief  
with these dark blows of pain!

XERXES

Now beat your chests and as you do  
howl out a Mysian strain!<sup>1</sup> 1230

CHORUS

Such grief! Such sorrow!

XERXES

And tear those white hairs on your chin!

CHORUS

With fists I clench my beard and moan!

XERXES

Let your shrill cries ring out!

CHORUS

I will cry out!

XERXES

And with your fingers rip your flowing robes! [1060]

---

<sup>1</sup>The Mysians, who lived in northern Asia Minor, were famous for their mourning laments.

PERSIANS

CHORUS

The pain! The sorrow!

XERXES

Now tug your hair out as you cry  
for our lost army!

CHORUS

With these fists  
I clench my hair and moan!

XERXES

Let your eyes fill with tears.

CHORUS

They do! They do!

XERXES

Shout out your cries to answer mine.

CHORUS

Alas! Alas!

1240

XERXES

And now, as you lament, go home.

CHORUS

Alas! Alas! Such grief to move  
across our Persian land.

[1070]

XERXES

Such grief throughout the city.

CHORUS

So much pain, so much distress!

XERXES

Tread softly as you wail your grief.

CHORUS

Alas! Alas! Such grief to move  
across our Persian land.

PERSIANS

XERXES

Aaaaiii! Alas, for those destroyed  
in the flat bottomed boats—  
the power of those three-tiered galleys!

1250

CHORUS

I will be your escort and attend on you  
with mournful cries of sorrow.

*[Xerxes and the Chorus exit.]*