

THE PERSIANS

by Aeschylus

THE PERSIANS

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THE PERSIANS

THE PERSIANS

by Aeschylus

translated by Robert Potter

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CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

ATOSSA, widow of Darius and mother of XERXES

MESSENGER

GHOST OF DARIUS

XERXES

CHORUS OF PERSIAN ELDERS, who compose the Persian Council of State

(SCENE:—Before the Council—Hall of the Persian Kings at Susa. The tomb of Darius the Great is visible. The time is 480 B.C., shortly after the battle of Salamis. The play opens with the CHORUS OF PERSIAN ELDERS singing its first choral lyric.)

CHORUS

While o'er the fields of Greece the embattled troops
Of Persia march with delegated sway,
We o'er their rich and gold-abounding seats
Hold faithful our firm guard; to this high charge
Xerxes, our royal lord, the imperial son
Of great Darius, chose our honour'd age.
But for the king's return, and his arm'd host
Blazing with gold, my soul presaging ill
Swells in my tortured breast: for all her force
Hath Asia sent, and for her youth I sigh.
Nor messenger arrives, nor horseman spurs
With tidings to this seat of Persia's kings.
The gates of Susa and Ecbatana
Pour'd forth their martial trains; and Cissia sees
Her ancient towers forsaken, while her youth,
Some on the bounding steed, the tall bark some
Ascending, some with painful march on foot,
Haste on, to arrange the deep'ning files of war.
Amistres, Artaphernes, and the might
Of great Astaspes, Megabazes bold,
Chieftains of Persia, kings, that, to the power
Of the great king obedient, march with these
Leading their martial thousands; their proud steeds
Prance under them; steel bows and shafts their arms,
Dreadful to see, and terrible in fight,
Deliberate valour breathing in their souls.
Artembares, that in his fiery horse
Delights; Masistress; and Imaeus bold,
Bending with manly strength his stubborn bow;
Pharandaces, and Sosthanes, that drives
With military pomp his rapid steeds.

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Others the vast prolific Nile hath sent;
Pegastagon, that from Aegyptus draws
His high birth; Susiscanes; and the chief
That reigns o'er sacred Memphis, great Arsames;
And Ariomardus, that o'er ancient Thebes
Bears the supreme dominion; and with these,
Drawn from their watery marshes, numbers train'd
To the stout oar. Next these the Lycian troops,
Soft sons of luxury; and those that dwell
Amid the inland forests, from the sea
Far distant; these Metragathes commands,
And virtuous Arceus, royal chiefs, that shine
In burnish'd gold, and many a whirling car
Drawn by six generous steeds from Sardis lead,
A glorious and a dreadful spectacle.
And from the foot of Tmolus, sacred mount,
Eager to bind on Greece the servile yoke,
Mardon and Tharybis the massy spear
Grasp with unwearied vigour; the light lance
The Mysians shake. A mingled multitude
Swept from her wide dominions skill'd to draw ;1H
The unerring bow, in ships Euphrates sends
From golden Babylon. With falchions arm'd
From all the extent of Asia move the hosts
Obedient to their monarch's stern command.
Thus march'd the flower of Persia, whose loved youth
The world of Asia nourish'd, and with sighs
Laments their absence; many an anxious look
Their wives, their parents send, count the slow days,
And tremble at the long-protracted time.

strophe 1

Already o'er the adverse strand
In arms the monarch's martial squadrons spread;
The threat'ning ruin shakes the land,
And each tall city bows its tower'd head.
Bark bound to bark, their wondrous way
They bridge across the indignant sea;
The narrow Hellespont's vex'd waves disdain,
His proud neck taught to wear the chain.
Now has the peopled Asia's warlike lord,
By land, by sea, with foot, with horse,
Resistless in his rapid course,
O'er all their realms his warring thousands pour'd;
Now his intrepid chiefs surveys,
And glitt'ring like a god his radiant state displays.

antistrophe 1

Fierce as the dragon scaled in gold
Through the deep files he darts his glowing eye;
And pleased their order to behold,
His gorgeous standard blazing to the sky,
Rolls onward his Assyrian car,

by Aeschylus

THE PERSIANS

Directs the thunder of the war,
Bids the wing'd arrows' iron storm advance
Against the slow and cumbrous lance.
What shall withstand the torrent of his sway
When dreadful o'er the yielding shores
The impetuous tide of battle roars,
And sweeps the weak opposing mounds away?
So Persia, with resistless might,
Rolls her unnumber'd hosts of heroes to the fight.
strophe 2

For when misfortune's fraudulent hand
Prepares to pour the vengeance of the sky,
What mortal shall her force withstand?
What rapid speed the impending fury fly?
Gentle at first with flatt'ring smiles
She spreads her soft enchanting wiles,
So to her toils allures her destined prey,
Whence man ne'er breaks unhurt away.
For thus from ancient times the Fates ordain
That Persia's sons should greatly dare,
Unequall'd in the works of war;
Shake with their thund'ring steeds the ensanguined plain,
Dreadful the hostile walls surround,
And lay their rampired towers in ruins on the ground.
antistrophe 2

Taught to behold with fearless eyes
The whitening billows foam beneath the gale,
They bid the naval forests rise,
Mount the slight bark, unfurl the flying sail,
And o'er the angry ocean bear
To distant realms the storm of war.
For this with many a sad and gloomy thought
My tortured breast is fraught:
Ah me! for Persia's absent sons I sigh;
For while in foreign fields they fight,
Our towns exposed to wild affright
An easy prey to the invader lie:
Where, mighty Susa, where thy powers,
To wield the warrior's arms, and guard thy regal towers?
epode

Crush'd beneath the assailing foe
Her golden head must Cissia bend;
While her pale virgins, frantic with despair,
Through all her streets awake the voice of wo;
And flying with their bosoms bare,
Their purpled stoles in anguish rend:
For all her youth in martial pride,
Like bees that, clust'ring round their king,
Their dark imbodied squadrons bring,
Attend their sceptred monarch's side,
And stretch across the watery way

THE PERSIANS

From shore to shore their long array.
The Persian dames, with many a tender fear,
In grief's sad vigils keep the midnight hour;
Shed on the widow'd couch the streaming tear,
And the long absence of their loves deplore.
Each lonely matron feels her pensive breast
Throb with desire, with aching fondness glow,
Since in bright arms her daring warrior dress'd
Left her to languish in her love-lorn wo.
Now, ye grave Persians, that your honour'd seats
Hold in this ancient house, with prudent care
And deep deliberation, so the state
Requires, consult we, pond'ring the event
Of this great war, which our imperial lord,
The mighty Xerxes from Darius sprung,
The stream of whose rich blood flows in our veins,
Leads against Greece; whether his arrowy shower
Shot from the strong-braced bow, or the huge spear
High brandish'd, in the deathful field prevails.
But see, the monarch's mother: like the gods
Her lustre blazes on our eyes: my queen,
Prostrate I fall before her: all advance
With reverence, and in duteous phrase address her,
(ATOSSA enters with her retinue. The Elders do their obeisance
to her.)

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Hail, queen, of Persia's high-zoned dames supreme,
Age-honour'd mother of the potent Xerxes,
Imperial consort of Darius, hail!
The wife, the mother of the Persians' god,
If yet our former glories fade not from us.

ATOSSA

And therefore am I come, leaving my house
That shines with gorgeous ornaments and gold,
Where in past days Darius held with me
His royal residence. With anxious care
My heart is tortured: I will tell you, friends,
My thoughts, not otherwise devoid of fear,
Lest mighty wealth with haughty foot o'erturn
And trample in the dust that happiness,
Which, not unblest'd by Heaven, Darius raised.
For this with double force unquiet thoughts
Past utterance fill my soul; that neither wealth
With all its golden stores, where men are wanting,
Claims reverence; nor the light, that beams from power,
Shines on the man whom wealth disdains to grace.
The golden stores of wealth indeed are ours;
But for the light (such in the house I deem
The presence of its lord) there I have fears.
Advise me then, you whose experienced age
Supports the state of Persia: prudence guides

THE PERSIANS

Your councils, always kind and faithful to me.

LEADER

Speak, royal lady, what thy will, assured
We want no second bidding, where our power
In word or deed waits on our zeal: our hearts
In this with honest duty shall obey thee.

ATOSSA

Oft, since my son hath march'd his mighty host
Against the Ionians, warring to subdue
Their country, have my slumbers been disturb'd
With dreams of dread portent; but most last night,
With marks of plainest proof. I'll tell thee then:
Althought two women stood before my eyes
Gorgeously vested, one in Persian robes
Adorn'd, the other in the Doric garb.
With more than mortal majesty they moved,
Of peerless beauty; sisters too they seem'd,
Though distant each from each they chanced to dwell,
In Greece the one, on the barbaric coast
The other. 'Twixt them soon dissension rose:
My son then hasted to compose their strife,
Soothed them to fair accord, beneath his car
Yokes them, and reins their harness'd necks. The one,
Exulting in her rich array, with pride
Arching her stately neck, obey'd the reins;
The other with indignant fury spurn'd
The car, and dash'd it piecemeal, rent the reins,
And tore the yoke asunder; down my son
Fell from the seat, and instant at his side
His father stands, Darius, at his fall
Impress'd with pity: him when Xerxes saw,
Glowing with grief and shame he rends his robes.
This was the dreadful vision of the night.
When I arose, in the sweet-flowing stream
I bathed my hands, and on the incensed altars
Presenting my oblations to the gods
To avert these ills, an eagle I behold
Fly to the altar of the sun; aghast
I stood, my friends, and speechless; when a hawk
With eager speed runs thither, furious cuffs
The eagle with his wings, and with his talons
Unplumes his head; meantime the imperial bird
Cowers to the blows defenceless. Dreadful this
To me that saw it, and to you that hear.
My son, let conquest crown his arms, would shine
With dazzling glory; but should Fortune frown,
The state indeed presumes not to arraign
His sovereignty; yet how, his honour lost,
How shall he sway the sceptre of this land?

LEADER

We would not, royal lady, sink thy soul

THE PERSIANS

With fear in the excess, nor raise it high
With confidence. Go then, address the gods;
If thou hast seen aught ill, entreat their power
To avert that ill, and perfect ev'ry good
To thee, thy sons, the state, and all thy friends.
Then to the earth, and to the mighty dead
Behooves thee pour libations; gently call
Him that was once thy husband, whom thou saw'st
In visions of the night; entreat his shade
From the deep realms beneath to send to light
Triumph to thee and to thy son; whate'er
Bears other import, to inwrap, to hide it
Close in the covering earth's profoundest gloom.
This, in the presage of my thoughts that flow
Benevolent to thee, have I proposed;
And all, we trust, shall be successful to thee.

ATOSSA

Thy friendly judgment first hath placed these dreams
In a fair light, confirming the event
Benevolent to my son and to my house.
May all the good be ratified! These rites
Shall, at thy bidding, to the powers of heaven,
And to the manes of our friends, be paid
In order meet, when I return; meanwhile
Indulge me, friends, who wish to be inform'd
Where, in what clime, the towers of Athens rise.

LEADER

Far in the west, where sets the imperial sun.

ATOSSA

Yet my son will'd the conquest of this town.

LEADER

May Greece through all her states bend to his power!

ATOSSA

Send they embattled numbers to the field?

LEADER

A force that to the Medes hath wrought much wo.

ATOSSA

Have they sufficient treasures in their houses?

LEADER

Their rich earth yields a copious fount of silver.

ATOSSA

From the strong bow wing they the barbed shaft?

LEADER

They grasp the stout spear, and the massy shield.

ATOSSA

What monarch reigns, whose power commands their ranks?

LEADER

Slaves to no lord, they own no kingly power.

ATOSSA

How can they then resist the invading foe?

LEADER

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THE PERSIANS

As to spread havoc through the numerous host,
That round Darius form'd their glitt'ring files.

ATOSSA

Thy words strike deep, and wound the parent's breast
Whose sons are march'd to such a dangerous field.

LEADER

But, if I judge aright, thou soon shalt hear
Each circumstance; for this way, mark him, speeds
A Persian messenger; he bears, be sure,
Tidings of high import, or good or ill.
(A MESSENGER enters.)

MESSENGER

Wo to the towns through Asia's peopled realms!
Wo to the land of Persia, once the port
Of boundless wealth, how is thy glorious state
Vanish'd at once, and all thy spreading honours
Fall'n, lost! Ah me! unhappy is his task
That bears unhappy tidings: but constraint
Compels me to relate this tale of wo.
Persians, the whole barbaric host is fall'n.

CHORUS (chanting)

O horror, horror! What a baleful train
Of recent ills! Ah, Persians, as he speaks
Of ruin, let your tears stream to the earth.

MESSENGER

It is ev'n so, all ruin; and myself,
Beyond all hope returning, view this light.

CHORUS (chanting)

How tedious and oppressive is the weight
Of age, reserved to hear these hopeless ills!

MESSENGER

I speak not from report; but these mine eyes
Beheld the ruin which my tongue would utter.

CHORUS (chanting)

Wo, wo is me! Then has the iron storm,
That darken'd from the realms of Asia, pour'd
In vain its arrowy shower on sacred Greece.

MESSENGER

In heaps the unhappy dead lie on the strand
Of Salamis, and all the neighbouring shores.

CHORUS (chanting)

Unhappy friends, sunk, perish'd in the sea;
Their bodies, mid the wreck of shatter'd ships,
Mangled, and rolling on the encumber'd waves!

MESSENGER

Naught did their bows avail, but all the troops
In the first conflict of the ships were lost.

CHORUS (chanting)

Raise the funereal cry, with dismal notes
Wailing the wretched Persians. Oh, how ill
They plann'd their measures, all their army perish'd!

THE PERSIANS

MESSENGER

O Salamis, how hateful is thy name!
And groans burst from me when I think of Athens.

CHORUS (chanting)

How dreadful to her foes! Call to remembrance
How many Persian dames, wedded in vain,
Hath Athens of their noble husbands widow'd?

ATOSSA

Astonied with these ills, my voice thus long
Hath wanted utterance: griefs like these exceed
The power of speech or question: yet ev'n such,
Inflicted by the gods, must mortal man
Constrain'd by hard necessity endure.
But tell me all, without distraction tell me,
All this calamity, though many a groan
Burst from thy labouring heart. Who is not fallen?
What leader must we wail? What sceptred chief
Dying hath left his troops without a lord?

MESSENGER

Xerxes himself lives, and beholds the light.

ATOSSA

That word beams comfort on my house, a ray
That brightens through the melancholy gloom.

MESSENGER

Artembares, the potent chief that led
Ten thousand horse, lies slaughtered on the rocks
Of rough Sileniae. The great Dadaces,
Beneath whose standard march'd a thousand horse,
Pierced by a spear, fell headlong from the ship.
Tenagon, bravest of the Bactrians, lies
Roll'd on the wave-worn beach of Ajax' isle.
Lilaeus, Arsames, Argestes, dash
With violence in death against the rocks
Where nest the silver doves. Arcteus, that dwelt
Near to the fountains of the Egyptian Nile,
Adeues, and Pheresba, and Pharnuchus
Fell from one ship. Matallus, Chrysa's chief,
That led his dark'ning squadrons, thrice ten thousand,
On jet-black steeds, with purple gore distain'd
The yellow of his thick and shaggy beard.
The Magian Arabus, and Artames
From Bactra, mould'ring on the dreary shore
Lie low. Amistris, and Amphistreus there
Grasps his war-wear spear; there prostrate lies
The illustrious Ariomardus; long his los
Shall Sardis weep: thy Mysian Sisames,
And Tharybis, that o'er the burden'd deep
Led five times fifty vessels; Lerna gave
The hero birth, and manly race adorn'd
His pleasing form, but low in death he lies
Unhappy in his fate. Syennesis,

THE PERSIANS

Cilicia's warlike chief, who dared to front
The foremost dangers, singly to the foes
A terror, there too found a glorious death.
These chieftains to my sad remembrance rise,
Relating but a few of many ills.

ATOSSA

This is the height of ill, ah me! and shame
To Persia, grief, and lamentation loud.
But tell me this, afresh renew thy tale:
What was the number of the Grecian fleet,
That in fierce conflict their bold barks should dare
Rush to encounter with the Persian hosts.

MESSENGER

Know then, in numbers the barbaric fleet
Was far superior: in ten squadrons, each
Of thirty ships, Greece plough'd the deep; of these
One held a distant station. Xerxes led
A thousand ships; their number well I know;
Two hundred more, and seven, that swept the seas
With speediest sail: this was their full amount.
And in the engagement seem'd we not secure
Of victory? But unequal fortune sunk
Our scale in fight, discomfiting our host.

ATOSSA

The gods preserve the city of Minerva.

MESSENGER

The walls of Athens are impregnable,
Their firmest bulwarks her heroic sons.

ATOSSA

Which navy first advanced to the attack?
Who led to the onset, tell me; the bold Greeks,
Or, glorying in his numerous fleet, my son?

MESSENGER

Our evil genius, lady, or some god
Hostile to Persia, led to ev'ry ill.
Forth from the troops of Athens came a Greek,
And thus address'd thy son, the imperial Xerxes:—
"Soon as the shades of night descend, the Grecians
Shall quit their station; rushing to their oars
They mean to separate, and in secret flight
Seek safety." At these words, the royal chief,
Little conceiving of the wiles of Greece
And gods averse, to all the naval leaders
Gave his high charge:—"Soon as yon sun shall cease
To dart his radiant beams, and dark'ning night
Ascends the temple of the sky, arrange
In three divisions your well-ordered ships,
And guard each pass, each outlet of the seas:
Others enring around this rocky isle
Of Salamis. Should Greece escape her fate,
And work her way by secret flight, your heads

THE PERSIANS

Shall answer the neglect." This harsh command
He gave, exulting in his mind, nor knew
What Fate design'd. With martial discipline
And prompt obedience, snatching a repast,
Each mariner fix'd well his ready oar.
Soon as the golden sun was set, and night
Advanced, each train'd to ply the dashing oar,
Assumed his seat; in arms each warrior stood,
Troop cheering troop through all the ships of war.
Each to the appointed station steers his course;
And through the night his naval force each chief
Fix'd to secure the passes. Night advanced,
But not by secret flight did Greece attempt
To escape. The morn, all beauteous to behold,
Drawn by white steeds bounds o'er the enlighten'd earth;
At once from ev'ry Greek with glad acclaim
Burst forth the song of war, whose lofty notes
The echo of the island rocks return'd,
Spreading dismay through Persia's hosts, thus fallen
From their high hopes; no flight this solemn strain
Portended, but deliberate valour bent
On daring battle; while the trumpet's sound
Kindled the flames of war. But when their oars
The paeon ended, with impetuous force
Dash'd the resounding surges, instant all
Rush'd on in view: in orderly array
The squadron on the right first led, behind
Rode their whole fleet; and now distinct we heard
From ev'ry part this voice of exhortation:—
"Advance, ye sons of Greece, from thralldom save
Your country, save your wives, your children save,
The temples of your gods, the sacred tomb
Where rest your honour'd ancestors; this day
The common cause of all demands your valour."
Meantime from Persia's hosts the deep'ning shout
Answer'd their shout; no time for cold delay;
But ship 'gainst ship its brazen beak impell'd.
First to the charge a Grecian galley rush'd;
Ill the Phoenician bore the rough attack,
Its sculptured prow all shatter'd. Each advanced
Daring an opposite. The deep array
Of Persia at the first sustain'd the encounter;
But their throng'd numbers, in the narrow seas
Confined, want room for action; and, deprived
Of mutual aid, beaks clash with beaks, and each
Breaks all the other's oars: with skill disposed
The Grecian navy circled them around
With fierce assault; and rushing from its height
The inverted vessel sinks: the sea no more
Wears its accustomed aspect, with foul wrecks
And blood disfigured; floating carcasses

THE PERSIANS

Roll on the rocky shores: the poor remains
Of the barbaric armament to flight
Ply every oar inglorious: onward rush
The Greeks amid the ruins of the fleet,
As through a shoal of fish caught in the net,
Spreading destruction: the wide ocean o'er
Wailings are heard, and loud laments, till night
With darkness on her brow brought grateful truce.
Should I recount each circumstance of wo,
Ten times on my unfinished tale the sun
Would set; for be assured that not one day
Could close the ruin of so vast a host.

ATOSSA

Ah, what a boundless sea of wo hath burst
On Persia, and the whole barbaric race!

MESSENGER

These are not half, not half our ills; on these
Came an assemblage of calamities,
That sunk us with a double weight of wo.

ATOSSA

What fortune can be more unfriendly to us
Than this? Say on, what dread calamity
Sunk Persia's host with greater weight of wo.

MESSENGER

Whoe'er of Persia's warriors glow'd in prime
Of vig'rous youth, or felt their generous souls
Expand with courage, or for noble birth
Shone with distinguish'd lustre, or excell'd
In firm and duteous loyalty, all these
Are fall'n, ignobly, miserably fall'n.

ATOSSA

Alas, their ruthless fate, unhappy friends!
But in what manner, tell me, did they perish?

MESSENGER

Full against Salamis an isle arises,
Of small circumference, to the anchor'd bark
Unfaithful; on the promontory's brow,
That overlooks the sea, Pan loves to lead
The dance: to this the monarch sends these chiefs,
That when the Grecians from their shatter'd ships
Should here seek shelter, these might hew them down
An easy conquest, and secure the strand
To their sea-wearied friends; ill judging what
The event: but when the fav'ring god to Greece
Gave the proud glory of this naval fight,
Instant in all their glitt'ring arms they leap'd
From their light ships, and all the island round
Encompass'd, that our bravest stood dismay'd;
While broken rocks, whirl'd with tempestuous force,
And storms of arrows crush'd them; then the Greeks
Rush to the attack at once, and furious spread

THE PERSIANS

The carnage, till each mangled Persian fell.
Deep were the groans of Xerxes when he saw
This havoc; for his seat, a lofty mound
Commanding the wide sea, o'erlook'd his hosts.
With rueful cries he rent his royal robes,
And through his troops embattled on the shore
Gave signal of retreat; then started wild,
And fled disorder'd. To the former ills
These are fresh miseries to awake thy sighs.

ATOSSA

Invidious Fortune, how thy baleful power
Hath sunk the hopes of Persia! Bitter fruit
My son hath tasted from his purposed vengeance
On Athens, famed for arms; the fatal field
Of Marathon, red with barbaric blood,
Sufficed not; that defeat he thought to avenge,
And pull'd this hideous ruin on his head.
But tell me, if thou canst, where didst thou leave
The ships that happily escaped the wreck?

MESSENGER

The poor remains of Persia's scatter'd fleet
Spread ev'ry sail for flight, as the wind drives,
In wild disorder; and on land no less
The ruin'd army; in Boeotia some,
With thirst oppress'd, at Crene's cheerful rills
Were lost; forespent with breathless speed some pass
The fields of Phocis, some the Doric plain,
And near the gulf of Melia, the rich vale
Through which Sperchius rolls his friendly stream.
Achaea thence and the Thessalian state
Received our famish'd train; the greater part
Through thirst and hunger perish'd there, oppress'd
At once by both: but we our painful steps
Held onwards to Magnesia, and the land
Of Macedonia, o'er the ford of Axius,
And Bolbe's sedgy marshes, and the heights
Of steep Pangaeos, to the realms of Thrace.
That night, ere yet the season, breathing frore,
Rush'd winter, and with ice incrust'd o'er
The flood of sacred Strymon: such as own'd
No god till now, awe-struck, with many a prayer
Adored the earth and sky. When now the troops
Had ceased their invocations to the gods,
O'er the stream's solid crystal they began
Their march; and we, who took our early way,
Ere the sun darted his warm beams, pass'd safe:
But when this burning orb with fiery rays
Unbound the middle current, down they sunk
Each over other; happiest he who found
The speediest death: the poor remains, that 'scaped,
With pain through Thrace dragg'd on their toilsome march,

THE PERSIANS

A feeble few, and reach'd their native soil;
That Persia sighs through all her states, and mourns
Her dearest youth. This is no feigned tale:
But many of the ills, that burst upon us
In dreadful vengeance, I refrain to utter.
(The MESSENGER withdraws.)

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

O Fortune, heavy with affliction's load,
How bath thy foot crush'd all the Persian race!

ATOSSA

Ah me, what sorrows for our ruin'd host
Oppress my soul! Ye visions of the night
Haunting my dreams, how plainly did you show
These ills!—You set them in too fair a light.
Yet, since your bidding hath in this prevail'd,
First to the gods wish I to pour my prayers,
Then to the mighty dead present my off 'rings,
Bringing libations from my house: too late,
I know, to change the past; yet for the future,
If haply better fortune may await it,
Behooves you, on this sad event, to guide
Your friends with faithful counsels. Should my son
Return ere I have finish'd, let your voice
Speak comfort to him; friendly to his house
Attend him, nor let sorrow rise on sorrows.
(ATOSSA and her retinue go out.)

CHORUS (singing)

strophe

Awful sovereign of the skies,
When now o'er Persia's numerous host
Thou badest the storm with ruin rise,
All her proud vaunts of glory lost,
Ecbatana's imperial head
By thee was wrapp'd in sorrow's dark'ning shade;
Through Susa's palaces with loud lament,
By their soft hands their veils all rent,
The copious tear the virgins pour,
That trickles their bare bosoms o'er.
From her sweet couch up starts the widow'd bride,
Her lord's loved image rushing on her soul,
Throws the rich ornaments of youth aside,
And gives her griefs to flow without control:
Her griefs not causeless; for the mighty slain
Our melting tears demand, and sorrow—soften'd strain.

antistrophe

Now her wailings wide despair
Pours these exhausted regions o'er:
Xerxes, ill-fated, led the war;
Xerxes, ill-fated, leads no more;
Xerxes sent forth the unwise command,
The crowded ships unpeopled all the land;

by Aeschylus

THE PERSIANS

That land, o'er which Darius held his reign,
Courting the arts of peace, in vain,
O'er all his grateful realms adored,
The stately Susa's gentle lord.
Black o'er the waves his burden'd vessels sweep,
For Greece elate the warlike squadrons fly;
Now crush'd, and whelm'd beneath the indignant deep
The shatter'd wrecks and lifeless heroes lie:
While, from the arms of Greece escaped, with toil
The unshelter'd monarch roams o'er Thracia's dreary soil.
epode

The first in battle slain
By Cychrea's craggy shore
Through sad constraint, ah me! forsaken lie,
All pale and smear'd with gore:—
Raise high the mournful strain,
And let the voice of anguish pierce the sky:—
Or roll beneath the roaring tide,
By monsters rent of touch abhorr'd;
While through the widow'd mansion echoing wide
Sounds the deep groan, and wails its slaughter'd lord:
Pale with his fears the helpless orphan there
Gives the full stream of plaintive grief to flow;
While age its hoary head in deep despair
Bends; list'ning to the shrieks of wo.
With sacred awe
The Persian law
No more shall Asia's realms revere;
To their lord's hand
At his command,
No more the exacted tribute bear.
Who now falls prostrate at the monarch's throne?
His regal greatness is no more.
Now no restraint the wanton tongue shall own,
Free from the golden curb of power;
For on the rocks, wash'd by the beating flood,
His awe commanding nobles lie in blood.
(ATOSSA returns, clad in the garb of mourning; she carries
offerings for the tomb of Darius.)

ATOSSA

Whoe'er, my friends, in the rough stream of life
Hath struggled with affliction, thence is taught
That, when the flood begins to swell, the heart
Fondly fears all things; when the fav'ring gale
Of Fortune smooths the current, it expands
With unsuspecting confidence, and deems
That gale shall always breathe. So to my eyes
All things now wear a formidable shape,
And threaten from the gods: my ears are pierced
With sounds far other than of song. Such ills
Dismay my sick'ning soul: hence from my house

THE PERSIANS

Nor glitt'ring car attends me, nor the train
Of wonted state, while I return, and bear
Libations soothing to the father's shade
In the son's cause; delicious milk, that foams
White from the sacred heifer; liquid honey,
Extract of flowers; and from its virgin fount
The running crystal; this pure draught, that flow'd
From the ancient vine, of power to bathe the spirits
In joy; the yellow olive's fragrant fruit,
That glories in its leaves' unfading verdure;
With flowers of various hues, earth's fairest offspring
Inwreathed. But you, my friends, amid these rites
Raise high your solemn warblings, and invoke
Your lord, divine Darius; I meanwhile
Will pour these off'rings to the infernal gods.

CHORUS (chanting)

Yes, royal lady, Persia's honour'd grace,
To earth's dark chambers pour thy off'rings: we
With choral hymns will supplicate the powers
That guide the dead, to be propitious to us.
And you, that o'er the realms of night extend
Your sacred sway, thee mighty earth, and the
Hermes; thee chief, tremendous king, whose throne
Awe with supreme dominion, I adjure:
Send, from your gloomy regions, send his shade
Once more to visit this ethereal light;
That he alone, if aught of dread event
He sees yet threat'ning Persia, may disclose
To us poor mortals Fate's extreme decree.
Hears the honour'd godlike king?
These barbaric notes of wo,
Taught in descant sad to ring,
Hears he in the shades below?
Thou, O Earth, and you, that lead
Through your sable realms the dead,
Guide him as he takes his way,
And give him to the ethereal light of day!
Let the illustrious shade arise
Glorious in his radiant state,
More than blazed before our eyes,
Ere sad Susa mourn'd his fate.
Dear he lived, his tomb is dear,
Shrining virtues we revere:
Send then, monarch of the dead,
Such as Darius was, Darius' shade.
He in realm—unpeopling war
Wasted not his subjects' blood,
Godlike in his will to spare,
In his councils wise and good.
Rise then, sovereign lord, to light;
On this mound's sepulchral height

THE PERSIANS

Lift thy sock in saffron died,
And rear thy rich tiara's regal pride!
Great and good, Darius, rise:
Lord of Persia's lord, appear:
Thus involved with thrilling cries
Come, our tale of sorrow hear!
War her Stygian pennons spreads,
Brooding darkness o'er our heads;
For stretch'd along the dreary shore
The flow'r of Asia lies distain'd with gore.
Rise, Darius, awful power;
Long for thee our tears shall flow.
Why thy ruin'd empire o'er
Swells this double flood of wo?
Sweeping o'er the azure tide
Rode thy navy's gallant pride:
Navy now no more, for all
Beneath the whelming wave—
(While the CHORUS Sings, ATOSSA performs her ritual by the tomb.
As the song concludes the GHOST OF DARIUS appears from the tomb.)

GHOST OF DARIUS

Ye faithful Persians, honour'd now in age,
Once the companions of my youth, what ills
Afflict the state? The firm earth groans, it opes,
Disclosing its vast deeps; and near my tomb
I see my wife: this shakes my troubled soul
With fearful apprehensions; yet her offerings
Pleased I receive. And you around my tomb
Chanting the lofty strain, whose solemn air
Draws forth the dead, with grief—attemper'd notes
Mournfully call me: not with ease the way
Leads to this upper air; and the stern gods,
Prompt to admit, yield not a passage back
But with reluctance: much with them my power
Availing, with no tardy step I come.
Say then, with what new ill doth Persia groan?

CHORUS (chanting)

My wonted awe o'ercomes me; in thy presence
I dare not raise my eyes, I dare not speak.

GHOST OF DARIUS

Since from the realms below, by thy sad strains
Adjured, I come, speak; let thy words be brief;
Say whence thy grief, tell me unawed by fear.
I dread to forge a flattering tale, I dread
To grieve thee with a harsh offensive truth.

GHOST OF DARIUS

Since fear hath chained his tongue, high—honour'd dame,
Once my imperial consort, check thy tears,
Thy griefs, and speak distinctly. Mortal man
Must bear his lot of wo; afflictions rise
Many from sea, many from land, if life

THE PERSIANS

Be haply measured through a lengthen'd course.

ATOSSA

O thou that graced with Fortune's choicest gifts
Surpassing mortals, while thine eye beheld
Yon sun's ethereal rays, lived'st like a god
Bless'd amid thy Persians; bless'd I deem thee now
In death, ere sunk in this abyss of ills,
Darius, hear at once our sum of wo;
Ruin through all her states hath crush'd thy Persia.

GHOST OF DARIUS

By pestilence, or faction's furious storms?

ATOSSA

Not so: near Athens perish'd all our troops.

GHOST OF DARIUS

Say, of my sons, which led the forces thither?

ATOSSA

The impetuous Xerxes, thinning all the land.

GHOST OF DARIUS

By sea or land dared he this rash attempt?

ATOSSA

By both: a double front the war presented.

GHOST OF DARIUS

A host so vast what march conducted o'er?

ATOSSA

From shore to shore he bridged the Hellespont.

GHOST OF DARIUS

What! could he chain the mighty Bosphorus?

ATOSSA

Ev'n so, some god assisting his design.

GHOST OF DARIUS

Some god of power to cloud his better sense.

ATOSSA

The event now shows what mischiefs he achieved.

GHOST OF DARIUS

What suffer'd they, for whom your sorrows flow?

ATOSSA

His navy sunk spreads ruin through the camp.

GHOST OF DARIUS

Fell all his host beneath the slaught'ring spear?

ATOSSA

Susa, through all her streets, mourns her lost sons.

GHOST OF DARIUS

How vain the succour, the defence of arms?

ATOSSA

In Bactra age and grief are only left.

GHOST OF DARIUS

Ah, what a train of warlike youth is lost!

ATOSSA

Xerxes, astonished, desolate, alone—

GHOST OF DARIUS

How will this end? Nay, pause not. Is he safe?

THE PERSIANS

ATOSSA

Fled o'er the bridge, that join'd the adverse strands.

GHOST OF DARIUS

And reach'd this shore in safety? Is this true?

ATOSSA

True are thy words, and not to be gainsay'd.

GHOST OF DARIUS

With what a winged course the oracles
Haste their completion! With the lightning's speed
Jove on my son hath hurled his threaten'd vengeance:
Yet I implored the gods that it might fall
In time's late process: but when rashness drives
Impetuous on, the scourge of Heaven upraised
Lashes the Fury forward; hence these ills
Pour headlong on my friends. Not weighing this,
My son, with all the fiery pride of youth,
Hath quickened their arrival, while he hoped
To bind the sacred Hellespont, to hold
The raging Bosphorus, like a slave, in chains,
And dared the advent'rous passage, bridging firm
With links of solid iron his wondrous way,
To lead his numerous host; and swell'd with thoughts
Presumptuous, deem'd, vain mortal! that his power
Should rise above the gods, and Neptune's might.
And was riot this the phrensy of the soul?
But much I fear lest all my treasured wealth
Fall to some daring hand an easy prey.

ATOSSA

This from too frequent converse with bad men
The impetuous Xerxes learn'd; these caught his ear
With thy great deeds, as winning for thy sons
Vast riches with thy conquering spear, while he
Tim'rous and slothful, never, save in sport,
Lifted his lance, nor added to the wealth
Won by his noble fathers. This reproach
Oft by bad men repeated, urged his soul
To attempt this war, and lead his troops to Greece.

GHOST OF DARIUS

Great deeds have they achieved, and memorable
For ages: never hath this wasted state
Suffer'd such ruin, since heaven's awful king
Gave to one lord Asia's extended plains
White with innumerable flocks, and to his hands
Consign'd the imperial sceptre. Her brave hosts
A Mede first led; the virtues of his son
Fix'd firm the empire, for his temperate soul
Breathed prudence. Cyrus next, by fortune graced,
Adorn'd the throne, and bless'd his grateful friends
With peace: he to his mighty monarchy
Join'd Lydia, and the Phrygians; to his power
Ionia bent reluctant; but the gods

THE PERSIANS

His son then wore the regal diadem.
With victory his gentle virtues crown'd
His son then wore the regal diadem.
Next to disgrace his country, and to stain
The splendid glories of this ancient throne,
Rose Mardus: him, with righteous vengeance fired
Artaphernes, and his confederate chiefs
Crush'd in his palace: Maraphis assumed
The sceptre: after him Artaphernes.
Me next to this exalted eminence,
Crowning my great ambition, Fortune raised.
In many a glorious field my glittering spear
Flamed in the van of Persia's numerous hosts;
But never wrought such ruin to the state.
Xerxes, my son, in all the pride of youth
Listens to youthful counsels, my commands
No more remember'd; hence, my hoary friends,
Not the whole line of Persia's sceptred lords,
You know it well, so wasted her brave sons.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Why this? To what fair end are these thy words
Directed? Sovereign lord, instruct thy Persians
How, mid this ruin, best to guide their state.

GHOST OF DARIUS

No more 'gainst Greece lead your embattled hosts;
Not though your deep'ning phalanx spreads the field
Outnumb'ring theirs: their very earth fights for them.

LEADER

What may thy words import? How fight for them?

GHOST OF DARIUS

With famine it destroys your cumbrous train.

LEADER

Choice levies, prompt for action, will we send,

GHOST OF DARIUS

Those, in the fields of Greece that now remain,
Shall not revisit safe the Persian shore.

LEADER

What! shall not all the host of Persia pass
Again from Europe o'er the Hellespont?

GHOST OF DARIUS

Of all their numbers few, if aught avails
The faith of heaven-sent oracles to him
That weighs the past, in their accomplishment
Not partial: hence he left, in faithless hope
Confiding, his selected train of heroes.
These have their station where Asopus flows
Wat'ring the plain, whose grateful currents roll
Diffusing plenty through Boeotia's fields.
There misery waits to crush them with the load
Of heaviest ills, in vengeance for their proud
And impious daring; for where'er they held

THE PERSIANS

Through Greece their march, they fear'd not to profane
The statues of the gods; their hallow'd shrines
Emblazed, o'erturn'd their altars, and in ruins,
Rent from their firm foundations, to the ground
Levell'd their temples; such their frantic deeds,
Nor less their sufferings; greater still await them;
For Vengeance hath not wasted all her stores;
The heap yet swells; for in Plataea's plains
Beneath the Doric spear the clotted mass
Of carnage shall arise, that the high mounds,
Piled o'er the dead, to late posterity
Shall give this silent record to men's eyes,
That proud aspiring thoughts but ill beseem
Weak mortals: for oppression, when it springs,
Puts forth the blade of vengeance, and its fruit
Yields a ripe harvest of repentant woe.
Behold this vengeance, and remember Greece,
Remember Athens: henceforth let not pride,
Her present state disdain, strive to grasp
Another's, and her treasured happiness
Shed on the ground: such insolent attempts
Awake the vengeance of offended Jove.
But you, whose age demands more temperate thoughts,
With words of well-placed counsel teach his youth
To curb that pride, which from the gods calls down
Destruction on his head. (To ATOSSA) And thou, whose age
The miseries of thy Xerxes sink with sorrow,
Go to thy house, thence choose the richest robe,
And meet thy son; for through the rage of grief
His gorgeous vestments from his royal limbs
Are foully rent. With gentlest courtesy
Soothe his affliction; for is dutiful ear,
I know, will listen to thy voice alone.
Now to the realms of darkness I descend.
My ancient friends, farewell, and mid these ills
Each day in pleasures battle your drooping spirits,
For treasured riches naught avail the dead.
(The GHOST OF DARIUS vanishes into the tomb.)

LEADER

These many present, many future ills
Denounced on Persia, sink my soul with grief.

ATOSSA

Unhappy fortune, what a tide of ills
Bursts o'er me! Chief this foul disgrace, which shows
My son divested of his rich attire,
His royal robes all rent, distracts my thoughts.
But I will go, choose the most gorgeous vest,
And liaste to meet my son. Ne'er in his woes
Will I forsake whom my soul holds most dear.
(ATOSSA departs as the CHORUS begins its song.)

CHORUS

THE PERSIANS

strophe 1

Ye powers that rule the skies,
Memory recalls our great, our happy fate,
Our well-appointed state,
The scenes of glory opening to our eyes,
When this vast empire o'er
The good Darius, with each virtue bless'd
That forms a monarch's breast,
Shielding his subjects with a father's care
Invincible in war,
Extended like a god his awful power,
Then spread our arms their glory wide,
Guarding to peace her golden reign:
Each tower'd city saw with pride
Safe from the toils of war her homeward-marching train.

antistrophe 1

Nor Haly's shallow strand
He pass'd, nor from his palace moved his state;
He spoke; his word was Fate.
What strong-based cities could his might withstand?
Not those that lift their heads
Where to the sea the floods of Strymon pass,
Leaving the huts of Thrace;
Nor those, that far the extended ocean o'er
Stand girt with many a tower;
Nor where the Hellespont his broad wave spreads;
Nor the firm bastions' rampired might,
Whose foot the deep Propontis laves;
Nor those, that glorying in their height
Frown o'er the Pontic sea, and shade his darken'd waves.

strophe 2

Each sea-girt isle around
Bow'd to this monarch: humbled Lesbos bow'd;
Paros, of its marble proud;
Naxos with vines, with olives Samos crown'd:
Him Myconos adored;
Chios, the seat of beauty; Andros steep,
That stretches o'er the deep
To meet the wat'ry Tenos; him each bay
Bound by the Icarian sea,
Him Melos, Gnidus, Rhodes confess'd their lord;
O'er Cyprus stretch'd his sceptred hand:
Paphos and Solos own'd his power,
And Salamis, whose hostile strand,
The cause of all our wo, is red with Persian gore.

antistrophe 2

Ev'n the proud towns, that rear'd
Sublime along the Ionian coast their towers,
Where wealth her treasures pours,
Peopled from Greece, his prudent reign revered.
With such unconquer'd might

by Aeschylus

THE PERSIANS

His hardy warriors shook the embattled fields,
Heroes that Persia yields,
And those from distant realms that took their way,
And wedged in close array
Beneath his glitt'ring banners claim'd the fight.
But now these glories are no more:
Farewell the big war's plumed pride:
The gods have crush'd this trophied power;
Sunk are our vanquish'd arms beneath the indignant tide.
(XERXES enters, with a few followers. His royal raiment is torn,
The entire closing scene is sung or chanted.)

XERXES

Ah me, how sudden have the storms of Fate,
Beyond all thought, all apprehension, burst
On my devoted head! O Fortune, Fortune!
With what relentless fury hath thy hand
Hurl'd desolation on the Persian race!
Wo unsupportable! The torturing thought
Of our lost youth comes rushing on my mind,
And sinks me to the ground. O Jove, that
Had died with those brave men that died in fight I

CHORUS

O thou afflicted monarch, once the lord
Of marshall'd armies, of the lustre beam'd
From glory's ray o'er Persia, of her sons
The pride, the grace, whom ruin now hath sunk
In blood! The unpeopled land laments her youth
By Xerxes led to slaughter, till the realms
Of death are gorged with Persians; for the flower
Of all the realm, thousands, whose dreadful bows
With arrowy shower annoy'd the foe, are fall'n.

XERXES

Your fall, heroic youths, distracts my soul.

CHORUS

And Asia sinking on her knee, O king,
Oppress'd, with griefs oppress'd, bends to the earth.

XERXES

And I, O wretched fortune, I was born
To crush, to desolate my ruin'd country!

CHORUS

I have no voice, no swelling harmony,
No descant, save these notes of wo,
Harsh, and responsive to the sullen sigh,
Rude strains, that unmelodious flow,
To welcome thy return.

XERXES

Then bid them flow, bid the wild measures flow
Hollow, unmusical, the notes of grief;
They suit my fortune, and dejected state.

CHORUS

Yes, at thy royal bidding shall the strain

THE PERSIANS

Pour the deep sorrows of my soul;
The sufferings of my bleeding country plain,
And bid the mournful measures roll.
Again the voice of wild despair
With thrilling shrieks shall pierce the air;
For high the god of war his flaming crest
Raised, with the fleet of Greece surrounded,
The haughty arms of Greece with conquest bless'd,
And Persia's wither'd force confounded,
Dash'd on the dreary beach her heroes slain,
Or overwhelm'd them in the darken'd main.

XERXES

To swell thy griefs ask ev'ry circumstance.

CHORUS

Where are thy valiant friends, thy chieftains where?
Pharnaces, Susas, and the might
Of Pelagon, and Dotamas? The spear
Of Agabates bold in fight?
Psammis in mailed cuirass dress'd,
And Susiscanes' glitt'ring crest?

XERXES

Dash'd from the Tyrian vessel on the rocks
Of Salamis they sunk, and smear'd with gore
The heroes on the dreary strand are stretch'd.

CHORUS

Where is Pharnuchus? Ariomardus where,
With ev'ry gentle virtue graced?
Lilaeus, that from chiefs renown'd in war
His high-descended lineage traced?
Where rears Sebalces his crown-circled head:
Where Tharybis to battles bred,
Artembares, Hystaechmes bold,
Memphis, Masistress sheath'd in gold?

XERXES

Wretch that I am! These on the abhorred town
Ogygian Athens, roll'd their glowing eyes
Indignant; but at once in the fierce shock
Of battle fell, dash'd breathless on the ground.

CHORUS

There does the son of Batanochus lie,
Through whose rich veins the unsullied blood
Of Susamus, down from the lineage high
Of noble Mygabatas flow'd:
Alpistus, who with faithful care
Number'd the deep'ning files of war,
The monarch's eye; on the ensanguined plain
Low is the mighty warrior laid?
Is great Aebares 'mong the heroes slain,
And Partheus number'd with the dead?—
Ah me! those bursting groans, deep-charged with wo,
The fate of Persia's princes show.

THE PERSIANS

XERXES

To my grieved memory thy mournful voice,
Tuned to the saddest notes of wo, recalls
My brave friends lost; and my rent heart returns
In dreadful symphony the sorrowing strain.

CHORUS

Yet once more shall I ask thee, yet once more,
Where is the Mardian Xanthes' might,
The daring chief, that from the Pontic shore
Led his strong phalanx to the fight?
Anchaes where, whose high-raised shield
Flamed foremost in the embattled field?
Where the high leaders of thy mail-clad horse,
Daixis and Arsaces where?
Where Cigdadata and Lythimnas' force,
Waving untired his purple spear?

XERXES

Entomb'd, I saw them in the earth entomb'd;
Nor did the rolling car with solemn state
Attend their rites: I follow'd: low they lie
(Ah me, the once great leaders of my host!
Low in the earth, without their honours lie.

CHORUS

O wo, wo, wo! Unutterable wo
The demons of revenge have spread;
And Ate from her drear abode below
Rises to view the horrid deed.

XERXES

Dismay, and rout, and ruin, ills that wait
On man's afflicted fortune, sink us down.

CHORUS

Dismay, and rout, and ruin on us wait,
And all the vengeful storms of Fate: Ill flows on ill, on sorrows sorrows rise;
Misfortune leads her baleful train; Before the Ionian squadrons Persia flies,
Or sinks ingulf'd beneath the main.
Fall'n, fall'n is her imperial power,
And conquest on her banners waits no more.

XERXES

At such a fall, such troops of heroes lost,
How can my soul but sink in deep despair!
Cease thy sad strain.

CHORUS

Is all thy glory lost?

XERXES

Seest thou these poor remains of my rent robes?

CHORUS

I see, I see.

XERXES

And this ill-furnish'd quiver?

CHORUS

Wherefore preserved?

THE PERSIANS

XERXES

To store my treasured arrows.

CHORUS

Few, very few.

XERXES

And few my friendly aids.

CHORUS

I thought these Grecians shrunk appall'd at arms.

XERXES

No: they are bold and daring: these sad eyes
Beheld their violent and deathful deeds.

CHORUS

The ruin, sayst thou, of thy shattered fleet?

XERXES

And in the anguish of my soul I rent
My royal robes.

CHORUS

Wo, wo!

XERXES

And more than wo.

CHORUS

Redoubled, threefold wo!

XERXES

Disgrace to me,
But triumph to the foe.

CHORUS

Are all thy powers
In ruin crush'd?

XERXES

No satrap guards me now.

CHORUS

Thy faithful friends sunk in the roaring main.

XERXES

Weep, weep their loss, and lead me to my house;
Answer my grief with grief, an ill return
Of ills for ills. Yet once more raise that strain
Lamenting my misfortunes; beat thy breast,
Strike, heave the groan; awake the Mysian strain
To notes of loudest wo; rend thy rich robes,
Pluck up thy beard, tear off thy hoary locks,
And battle thine eyes in tears: thus through the streets
Solemn and slow with sorrow lead my steps;
Lead to my house, and wail the fate of Persia.

CHORUS

Yes, once more at thy bidding shall the strain
Pour the deep sorrows of my soul;
The sufferings of my bleeding untry plain,
And bid the Mysian measures roll.
Again the voice of wild despair
With thrilling shrieks shall pierce the air;
For high the god of war his flaming crest

THE PERSIANS

Raised, with the fleet of Greece surrounded,
The haughty arms of Greece with conquest bless'd,
And Persia's withered force confounded,
Dash'd on the dreary beach her heroes slain.,
Or whelm'd them in the darken'd main.
THE END