

# Persians

## Characters:

Chorus of Persian Elders  
Queen of Persia, widow of Darius and mother of Xerxes  
Persian Messenger  
Ghost of King Darius, father of Xerxes  
King Xerxes

*Setting: a crossroads near Susa, capital of the Persian Empire. Near a council house. On the left, a road leading from the Imperial Palace. On the right, a road leading to Susa from the West. A group of twelve Persian elders enters, left.*

### **Chorus of Persian Elders:**

When all the Persian troops had gone  
To conquer Greece, we old men known  
As 'The Trustees' were left to guard  
A rich, gold-glittering estate.  
Xerxes himself, High King, War Lord, 5  
(And eldest offspring of the late  
Darius) ordered us to head  
The empire while he is abroad,  
Trusting in our long years of service.

For some time now I have been nervous 10  
For him and his gold-glittering host—  
When will they ever come back home?  
The fortuneteller in my breast  
Has cried out with the voice of doom  
Because the whole strength of the land 15 (13)  
Has set out eagerly yapping round  
An inexperienced man, and still  
No page or courier has come  
With dispatch to the capital.

From Susa, Ecbatana and the ancient 20  
Kissian castle-keep,  
They left on horseback, foot and ship,  
Each marshalling his own contingent:  
Artaphernes, Megabates,  
Astaspes and Amistris—all 25  
Persians who love their King. Astraddle  
Horses and spurring countless bodies,  
Those bowmen were a frightening sight,  
So fierce in battle, so much pride.  
Masistris reckoned in their number, 30 (30)  
Artembares war-horse-tamer,  
Imaios the high-minded archer,

Pharnadakes and Sosthanes  
Urging his team of stallions on.

Glorious for the floods they nurture, 35  
The streams of Nile sent Sousikanes,  
Egypt's own Pegastagon  
And large Arsames who is famous  
For chanting at the Memphian altar.  
Among them, too, was Ariomardos 40  
Overseer of Thebes the Elder,  
And those old hands at mud and fen,  
Delta-goers, skillful rowers,  
Innumerable rivermen.

Next went the wealthy Lydians 45 (41)  
Who govern all the coastal clans.  
With funding from gold-glittering Sardis,  
Two of the High King's officers,  
Mitrogathes and brave Arkteus,  
Sent tribesman forth as charioteers 50  
To drive their countless battle-cars.  
Half were twin-, half triple-poled,  
But all were dreadful to behold.

Our lance-shattering anvils, then,  
Tharybis, Mardon, rushing down 55  
The slopes of holy Tmolus, led  
A light-armed Mysian brigade  
To clap Greece in a slavish yoke;  
And gold-glittering Babylon  
Dispatched, en masse, its alloyed corps: 60 (52)  
Men mounted on a rowing-deck  
Or shooting valiance from afar.

Every saber-bearing race  
In Asia has assumed its place  
In Xerxes' terrifying train— 65  
Thus was the flower of manhood,  
The best of Persia, sent abroad.

The continent that nursed them grieves  
Their absence, deeply needs them. Wives  
And children, reckoning the days, 70  
Shudder as the time drags on.

*Strophe A*  
The High King's city-engulfing host

Has long since breached the coast  
That dares oppose his own. Sea's neck  
Harnessed beneath a yoke, 75 (71)  
Our soldiers crossed the stretch of water  
Named from Athamas' daughter  
On a road made of dowels and knots,  
A boulevard of boats.

*Antistrophe A*

Prolific Asia's willful master 80  
Drove pious flocks to pasture  
On separate fields: some graze the brine;  
Others, the battle-plain;  
But everywhere staunch deputies  
Have set his mind at ease. 85  
Only a golden race could breed  
A man so like a god.

*Strophe B*

How like a surfeit serpent's slits  
His eyes shine black, emit no light.  
From his Assyrian chariot 90 (84)  
This king of countless boots and fleets  
Leads a far-shooting god of war  
Against men famous for the spear.

*Antistrophe B*

Nothing, not even an army tried  
In battle can withstand our flood 95  
Of soldiers, no stone mole exclude  
The rising and impossible tide.  
Our empire has an iron will;  
Its battery is unstoppable.

*Strophe C*

Destiny, by the will of heaven, 100  
has ruled for years and always given  
Our race success when it engages  
In rampart-devastating sieges,  
The counter-play of charging horses  
Or leveling a hill-top fortress. 105 (107)

*Antistrophe C*

And when the gale-wind's boisterous breath  
Battered our passage to white froth  
We pierced the wild groves of the sea  
With our ingenuity,

Daring to trust a file of troops 110  
To bold devices, plaited ropes.

*Epode*

And yet . . . what mortal can outwit  
Deities skilled at sleight of hand?  
What nimble tumbler with a bound  
Clear the encircling net? 115

Clever Calamity spreads grins  
Around the entrance to the trap;  
And man, once caught, for all he strains  
And wriggles, never can escape.

*Strophe D*

So my heart wears a sable cloak 120 (114)  
And shudders at its fears—  
The army never coming back  
And, soon as the whole city hears  
The mighty seat of Susa is  
Unmanned and vacuous, 125

*Antistrophe D*

The walls of Kissia responding  
As the women keen,  
Responding to the rhythmic pounding  
Of female fists on their own skin.  
I fear their gorgeous muslin dresses 130  
Will be ripped to pieces.

*Strophe E*

Now that all our warlike men  
On horseback and on foot left home  
As bees swarm from the honeycomb  
And marched with the high suzerain 135 (129)  
Over the ridge that joins two lands  
(A yoke across the continents),

*Antistrophe E*

All our marriage-beds are brimming  
With tears of longing. Wives who saw  
Armed eager husbands off to war 140  
Are still awaiting their home-coming:  
They sit here wistful and alone,  
Tenderly grieving men long gone.

Come, old Persians, since the need  
Has come upon us, let us gather 145  
Under this ancient roof and brood  
Wisely and thoroughly upon  
These matters: Is Darius' son  
True to the great name of his father  
And successful in this war? 150 (145)  
Has the back-bent longbow won  
Or the hefty tapered spear?

*The Queen of Persia enters on a chariot and with retinue, left.*

But look there! Xerxes' royal mother  
Is sweeping towards us, luminary  
As gods' eyes carved in statuary. 155  
I bow down humbly to the floor.  
Come, let us duly welcome her:

*The Persian elders prostrate themselves before the Queen as if she were a god.*

Greetings to the most exalted of the deep-sashed Persian matrons!  
All hail Xerxes' reverend mother and the widow of Darius!  
Queen, you are the former consort of a Persian god, as such, 160  
You in turn are mother to a god—unless, perhaps, the faithful  
Guardian spirit of the army has at long last turned against it.

**The Queen:**

Such fears are the reason I have set forth from the gilded palace,  
Left the chamber King Darius and myself once held in common—  
I have come because a thought gnaws on my heart. Since apprehension 165 (161)  
Never lets me rest, old friends, I shall confess my fear: by kicking  
Dust-clouds up around the world, our own colossal wealth may ruin  
All the benefits Darius heaped up with a god's assistance.

Hence the double cares fretting my breast: that heaps of wealth are nothing  
Without soldiers, and that splendor never shines on beggared races, 170  
Even if their strength is great. Although our wealth is not in danger,  
I am worried about Xerxes—he is daylight in my eyes;  
Yes, his regal presence shines like daylight in the palace.

Therefore,  
Seasoned loyalists, old Persians, since this matter stands just so,  
Share your minds with me. I rest my hopes entirely on your guidance. 175

**Chorus-leader:**

High Queen of the land, be certain you need never twice request  
Any act or any counsel our mean powers can offer you.  
You have called on counselors who only have the best intentions.

**The Queen:**

I have been nightly visited by dreams  
Since that first evening when my son the king, 180 (177)  
With all his panoply arrayed around him,  
Departed for the land of the Ionians.  
None of my visions, though, were half so vivid  
As what I saw last night. Let me describe it:

Two ladies, on parade before my eyes, 185  
Were modeling distinctive kinds of dress.  
Though they were sisters of a common stock,  
And though, perfectly lovely both, they stood  
Taller than any women of this world,  
One of them head to foot was lapped in Persian 190  
Finery, while the other simply wore  
A Doric skirt. The latter had obtained  
Greece as her lot, their common fatherland;  
The former settled in our Eastern Empire.

Something had come between them, or so it seemed, 195 (188)  
And when my son found out about the quarrel,  
He bound them both and broke them to the harness  
Beneath his chariot. When the yoke was laid  
Across their necks, the girl in Persian dress  
Stood tower-like in her caparisons 200  
And like a good mare answered to the bit.  
The other mettlesomely flicked the reins;  
Hands tearing harness from the tracing-pole,  
She bucked and galloped with free-rein until  
The pole was broken and my son went reeling. 205  
And there beside the wreckage stood his father,  
Darius, pitying him. Beneath that gaze  
Xerxes could only tear the gorgeous gown  
Wrapped round and round his body into ribbons.

Straight out of bed I went to dip my hands 210 (201)  
In lustral water. Later, at the altar,  
Poised in the act of offering honey, oil  
And barley to the talismanic gods  
Who honor rites like these, I saw an eagle  
Aflutter and diving toward the Sun-god's shrine. 215  
I stopped and stood there, gaping at the omen.  
A falcon intercepted it, mid-flight;  
Wings beating, talons tearing at its crest,  
The reeling eagle only could sink lower  
And lower—an auspice striking to my eyes 220  
As to your ears.

Now mark my words: my son,



**Chorus-leader:**  
Rather fountainheads of silver, treasure buried in the earth. 250

**Queen:**  
Do the bow and arrow fit as comfortably in their hands?

**Chorus-leader:**  
Hardly, rather spears for hand-to-hand and shields, their only armor.

**Queen:**  
Does that herd have any head, some suzerain to urge them on?

**Chorus-leader:**  
Neither slaves nor subjects, they are said to serve no king at all.

**Queen:**  
How can they expect to join in common cause against invasion? 255 (243)

**Chorus-leader:**  
Well enough to have once crushed the noble legions of Darius.

**Queen:**  
Hard words, truly, for the parents who have sent their sons to war.

*The Messenger appears at the far end of the road on the right, disheveled and panting from a long run.*

**Chorus-leader:**  
You will swiftly hear a full, candid account, it seems—this fellow  
Dashing towards us shows the clear signs of a Persian in his gait.  
Doubtless, he is bringing recent tidings—good, perhaps, or grim. 260

**Messenger:**  
You Asian strongholds and you Persian earth,  
Port of colossal wealth, a single blow,  
And all your vast prosperity is shattered!  
The flower of Persia wilted and has died.

Although the first man to relate hard news 265  
Has a hard task before him, duty bids me  
Ravel the whole disaster out. In sum:  
The entire army of the East is lost.

**Chorus:**  
*Strophe A*  
Weighty, weighty disaster breaks  
Suddenly, cruelly over us! 270 (257)  
Weep, weep, Persians, since he speaks  
Of heaviness.

**Messenger:**

All of those troops destroyed! And I, past hope,  
Survived to see the day of my return.

**Chorus:**

*Antistrophe A*

The course of our longevity  
Has dragged out age for too long now— 275  
To hear of so much misery  
Out of the blue!

**Messenger:**

I was there, Persians, saw it all first-hand  
And can report what sorts of wrongs we suffered.

**Chorus:**

*Strophe B*

Woe—we deployed an arsenal 280  
To conquer Greece, the land of Zeus,  
And all our sundry ways to kill  
Were of no use, no use.

**Messenger:**

The shores of Salamis and coastal stretches  
Abound in lonely corpses, heaps of corpses. 285 (273)

**Chorus:**

*Antistrophe B*

Woe—you have told us our loved ones  
Are now sea-beaten, dead.  
Some of them, weighted by their gowns,  
Are swaying in the tide.

**Messenger:**

Our archery proved pointless; our armada 290  
Went down penetrated by their prows.

**Chorus:**

*Strophe C*

Raise a despairing, comfortless  
Wail for the Persians, a fierce race,  
Who now are utterly undone.  
Woe, woe for our lost campaign. 295

**Messenger:**

‘Salamis’ is a hiss, a hated name,  
And Ah! I choke up when pronouncing ‘Athens.’

**Chorus:**

*Antistrophe C*

Athens is ruthless to invasion.  
Never forget how many Persian  
Women built their nests in vain— 300 (288)  
Athens has killed our sons, our men.

**Queen:**

I have stood sad and silent for some time  
Because your news has stuck me dumb, because  
The whole thing has so overwhelmed me that  
I cannot properly fit words together 305  
And ask you how it happened.

All the same,

It is the task of mankind to endure  
Whatever woes our deities decide on.  
Now pull yourself together, sir; unravel  
The whole disaster from beginning to end, 310  
Even if you must groan while telling it.

Who has survived? And whom are we to mourn?  
Which leaders set to watch with rod in hand  
Forever have deserted our front-lines?

**Messenger:**

Xerxes survived and yet looks on the light. 315 (299)

**Queen:**

Those words are radiance shining through the palace,  
Daylight ending the great gloom of night!

**Messenger:**

But Artembares, who as general had  
Ten thousand horseman at his beck and call,  
Is being ground down to nothing, as we speak, 320  
On the hard headland of Sileniai;

The Chiliarch Dadakes bounded nimbly  
Over the gunnel when a spear struck home,  
And that blue-blooded Bactrian, Tenagon,  
Resides now on the wave-washed Isle of Aias. 325

Lilaius and Arsames, with Argestes,  
Rammed in defeat a rocky promontory  
Where pigeons come to roost. Arkteus, once neighbor  
To the headwaters of Egyptian Nile,  
Went tumbling headlong overboard, beside 330 (313)  
Shield-wielding Pharnouchos and Adeues.

Matallus, born in Chrysa, once a captain  
 Who drove ten thousand troops to battle, once  
 The leader of the thirty thousand riders  
 Known as the Sable Horse, drowned in the strait, 335  
 His full, red, bristling beard turning to purple  
 In brackish water. Arabus the Mage  
 And Bactrian Artabes both fell there,  
 Aliens, now, on foreign soil. Amistris,  
 And Amphistreus, hurler of painful lances, 340  
 Good Ariomardos (a home grief for Sardis!),  
 Mysian Seisames, even Tharybis,  
 Admiral of five times fifty ships,  
 A dashing chap, and a Lerneian—all  
 Had bad luck there and died in shameful ways. 345 (324)

At least the governor of the Cilicians,  
 Sunnesis the Courageous, wreaking havoc  
 Hand-to-hand among them, passed in glory.

That's the extent of what I can relate  
 About the leaders, since, out of so many 350  
 Disasters, I can only list a few.

**Queen:**

Revolting news! The scene you are describing  
 Reaches the height of all catastrophe—  
 Humiliation for the Persians, reason  
 For piercing cries. But turn back to your story 355  
 And tell me this: how multitudinous was  
 The Greek armada, that they hoped to match  
 Our navy in a battle, prow for prow?

**Messenger:**

If one can trust in numbers, rest assured  
 We should have crushed them. All in all, their fleet was 360 (338)  
 A mere three-hundred vessels, ten of which  
 Were worthy of respect. Xerxes' armada  
 Was fully a thousand galleys strong, I swear,  
 And of that sum at least two hundred seven  
 Matchless in swiftness—so much for the odds. 365

Really, do you believe arithmetic  
 Had any bearing? No, it was some god  
 That shattered our whole fleet, dropping a sinking  
 Destiny onto our side of the balance.  
 The gods prop up the citadel of Pallas. 370

**Queen:**

So Athens still has not been razed to rubble?

**Messenger:**

With men to man them, city-walls are strong.

**Queen:**

But tell me: who began the naval engagement?

Was it the Greeks or did my son strike first,

Puffed up with false pride in his multitude?

375 (352)

**Messenger:**

Some vengeful spirit or some spiteful power  
Must have begun our troubles, queen. A Greek

Came to our barracks, an Athenian,

And told your son, King Xerxes, that the foe

Would not engage us, no, they meant to man

The benches in the darkest hours of night

And slip away in secretive retreat,

Some this way and some that, to save their lives.

Your son accepted the whole story, never

Conceiving that a Greek could be a liar,

Nor that a god could bear a grudge against him.

380

385

In the harangue he told his admirals

That when the sun released the land from light

And darkness claimed the precinct of the sky

Three squadrons from the navy should be sent

To guard the straits which lead to open ocean,

And that a fourth division should blockade

The Isle of Aias. Further, if the Greeks

Should somehow find means in their single ships

Secretly to outstrip their final hour,

Every admiral would die, headless.

So spoke the Great King with a hopeful mind—

Too hopeful, for he did not understand

The gods' intent.

390 (366)

395

When we had messed that evening,

All hands yarely and with one spirit fit

The oars they knew so well into the straps.

The last rays of the twilight died, and night

Came rushing in, and every man walked up

The gangplank like a sultan of his oar

And captain of the rigging. Exhortations

Swept through our massive hulls from bench to bench

As each ship coasted to its post. All night

The captains kept the navy under sail.

400

405 (380)

Though night was nearly done, still the Greek army  
 Had not attempted any sly escape; 410  
 However, when dawn rose on her white horses  
 And filled the world with radiance, a cry,  
 Ominous and melodious, resounded  
 Over the water from the Greek encampment.  
 Straightway, the headlands of the island answered 415  
 Hoarsely their battle-song, and terror fell  
 On us barbarians. We had been mistaken.

Not in retreat were the Greek soldiers singing  
 The sacred battle-hymn, no, they were rushing  
 To combat, hopeful, even confident. 420 (394)  
 Their hearts took fire from a bellowing trumpet,  
 And smartly as the helmsmen called the strokes,  
 The plashing and the rhythmic oar dug up  
 Swaths of the sea. Soon we could see them coming:  
 There in the vanguard was the right wing, locked 425  
 In tight formation; then their navy wholly  
 Swept into sight. At last we could make out  
 The words they shouted over and over again:  
 ‘Onward, O sons of Greece, come, free the land  
 That bore you; liberate your wives and children; 430  
 Free tombs of ancestors and temple-homes  
 Of native gods. This battle is all-in-all.’  
 Out of our ranks only a Persian murmur  
 Rose to oppose them—then when every instant  
 Cried out for action!

Soon a beak of bronze 435 (408)  
 Stove in a ship—it was some vessel of theirs  
 That started all the ramming, ripped the stern  
 Of a Phoenician warship clean away.  
 Each of their captains steered his prow dead on  
 Into our hulls. Our massive Persian navy 440  
 Put up a fight at first, but as it was,  
 So many vessels in so tight a strait,  
 No help from anywhere, the bronze-toothed beaks  
 Of our own warships beat on our own boards  
 And shattered all the rowing-gear. All tact 445  
 And prudence, they kept pounding on our planks  
 In circular formations. Soon our keels  
 Were in the air, and the sea’s surface, crammed  
 With naval wreckage and remains of men,  
 Was nowhere to be seen. The barrier-reefs 450 (421)  
 And even the shoreline were awash with bodies.  
 When every ship that still survived to bear  
 The remnants of our army into flight  
 Scattered disorderly, they caught us, flayed us

Like mackerel, like some school of fish, with riven  
Oars and the splinters of our wrack. Our wailing  
Coursed through the sea, a wailing mixed with shrieks,  
Until the black eye of the night released us. 455

I never could detail the whole disaster,  
Not if I had ten days to tell it in, 460  
For never in one day (and mark me well),  
Never in one day only has so vast  
A multitude of soldiers met its fate.

**Queen:**

Truly a huge and catastrophic ocean  
Has broken on Persia and the Eastern peoples. 465 (434)

**Messenger:**

And that's not even half of it—so weighty  
An agony succeeded this first stroke  
That in the balance we sunk twice as low.

**Queen:**

But what misfortune could be worse than this!  
Speak of this second blow, which, as you say, 470  
Tipped the scales further downward for our army.

**Messenger:**

Persians in their peak and prime, of courage  
Noted and by pedigree distinguished—  
Men who were staunchly faithful to their King—  
Expired in manners most humiliating. 475

**Queen:**

Ah, my friends, these evils lay me low.  
What deaths, though, do you say they suffered?

**Messenger:**

Off Salamis lies an island, small, a mooring  
Tricky for men-of-war. Along its shore,  
The dance-god Pan supposedly goes traipsing. 480 (449)

Here had your son assigned his best men, first,  
To pick off handily whichever Greeks  
Sought safety from a shipwreck on dry land  
And, second, in the odd chance that our sailors  
Went overboard, to fish them from the straits— 485  
So foolishly he reckoned on the future.

The very day that god had granted them  
Fame in the form of victory at sea,

The Greeks (armed to a man from head to foot)  
Vaulted from gunnels all around the island— 490  
There was nowhere to turn. With stone in hand  
And arrow on the string, they wore away  
Our nobles at long range. In the end, however,  
With one last rush and rallying cry, they hacked,  
No, butchered piecemeal our gentility, 495 (463)  
Until no one was left alive.

Seaside,

Atop a peak with a commanding view  
Of the whole army, Xerxes looked downward  
Into the depth of the disaster and groaned.  
His vestments rent by his own hands, he shrieked 500  
Immediate retreat at the foot-soldiers  
And fled, indecorous—a further reason  
To grieve on top of all that came before.

**Queen:**

O deity detestable for stealing  
Our Persian common sense! My son contrived 505  
Harsh punishments indeed for glorious Athens!  
All the Eastern lives that Marathon  
Had wasted, to his mind, were not enough.  
Sure of avenging our defeat, he brought on  
Only so many more afflictions.  
Tell me, 510 (478)  
What ships escaped? Where did you see them last?  
You know enough to tell me in detail?

**Messenger:**

The captains of the few remaining vessels  
Awkwardly started homeward, and for this  
The wind was not unfriendly. In Boeotia 515  
The remnants of our army went on dying,  
Some of them parched and yards from bracing springs.  
Others of us, though breathless, made our way  
To Phocis, Doris, and the Malian Gulf  
Where Sperchios so generously begins 520  
To irrigate the plain.

On to Achaia,

Then, and Thessalian citadels—cold comfort  
For starving soldiers. There our numbers dwindled  
Further from hunger and thirst, for hunger and thirst  
Abounded there. We passed into the lands 525 (492)  
Of the Magnesians and the Macedonians,  
Forded the Axios and, after slogging  
Through Bolbe's cattails, pitched camp at the foot  
Of Mt. Pangaion in Edonia.

That night god gathered an untimely storm 530  
And froze the flowing of the sacred Strymon  
Straight across, from bank to bank. Old soldiers  
Who never talked much to the gods before  
Hunkered like dogs on hands and knees, invoking  
Heaven and Earth. After these warm entreaties, 535  
We tried our footing on the frozen crossing,  
But only those who skittered over sooner  
Than the Sun-god had scattered all his beams  
Happened to reach the other bank alive.  
His keen orb with persistent glinting clove 540 (504)  
The river down the middle and, when the rearguard  
Went tumbling in on top of those before them,  
Luckiest was the man who first exchanged  
His breath for water.

Few, the chance survivors  
Who, laboring through further pain in Thrace, 545  
Escaped at last and reached their hearths and homes.

Here is good reason for the capital  
To grieve—the loss of its beloved youth.  
Every word of this is true, and still  
I have omitted most of the afflictions 550  
God has visited upon us Persians.

*The Messenger exits, left.*

**Chorus-leader:**

Hard-hearted god, you leapt up and have crushed  
The Persian race beneath your heavy feet.

**Queen:**

I am destroyed. Oh, our entire army  
Massacred! Nocturnal vision, how 555 (518)  
Precisely you prefigured our misfortunes!  
And you, my sage dream-readers, brushed it off  
As nothing serious.

Still, since you happened  
To counsel ritual service, I am bound  
To make good on my vows and offer worship, 560  
First, to the gods above. Then, on returning,  
I shall provide Earth and the Dear Departed  
With choice libations from the palace stores.  
But since I know that deeds, once done, are done  
Forever, I shall offer for the future, 565  
Hoping for the better.

Careful, friends—

Henceforth be more dependable to those  
Dependent on you for your good advice.  
If Xerxes happens to return before me,  
Comfort him if you can and to the palace  
Escort him before something else goes wrong. 570 (530)

*The Queen exits in her chariot and with her retinue, left.*

**Chorus:**

*Astrophic*

Absolute Zeus, you have undone  
The wide-mouthed, many-headed  
Army of Persia; you have shrouded  
Susā and Ecbatana in  
Sorrows as black as funeral weeds. 575

Fingers fitter for caresses  
Have learned to tear veils into shreds;  
Women are sprinkling their dresses'  
Folds with tears—each has a share  
In our misfortunes. Newlyweds,  
Lavish in longing for the men  
Who warmed their blankets and were gone,  
Struggle to release all thoughts  
Of bedrooms and the coverlets  
Where youthful dalliance lay in love—  
No, they can never mourn enough. 580  
585 (543)

Therefore I, too, shall duly grieve  
Our honored dead, raising my voice  
To sing of many miseries: 590

*Strophe A*

Now we can be certain all  
Asia raises an empty howl.  
Our youth embarked with Xerxes. Ah!  
Xerxes destroyed them. (Woe, woe.)  
Xerxes it was  
Who heeded bad advice,  
Mismanaged our broad men-of-war. 595

Why was it no mischance could injure  
Saintly Darius, master-archer,  
Susā's redoubtable emperor? 600 (557)

*Antistrophe A*

Pitch-eyed ships with linen sails  
Berthed our sea- and land-details.

Our youth embarked on ships, and Ah!,  
Those ships destroyed them. (Woe, woe.)  
The ships it was 605  
That yielded, piece by piece,  
To those strong-gripped Ionians.

Our king had trouble while retreating  
Through Thrace, we hear: he lost his footing  
On icy back roads through the plains. 610

*Strophe B*

Survivors scattered with such haste  
(No, no.)  
The first warriors we lost  
Were left on the Kychreian coast.  
(It can't be true.) 615 (570)

Gnash your teeth and heave a sigh.  
Raise a complaint, for all its weight,  
Raise it and hurl it at the sky;  
Release the cries  
That stick like snarling in the throat, 620  
A grating, grief-afflicted noise.

*Antistrophe B*

The ocean's hostile eddies thrash  
(No, no.)  
Bobbing bodies, and dumb fish  
Frenziedly snap at human flesh. 625  
(It can't be true.)

Now must a household mourn its master.  
Once father and mother, man and wife  
Lament a heaven-sent disaster,  
Angry such news 630 (581)  
Should fall upon them late in life—  
Such catastrophic casualties.

*Strophe C*

All over Asia underlings  
Will take no stock in Persian laws,  
Nor will the title 'King of Kings'  
Squeeze tribute from the provinces. 635

None of our subjects will bow down  
Before a decimated throne—  
All imperial power is gone.



To please the dead; summon Dareius' shade  
And I shall pave the way by pouring honors 680  
To parched Earth and the gods of underground.

**Chorus:**

Queen Mother, worshipped and obeyed  
Throughout the land, while you are pouring  
Gifts to the chambers in the ground,  
We shall sing ritual songs, imploring 685  
The deities who rule the dead  
To hear us and be kind:

Pure gods who dwell beneath our feet,  
Earth first, Hermes next, then you,  
Lord of the Dear Departed, please 690 (629)  
Release a spirit to the light.  
If there is something we can do,  
Beyond mere prayer, to cure our woes,  
He is the only mortal who  
Can tell us what it is. 695

*Strophe A*

But will our reverend Emperor,  
A peer of gods, still recognize  
The imprecise barbaric language  
In which I frame these desperate cries?  
Am I to shout out utter anguish 700  
Or is he heeding me down there?

*Antistrophe A*

Earth and you gods who rule in her,  
I beg you, please release a shade  
Of great renown from his new home.  
Send us a man that Susa bred, 705 (643)  
A Persian god the likes of whom  
Our soil had never held before.

*Strophe B*

Dear is the tomb, and dear the man,  
And dear the character within.  
Aidoneus, Aidoneus, 710  
As escort to the upper air,  
Please give Dareius back to us,  
Release our pious Emperor.

*Antistrophe B*

Because he spent no lives on sieges  
Deities later would begrudge us 715

He was known throughout the realm  
As Reverent. He earned that title  
Standing at the army's helm  
Steering it prudently through battle.

*Strophe C*

Rise, Ancient Sultan, to the light. 720 (658)  
Reveal your miter, tier by tier;  
Come, let the sandals on your feet  
Stand, all saffron, atop your bier.

We can find no fault in you—  
Yet you are a father, too. 725

*Antistrophe C*

Despot of Despots, please appear  
And listen to our sad hard tale.  
The mist of Styx is thick up here—  
All of our young men perished, all.

We can find no fault in you—  
Yet you are a father, too. 730

*Epode*

O thou much-lamented loss  
To friend and kin, what does it mean?  
Dear sultan, why must we endure  
This not-to-be-forgotten twin 735 (676)  
Disaster? All the triple-tiered  
Ships that we built have disappeared.  
Our ships are ships no more, no more.

**Ghost of Darius:**

Loyal trustees of my estate, old men  
As staunch as when in youth we were companions, 740  
What happened to my empire? The earth groans,  
Its surface beaten down by trampling boots.  
Seeing the woman who once shared my chamber  
Bent at my tomb has filled me with alarm.  
With good will I received her offerings 745  
While you, mourning at my memorial,  
Summoned me up in a most desperate fashion  
With necromantic gasps. Though leave is never  
Easy to obtain from Hades (since the gods  
Of underground are less inclined to lend 750 (690)  
Than take away), I have come all the same,  
For I am of some influence below.

Now to the point, so that I not be charged  
With truancy, divulge what unexpected  
And grievous wrong has fallen upon my Persians. 755

**Chorus:**

*Strophe*

Full of the old respect, we  
Cannot look on you directly,  
Cannot address  
Your highness face to face.

**Ghost of Darius:**

I have come a long way upward in obedience to your summons, 760  
So do not now waste the time in protest. Cast your awe aside.  
Cut the tale down to essentials; tell me everything at once.

**Chorus:**

*Antistrophe*

Dazzled by you, old friend,  
We cannot act on your command,  
Cannot break 765 (704)  
News that is hard to take.

**Ghost of Darius:**

Since the die-hard veneration in your hearts obstructs my wishes,  
You, the former partner of my private chamber, noble lady,  
Dry your eyes now; no more wailing. Bluntly sum the matter up.

It is only natural that setbacks mar your human fortunes 770  
Since, for mortals, there are many tribulations, some on land,  
Some at sea, but always more and more the longer life continues.

**Queen:**

Lucky husband, you surpassed all living men with your successes.  
Every year that you were up here in the sunlight, admiration  
Envied you; prosperity adorned you like a Persian god— 775  
So now, too, I envy you for dying without ever seeing  
Such great casualties. Darius, hear the whole tale in an instant:  
The whole Persian military has been utterly wiped out.

**Ghost of Darius:**

How, though? Did a plague descend? Did civil war divide the empire?

**Queen:**

Neither—no, our army met destruction out near Athens. 780 (716)

**Ghost of Darius:**

Tell me straight: which son of mine has gone campaigning over there?

**Queen:**

Zealous Xerxes, after drafting the whole continental shelf.

**Ghost of Darius:**

Did that wretch attempt this folly with the army or the navy?

**Queen:**

Both of them. The thrust was twofold and dependent on both branches.

**Ghost of Darius:**

How, though, did so large an army make its way across the strait? 785

**Queen:**

Xerxes fashioned an ingenious yoke to span the Hellespont.

**Ghost of Darius:**

And he really did this? Locked up tight the mighty Bosphorus?

**Queen:**

Even so. Some spirit must have put the thought into his head.

**Ghost of Darius:**

Ah! a mighty power indeed to make him lose his commonsense!

**Queen:**

Yes, the outcome of his plan clearly exposed how poor it was. 790

**Ghost of Darius:**

What befell them there that you are mourning for them in this manner?

**Queen:**

When it met defeat, the navy dragged the army down with it.

**Ghost of Darius:**

So the spear has wiped out both the branches of our military?

**Queen:**

Yes, and Susa, therefore, grieves the utter absence of defense.

**Ghost of Darius:**

Ah! to lose our local garrison and all support from allies! 795 (731)

**Queen:**

Yes, and all our Bactrians wiped out—not one old soldier lived.

**Ghost of Darius:**

Curse that boy! He has destroyed our allies' fresh stock in its prime!

**Queen:**

Xerxes, it is said, forlorn and with a scanty retinue—

**Ghost of Dareius:**

Tell me how and where he perished. Any chance he has survived?

**Queen:**

—luckily has crossed the bridge that harnesses the continents. 800

**Ghost of Dareius:**

He has safely made his way back into Asia, is it so?

**Queen:**

Yes, a sound report attests the fact. No others have denied it.

**Ghost of Dareius:**

Ah, the oracle has turned into a real event too early!  
Zeus has dropped the prophecy's fulfillment on my own son's head.  
All these years I had assumed the gods would bring the thing to pass 805  
Generations down the line. Still, whenever a rash person  
Recklessly goes rushing forward, god need only lend a hand.  
Now a font of woes, it seems, has been unearthed for all my kinsmen.

Youthful, ignorant and hasty, my own son has done the damage.  
Striving to restrain the holy flowing of the Hellespont, 810 (745)  
God's beloved Bosphorus, like some old servant in the stocks,  
He contrived a new bridge and, by casting manacles upon it,  
Made a massive roadway for a massive army. He attempted,  
Mortal though he is, to be the master of the gods. What folly!  
Playing sea-god like Poseidon! How is this not symptomatic 815  
Of a brain-disease? I am afraid the ample stores of treasure  
I heaped up are now mere plunder waiting for the first marauder.

**Queen:**

Xerxes all too readily picked up these habits from the bad advisors  
Who attended him. They told him that, whereas you had amassed  
Heaps of wealth for your descendents, he in cowardly fashion played 820  
Soldier in his chamber, adding nothing to his father's stores.  
Thus provoked to action day in, day out by these noxious fellows  
He at last conceived his new sea-bridge and the campaign to Greece.

**Ghost of Dareius:**

He has accomplished something great indeed  
And unforgettable: no ruler ever 825 (761)  
Has managed to drain all the men from Susa  
Since High King Zeus bestowed imperial honors  
Upon us, setting up one lord monarchic

To rule as suzerain with rod in hand  
Over the livestock-nourishing domains of Asia 830

King Medos was the first to lead our army.  
Second, an heir who actually managed  
To reach the same distinction as his father,  
Because in *his* case prudence proved the pilot  
That steered his governance. The third was Cyrus, 835  
A blessed man, who in his reign concluded  
A general peace among the well-disposed:

He easily annexed the lands of Lydia  
And Phrygia and pacified Ionia  
By force, because no god could bear a grudge 840 (771)  
Against so circumspect a man. His son  
Succeeded him, fourth in the line to lead  
The army in war.

Our fifth king, though, was Mardos,  
A blot upon the empire and the throne.  
Good Artaphernes crept into the palace 845  
And with a gang of friends in a just cause  
Slaughtered him; and the sixth was Maraphis;  
Seventh came Artaphernes; then in turn  
I hit upon the lot I long desired.  
I campaigned amply with an ample army 850  
And never with such thorough decimation  
Assailed the Persian capital.

My son  
Is young yet, so his plans are immature;  
He has forgotten, of course, all that I told him.  
Trust me when I say this, dear old friends— 855 (784)  
None of the kings who held the throne would ever  
Have been the source of so much suffering.

**Chorus-leader:**

But, Lord Darius, what comes next? Do you  
Have any parting words? How can the Persians  
Thrive in the future, after such a setback? 860

**Ghost of Darius:**

By never sending troops against the Greeks,  
Not even if our Medic army is larger.  
In Greece the very soil serves as their ally.

**Chorus-leader:**

How do you mean? In what way does it aid them?

**Ghost of Darius:**

It uses famine to reduce large armies. 865

**Chorus-leader:**

What if we send picked, well-provisioned soldiers?

**Ghost of Darius:**

Not even the contingent left in Greece  
Will live to see the day of its return.

**Chorus-leader:**

What do you mean? Won't the surviving soldiers  
March out of Europe through the Hellespont? 870 (799)

**Ghost of Darius:**

Of many, few—since, after having learned  
Of what already happened, I must trust  
In all the gods have prophesied concerning  
What is to come. All oracles come true,  
Not merely some. Now, since this is the case, 875  
It's clear that Xerxes placed his confidence  
On empty hopes when he resolved to leave  
His picked troops as a garrison in Greece.

Bivouacked where Asopos feeds the plain  
With tributary streams, they soon will be 880  
A handsome fattening for Boiotian soil.  
An end awaits them there, a crown defeat  
To clear the debts of pride and sacrilege.

When they arrived in Greece, they went around  
Defacing sacred images and burning 885 (810)  
Temples down. Altars have been uprooted;  
Statues of gods, snapped at the feet, have tumbled  
From pedestals and lie about like rubble.

Certainly they will suffer nothing less  
Than all they earned, and still more in the future. 890  
Far from dry, the well-spring of their woes  
Gushes as thickly as their blood will flow  
When Doric spears, by slaughtering them, transform  
Plataia's topsoil into swampy ground.

The bodies heaped in mute commemoration 895  
Will clearly show even our great-grandchildren  
That mortals never should be over-boastful.  
Outrage, once ripened, yields a bumper-crop  
Of retribution, of tears reaped in season.

Such are the penalties for their misdeeds. 900 (823)  
Study them well; remember Greece and Athens,  
And let no Persian in the future scorn

The guardian god of present happiness  
And, by desiring more and still more, squander  
Prosperity. Zeus is a stringent judge 905  
Of willful overreach, a heavy censor.  
Though Xerxes has been chastened well already,  
Remind him, all the same, in gentle phrases,  
To cease offending god with wide-mouthed violence.

And you, my darling, his devoted mother, 910  
Go to the palace and selecting there  
Whichever garment best will cloak his shame,  
Ride out to meet your son. In his distress,  
His fingernails have clawed the gowns of state  
To shreds and patches. You should be the one 915 (837)  
To daub his tears, because, as I well know,  
He will accept his mother's consolation  
Only.

I must return now to the darkness.  
Goodbye, old friends. Even in times of trouble  
Delight yourselves each day with trifling pleasures. 920  
All wealth is worthless in the underworld.

*The Ghost of Dareius descends into his tomb.*

**Chorus-leader:**

I feel grief for the Eastern peoples, knowing  
Their current casualties and those to come.

**Queen:**

O god, so many worries rush at me!  
But one concern has cut me to the quick: 925  
My son's disgrace—the regal raiment hanging  
In tatters from his body. I am going  
To fetch fresh wraps from home and welcome him  
With what scant pomp I can—I must not fail  
My dearest darling in his darkest hour. 930 (851)

*The Queen exits, left.*

**Chorus:**

*Strophe A*

What glorious benefits we had,  
What laws to guide the commonweal,  
Back when the aged, capable  
And safe Dareius, like a god,  
Ruled over us as Emperor. 935  
He was not over-fond of war.

*Antistrophe A*

He used two kinds of methods—men-  
At-arms to frighten enemies  
And laws like towers to supervise  
All that occurred in his domain. 940  
Unbeaten and with all their limbs,  
Our troops returned to happy homes.

*Strophe B*

Though he never crossed the Halys,  
Never stirred from his fireplace,  
How far he spread his empery— 945 (870)  
He took towns on the Achelaus  
That neighbor with the land of Thrace  
Down along the Strymon sea;

*Antistrophe B*

Then citadels on higher ground  
Bowed to receive his governance, 950  
As did the depots that are set  
On either side of Helle's sound,  
Remote Propontic settlements,  
And towns along the Pontic straight,

*Strophe C*

And all those waved-washed islands close 955  
To our west coast, fanned out before us:  
Lesbos is one, and Samos rich  
In olive-orchards, Andros (which  
Is only yards from Tenos), Paros,  
And Chios, Naxos, Mykonos. 960 (885)

*Antistrophe C*

He seized those lands ringed by the sea  
That lie removed from the land mass—  
Lemnos, Cnidos, Rhodes, the seat  
Of Ikarus, and Cypriot  
Paphos, Soloi and Salamis, 965  
Whose source-town caused this misery.

*Epode*

And he controlled by fixity of mind  
The rich and populous Greek colonies  
On the Ionian coast. Ready supplies  
Of troops and allied tribes were then on hand. 970

Now, though, a sea-beating has wiped us out,  
And there can be no doubt

It was the gods that fixed us with this loss.

*Xerxes enters, right, in tatters, riding in a tattered palanquin, his retainers also in rags.*

**Xerxes:**

*Astrophic*

Ah! suddenly unfortunate,  
I stumbled on a hateful fate. 975 (909)

Some god has jumped up and with bloody  
Vengeance crushed the Persian race.

Wretched as I am already,  
What suffering is to come? One glance  
At these imposing veterans, 980  
And all my sinews are unstrung.

Oh Zeus,  
I wish the doom of death had hid me  
Deep down beneath the earth among  
My ranks upon ranks of casualties.

**Chorus:**

Oh High King, alas, alas, 985

The Persian power was once revered!

How glorious our army was.

Fine outfits clothed our soldier's bodies—

Some god has cut them all to shreds.

Earth groans for the boys she reared 990 (922)

To die for Xerxes, glitter of Hades.

In dense and countless multitudes,  
Platoons of soldiers, bow in hand,  
The entire flower of the land,  
Marched off to dwell in darkness. We 995  
Groan for our lost security.

O King, how wretched: Asia is

Bent over double on her knees.

*Strophe A*

**Xerxes:**

Here I am, Woe!, the object of 1000

Your lamentation; to my nation,

My fatherland, a source of grief.

**Chorus:**

Yes, I shall send you, in salute,

A cursing and accurséd shout,

The Mariandynian lament

Choked with sobbing, dissonant. 1005 (940)

*Antistrophe A*

**Xerxes:**

Go on, raise a discordant cry  
Brimming with woes and tears because  
My guardian god has turned on me.

**Chorus:**

I, with the help of our sad State,  
Shall cry out to commemorate 1010  
Your losses, our sea-stricken men.  
Sobbing will rattle in the groan.

*Strophe B*

**Xerxes:**

Some foreigner-repellant power,  
Some plank-destroying god of war,  
Backs the Ionian cause. 1015  
Each night he scours the open seas  
And that accursed shore.

**Chorus:**

Cry Woe! Look back at all that you have lost!  
Where is the rest of your expansive host?  
Where have your guardsmen gone? I mean, such men as 1020 (961)  
Ecbatanian Sousikanes,  
Pelagon, Pharnadakes, Dotamas?  
Sousas and Psammis? Agbatas?

*Antistrophe B*

**Xerxes:**

I left them where I saw them last.  
During the battle they were tossed 1025  
From their Phoenician ship.  
Salamis with a sharp outcrop  
Now pins them to its coast.

**Chorus:**

Cry Woe! Come, tell us where Pharnouchos is  
And noble Ariomardos. Tharybis 1030  
And Memphis—are they lost with Artembares,  
Masistras and Hystaichamas? Where is  
The Lord Seualkes? With genteel Lilaos?  
We need to know all. Satisfy us.

*Strophe C*

**Xerxes:**

Woeful, woeful—they beheld 1035 (975)

Miserable old  
Athens and in a quick sweep of the oar  
Exhaled their last gasp on the shore.

**Chorus:**

Where is that flower of our land,  
The faithful Eye who counted myriads of men? 1040  
He was the favorite son of Batanouchus, son  
Of Sesames, Megabates' heir.  
Oibares, Parthus the Renowned—  
How could you have left them there?  
Weep for the troops who were cut down. 1045  
You speak of trouble  
Beyond all trouble.  
Woe for our Persian noblemen.

*Antistrophe C*

**Xerxes:**

You move me with your wryneck's call;  
You speak of unforgettable 1050 (990)  
Disasters for my comrades, woes on woes.  
My heart keeps mourning for the loss.

**Chorus:**

So many men we long to see:  
Xanthes with his myriad of Mysians;  
Anchares heading a brigade of Arians; 1055  
Then there's Diaixis and Arsakes,  
Captains of the cavalry;  
Then there's Lithimnas and Dadakes,  
And Tolmos ravenous for war.  
I stand aghast— 1060  
So large a host,  
And none attend your tented car.

*Strophe D*

**Xerxes:**

All of the army's generals are gone.

**Chorus:**

All gone without a grave.

**Xerxes:**

Woe for them, woe.

**Chorus:**

You gods have struck us with a sudden blow. 1065 (1005)  
Calamity glared once, and it was done.

*Antistrophe D*

**Xerxes:**

Our old luck failed; defeat has struck us down.

**Chorus:**

Yes, we have all been struck.

**Xerxes:**

By fresh regret.

**Chorus:**

Our fortune failed when we engaged their fleet.

The Persians are unlucky on campaign.

1070

*Strophe E*

**Xerxes:**

How are we not? Already wrecked, I suffer

Afresh from so much lack of a parade.

**Chorus:**

Wrecker of Persia, what is not destroyed?

**Xerxes:**

Do you discern these rags, my regal apparel?

**Chorus:**

I see. I see.

**Xerxes:**

This bow without a quarrel?

1075

**Chorus:**

What did you save?

**Xerxes:**

An archer's empty coffer.

**Chorus:**

So many set forth; you return with little.

**Xerxes:**

We lack protection.

**Chorus:**

And the Greeks love battle.

*Antistrophe E*

**Xerxes:**

They worship battle. I cannot believe  
That we have suffered such catastrophe.

1080 (1027)

**Chorus:**

You mean the loss of all our men at sea?

**Xerxes:**

Yes, the disaster made me rend my dress.

**Chorus:**

A shameful sight.

**Xerxes:**

Disgrace beyond disgrace.

**Chorus:**

Twofold and threefold

**Xerxes:**

joy for foes, our grief.

**Chorus:**

Our strength is hobbled.

**Xerxes:**

And me without a train!

1085

**Chorus:**

Because the sea took vengeance on our men.

*Strophe F*

**Xerxes:**

March for the palace, weeping as you go.

**Chorus:**

Misery, misery, woe on woe.

**Xerxes:**

Now when I lead, you sing the antiphon.

**Chorus:**

Woes for the woeful from the woebegone.

1090

**Xerxes:**

Cry like the wryneck; join your song with mine.

**Chorus:**

Ah, ah,  
The burden is heavy. Yes, I feel the pain.

*Antistrophe F*

**Xerxes:**

Row with your arms now; groan in sympathy.

**Chorus:**

I cannot keep from weeping. Woe is me.

**Xerxes:**

Now when I lead, you sing the antiphon. 1095 (1048)

**Chorus:**

Suzerain, the burden will be mine.

**Xerxes:**

Now launch your lamentation overseas.

**Chorus:**

Ah, ah,  
Bruising blows are mixed in with our cries.

*Strophe G*

**Xerxes:**

Drum your chest now; rave like Mysians.

**Chorus:**

Pitiful, pitiful downfall. 1100

**Xerxes:**

Pluck at the gray beards on your chins.

**Chorus:**

Fingers rooting, I wail and wail.

**Xerxes:**

Now raise a cry.

**Chorus:**

I must obey.

*Antistrophe G*

**Xerxes:**

Tear with your fingers; shred our dresses. 1105

**Chorus:**

Pitiful, pitiful downfall.

**Xerxes:**

Pluck out your hair and grieve our losses.

**Chorus:**

Fingers rooting, I wail and wail.

**Xerxes:**

Weep now, weep.

**Chorus:**

The tears won't stop.

1110 (1065)

*Epode*

**Xerxes:**

I lead; you sing the antiphon.

**Chorus:**

Undone, undone.

**Xerxes:**

Start marching toward my palace, joyless.

**Chorus:**

Alas, alas.

**Xerxes:**

Shout your grief throughout the city.

1115

**Chorus:**

King, I am crying, crying loud.

**Xerxes:**

Keep wailing; but march delicately.

**Chorus:**

The Persian earth is hard to tread.

**Xerxes:**

Warships with triple-banks of oars!

**Chorus:**

The warships killed our warriors.

1120

**Xerxes:**

Walk with me to my palace now.

**Chorus:**

Yes, we will join you, crying Woe.

*Xerxes, his three retainers, and the twelve Persian elders exit on foot toward the palace, left.*