

Persians

Characters:

Chorus of Persian Elders

Queen of Persia, widow of Dareius and mother of Xerxes

Persian Messenger

Ghost of King Dareius, 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,
(And eldest offspring of the late
Dareius) ordered us to head
The empire while he is abroad,
Trusting in our long years of service.

5

For some time now I have been nervous
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
Has set out eagerly yapping round
An inexperienced man, and still
No page or courier has come
With dispatch to the capital.

10

15 (13)

From Susa, Ecbatana and the ancient
Kissian castle-keep,
They left on horseback, foot and ship,
Each marshalling his own contingent:
Artaphernes, Megabates,
Astaspes and Amistris—all
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,
Artembares war-horse-tamer,
Imaios the high-minded archer,

20

25

30 (30)

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
To bold devices, plaited ropes. 110

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 Dareius' 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 Dareius!
 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 Dareius 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 Dareius 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,

When he succeeds, will be a paragon
Among us; but if somehow he should fail,
He will in no way be accountable.
Let me be clear: if Xerxes makes it home
Alive, he will command us as before. 225 (214)

Chorus-leader:

Since you are a mother, we would neither frighten you unduly
Nor build up your hopes too high:
if you have witnessed a dire omen,
Supplicate the gods, pray that they ward the evil off, transmuting
Perils into benefits for you and yours, your friends, the city. 230
Next, go pour libations to the Earth and Dear Departed, wisely
Asking that your spouse Dareius (whom you witnessed in the vision)
Send, from darkness to the light, good fortunes for your son and you;
Further stipulate that the opposing fortunes be detained there,
Pent beneath the earth, to fade into the gloom—
such is the counsel 235
I present to you with high hopes and heartfelt prognostication.
We predict that all will turn out well for you in every way.

Queen:

As the first to read my dream, sir, you have shown my son and palace
That you certainly mean well. May only good things come to pass.
Back at my estate, I shall perform these rites as you instructed, 240 (229)
Paying honor both to gods and family beneath the earth.

There are several further questions I would like to ask you: first,
Where in the wide world is Athens said to have been situated?

Chorus-leader:

Far off westward where the Sun-god dims his brilliance and goes down.

Queen:

This, then, is the outpost Xerxes so long wanted to expunge? 245

Chorus-leader:

When that town is taken, all of Greece will answer to your son.

Queen:

Do they have on hand sufficient bodies to comprise an army?

Chorus-leader:

Yes, an army strong enough to have wreaked havoc on the Medes.

Queen:

What besides can they lay claim to? Well-stocked coffer in a palace?

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—
To hear of so much misery
Out of the blue! 275

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
To conquer Greece, the land of Zeus,
And all our sundry ways to kill
Were of no use, no use. 280

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
Went down penetrated by their prows. 290

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—

Athens has killed our sons, our men.

300 (288)

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

And ask you how it happened.

305

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,

Even if you must groan while telling it.

310

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,

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.

320

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

Shield-wielding Pharnouchos and Adeues.

330 (313)

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 380

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, 385

Nor that a god could bear a grudge against him.

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 390 (366)

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, 395

Every admiral would die, headless.

So spoke the Great King with a hopeful mind—

Too hopeful, for he did not understand

The gods' intent.

When we had messed that evening,

All hands yarely and with one spirit fit 400

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 405 (380)

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.

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 570 (530)
Escort him before something else goes wrong.

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
Susa and Ecbatana in 575
Sorrows as black as funeral weeds.

Fingers fitter for caresses
Have learned to tear veils into shreds;
Women are sprinkling their dresses'
Folds with tears—each has a share 580
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 585 (543)
Where youthful dalliance lay in love—
No, they can never mourn enough.

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 595
Who heeded bad advice,
Mismanaged our broad men-of-war.

Why was it no mischance could injure
Saintly Darius, master-archer,
Susa'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
That yielded, piece by piece,
To those strong-gripped Ionians.

605

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,
A grating, grief-afflicted noise.

620

Antistrophe B

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

625

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

630 (581)

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.

Tongues no longer held in check, 640
The yoke of empire shaken off,
People will be free to speak
Whatever they are thinking of.

On all sides round the breakers lap
Aias's Isle which, drop by drop, 645 (596)
Appropriated Persia's hope.

The Queen enters alone and on foot, left. She is carrying three pitchers and a basket.

Queen:

Everyone that has suffered through his share
Of troubles knows that, if one wave of woes
Comes crashing in, the human heart delights
In giving way to absolute despair; 650
But let a guardian god once grant smooth sailing
And that same heart will just as soon assume
The lucky breeze will always swell its sail.

All things for me are filled with fear already.
Inside my eyes, visions of hostile gods
Are flickering; and in my ears a trickling
Drips in a way that soothes me not at all.
Disaster on disaster has so shocked me
That I am at wit's end.

This is the reason
 Why I have left the palace once again— 660 (607)
Sans chariot and in a humble gown.

I stand before you with these vessels full
Of sweet appeasements that the dead delight in,
And may they reach the father of my son:
There's milk, the fine white coating for the throat 665

Drawn from a sacred heifer's udders; honey
 That workers in the flowers have distilled
 Splendid as sunlight; water that has run
 In virgin springs; and that great charmer, wine,
 As unadulterated as the soil 670
 That gave it life, a venerable vintage.
 I brought the olives from the olive-tree
 That, silver as it is, still flourishes
 Even into old age. I hope its scent
 Will be enticing. Lastly a bouquet 675 (618)
 Of flowers, offspring risen from the earth
 That raises all.

Dear friends, accompany
The pouring of these offerings with hymns

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

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— 730
Yet you are a father, too.

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 Dareius:

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 Dareius:

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 Dareius:

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. Dareius, hear the whole tale in an instant:
The whole Persian military has been utterly wiped out.

Ghost of Dareius:

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 Dareius:

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

Queen:

Zealous Xerxes, after drafting the whole continental shelf.

Ghost of Dareius:

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 Dareius:

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 Dareius:

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 Dareius:

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 Dareius:

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 Dareius:

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 Dareius:

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 Dareius:

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

Ghost of Dareius:

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 Dareius:

It uses famine to reduce large armies. 865

Chorus-leader:

What if we send picked, well-provisioned soldiers?

Ghost of Dareius:

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 Dareius:

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
Your lamentation; to my nation, 1000
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.