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THE PERSAE OF AESCHYLUS

EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION
CRITICAL NOTES AND COMMENTARY
BY

H. D. BROADHEAD
LITT.D.

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PREFACE

THE progress of classical scholarship makes imperative the periodical revision of texts and the issue of fresh commentaries. For this reason alone a new edition of the *Persae* is needed, especially for English-speaking students, who during the last half century have relied mainly on Sidgwick's edition, published in 1903. Furthermore, no edition has appeared in Britain comparable in scale with the editions of other plays of Aeschylus by such scholars as Verrall, Tucker and G. Thomson. It is certainly time that the play was rescued from this unmerited neglect; hence the present contribution towards its elucidation.

In the Introduction I have devoted some space to the appraisal of the *Persae* as a work of dramatic art and to the discussion of various problems that could receive only fragmentary treatment in the commentary—how far the poet's national feelings have coloured his picture of the Persian tragedy, to what extent the dramatist has departed from the facts of history. Some consideration is given also to the question whether the play was part of a connected tetralogy and to the alleged evidence for a separate Sicilian text. Lastly, I explain the principles followed in establishing the text and the reasons for presenting select critical notes instead of a full-scale *apparatus criticus*.

In the commentary I have tried to strike the mean between dogmatic brevity and all-embracing prolixity. Illustrative material has been freely used to support an argument, but has otherwise been kept within strict bounds. In general I have made much use of Fraenkel's *Agamemnon*, Jebb's *Sophocles*, the Oxford *Euripides*, and on grammatical points Goodwin's *Syntax of Greek Moods and Tenses*, Kühner–Gerth's *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache*, while for the Greek particles I have relied mainly on Denniston's invaluable work.

In order not to overburden the commentary I have reserved for Appendix 1 supplementary discussions of certain passages. Other appendices deal with metre and various topics listed in the table of contents.

The commentaries most frequently consulted were those of Paley, Prickard, Sidgwick, Blomfield, Schütz, Teuffel, Conradt–Schiller, Wecklein–Zomarides, Groeneboom, Italie. For information about

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MS. readings I have depended for the most part on the work of Wecklein, Wilamowitz and Murray.

It remains for me to express my gratitude to those scholars who have helped me in various ways: to Professor D. S. Robertson, my former teacher, whose encouragement has upheld me in the prosecution of a very arduous task; to Professor D. L. Page, whose interest in my work has been a great stimulus, who has subjected the whole of my typescript to a searching scrutiny and from whose penetrating criticisms I have derived very great profit (for any mistakes or inadequacies that remain I am, of course, solely responsible); to the late Professor Gilbert Murray, who generously gave me the benefit of his advice on a number of points; to Professor Fraenkel, who discussed with me a portion of an early draft of the commentary, and to Professor E. R. Dodds for helpful criticism; to the late Professor A. Y. Campbell for the hours he spent with me discussing difficulties in the *Persae*; to Mr A. S. F. Gow and Mr L. H. G. Greenwood for their expression of opinion on various questions submitted to them; to Professor H. D. F. Kitto and Professor J. D. Craig for answering some queries concerning the dramatic qualities of the play; to Mr B. S. Page for his courtesy in placing the Brotherton library at my disposal during my visit to Leeds in 1951; to Mr H. R. Creswick, Librarian of the Cambridge University Library, for permission to have microfilms made of certain books; to the proof-reader for his scholarly care; and, finally, to Mr C. W. Collins, Librarian, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, N.Z., and his staff, for their services in procuring books, and microfilms of unprocurable books or articles, services which helped to no small extent to offset the disadvantageous conditions under which the Antipodean scholar pursues his researches.

H.D.B.

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SELECT LIST OF BOOKS AND ARTICLES

The following list contains the principal books and articles referred to in the present edition, but does not profess to be a complete bibliography; nor does it include books or articles published after December 1956. For principal editions consulted see Preface. Abbreviations for periodicals have been used as follows: *A.J.P.*, American Journal of Philology; *C.Q.*, Classical Quarterly; *C.R.*, Classical Review; *J.H.S.*, Journal of Hellenic Studies; *J.P.*, Journal of Philology.

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NOTE. In quoting from the fragments of the dramatic and other poets I adopt the numbering in the editions followed by Liddell and Scott (9th ed.) As for the *Grammatik* of Kühner-Gerth, references are normally to the first and second volumes of the *Satzlehre*; when the first two volumes of the whole work are referred to (i.e. those dealing with *Elementar- und Formenlehre*), the number of the volume is preceded by I.

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INTRODUCTION

A. TRAGEDY AND PATRIOTIC CELEBRATION

In form the *Persae* is certainly a tragedy, but in the opinion of many scholars its subject-matter and the spirit in which it has been handled remove it from the category of genuine tragedy. Blomfield writes:[1] 'It must be confessed that in the ἔξοδος of the *Persae* Aeschylus has departed somewhat from the dignity of tragedy. Xerxes presents an utterly ridiculous figure with his laments, his rags and his empty quiver; but far more ridiculous is the behaviour of the Chorus in obeying Xerxes' instructions (1039ff.)....I believe all this was designed by the poet to raise a laugh among the Athenians...*uidemus igitur quaedam ueteris tragoediae, quae circa res ludicras uersabatur, uestigia*.' To Blomfield it seemed passing strange that it should have occurred to anyone to imagine that the poet's design was to show how the Persian disaster was due to their excessive self-confidence and arrogance, which were justly punished by the Gods. No: the poet's aim was 'ut auidae Atheniensium φιλοδοξίᾳ gratificaretur, populo ut placeret quam fecisset fabulam, et sic ut ἀντιδιδασκάλους uinceret'.[2] A century later Gilbert Murray writes about the *Persae*:[3] 'It was apparently a performance written to order for a public celebration...a celebration of a national victory.' He suggests[4] that there may have been 'a regular celebration of the Great Deliverance at the Dionysia every year from 477 to 472' and observes that 'tragedy was not quite the suitable vehicle for such a record of joy and thanksgiving'. Gravenhorst[5] believes that the play is not, properly speaking, a drama, but 'a dramatised dirge of epico-lyrical character'. Others[6] again hold that the *Persae* is a tragedy both in spirit and in form, and that any patriotic celebration is incidental, though there is considerable disagreement concerning the extent to which national bias has coloured the poet's presentation of the Persian tragedy. Croiset[7] maintains that the patriotic enthusiasm of Aeschylus is felt throughout the play, but that it is permeated and transcended by religious ideas—in the defeat of

[1] *Praefatio*, p. xiv.
[2] *Ibid.* p. xiii.
[3] *Aeschylus*, p. 121.
[4] Preface to translation, p. 8.
[5] *Über die Perser des Aischylos*, Leipzig, 1891.
[6] E.g. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, p. 37; Haigh, *The Tragic Drama of the Greeks*, p. 104.
[7] *Histoire de la Littérature grecque*, 3rd ed., vol. III, p. 185.

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Xerxes we are to see the accomplishment of the oracles and the punishment of ὕβρις. When the Chorus refers to the many cities taken by King Darius 'without crossing the river Halys', Sidgwick (on 865–6) is certain that Aeschylus is indulging in a sneer, and in the description of Atossa's concern about her son's tattered robes he sees 'a satire on the ways of Oriental royalties' (n. on 847).

On the view we adopt will depend to no small extent our estimate of the play. In the following discussion the problem will be approached from different angles, and the conclusion will be that the *Persae* was intended to be a genuine tragedy, that the dramatist has on the whole been successful in carrying out his intention, and that the comparative absence of patriotic bias is in keeping with the high moral tone of the play, and particularly of the Darius scene, which contains the essence of the poet's own philosophy. If the doctrine is Greek, it takes no account of national differences—it concerns equally both Greek and barbarian.

(i) *The 'Persae' and the tragic tradition*

The normal type of tragedy presents to us a tragic figure who through some ἁμαρτία passes from prosperity to misfortune or death; a more or less sympathetic chorus who share in and reflect in their utterances the sufferings of the tragic figure; a messenger who describes the disastrous event; one or two characters whose role is to assist the progress of the action or to throw into relief some aspect of the 'hero's' personality. In this mould the *Persae* too, I believe, has been cast, though there are important differences, of which the most outstanding is that the characters and the events belong, not to the distant, but to the very recent past. In our play appear not the heroic figures of myth or legend, but contemporary flesh and blood. The catastrophic event was not one that occurred, or was believed to have occurred, in a legendary setting, but one that had happened only a few years before, an event of intense significance for the Greek world and to be recalled only with a deep glow of patriotic enthusiasm. Was it to be expected that a Greek audience would shed tears at the discomfiture and humiliation of the arrogant monarch who had attempted to reduce them to slavery? In view of all this it would be peculiarly difficult for the dramatist to create and to maintain the necessary tragic atmosphere.

Inherent in the special nature of the subject is another difficulty. According to Aristotle[1] it is not the function of the poet to relate what

[1] *Poetics*, ch. 9.

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has happened, but what may happen (οἷα ἂν γένοιτο): history deals with the particular, poetry rather with the universal (μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου), so that we can see how a person of given character will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity (κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον); hence the pity and fear experienced by the spectator who feels that what happened to the tragic 'hero' might have happened or may yet happen to himself. He reacts not to the particular as such, but to the universal symbolised by or embodied in the particular. In other words, the characters depicted by tragedy, the actions and fortunes of the persons with whom it acquaints us, possess a typical and universal value.[1] Now when a tragic poet derives the material for his 'plot' not from some well-known myth, but from recent events, he is not entirely free to mould that material to his purposes. He must adhere fairly closely to the facts of history; the real will tend to supplant the ideal, so that his scope for rising above the level of the particular is considerably reduced. Nevertheless, as Aristotle remarks, if he does take an historical subject,[2] he can handle it as a poet, since there is nothing to prevent some real happenings from being τοιαῦτα οἷα ἂν εἰκὸς γενέσθαι. This is, I believe, precisely what Aeschylus has done in the *Persae*: he has adhered broadly to the historical facts, but there are clear indications that he has striven to raise the historical to the level of the poetic and the philosophic. For our present purpose it will suffice to mention two significant deviations from the facts of history. It is an idealised Darius that Aeschylus has portrayed: the blameless father is a foil to his erring son, and the mouthpiece of the philosopher-poet. We might almost say that the facts have been altered so as to fit into the dramatist's theological framework. Xerxes too has been changed, though to a much smaller extent. We know from Herodotus that in preparing the expedition against Greece he was only carrying out his father's express design; yet Darius in the play

[1] S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, p. 246.

[2] Although in this respect the *Persae* is unique in the extant literature, it was by no means unique among ancient tragedies. Phrynichus wrote *The Capture of Miletus* and the *Phoenissae*; in the fourth century Moschion is said to have written a play *Themistocles*, which dealt with the battle of Salamis, while Theodectes composed a tragedy in honour of Mausolus; in the Hellenistic period at least two tragedies dealt with historical subjects: the *Themistocles* of Philicus and the Κασανδρεῖς of Lycophron. To what century should be assigned the play dealing with the usurpation of the throne of Lydia by Gyges, a fragment of which was recently discovered (see *A New Chapter in the History of Greek Tragedy*, by D. L. Page), is uncertain.

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censures his son for his rashness and impious daring. To that extent, as Snell puts it, Aeschylus has made myth out of history. This manner of handling the historical facts itself suggests that as a dramatist he has adopted a (for the most part at least) supra-national attitude: he has treated the Persian in much the same way as he would have treated the Greek in similar circumstances; from the particular he has distilled the universal.

(ii) *Some crucial passages*

(*a*) *The Messenger's speeches*[1]

Confirmation of the *dramatist's* impartiality is provided by one scene in which, if anywhere, he might have been expected to betray national bias.

In lines 302–30 we have a list of the principal ἀρχελεῖοι who fell: there is no suggestion that the Persians were not gallant and courageous fighters. On the contrary, it is a reasonable inference from the tribute paid to Syennesis (326–8) that there were many brave warriors who caused great havoc to their foes. In 337 f. we learn that in respect of numbers the Persians had an enormous superiority, and had every reason to expect victory; but it is constantly stressed that the gods were against them: δαίμων τις κατέφθειρε στρατόν (345), ἀλάστωρ ἢ κακὸς δαίμων ποθέν (354), τὸν θεῶν φθόνον (362), τὸ μέλλον ἐκ θεῶν (373). It would have been easy for Aeschylus to attribute the victory to the skill and prowess of the Greeks—to make the admission come from the lips of a Persian would heighten the effect!—but of this there is not a word. It was a trick that brought the Persian fleet into its fatal position (ἐν στενῷ), and that the trick was successful was due to the θεῶν φθόνος. Finally, the flower of the Persian nobles was cut off and destroyed on Psyttaleia, αἰσχρῶς δυσκλεεστάτῳ μόρῳ: the contest was not on even terms, and the Persians were at the mercy of the Greek heavily armed troops.

The description of the actual naval battle occupies only twenty-one lines (408–28), and is remarkable for its restraint as well as for its brevity. There must have been many details that would interest a Greek audience and flatter its pride. Instead of these we have the barest possible summary of the action: broad impressions only are conveyed, of hopeless confusion among the Persian lines, of a sea strewn with innumerable corpses, and of a butchery that ended only with the fall of darkness.

It is very significant that not one Greek is named, in marked

[1] I cannot agree with Cahen (p. 305) that except for his groans the Messenger speaks like a Greek who exalts the great deeds of the Athenians.

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contrast to the long roll of Persian leaders,[1] and that too although the audience was well aware who was the author of the false message that deceived the Persians (355 ff.) and to whom was due the annihilation of the Persian force on Psyttaleia (447 ff.). This reticence was wholly fitting in a play that was to be primarily the presentation of the Persian tragedy as seen through Persian eyes.

Could we expect a more restrained and impartial account from the pen of a Greek? The only passage that betrays Greek national sentiment is that which contains the inspiriting battle-song: ὦ παῖδες Ἑλλήνων ἴτε...νῦν ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀγών (402–5), which finely expresses the glowing patriotism of the Greeks and their realisation that their lives, their liberty and all they held dear were at stake.

We may now proceed to consider certain passages in which, according to some critics, a Persian is made to speak out of character merely in order to swell the pride of the audience, or in which it was the aim of the poet to satirise or pour scorn on the Persians.

(*b*) *Atossa's enquiries about Athens* (230–45)

On her first appearance Atossa is full of anxiety lest the tide of Persian prosperity may have turned; she is apprehensive too about the safety of her son. Her gloomy forebodings are dramatically appropriate as a preparation for the news soon to be brought by the Messenger, though for a brief space she derives some relief from the comforting words of the Chorus, who assure her that if prayers are offered to the gods and libations to the departed spirits all will be well.

Now if the Messenger had arrived immediately after 225, the transition from hope to despair would have been too violent: some interval was necessary, and this is provided by the Queen's enquiries about Athens and the Athenians. But are these enquiries *à propos*?[2] Does there not seem to be no necessary sequence in the thought? Is not the real *raison d'être* of the dialogue the desire of the poet to eulogise the Greeks and (impliedly) to disparage the Persians (see especially 242, οὔτινος δοῦλοι κέκληνται...)? Is he not simply gratifying Athenian pride when he makes the Chorus refer to the

[1] Lattimore (pp. 87–8 of essay referred to in postscript to (*d*) *infra*, p. xxii) maintains with considerable plausibility that it was the poet's plain intention to create an impression of enormous losses on the Persian side, both by sea and land; hence the sounding catalogue of names, many of which do not occur elsewhere in connection with the Persian invasion. Cf. App. v.

[2] Flickinger says that Aeschylus valued dramatic verisimilitude less highly than the fervent response each couplet would evoke.

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quality of the troops that won the day at Marathon (236)? (The criticism that it is hardly natural to represent Atossa as being so ignorant about Athens and its people, and that in any case such ignorance is inconsistent with the knowledge displayed in 473 ff., is not relevant to our present discussion: see comm. *ad loc.*)

It is undeniable that some of the statements put into the mouth of the Chorus would be very gratifying to Athenian ears, but we may not therefore tax Aeschylus with pure jingoism. As was pointed out above, this passage of στιχομυθία provided an interval during which the emotional tension could be relaxed. There was, after all, no urgent need for the Queen to proceed with the prayers and offerings, and, furthermore, the questions were not unsuited to her present state of mind. The vivid dream would make her eager to know more exactly where Xerxes had gone (note the vagueness of Ἰαόνων γῆν οἴχεται πέρσαι θέλων in 178), how distant was the city he had sworn to capture, whether he was likely to meet with serious opposition, and so on. When she is reminded of the severe defeat inflicted by the Athenians on the army of Darius her fears return (245, δεινὰ... τοῖς τεκοῦσι).

I think, then, that this passage is not a dramatically illegitimate παρενθήκη, and that it is fair to say that Aeschylus has skilfully used the dialogue to a not unworthy advantage. All considered, we must admire his restraint.

(*c*) *Atossa's concern for Xerxes' robes* (845–8)

At the conclusion of the ghost scene Atossa displays what seems to some commentators to be a ridiculous concern about her son's appearance in ragged robes. Sidgwick, for example, takes the passage to be 'a satire on the ways of Oriental royalties' (n. on 847). This seems to me a quite gratuitous supposition. Oriental ways often differed widely from the Greek—of this the whole play gives ample evidence—and since the scene is set in the heart of Persia and since the characters are all Persians, the dramatist was bound to present as faithfully as he could the Persian point of view. For the King of Kings to appear in tattered garments was a terrible degradation in the eyes of a Persian, for whom the monarch was almost a divine personage. A large and splendid retinue always accompanied him; his robes were the finest and the costliest that could be procured; a King without these was inconceivable. How much more bitter would the humiliation be to his royal mother, for whom pomp and χλιδή were very real and indispensable concomitants of kingly

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power and dignity. In spite of the disaster she must at least restore appearances: her son must still be recognised as the monarch of a great empire. Of course, regal trappings meant little to a Greek, to whom the servility of the Persians towards their King was abhorrent, but there is no need whatsoever to assume that Aeschylus is here indulging in satire.

(*d*) *The prophecies of Darius* (800–20)

In this passage Darius, who has already (740) recognised in Salamis the fulfilment of certain oracles, expresses his sure conviction that still further disasters await the Persian people. The greater part of the forces left behind in Greece by Xerxes will never return to their homeland; because of their impious deeds they will be all but annihilated at Plataea by the Dorian spear. Since the fulfilment of this prophecy lies outside the action of the play, it may be said that its mention here is dramatically irrelevant, and affords further evidence that the poet's real intention was to celebrate the exploits of the Greeks: Aeschylus has gone out of his way to sing the nation's praise just as much as Virgil did when his hero was given a vision of the future greatness of Rome.

It is true that the prophecies have nothing to do with the action of the play (we shall see below that it has no action as commonly understood), but it is also true that they are very closely connected with the whole object of Darius' appearance—the giving of sound advice to his people so that they may avoid such disasters in future. They must send no more expeditions to Greece, and take warning from the fate that would befall the army at present in Greece as a result of ὕβρις and ἄθεα φρονήματα (808). Athens and Greece must be a perpetual reminder of the penalty that overtakes the man who ὑπερφρονήσας τὸν παρόντα δαίμονα / ἄλλων ἐρασθεὶς ὄλβον ἐκχέῃ μέγαν (825–6). Of course, such advice could have been given in the light of what had already happened and without reference to the future, but such a reference is quite legitimate, since Darius is represented as repeating what was contained in the oracles, and it makes his utterances all the more impressive.

Although it is undeniable that the mention of Plataea would be deeply appreciated by the Greek audience, the solemn context in which it occurs is decisive against the view that Aeschylus' sole object was to appeal to national pride. Here and elsewhere what gave pleasure appears as a secondary result, not as a primary purpose—and therein lies the skill of the dramatist.

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Postscript to (*d*). The above was written before I read the essay 'Aeschylus on the defeat of Xerxes' by Richmond Lattimore (pp. 82–93 of *Classical Studies in Honor of W. A. Oldfather*, 1943). This essay throws considerable light on a number of points, but it has not convinced me that the *Persae* was intended to be an account of the whole war (p. 82), or that Aeschylus has deliberately played down Plataea (p. 91). Lattimore states that the events *recounted* go far beyond Salamis (p. 82). Marathon and Plataea certainly go beyond Salamis, but neither event can be said to be *recounted*, nor does the *manner* in which they are mentioned support Lattimore's contention about the purpose of the *Persae*. Marathon is twice referred to (236, 475), but cursorily and by way of illustration; Plataea is mentioned as the culmination of the punishment of Persian ὕβρις. If Aeschylus had intended the play to be an account of the entire war, he would surely have made more of these great events, and he would doubtless have contrived to make some reference to Thermopylae, Artemisium, Mycale. Such omissions Lattimore puts down to the fact that dramatic unity made it necessary to focus attention on Salamis: but a casual reference like that to Marathon would not have disturbed this unity.

As for the playing down of Plataea, I think Plataea receives just as much space as is reasonable in the context. Even if Aeschylus did mean to cover the 'entire war', I should still be unable to agree that he has belittled the Spartan achievement and has reserved for it an inconspicuous place. Considering that in his two previous speeches Darius has expatiated at some length on Xerxes' ὕβρις and νόσος φρενῶν and on the consequences thereof (the fulfilment of prophecies) as well as on the harm he has done in comparison with previous rulers, we might have supposed that enough had been said to hammer home the obvious lesson. No: the poet has in reserve still another speech—the longest of the three—in which the father harps again on his son's impiety and points to its *future* consequences. It would almost seem that the third speech was designed largely to bring in the stern object-lesson of Plataea: ὕβρις having reached maturity produced a crop of woe (821–2). I fail completely to see that Plataea was regarded by Aeschylus as an 'insignificant mopping-up operation' or that line 817 is a mere 'sop to historical actuality' (Lattimore, p. 91). Such a view is hardly to be reconciled with the undeniable fact that for twenty-seven lines (796–822) Plataea was in the minds of the Greek audience.

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(*e*) *The final scene* (907–1076)

For the modern reader the final scene has usually no appeal. Forming his impressions from the printed page, and unable in any case to appreciate the mechanical wailings of an Oriental dirge, he tends to judge the reactions of a Greek audience by his own. Some scholars believe that Aeschylus intended to hold Xerxes up to ridicule by making him appear on the stage in rags[1] or to arouse the spectators' contempt by the spectacle of the dejected and humiliated monarch. Such a view makes of the *Persae* not a tragedy, but a farce;[2] it clashes intolerably with the serious moral purpose of the preceding ἐπεισόδιον, and, indeed, with the elevated tone of all the other scenes. In the κομμός the harvest which ὕβρις reaped (822) is made visible in the person of Xerxes, whose sin had brought about the terrible catastrophe. This final scene can be understood and appreciated only if we recognise that Xerxes, unsuitable as he was for the role of traditional tragic hero, is nevertheless the mainspring of the tragedy. In all the earlier scenes he has been present to our minds so that his appearance in the flesh is a veritable climax, which must be reserved for the end of the play. Aeschylus, with unerring instinct, made it follow upon the impressive denunciations of Darius, which, no less than the charge to Atossa (833–4), prepare the audience for the picture of the broken monarch, utterly overwhelmed by the shame and disgrace he has incurred, confessing his responsibility for his country's ruin, wishing that he had perished with his army, deeply moved when he recalls the trusty comrades he has lost, answering meekly the reproachful enquiries of the Elders, and finally participating in the mournful antiphonal dirge that fittingly completes the picture of the depths of misery to which the once glorious and triumphant Persia is reduced. There is no chauvinism[3] in this ἔξοδος, and Gilbert Murray is surely right when he remarks,[4] 'This lamentation is not only written with great technical skill, but seems to combine an expression of utter defeat and desolation with a certain nobleness and dignity. The conquered oppressor is not mocked.'

Perhaps enough has now been said to acquit the poet of the charge that in such passages as those above considered his primary purpose was the glorification of the Greeks and the disparagement of the

[1] See *infra*, pp. xxxviii, xlvii f.

[2] 'Contempt or ridicule of a defeated adversary would destroy the very purpose of tragedy' (Smyth, *Aeschylean Tragedy*, p. 70).

[3] Cf. Snell, *Aischylos und das Handeln im Drama*, p. 70.

[4] Notes to translation, p. 92.

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Persians, and the discussion may now take a more positive turn. If the *Persae* was meant to be a genuine tragedy, we expect to find that the poet has done his best to view the scene through Persian eyes, and that whatever his feelings towards the barbarian invader, he has, as a dramatist and a delineator of character, entered with imaginative insight into the heart of the Persian tragedy. We shall first consider the characters.

(iii) *The characters*

(*a*) *The Chorus*

Chosen by Xerxes to manage during his absence the affairs of state these trusty Elders (γηραλέα πιστώματα, 171), who had enjoyed the confidence of their revered lord Darius, are worthy representatives of the noble class, proud of Persian might and wealth, and devoted to the highest interests of the empire so gloriously acquired by Persian arms (cf. περσονόμου τιμῆς μεγάλης, 919; περσονομοῦνται, 585). In the πάροδος they express in somewhat extravagant language their conviction that the strength of the Great King's army is irresistible (87 ff.), though they cannot stifle their brooding anxiety lest the splendid contingents may have come to grief (it is this mood of foreboding that prevents them from giving a clear-cut interpretation of Atossa's dream: they hedge and recommend her to have recourse to prayers and libations). They are well informed about Athens, and can readily answer all the Queen's questions, as behoves members of a Privy Council. After the disastrous news is announced their role is the natural if conventional one of uttering lyrical comments.

In the first στάσιμον they dwell on the sorrows of the Persian people and of the whole Asiatic continent. Here occurs their first outspoken criticism of their King (553 f.), who is so different from Δαρεῖος ἀβλαβής. They fear rebellion now that the power and might of the Persian kingdom are gone. From this point onwards the dramatist has used the Chorus, as he later used Darius himself, to point the glaring contrast between the father's wisdom and the son's folly.

In the evocation scene it is entirely appropriate that the Elders, who had been so long associated with the late King (681) and were now representatives of the whole nation, should be assigned the important duty of calling upon the nether powers to allow Darius to rise to the light above, since from him alone could salvation come, the ruler who was godlike in counsel and never brought ruinous war to the Persians (ἀντ. α′). In στρ. γ′ they invoke Darius himself: he must hear their woes. Throughout there is one recurrent refrain, the

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godlike qualities of their former lord—δαίμονα μεγαυχῆ, Σουσιγενῆ θεόν—there never was his like, and he was beloved by his people.

Since all the invocatory utterances came from the Chorus, it was natural that to them first should Darius' enquiries be directed; but so deep is their reverence for him, so awe-struck are they that words almost fail them, much less can they have the heart to break the terrible news. It is only after a long dialogue between Atossa and Darius that they ask him (somewhat abruptly) what their future policy should be.

The last στάσιμον is another eulogy of the ἰσόθεος βασιλεύς, and describes in detail the extent of his bloodless conquests of the Greek-inhabited islands of the Aegean and of the northern settlements on the Greek mainland.

For the greater part of the final scene (907–1037) the Chorus do little more than rub salt into the wretched King's wounds: they boldly reproach him for cramming Hades with the flower of the Persian forces and for bringing the whole of Asia to its knees. Four times in all they remind him of distinguished warriors who have perished, but the manner of reminding reveals their own deep emotions: the despairing questions, ποῦ δὲ φίλων ἄλλος ὄχλος; / ποῦ δέ σοι παραστάται, / οἷος ἦν Φαρανδάκης, κτλ. (956 ff.), οἰοιοῖ ποῦ σοι Φαρνοῦχος. . . / ποῦ δὲ Σευάλκης ἄναξ, κτλ. (967 ff.), the pathetic repetitions, ἔλιπες ἔλιπες (985), ἔταφον ἔταφον (1000), and even the occasional epithets that add touches of individuality to the sad catalogue, ἀγαθός (968), εὐπάτωρ (970), μέγαν (984), αἰχμᾶς ἀκόρεστον (999), especially sad because so many *noble* Persians (Πέρσαι ἀγαυοί, 986) have fallen.

This brief account of the part played by the Chorus shows that they provide a distinctively Persian background and that through them is conveyed to the audience the most lively impression of the effects of the disaster on the Persians and their vast empire. But, it may be said, is not the critical attitude[1] of the Chorus towards their King out of character? Is not their παρρησία inconsistent with the obeisance they elsewhere display in the presence of royalty and with the flattering portrait of Xerxes in the πάροδος (e.g. ἰσόθεος φώς, 80)? Has not the poet imported into their speech something of the outspokenness that was characteristic of democratic Athens? This is not unlikely, and Kranz[2] is probably right in saying that here the

[1] 'Emportée véhémente et presque séditieuse' (Patin); 'accusing and menacing tone' (Kitto).

[2] *Stasimon*, pp. 169 f., where Kranz remarks that the Chorus in the last scene behave like an independent actor, and as if they were on a level with the King.

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voice of the Chorus is the voice of the poet (cf. 550 ff., n.). Compare the way in which Darius is portrayed as the model ruler by whose standard of wise government Xerxes is to be judged, who passes very severe judgement on his son's actions, and warns the Chorus that by their admonitions they must prevail on Xerxes to cease offending Heaven (830–1). Nevertheless it is not altogether unnatural that the Chorus should openly express their feelings to their humiliated King, since he acknowledges his responsibility for the misfortunes he has brought upon his people (933–4). However that may be, if the poet has made Chorus or Darius to be his mouthpiece, the utterances spring from the poet's deep convictions on life and are quite incompatible with a satiric or contemptuous tone.

(*b*) *Atossa*

To most of the audience Atossa would hardly be more than a name.[1] In the play she is simply 'the Queen', and it is to be expected that the poet would allow himself much greater freedom of characterisation than was possible in the case of Xerxes. She strikes us as the most freshly drawn of the *dramatis personae*, distinguished above all for her queenly dignity and her intense devotion to her son, a devotion that seems to make her at times insensible to wider issues. In her opening speech she expresses her fear that the ὄλβος established by Darius may be overthrown, but her main anxiety is for the safety of Xerxes, the ὄμμα δόμων. If disaster does come, she can console herself with the thought that after all he is not ὑπεύθυνος πόλει, and on his return will continue to be lord of the land (213–14)—a remark that like her question in 241 reveals the irresponsible character of the Persian δεσπότης.

In the Messenger scene, except for her initial speech (290–8), Atossa's role is the largely formal one of breaking up the Messenger's long story. Neither in her questions nor in her comments is there anything specially characteristic:[2] the Chorus could have taken her part equally well. Her personality is for the time being completely

[1] Wilamowitz (on 159) holds that her name was introduced into the text from a scholium.

[2] I think that Kitto (*Greek Tragedy*, p. 44) somewhat overstates Atossa's role in this scene ('sensible enough to ask the right questions of the Messenger'), though I agree that 'she has acquired a perceptible dramatic stature —at the expense of the Chorus' (from a letter replying to some criticisms). There seems to me to be some exaggeration also in the statement concerning the Nobles that 'half of their task of conveying to us the tragedy of Persia they have had to surrender to the Queen'.

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overshadowed by the account of the battle. Her expressions of sympathy for the bereaved are very brief (332–3, 433–4), and she passes quickly to further questions. In a longer comment (472 ff.) she shows that she never lets her thoughts wander far from Xerxes. At 517 there is one line about the annihilated host: then she turns to the business of prayers and offerings and ends with another reference to her son.

In the lines that follow immediately upon the story of Psyttaleia (472–7) we have Atossa's longest comment on the disaster which, like the Messenger (354) and Darius (725), she attributes to the 'deceptive' action of some δαίμων (cf. comm. on ἀπάταν θεοῦ, 107), who caused Xerxes' attempt at vengeance on Athens to recoil on his own head, as if Marathon should not have taught him a lesson! One cannot resist the conclusion that here the poet has made the Queen voice Greek sentiments, not to mention the astonishing epithet κλεινῶν that she applies to the Athens of which she earlier had shown herself comparatively ignorant, and one feels that in this part of the play the characterisation is unconvincing.

At the conclusion of the scene she becomes once more her normal self. Her practical nature asserts itself in her determination to carry out the advice of the Chorus (230), while her maternal devotion is again revealed in her instructions to the Chorus (529–31).

On her next appearance (598 ff.) she is full of apprehension: the very atmosphere seems charged with sinister bodings, which have driven her to hasten the preparations for appeasing the departed. The fact that she has dispensed with the chariot and the pomp that marked her first appearance is significant evidence of her mental state, and is in keeping with the solemnity of the rites in which she is soon to engage.

In the next ἐπεισόδιον Darius, finding the Chorus all but speechless, turns to his wife for information. Here one must admire the skill with which Aeschylus has made use of the second actor. So far as the mere imparting of information was concerned, the Chorus could have been used; it had, however, to recede into the background when husband and wife were face to face. This Aeschylus has cleverly achieved by representing the Elders as being tongue-tied through reverence for their late master and reluctance to cause him grief.[1] This has the double advantage of opening the way for the Queen's participation in the dialogue and of enhancing the impressiveness of the ghost's appearance. That the Queen should answer Darius' questions

[1] See p. xlii.

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was appropriate for another reason: the responsibility for the disaster had to be sheeted home to Xerxes, a task that demanded an outspokenness from which the Chorus *in the circumstances* would naturally shrink, but which was necessary as a preparation for the scathing strictures that Darius was soon to make and that were of cardinal importance for the inculcation of the grand moral lesson of the play. Atossa's love for her son does not blind her to his weaknesses: she admits the bad effects of his association with evil-minded men (753), and probably sees some truth in the charge that he lacked the spirit to follow in his father's footsteps. Twice she calls him θούριος Ξέρξης (718, 754) in reference (so the context suggests) to his impetuous nature, evidenced by his rashness in undertaking the expedition into which he was goaded by the reproaches of his evil associates (on the lips of the Chorus in line 73 the epithet has a different meaning: see n. on 718).

The last glimpse we have of Atossa shows her still as the fond and anxious mother, deeply distressed at the undignified appearance of her son.

This portrait of the Queen reveals a distinctive personality, sympathetically drawn by the dramatist and more consistently Persian than any of the other characters.

(*c*) *Darius*

This imposing, dignified and majestic figure, more than any other in the play, shows how far Aeschylus has risen above the level of a narrow nationalism. This will be clear from a brief consideration of the part he plays in the drama. In the first place he raises it nearer the level of those tragedies in which heroes or deities appear on the stage: for Darius is heroic in stature, indeed is regarded almost as a god. His appearance is a kind of theophany. He has the commanding presence of an Olympian deity whose impressive pronouncements are accepted without question, and are like a strong breeze that blows sanity into a disordered world. He is in strongest possible contrast to Xerxes, and drives home the truth already recognised by Chorus and Queen that the young King's folly had brought about their ruin. Then he gives sage advice for the future—never to carry war into Greece. (The reason given would be some comfort to the Greeks, especially as the army in its retreat provided an excellent example that proved the wisdom of the advice.) He foretells the sufferings that yet await the remaining Persian forces and their utter defeat at Plataea (*supra*, p. xxi). This final disaster he attributes to

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the impious destruction of temples and the desecration of altars, and above all to the ὕβρις which led to the commission of such heinous sins, the ὑπέρκομπον φρόνημα of Xerxes, who, not content with his inherited prosperity, sought to rival the gods themselves and to overstep the limits beyond which mere mortals might not go.

This picture is, of course, an idealisation, and the theology is Greek rather than Persian. Aeschylus, like his audience, probably knew little, if anything, about the Persian religion; however that may be, he chose to make Darius moralise as if he were a member of the Chorus in the *Agamemnon*. The significant thing for our present purpose is that a Persian is made to set the calamity down *not to the superiority of the Greeks* (p. xviii, *supra*), *but to the transgression of divine law*, transgression that would bring disaster upon any human being, be he Greek or barbarian. In Darius' utterances we have, as was said above (p. xvi), the concentrated essence of the poet's philosophy, and this fact, combined with the idealisation itself, is surely eloquent testimony to the truth of our thesis.

Xerxes has been dealt with above (p. xxiii), while the Messenger (pp. xviii f.) is, on the whole, made to speak from the standpoint of a Persian.

Our study of the characters, then, leaves us with the strong impression that the dramatist has sought to delineate, not with prejudice or malice, but with sympathetic imagination, the Persian tragedy as he conceived it to have affected the Persian people, and, in particular, the ruling class. That his characters occasionally express views or feelings that are Greek rather than Persian cannot be denied: indeed, in view of the very special nature of the subject-matter, it would be surprising if they did not. By some scholars too much has been made of these 'lapses', which stand out all the more prominently because of the evidently impartial attitude we find elsewhere. Such impartiality is demanded of the dramatist and is not inconsistent with patriotic fervour and absolute loyalty to his country. Indeed, as Pohlenz says (*Die griechische Tragödie*, p. 52), 'To the poet and his countrymen patriotic and religious feelings were identical. In what had happened Aeschylus saw the operation of divine providence, of immanent righteousness,[1] so that the particular event was raised to the realm of the eternal.' This alone, it seems to me, decides the question, 'Was the *Persae* written to celebrate a victory or to picture a tragedy?'

[1] Cf. Kranz, p. 64: 'On the Greek side stood the God of Justice, yet the poet draws tears for the lot of the Persians.'

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(iv) *The Persian background*

Apart from his delineation of character Aeschylus has made clear his basic aim by a remarkably faithful painting of the Persian scene. Throughout we are constantly reminded of the gulf that separated the Greek from the oriental world with its enormous wealth, its luxury, its golden splendour, the supremacy of the Persian ruling caste, the divine right of its imperial monarch (762–4), the tribute paid by innumerable subject nations, its vassal kings, the magnificence of the royal entourage, the extravagant προσκύνησις, the pomp that attended the appearance of royalty in public (cf. Xerxes' ἁρμάμαξα and Σύριον ἅρμα, and the Queen's display of finery, etc.), the despotic power of the Great King (cf. 241–2), the mighty power that under the favour of Heaven had extended Persian sway over the whole of the Asiatic continent. Nor are lesser features wanting to complete the picture—the Persian bow as contrasted with the Greek spear, the worship of mountains and rivers, the fine linen worn by the Persian women, the interpretation of dreams, the oriental dirge.

Even in the matter of language Aeschylus has contrived to impart oriental colour and flavour. If the Persians speak Greek, it is Greek that often recalls the Ionic[1] form spoken on the coast of Asia Minor. The Greeks are generally referred to as Ἰάονες or Ἰᾶνες, the name by which they were known to the barbarians. In the evocation scene especially we are conscious of an attempt to create an exotic atmosphere by verbal means: the use of the form Δαριάν (651, 663), which is nearer the Iranian than the Greek form Δαρεῖος, and the foreign appellation βαλλήν (657–8) for the δέσποτα of 666. Most effective of all are the numerous Persian names that stud the πάροδος, the Messenger's first speech and the κομμός. According to philologists the majority are Iranian, though some are partially Hellenised. The Persian vessels are twice called βάριδες (553, 1075), and several times we find the exclamation ὀᾶ, said by the schol. (M) on 117, 122 to be a Περσικὸν θρήνημα.

Into such a Persian texture we find, however, that the poet has at times woven Greek ideas and customs. Atossa after her dream follows Greek ritual when she approaches the altar with the intention of presenting πελανός to the δαίμονες ἀπότροποι. The offerings she brings to 'appease' the departed are what a Greek would lay at the tomb of the spirit invoked. Persians address their prayers to Zeus or

[1] See Headlam in *C.R.* 1898, pp. 189 f.

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Hermes or Aidoneus, and refer as naturally as a Greek to Apollo, Poseidon, Ares. Darius preaches on the familiar Greek doctrine of ὕβρις. Of course, some religious practices were common to Greek and oriental, so that it is hardly possible for us to be sure in such cases whether the poet was describing something Greek, or Persian, or both. Gow (*J.H.S.* XLVIII, p. 138) is of opinion that 'Atossa's offerings (611 f.) look like Greek ritual...but are very likely Persian also (Strabo xv, p. 733)'. So the portent (205 f.) 'has a remarkably Greek look, but its reference to Persia is also unmistakable' (Gow, *loc. cit.*; cf. Comm. *ad loc.*). The epithet ἱερός is applied to Tmolus (49), possibly because the mountain was, for the Greek, made holy by the god's presence (it was sacred to Dionysus), though there may be a reference to the oriental (Lydian) reverence for mountains; cf. ἁγνοῦ Στρυμόνος (497), which may reflect the Greek belief in river-gods and the Persian worship of rivers (Kranz, p. 86).[1] When the whole Persian army falls on its knees and prays to γῆ and οὐρανός (499), some scholars see a reference to a specifically Persian custom.[2] In the evocation scene the Chorus appeal to Darius, the ἰσοδαίμων βασιλεύς of whose help the Persians stood in such dire need, in much the same way as Orestes and Electra in the *Choephoroi* appeal to their father, the σεμνότιμος ἀνάκτωρ κατὰ χθονὸς ἐμπρέπων, the πρόπολος τῶν μεγίστων ἐκεῖ τυράννων. Such incongruities would hardly disturb a Greek audience.[3]

On a somewhat different footing are the poet's deviations from the facts of history. His idealisation of Darius was deliberate, and the Queen seems to have been largely his own creation, but such liberty could well be taken by a dramatist, especially as Darius appears in the play only as a ghost, while Atossa was doubtless to the Athenian a somewhat shadowy figure. From Darius' list of Medo-Persian kings we cannot draw any firm conclusion (see App. on 765 ff.), but if it is inaccurate, the inaccuracy is dramatically unimportant, and would matter not at all to an audience probably unacquainted with early

[1] Note, however, that the same epithet is applied to the Strymon in *Suppl.* 254.

[2] See, however, Comm. *ad loc.*

[3] 'Though the scene is laid in the Persian capital, and though the characters are Persians, we may rest assured that they represent for us faithfully the doctrines respecting the dead held by the Greeks of the fifth century B.C.... Aeschylus regards Darius as having the same powers as the old Greek heroes, such as Scephrus, who were supposed to influence the spirits beneath the earth and thus produce barrenness or plenty' (Ridgeway, *The Origin of Tragedy*, p. 118).

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Persian history. Furthermore, we need not expect strict adherence to historical fact (if known to Aeschylus) in a context in which Darius in his reference to himself glosses over his own well-known failures (Scythia, Marathon).

As for the Messenger's speeches: there is little reason to doubt that the account of the naval battle is essentially reliable (see App. VI). If the story of the frozen Strymon is the poet's invention, it is a dramatically effective illustration of how divine Providence controls events and it betrays no gloating over a defeated enemy.

In fine, a tragic poet, in dealing with a subject taken from contemporary or recent history, was both fettered and free. Where the audience was well acquainted with the facts, he could not seriously tamper with those facts; but the slighter their knowledge, the greater could be his freedom of treatment, especially if his dramatic purpose was thereby furthered. Minutiae that are important for the historian may have little or no significance for the poet.

To conclude this section—the thesis propounded above (p. xvi), that the *Persae* is, and was intended to be, a genuine tragedy, seems to me to be strongly supported by the dramatist's marked restraint in describing the Greek victory, by his sympathetic delineation of character, by his (on the whole) successful attempt to view the tragedy as it appeared to the Persians, by his insistence on the moral lessons to be learned from the Persian defeat, by his broad adherence to the historical facts and his usually impartial manner of presenting them. The occasional lapses we can detect do not seriously impair the dominant impression derived from every scene or appreciably lower the elevated tone so conspicuous in the portrayal of an idealised Darius.

B. DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE

Viewed from the purely dramatic standpoint the *Persae* has not escaped serious criticism. The construction is faulty: the three main scenes have little organic connection and might rather have formed a trilogy (Wilamowitz). There is a lack of a clear focal point in the action (Kitto), and there is no plot, as this term is commonly understood. The play retains some of the archaic features of early tragedy, and the handling of the second actor is awkward. There is truth in all these charges, but it will be argued that the peculiar nature of the subject-matter makes it unreasonable to apply rigorously to the *Persae* certain canons of dramatic criticism.

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INTRODUCTION

(i) '*No action and no plot*'

Critics who complain that the *Persae* has little or no action and that it lacks a plot do not seem to make sufficient allowance for the limitations imposed on the dramatist by his choice of subject. In the first place, he was bound, since the play dealt with very recent events, to adhere fairly closely to the historical facts, so far at least as he and his audience had personal experience of those events (see p. xxxii, *supra*). He could not ignore, for example, the fact that Xerxes was present at the battle of Salamis. Consequently, if the scene was to be set in Persia—an aesthetic necessity—Xerxes' appearance on the stage had to be subsequent to the battle: the turning-point of Persian fortunes was past before the character mainly responsible for it could be presented to the spectators. This ruled out the possibility of a plot in which the action of the 'hero' leads up to the grand climax. In the second place, since the story of Salamis had to be told, and since, however great the detachment and the restraint of the presentation, it could hardly fail to arouse patriotic feelings in the breasts of the audience, it could not form the περιπέτεια without doing grievous prejudice to the fulfilment of the dramatist's primary purpose: it had to be placed early enough to do the least violence possible to the tragic atmosphere, which reaches its climax in the κομμός.

Now if the account of the battle had to be given in the first part of the play, the latter part would inevitably be taken up with a presentation of Persian despair and sorrow, and this presentation would consist either of lyrical laments (as apparently in Phrynichus' *Phoenissae*) or of laments varied by the introduction of an ἐπεισόδιον in which the effect of the disaster would be the burden of the dialogue, with perhaps some discussion of the measures to be taken in view of the critical situation. Such laments and episode could obviously not form part of a progressing 'plot': they could only illustrate the reactions of the *dramatis personae* to a given situation. In fact, the nature of the theme made two main demands upon the dramatist: that in his account of the battle he should do justice to the grandeur of the subject, and that he should adequately portray its effects on the defeated enemy. It would, however, be wrong to say that Aeschylus sought to make of this play a Greek paean on the one hand, a Persian dirge on the other. Rather should we say that his broad aim was to show the mighty fallen, through ὕβρις, from his high estate. This aim has been achieved (i) by the account of the disaster that laid him low; (ii) by the demonstration, through Darius' pronouncements, that the

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