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CHAPTER ONE

Zeus in *Persae*[1]

Aeschylus was a dramatist of ideas – of religious ideas. His ideas may have been old or new, clear or confused, crude or profound, but it was in terms of religious ideas that he interpreted the story of the house of Argos; and it was in terms of religious ideas that he interpreted a great event in the history of his own time. It is, therefore, of considerable interest and importance to discover, if we can, a relationship between the way he thought in 472 and the way he thought in 458. In 458 he made a Chorus reject[2] an old doctrine: that prosperity and good fortune in themselves give rise to disaster – the doctrine, that is to say (though the word is not used), of the jealousy of the gods (φθόνος τῶν θεῶν). No, sings this Chorus, it is the impious deed that begets after its kind, the old *hubris* that gives birth to new and to a train of evil consequences. In 472, in *Persae*, we seem to find both doctrines. We find the Chorus singing of the crafty deceit of a god from which no mortal can escape, and we find the Messenger speaking of the jealousy of the gods. But we also find Darius speaking of the stern punishments of Zeus and attributing the disasters of the Persians to their own acts of *hubris*. As though such seeming contradictions were sent to test our ingenuity, eminent scholars – I mention no names[3] – have tied themselves in knots to demonstrate that the contradiction does not exist. I would suggest that the contradiction not only exists but is essential to the

[1] This chapter is reprinted with minor alterations from *JHS* 93 (1973) 210–19, which was a volume in honour of Professor E. R. Dodds.

[2] *Agam.* 750ff.

[3] Except to say that Dodds is not among them. 'What to the partial vision of the living appears as the act of a fiend, is perceived by the wider insight of the dead to be an aspect of cosmic justice' (Dodds (1) 39). If there is any originality in this chapter, it is in regard to the art rather than to the thought of Aeschylus.

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thought of the play, and that it has, to some extent, dictated the play's form.[4]

This form is very simple, just as the dramatic action is simple. The Persian elders express their anxiety at the long-delayed return of Xerxes and his mighty army; Atossa tells them about her sinister dream; a messenger brings news of the disaster at Salamis. By the closing words of Atossa, before she leaves the stage at 531, the poet seems deliberately to have left open in the mind of his audience the possibility of a speedy arrival of Xerxes;[5] and, if the news of Salamis had been followed, after a short choral ode, by the return of Xerxes in rags and a scene of lamentation closing the play, it would have been a sequence very gratifying to Athenian pride. But it does not happen that way. Between the news of disaster and the return of Xerxes comes the evocation of Darius from his tomb. Not only so, but this episode occupies roughly a quarter of the play, of which, in point of action, it is manifestly the most striking – and surprising – feature. We are of course free to say that Aeschylus, observing that his play lacked action, decided to expand it with a characteristic exhibition of what ancient critics called τὸ τερατῶδες – 'the portentous', 'the sensational'. We can even regard Darius as a rather uneconomical device for introducing the battle of Plataea. Such explanations are, however, best kept in reserve to be brought forward if no reason more creditable to the dramatic skill of the poet can be found.

We are faced, then, with a formal problem. Why does Aeschylus hold up the return of Xerxes, while the ghost of Darius is evoked from the tomb? And why does he devote so large a part of the play to this scene? It is perhaps by asking ourselves such questions and attempting to answer them that we stand the best chance of reaching plausible interpretations of Aeschylus. There is another question – not this time of form – which should be asked and can be answered.[6] Why, in a play produced in Athens about the Athenians' finest hour,[7] is the goddess Athena mentioned only once (no more often than Poseidon or Hermes, Phoebus or Pan) and not even then as herself the saviour? The answer is that Athena would be too

[4] I am not concerned to deny that the play has patriotic and political aspects. It is indeed obvious that, in some degree, it was bound to evoke a patriotic response, at which certain features may have been aimed, but Kitto (3) gets the emphasis right. On the political aspect, cf. A. J. Podlecki, *The political background of Aeschylean tragedy* (Ann Arbor 1966) 8–26, and my review in *Gnomon* 39 (1967) 641ff.; Dodds (3) 22 n. 1.

[5] Cf. R. D. Dawe, *PCPS*, n.s. 9 (1963) 27; Taplin 92–8 (who, however, doubts the text and argues for a radical solution).

[6] The point is made by Pohlenz I 61.

[7] Cf. Aristoph., *Frogs* 1027.

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patriotic, too local. Aeschylus is going to interpret the campaign, not in terms of Athena saving her city, but of Zeus maintaining a moral order in the world. The answer to this question will perhaps enable us to answer the other question – the question of form.

It is unnecessary to expatiate upon the importance of Zeus in the thought of Aeschylus. But that great name is not bandied about in his plays. In *Persae* it occurs five times: five times as often as the name of any other Olympian god, but five times only. Three of these occurrences are in the Darius-scene, out of the mouth of Darius himself (740, 762, 827). One opens the choral ode (*ὦ Ζεῦ βασιλεῦ*, 532) which ends the first half of the play and precedes the evocation. The remaining instance lies on the far side of the Darius-scene, in the first outburst of Xerxes on his entrance (915). After that outburst Zeus is not mentioned in the closing scene; he is not mentioned in the first half of the play at all (until 532). Perhaps, then, it would not be unfair to say that Zeus belongs particularly to the Darius-scene and its immediate environment. This said, let us now return to the beginning and consider the religious standpoint which is expressed in the play's first half.

The Chorus of Persian elders, faithful counsellors of the King, are anxious because no news has come from the great host. They recall the vast manpower and the vast wealth of the Persian realm; they recite the names of princes from all parts of the empire who had departed. If this gives the measure of their anxiety, it is also their ground of confidence. For who could resist this great army advancing like a wave of the sea? 'The host of Persia is not to be withstood, its people valiant' (91f.). At this point we come up, as so often alas in Aeschylus, against a textual problem. Is the order of stanzas, as we find it in the MSS, correct? Many editors have followed O. Müller in placing the pair of stanzas *θεόθεν γὰρ . . . λαοπόροις τε μηχαναῖς* (101–14) before *δολόμητιν δ' ἀπάταν . . . ἀλύξαντα φυγεῖν* (or whatever we read there, and whether we accept 93–100 as a mesode or make a pair of stanzas out of it); and for a variety of reasons I am sure they are right.[8] With this transposition, the Chorus now explain the irresistible character of Persian might by singing of a *moira* or allotted portion of divine origin (*theothen*) which has imposed

[8] The case for the transposition is well argued by Broadhead on 93–106. D. Korzeniewski's suggestion (*Helikon* 6 (1966) 573ff.) that the mesode should be placed between Str. γ' and Ant. γ' seems an awkward and unrewarding compromise. The MS order is defended by W. C. Scott, *GRBS* 9 (1968) 25–66, who argues that, in the mind of the Chorus, it is the Greeks who, in resisting the Persians, are victimized by the divine deceit; and by two recent writers: di Benedetto 8f., G. Paduano, *Sui Persiani di Eschilo: problemi di focalizzazione drammatica* (Rome 1978) 45.

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upon the Persians a career of wars and sieges and sacks. (No specific god is mentioned, and this, as we shall see, is characteristic. The idea of *moira*, of a divinely appointed portion or lot, is a common feature of Greek thought in the archaic period.) When the Chorus add that the Persians learnt to look upon the rough waters of the sea, the audience may perhaps wonder whether this was something that was not (in the Homeric phrase) *kata moiran*, but that idea cannot be in the minds of the Chorus. When they sing that their countrymen have put their trust in 'slender cables and devices for transport of a host', *they* will be thinking of ships, but (after 71f.) the audience may well remember the bridging of the Hellespont.[9] And thus on two levels this stanza leads into the sinister themes which follow. For, if the audience thinks of the rash act of Xerxes, the Chorus is pursuing a different train of thought. May not the power and success of Persia be in itself a cause for alarm? They have sung of a dispensation divinely given: but can men trust the gods? *δολόμητιν δ' ἀπάταν θεοῦ τίς ἀνὴρ θνατὸς ἀλύξει;* (107f.). 'What mortal man can escape the crafty-minded deceit of god (or of a god)?'

Again we run into textual difficulties, but fortunately they do not obscure the nature of the ideas employed, which are familiar commonplaces of archaic thought.[10] With a false show of fawning friendliness the god (a god) leads a mortal man on into a net from which he cannot escape. The subject of the sentence (97–100 *or* 111–14) may be *ἀπάτα*, but more likely it is *ἄτα*: in any case the notion of *ate* is introduced and means here 'infatuation'. For the smiling favour of heaven induces the mortal victim to commit some fatal error which brings him down at the height of his prosperity. So far as the language of the Chorus goes, the notion is quite unmoralized, though of course the audience may already be disposed to supply a moral. There is a strong emphasis upon *deceit* (*δολόμητις ἀπάτα*), which implies that the divine purpose is concealed, until it is too late. If the gods are deceitful, they are also fickle: friendly at one moment, hostile at the next. Notice, then, the words with which the Elders greet their queen, when she enters at the end of the *parodos*: 'To a god of the Persians were you bedfellow, and of such a god the mother – unless its former *daimon* has now deserted the host': (*θεοῦ μὲν εὐνάτειρα Περσῶν, θεοῦ δὲ καὶ μήτηρ*

[9] Broadhead (on 100–3) and A. H. Coxon (*CQ* n.s. 8 (1958) 46) argue conclusively that the first part of the stanza refers not to the Hellespont but to the sea in general. It is therefore very awkward if, as Broadhead (on 104–6) holds, the subsequent lines refer to the bridge of boats, the Chorus having 'passed from the general to the particular'. Coxon and Groeneboom (and others) seem to be right that the Chorus is thinking of the sea, generally, throughout.

[10] The textual problems are discussed at length by Broadhead *ad loc.*

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ἔφυς, εἴ τι μὴ δαίμων παλαιὸς νῦν μεθέστηκε στρατῷ, 157f.). *Daimon* here is perhaps something less than 'god', certainly something more than 'destiny' (in the faded sense which we find in Euripides and later writers). It is related to the *theothen moira* of the *parodos*. It was characteristic of the archaic period[11] to use this half-personification of the *moira* which stressed its divine origin – most commonly of course of the individual destiny, but here of the *moira* and *daimon* of the Persian host, though these are closely linked to the personal fate of the despotic ruler. But the *daimon* is changeable (μεθέστηκε): the man or nation that was once *eudaimon* may become *dusdaimon*.

If the elders are anxious, so, because of her dream, is Atossa. Like them, she fears a great reversal of fortune. She fears that the prosperity which Darius raised 'not without some god's aid' will be overturned. Again the text – or its interpretation – is perplexed (163f.),[12] but the general sense must certainly be that, as the gods gave, so they may take away; and again we have a vague expression: 'not without some god's aid' (οὐκ ἄνευ θεῶν τινός). Atossa has nothing more to add to our understanding of the situation, as she goes on to tell her dream to the elders and receive their well-meant if futile advice.

The first speech of the Messenger reveals that the fears of Atossa were justified: 'At one stroke great wealth has been destroyed, the flower of the Persians is fallen and gone away' (ὡς ἐν μιᾷ πληγῇ κατέφθαρται πολὺς | ὄλβος, τὸ Περσῶν δ' ἄνθος οἴχεται πεσόν, 251f.). Her fear for the wealth, her fear for the men.[13] Note that to the Chorus, despite their earlier forebodings, this is a monstrous and unlooked-for blow which they describe as κακὰ νεόκοτα (256) and πῆμ' ἄελπτον (265). The Messenger, when he has assured Atossa of the personal survival of Xerxes, gives a catalogue of fallen princes which echoes ironically the catalogue in the *parodos*.[14] With the details of his narrative we are not now concerned, but only with the light in which he sees the events recounted. He sees, naturally, the operations of a god or gods. It was a god that gave the glory of the naval battle to the Greeks (454f.); a god that raised the storm in Thrace and froze the Strymon, so that men prayed who had previously been indifferent to religion (495ff.). His last words speak of the evils that a god had brought down upon the Persians (514).

This closing comment echoes more briefly the judgement which he had

[11] Cf. Dodds (1) 23 n. 65, 42, 58 n. 79.
[12] See n. 22 below.
[13] On the difficulties of 159–69 see my review of Broadhead in *CR* n.s. 12 (1962) 124.
[14] On the third catalogue see n. 37 below.

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already expressed in answer to a question from Atossa. She had asked whether the numbers of the Greek ships had been so great. No, he replies, it was the Persians who had the advantage: *ἀλλ' ὧδε δαίμων τις κατέφθειρε στρατόν, | τάλαντα βρίσας οὐκ ἰσορρόπῳ τύχῃ. | θεοὶ πόλιν σῴζουσι Παλλάδος θεᾶς* (345ff.). It was a *daimon* that destroyed the Persian navy, weighting the scales of fortune against them; it was the gods that saved the city of the goddess Pallas. But the most interesting piece of interpretation is that with which the Messenger begins his narrative, again in answer to a question from Atossa. Who began the battle? 'The whole trouble began, lady, when from somewhere there appeared an *alastor* or an evil *daimon*' (353f.). And the destructive spirit, the *daimon*, we learn was incarnate, as divine agencies in Aeschylus so often are, in a human person[15] – in the emissary that Themistocles (not here named) sent to Xerxes. Xerxes, when he had heard him, gave the fatal instructions, 'for he did not know the future that the gods ordained' (*οὐ γὰρ τὸ μέλλον ἐκ θεῶν ἠπίστατο*, 373). More significant still is this expression: 'not understanding the trick of a Greek man or the *phthonos* of the gods' (*οὐ ξυνεὶς δόλον | Ἕλληνος ἀνδρὸς οὐδὲ τὸν θεῶν φθόνον*, 361f.). The word *dolos* recalls the *dolometis apata* of 107 (93); the *phthonos* makes explicit what was only implied in the *parodos* and attributes a motive to the gods.

Atossa has her comment, and so does the Coryphaeus have his. At 471 there is a pause in the narrative. *ὦ στυγνὲ δαῖμον*, exclaims the queen, *ὡς ἄρ' ἔψευσας φρενῶν | Πέρσας* (472f.). 'Hateful *daimon*, how you have cheated the Persians of their wits.'[16] The comment from the Chorus at the close of the Messenger's speech is similar in tone: 'Burdensome *daimon*, with what excessive weight have you trampled on the whole Persian race!' (*ὦ δυσπόνητε δαῖμον, ὡς ἄγαν βαρὺς | ποδοῖν ἐνήλου παντὶ Περσικῷ γένει*, 515f.). The disaster is seen, then, as a cruel and excessive blow dealt by a deceptive divinity.

Neither here nor elsewhere, in this part of the play, is there mention of any specific god. Chorus, queen and messenger, are alike in speaking always of *theos* or *theoi*, *daimon* or *daimon tis*.[17] There are two reasons for this which amount to much the same thing. (i) The name of the great god

[15] On double causation or 'over-determination' in Homer and Aeschylus see Dodds (1) 30f. (with specific reference to this passage) and Dodds (3) 27 n. 5.

[16] See Broadhead on 472 (and App.): the scholiast is wrong. This is the *apate/ate* of the *parodos*. Cf. 552, 724f.

[17] Here I reluctantly part company with Professor Kitto who has so much of value to say about the play, when he asserts (Kitto (3) 56) that 'it is a matter of indifference to Aeschylus' how the divine power is named. Not, surely, where the attitudes of his characters and the form of the play are concerned.

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who is ultimately responsible for all will come with the greater effect for the preceding anonymity; and it does in fact come at the beginning of the following stasimon: ὦ Ζεῦ βασιλεῦ (532). (ii) The set of ideas in terms of which the events are interpreted by Chorus, Queen and Messenger, were in fact associated in Greek popular thought, not so much with clearly envisaged personal gods as with vaguely conceived divine powers – with a *daimon*, with *theōn tis*, with *to theion*. We have the evidence in Homer and Herodotus. It has been observed that, in Homer, while the poet attributes events to the intervention of a named Olympian god, his characters often use the vaguer terms;[18] and in Herodotus we are familiar with this unspecific use of *to theion* and *ho theos*.[19] Indeed Herodotus is the best commentator on the first half of the *Persae*, giving us the range of ideas within which the Aeschylean characters are moving. The ideas are these: that the gods are jealous, that they grudge men excessive prosperity; that they deceive men, luring them on; that their favour cannot be depended upon; that their ways are unpredictable; that they are cruel, deceptive, and fickle. The view of the supernatural taken in this part of the play is, I suggest, hardly at all moralized. True, since Xerxes has met with disaster, Xerxes has evidently made a big mistake. This is part of the process by which the gods curtail the prosperity that has earned their jealousy; they lure the prosperous man into making such a mistake, and he makes it in over-confidence, believing, in the words of Atossa, that, when his *daimon* is in fair course, the same wind of fortune will blow for ever (601f.).[20] So Atossa asked if it was Xerxes that began the battle: 'proudly confident in the multitude of his ships' (πλήθει καταυχήσας νεῶν, 352), but I do not think she means to criticize her son in moral terms. No more do the Chorus imply criticism, when they speak of the Persians as 'greatly proud' (τῶν μεγαλαύχων, 533). But here the word, coming as it does immediately after the address to Zeus the king, may, like that address, be the poet's way of pointing forward to the scene which is to follow.[21]

[18] Cf., e.g., M. P. Nilsson, *Greek piety* (Oxford 1948) 59f.; Dodds (1) 10ff. (with special reference to the *Odyssey*); P. Chantraine, *Fondation Hardt Entretiens* I 50ff. (with special reference to *daimon*). The name of Zeus is sometimes used to stand for the divine world in general, which perhaps facilitates the transitions in *Persae*, the Aeschylean Zeus fading in at 532, fading out at 915.

[19] The possible influence of *Persae* on Herodotus is too big a question to be handled here: the modes of expression which we find, e.g. in Herodotus 1 and 7, are in any case appropriate to the proverbial wisdom which he is expounding.

[20] αἰεὶ (*uel* ἀεὶ) δάιμον' codd. αἰὲν ἄνεμον Weil. The emendation is compelling. One cannot accept the attempts of Groeneboom and Broadhead to defend δαίμονα . . . τύχης by reference to such expressions as θεοῦ μοῖρα, τύχη δαίμονος, which clearly are not reversible.

[21] Contrast 827, 831. This seems to be an example of the way in which the implications of a word or theme are unfolded during the course of an Aeschylean play, on which see App. A, with particular reference to the use of οἴχομαι in this play.

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The divine world is jealous of human success, of human prosperity; the tangible evidence of prosperity is wealth, and the pre-eminent symbol of wealth is gold. So, in the opening anapaests of the Chorus, the word *πολύχρυσος* occurs four times. So Atossa leaves the gold-bedecked palace (*χρυσεοστόλμους δόμους*, 159) to express her fear not only for the men but for the wealth of Persia. Textual and interpretative difficulties again, but she seems to be saying that great wealth may be a danger and may overthrow the prosperity it represents.[22] And the Messenger, in his first words, apostrophizes Asia as 'a great haven of wealth' (*πολὺς πλούτου λιμήν*, 250): not only the flower of the Persians is gone, but great prosperity (*ὄλβος*) has been overthrown at a blow. We are not surprised that the theme recurs in the Darius-scene, in association with the motives and the punishment of Xerxes. For there is a problem in the relationship between wealth and disaster. In *Agamemnon*, the Chorus reject the notion that it is prosperity and good fortune that are the cause of misery; if the goddess of Justice leaves 'gold-bespangled mansions' (*χρυσόπαστα ἔσθλα*), it is when hands are defiled (*σὺν πίνῳ χερῶν*).[23]

We thus return to our original issue. The beliefs which are, if I am right, reflected in the utterances of Chorus and characters up to this point of the play were common beliefs of the average Greek. If I say (what is obvious) that they were not the beliefs of Aeschylus when he wrote *Agamemnon*, I am not of course suggesting that his rejection of the old *phthonos*-doctrine was a revolutionary innovation, though nowhere else is this rejection so strongly and sharply put. In that amalgam of ideas and feelings which Gilbert Murray called 'the Inherited Conglomerate' there was more than one explanation of the disasters which befall mankind. If the Greeks often felt the gods to be malevolent, they longed for them to be just,[24] and generations before Aeschylus writers such as Hesiod and Solon had seen disasters in the light of punishments. Yet Aeschylus, when he wrote that chorus in *Agamemnon*, thought it was worth while explicitly to reject the doctrine that wealth and prosperity were in themselves sufficient to generate woe, in favour of the Solonian doctrine which found in *hubris* a middle term between *koros* and *ate*. He found it worth while, I am

[22] *πλοῦτος* should by all means be retained, but the force of the image has not been determined beyond doubt. See recently Korzeniewski, op. cit. 577ff.; Taplin 78 (with n. 2).
[23] *Agam.* 773ff.
[24] Dodds (1) 32: 'Man projects into the cosmos his own nascent demand for social justice; and when from the outer spaces the magnified echo of his own voice returns to him, promising punishment for the guilty, he draws from it courage and reassurance.'

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suggesting, to interpret a historical event of his own time upon exactly the same lines. To give this interpretation is the function of Darius.

He serves this function mainly by what he says but also, partly, by what he is and was. The choral ode which follows the news of Salamis (532ff.) closes the first half of the play with a lamentation. In the first stanza, the Chorus put the full responsibility upon Xerxes, whose name is thrice repeated. They go on: *τίπτε Δαρεῖος μὲν οὕτω τότ' ἀβλαβὴς ἐπῆν τόξαρχος πολιήταις, Σουσίδαις φίλος ἄκτωρ;* (554–7). Some editors have wished to change the text, and some perverse interpretations have been given. But, as Broadhead has seen, there is only one natural interpretation: 'Why was *Darius* (*μέν*) in his time so undisastrous a lord of the bow over his citizens?' And there is only one difficulty, which is why the Chorus should (as Broadhead puts it) 'have chosen to express their judgement in the form of a question'. Perhaps they are made to do so, because this is a question they cannot answer and Darius can. And he will do so in terms of the Zeus whom the Chorus had, we might say, ignorantly hailed (532). Note, then, the words with which the ghost of Darius is first addressed by the queen: *ὦ βροτῶν πάντων ὑπερσχὼν ὄλβον εὐτυχεῖ πότμῳ, | ὡς ἕως τ' ἔλευσσες αὐγὰς ἡλίου ζηλωτὸς ὢν | βίοτον εὐαίωνα Πέρσαις ὡς θεὸς διήγαγες, | νῦν τέ σε ζηλῶ θανόντα πρὶν κακῶν ἰδεῖν βάθος* (709ff.).[25] He had exceeded all men in prosperity and good fortune; he had been the object of envy (*ζηλωτός*); taking *Πέρσαις ὡς θεός* together, as they should probably be taken, he had been regarded by his subjects in the light of a god. All of which things, according to the traditional view of the jealousy of heaven, were a prescription for ultimate disaster. And yet he lived out (*διήγαγες*) a life of blessedness through to the end and, by dying before ill befell, was truly *eudaimon* in the Herodotean sense. What, then, was Darius? He was the good king who brought no great disaster upon his people; and his career of lasting success was evidence that wealth and prosperity and enviability are harmless, if men know how to bear them.[26]

Let us now turn to what Darius says. As soon as he hears that an

[25] I should take *ὡς* (with Groeneboom) as explanatory rather than exclamatory. The only real problem in the lines concerns *Πέρσαις*, and the best solution seems to be in taking it with *ὡς θεός* (cf. 157f., 654f., 856). This carries matters a step beyond the normal Greek description of continuous prosperity (cf. Plato, *Gorg.* 473c).

[26] The point is made again at 852ff., on the placing of which see Taplin 126. A portrait of doubtful historicity, no doubt. But Aeschylus treats history as myth – and could do so, as long as he did not flagrantly disregard facts well known to his audience. Marathon could not be omitted but demanded – and received – cautious handling. Darius' bridging of the Bosphorus is quietly disregarded. (Cf. J. H. Quincey, *CQ* n.s. 12 (1962) 184). Kitto (3) 74ff., has a good discussion of the relationship between the historical events and the dramatic treatment. See also n. 31 below.

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expedition has been made against Athens, he recognizes it as an act of folly (719). Then Atossa tells him of the bridging of the Hellespont (722). 'Did he actually do that (καὶ τόδ' ἐξέπραξεν)', exclaims Darius, 'close the great Bosporus?' 'Yes,' replies the queen, 'some *daimon* surely lent its aid to his decision' (or however we should translate γνώμης . . . ξυνήψατο).[27] 'Alas, it was some great *daimon* that came upon him so that his judgement was at fault.' Darius gives no name, though he soon will; and I think it was of deliberation that Aeschylus here, at first, makes him use language which recalls the theology of the early part of the play. Inded what he has said so far hardly carries us beyond the range of ideas we have already met. Atossa knew that the Persians had been cheated of their wits (472f.); the elders knew that the trickery of the gods led the prosperous man into a state of infatuation (111ff.). But why was Darius so struck by the bridging of the Hellespont? This he tells us in a speech which begins with Zeus and ends with Poseidon. For he has recognized that Xerxes, by his own impetuous folly, had brought an early fulfilment of destined and prophesied disasters (739–41). In his ignorance and youthful rashness he had precipitated the fatal train of events, putting shackles upon the Hellespont, thinking that he, a mortal, could master the gods (744–50).

The modern reader may at first feel some disappointment here. Was it all, then, a formal insult to the gods in general and to Poseidon in particular? But of course the act of Xerxes was symbolical, as the act of Agamemnon in treading the scarlet draperies was symbolical; and the significance of a symbolical act must be seen not only in what it is but in what it symbolizes. Agamemnon's act symbolized (as I believe) a state of mind,[28] and so did that of Xerxes. But the act of Xerxes does more: it symbolizes the wider implications of the whole expedition. *Persae*, in one aspect, interprets world-history.

By bridging the Hellespont, Xerxes was in effect seeking to abolish a natural boundary between East and West. The contrast between the two races – the Greeks and the oriental barbarians – diverse in their ways of thought and life must have impressed itself strongly upon this generation (and was later to dominate the history of Herodotus). In *Persae* Aeschylus seeks to give an intelligible account of this world-fact. The two races were different, and they were intended by Zeus to remain different. It is no accident that the comments of Darius upon the bridging of the Hellespont are immediately followed by another of the infrequent mentions of the

27 See n. 30.
28 See ch. 5, p. 90.

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