

Spring 2019

## "Does Victory in This Clash Mean So Much to You?" : Translating Power in Three Plays of Aeschylus

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### Recommended Citation

Dwyer, Stephen Patrick, ""Does Victory in This Clash Mean So Much to You?" : Translating Power in Three Plays of Aeschylus" (2019). *Senior Projects Spring 2019*. 156.  
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*Does Victory in This Clash Mean So Much to You? :*

Translating Power in Three Plays of Aeschylus

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2019



## Acknowledgments

To Finn West, for all the midnights we've spent spiraling

To all my friends and the crews at 89 Broadway, Mann House, 57 East Market, Stone Row,  
and Catskill, for making these past five years messy and extraordinary

To Daniel Mendelsohn, for his insights and for convincing me I would make it this far

To Wyatt Mason, for his gravity and wisdom

To James Romm, for introducing me to the tangled world of Aeschylus

To Shirin Hijab, for all the crazy years we've shared

To Mom & Dad, for more than I can say

To Rachel, my twin through it all



## Table of Contents

I.	Introduction: <i>The Veteran's Mind</i> .....	1
II.	<b><i>The Persians</i></b> .....	9
	1. The Refracted Present	
	2. The Bewildering Present	
	3. The Politics of Fear	
	4. The Dream	
	5. The Omen	
	6. Ancient Fear	
	7. The Spirit's Touch?	
	8. Xerxes in the Context of Persian History	
	9. Athens & Susa	
	Appendix I: Literal Translations of the <i>Persians</i>	
	a. Translating the <i>Persians</i>	
III.	<b><i>The Suppliants</i></b> .....	78
	1. Male Kratos & Biã	
	2. The Extent of the Danaids' Agency	
	3. The Act of Supplication	
	4. Embodying Io, Invoking Zeus	
	Appendix I: Literal Translations of the <i>Suppliants</i>	
	a. Translating the <i>Suppliants</i>	
IV.	<b><i>Agamemnon</i></b> .....	115
	1. The Maddened Reader	
	2. "What Name Would Strike the Traitorous Monster on Target?"	
	3. Navigating the Sea of Clothes	
	Appendix III: Literal Translations of <i>Agamemnon</i>	
	a. Translating <i>Agamemnon</i>	
V.	Conclusion.....	138
VI.	Works Cited	



Introduction:  
*The Veteran's Mind*

You are fighting alongside your brothers on a scorching beach. Out there in the distance, in the light of the surrendering sun, but coming closer, speeding faster, oars plashing against the waves, you see yet another fleet of hulking war vessels eager to ram their prows into whatever they can splinter. The smell of brine and corpses stings your nostrils.

In your language, you do not just call the sea the Sea: you know it better as the Salt. *Hó hals*. The way it smells and tastes.

Now your enemies have closed the gap. They fire their first volley of arrows and the arrows arc upward and then descend like angry birds and thwack shields and whistle past you and skewer one of your friends through the neck. You call those enemies barbarians. Everyone on your side calls them that, disparagingly, with a certain spit in it—*barbaroi*—because all their babbling voices sound like *bar-bar-bar*. No sense in it.

Yet unlike your comrades, you do not say the word with the same bite, at least not all the time. They slur it and bark it with gleeful hate—*BARBAROI!* It gives them a target for their emotions. But to you, the *barbaroi* are, more than anything, people who live *out there* in all those lands beyond your knowledge, in Lydia, Phrygia, Egypt, Persia: people who are not Greek, as you are. Even in this moment, although you are caught up in the frenzy of battle and want to kill those *barbaroi* as badly as anyone else, they fascinate you.

Your curiosity distracts you, takes you out of the moment, adds an abstract layer to the visceral slaughter happening before your eyes. You ask yourself, *What are these men fighting for? What are we Greeks fighting for? What separates the two of us?* You arrive, for an instant, at a sense of what these



differences might be, but you do not have the time to think them through, not right now. You just barely dodge an arrow singing past your ear. War music.

Although you are adept here on the battlefield, you are not in your chosen element. You are a poet at heart and by trade. Your fellow soldiers know you as the one who tells the best stories and invents the funniest songs. The story goes that *you were exhausted after working in the vineyard one day, and fell asleep under a tree loaded with grapes. Dionysus came to you that night in your dreams and told you to write tragedies to honor him, and you listened, and ever since then you have followed his voice...* This beach is no vineyard, yet even in the thick of all these spears and arrows crossing, war-cries and barbarian thunder, you remember how the blind poet, Homer, sang about war hundreds of years ago in his epics. Your mother used to sing them to you at bedtime; your father, Euphorion, out in the wheat fields; and you and your brothers, Cynegirus and Ameinias, used to play as Ajax, Agamemnon, and Menelaus against your neighborhood best friends who played as Hector and Paris. But you used wooden swords back then.

Lines like, “*The rough stone shattered this joint and severed both tendons, ripping open the skin. The hero sank to his knees, clenching the dirt with one hand, while midnight settled upon both his eyes,*” echo in your mind. They mirror what you see on the beach. The sun has almost set, but midnight has fallen over many eyes. Your mind wanders again. You think about how Homer called this same sea you are fighting before *oinops*—looks like wine. Just as intoxicating. Just as mad.

A wave of elation rises among you and your comrades. The Persians are retreating! Everywhere on the beach the Greeks are hurtling spears at the fleeing *barbaroi*, impaling them through their iron backplates. Excited, you take your own shot at a Persian, pierce his shoulder, then run up to him and

finish him off with a sword through the neck. The Persians are retreating! Back to their ships! *Boâ!*  
*Boâ!*

As they scamper away, you see one Greek leading an all-out attack, charging into the water. His whoop of *ALALÁ* climbs louder than the rest. He mows down every Persian in his sight.

It is your brother, Cynegirus.

Out in front, waist-deep in water, he slashes still more men. The blade of his *xiphos* has a mind of its own. As a Persian ship starts to leave the shallows, you see him grab hold of the stern with his bare hands and attempt to scale it. Rabid. When he barks *barbaroi!*—you know it is pure hate. All the Greeks are drawing from his manic energy, falling into their own frenzy as they zero in on their next target. Then a Persian at the edge of the stern brings down an axe on his wrist and chops off his hand. He falls back into the Salt. You look on, in awe.

It is the third year of the seventy-second Olympiad and you have just helped your country win the Battle of Marathon against the Persian king, Darius, and his massive army. Soon, the messenger Pheidippides will run back to Athens as fast as his feet will carry him to declare *Victory, Victory!* in the town square. He will tell the whole city about Cynegirus' bravery, how he slashed the barbarians until he had no more hands to kill with. But you will not celebrate or sleep tonight; you will sit alone, letting your tears fall, thinking of your brother.

Tears are made of salt, like the sea.



After Marathon, the Persians returned to Asia in disgrace. A ten-year lull in conflict ensued, but both combatants knew peace was nowhere to be had. Then, in the spring of 480 BCE, Darius' son, King Xerxes, launched a renewed Persian campaign to conquer Greece in order to avenge his father's loss—and to outdo him. The Persian host was now even larger and more impressive than before. With the *barbaroi* threatening his homeland for the second time in ten years, Aeschylus was again called to serve in the navy, to fight in the Battle of Salamis.

Armed with more intimate knowledge of the local geography, the Greeks achieved a stunning victory at Salamis which signaled the beginning of the end of the Second Persian Invasion. The empire's fate was sealed by the death-blow at the Battle of Plataea a year later, in 479 BCE. Together, the triumphs at Marathon and Salamis constituted two major turning-points in the Greco-Persian Wars that reshaped the Greek world. As Persia ended its imperial ambitions in Europe, Greece rose in international prominence. But all of Greece did not share in this newfound power. Although most of Hellas joined together to ward off Persian aggression, it was the city of Athens that spearheaded the effort. At the turn of the 5th century, the Athenians followed the exhortations of the naval general, Themistocles—who foresaw the imminent threat that Persia posed—to build their navy into an unparalleled and highly disciplined force, a move that transformed the *polis* into a *thalassocracy* (“sea-power; rule by the sea”). Greek victory in the wars would not have been possible without this conscious self-reinvention. In maritime battles such as Salamis, Athens' prowess on the seas played a pivotal role in Greece's defeat of Persia.

In 478 BCE, soon after the war, Athens persuaded over 300 other Greek city-states to unite under its leadership in a pan-Hellenic alliance known as the Delian League (Cartwright). Protected by

Athens' mighty *thalassocracy*, the new coalition promised to both free Greeks in Ionia from Persian rule as well as to defend against possible Persian retaliation in the future. For many weaker and vulnerable city-states, such an offer was hard to resist. Yet, though the nominal goals of the pact were regional stability and self-preservation against the East, the League also dramatically increased Athens' sway over the Aegean Sea. Years before, Themistocles had said, "He who commands the sea has command of everything." Now, suddenly, it seemed Athens was well on its way to commanding everything.

As a soldier in the Battles of Marathon and Salamis, Aeschylus experienced these rapid historical developments with extraordinary vividness. He watched his brother, Cynegirus, die with such valor in his Persian-killing rampage that orators six centuries later were still citing him as the premier example of heroism, the embodiment of the Hellenic spirit. He felt the bone-deep hatred of the *barbaroi* that gripped him and his comrades in war; and he witnessed how two wildly different cultures with divergent ethical and political systems came into contact with one another and struggled for supremacy. He had actively participated in the creation of Athens as a hegemonic force. No ordinary veteran, he was indeed that cerebral type of soldier who would ask himself, after volleys of arrows, what values the Persians and Greeks were fighting for, and what separated the two of them. His position as a playwright allowed him to coolly analyze his feelings and experiences, and then interrogate them through his art.

From having gone through this tumultuous period and of having seen international power change hands, Aeschylus became obsessed with the theme of power. In his plays, he explores how power works conceptually and politically, in the interaction between states, but, more importantly, how power is created through the intimate and intense exchange of wills, revealing that behind

historical processes—such as Persia’s defeat, the rise of Athens, and upheavals within city-states—lies power that must first be won, lost, given, requested, ridiculed, and seized at the personal level.

For my project, I have therefore chosen to translate and analyze five dynamic episodes spread across three of Aeschylus’ plays, the *Persians*, the *Suppliants*, and the *Agamemnon*, that investigate his concern with power from a variety of angles. Scenes of prayer and prophecy, the relationship between kings and their subjects, between action and indecision, and the private and thorny arena of marriage provide the basis for my inquiry.

The following chapters move chronologically from the *Persians* of 472 BCE—both Aeschylus’ and Greek literature’s first extant tragedy—to the *Agamemnon* of 458 BCE, the first play in his final work, the *Oresteia* trilogy. Along the way, I trace the evolution of two of his major fixations: the place of the barbarian Other as a contrast to or an encroachment upon Greek values, and the struggle between the sexes. In all three plays, these concerns are inextricably linked, associating the disruptive potential of the female with the threat posed by the world of the *barbaroi*. In this respect, the chapters follow a nuanced and surprising trajectory that complicates the imagined polarity between Hellenism and barbary, masculinity and femininity.

First, in the *Persians*, Queen Atossa, though a Persian and an embodiment of autocratic values and norms, stands as a loving wife and mother who must endure hearing about her son’s disastrous campaign. She is the most sympathetic of all the women in Aeschylus’ work. At the center of the Persian court, she accepts the authority of her husband, Darius, and allows patriarchy and tradition to reign. The Danaid sisters of the *Suppliants*, half-Egyptian, but also half-Greek, then begin to subvert the power of the male and the order of society. Trying to win asylum as suppliants in the Greek *polis* of Argos, they resort to shocking tactics to obtain what they seek, displacing the power of the Argive

king. They are hybrid figures, both pseudo-barbarians and imperfect Hellenes. Lastly, in the *Agamemnon*, Queen Clytemnestra—though fully Greek—acts as the most “barbarian,” disruptive, and “man-minded” of all these women. A murderer, usurper, and adulteress, she illustrates that Hellenism is far from synonymous with morality, that simple words like man and woman, Greek and Persian, are limited and ultimately flawed descriptions of people’s characters.

But I was not content with exploring Aeschylus’ interest in power merely through English translations and by looking at my chosen passages in Greek. I knew that if I wanted to thoroughly understand him and his language, with all of its gnarls and mysteries, I would have to stand beside him on the beach at Marathon, spend long nights with his words, and attempt to see into his mind. I would, in short, have to translate him myself. I wanted to decipher what these texts do, how Aeschylus and his characters think in Greek, and then see how translation can or cannot uproot and replicate these qualities in English. In this pursuit, I also saw a great opportunity to renew my energy as a writer, an energy that had lain dormant for the past few years. Here was a challenge which would sustain and vex me for months.

When I speak of gnarls and mysteries, I am referring to the superabundance of Aeschylus’ language. I speak of his prolific image-making, his belief that alongside the literal action on stage must run verbal and symbolic subplots that engulf the drama. From snakes, to yokes, to the “fruit of Delusion” and “blossoming corpses,” to a sea of clothes, his texts become saturated with symbols. In her essay, “On Not Knowing Greek,” Virginia Woolf<sup>1</sup> aptly describes Aeschylus’ style:

Aeschylus makes these little dramas tremendous by stretching every phrase to the utmost, by sending them floating forth in metaphors, by bidding them rise up and stalk eyeless and majestic through the scene... By the bold and running use of metaphor he will amplify and give us, not the thing itself, but the reverberation and reflection

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<sup>1</sup> Very much knowing Greek.

which, taken into his mind, the thing has made; close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge, and make splendid.

Here she hints at a central feature of Aeschylus' writing that emerges naturally from his dynamic use of metaphor—an attempt to escape the gravity of language. The “thing itself” is not enough for him; it has to float forth, reverberate, and reflect. Woolf also says that he demands the reader to “take that dangerous leap through the air without the support of words which Shakespeare also asks of us.”

My project is an attempt to see how he takes that dangerous leap.

It proceeds in the following form: in each chapter, moving from the *Persians* to the *Agamemnon*, I have interwoven my polished translations of the five passages with interpretive commentary and translation decisions that are relevant to the content being analyzed. At the end of each chapter, there follows a literal translation of the same passages, which you can feel free to either read through or pass over. This shuttling back-and-forth between literal translationese and my polished verse will, for the reader so interested, provide the most detailed picture of how I moved from the Greek to a semi-satisfactory endpoint—but it is not essential. After these literal versions, I then explain certain principles I followed while translating, along with many of the aesthetic decisions I made and the liberties I took.

Together, I believe the interplay between the polished, literal, and explanatory sections, informed by textual analysis, creates what William Gass calls the “record of a reading”—my reading of Aeschylus—“not the economical setting down of a critical interpretation, although the interpretation must take place, but one step beyond that toward the compound, multi-spliced and engineered, performance which emerges from a recording studio.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> William H. Gass. “Ein Gott Vermags.” *Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation*. New York, Basic Books, 1999, pp. 56-93.

## Chapter One

# *The Persians*

### *I. The Refracted Present*

“Tell all the truth but tell it slant.”

-Emily Dickinson

In her essay, “Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama,” Froma Zeitlin argues that 5th century Athens takes the city of Thebes, as represented in myth and literature, as a foil for itself and imagines it as an “Anti-Athens.” Ancient theater more broadly allows “the city to put itself and its values into question by projecting itself upon the stage to confront the present with the past through its ancient myths” (144). Just as the self needs to observe and interact with other selves to understand and develop its own identity, so Athens as “the self” in this schema needs a radically different “other place” for conceptual comparison.

During the *pentecontaetia*, the great “Age of Fifty Years” that lasted from 480 to 430 BCE, it was easy for Athens to become satisfied with itself as a morally advanced state, believing its democratic values to be a beacon for other cities to follow. Yet it was for that exact reason that Athens needed to process tales of Thebes’ misfortunes—including the myths of Oedipus, of the Sown Men, and of Pentheus’ rejection of Dionysus as a god—in order to see the problems of the Theban *polis* within their own city-state. Apart from a few noteworthy examples of plays that take place within Athens’ borders, oblique examination of the city was the standard dramatic method.



By setting their works in Thebes, in Argos,<sup>3</sup> and in sites far from Greece or virtually off the map,<sup>4</sup> the playwrights distance their commentary on Athens, turning issues addressed in their plays like justice, impiety, and rulership, into problems ostensibly concerning *other* people, in *other* places. But this practice of using the past to understand the present self was not always their exclusive mode of analysis. As Aristotle notes in his *Poetics*, many of the early plays in the dramatic tradition depicted the tragic stories of modern figures. Only after a period of trial and error or, perhaps, through “luck not art” he says, did the poets discard topical events and settle on telling the stories of only the most important—that is, the most vexing and gripping—families from mythology, “cases where suffering befalls bonded relations” (Halliwell 45-46). In short, they located the narratives from which to draw out the most possible drama and complexity. From this set of central families and tragic nodes in Greek mythology, they explored the most troubled aspects of the human condition. Drama thus became a showcase, not of things recently done, but of actions performed long ago. Only by training their attention on the past were the Athenians able to perceive their contemporary moment with all its anxieties and predicaments.

There emerged, then, a two-fold obliqueness and deliberate alienation as the standard for tragedians to follow. The tacit injunction demanded that the playwright must turn away from the city of Athens proper, and that he must retreat into the past. This development, as it happened, was serendipitous for the poet looking to present provocative material to his audience. What method could be more suited to speaking truth to power than one full of disguises and (quite literally in the case of Greek theater) masks? Conversely, mythology, which for so long had been an oral hodgepodge of

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<sup>3</sup> Which Zeitlin calls the “middle space between the two extremes that Athens and Thebes represent” (145).

<sup>4</sup> Such as Scythia in *Prometheus Bound*, the northern shore of the Black Sea in *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*, and Egypt in the *Helen*.

variant myths, now became subject to being canonized by the playwrights. They could take stories that belonged to Greek culture in no fixed form and use them to fashion etiologies that explained or upheld Athenian values and social practices. Thus tragedians could, with one play, use drama's refracted means of representation to "Tell all the truth but tell it slant," and, in the next, forge a "truth" that bolstered the power of the *polis*.

## ***II. The Bewildering Present***

Aeschylus' *Persians* follows in this tradition of creating distance between the politics of the present and his Athenian audience while also returning to a non-mythic examination of the present day.

The enormity of the Greco-Persian Wars compelled both Aeschylus and his tragic mentor, Phrynichus, to capture the event through art. Phrynichus staged *The Sack of Miletus* in 494 BCE, which depicted the city's capture at the hands of the Persian king, Darius I, during the first wave of the wars. This confrontation with such a recent disaster, however, proved to be too much, too soon for the Athenians. Herodotus says of the play that, "the whole audience at the theatre burst into tears and fined Phrynichus a thousand drachmas for reminding them of a calamity that was their very own" (Waterfield 6.21).

It became evident that this method of directly addressing the troubles of the day would not work again. In 472 BC, seven years after the end of the wars, Aeschylus took the Greek victory at the Battle of Salamis, a turning-point in the struggle and a transformative experience for him, as his subject. To avoid the fate of Phrynichus' play, he displaced the action away from Greece and Ionia (the

locus of the wars) to the royal court of the Persian rulers in Susa.<sup>5</sup> With sufficient geographical and cultural distance secured, Aeschylus was then able to comment on the present with total freedom, even if, as scholars have noted, he was presenting history “imaginatively and somewhat inaccurately” (Favorini 103).

Through this refractive method, Aeschylus elevates his living Persian characters to the status of myth. As a conscious act of historical transformation, his myth-making situates Greece’s victory over Persia as an epochal moment: on the one hand, a paradigm-shifting event that proved the benefits of a democratic system over an autocratic one on a grand scale; and, on the other hand, a second pan-Hellenic triumph on par with Greece’s victory over Troy in the Heroic Age. Even though the play often sings the praises of Athens—which, to use Zeitlin’s model, praises itself (347: “The gods protect divine Athena’s city”)—Aeschylus makes clear that the war solidified the Greeks’ sense of their shared identity. Relating the Battle of Salamis, the Messenger quotes a war-cry shouted among the ships: “Go forward, all you children of the Greeks! (παῖδες Ἑλλήνων) / Free your homeland!”<sup>6</sup> This pan-Hellenic address stands in contrast to the epithets that are so often used in Greek literature to atomize cities and families, such as the generic “children of Cadmus” or “children of the dragon’s teeth” to refer to Thebans. These combatants are children of no city and no sub-ethnic group; they belong, first and foremost, to Hellas.

If the Greco-Persian Wars may be said to represent a neo-Trojan War that has achieved in unshackling Greece from Eastern political influence, then the drama places the disaster that besets the Persian royal family in conversation with Priam’s family in the aftermath of the Trojan War. Just as

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<sup>5</sup> What is Susa, then, if Thebes is the Anti-Athens and Argos is the “middle space?”

<sup>6</sup> Aeschylus. *Persians*. Translated by James Romm. Henceforth, when quoting Aeschylus, I cite from Romm’s *Persians*, Burian’s *Suppliants*, and Ruden’s translation of *Agamemnon*, except for the passages which I have translated myself.

Homer depicts the Trojans sympathetically in the *Iliad*, most notably through Hector's unflinching loyalty to his wife and city, and Priam's moment of shared grief with Achilles in Book 24, so Aeschylus ennoble the Persians, the Greeks' hated enemy. He levels plenty of criticism against the political system that shapes the Persian Empire, as I will detail later in this chapter, but he also undoubtedly treats his foreign subjects with fellow-feeling. Sometimes it even appears as if he characterizes the Persians as merely passive victims of a toxic, hierarchical system that, once in place, comes to corrupt a society, but that as agents themselves they are not inherently malicious or bad. Richard Kuhns, for one, calls the *Persians* "politically empathetic, even inexplicably generous" toward its foreign characters and the problematic system of government that it depicts (11). Even Darius, the original engineer of Persian aggression toward Greece, is given a sympathetic and even admiring treatment. We witness this especially in the scene of the Chorus' veneration of their god-king, Darius, which is meant to display to the subordinate mentality of the Persians toward their ruler and their misplaced ascription of the divine to human governance—and, chiefly, to provide a devastating contrast between father and son. But there is no doubt that Aeschylus' portrayal of Darius depicts him, if not as *akake*—"blameless, free from evils, non-bad"—as the Chorus sees him, then certainly as a sage and exemplary leader.

Aeschylus uses further techniques to veil his subject and to analyze Athens' political relationship to its enemy. He immerses his characters in a mysterious world teeming with dreams, omens, and the supernatural, where the presence of an enigmatic and ever-shifting *daimon*—a nebulous spirit whose import cannot be precisely determined—lurks in their minds. All this strongly contributes to the sense that the Persians are steeped in a haunted atmosphere, trapped between two polarities in time. First, they look forward in fear that their empire is on the verge of imminent disaster,

then, once they have heard of the disaster, they fixate on the memory of the Empire's founding and illustrious past. Nearly all of the play's action is haunted by premonitions, speculations, prophecies, retrospective assessments, or reminiscences. The present, when it does appear, is also transmitted indirectly: the messenger scene in which a Persian soldier returns to Susa to tell Atossa and the Chorus about the horrors of Salamis is a mediated event, an account rather than an action. Only in the final exchange of lamentation between Xerxes and the Chorus do the characters engage in what is unquestionably the present. But even this ostensible present is not quite normal; it is, in fact, a sort of visceral hyper-present, a *kommos* scene in which characters reach the upper registers of emotionality and step outside of time.

This future- and past-oriented approach implies that the magnitude of the present moment is too difficult for the Persians to bear or accept as fact by the rational mind. This defeat, as the Chorus says, is their *kakos kakôn*—"woe of woes; evil of evils." It is a bewildering present that compels Atossa, Darius, and the Chorus consider their political and social disaster on a macro-historical scale, stretching from the very beginning of the Persian Empire, when "god-sent Fate... / charged[d] the Persians / with tower-toppling wars" until the Chorus proclaims, in the final *kommos*, "Hard is the fate of the Persian race in war" (102-4, 1013). Aeschylus' free play with memory, fear, and historical fact allow this momentous event to progress according its own temporal logic.

### ***III. The Politics of Fear***

The first third of the *Persians* is steeped in a climate of fear: fear that affects the body, pervades the mind, and infects one's worldview. In "The Politics of Fear in Aeschylus' *Persians*," Ippokratis

Kantzios deems the *Persians* Aeschylus' most fear-based play (3). This is not just a product of verbal frequency, he says,<sup>7</sup> but a political analysis of what it is like to live under a regime that constricts thought and feeling. "Here, in typical Aeschylean manner," Kantzios writes, "fear is not only a product of the inability of humans to decipher the intentions of the divine will, but also the corollary of the ideological foundations and institutional structure of a society (3). For the Persians, fear is both a fleeting condition and an enduring structure, a method of governance and, as the play bears out, the seed of that very government's disharmony and undoing.

Their system is a wholly familiar one. As a monarchy, it demands total obedience by the common people to their ruler as well as compliance from the king's advisors, who are often forced to repress their dissent; fear of punishment and of the despot's wrath remains ever-present. Yet the Persian system is no ordinary monarchy. In Aeschylus' depiction of this Oriental government, an embellishment of Greek notions about Eastern decadence and impiety, the king is also worshipped as a god. This reality only heightens the fear already inherent in the structure, turning insubordination into a crime of impiety and the threat of punishment into divine wrath. In such a system, reverence and fear mix together to create a *hierarchy* in its truest sense: a "sacred rule."

Because of its demands for silence, obedience, and blind veneration, monarchy naturally leads to complacency. As an empire continues to expand, those in charge begin to feel invincible and embark on increasingly ambitious quests, as if their every action has been ordained by a "god-sent Fate." In this sort of mindset, Xerxes, the leader of the largest empire in the world, can go forth with an army of 1.7 million men<sup>8</sup> into a distant land, completely sure of victory. Abroad, he lives without the

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<sup>7</sup> The words *deos*, *tarbos*, and *phobos*, all of them synonyms for and different varieties of fear, suffuse the text.

<sup>8</sup> According to Herodotus.

specter of fear. The royal court at home in Susa, however, consisting of a Chorus of old men and Queen Atossa, Xerxes' mother, does not live under the same spell of delusion. They feel anxiety that rightly matches the gravity of current events.

#### ***IV. The Dream***

But Atossa and the elders cannot correctly assess reality, either, because they too have been sheltered by ignorance. Isolated in their palace, they stand at the heart of the autocratic regime, which, by nature, tries to deny potential weakness in the system and keep up the facade of competency. It is in this unknowing state that the Chorus and Atossa trade premonitions with each other. Aeschylus stages the conflict between intuition and ignorance by circumventing a direct path of knowledge for the Persians, which he could have achieved simply by having the Messenger relay the news about Salamis. Instead, he cloaks the future in a doubly oblique way, first as a dream, then as an omen.

Here, after asking the Chorus to interpret her vision, Atossa relates her experience in startling detail:

#### **Lines 176-214**

##### **Ἄτοσσα**

πολλοῖς μὲν αἰεὶ νυκτέροις ὀνειράσιν  
 ξύνειμι, ἀφ' οὐπὲρ παῖς ἐμὸς στείλας στρατὸν  
 Ἰαόνων γῆν οἴχεται πέρσαι θέλων:  
 ἀλλ' οὐτι πω τοιόνδ' ἐναργὲς εἰδόμεν  
 ὡς τῆς πάροιθεν εὐφρόνης: λέξω δέ σοι.  
 ἐδοξάτην μοι δύο γυναῖκ' εὐείμονε,  
 ἢ μὲν πέπλοισι Περσικοῖς ἠσκημένῃ,  
 ἢ δ' αὖτε Δωρικοῖσιν, εἰς ὄψιν μολεῖν,  
 μεγέθει τε τῶν νῦν ἐκπρεπεστάτα πολύ,

κάλλει τ' ἀμώμω, καὶ κασιγνήτα γένους 185  
 ταῦτοῦ: πάτραν δ' ἔναιον ἢ μὲν Ἑλλάδα  
 κλήρῳ λαχοῦσα γαίαν, ἢ δὲ βάρβαρον.  
 τούτῳ στάσιν τιν', ὡς ἐγὼ ἴδούκουν ὄραν,  
 τεύχειν ἐν ἀλλήλαιοι: παῖς δ' ἐμὸς μαθῶν 190  
 κατεῖχε ἀπράνουν, ἄρμασιν δ' ὑπο  
 ζεύγνυσιν αὐτῷ καὶ λέπαδν' ἐπ' ἀυχένων  
 τίθησι. χῆ μὲν τῆδ' ἐπυργούτο στολῆ  
 ἐν ἠνίασί τ' εἶχεν εὐαρκτον στόμα,  
 ἢ δ' ἐσφάδαζε, καὶ χεροῖν ἔντη δίφρου 195  
 διασπαράσσει καὶ ξυναρπάξει βία  
 ἄνευ χαλινῶν καὶ ζυγὸν θραύει μέσον.  
 πίπτει δ' ἐμὸς παῖς, καὶ πατήρ παρίσταται  
 Δαρειῖος οἰκτεῖρων σφε: τὸν δ' ὅπως ὄρα  
 Ξέρξης, πέπλους ῥήγνυσιν ἀμφὶ σώματι.

καὶ ταῦτα μὲν δὴ νυκτὸς εἰσιδεῖν λέγω. 200  
 ἐπεὶ δ' ἀνέστην καὶ χεροῖν καλλιρρόου  
 ἔψαυσα πηγῆς, σὺν θυηπόλῳ χερὶ  
 βωμὸν προσέστην, ἀποτρόποισι δαίμοσιν  
 θέλουσα θῦσαι πέλανον, ὧν τέλη τάδε. 205  
 ὁρῶ δὲ φεύγοντ' αἰετὸν πρὸς ἐσχάραν  
 Φοῖβου: φόβῳ δ' ἄφθογος ἐστάθην, φίλοι:  
 μεθύστερον δὲ κίρκον εἰσορῶ δρόμῳ  
 πτεροῖς ἐφορμαίνοντα καὶ χηλαῖς κάρα  
 τίλλονθ': ὁ δ' οὐδὲν ἄλλο γ' ἢ πτήξας δέμας 210  
 παρεῖχε. ταῦτ' ἔμοιγε δείματ' εἰσιδεῖν,  
 ὑμῖν δ' ἀκούειν. εὖ γὰρ ἴστε, παῖς ἐμὸς  
 πράξας μὲν εὖ θαυμαστὸς ἂν γένοιτ' ἀνήρ,  
 κακῶς δὲ πράξας—οὐχ ὑπεύθυνος πόλει,  
 σωθεῖς δ' ὁμοίως τῆσδε κοιρανεῖ χθονός.



### Queen Atossa

Night after night I steep in dreams  
 ever since my son mustered his army



and departed with one wish:

raze Ionian land.

But never have I dreamed a dream  
as vivid as the one I dreamed last night.  
I will tell it to you.

Two women  
in beautiful clothes appeared before me.  
One was dressed in Persian finery,  
the other in a plain Doric tunic,  
both of them astonishingly tall,  
much taller than modern women,  
their beauty flawless.  
They were sisters of the same race.  
One lived in Hellas, the native land  
that Fate allotted her; the other,  
beyond Greek borders. Then the sisters  
began to fight among themselves.  
When my son learned about the conflict  
he restrained them, tamed them, and beneath  
his chariot yoked them, placing halters beneath  
their necks. One towered proud in her new  
attire: she let the bridles clench her mouth  
and govern it. But the other began  
to thrash about—she shredded the harness  
and snatched the reins with violent hands,  
free of the bit and all constraints,  
and split the yoke down the middle.

Now my son falls out of the chariot  
while his father stands beside him,  
Darius, pitying him. Son sees father:  
Xerxes tears his own clothes to tatters.

I declare I saw this clearly in the night.  
And when I awoke I rinsed my hands  
in a stream's fresh current. With hands  
fit for sacred work I drew near the altar,

eager to offer the gods who drive away  
 evil a slab of honey-cake, the mystery  
 they require. Just then I saw an eagle  
 fleeing for the hearth of Phoebus.  
 Friends, I stood there—speechless in fear.  
 And then I saw a falcon dive  
 down on the eagle in a blur of wings  
 and dig its talons in the feathered head.  
 But the eagle did not fight back—  
 it just shuddered and surrendered its body.

I watched these scenes in terror.  
 Now you listen to them, terrified.

Understand what I say:  
 if my son succeeds,  
 all men will marvel at him.  
 But if he fails—no, he cannot be reined in!  
 He reigns over this land for life!



This passage reveals the wealth of symbols working beneath the surface of the play and the Queen’s conscious mind. It unfolds as a play within the play, and as a political allegory of the Greco-Persian Wars.

There is one phrase in the dream that is both central to the play and so rife with suggestion that I could not find a satisfactory way to translate it.<sup>9</sup> Atossa says that Xerxes set out on his expedition “wishing to raze Ionian land.” But the phrase “wishing to destroy” (*πέρσαι θέλων*, *persai thelon*) carries with it an extraordinary double meaning, for the infinitive verb *persai*, “to raze,” is also the Greek

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the problem of *persai thelōn* and my trials translating Greek, see Appendix I and all subsequent Appendices.

plural proper noun word for “Persians.” Hence Aeschylus’ imagined Persians, by dint of their homophone verb, are inherently a warlike and destructive people. They can bring ruin to others, but in that same ability also lies the chance that they might bring ruin upon themselves. This idea further implies that if Xerxes wishes to “destroy Ionian land,” he also has, unwittingly, a death-drive—in trying to pillage Greece, he will inadvertently destroy the Persians; he will *persai* his own *genos*. It seems unlikely that Atossa herself is hinting at something here,<sup>10</sup> though after the news of the disaster at Salamis is revealed and the mourning begins, *persai* and its various forms will become ubiquitous in the royal court’s vocabulary.<sup>11</sup> More likely the phrase is a brilliant double entendre meant to convey a critique of the Persians from behind the authorial curtain.

Through this episode, Atossa has become, like Cassandra and the Pythian oracle,<sup>12</sup> a female receptacle for prophecy. Months of intense fear and constant dreaming have given both her and the Chorus a kind of internal, intuitive prophetic power, of which they are only partly aware. Twice the Chorus calls their heart (*thumos*)—the physiological center of fear—a prophet (*mantis*): first a *kakomantis* (“prophet of evil”) while they are narrating the mustering of the Persian forces departing for Greece, then a *thumomantis* (“a prophet who sees with the heart”) while trying to interpret the import of their queen’s vision [10, 224]. They sense a visionary power rising inside them, born out of fear; but since they are still subject to the ignorance that dominates the autocratic system, they do not take seriously the prophetic potential of their heart. This is demonstrated when the Chorus, calling itself a *thumomantis*, in the same breath says that Atossa has merely seen “something trivial” in the

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<sup>10</sup> However, she might be taking some pride in the phrase *persai* while reminding herself and the Chorus that her son, Xerxes, has gone out to do what the Persians are good at, which is to *persai*.

<sup>11</sup> Such as when, with utter succinctness, Atossa tells Darius that *διαπεπόρθηται τὰ Περσῶν πράγματα*, ὡς εἰπεῖν ἔπος (*Person pragmata* = the “property/things/belongings/interests of the Persians” have been totally destroyed), the *pi*’s spraying from her lips [line 713].

<sup>12</sup> Both of whom Aeschylus depicts in the *Oresteia*.

night (217: εἴ τι φλαῦρον εἶδες). Despite their seemingly burgeoning power, they cannot correctly interpret Atossa's dream as a proper oracle would. Atossa, too, though the epicenter of knowledge, is even more ignorant of the indirect path to revelation that this last-minute burst of prophecy has given her. While recounting the dream, she qualifies her words with uncertain phrases like "They seemed to me" and "so I seemed to see," despite the fact that she describes the dream as being absolutely vivid (179: ἀλλ' οὔτι πω τοιόνδ' ἐναργὲς εἰδόμην) Distrustful of her own vision, and needing others to help her interpret it, she does not recognize that she has become a prophetic channel and, like a true seer, has seen things that will come true.<sup>13</sup>

What Atossa has absorbed and is now relaying in this moment is the very system into which she has been inculcated since she was raised in the court of her grandfather, Cyrus the Great, and married off to Darius to lend his new reign legitimacy. The conduit of Aeschylus' foreshadowing, she is witnessing the fate of the Persian of Empire, the fate of her son, and unknowingly prophesying events that will happen later in the play. She is the system perceiving itself and, after looking in the mirror with terror, deciding not to change, or rather denying that it must.

Atossa first gives the minimal, expository details needed to contrast the two women she sees in her prophetic dream: "One was dressed in Persian finery, / the other in a plain Doric tunic" (182-3), and "One lived in Hellas, the native land / that Fate allotted her; the other, / beyond Greek borders [*barbaros*]" (186-7).<sup>14</sup> But the women are peaceful as the scene begins, and there seems to be much more similarity between them than there is difference. Despite their contrasting styles of clothing, they are both referred to as "well-dressed," "in stature far more remarkable than modern women,"

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<sup>13</sup> Truth that will come no more than 50 lines later, in the very next scene.

<sup>14</sup> Here and in several instances throughout the play, Atossa and her fellow Persians refer to themselves and the non-Greek world as *barbaros* ("non-Greek, foreign; barbarian"), as if in the third-person.

“unblemished/flawless in beauty” (184: κάλλει τ’ ἀμώμω),<sup>15</sup> and crucially, “sisters of the same race” (185). It is ambiguous what “same race” might mean here. Is it not obvious that sisters belong to the same race or family? Has Atossa’s dreaming mind fitfully created a relationship, exclusive to the nightmare, between the Persians and Greeks that transcends the fact that the Persians are referred to elsewhere in the play by the epithet, “born from a race of gold,” that they inherited from their progenitor, Perseus? Or is Aeschylus suggesting that a more ancient Proto-Indo-European<sup>16</sup> common ancestry and special destiny binds Greeks and Persians together that has ultimately led to this epochal familial conflict?

Since this scene is a political allegory, *genos autos* (“same race”) could be further seen as representing power (*kratos*) at large. In their theomorphic attributes, as both gorgeous and mythically large in size, these women recall patron goddesses who guard over their cities. They represent female personifications of Greece and Persia, both of whom possess the same mythic beauty and oversized influence in their regions as these women. They both belong to the same exceptionable *genos*, in the midst of other less distinguished *genê*, that is capable of exerting true, hegemonic *kratos*.

But peacetime and congeniality between such powerful members of the same family can only last for so long. As sisters, the women are susceptible to sibling rivalry. An unspecified, mutually instigated conflict arises between the two: “They began to work in one another / some kind of strife, as I seemed to see” (187-8). Here, the allegorical symmetry of the passage starts to come into view: the women stand in for their respective countries, while their sisterly strife represents the Greco-Persian Wars. In accordance with dream logic, Xerxes suddenly appears and “restrains and tames” the women.

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<sup>15</sup> ἀμώμω being an epithet frequently used of objects or animals that are pure and fitting for ritual or sacrifice.

<sup>16</sup> A thoroughly anachronistic term to apply to however the ancients imagined their cross-cultural and ethnic ties.

He yokes them (ζυγόν), places halters beneath their necks, and thereby tries to turn them into horses that will help drive his chariot, which all too clearly symbolizes the Empire itself using conquered peoples to fuel its power. From here, however, Atossa's language of "seeming to see" things acquires further ambiguity. Where she begins her account with clear, expository parallelism, facilitated by the Greek particles μὲν and δέ ("on the one hand, on the other hand"), her μὲν and δέ structure from line 192 onward no longer clearly refers to the Persian or the Greek. Either woman could potentially be the subject of the μὲν ("One towered proud in her new / attire") or the δέ ("But the other began / to thrash about").

Duress and the threat of animalistic bondage have now brought out profound differences in the character of these women. One takes pride—she feels like a literal tower (ἐπυργούτο)—in the slavish gear that Xerxes has made her wear, while the other reflexively and violently resists being subject to another person's rule. Subjugation has revealed an essential feature in the first woman, whose mouth is called εὐαρκτον ("well-governed/easily governed"). Here, the rest of the play answers the question of whom these traits refer to. After the Persians learn of the defeat at Salamis, the Chorus laments that the "tongues" of men under Persian dominion will no longer be "bound fast in fetters" (591-92). They will be able to say whatever they want and to express themselves free from threat of censure. Because the Chorus elders are at the center of an autocracy and unequivocally devoted to their god-king, they believe this is the natural and proper behavior for everyone who is not the king: they think that people should both allow (and *want*) their mouths to be easily governed and their tongues constrained. Thus the character of the Persian people, who willfully accept Xerxes' rule, are associated with the dream-woman who feels more than content being under another person's control.

This expectation of servility is furthered by the fact that these women are enslaved. In this respect, the Persian woman conforms to both standards of her society, both in general obedience to authority and female passivity. The Greek woman, on the other hand, rises up in rebellion against her oppressor with an unmistakably masculine gesture: “she snatches forcefully” (195: *ξυναρπάξει βία*). The violence and aggression associated with *harpadzein* (“to snatch; abduct”) and *biá* (“force”) suggest the realm of the masculine, rather than of feminine, action. That these words should be used of a female—here, the personification of Greece/Athens, rising up against a king—only underscores the unusual extremity of this woman’s resistance to submissiveness in any form.

The scene reaches a symbolic crescendo in the final four lines, which distill the already allegorical dream to its absolute essence. One of the central images of the play, the ζυγόν (“yoke”), is broken. This motif is first summoned by the Chorus in the parodos, where it describes the subjugation that Xerxes has tried to force upon the Hellespont and Greek people as him “throwing a many-bolted yoke on the neck of the sea” (71). The broken yoke represents Xerxes’ failed attempts to control nature through artificial means and to pacify the Greeks, who by nature will not accept the yoke or horse’s bit. The Greek woman then topples Xerxes from his chariot, and Darius suddenly “stands beside” his son, “pitying him.” Seen in isolation, line 197, “My son falls, and his father stands beside him” (*πίπτει δ’ ἐμὸς παῖς, καὶ πατήρ παρίσταται*) even suggests that Xerxes has suffered a child’s injury, falling and hurting himself while his father, near at hand, has to comfort him. Darius has both the physical proximity of a concerned parent and the spectral presence of a ghost, the manifested, burdensome reputation of a beloved king that looms over Xerxes. Indeed, the word order of the lines has Darius literally standing not only beside but *above* Xerxes, as their names begin consecutive lines: “Δαρείος (Darius) οἰκτεῖρων σφε: τὸν δ’ ὄπως ὄρᾳ / Ξέρξης, (Xerxes) πέπλους ῥήγνυσιν ἀμφὶ σώματι” (198-9). The

presence of his father in this moment of shame and failure is ultimately too overwhelming for Xerxes, causing him to rend his clothes in an Eastern gesture of mourning and catharsis. The *peplos* (“robe, clothing”) that the Persian woman was wearing at the beginning of the passage (182) is now in tatters. The emperor wears no clothes.

Interestingly, these last three lines (197-9) foreshadow much of the play’s second half, but blurrily—through the mist of dreams. The play concludes with Xerxes returning home in his chariot, having “fallen” from grace, and entering a state of heightened lament, the *kommos*, that matches the dream’s emotional rending of robes. But he does not tear his clothes in shame in the finale; the Messenger relates that he already rent his royal garments when he saw the horror befalling his men at Salamis, which Darius reiterates in his conversation with Atossa. Darius, too, makes an extended appearance, having metamorphosed from a figment in a dream to a resurrected ghost. But Xerxes and Darius never cross paths in the play. Darius leaves for the underworld just before his son returns home, leaving as if pressed for time, knowing that seeing his son would be too painful for the both of them. Instead, the devastating meeting between a father beloved by his people and his ruined son only occurs in the confines of the nightmare. Here, Darius’ presence symbolizes the oppressive memory and expectations he has placed on his son to add to the Persian Empire’s glory. Wordless, comprising only three lines, the encounter is a scene unto itself.

### ***V. The Omen***

The omen that follows (200-14) essentially re-enacts and amplifies the import of the dream. Troubled by the ominous nature of the nightmare, Atossa awakes, purifies her hands, makes her way



to an altar, and tries to propitiate the apotropaic spirits of the underworld (*ἀποτρόποισι δαίμοσιν*) with an offering of *pelanon*, a mixture of milk, honey, and grain, hoping to ward off any possible misfortune for the Persians. Then, out of the sky, she sees an eagle fleeing for refuge at the hearth of Phoebus Apollo, pursued by a falcon. The sight is sudden, inexplicable. But whereas the dream makes a political allegory explicit, clearly representing a Persian woman and Greek woman in conflict, the omen is vaguer in its implications. We can read Atossa's deeply frightened reaction ("Friends, I stood there—speechless in fear!") as stemming not just from the fact that she is watching one bird assaulting another, but that a falcon, a much smaller bird, is attacking a majestic eagle (206). The scene shows the weak rising up against and even dominating the strong, a vision that upsets Atossa's sensibility as a queen. The attack also carries theological importance, since the eagle is Zeus' herald, a mediator between the divine and human realms. Power on earth is disturbed in tandem with power in the heavens. For a lowly falcon to defeat the messenger of Zeus himself suggests a disturbing inversion of the natural order.

Instead of mutual strife, as in the dream of the two women, the conflict here between the birds is one-sided. The falcon is clearly chasing the eagle, attacking it, and tearing out (*tillein*) the feathers in its head, a gesture that echoes Xerxes' rending of his clothes. The verb *τίλλονθ'*, which equally suggests the plucking of hair, also inevitably recalls the other signal gesture of ritual lament, and indeed the word is used in the final scene when Xerxes and the Chorus tear (*tillein*) their hair from their heads and beards. Most shocking of all is the eagle's cowardice during the struggle: "The eagle did nothing but cower and gave up its body" [*ὁ δ' οὐδὲν ἄλλο γ' ἢ πτήξας δέμας / παρείχε*] (209-10). It lets itself be destroyed, a timidity that again recalls the Persian woman's willingness to simply submit to Xerxes' yoke and harness.

Aeschylus has thus created a second symbolic sequence that emphasizes the message of the first one: Greece is represented both as the woman who rebels against Xerxes and as the falcon, while Persia is the happily servile woman and the imposing but craven eagle. Like the falcon, the Greek coalition army is a small but disciplined group of soldiers, while the Persian imperial force, like the falcon, is enormous but lacks boldness. The unexpected triumph of the underdog provokes horror in the major channels of sensory perception: “All these sights brought terror / to my eyes. Now they bring terror to your ears.” The drama of fear that Kantzios describes has reached its conclusion.

The Persian queen intuitively understands that the combination of this dream and omen portends catastrophe for her son and for the empire. And yet just afterward she declares, almost as a non-sequitur: “Know this well: if my son / succeeds, he would become a man all will marvel at, / but if he fails—he is not accountable to the state” (211-13). She seems to have moved away from narration in her monologue to directly addressing the Chorus, but she is also, paradoxically, turning further inward and vocalizing her own anxieties to herself. Relating her dream helped her make sense of it, consciously, for the first time; now that she has finished, she is trying to unravel the meaning of what she has processed. But in the very attempt to “make sense of it,” she avoids the logical implication of the visions she has seen and instead exhibits a kind of denial, entrenching herself in the autocratic system. The break in thought between “but if he fails—he [is] not accountable to the state,” which in the Greek is more disruptive, due to the lack of the verb “to be” (*κακῶς δὲ πράξας—οὐχ ὑπεύθυνος πόλει*),<sup>17</sup> shows Atossa trying to reassure herself that everything will be all right, despite all evidence to the contrary. However Xerxes’ campaign fares, she proclaims with authoritarian brashness, he will not

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<sup>17</sup> Whose fiercely defensive quality I have tried to render as the exclamatory “No, he cannot be reined in!”

have to face the same *hypeuthynos*<sup>18</sup> that democratically elected Greek officials face at the end of each year. Instead, “Brought to safety, he still rules this land” (214).

And so the system, embodied by Atossa, confronted with a fearful, suggestive analysis of its flaws of subordination, incompetence (in Xerxes’ failed attempt to control the women), and cowardice, digs in its heels and deludes itself into thinking nothing is wrong with how Persia is governed. The hierarchy remains uncritical. Atossa returns to the comforting status quo of hereditary monarchy where the knowledge that there will always be one man on the throne, no matter what, is easier to accept than having to challenge her fundamental worldview that autocracy is the one true way of life.

Understand what I say:  
 if my son succeeds,  
 all men will marvel at him.  
 But if he fails—no, he cannot be reined in!  
 He reigns over this land for life!

## ***VI. Ancient Fear***

How did Persia become like that woman, though—who feels like a “tower” in her constraints? How did it become a grand structure, outwardly mighty like the eagle, but lose all of its fortitude? Why did Greece triumph over Persia? What is Xerxes’ personal role in the *kakos kakôn*?<sup>19</sup> And what comes next?

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<sup>18</sup> “Straightening, disciplining.” An Athenian institution of accountability, or audit.

<sup>19</sup> “Woe of woes; evil of evils.”

Now that they have heard of the disaster at Salamis, the Persians feel the need to seek answers to these pressing questions. To do this, the Chorus elders invoke Darius through ritual hymn while Atossa pours out libations for her husband to resurrect him from the dead. The act draws from the play's setting, which includes both Darius' *taphos* ("tumulus, burial mound") and the royal palace. Throughout the play thus far, he has been speaking mutely through his *sēma*, which has the double meaning of both "tomb" and, more generally, a "sign." His grave has served as a testament to the fear and veneration inspired by, and the power of, a great monarch. Rising to earth, he then appears before them as an *eidolon*—a ghost, a waking vision. Once again, Aeschylus creates an indirect path to knowledge for the Persians, suspending the laws of the living and the dead in the service of placing their tragedy in a broader context where history is never dead, but still very much alive. To explain the inexplicable, mute signs have to speak, ghosts must walk, while *daimones* further complicate the Persians' desire for rational causality.

**Lines 647-703**

**Χορός**

ἢ φίλος ἀνὴρ, φίλος ὄχθος:

φίλα γὰρ κέκευθεν ἦθη.

Ἄιδωνεὺς δ' ἀναπομ-

πὸς ἀνείης, Ἄιδωνεὺς,

650

θεῖον ἀνάκτορα Δαριάνα. ἦέ.

οὐδὲ γὰρ ἄνδρας ποτ' ἀπώλλυ

πολεμοφθόροισιν ἄταις,

θεομήστωρ δ' ἐκικλή-

σκετο Πέρσαις, θεομήστωρ δ'

655

ἔσκειν, ἐπεὶ στρατὸν εὖ ποδούχει. ἦέ.

βαλήν, ἀρχαῖος βαλήν,

ἴθι, ἰκοῦ:

ἔλθ' ἐπ' ἄκρον κόρυμβον ὄχθου,  
κροκόβαπτον ποδὸς εὐμαριν αἰείρων, 660  
βασιλείου τιάρας  
φάλαρον πιφαύσκων.  
βάσκε πάτερ ἄκακε Δαριάν, οἷ.

ὄπως αἰανῆ κλύης  
νέα τ' ἄχη, 665  
δέσποτα δεσπότη φάνηθι.  
Στυγία γάρ τις ἐπ' ἀχλὺς πεπόταται:  
νεολαία γὰρ ἤδη  
κατὰ πᾶσ' ὄλωλεν. 670  
βάσκε πάτερ ἄκακε Δαριάν, οἷ.

αἰαῖ αἰαῖ:

ὦ πολὺκλαυτε φίλοισι θανών,  
†τί τάδε δυνάτα δυνάτα 675  
περὶ τᾶ σᾶ δίδυμα διαγόνεν ἀμάρτια;†  
πᾶσαι γὰ τᾶδ'  
ἐξέφθινται τρίσκαλμοι  
νάες ἄναες ἄναες. 680

### Εἶδωλον Δαρείου

ὦ πιστὰ πιστῶν ἠλικές θ' ἤβης ἐμῆς  
Πέρσαι γεραιοί, τίνα πόλις πονεῖ πόνον;  
στένει, κέκοπται, καὶ χαράσσεται πέδον.  
λεύσσω δ' ἄκοιτιν τὴν ἐμὴν τάφου πέλας 685  
ταρβῶ, χοὰς δὲ πρευμαμένης ἐδεξάμην.  
ὕμεῖς δὲ θρηγεῖτ' ἐγγὺς ἐστῶτες τάφου  
καὶ ψυχαγωγοῖς ὀρθιάζοντες γόοις  
οἰκτρῶς καλεῖσθέ μ': ἐστὶ δ' οὐκ εὐέξοδον,  
ἄλλως τε πάντως χοὶ κατὰ χθονὸς θεοὶ 690  
λαβεῖν ἀμείνους εἰσὶν ἢ μεθιέναι.  
ὅμως δ' ἐκείνοις ἐνδυναστεύσας ἐγὼ  
ἦκω. τάχυνε δ' ὡς ἄμεμπτος ὦ χρόνου.  
τί ἐστι Πέρσαις νεοχμὸν ἐμβριθεὲς κακόν;

### Χορός

σέβομαι μὲν προσιδέσθαι,  
 σέβομαι δ' ἀντία λέξαι 695  
 σέθεν ἀρχαίῳ περὶ τάρβει.

### Δαρεῖος

ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ κάτωθεν ἦλθον σοῖς γόοις πεπεισμένος,  
 μή τι μακιστήρα μῦθον, ἀλλὰ σύντομον λέγων  
 εἰπὲ καὶ πέραινε πάντα, τὴν ἐμὴν αἰδῶ μεθείς.

### Χορός

δίεμαι μὲν χαρίσασθαι, 700  
 δίεμαι δ' ἀντία φάσθαι,  
 λέξας δύσλεκτα φιλοισιν.

### Δαρεῖος

ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ δέος παλαιὸν σοὶ φρενῶν ἀνθίσταται...



### Chorus

Beloved is the man, cherished is the tomb:  
     beloved is the heart  
         the dirt has hidden.  
             Hades  
             Who Raises the Dead,  
         cast him up to us,  
 Hades—our godlike master, Darius!

*Kaka!*

Never in his day did he send men  
     to death blinded by War's delusions!  
 A man of godly judgment he was called  
     among the Persians,  
 and a man blessed with a god's mind  
     he proved himself  
 when he led his armies to success.

*Kaka!*

Shahanshah,  
 O Shahanshah  
                                   of old!  
           Come here,  
                                   draw near!

Rise up  
           to the crest of your burial  
 hill, treading on  
           foot with saffron slippers  
 dyed from crocus  
           flowers and reveal  
 the peak of your lofty  
           royal tiara.

*Ascend*

*Father*  
*Untouched by Evils,*  
*Darius!*

*Anax!*

So that you may listen to grief  
           on a scale till now unknown,  
 reveal yourself,  
           O Shahanshah,  
           O Achaemenid  
           King of Kings!  
           Some mist from the Styx  
 hovers over us:  
           our armed force, full of young  
 faces, has been slaughtered.

*Ascend*

*Father*  
*Untouched by Evils,*  
*Darius!*

*Anax!*

O Shah! When you died  
     your loved ones  
         wept endlessly...

O Shah!

    Our every last  
 Egyptian ship  
         has been rent  
                                 apart,  
         a fleet of ships  
 no longer ships,  
         splintered and undone.

**Darius**

O most trusted of trusted men, friends  
 from my youth! Elders of Persia, what pains  
 our country? A moment ago the ground  
 above me was moaning and pounding its breast,  
 stamped by feet. I dread to see my wife  
 standing now beside my tomb,  
 though I am thankful to accept  
 her libations. Huddled by my tomb  
 you old men lament, you shriek soul-raising howls;  
 desperately you summon me. But the road out  
 of Hades isn't smooth. The gods below the earth  
 know better how to snatch than to surrender.  
 Yet through my royal sway among them I have come.  
 Now be brief, so I don't overstay Time's limits.  
 What grave affair now grips us Persians?

**Chorus**

I tremble to look at you.  
 I tremble to speak to your face.  
 My former fear of you restrains me.

**Darius**

Know that I came with great effort from out of the depths, stirred



by your wails. Don't draw out a tedious story, but speak  
to the point and explain everything. Let go of your reverence for me.

**Chorus**

I shrink from granting this favor.  
I shrink from saying openly  
what friends cannot say to friends.

**Darius**

Your enduring fear hinders your thoughts.



Through this interaction between the dead king and his former subjects, Aeschylus means to show how power functions in the Persian Empire at the interpersonal level: the foundation on which the entire imperial structure is based. By having the elders call upon their god-king, he frames the exchange as a fundamentally unequal one that is meant to register as deeply foreign to fifth-century Greeks. In “The Invocation of Darius in Aeschylus’ *Persae*,” Charles E. Muntz observes that “There is good evidence that the Greeks widely believed that the Persians worshipped their kings, and I suggest that Aeschylus, whether he believes this himself or not, is drawing on this misconception in this scene. Whether or not the Persians actually worshipped their kings as divinities, dead or alive, is not the relevant point for Aeschylus and his audience” (268). Muntz goes on to say that most of the Greeks’ ideas about Persian hierarchy and customs probably come from their knowledge of the act of *proskynesis*, in which men of inferior rank prostrate themselves before their superiors. The Greeks saw this gesture as only appropriate between worshipper and god. They may have thus conflated the Persians’ non-religious *proskynesis* with their own customs and beliefs, which relegate *proskynesis* exclusively to divine petition. The true disparity in the Persian system between monarch and subject

already existed, but it may have been exaggerated by the Greeks' own cultural misconceptions, which turned Darius and Xerxes from mere kings into god-kings.

As Muntz notes, Aeschylus may not be striving for complete cultural accuracy; rather, he is merely using the symbolic blend of king and god to illustrate more clearly his thoughts on the problems of the Eastern style of governance and to create a powerful juxtaposition between Darius and Xerxes. The Chorus heaps extraordinary amounts of praise on their deceased ruler, calling him, variously, divine, their father, *isodaimon* ("equal to a god"), the "Susa-born god of the Persians," and a "god-counsellor." Everything associated with him is "beloved:" the man himself, his tumulus, and the heart buried inside the tomb. Naturally, believing him to be both king and god, the Chorus also deems him the "King of Kings," which I have rendered as *Shahanshab*, both because of the word's incantatory sound—especially appropriate for this scene of spirit-raising—and because it has been used as a title for the leader of Persia throughout its history.

Through this summoning, the Chorus begins to process the seismic historical change that has just occurred and to draw meaningful distinctions between their idolized former king and their current one, Xerxes. Referring to Darius' successful reign, they say: "Never in his day did he send men to / death possessed by War's delusions!" The contrast between father and son is meant to be tacitly understood: Darius led his *stratos* ("army") well ("*eu*") and proved that he had a godlike sense of judgment in war, while Xerxes, in his campaign against Greece, was possessed by Atē ("delusion, ruin, blindness"). Here, the Chorus does not mention Xerxes by name. It is as if the elders feels that the son has already become a toxic, taboo presence, and that naming him outright would not be appropriate in a hallowed ritual meant for Darius.

Beneath this veneration, too, lies a deeper tale of subservience, infantilization, and the ingrained, ideological fear which Kantzios, in the “Politics of Fear,” says despotism has created in these Persian characters. Twice the Chorus repeats the refrain: “Ascend / Father / Untouched By Evils, / Darius! *Oi!*” (βάσκει πάτερ ἄκακε Δαριάν, οἶ.) On one hand, the elders are drawing another clear parallel between father and son, insinuating that Xerxes is *kakos* (“evil, bad, cowardly”), while Darius is completely *akake* (“blameless, non-bad”). I have chosen to render this line in the style of an epithet, Father Untouched By Evils, which fits with the other extravagant titles the Chorus has given their dear leader. On the other hand, it is somewhat strange that the Chorus of Persian elders are calling their dead king their “father.” They are far from children now, and they were always Darius’ coevals while he was alive. The king even refers to them, in turn, rather equitably as, “Most trusted of trusted men, age-mates from my youth, / Elders of Persia.” He gently defers to their status and considers them friends—but by no means his children. He is putting forth a desire to erase, at least to some degree, the strict code of conduct that once bound them together as monarch and advisors. The Chorus is the one ascribing Darius with the epithets of god, god-counsellor, and Father Untouched By Evils; the king’s introductory words to them do not demand that they act obsequiously toward him. This praise may be necessary to summon enough goodwill for Darius to return from the underworld, but it is still problematic behavior nonetheless.

By the same token, Darius does not shy away from the fact of his extraordinary presence. No common man or king could just escape from the underworld. There is, as he says, “no easy road out of Hades.” Only because of his unique “royal sway” among the chthonic spirits is he able to escape. In all of mythological history, passage between the realms of the living and the dead is extremely rare,

limited to the exceptional tales of Orpheus, Asclepius (who tried to heal the dead), and Odysseus' journey into Hades. Yet here Darius is, special enough to join the ranks of Orpheus and Odysseus.

Darius then presses the Chorus to tell him, "What grave affair now grips us Persians?" He wants clear answers, an unfiltered explanation of what has happened to the empire. But the elders are anything but clear; they remember the old days, and they cannot help but think back to the time when being the bearer of bad news and upsetting the king were punishable offenses. Thus they say that they "dread" to look at him, they "dread" to speak to his face. They call the feeling stirring within them, *σέθεν ἀρχαίῳ περὶ τάρβει*, "my ancient/former fear of you." Their vestigial fear is uncontrollable, instinctual. Merely to behold him reduces their capacity to speak: they can only muster short, timid, and repetitive tercets. Although the use of "ancient" (*arkhaios*) here to describe their fear likely just means something more akin to "former" fear of Darius (he died not long ago), *arkhaios* could also be read to apply to the institution of monarchy more generally. Crippling fear of a king is indeed "ancient" and immemorial, and it is to this timeless anxiety which the Chorus may be referring.

Darius clearly understands what is inhibiting the elders and tries to persuade them to break out of their verbal paralysis. "Let go of your reverence (*αἰδῶ*) for me," he says. But at their core they are unable to "grant this favor." To them, the weight of the news of Persia's extraordinary defeat is *dyslekta philoisi*, "unspeakable to friends/dear ones." In this phrase, the elders now seem to be suggesting that while a certain closeness *does* exist between them and their king, which Darius tried to appeal to earlier, the nature of their hierarchical relationship still cannot engender true honesty. Submissiveness and fear have been too essential to the uneasy maintenance of their "friendship" that it is now impossible to act merely as friends. Recognizing that the *deos palaion* ("ancient fear," rephrased

and parroted back by Darius) is hindering any meaningful communication, the king turns to his wife, Atossa, for the news.

## VII. *The Spirit's Touch?*

### Lines 704-58

#### **Δαρείος**

ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ δέος παλαιὸν σοὶ φρενῶν ἀντίσταται,  
τῶν ἐμῶν λέκτρων γεραιὰ ζύνημι· εὐγενὲς γύναι,  
κλαυμάτων λήξασα τῶνδε καὶ γόων σαφές τί μοι  
λέξον: ἀνθρώπεια δ' ἂν τοι πῆματ' ἂν τύχοι βροτοῖς. 705  
πολλὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐκ θαλάσσης, πολλὰ δ' ἐκ χέρσου κακὰ  
γίγνεται θνητοῖς, ὁ μᾶσσων βίोटος ἦν ταθῆ, πρόσω.

#### **Ἄτοσσα**

ὦ βροτῶν πάντων ὑπερσχῶν ὄλβον εὐτυχεῖ πότιμω  
ὡς ἕως τ' ἔλευσσεσ ἀύγαξ ἡλίου ζηλωτὸς ὦν 710  
βίοτον εὐαίωνα Πέρσαις ὡς θεὸς διήγαγες,  
νῦν τέ σε ζηλῶ θανόντα, πρὶν κακῶν ἰδεῖν βάθος.  
πάντα γάρ, Δαρεῖ' ἀκούσῃ μῦθον ἐν βραχεῖ χρόνῳ.  
διαπεπόρηται τὰ Περσῶν πράγμαθ', ὡς εἰπεῖν ἔπος.

#### **Δαρείος**

τίνι τρόπῳ; λοιμοῦ τις ἦλθε σκηπτὸς ἢ στάσις πόλει; 715

#### **Ἄτοσσα**

οὐδαμῶς: ἀλλ' ἀμφ' Ἀθήνας πᾶς κατέφθαρται στρατός.

#### **Δαρείος**

τίς δ' ἐμῶν ἐκείσε παιδῶν ἐστρατηλάτει; φράσον.

#### **Ἄτοσσα**

θούριος Ξέρξης, κενώσας πᾶσαν ἠπειροῦ πλάκα.

**Δαρείος**

πεζός ἢ ναύτης δὲ πείραν τήνδ' ἐμώρανεν τάλας;

**Ἄτοσσα**

ἀμφοτέρα: διπλοῦν μέτωπον ἦν δυοῖν στρατευμάτοιν. 720

**Δαρείος**

πῶς δὲ καὶ στρατὸς τοσόσδε πεζὸς ἤνυσεν περᾶν;

**Ἄτοσσα**

μηχαναίς ἐξευξεν Ἑλλης πορθμόν, ὥστ' ἔχειν πόρον.

**Δαρείος**

καὶ τόδ' ἐξέπραξεν, ὥστε Βόσπορον κλήσαι μέγαν:

**Ἄτοσσα**

ᾧδ' ἔχει: γνώμης δὲ πού τις δαιμόνων ξυνήψατο.

**Δαρείος**

φεῦ, μέγας τις ἦλθε δαίμων, ὥστε μὴ φρονεῖν καλῶς. 725

**Ἄτοσσα**

ὡς ἰδεῖν τέλος πάρεστιν οἶον ἤνυσεν κακόν.

**Δαρείος**

καὶ τί δὴ πράξασιν αὐτοῖς ᾧδ' ἐπιστενάζετε;

**Ἄτοσσα**

ναυτικὸς στρατὸς κακωθεὶς πεζὸν ὤλεσε στρατόν.

**Δαρείος**

ᾧδε παμπήδην δὲ λαὸς πᾶς κατέφθαρται δορί;

**Ἄτοσσα**

πρὸς τὰδ' ὡς Σούσων μὲν ἄστυ πᾶν κενανδρίαν στένει. 730

**Δαρείος**

ᾧ πόποι κεδνῆς ἀρωγῆς κάπικουρίας στρατοῦ.

**Ἄτοσσα**

Βακτριῶν δ' ἔρρει πανώλης δῆμος, οὐδέ τις γέρων.

**Δαρείος**

ᾧ μέλεος, οἶαν ἄρ' ἤβην ξυμμάχων ἀπώλεσεν.

**Ἄτοσσα**

μονάδα δὲ Ξέρξην ἔρημόν φασιν οὐ πολλῶν μέτα—

**Δαρείος**

πῶς τε δὴ καὶ ποῖ τελευτᾶν; ἔστι τις σωτηρία;

735

**Ἄτοσσα**

ἄσμενον μολεῖν γέφυραν γαῖν δυοῖν ζευκτηρίαν.

**Δαρείος**

καὶ πρὸς ἠπειρον σεσῶσθαι τήνδε, τοῦτ' ἐτήτυμον;

**Ἄτοσσα**

ναί: λόγος κρατεῖ σαφηνῆς τοῦτό γ', οὐδ' ἐνι στάσις.

**Δαρείος**

φεῦ, ταχεῖά γ' ἦλθε χρησμῶν πράξις, ἐς δὲ παιδ' ἐμόν  
Ζεὺς ἀπέσκηψεν τελευτὴν θεσφάτων: ἐγὼ δέ που  
διὰ μακροῦ χρόνου τὰδ' ἠὔχουν ἐκτελευτήσειν θεοῦς:  
ἀλλ' ὅταν σπεύδῃ τις αὐτός, χῶ θεὸς συνάπτεται.

740

νῦν κακῶν ἔοικε πηγῇ πᾶσιν ἠύρησθαι φίλοις.

παῖς δ' ἐμὸς τὰδ' οὐ κατειδῶς ἤνυσεν νέω θράσει:

ὅστις Ἑλλήσποντον ἱρὸν δοῦλον ὡς δεσμώμασιν

745

ἤλπισε σχήσειν ῥέοντα, Βόσπορον ῥόον θεοῦ:

καὶ πόρον μετερρύθμιζε, καὶ πέδαις σφυρηλάτοις

περιβαλῶν πολλὴν κέλευθον ἤνυσεν πολλῶ στρατῶ,

θνητὸς ὦν θεῶν τε πάντων ᾤετ', οὐκ εὐβουλία,

καὶ Ποσειδῶνος κρατήσειν. πῶς τὰδ' οὐ νόσος φρενῶν

750

εἶχε παιδ' ἐμόν; δέδοικα μὴ πολὺς πλούτου πόνος

οὐμὸς ἀνθρώποις γένηται τοῦ φθάσαντος ἀρπαγῆ.

**Ἄτοσσα**

ταῦτά τοι κακοῖς ὁμιλῶν ἀνδράσιν διδάσκειται  
 θούριος Ξέρξης: λέγουσι δ' ὡς σὺ μὲν μέγαν τέκνοις  
 πλούτον ἐκτήσω ξὺν αἰχμῇ, τὸν δ' ἀνανδρίας ὑπο  
 ἔνδον αἰχμάζειν, πατρῶον δ' ὄλβον οὐδὲν αὐξάνειν.  
 τοιάδ' ἐξ ἀνδρῶν ὄνειδη πολλακίς κλύων κακῶν  
 τήνδ' ἐβούλευσεν κέλευθον καὶ στρατεύμ' ἐφ' Ἑλλάδα.

755



### Darius

Atossa,

lovely woman who shared our marriage bed,  
 noble by birth and venerable in years,  
 cease these wails and this weeping of yours and tell me  
 the clear facts. They say that mankind is the target  
 and struggle is the arrow. The longer a man's life  
 is stretched, the more woes from land and sea  
 will overwhelm him.

### Atossa

O you who once held wealth beyond all men—  
 your destiny!—In all the years you saw  
 the sun's bright rays the Persians envied you, thought  
 you a god, while you lived a blissful life. Now I envy  
 you in death—until you see how deep the evil goes.  
 My Darius, you shall hear the tale in full with no delay.  
 In a word: Persia's possessions have been sacked.

### Darius

How? Did some bolt of plague blast Susa, or civil war?

### Atossa

Not at all. Our whole fighting force was ravaged near Athens.

### Darius

Which of my sons led an army *there*? Speak.

### Atossa



Impulsive Xerxes, after he emptied every corner of the continent.

**Darius**

Did the poor soul take the gamble by land or by sea?

**Atossa**

Both routes. There were two fighting fronts, a double army.

**Darius**

How did a land contingent that large manage to pass through?

**Atossa**

He used new inventions to yoke the Hellespont and take hold of the strait.

**Darius**

And he managed this feat, he closed shut the mighty Bosphorus?

**Atossa**

So they say. I believe some spirit may have touched his mind.

**Darius**

*Phew!* A great spirit must have gripped him and distorted his thoughts.

**Atossa**

Since we can see the results, all this evil he unleashed.

**Darius**

And the men you mourn for now: how did they fare?

**Atossa**

The navy was routed, then the footsoldiers met their deaths.

**Darius**

So all of Asia's people have been gored by the spear?

**Atossa**

Every square in Susa mourns the city's emptiness—no men left.

**Darius**

*O popoi!* Our army, our bulwark, our defense!

**Atossa**

Even the Bactrian army is gone. Their old men, too.

**Darius**

Miserable son! He's killed all our allies' young men!

**Atossa**

They say that Xerxes, dejected and alone, with only a handful of men—

**Darius**

How did he end up? And where? Is he safe?

**Atossa**

—came relieved to the bridge that yokes two lands.

**Darius**

Then he was saved on his way back to Asia? Is this true?

**Atossa**

Yes, a clear report confirms this. Nothing conflicts.

**Darius**

*Pheu!*

How swiftly the oracle's words were fulfilled!

Then Zeus blasted my son with the bolt that ends prophecies.

I hoped that it would take many years before the gods brought those words to pass, but when a man falls into frenzy, the god too lends its touch. Now I see a stream of misery unearthed for those I love.

Ignorant of the oracles, my son brought his plans to life with youthful recklessness— he who hoped to lock the sacred Hellespont in bonds, as if it were a slave, the passage that the cow once crossed, holy to the Sea God. He changed the rhythm of the current, threw fetters beaten by hammers on both shores, making a spacious road for his immense army— he, a mere mortal, who senselessly thought he could

rule Poseidon Who Shakes the Earth and all the gods.  
 How could a sickness of the mind not have seized  
 my son? Now I dread that the gold I toiled for  
 will be looted by the man who snatches it first.

### **Atossa**

Impulsive Xerxes learned these notions while he kept the company  
 of wicked men. They kept telling him that you amassed  
 great wealth for your children by the spear, while he stayed home  
 and cast spears like a woman, failing to add to the gold  
 of his forefathers. After listening to enough of these insults,  
 he devised his course of action: a campaign against Greece.



There is one important character who does not appear in the *Dramatis Personae* at the beginning of this play: the *daimon*. Constantly alluded to, it shapeshifts and works behind the scenes, a mysterious force that accrues new meanings through repeated use. One moment, it appears to be working for the Persians, the next against them. So for instance in the Chorus' invocation, where they refer to Darius positively as a *daimon*, or the foreboding but revered *daimones* of the underworld that need to be propitiated to release Darius from Hades (642). In most other cases, however, when the Persians speak of a *daimon*, they mean a deity or lower power that has inexplicably brought ruin upon them, that has somehow interfered with the natural order and balance of power, whose nature they only dimly understand.

It is telling, now that Darius is talking to his near co-equal, Atossa, that she does not hesitate to tell him the naked truth "with no delay": that "Persia's possessions have been sacked" (713-14). The "ancient fear" does not impede their communication. From here, the queen takes up the unenviable

role of the play's second messenger, following in the footsteps of the soldier who first recounted the Battle of Salamis. She acts the middle link in a drama dominated by the spread of news, proceeding the play's final messenger, Xerxes, who fills in the remaining details about the Persian *kakos kakôn*.

In this passage, we are brought into a startlingly intimate conversation between mother and father discussing their son. After Atossa informs Darius exactly what has happened to his country (the expedition; the complete loss of both land and naval forces; the “man-emptiness” [κενανδρίαν] of their capital, Susa), the parents begin to make conjectures about Xerxes’ mental state. On line 716, to be repeated again in line 754, Atossa calls her son “impulsive/warlike Xerxes” (θούριος Ξέρξης) in an attempt to explain his rashness in terms of an innate personality flaw. But the sheer scale of his folly, in which he “emptied every corner of the continent” and tried to “yoke the Hellespont,” both parents find hard ascribe to their son’s flaws alone (716, 721), reasoning that no one could have ever conceived of such a plan by themselves, no matter their state of mind. Thus they resort to an explanation involving the *daimon*. Atossa says she believes “some Spirit may have touched his mind/judgment” (723). To this, Darius agrees, also characterizing the force of ruin as *tis daimon*, “some Spirit” (Atossa: ὧδ’ ἔχει: γνώμης δέ πού τις δαιμόνων ξυνήψατο. / Darius: φεῦ, μέγας τις ἦλθε δαίμων, ὥστε μὴ φρονεῖν καλῶς. 723-4). Their indefinite description of the Spirit mirrors their overall uncertainty and bafflement over why Xerxes acted as he did.

After a brief moment of shared joy, in which Atossa tells her husband that Xerxes has returned safely back to Asia, Darius attempts a theological explanation of events, mentioning some oracles he heard while alive that foretold disaster for Persia that have now come to fulfillment.<sup>20</sup> “I hoped that it would take many years before the gods / brought them to pass,” he says, “but when a man falls into

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<sup>20</sup> A strange, oblique reference that occurs nowhere else in the play.

frenzy, / the god too lends its touch” (741-42). Here, the word *theos*, the more conventional term for “god,” has replaced *daimon*, but its import as an indefinite power remains. Darius here returns to his wife’s original hypothesis and language, which supposes that “some Spirit may have touched” his mind, and repeats her verb *συνάπτεται*. *Sunaptetai* can mean, abstractly, to “play a part, join in,” but there is something *physical* about the word that transcends its less tangible alternatives. I wanted to stress how intimately the *daimon* has infiltrated Xerxes’ thinking, so I settled on having the spirit “touch” Xerxes rather than act as his co-conspirator.<sup>21</sup> It is a force that has wheedled its way into his brain, like a tapeworm, or a parasite. Indeed, upon coming home, Xerxes will later say that the *daimon* has “trounced/stepped on the Persian race,” which also depicts the spirit as an oddly physical presence (911-12).

But Darius is not fully satisfied with displacing blame onto an elusive force that has somehow intervened. Merging Atossa’s attribution of an “impulsive” character with the enigmatic quality of the *daimon*, the king offers a more dispassionate analysis that combines both personal flaw with religious impiety. Now equipped with the facts of the matter, he is doing exactly what he was summoned from Hades to do: explain the causes of the “woe of woes.” Thus he says that Xerxes was “ignorant” of the oracles and set out on his campaign with “youthful recklessness,” two faults rooted in his character. Whereas the elders, in the parodos, mention Xerxes’ “yoking” of the Hellespont with little criticism, Darius harshly judges the pontoon bridge that his son built to lead his army across the strait. Unlike the Chorus and Atossa, he has not been invested in the fate of Xerxes’ campaign, so he can assess his son’s actions without bias. He emphasizes that the act has transgressed against ecological and religious

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<sup>21</sup> Aeschylus has cleverly blended man and spirit even further with the crisis, *χὼ θεὸς συνάπτεται*.

order,<sup>22</sup> stating that Xerxes “hoped to keep the sacred Hellespont / in bonds, as if it were a slave,” that “changed the rhythm / of the current,” and that he, “a mere mortal, senselessly thought he could / rule Poseidon [...] and all the gods (745-50). Xerxes’ primary offense, he determines, is extreme sacrilege against Poseidon, which naturally deserved a comparable punishment.

But the parent in Darius finally breaks out. He cannot believe that his own son, out of mere ignorance of the oracles and “youthful recklessness,” or the touch of a *daimon*, would try to govern the gods. He throws his hands up in trying to offer a coherent explanation, instead citing that a “sickness of the mind” [νόσος φρενῶν] must have gripped Xerxes (750-51). The father has turned again back to psychological causes. Meanwhile, Atossa tries to consider her son’s personal and ideological development. She ventures that “impulsive Xerxes learned these notions while he kept the company / of wicked men,” advisors in the royal court who are far from being, as Darius calls the elders, “most trusted of trusted men” (753-54). These shifty men pressured young Xerxes into feeling inadequate compared to his father, saying that Darius went out and won wealth with his spear, while Xerxes stayed at home and merely practiced throwing spears, a sign of “cowardice/unmanliness” (755: τὸν δ’ ἀνανδρίας ὕπο). Nor did he add to the “wealth of his forefathers.” In leveling these insults, they weaponized both paternal anxiety and appeals to national glory to corrupt Xerxes.

Although Aeschylus mentions these nameless *andres kakoi*, “wicked men,” only briefly, I believe he is proposing that this circle of dangerous advisors represents one of the greatest flaws in the autocratic and imperial machine. For maximum juxtaposition with his son, Darius here is clearly

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<sup>22</sup> Aeschylus depicts the Persians as worshipping the same gods as the Greeks: Zeus, Poseidon, Ares. Since Greek religion is highly animistic, believing that all streams, meadows, and other places in nature have their own nymphs and river-gods, any offense done to the land is also an affront toward a god. This is shown most vividly in Book 21 of the *Iliad* when Achilles, in the heat of his *aristeia*, makes war on the River Scamander.

shown to be less susceptible to outside pressure and evil advisors—more competent, more sensible than Xerxes. But Herodotus, in his account of the development of the Persian Empire, suggests, more realistically than Aeschylus, that both Darius and Xerxes were straightjacketed by the same system. Neither Aeschylus nor Herodotus, of course, could have fully known the motivations for these kings' actions; so they both invent etiologies.

The *Histories* presents Darius' early reign, by and large, as a preference for the status quo. He recognized the territorial achievements of Cyrus the Great and Cambyses II and guarded them. Then Herodotus creates a fictionalized conversation between Darius and Atossa in bed, where she says to him: “My lord, you have so much power, but you do nothing with it... One would expect a man with youth and vast material resources at his disposal to make the Persians realize that they are being ruled by a real man... Make your mark, while you are young” (Waterfield 3.134). This then spurs him into launching a campaign against Greece. The language of “real man,” “doing nothing [with] so much power,” and “vast material resources” all echo the coercive influence of the wicked advisors in the *Persians*. What the *andres kakoi* are to Xerxes, Atossa is to Darius. In both scenarios, “absolute” monarchy is shown to be a much more slippery affair—the power does not emanate from a single man. It is not necessarily the king who makes foolish policy, nor the existence of courtier “yes men,” but rather the rapaciousness and bad judgment of the king's questionable confidants. Where the king demurs, they goad him into further aggression and conquest. They lie at the heart of the imperial engine.

It is curious (at least, for modern readers) that neither Darius nor Atossa ever considers where *they* might have gone wrong as parents in raising Xerxes. For them, it must be the *daimon*'s fault, or the fault of the “wicked men,” or some sickness of the mind. The lack of responsibility on their part

for their son's disastrous actions will be mirrored, later on, by Xerxes' blithe refusal to take responsibility for the fiasco at Salamis.

### *VIII. Xerxes in the Context of Persian History*

The family disaster gives way to a national conversation. To explain the magnitude of Xerxes' actions, Darius provides an overview of Persian history that juxtaposes the past several generations of sensible leaders with Xerxes' recklessness, impiety, and the moral decline of the nation as a whole.

#### Lines 759-851

##### **Δαρείος**

τοιγάρ σφιν ἔργον ἐστὶν ἐξειργασμένον μέγιστον, αἰμίμηστον, οἷον οὐδέπω	760
τόδ' ἄστυ Σούσων ἐξεκείνωσεν πεσόν, ἐξ οὔτε τιμὴν Ζεὺς ἀναξ τήνδ' ὤπασεν, ἐν' ἄνδρ' ἀπάσης Ἀσίδος μηλοτρόφου ταγεῖν, ἔχοντα σκῆπτρον εὐθυντήριον. Μῆδος γὰρ ἦν ὁ πρῶτος ἡγεμῶν στρατοῦ:	765
ἄλλος δ' ἐκείνου παῖς τόδ' ἔργον ἦνυσεν: φρένες γὰρ αὐτοῦ θυμὸν ὠακοστρόφουν. τρίτος δ' ἀπ' αὐτοῦ Κύρος, εὐδαίμων ἀνὴρ, ἄρξας ἔθηκε πᾶσιν εἰρήνην φίλοις: Λυδῶν δὲ λαὸν καὶ Φρυγῶν ἐκτήσατο,	770
Ἴωνίαν τε πᾶσαν ἤλασεν βία. θεὸς γὰρ οὐκ ἤχθηρεν, ὡς εὐφρων ἔφυ. Κύρου δὲ παῖς τέταρτος ἠϋθυνη στρατόν. πέμπτος δὲ Μάρδος ἤρξεν, αἰσχύνῃ πάτρα θρόνοισί τ' ἀρχαίοισι: τὸν δὲ σὺν δόλῳ	775
Ἄρταφρένης ἔκτεινεν ἐσθλὸς ἐν δόμοις,	



ξὺν ἀνδράσιν φίλοισιν, οἷς τόδ' ἦν χρέος.  
 ἔκτος δὲ Μάραφισ, ἔβδομος δ' Ἀρταφρένης.  
 καὶ γὰρ πάλου τ' ἔκυρσα τοῦπερ ἤθελον,  
 κάπεστράτευσα πολλὰ σὺν πολλῶ στρατῶ: 780  
 ἀλλ' οὐ κακὸν τοσόνδε προσέβαλον πόλει.  
 Ξέρξης δ' ἐμὸς παῖς ὦν νέος νέα φρονεῖ,  
 κοῦ μνημονεύει τὰς ἐμὰς ἐπιστολάς:  
 εὖ γὰρ σαφῶς τόδ' ἴστ', ἐμοὶ ξυνήλικες,  
 ἅπαντες ἡμεῖς, οἱ κράτη τάδ' ἔσχομεν, 785  
 οὐκ ἂν φανεῖμεν πῆματ' ἔρξαντες τόσα.

### Χορός

τί οὖν, ἄναξ Δαρεῖε, ποῖ καταστρέφεις  
 λόγων τελευτήν; πῶς ἂν ἐκ τούτων ἔτι  
 πράσσοιμεν ὡς ἄριστα Περσικὸς λεώς;

### Δαρεῖος

εἰ μὴ στρατεύοισθ' ἐς τὸν Ἑλλήνων τόπον, 790  
 μηδ' εἰ στράτευμα πλείον τὸ Μηδικόν.  
 αὐτὴ γὰρ ἡ γῆ ξύμμαχος κείνοις πέλει.

### Χορός

πῶς τοῦτ' ἔλεξας, τίνι τρόπῳ δὲ συμμαχεῖ;

### Δαρεῖος

κτείνουσα λιμῶ τοὺς ὑπερπόλλους ἄγαν.

### Χορός

ἀλλ' εὐσταλῆ τοι λεκτὸν ἀροῦμεν στόλον. 795

### Δαρεῖος

ἀλλ' οὐδ' ὁ μείνας νῦν ἐν Ἑλλάδος τόποις  
 στρατὸς κυρήσει νοστίμου σωτηρίας.

### Χορός

πῶς εἶπας; οὐ γὰρ πᾶν στράτευμα βαρβάρων  
 περᾶ τὸν Ἑλλης πορθμὸν Εὐρώπης ἄπο;

### Δαρεῖος

- παῦροι γε πολλῶν, εἴ τι πιστεῦσαι θεῶν 800  
 χρή θεσφάτοισιν, ἐς τὰ νῦν πεπραγμένα  
 βλέψαντα: συμβαίνει γὰρ οὐ τὰ μέν, τὰ δ' οὔ.  
 κείπερ τὰδ' ἐστί, πλήθος ἔκκριτον στρατοῦ  
 λείπει κεναῖσιν ἐλπίσιν πεπεισμένος.  
 μίμνουσι δ' ἔνθα πεδίον Ἄσωπὸς ῥοαῖς 805  
 ἄρδει, φίλον πίασμα Βοιωτῶν χθονί:  
 οὐ σφιν κακῶν ὕψιστ' ἐπαμμένει παθεῖν,  
 ὕβρεως ἄποινα καθέων φρονημάτων:  
 οἱ γῆν μολόντες Ἑλλάδ' οὐ θεῶν βρέτη 810  
 ἡδούντο συλᾶν οὐδὲ πιμπράναι νεώς:  
 βωμοὶ δ' αἰστοί, δαιμόνων θ' ἰδρύματα  
 πρόρριζα φύρδην ἐξανέστραπται βάθρων.  
 τοιγὰρ κακῶς δράσαντες οὐκ ἐλάσσονα 815  
 πάσχουσι, τὰ δὲ μέλλουσι, κούδέπω κακῶν  
 κρηνὶς ἀπέσβηκ' ἀλλ' ἔτ' ἐκπιδύεται.  
 τόσος γὰρ ἔσται πέλανος αἵματοσφαγῆς  
 πρὸς γῆ Πλαταιῶν Δωρίδος λόγχης ὑπο:  
 θίνες νεκρῶν δὲ καὶ τριτοσπόρω γονῆ  
 ἄφωνα σηματοῦσιν ὄμμασιν βροτῶν 820  
 ὡς οὐχ ὑπέρφου θνητὸν ὄντα χρή φρονεῖν.  
 ὕβρις γὰρ ἐξανθοῦσ' ἐκάρπωσεν στάχυν  
 ἄτης, ὅθεν πάγκλαυτον ἐξαμᾶ θέρος.
- τοιαῦθ' ὁρῶντες τῶνδε τὰπιτίμια  
 μέμνησθ' Ἀθηνῶν Ἑλλάδος τε, μηδὲ τις 825  
 ὑπερφρονήσας τὸν παρόντα δαίμονα  
 ἄλλων ἐρασθεὶς ὄλβον ἐκχέη μέγαν.  
 Ζεὺς τοι κολαστὴς τῶν ὑπερκόμπων ἄγαν  
 φρονημάτων ἔπεστιν, εὐθυνοσ βαρὺς.  
 πρὸς ταῦτ' ἐκείνον, σωφρονεῖν κεχρημένον,  
 πινύσκετ' εὐλόγοισι νουθετήμασιν, 830  
 λῆξαι θεοβλαβοῦνθ' ὑπερκόμπω θράσει.  
 σὺ δ', ὦ γεραῖά μήτερ ἢ Ξέρξου φίλη,  
 ἐλθοῦσ' ἐς οἴκους κόσμον ὅστις εὐπρεπέης  
 λαβοῦσ' ὑπαντίαζε παιδί. πάντα γὰρ  
 κακῶν ὑπ' ἄλγους λακίδες ἀμφὶ σώματι 835  
 στημορραγοῦσι ποικίλων ἐσθημάτων.  
 ἀλλ' αὐτὸν εὐφρόνως σὺ πρᾶννον λόγοις:

μόνης γάρ, οἶδα, σοῦ κλύων ἀνέξεται.  
 ἐγὼ δ' ἄπειμι γῆς ὑπὸ ζόφον κάτω.  
 ὑμεῖς δέ, πρέσβεις, χαίρετ', ἐν κακοῖς ὄμωσ  
 840  
 ψυχῇ διδόντες ἡδονὴν καθ' ἡμέραν,  
 ὡς τοῖς θανούσι πλοῦτος οὐδὲν ὠφελεί.

### Χορός

ἢ πολλὰ καὶ παρόντα καὶ μέλλοντ' ἔτι  
 ἤλγησ' ἀκούσας βαρβάροισι πήματα.

### Ἄτοσσα

ὦ δαίμον, ὡς με πόλλ' ἐσέρχεται κακὰ  
 845  
 ἄλγη, μάλιστα δ' ἦδε συμφορὰ δάκνει,  
 ἀτιμίαν γε παιδὸς ἀμφὶ σώματι  
 ἐσθημάτων κλύουσας, ἢ νιν ἀμπέχει.  
 ἀλλ' εἴμι, καὶ λαβοῦσα κόσμον ἐκ δόμων  
 850  
 ὑπαντιάζειν παιδί μου πειράσομαι.  
 οὐ γὰρ τὰ φίλτατ' ἐν κακοῖς προδώσομεν.



### Darius

Then he has completed his masterwork—  
 a catastrophe no one will forget,  
 a disaster such as never before  
 crashed down on Susa and left it desolate  
 since Lord Zeus first granted us this honor:

*Let one man be the chief of all of Asia,  
 the land that fattens sheep. Let him hold  
 the scepter that keeps the kingdom straight.*

Medus was the first commander of our army.  
 Then another son of that stock took on the work.  
 His mind was the helmsman of his heart.  
 Third came Cyrus, a glorious man,

who through his rule established peace  
 for all he loved. He conquered the Lydians  
 and Phrygians and subdued the Ionians  
 through force. Since he was born a sensible man,  
 no god hated him. Fourth came Cambyses,  
 son of Cyrus, the next to guide the army straight.  
 Fifth ruled Mardus, a disgrace to the fatherland  
 and ancient throne. But through trickery  
 bold Artraphrenes murdered Mardus  
 in the palace with the help of the friends  
 to whom he entrusted the task. Then I won  
 the lot I had hoped for that determined  
 who would be king. I launched many wars  
 with a mammoth army under my control,  
 but no great evil ever struck our country.  
 Xerxes is young and thinks young thoughts,  
 nor does he remember my guidance.  
 Let this be clearly acknowledged, my old peers,  
 we who once held these stations of power:  
 we never wrought such woe.

**Chorus**

What follows, Lord Darius? What end  
 are you driving at? And how might we,  
 the Persian people, still do what's best?

**Darius**

You shouldn't send an army against  
 Greek soil, even if the Persian one is larger.  
 The land itself is an ally to those people.

**Chorus**

What do you mean? In what way their ally?

**Darius**

It kills with hunger hordes of men.

**Chorus**

But we will raise a formidable army—only the best!

**Darius**

Not even the army now mired in Hellas  
will win the peace of coming home.

**Chorus**

What do you mean? Isn't Asia's whole army  
passing through the Hellespont away from Europe?

**Darius**

Precious few, if we are to trust the oracles  
of the gods. Look at those that have already  
been fulfilled: they all inevitably come true.  
If this is so, then Xerxes has been deceived  
by hollow hopes and leaves behind  
the majority of the army's chosen men.  
They are stuck where the River Asopus  
waters the land with its streams, a beloved  
fattener of Boeotian earth. From this spot  
they wait to suffer a mountain of woe  
as retribution for their arrogance  
and insolence against the gods—  
they who landed in Greece and felt no shame,  
they who stripped gods' images and burned  
their temples. Altars are gone, and holy shrines  
have been ripped like roots  
from their foundations. Our men suffer  
pain that matches the wicked deeds  
they've done. More is to come.  
Sorrow's rivers have not yet run dry;  
they still surge. Soon libations  
of blood and viscera shall ooze  
into Plataean dirt from the tip  
of the Dorian spear; beaches of dead  
bodies will give silent warning to the eyes  
of mortals down to the third generation  
that man, born to die, must not let his thoughts  
grow too tall. When insolence blooms, it bears  
the fruit of Delusion, from which a harvest

of untold tears is reaped. Now you see  
 the punishment for what our men have done.  
 Always remember Athens and Greece.  
 May no one fall in love with another's wealth  
 and think to surpass his present fortune,  
 and thereby squander his own great riches.  
 Zeus, we know, is the Punisher of the Proud,  
 the Toppler of Arrogance, a heavy judge.  
 Since you are wise with experience,  
 admonish him and warn him with reason  
 to cease offending the gods with unbridled  
 boldness. And you, venerable woman,  
 Xerxes' dear mother, go into the palace  
 and find clothes that befit the occasion;  
 go and welcome home your son.  
 Overwhelmed by all the evil  
 he unleashed, he ripped his dazzling robes  
 to rags that barely cover him. Please try  
 to soothe him with your words: for you alone,  
 I know, he will be able to endure hearing.

I must leave now for the gloom below.  
 Elders of Persia, farewell: but even  
 in your misery, let your soul take  
 pleasure in every day that you're alive.  
 Heaps of gold are worthless to the dead.

### **Chorus**

Hearing of Persia's current and future sorrows  
 makes me surge with pain.

### **Atossa**

Oh, Spirit! Do you see the countless pains  
 that stalk me? But this misfortune  
 bites the hardest: to hear of the tattered  
 robes, the dishonor that clings  
 to my son. I have to hurry now.  
 Once I've retrieved clothes from the palace,  
 I'll try to meet my son when he arrives.

I won't neglect my dearest in dark times.



Compelled to assuage his own distress, and now thoroughly outraged by the fate of the empire he ruled not long ago, Darius gives a summary of Persian history that functions both as a nostalgic interlude and a moral lesson. He begins the passage in a moment of indignant sarcasm, saying of Xerxes: “Then he has completed his masterwork!” (759-60: *τοιγάρ σφιν ἔργον ἐστὶν ἐξειργασμένον / μέγιστον*). Darius sardonically implies that this *kakos kakôn* is the realization of Xerxes’ wishes and his character, the fulfillment and the “masterwork” that will come to define his reign in the memory of generations to come (760: *ἀείμνηστον*). Indeed, it will eclipse the *erga* of all previous Persian kings ever “since Lord Zeus first bestowed us [the Persians] this honor:” for one man to rule all of Asia (762).

Darius then gives a genealogy of kings that supports his claim about Xerxes’ unprecedented disgrace. He introduces Medus as the “first commander (*hegemon*) of our army (*stratos*),” compares the unnamed second leader’s mind to a good helmsman (in line with Aeschylus’ penchant for naval metaphors), highlights Cyrus’ expansive territorial gains over the Lydians, Phrygians, and Ionians, which simultaneously brought “peace to all he loved,” and then says that Cambyses was the “forth to guide the army straight” (765-73). In his retelling of history, Darius sets forth a view of successful kingship that is bound to military accomplishments and competency. The success of the Persian *stratos* abroad in ages past becomes a synecdoche for the king’s ability to govern well domestically.

He also summarizes his own reign in strictly martial terms: “I launched many wars / with a mammoth army under my control” (780: *κάπεστράτευσα πολλὰ σὺν πολλῶ στρατῶ*). Here Aeschylus employs the *figura etymologica*, “etymological figure,” whereby two or more words of the same root

are used in different parts of speech (a device that comes naturally to Greek, but suffers severely in English). In line 780, Darius in fact only uses two words, *polus* (“many”) and *stratos* (“army”), and a preposition to convey what I have just quoted. A literal rendering might read: “I led many armies with a numerous army,” but this is clearly insufficient. The point stands that Darius prizes martial achievement and martial quantity above all else. Line 780, applied to himself, also deliberately echoes and contrasts with line 748, in which he chastises Xerxes for yoking the Hellespont: “on both shores, making a spacious road for his immense army” (περιβαλὼν πολλήν κέλευθον ἤγνυσεν πολλῶ στρατῶ). Both lines feature a repetition of *polus* and end with the phrase “immense army” (πολλῶ στρατῶ). Through this parallelism, Darius insinuates that he adeptly handled the same large military force as his son, but “never cast down such evil on the country,” while Xerxes bungled the numerical superiority he inherited from Darius and used it for improper ends. The old king is drawing unequivocal, even simplistic, distinctions between past kings and Xerxes to paint the contemporary moment as uniquely *kakos* (“woeful, evil”).

Not only has the monarchy undergone a degradation of values, Darius suggests, but the Persian people themselves have been degraded. He goes from criticizing Xerxes’ personal impiety (742-50) to lamenting the gross sacrilege committed by Persian soldiers upon their arrival in Greece, as well as the general consequences of their *hybris* (“insolence toward the gods”), arrogance, and greed (800-31). After assuring the Chorus elders of their reputation in posterity’s eyes (“Let this be clearly acknowledged, my old peers, / we who once held these stations of power: / we could never be seen to have wrought such woe”), they ask him where his speech is leading (784-86). Darius suddenly utters a prophecy: he tells of how the Persians still mired in Greece will die and pay for their desecration of Greek temples and altars, which they burned and “ripped like roots from their foundations.” Their



punishment will match the evil they have shown toward the gods. Darius then foretells the future Battle of Plataea, turning from a sage voice into yet another of the play's messengers: "Yes, soon there shall flow / libations made of blood and viscera / into Plataean dirt from the tip / of the Dorian spear" (816-17).

Here, the king details a series of coming inversions that make use of the *Persians'* earlier imagery and look forward to the play's ultimate symbolic reversal: the appearance, in the resurrection scene, of Darius in full, splendid regalia, followed by Xerxes returning home in dishonorable tatters. This bloody libation he speaks of, *pelanos*, or "ritual offering," upends the earlier *pelanos* that Atossa gave to the earth spirits after her nightmare and then to Darius to release him from Hades. Similarly, now that the "flower of Persian youth" (*anthos hēbēs*) that the Chorus holds dear has been cut down, and men's thoughts have "grown too tall" (820), a perverted growth follows in their wake: "When insolence blooms, it bears / the fruit of Delusion, from which a harvest / of untold tears is reaped" (821-22: ὕβρις γὰρ ἐξανθοῦσ' ἐκάρπωσεν στάχυν / ἄτης, ὅθεν πάγκλαυτον ἐξαμαῖ θέρος). The treasured ἄνθος has appropriately devolved into a diseased ἐξανθοῦσ'. Lastly, Darius resumes the discussion of the *ploutos* ("wealth") and *olbos* ("wealth; prosperity and happiness") that preoccupy the Persians and which they have hitherto had in great measure: "May no one fall in love with another's wealth (*olbos*) / and think to surpass his present fortune, / and thereby squander his own great riches" (824-26). And to the Chorus themselves, he says: "Heaps of gold (*ploutos*) are worthless to the dead" (842). Armed with the knowledge and perspective he has gained from his time in the underworld, the old king is criticizing the Persian way of life and their focus on wealth. Though he himself sought to obtain it in his own life, he now sees how destructive greed and how ephemeral money ultimately are. These are

not radical insights by any means, but for the *olbos*- and *ploutos*-minded Persians, they are relevant and striking reminders of age-old truth.

The scene ends with a return to the family tragedy. Darius instructs Atossa to “find clothes that befit the occasion,” or, simply, “are fitting” (833: *κόσμον ὅστις εὐπρεπέης*). Fitting for what—for a king? for mourning?—he does not specify. She, in turn—despite the remarks Darius has just given, and the prophecy about Plataea—says that, of all the misfortunes she has heard, the “dishonor” of Xerxes’ tattered robes “bites the hardest” (846-48). In this phrase, she reveals her extraordinary attachment to the symbolism of *kosmos*, “clothes.” With little else to cling to now, she finds refuge in the power and meaning that royal clothes confer; she will not let her son face a shameful homecoming in torn garments. In a tragic irony, however, she will not reach him in time to prevent him from facing the Chorus utterly disgraced, without his robes, his kingly signifiers.

### ***IX. Athens & Susa***

If Thebes is a morally debased “Anti-Athens” and Argos is a “middle ground,” what then can Susa signify in the play that distinguishes it from drama’s other distant, transportive settings?

I want to suggest that Susa, as seen in the *Persians*, is its own kind of Athens. Aeschylus presents both cities as the leading examples of different paradigms of government: democracy and “barbarian/non-Greek” monarchy. Autocratic rule, as he explores, has many ethical drawbacks, including the subjugating power of fear and coercion; its systemic weaknesses can swerve suddenly into ruin. In this epochal conflict, the Greco-Persian Wars, the values of *isēgoria* (“the right for citizens to speak freely”) and *aidōs* (“reverence, piety”) rightly win out over their opposites. Discipline trumps

grandiosity. But Aeschylus confirms that one-man rule, when led by sensible kings like Darius and his predecessors, can also achieve great wealth (*ploutos*) and prosperity (*olbos*) for the nation. In this model, a powerful army is essential to the maintenance of domestic peace. With the *Persians*, Aeschylus celebrates the ascendance of one form of government and the temporary decline of another, but through Darius' extended meditations on power, he equally recognizes how quickly hubris, insolence toward the gods, and the complacency that wealth engenders can radically alter a country's fate. All great powers are susceptible to a deterioration of their values.

And so, despite their differences, Greece and Persia are still "sisters of the same race."

## Appendix I: Literal Translations of the *Persians*

### Atossa's Dream

*Note: In this scene, Atossa alternates freely between the present and past tense, often in the same sentence. The sudden shifts into the present convey a heightened vividness in the Greek. In my polished version, I have only kept this vivid present effect in the climactic three lines of the dream.*

#### **Queen Atossa**

I am constantly joined with many nocturnal dreams  
 ever since my son, after mustering the host,  
 sets out, wishing to raze the Ionians' land.  
 But never yet such a vivid dream did I see  
 as the one from last night. I shall tell it to you.  
 Two well-dressed women came into my sight,  
 that is how it seemed. One was styled

in Persian clothing, the other in Doric dress,  
 both in stature more remarkable by far than women now,  
 and in beauty immaculate; also sisters of the same race.  
 One lived in Greece as her fatherland,  
 receiving the land by lot; the other, non-Greek land.  
 The two began to work some strife in one another,  
 so I seemed to see. Then my son in learning of this  
 restrained and tamed them, and under his chariot  
 yokes them both, and places halters beneath their necks.  
 One exalted in this equipment,  
 and her easily governed mouth held in the bridles,  
 while the other struggled and with her hands  
 tears apart the harness of the chariot  
 and snatches it by force, free of the bridle,  
 and she splits the yoke down the middle.  
 Out falls my son, and his father stands beside him,  
 Darius, pitying him. When he sees his father,  
 Xerxes tears the clothes about his own body.

I say that I truly saw these things in the night.  
 And after I rose and touched my hands  
 in a beautifully flowing stream, with sacrificial hand  
 I drew near the altar, wishing to sacrifice honey-cake  
 to the apotropaic gods, to whom these acts are due.  
 Then I see an eagle fleeing toward the hearth  
 of Phoebus: in fear and speechless I stood, friends!  
 After that, I see a falcon on its course  
 with wings attacking the eagle and tearing  
 the head with its talons. The eagle did nothing  
 but cower and give up its body.

Such things were terrors for me to see,  
 for you to hear. Know this well: if my son  
 succeeds, he would be a marveled man;  
 but if he fares poorly—he's not accountable to the state,  
 because, when brought to safety, he still rules this land.

### The Ghost of Darius

**Chorus**

O beloved man, O beloved tomb:  
 beloved the heart it has covered.  
 Hades Who Raises the Dead,  
 cast him up, Hades,  
 our godlike lord, Darius! *Ēē!*

For he never killed men  
 with war-destructive delusions,  
 and truly a divine counsellor he was called  
 by the Persians, and a divine counsellor  
 he was, when he governed the army well. *Ēē!*

Emperor, ancient emperor,  
 come, come.  
 Come upon the topmost peak of the mound,  
 treading on your foot's purple-dyed slipper,  
 revealing  
 the peak of your regal tiaria.  
 Ascend, father, blameless Darius! *Oi!*  
 So that you may hear miserable  
 and new griefs,  
 King of Kings, reveal yourself!

*Aiai! Aiai!*

O you, much-wept for by your loved ones upon dying,  
 why these—O master, master—  
 extraordinary twofold lamentable mistakes?  
 Every three-benched ship  
 has been destroyed by this earth,  
 ships unshipped, unshipped.

**Ghost of Darius**

O trusted among the trusted and peers from my youth,  
 Elders of Persia, what suffering does the nation suffer?  
 The land groans, beats its breast, and is imprinted.  
 Seeing my wife near my tomb  
 I am frightened, though her libations I graciously received.

And you all are wailing, standing beside my tomb,  
 and by shrieking soul-raising howls  
 piteously you call on me. But escape from Hades  
 is not easy, especially since the gods below earth  
 are better at taking than releasing.  
 Nevertheless, having sway among them, I have come.  
 Now be quick, so that I stay blameless in Time's eyes.  
 What new, heavy affair is there for Persians?

**Chorus**

I fear, on the one hand, to look upon you,  
 and I fear, on the other hand, to speak before you  
 because of my ancient fear of you.

**Darius**

But since I came from below, persuaded by your wailing,  
 no tedious story, but rather speaking concisely  
 say and finish everything, letting go of your reverence for me.

**Chorus**

I flee, on the one hand, from granting the favor,  
 and I flee, on the other hand, from speaking openly,  
 saying things hard to say to friends.

**Darius**

Since your former fear stands against your wits—

*(turns to Atossa)*

O sharer of my marriage bed, aged, noble woman,  
 ceasing these wailings and weepings, tell me something  
 clear It is true: mankind's troubles strike all men.  
 Many woes from the sea, and many woes from land  
 arise for mortals, if their life is stretched out longer.

**Atossa**

O you who held prosperity exceeding all men through your blessed fate,  
 oh, so long as you looked on the rays of the sun, being envied  
 like a god in Persians' eyes, you led a life full in years!

Now I envy you in death—until you see the depth of woes.  
 Darius, you shall hear the story fully in a brief moment.  
 The possessions of the Persians have been utterly ruined. That is it.

**Darius**

In what way? Did some blast of plague come, or civil strife to the state?

**Atossa**

Not at all. Rather, near Athens the whole martial force has been destroyed.

**Darius**

And which of my sons led an army there? Speak.

**Atossa**

Impetuous/warlike Xerxes, after emptying the whole surface of the continent.

**Darius**

On foot or by sea did the wretch embark on this wild venture?

**Atossa**

Both. There was a double front of two armies.

**Darius**

How did so large a host even manage to pass through?

**Atossa**

With devices he yoked the strait of Helle, with the result that he took hold of the passage.

**Darius**

And he achieved this, with the result that he closed up the great Bosphorus?

**Atossa**

Thus it holds. I suspect some divinity had a hand in his judgment.

**Darius**

*Phew*, some great spirit came so that he did not think well.

**Atossa**

Since we can see the results, what evil he achieved.

**Darius**

And the men you mourn for now: how did they fare?

**Atossa**

After the naval force suffered woe, the land force began dying.

**Darius**

So the whole army has perished by the spear?

**Atossa**

In addition, the whole city of Susa laments the desolation.

**Darius**

*O popoi!* The devoted protection and support of the army!

**Atossa**

And the Bactrian people are lost, totally destroyed, nor [is there] any old man [left].

**Darius**

O wretched man, what youth of [our] allies he made perish!

**Atossa**

They say that Xerxes, alone, desolate, but with not many men...

**Darius**

How and where did he reach the end? Is there some salvation?

**Atossa**

...came relieved to the bridge yoked to two lands.

**Darius**

He has been saved [coming] toward this continent, is this true?

**Atossa**

Yes. A clear account governs this, and in it [there lies] no conflict.

**Darius**

*Phou!* The doing of the oracles came swift, and at my son



Zeus hurled down the fulfillment of their prophecies. I thought that after a long period of time the gods would somehow bring them to pass. But when a man urges on himself, the god also joins in. Now it appears a wellspring of woes has been discovered for all my loved ones. My son, not understanding, accomplished these things through young audacity: he who hoped to hold the Hellespont, a holy waterway, with fetters as if it were a slave—the Bosphorus current, sacred to a god; and he changed the shape of the pathway, and having cast hammer-wrought bonds around it, created a great road for his enormous army, but being mortal he thought that, with an unsound plan, that he could rule over Poseidon and all of the gods. How could a disease of the mind not have possessed my son? I fear that my great labor of wealth may become to men the spoils of the first-comer.

### **Atossa**

These things, let me tell you, impulsive Xerxes was taught through being in the company of evil men. They said that you obtained great wealth for your children by the spear, while he, out of unmanliness, merely threw spears at home, and did not increase his forefathers' wealth. After often hearing such reproaches from evil men, he settled on this course of action and expedition against Hellas.

### **Darius**

Therefore, this greatest of deeds has been accomplished by him, forever to be remembered, such as has never yet fallen upon this city of Susa and thoroughly emptied it, ever since Lord Zeus bestowed this honor: one man to be chief over all of sheep-feeding Asia, holding the scepter that rules straight. For a Mede was the first leader of the military; then another child of that stock completed this work. His mind steered his heart. Third from the start was Cyrus, a blessed man, who, in his rule, established peace for all he loved: he came to possess the Lydian and Phrygian peoples and drove all of Ionia through force. For a god did not hate him, since he was born sensible. Then Cyrus' child, fourth in line, directed the military.

Fifth, Mardos ruled, a disgrace to the fatherland  
 and to the ancient throne. Then with cunning  
 Artraphrenes, a brave man, murdered Mardus in the palace,  
 with the help of his friends, who had the duty.  
 Then I, after winning the lot I wished,  
 launched many campaigns with a massive army.  
 But no such evil ever struck the nation.  
 Xerxes, my son, being young, thinks young thoughts  
 and does not remember my commandments.  
 Know this well and clearly, my contemporaries,  
 all of us who once held these powers,  
 we can not be seen as having caused such miseries.

**Chorus**

What then, Lord Darius? Toward where do you finish  
 the end of your words? How might we, the Persian people,  
 in this situation, still do as best we can?

**Darius**

If you should not lead an army to the land of the Greeks,  
 even if the Persian expedition is larger.  
 For the land itself is an ally to those people.

**Chorus**

How do you mean, in what way their ally?

**Darius**

It kills with hunger those who number too many.

**Chorus**

But we will raise a well-equipped, selected force.

**Darius**

But not even the army remaining now in Hellas  
 will win a safe homecoming.

**Chorus**

How do you speak? Isn't the whole army of non-Greeks  
 passing through the strait of Helle, away from Europe?

**Darius**

Few of many, if one ought to trust the prophecies  
 of the gods, by looking at the things that have happened.  
 They all come to pass: not just some, but not others.  
 Even if these things are so, Xerxes leaves behind the greater part  
 of the army's chosen men, having been persuaded by vain hopes.  
 They remain where the Asopus waters the plain with its streams,  
 a beloved fattener to the land of the Boeotians;  
 from this point, they wait to suffer the highest of woes,  
 retribution for their insolence and their arrogance against the gods:  
 they who, upon coming to Greek land, were not ashamed  
 to strip the the statues of the gods and burn temples.  
 Altars are gone from sight, and the shrines of the gods,  
 from their roots, in chaos, have been ripped from their foundations.  
 Therefore, having done evil, they suffer no less evils,  
 and more ills await, and the spring of woes has not yet  
 ceased, but yet continues to flow forth.  
 For there shall be so great an offering born of blood  
 shed from the Dorian spear upon the land of Plataea:  
 and beaches of corpses shall signal for even three generations  
 that one must, being mortal, not think over-highly.  
 For insolence makes bloom and bears the fruit of Delusion,  
 from which it reaps a harvest of tears.  
 After seeing such awful deeds and the penalties for our men,  
 remember Athens and Greece, and may no one,  
 thinking to surpass their present fortune,  
 in love with others' wealth, squander their own great wealth.  
 Zeus, indeed, is the punisher of the proud, and places  
 penalties on arrogant schemes, a heavy corrector.  
 Therefore, since you have been furnished with wisdom,  
 admonish him with sensible warnings  
 to stop offending the gods with his arrogant audacity.  
 And you, O venerable woman, Xerxes' dear mother,  
 after heading into the palace and retrieving clothes  
 which are suitable, go to meet your son.  
 Because of the pain of his woes, the rags  
 of his richly patterned garments are torn to shreds  
 around his whole body. But with good cheer

go soothe him with words: for you alone, I know,  
 he will bear to listen to. Now I am leaving  
 the earth to descend to the darkness below.  
 And you all, O elders, enjoy yourselves, even in woe,  
 giving your soul to pleasure every day,  
 since riches are worthless to the dead.

### **Chorus**

Hearing the many present ills and those yet  
 to come for non-Greeks pains me.

### **Atossa**

O Spirit! How many woeful pains approach me!  
 But this misfortune, most of all, bites:  
 hearing of the indignity of clothes that surrounds  
 my son's body, which covers him.  
 But I am going, and taking clothes from the palace  
 I will try to greet my son face to face.  
 Let us not neglect the dearest things, though among woes.

## Translating the *Persians*

I will only do this exercise once, 1.) so as not to bore you and, 2.) so as to shed light on my decision-making process while translating 400 lines of Greek poetry. These three lines, spoken by Atossa, were the beginning of my voyages in verse.

### Atossa's Dream

The Greek:

πολλοῖς μὲν αἰεὶ νυκτέροις ὀνείρασιν  
 ξύνειμ', ἀφ' οὗπερ παῖς ἐμὸς στείλας στρατὸν

Ἰαόνων γῆν οἴχεται πέρσαι θέλων.

Literal (in sense and syntax):

**Always with many nocturnal dreams  
I am joined, ever since my son, [after] mustering [the] host,  
[for the] land of Ionians sets out, to raze [it] wishing.**

Literal (translationese, but not tortured):

**I am constantly joined with many nocturnal dreams  
ever since my son, after mustering the host,  
sets out, wishing to raze the Ionians' land.**

Attempt No. 1:

**All throughout the night I am steeped in dreams,  
a pool of dreams ever since my son mustered  
his army and set out, his heart longing to raze  
Ionian land.**

Attempt No. 2:

**Night after night I am steeped in dreams.  
It's been this way ever since my son rounded up  
his army and marched out with one wish:**

**RAZE IONIAN LAND.**

Final:

**Night after night I steep in dreams  
ever since my son mustered his army  
and departed with one wish:**

**raze Ionian land.**

Straightaway you can see the concessions, decisions, pointless mutations, expansions, and contractions that occur as I wend my way toward that arbitrary and still-exasperating thing called the “final version.” To be sure, when I present these iterations as distinct “attempts,” I am eliding all of the flotsam that orbited them.

The first thing I discarded in the translation process was any effort to preserve Greek syntax. The verb *ξύνειμ'*, richly delayed until the second line, although possible to recreate, as the first literal version attests, is not at all natural in English—at least not in this century. John Broadus describes Greek as a “participle-loving language,” and loves them here it does. In a brief three lines, there are already two: *στείλας* (“mustered”) and *θέλων* (“wishing”). Note how in the contorted literal rendering I’ve bracketed the phrase, “[after] mustering [the] host.” This is because the Greek aorist participle<sup>23</sup> does not explicitly reveal its meaning; it provides no conjunction or preposition that connects it to the main verb. Its meaning (whether temporal, concessive, causal, etc.) is entirely dependent on context. But English, though it likes participles, does not love them as unconditionally as Greek. So, when confronted with a series of complex participles, it often becomes necessary to reduce them to mere indicative verbs. “Mustering” must become “mustered.”

Attempt No. 1 bears witness to the fact that I wanted the beginning of Atossa’s narration to have a sort of aquatic, misty essence. In no way is this idea represented in the Greek; it was a purely subjective and idiosyncratic feeling I had upon reading the text through several times that I decided to follow. “Joined with” or “present with many nocturnal dreams,” I felt, would not do. They don’t give the reader a tangible image. Thus I introduced water-loaded language: “I am steeped” and a “pool of dreams.” But this was too extreme, an expansion of an idea that didn’t even exist. So, too, in the final

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<sup>23</sup> For the layman: the aorist tense in Greek conveys the simple past (e.g. “I caught a fish”).

phrase: “his heart longing to raze / Ionian land.” Where is Xerxes heart mentioned? Nowhere. This pointless mutation and expansion came from my desire to convey Xerxes’ very real craving to destroy Ionia and thereby best his father, Darius. But his palpitating organ, whether taken figuratively or physically, does not need to enter the picture.

Attempt No. 2 reworks the *αἰεὶ* (“forever, always”) that I first made into, “All throughout the night,” to become “Night after night.” Now I stress the chronic event over the prolonged dreaming of a single night. But I have also done something stupid in this attempt, although I liked it at the time, which is to make Atossa sound more colloquial than she ought to be. I enjoyed the simplicity of her declaring, “Night after night I am steeped in dreams”—period—then quickly and informally saying, as if plagued by her non-stop dreaming, “It’s been this way ever since my son rounded up / his army and marched out with one wish.” Yet I have monkeyed too much with the plain *ἀφ’ οὐπερ* (“ever since; from the time when”). And to match the informal “It’s been this way,” I have turned “mustered” into the low register “rounded up,” which sounds like Xerxes is corralling his horde, and “set out” into the more vivid “marched out.” Good, I thought: the image of a huge army marching across the continent. Ugly, though: these verbs plus prepositions. Fat needing to be cut. (And let’s not talk about that all uppercase “RAZE IONIAN LAND.” I... just wanted to isolate and emphasize the image...)

At last, I cut the distortions and arrive at a fine register. The passive “I am steeped” stands up straight to become “I steep in dreams.” From Attempt No. 2’s topsy-turvy experiment, I have kept one good nugget, “with one wish.” This makes concrete and concise that Greek participle *θέλων* (“wishing”). There are no breaks in rhythm until the final colon, which launches into the still-isolated, “raze Ionian land.” Now we get a sense of Xerxes’ single-minded desire to invade Greece without including anatomy or uppercase tomfoolery. “Departed,” though, makes it sound as if Xerxes has

already died. Did he set out with his army, or did he leave this earth? (Maybe, in spirit, he did both at once.) I wanted to say “marched out” instead of “departed” for the clear image, but “departed” is more appropriately ambiguous. Throughout the play, the verb *oixomai*, used here, creeps slowly into darkness. After the Messenger’s speech, the *oixomenoi*, whom the elders refer to in the parodos as “those who have left” Persia, morph grimly into “the departed ones.”

**raze Ionian land.**

A poor replacement for *persai thelon!*

**But never have I dreamed a dream  
as vivid as the one I dreamed last night.**

We’re falling under Atossa’s spell. I have stretched the meaning of πολλοῖς μὲν αἰεὶ νυκτέροις *ὄνειρασιν* by turning the literal “many nocturnal dreams” into Atossa repeating the word “dream.” An attempt to create an incantatory feeling. Let’s hope this attempted magic isn’t overshadowed by people’s associations with the song, “I Dreamed a Dream...”

Literal:

**I drew near the altar, wishing to sacrifice honey-cake  
to the apotropaic gods, to whom these acts are due.**

Final:

**eager to offer the gods who drive away evil  
evil a slab of honey-cake, the mystery  
they require.**

“To whom these acts are due,” in the literal version, first became “rites.” Dissatisfied, I thought of the word “sacrament,” which Google’s useful etymology tool showed me was similar to the



Greek-derived word “mystery.” Ah-ha: a word fit to describe the thoroughly mysterious act of pleasing the chthonic spirits.

**Just then I saw an eagle  
fleeing for the hearth of Phoebus.  
Friends, I stood there—speechless in fear!**

These lines contain my favorite alliteration in all of the passages I’ve translated, the incomparable string of *phis*, which I have tried to recreate with “f” sounds.

ὄρω δὲ φεύγοντ’ αἰετὸν πρὸς ἐσχάραν  
Φοίβου: φόβῳ δ’ ἄφθογγοσ ἐστάθην, φίλοι.

**But if he fails—no, he cannot be reined in!  
He reigns over this land for life!**

I still don’t know if this wordplay was the best idea, or if it enters the realm of translation heresy, but when I first thought of it, it was impossible not to include. They say, “Kill your darlings,” and this pun was indeed a darling. “Reined in” echoes the reins forced on the women earlier in the passage, a symbolic interconnectedness which I could easily imagine Aeschylus creating.

### The Ghost of Darius

**Note:** When it comes to choral odes, both for the *Persians* and the *Suppliants*, I have indented and enjambed intuitively. The lines cascade according to their own logic. Besides the required breaks between strophes and antistrophes, I indent or slide across the page to convey distinct shifts in thought.

Lines sometimes become shorter to isolate phrases and images, or run longer for rhythm. Doing these odes true justice is beyond my grasp.

cast him up to us,  
Hades—our godlike master, Darius!

*Kaka!*

&

*Father*  
*Untouched by Evils,*  
*Darius!*

*Anax!*

Greek sounds of lamentation and exclamation are notoriously hard to render into English. Older translations used to anglicize (or “domesticate”) them as “Woe!” or “Alas,” but there has been a shift in the past several decades to keep them untranslated in order to give the reader a sense of their strangeness, their *je ne sais quoi*. Though a fan of this new school, here, in the Chorus’ invocation, I have opted to replace the hard-to-pronounce “Ēē!” with the exclamation “Kaka,” and “Oi!” with “Anax!” I believe both substitutions retain roughly the essence of the originals and fit within the context of the scene. The second half of the *Persians* is defined by mourning and innumerable uses of *kaka* (“woes, evils”), so it is therefore appropriate to let the English reader hear this oft-repeated and evocative word. *Anax*, too, means “lord” or “master,” which Darius is to the elders. They even use the word in their address, just not as an exclamation. “Oi” sounds too much like “Oi vey,” or like the British version of “Hey!”

τί ἐστι Πέρσαις νεοχμὸν ἐμβριθὲς κακόν;

Literal:

**What new, heavy affair is there for [the] Persians?**

Final:

**What grave affair now grips us Persians?**

I have selected this line as an example of the almost imperceptibly small, but consequential, interpretive decisions I have made along the way. When Darius asks the Chorus this question, he does not include the word “us.” In my reading of the text, however, I think that Darius, as a resurrected king, still feels very much invested in the fate of his people and empire. For this scene, he resumes his role as a benevolent, all-knowing monarch dispensing wisdom to Atossa and the elders. By saying “us Persians,” he is expressing a shared closeness between him and his subjects that has not faded with his death.

Literal:

**ever since Lord Zeus granted this honor:  
one man to be chief of all of sheep-feeding Asia,  
holding the scepter that rules straight.**

Final:

**since Lord Zeus first granted us this honor:**

***Let one man be the chief of all of Asia,  
the land that fattens sheep. Let him hold  
the scepter that keeps the kingdom straight.***

I wanted these lines to have an elevated, pseudo-Biblical resonance. In this moment, Darius is describing the very origin of the empire’s power and how Zeus ordained that the Persians should rule

over the rest of the continent. I have thus made Darius repeat what are essentially Zeus' "commandments" to the Persians. The final participial clause, "holding the scepter that rules straight," was also, as many Greek participles are, in need of its own sentence.

## Chapter Two

# *The Suppliants*

### ***I. Male Kratos and Biâ***

In Ancient Greek, the word *biâ* means “force,” the physical subjugation of one person or party by another. It says, *I can inflict on you whatever I want*. Or, in Thucydides’ harsh formulation: “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (5.89). In the beginning of *Prometheus Bound*, we see the personifications of *kratos* (“power” as a complement to force: the condition of having hierarchical or figurative control over a group of people) and *biâ* drag Prometheus to his crag in Scythia. There they loom, a supremely imposing duo. Kratos issues all the commands, urging Hephaestus to bolt Prometheus to the rock; he insults and swaggers. Biâ, on the other hand, is a *muta persona*. He stands on stage in silence beside his partner in crime and symbol, waiting to unleash violence. His silence lends him a menace speech would make too explicit. Naturally, both are agents of Zeus, whose absolute *kratos* compels all the Olympians to obey him, and whose *biâ* is capable of seizing any mortal woman he chooses—or, as the case of Deucalion shows, of almost exterminating humanity through a wrathful flood.

Outside of the world of personifications, however, it was men who held most of the *kratos*, and seemingly all of the *biâ*, in Ancient Greece.<sup>24</sup> One need only look back at those most silenced of

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<sup>24</sup> At least in the Ancient Greece that has been historically documented, rather than prehistorical Greece. As Zeitlin details in “The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*,” there are significant remnants in the Greek mythical imagination of a possible “matriarchy”

silent figures in Greek literature, the *Iliad's* Chryseis and Briseis, the war prizes of Agamemnon and Achilles, to understand how total men's control over the female body and voice was in Dark Age Greece. Even in the 5th century, during the height of enlightened democratic progress, women had no political *kratos*; they could not vote or serve in the *boulē* or law courts. There were, however, ample social norms stringently enforced that protected women from the threat of *biā*. As Johansen and Whittle note, "girls' control and marriage by their male next of kin," whether father, brother, or uncle, were prescribed in both Athenian and Egyptian law (Turner 34). Consider, too, the oppressive measures *poleis* took to keep women cloistered in their houses, largely restricted to the *gynaikonitis*,<sup>25</sup> which prevented them from interacting much with men outside of the family.

In nearly all of his work, Aeschylus sought to bring this long-standing inequality to the stage, exploiting its dramatic force and enlarging its symbolic potential.

The Danaid trilogy of the 460s, of which the *Suppliants* is usually believed to be the first installment and whose latter two plays are lost, takes the myth of the Danaids as its subject. The Danaids are a group of fifty unmarried virgin sisters who are fleeing their fifty predatory cousins, the Aegyptids, who want to marry them—a union which would result in incest. Led by their father, Danaus, these desperate virgins come to Argos as suppliants, hoping that the city will accept their appeal and keep them from harm. They have chosen Argos for asylum because of its status as the home of Io, the girl transformed into a heifer, from whom the sisters claim ancient descent. Jealous of her relations with Zeus, Hera punished Io with a gadfly that drove her on a crazed trek to the outer limits of the world, through Asia, and eventually to Egypt. There, she was impregnated by Zeus through

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when women ruled over men but, through their abuse of power, had to be forcefully subdued. The dispute between Athena and Poseidon over who would rule Athens (before it was called such) tells of a time when women could vote (115).

<sup>25</sup> An architectural space within the *oikos*: the "women's quarters of the house."

breath and touch and gave birth to a son, Epaphus (“Touch”). Thirteen generations later Epaphus’ race produced two lines in conflict with each other: Danaus’ daughters and Aegyptus’ sons. This tale of sexual violence shares complex parallels with Io and Zeus’ relationship from the deeper mythical past.

In one sense, the *Suppliants* is a bold work with unmistakable touches of feminist sympathies: it enacts a dramatic flight from force and confronts violence’s very real, dangerous, and seemingly immutable place in the female experience. It depicts masculine *biā* as morally egregious—the mark of a lower class of men, especially *barbaroi* men, an association which the Danaids fervently project onto their cousins. The play recognizes men in general as being lustful and inherently savage. In “The Politics of Eros in the Danaid Trilogy of Aeschylus,” Zeitlin argues that Danaus’ final speech to his daughters, in which he tells them to guard their chastity against Argive men after they are accepted into the city as suppliants, comments explicitly on this facet of masculinity: “These Greeks are just like all men. The force of desire is universal; the Greeks are no more exempt from lust than the barbarians, but they are expected to regulate erotic desire through courtship, using the weapons of charm and persuasion” (140). Thus Aeschylus’ critique is not just narrowly concerned with aberrant violence among one particular group of men, but with a feature of masculinity that transcends nationalities and cultures, and which ethical norms and systems have to tame and rechannel.

On the other hand, the drama, contextualized within the trilogy as a whole—whose arc scholars have largely reconstructed—still upholds the norms and institutions that affirm patriarchy and restrict female agency. In the second play, the Danaids “surrender” to their cousins. Forty-nine of the fifty sisters then kill their husbands on their wedding night, but one, Hypermnestra, refrains from murdering her betrothed, Lynceus. In the third play, a trial is staged to stabilize the social and political

upheaval of the first two plays: at its conclusion, Aphrodite delivers an “encomium of marriage” that places marriage, and women’s willing subordination to men, at the heart of civilized life (Turner 32). But whatever the trilogy’s resolution, it is clear that the *Suppliants* imagines an alternative state where women can escape male domination.

The language of the Danaids displays remarkable verbal skill, which helps them shape their own destiny and self-identity. Of particular note is the way in which they use language to weaponize their subjugated position and subvert men’s monopoly on *biâ*. Aeschylus’ portrayal of the Danaid myth is no simple story about the injustice women suffer or the naked wrongdoing of men; though much of the conflict seems to occur between archetypal forces, it is no cartoon of good and evil. Rather, he gives expression to both women’s ever-present fear of violence and men’s anxieties about women disrupting social norms between the sexes.

## ***II. The Extent of the Danaids’ Agency***

On the play’s surface, the Danaid sisters appear to be at the complete mercy of men, constituting an almost hyperbolic example of oppression. Their disadvantages are numerous: they are female refugees, hailing from a foreign, “sun-black tribe,”<sup>26</sup> who must confront an alien Greek culture and, ideally, assimilate into it. They are stateless and husbandless, with only their father to protect them; they are young and attractive, “ripe fruit” that even Argive men (imagined to be more civilized than the barbarian Aegyptids) “will covet and plunder;” and they are utterly without *biâ* to protect their bodies (151, 1017-18). Most of all, they face imminent capture by their cousins, a mob that

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<sup>26</sup> I quote from Peter Burian’s translation except for the passages I have tackled myself.



embodies the threat of sexual violence. One could hardly imagine a more total alienation created by the confluence of race, gender, culture, political status, and physical circumstance than the one that the Danaids face.

In contrast to the *Iliad's* comparisons<sup>27</sup> of men to either predatory or cowardly animals, such as lions or deer, that reveal a man's mettle as a warrior, the Chorus sees the Aegyptids as "mad dogs" that "howl / lecherous at my heels" (890-91). Stripped of the context of battle and viewed through a female perspective, the common comparison of men to beasts now thrums with a new element of sexual predation. Meanwhile, the martial connotations still remain. The great scale of the present conflict, of fifty young men chasing fifty young women, imagines an extreme binary in which the feelings of individual members—rapaciousness, desperation—are amplified by the sheer size of each group. Moving from Egypt to Argos, the conflict also takes on the geographical sweep of a military campaign. Portrayed less as people than a gang, a foreign horde lumped together as a single "raging, lustful beast," the Aegyptids are brute force (*biâ*) personified (759). Like the mute figure of Biâ in *Prometheus Bound*, they exist in the Danaids' minds, ever present, yet invisible. They do not appear in the play (only their Herald and attendants make it ashore), but their imminent arrival and the threat of mass violence could not be more palpable.

There are also the heavy presences of their father Danaus, who leads the girls to Argos, and of the Argive king, Pelasgus, to whom they must make a successful appeal. In the world of male archetypes, Danaus is imagined to be their protector, while Pelasgus is framed as their paternalistic savior. As Zeitlin puts it, "Danaus makes the major decisions [for his daughters]; when it comes to choose their lodging place in the city, they defer without question to his judgment [967-71]. There is

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<sup>27</sup> Homer's language and influence pervade Aeschylus' works; to speak of his relationship to the *Iliad* is only natural.

no dialogue between father and daughters, only paternal instruction and filial acquiescence” (144). Elsewhere, Zeitlin describes the relationship as “Danaus’ domination of his daughters” (146). And with good reason: in the parodos they invoke him as “the leader of our rebellion” (Burian 11-12), and throughout the play Danaus issues various directives to the Danaids, the last being the most the most forceful: “Honor modesty more than life itself!” (1030). Before they are to speak to Pelasgus, he first tells them:

“Strike all boldness  
from your words, and all immodesty  
from your eyes; look downcast and gentle. Speak only  
when spoken to, but then don’t be slow in reply.  
People here will be ready to take offence.  
You are refugees and in need: remember  
to be submissive. Proud speech is not for the weak” (194-200).

In most cases throughout the play, it holds true the Danaids do not question or rebel against the advice of their father to his face; they appear quite ready to obey him as a source of both wisdom and strength who can lend their claim to Pelasgus a necessary measure of male *kratos*.

And yet this picture of “domination,” the idea that “Danaus makes the major decisions,” is somewhat misleading. The fact is that he does not make their case to Pelasgus for them; they must do it themselves. In the play’s most crucial scene, while they are trying to persuade Pelasgus to accept their suppliant cause, they completely violate Danaus’ injunction to “strike all boldness / from your words” and “to be submissive.” Here, they command the exchange in full, far exceeding the discursive and behavioral limits their father places on them from the start.

### *III. The Act of Supplication*

The Danaids begin their attempted persuasion by following Danaus' commands, calmly explaining to Pelasgus their claim to Argive ancestry via Io (265-310) and subsequently describing their revulsion at being seized and married off to the Aegyptids. They make generic calls upon Pelasgus to respect Zeus Aphiktor ("Defender of Suppliants") and Themis, "suppliant goddess" (344).

But there is some question as to whether their adoption of the suppliant role is a valid one. Though they cling to the "suppliant's righteous claim" (348) and hope to win asylum based on the religious and social convention that a city *must* accept a suppliant or risk incurring *agos* ("defilement, pollution"), they may also be abusing a position of power that is, paradoxically, rooted in an oppressed status.

In "Perverted Supplication and Other Inversions in Aeschylus' Danaid Trilogy," Chad Turner notes that "The Danaids' claim of victimization axiomatically depends upon the justness of their suppliant cause. The suppliant may be in the right by virtue of striving toward a socially accepted goal (e.g., burial of the dead, as in Eur. *Supp.*, or ritual purification, as in Aesch. *Eum.*) or, more vaguely, by simply suffering hardship from a position of weakness... The Danaids fail to meet either of these criteria" (28). Instead, Turner suggests, their main claim rests on a rejection of marriage to their cousins that borders on an "absolute aversion against marriage"—a "militant virginity"<sup>28</sup> which, if anything, goes against Greek values. This is to say nothing of their claim's tenuous connection to Io.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Zeitlin, 128.

<sup>29</sup> It is common for states such as Athens and Rome to ground their contemporary power and values in the legendary past, as shown works like the *Oresteia*, the *Aeneid*, and the *Metamorphoses*, but what individual mythological figure, besides the Danaids, tries to mine their very distant ancestry for legitimacy? Theirs seems like a flimsy claim.

Pelagus, in response, is not immediately convinced by their plea, seeing as it lacks the typical “righteous” criteria; shrewdly, he recognizes the war with the Aegyptids that the Danaids would bring into his city as a graver threat. The two parties appear to be reaching a stalemate.

Suddenly, it becomes clear to the Danaids that their father’s original advice, to “be submissive” and to emphasize their helplessness, is not working. Now they must invent their own solutions and employ a new kind of rhetoric.

### Lines 365-401

#### **Βασιλεύς**

οὔτοι κάθησθε δωμάτων ἐφέστιοι 365  
 ἐμῶν. τὸ κοινὸν δ’ εἰ μιαίνεται πόλις,  
 ξυνη μελέσθω λαὸς ἐκπονεῖν ἄκη.  
 ἐγὼ δ’ ἂν οὐ κραίνοιμ’ ὑπόσχεσιν πάρος,  
 ἄστοις δὲ πᾶσι τῶνδε κοινώσας πέρι.

#### **Χορός**

σύ τοι πόλις, σὺ δὲ τὸ δάμιον. 370  
 πρύτανις ἄκριτος ὦν,  
 κρατύνεις βωμόν, ἐστίαν χθονός,  
 μονοψήφοισι νεύμασιν σέθεν,  
 μονοσκήπτροισι δ’ ἐν θρόνοις χρέος  
 πᾶν ἐπικραίνεις: ἄγος φυλάσσου. 375

#### **Βασιλεύς**

ἄγος μὲν εἶη τοῖς ἐμοῖς παλιγκότοις,  
 ὑμῖν δ’ ἀρήγειν οὐκ ἔχω βλάβης ἄτερ.  
 οὐδ’ αὖ τὸδ’ εὐφρον, τάσδ’ ἀτιμάσαι λιτάς.  
 ἀμηχανῶ δὲ καὶ φόβος μ’ ἔχει φρένας  
 δρᾶσαί τε μὴ δρᾶσαί τε καὶ τύχην ἐλεῖν. 380

#### **Χορός**

τὸν ὑψόθεν σκοπὸν ἐπισκόπει,

φύλακα πολυπόνων  
 βροτῶν, οἱ τοῖς πέλας προσήμενοι  
 δίκας οὐ τυγχάνουσιν ἐννόμου.  
 μένει τοι Ζηνὸς ἱκταίου κότος 385  
 δυσπαραθέλκτους παθόντος οἴκτοις.

### Βασιλεύς

εἴ τοι κρατούσι παῖδες Αἰγύπτου σέθεν  
 νόμῳ πόλεως, φάσκοντες ἐγγύτατα γένους  
 εἶναι, τίς ἂν τοῖσδ' ἀντιωθῆναι θέλοι;  
 δεῖ τοί σε φεύγειν κατὰ νόμους τοὺς οἴκοθεν, 390  
 ὡς οὐκ ἔχουσιν κύρος οὐδὲν ἀμφὶ σοῦ.

### Χορός

μή τί ποτ' οὖν γενοίμαν ὑποχείριος  
 κράτεσιν ἀρσένων. ὕπαστρον δέ τοι  
 μῆχαρ ὀρίζομαι γάμου δύσφρονος  
 φυγάν: ζύμμαχον δ' ἐλόμενος δίκαν 395  
 κρίνε σέβας τὸ πρὸς θεῶν.

### Βασιλεύς

οὐκ εὐκριτον τὸ κρίμα. μή μ' αἰροῦ κριτήν.  
 εἶπον δὲ καὶ πρὶν, οὐκ ἄνευ δήμου τάδε  
 πράξαιμ' ἂν, οὐδέ περ κρατῶν, μὴ καὶ ποτε  
 εἴπη λεώς, εἴ πού τι μὴ τοῖον τύχοι, 400  
 'ἐπήλυδας τιμῶν ἀπώλεσας πόλιν.'



### Pelasgus

You aren't sitting by the fire in my home.  
 A city is a community: if it is stained,  
 then the people must work as one to find a cure.  
 I won't make any promise until I've conferred  
 with all my townsmen and made your struggle  
 public knowledge.

### Chorus

You are the city!

You are the people!  
     You are a sovereign  
 who stands outside of judgment;  
     you rule this altar,  
         the hearth of your land;  
 your nod alone decides how the city  
     will act; and you alone  
         hold the scepter  
 and the throne, where every problem  
     falls to *you*.  
         Beware defilement!

### **Pelasgus**

Defilement be with my enemies!  
 But how can I help you while avoiding harm?  
 No sensible man would ignore your prayers.  
 I have no way forward! Fear paralyzes me.  
 Do I act? Or do I do nothing  
 and let Chance shoot the arrow for me?

### **Chorus**

Turn your eyes toward Him  
     whose eyes watch us from the highest  
         peak, the guardian of humans  
 who endure pain, the ones who crouch  
     desperately before their neighbors  
         but don't secure the justice  
 they deserve. The wrath of Zeus  
     Defender of Suppliants cannot  
         be moved by the tears  
             of the man it strikes.

### **Pelasgus**

You say Aegyptus' sons are your masters  
 based on the laws of your foreign land;  
 they assert they are your closest of kin.  
 Who am I to oppose their authority?  
 You must break free of these men  
 by twisting those same laws

so that you can't be bound to them.

**Chorus**

May I never fall under the hands  
of men, the hands  
of male power!  
I will follow the stars to find a means  
to flee this unthinkable marriage.  
Make Justice your ally,  
choose reverence for the gods.

**Pelasgus**

This judgment isn't easy to make.  
Don't make me the judge. As I said before,  
I will not act on any measure  
without the people. I will not govern.  
Someday, if disaster should befall us, the people  
would say of me: "He valued the lives of foreigners  
but destroyed the lives of Argives."



J. Gould says that in a normal act of supplication, "The first and most obvious thing to note about the behaviour of the suppliant is that he goes through a series of gestures and procedures that together constitute total self-abasement" (Turner 34). Turner summarizes Gould further: "The suppliant...assumes the position of a slave in relation to the supplicated" (34). The female suppliant, it goes without saying, must doubly abase herself. Here, though, the Danaids have not just strayed from their father's orders, but completely defied the norms that govern the act of supplication.

Pelasgus begins this stage of the dialogue by renouncing his *kratos* as monarch (365-69). Nominally, he still has the same despotic power over Argos that Xerxes in the *Persians* enjoys over Persia. But instead he removes himself from the equation, referring to his *polis* as *to koinon*, a

“common entity” or a “community,” which, if faced with a religious “stain” or “infection” of the kind that rejecting suppliants would cause, must find a cure “as one.” Sharing and transparency are his cardinal governing principles, which demand that the Danaids’ struggle be made “public knowledge” to “all my townsmen.” He will not discuss the matter secretly with his court members, or risk being swayed by the “evil advisors” who influenced Xerxes. In this sense, Pelasgus comports himself less like a Bronze Age king vested with absolute *kratos* and more like a constitutional monarch who feels bound by established norms to heed the will of the people.

This strange phenomenon can partly be explained as a conflict between artistry and ideology. Aeschylus naturally desires to render his mythic material as dramatically persuasive as possible, but also, in the way that the *Persians* and the *Oresteia* are both distinctly pro-Athenian documents, to have his play reflect the values of early 5th century Athens. Thus he depicts Argos under Pelasgus as blurring mythic and contemporary elements: as a Bronze Age proto-democratic *polis*—the seeds of a later system of government and ethics. In introducing himself, Pelasgus tells the Danaids that he rules over land stretching all the way from Argos to Dodona to Thrace, therefore encompassing much of what is considered the Greek world (242-62). The Argos of the *Suppliants*, then, is an enlightened city and larger pan-Hellenic domain that exists somewhere between autocracy and the development of democracy. It is Greece—at least the Greece that Aeschylus wants to project onto the past<sup>30</sup>—in miniature.

The Danaids, however, are not so keen on Pelasgus’ allegiance to community and consensus. Coming as they do from Egypt, which lacks the practices of common assembly and voting, they do not fully grasp democracy, an institution that they are likely encountering for the first time. Cultural

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<sup>30</sup> One that ignores the reality that oligarchy—not democracy—dominated the Hellenic world of the 5th century.



misunderstanding unfolds. Because of the imminent danger they face, they also cannot wait for a definitive answer from the king's consultation with his people; they need to know if they will be accepted into the city *now*. In response, the sisters try to thrust upon Pelasgus the absolute *kratos* that they expect from a monarch, but which he renounces:

You are the city!  
 You are the people!  
 You are a sovereign  
 who stands outside of judgment;  
 you rule this altar,  
 the hearth of your land;  
 your nod alone votes how the city  
 should act; and you alone  
 hold the scepter  
 and the throne, where every problem  
 falls to *you*.  
 Beware defilement!

This is the moment where the Danaids permanently shift from the position of “normal” suppliants into an authoritative, even “menacing group” of women (Turner 39). With great force, they begin every line in the Greek with an appeal to the king's power: *σύ, πρύτανις, κρατύνεις, μονοψήφοισι, μονοσκήπτροισι, πᾶν ἐπικραίνεις*. In the first line, they remove the verb “to be” and so collapse the distance between ruler and any semblance of a civic realm. In effect, they say, “You city! and you the people!” (370: *σύ τοι πόλις, σὺ δὲ τὸ δάμιον*). Unable to achieve this effect syntactically in English, I have opted for an insistent, anaphoric use of “you” and “your” to convey how the Danaids put the onus squarely on Pelasgus to decide their fate. Through these forceful declarations, they rebuke him for being a weak and timid leader. Lastly, they issue a shocking imperative to the Argive king to “Beware defilement!,” a not-so-veiled threat that darkly hints at how the argument will proceed.

The rest of the exchange sees Pelasgus firmly on the defensive, a self-proclaimed “righteous man” caught between the polarities of safety and harm, honor and dishonor, action and inaction, and judgment and non-judgment, while the Danaids try out new, more emotional, tactics of persuasion (325). He is, as he says, “at a loss” or “without resources,” (379: ἀμηχανῶ, *amekhanēin*), unsure of how to do what is just for both Argos and the refugees.<sup>31</sup> He has reached a state of impasse, gripped by fear, wondering aloud, “Do I act? / Or do I do nothing and let Chance / shoot the arrow for me?” Transitioning from their appeal to despotism, the sisters summon Zeus Hikesios (“Suppliant Zeus”) as their protector, whose wrath will engulf whoever crosses him (380-85). They have effectively pinned Pelasgus between two terrible options: *agos* (“defilement”) and *kotos* (divine “wrath”). In this way, the aggressive stance that the virgins have taken has reduced the king himself to precisely the passive and obedient position that Danaus had recommended to his daughters.

The king then returns to the central, tacit ambiguity that has been at the heart of their entire interaction: the question of whether the Danaids have a legitimate claim to being suppliants. As I have mentioned, both Athenian and Egyptian law grants the male next-of-kin total authority over their female family members. Since the Aegyptids claim to be the Danaids’ “closest of kin” (φάσκοντες ἐγγύτατα γένους / εἶναι), Pelasgus does not readily see a moral or legal problem in the sisters’ plight. The Aegyptids’ legally prescribed control over the women is consonant with the king’s own understanding of male-female relations, and he does not see how anyone “could oppose their authority.”

Next, the Danaids resort to what might be called one of the play’s most openly “feminist” sentiments, but which Turner interprets as “strident histrionics” (33). They exclaim, “May I never fall under the hands / of men, the hands / of male power!” (392-93: μή τί ποτ’ οὖν γενοίμαν ὑποχείριος /

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<sup>31</sup> The Danaids will soon seize on this word, *mekhanē* (“device, contrivance”), when they propose their plan hang themselves by their sashes and belts.

κράτεσιν ἀρσένων.) Clearly, the Danaids are trying to deflect Pelasgus' inquiry into their legal merits, but they are also decrying the inescapable presence of male *kratos* and *biā* (as expressed through their fear of the power, *kratesin*, of men's hands). Instead of using the typical term for men, *andres*, they employ the rarer, more technical word *arsenes*, meaning "males, the masculine sex," thus broadening their antipathy toward men to include not just the Aegyptids, but all men. Perhaps this moment is tinged with an element of "strident histrionics," but it is also a perfectly logical response from characters—emotionally on the edge—to the oppressive cohort of men that surrounds them: Danaus, Pelasgus, and the Aegyptids. Lines 396-400 end in deadlock, with the Danaids advising Pelasgus to make Justice his ally and to "choose reverence for the gods," while the king disavows his own power and responsibility in this dire situation.

It is noteworthy how rhetorically skilled and resourceful the Danaids are in this scene. Throughout, they seize on Pelasgus' words, dissect them, place them in new contexts, and force him to adopt their language. They take his invocation of the communal *polis*, and call *him* the *polis*; after he declares that the city must ἐκπονεῖν ("labor") as one to find a cure, they remind him of πολυπόνων βροτῶν ("much-laboring mortals), i.e. suppliants; after their warning to "Beware defilement!," he defensively retorts, "Defilement be with my enemies!"; when he refers to his enemies as *palingkotois* (ἐμοῖς παλιγκότοις), "those whose anger [swells] again and again," they call upon Suppliant Zeus' *kotos*, "wrath/anger," that will smite him; they reframe his indecisive τύχην ἐλεῖν ("to let chance take its course") as οἱ τοῖς πέλας προσήμενοι / δίκας οὐ τυγχάνουσιν ἐννόμου ("but don't receive the justice they deserve); instead of letting him "take a chance," they command that he ξύμμαχον δ' ἐλόμενος δίκαν ("take justice as your ally"); they turn his references to *phrēn* ("state of mind, thoughts, senses") in εὔφρον and φόβος μ' ἔχει φρένας into their γάμου δύσφρονος ("unthinkable/appalling marriage"); and,

lastly, after calling Pelasgus ἄκριτος (“subject to no judgment”) and telling him to κρῖνε σέβας (“choose reverence”), he says in exasperation, οὐκ εὔκριτον τὸ κρίμα. μὴ μ’ αἰροῦ κριτήν (“This judgment isn’t easy to judge. Don’t choose me as judge”). He literally begins to sputter, to anxiously repeat himself. At every turn, they pressure him.

This tense interplay and stalemate reaches a crescendo when the Danaids, unable to persuade Pelasgus through a “self-abased” posture, through appeals to Zeus Lord of Suppliants, or through a subversion of the suppliant-supplanted dynamic, resort to their final and most radical, as they claim, “righteous plea”: threatening mass suicide (449). Fulfilling an earlier, seemingly only figurative, promise of violence when they describe their olive branches as “suppliants’ weapons,” they now threaten to use their belts and sashes—“things suited to women,” Pelasgus says dismissively, not knowing the twist to come—as a “fine device [*mekhanē*]” to hang themselves in the altar of the gods (17-18, 452-3). In so doing, they weaponize their womanhood, transforming their female clothes and bodies into a kind of counter-violence—*biā* born not from physical strength, but from *mekhanē*. Pelasgus’ heart sinks; he recognizes that this act would create “defilement that cannot be overtopped” and unleash unimaginable divine wrath onto the city of Argos (467). Finally, driven to the brink, the king relents, allowing the Danaids’ struggle to go up for a vote in the common assembly. It is impossible, then, to say that Danaus has “domination [over] his daughters,” when their dialogue with Pelasgus shows them in such bold command of the situation. When his code of conduct no longer proved effective, they began to freely improvise and assert their own agency to shape their fate. Their sudden devising of the *mekhanē* is a masterstroke.

#### ***IV. Embodying Io, Invoking Zeus***

Throughout the *Suppliants*, the Danaids rely extensively on the figures of Io and Zeus for emotional and symbolic support in their struggle. Lacking any comfort in the world besides the presence of their father, they naturally look for other ways to orient themselves in a menacing environment. Although their connection to Io may not be genealogically “recent,” it is deeply important to them, not just because the story’s fame makes their suppliant request touch Argive sympathies, but because it helps them to make sense of their current reality.

The Danaids stand at a complicated crossroads of history and the present. As descendants of Epaphos, they are distantly related to both Io and Zeus, Epaphus’ parents. In their present role as suppliants, they must pray to their defender, Suppliant Zeus, for aid. But it is in Io that the sisters truly see their world reflected. She is the only the female figure available to them besides the goddess Artemis, protector of unmarried women, and Mother Earth, both of whom they invoke in desperate choral odes. She, too, is a victimized woman, and her journey from Argos to Egypt is, like their own exodus from Egypt, a narrative of displacement and wandering. By returning to Argos, the city of their ancestor, the Danaids can envision themselves as finishing the last leg of her ancient, unfulfilled *nostos*—“homecoming”—a *nostos* unique in that it follows a female protagonist rather than a man returning home from war, or returning from exile to assume the throne.

Their allegiance to these two figures, however, creates an extraordinary conundrum. For Zeus’ history with Io stands as a stark example of the sexual violence from which the Danaids are currently trying to flee; there is no worse offender on this charge in the entire pantheon. Above all his male cohorts, he stands as the unofficial god of rape, the perfect fusion of *boulē* (“will”), *kratos*, and *biā*.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Unlike Apollo, whose desires are sometimes thwarted (e.g. his pursuit of Daphne), Zeus *always* gets what he wants.

Nevertheless, the girls must propitiate him and find a way to reconcile his status as a violent defiler of female bodies and as their defender against men who seek to violate them.

While alone and in the limbo state of not knowing whether the Argives will vote to accept them into their city, the Danaids deliver the following prayer to Zeus:

**Lines 523-45, 575-99**

**Χορός**

ἀναξ ἀνάκτων, μακάρων μακάρτατε καὶ τελέων τελειότατον κράτος, ὄλβιε Ζεῦ, πιθοῦ τε καὶ γενέσθω. ἄλευσον ἀνδρῶν ὕβριν εὖ στυγῆσας· λίμνα δ' ἔμβαλε πορφυροειδεῖ τὰν μελανόζυγ' ἄταν.	525
 τὸ πρὸς γυναικῶν <δ'> ἐπιδῶν παλαίφατον ἀμέτερον γένος φιλίας προγόνου γυναικὸς νέωσον εὐφρον' αἴνον· γενοῦ πολυμνήστῳ, ἔφαπτορ Ἴοῦς. Δίαι τοι γένος εὐχόμεθ' εἶναι γὰς ἀπὸ τᾶσδ' ἔνοικοι.	530     535
 παλαιὸν δ' εἰς ἴχνος μετέσταν, ματέρος ἀνθονόμους ἐπωπάς, λειμῶνα βούχιλον, ἔνθεν Ἴω οἴστρω ἐρεσσομένα φεύγει ἀμαρτίνοος, πολλὰ βροτῶν διαμειβομένα φῦλα, διχῆ δ' ἀντίπορον	   540

γαῖαν ἐν αἴσα διατέμοντα πόρον  
κυματίαν ὀρίζει· 545

*{They recount Io's journey.}*

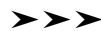
βία δ' ἀπημάντω σθένει 575  
καὶ θεΐαις ἐπιπνοΐαις  
παύεται, δακρύων δ' ἀπο-  
στάζει πένθιμον αἰδῶ.

λαβοῦσα δ' ἔρμα Δῖον ἀψευδεῖ λόγῳ  
γείνατο παιδ' ἄμεμψή, 580  
δι' αἰῶνος μακροῦ πάνολβον·  
ἔνθεν πᾶσα βοᾶ χθῶν,

ἔφουζίζου γένος τόδε  
Ζηγός ἐστιν ἀληθῶς·  
τίς γὰρ ἂν κατέπαυσεν Ἥ- 585  
ρας νόσους ἐπιβούλους;  
Διὸς τόδ' ἔργον· καὶ τόδ' ἂν γένος λέγων  
ἔξ' Ἐπάφου κυρήσαις.

τίν' ἂν θεῶν ἐνδικωτέροισιν  
κεκλοιμαν εὐλόγως ἐπ' ἔργοις; 590  
≤αὐτὸς ὁ≥ πατήρ φυτουργὸς αὐτόχειρ ἄναξ,  
γένους παλαιόφρων μέγας  
τέκτων, τὸ πᾶν  
μῆχαρ οὖριος Ζεύς.

ὑπ' ἀρχᾶς δ' οὐτινος θοάζων  
‡ τὸ μείον κρείσσον ὦν κρατύνει, 595  
οὐτινος ἄνωθεν ἡμένου σέβων κράτος.  
πάρεστι δ' ἔργον ὡς ἔπος  
σπεῦσαι τι τῶν  
βούλιος φέρει φρήν.



**Chorus**

Lord above all Lords,  
     happiest of the happy gods  
     and power most  
     complete of all  
     perfections,  
         Zeus of Plenty,  
         listen to your offspring.  
 Hate men's soaring pride  
     and keep their hands away!  
         Crash that ship  
 black oarsmen row,  
     plunge their vessel of Ruin  
         into the violet sea!

Look down at this cluster of women,  
     look down at our race  
         known since long  
         ago and renew  
     the gentle  
 story of your love  
     for that woman,  
 our ancestor. Remember how it all  
     unfolded, you who laid  
         your hands  
         on Io.

We declare our race shines  
     bright because of Zeus.  
         We are at home  
     here, though from distant lands.

We stand upon her ancient footprints  
     in the fertile meadow  
 where our mother  
         was watched  
     as she nibbled  
         flowers, the spot



where she was  
     stung into wandering  
         frenzy by  
             the gadfly,  
 her mind  
     shooting  
     thoughts  
 in all  
     directions.  
 She passed  
     through  
 countless  
 mortal  
 tribes  
 and then  
     as fate  
 had destined  
     cut a passage  
         bridging continents.  
 She found a road  
 through the waves.

*{They recount Io's journey. The passage resumes when Zeus impregnates her.}*

His force  
     is power  
     that brings  
     no pain,  
 it is but the heavy breath of god.  
     When it ends,  
     the cow cries and lows  
         to herself,  
         shame  
     tinged with sorrow.  
 She clings to Zeus

as her rock,  
 and the story does not lie:  
     she gave birth  
     to a perfect  
 son whose life was long and smiled  
     upon in  
     every way.

At this event  
 all of deep Earth  
 resounds:

    “This here  
     without question  
         is the race  
 of Zeus Who Brings Forth Life!  
     Who else could quell  
         the madness  
     Hera devised?”

Zeus alone.

    And our line descends  
 from Epaphus  
     as everybody knows.

What other god  
     could I ever  
     invoke  
 whose actions have been  
     more just?

Only the Father  
     himself,  
     lord who planted  
     us with his  
     own hand,  
 great craftsman  
     of our race  
 grown wise  
     with age,  
 a remedy for everything,  
     Zeus of the Sky.

He hurries at no one else's beck  
 and call; no one  
 is mightier. He is awed  
 by no one  
 else's power, since no one  
 sits above him.

Whatever leaves  
 his lips becomes action:  
 whatever his sage mind conceives  
 is instantly alive.



In this address, the Danaids give another multi-layered rhetorical performance, one that establishes their strong connection as “offspring” of Io and Zeus, their symbolic “mother” and “father,” while also subtly revealing their reservations about invoking him. They begin, as they must, by praising Zeus with superlatives and recognizing his preeminent status among the gods (523-525). They call him *teleon teleiotaton kratos* (τέλειων τελειότατον κράτος), the “most complete” power (*kratos*) of all perfected ends (*telos*)—that is, the source from which anything can be brought to pass. Crucially, they do not refer to “his” *kratos* specifically, as if it were a mere facet of his being, but call him *kratos* itself; he *is* cosmic omnipotence. Then, after asking him to “look down” in pity at them, their prayer takes a surprising turn: it ceases being a direct, vocative address, as is typical in prayer, and becomes entirely an act of storytelling, a remembrance of the glorious past.

But immediately their language begins to bear the marks of their internal contradictions. Suppressing their knowledge of Zeus’ transgressions, they frame his relationship with Io in sunny terms as a “gentle/cheerful story (εὐφρον’ αἶνον) of your love for that woman” (532-33). This, of

course, is a simplified version of the fraught courtship of their ancestors, one which elides the fact that most of the “cheerful story” is comprised of pain and suffering: Zeus’ unwanted advances against Io, his rape of her, Hera’s jealousy, the girl’s loss of her human form, her cruel surveillance by Argos, and her being driven across the world by the gadfly with “her mind shooting thoughts in all directions” (537-45). The story only ended “happily” in Egypt where Io finally found rest, was impregnated by Zeus, and gave birth to Epaphus. But this conclusion, like the beginning, was also defined by rape (Zeus’ nonconsensual initiation), though mythology says that Io, this time, had converted from an “unwilling” victim to at last become a “willing” lover.

The phrase *ἔφαπτορ Ἰοῦς* (534: *ephaptor Ious*) is also deeply charged: here the Danaids cast Zeus in ambiguous terms that recognize his status as both a sexual assailant and a lover. It can be read neutrally to mean “toucher of Io,” warmly, as “caressor,” but also, more sinisterly, as her “captor/seizer.” The word permits connotations of a number of modes of physical contact and, given Io’s story, invites this plurality of meanings. In my translation, I have settled on letting the Danaids address Zeus as “you who laid your hands on Io,” an impartial title that shows the sisters neither ceding too much ground to praising Zeus for his actions, nor shows them openly disparaging him. When narrating the moment of Epaphus’ conception, they describe Zeus’ *biā* in equally nuanced terms: “His force is power that brings no pain” (575: *βία δ’ ἀπημάντω σθένει*). But this rosy picture is soon contradicted by their portrayal of Io in the aftermath of the rape as crying a “sorrowful shame of tears” (577-78: *δακρύων δ’ ἀποστάζει πένθιμον αἰδῶ*). Surely this is a mixed message: one wonders how force can lead to tears if it supposedly “brings no pain.”

These paradoxes are the product of the Danaids’ attempt to praise their defender while also recognizing the strangeness of their ancestors’ complex courtship. After all, they owe their existence to

Zeus' touch and force, which gave birth to Epaphus, but neither is it lost on them that they are currently trying to flee the "hands of men" and violent seizure by the Aegyptids. They are in no position to fully expose the irony underlying their appeal to Zeus' authority. Thus they develop an "exclusive emphasis on the benign sexuality of Zeus" in order to craft an effective prayer (Zeitlin 52-53).

It is, however, possible that they find his actions toward Io negligible, or are even willfully ignorant of their nature. Parts of the Danaids' choral odes are so carried away by worship of Zeus as to suggest a deep, unequivocal love for their forefather. When they ask the question of what other god they could reasonably summon, based on his past demonstration of justice, they answer emphatically:

Only the Father  
 himself,  
 lord who planted  
 us with his  
 own hand,  
 great craftsman  
 of our race  
 grown wise  
 with age,  
 a remedy for everything,  
 Zeus of the Sky.

This praise does not ring false, nor does it sound like they feel conflicted about seeking Zeus the Rapist's aid in a situation that has been caused by the threat of sexual violence. It is clear throughout the rest of the play that the Danaids abhor force and fear men and marriage, but their qualms with these things may not include the male gods.

This question of purposeful omission versus acceptance is even more interesting when one looks at the instances in the text where the Danaids seem to incarnate Io. Throughout the play, the

sisters create a victimized self-identity based on the figure of Io as a heifer. In the parados they say, “I pick grief’s flowers and graze on buds of fear,” language that could well describe Io grazing in her Argive meadow (69). And, repeatedly, they style themselves as herd animals: a “heifer trapped by wolves on a steep crag / trusting still in her herdsman’s strength, / bleating for his help,” and an “unenvied herd” (335-38, 638). So they are both one, unitary group “heifer,” but also a “herd”—one Io and many Ios at once. This self-description stems from their need to understand themselves and their world through metaphor, a world that is too menacing to be faced nakedly, without the shield of language.

The last thing to note about this prayer is how it reveals the Danaids’ attitudes toward power, which are previously alluded to, but as yet undeveloped. They reached an impasse with Pelasgus where action was bogged down by democratic norms that limit the king’s power, and they experienced a moment of cultural confusion about Greek and Egyptian forms of government. But their invocation to Zeus seems to revel in his despotic and all-powerful position. They see in him the reverse of Pelasgus, whom they view as a feeble leader who defers to the will of his citizens. Zeus, by contrast, “is awed by no one else’s power,” and whatever he says is instantly transformed into action. What they crave from the human realm—instant executive action—they can only find in religion.

Here, too, in this private world of prayer, Danaus does not intrude upon his daughters. This is their own dangerous world to confront. He may tell them how they ought to behave to ensure their own safety, but he does not and cannot show them how to survive as emotional and spiritual beings.

## Appendix II: Literal Translations for the *Suppliants*

## The Danaids Plead with Pelasgus

### **Pelasgus**

Truly you do not sit at the fireside in my house.  
 And if the city, as a common entity, is stained,  
 then let the people, in common, care to search for a cure.  
 I should not fulfill a promise beforehand  
 until communicating with all townsmen about these matters.

### **Chorus**

You are the city and you are the people.  
 Being a lord free from judgment  
 you rule this altar, the hearth of your land,  
 with your nods that render the lone vote;  
 and in your lone-sceptered throne  
 you determine every affair. Guard yourself against defilement!

### **Pelasgus**

May defilement be with those who spite me,  
 but I cannot help you without harm.  
 Then again, this isn't favorable: to dishonor these supplications.  
 I have no resources, and fear grips my mind,  
 both to act and not to act and take what chance may send.

### **Chorus**

Look on him who watches from the heights,  
 The guardian of much-laboring mortals  
 who, though sitting near to those closeby,  
 do not earn lawful justice.  
 The inflexible wrath of Suppliant Zeus  
 remains unmoved by the sufferer's lamentations.

### **Pelasgus**

If, indeed, the sons of Aegyptus rule over you  
 with the law of your city, claiming to be the closest

to your race, who should wish to resist them?  
Truly you must flee according to the laws of your homeland,  
so that they do not hold any authority over you.

### **Chorus**

May I never, then, be under the hands  
of the powers of men. Truly, under the stars,  
I will find a means of flight from an ill-conceived marriage.  
Taking Justice as your ally,  
choose reverence for the gods.

### **Pelasgus**

The judgment is not easy to judge. Do not choose me as judge.  
I was saying before, I would not act on these matters  
without the people, nor even govern, lest someday  
the people say, if somehow some such evil should befall us:  
“By honoring foreigners he destroyed the city.”

## Invocation to Zeus

### **Chorus**

Lord of Lords, most blessed  
of the blessed ones and power  
most perfected of perfections, Zeus of Prosperity,  
listen to your offspring.  
Keep away the insolence of men, hating it well:  
throw into the purple harbor  
the black-benched source of ruin.

Looking upon this group of nearby women,  
our race spoken of long ago,  
renew the cheerful tale of love  
for the woman, our ancestor—  
you who remember everything about our race, toucher of Io.  
We declare that we are born of Zeus,  
inhabitants that left these lands.



I came to the ancient footprints,  
 the flower-browsings sights of my mother,  
 a meadow rich in fodder, from where Io,  
 driven by the gadfly,  
 flees with a distraught mind,  
 passing through many tribes of mortals,  
 and through a split, cutting through  
 the opposing land, by fate finds  
 a passage through the waves.

*{They relate Io's journey.}*

His force, with strength that brings no pain  
 and divine breath,  
 ceases, and she lets drop  
 a sorrowful shame of tears.  
 After taking Zeus as her rock, according to a true story:  
 she gave birth to a blameless son,  
 full of prosperity through his long life.  
 At this the whole earth cries aloud:  
 "This race is truly descended  
 from life-giving Zeus.  
 Who could end the plotting  
 sicknesses of Hera?"  
 This is Zeus' work: and if you say  
 that this race springs from Epaphus, you would hit the mark."

What other god might I reasonably call upon  
 whose past deeds are more just?  
 The father himself, lord who grew us by his own hand,  
 great craftsman of our race, wise with age,  
 every remedy, Zeus of the heavens.

He busies himself under the rule of no other  
 and rules the less powerful,  
 revering the power of no one who sits above him.

As his word, so goes his deed: able  
to instantly accomplish whatever of those things  
his sage mind conceives.

## Translating the *Suppliants*

I must now explain a crucial element of my style.

I have been called Mr. Alliteration, a title I feel I have to own up to. In my prose writing, I already produce alliterations quite fluently—too fluently, I’d argue. I believe this tic developed as a result of absurdly rhyming, Gerard Manley Hopkins-esque (and very emo) poetry I used to write back in middle school. Translating Aeschylus only exacerbated this tendency. Every line, sometimes, I felt I was making skip or spring—in places where the idea or image should be grave and level, not flashy.

Upon encountering articles that discuss how Aeschylus’ *barbaroi* speak, however, I felt justified and sure in my alliterative instincts. Commenting on the *Persians*, Favorini writes that Aeschylus “labored to create a Persian soundscape... he did everything he could to make his audience forget they were hearing Greek. Hall identifies among his devices the use of proper names, cacophonous catalogues, imitation of foreign vocabulary, cries, interjections... designed to suggest barbarian diction” (107). Elsewhere, describing the *Suppliants*, Turner writes: “We find in the Danaids’ speech all the markers of barbarian speech found in the *Persae*: repetition and alliteration, anaphora and exotic cries” (44).

It seemed, then, that I had inadvertently found kindred spirits in the *barbaroi*—people who spoke my language. And so I made characters (especially the Chorus of Persian elders and the Chorus

of Danaids) speak with barbarian sound effects, which sometimes are very overtly alliterative, anaphoric, or ostentatious. One of the more extreme examples of my technique here comes at the beginning of the Danaids' invocation to Zeus:

ἄναξ ἀνάκτων, μακάρων  
μακάρτατε καὶ τελέων  
τελειότατον κράτος, ὄλβιε Ζεῦ

Literal:

**Lord of Lords, most blessed  
of the blessed ones and power  
most perfected of perfections, Zeus of Prosperity**

Final:

**Lord above all Lords,  
happiest of the happy gods  
and power most  
complete of all  
perfections,  
Zeus of Plenty,  
listen to your offspring.**

The insistent p's, I'll admit, are somewhat bewildering. But the repetitions, superlatives, and endless kappas and taus in the Greek are themselves extravagant—a soaring register the Danaids have adopted to propitiate their ancestor. Here, I have tried to replicate this grandiosity, even though it temporarily stretches modern English sensibilities.

### The Act of Supplication

ἀμηχανῶ δὲ καὶ φόβος μ' ἔχει φρένας  
δρᾶσαι τε μὴ δρᾶσαι τε καὶ τύχην ἐλεῖν.

Literal:

**I have no resources, and fear grips my mind,  
both to act and not to act and take what chance may send.**

Polished:

**Do I act? Or do I do nothing  
and let Chance shoot the arrow for me?**

Here, the indecisive Pelasgus is speaking. You may be asking yourself: “Where did he get ‘let Chance shoot the arrow for me’” out of “take what chance may send?” Well, as I was thinking about the noun *τύχην* (“chance, fortune”), I also thought of the verb which it is related to: *tugkhanō* (“to hit the mark; gain”). The verb denotes an arrow striking its target, but also connotes the act of faith—the uncertainty—that accompanies the archer as he hopes that his arrow, caught in mid-flight, will pierce his desired target. In several of the translations of Greek I’ve read, translators try to convey the archery aspect of *tugkhanō* thus: “Who named her [Helen] so very aptly? / Was it some invisible being / seeing the future, who directed / language that whirred to the mark?” (Ruden 681-84). And so I have combined the image evoked by *tugkhanō*—archery, arrows—with the meaning of *tukhē* (“chance”) to suggest that Pelasgus, in this dire situation, cannot bring himself to shoot his own arrow and make the decision whether to accept the Danaids into his city. Exasperated, he thinks that it might be better to “let Chance shoot the arrow for me,” to see what unknown destination that arrow will whir to.

τὸν ὑψόθεν σκοπὸν ἐπισκόπει...

Literal:

**Look on him who watches from the heights...**

Polished:

**Turn your eyes toward Him  
whose eyes watch us from the highest  
peak...**

In many of the cases where I've changed and expanded the Greek, I've often done so in the service of making clear images. The Greek line succeeds through a nice use of *figura etymologica* and a beautifully stitched series of sigmas and pis. In English, though, I wasn't satisfied with the vague image of Suppliant Zeus looking down "from the heights" or "from above." I repeat "eyes" in order to convey the sense that everyone is looking at everyone else in this scene. It is a kind of stare-down: the Danaids are waiting for Pelasgus to blink, Pelasgus feels "paralyzed by fear," all the while Zeus, unseen, surveils and judges the whole affair. Zeus, in my translation, is no longer a watcher: he is a pair of eyes that watch us. And Pelasgus must "turn his eyes" to face those wrathful eyes, eyes which are not just looking at him "from above," but from the highest peak imaginable. The sight of a mountaintop—Olympus—makes concrete the abstract ὑψόθεν.

ὑπαστρον δέ τοι  
μῆχαρ ὀρίζομαι γάμου δύσφρονος  
φυγάν: ξύμμαχον δ' ἐλόμενος δίκαν  
κρίνε σέβας τὸ πρὸς θεῶν.

Final:

**I will follow the stars to find a means  
to flee this unthinkable marriage.  
Make Justice your ally,  
choose reverence for the gods.**

This is another prime example of the barbarian speech I've employed. The Danaids begin to ramp up their alliteration and musicality with "I will follow the stars to find a means / to flee this unthinkable marriage," then they dispense with their flourishes and get to the point: "Make Justice your ally, / choose reverence for the gods." It is important in creating such lines, just when the effect begins to strain English sensibilities, to immediately scale it back. Where I make the first two lines soar—literally, toward the stars—I bring the last two back down to earth.

μὴ καὶ ποτε  
εἴπη λεώς, εἴ ποῦ τι μὴ τοῖον τύχοι,  
'ἐπήλυδας τιμῶν ἀπώλεσας πόλιν.'

Literal:

**lest someday  
the people say, if somehow some such evil should befall us:  
"By honoring foreigners he destroyed the city."**

Polished:

**Someday, if disaster should befall us, the people  
would say of me: "He valued the lives of foreigners  
but destroyed the lives of Argives."**

In reading these lines, I imagined that 'ἐπήλυδας τιμῶν ἀπώλεσας πόλιν' ("By honoring foreigners he destroyed the city") is something that generations and generations of Argives after Pelasgus might repeat to each other, spitefully, as an everlasting curse upon on the king. It might be a pithy saying that grandparents pass along to their grandchildren so they would learn how Pelasgus, way back when, brought ruin on the city by taking care of others instead of his own. The rhyme of "lives" and "Argives" gives this sentiment the tone of a dark aphorism.

Invocation to Zeus

λίμνα δ' ἔμβαλε πορφυροειδεῖ  
τὰν μελανόζυγ' ἄταν.

Literal:

**Throw into the purple harbor  
the black-benched source of ruin.**

Final:

**Crash that ship  
black oarsmen row,  
plunge their vessel of Ruin  
into the violet sea!**

Here, I considerably reworked a mere two lines. The Greek *λίμνα* specifies a bay or a harbor, which I have omitted. Instead, I've only implied the idea of a harbor in “crash,” which is no longer the literal “throw into.” I then turn “throw into” into “plunge.” The very compressed and indirect “black-benched Ruin,” which refers to the ship that the black Aegyptid oarsmen are rowing towards Argos, also needed to be fleshed out. Now you can see the ship, you can see the black oarsmen rowing ever closer to the shore. Lastly, I conjure up a “violet sea,” not a “purple” or “purple-seeming” (*πορφυροειδεῖ*) harbor. In this decision, I was inspired by Guy Davenport’s remark in “Another Odyssey” about a line of William Cullen Bryant’s translation of the *Odyssey*. Bryant writes: “The sun / Rose shining for the immortals and for men / Upon the foodful earth.” Seizing on these lines, Davenport points out that “He [Bryant] is not afraid that in recitation the audience will hear ‘foodful’ as a tongue-twisted ‘fruitful’” (Davenport 137). I then thought of the interesting possibilities that

could result from deliberately using a word that the reader might mistake for a word that sounds similar. Could the two words, put in conversation with one another, enhance each other? Thus I've made the sea, not purple, but violet—a sea that the Danaids also want to act violently toward their pursuers.

ἐνθεν Ἴω  
οἴστρω ἐρεσσομένα  
φεύγει ἀμαρτίνοος

Literal:

**from where Io,  
driven by the gadfly,  
flees with a distraught mind**

Final:

**the spot  
where she was  
stung into wandering  
frenzy by  
the gadfly,  
her mind  
shooting  
thoughts  
in all  
directions.**

My expansion of ἀμαρτίνοος (*hamartinoos*) is arguably one of my favorite in the whole project. Abstractly, it means a “distraught mind.” But the opportunity presented here was too ripe to pass up. *Hamartanō*, like *tugkhanō*, refers to archery—to miss the target. A *hamartia* is a character’s tragic flaw, that is, where their ethical arrow flew into the bushes and destroyed them. In describing



Io's frenzy, I wanted to retain this potent archery imagery, and so she is not just wandering haphazardly through Europe and Asia, but her mind—an archer—is “shooting thoughts in all directions.”

## Chapter Three

# *Agamemnon*

### ***I. The Maddened Reader***

The *Agamemnon* opens in pitch black with the monologue of an anxious man. Propped “doglike” on the palace roof, the Watchman tells how he has waited for one sign for a whole year: the beacon declaring that Troy has fallen. He has stood guard for the House of Atreus so long he knows the movement of the stars by heart. He does not dream. “When I decide to sing, or chirr as birds do, / agony, out of tune with the rest, seeps in” (Ruden 16-17). But he is resigned to his duty: he must keep looking into the darkness, waiting for clarity to emerge.

He is, in other words, a diligent, dogged, maddened reader of the night sky.

There could hardly be a better avatar for the *Oresteia* itself—a trilogy that traces characters endlessly questioning and interpreting signs, reading the intentions of others, and creating elaborate networks of language to gain power. Dreams, double entendre, legal language, repeated and shifting animal metaphors, dramatic irony, performativity, impersonations, scathing stichomythia, etymological meditation, prophecy, speechlessness, shrieking, singing (both sweet and discordant) and enigmatic aphorisms all feature here in a work in which Aeschylus stretches *logos* to its limits. This means that the *Oresteia*, too, demands a diligent, dogged, maddened reader who will trace the symbolic and philological subplots that run parallel to the main action.

In the *Eumenides*, of course, the trilogy’s initial darkness ends in light. The Furies, converted by persuasion into the Kindly Ones, bear festive torches to celebrate a new ritual created in their

honor. Orestes is acquitted of murdering his mother; Athenian trial-by-jury is established; and the Furies' primeval force, a continuation of Clytemnestra's female wrath, is pacified. From the dizzying flux of what has come before, a seeming peace and clarity emerge. For the reader, however (to say nothing of Aeschylus' original playgoers), the chaos lingers long after the Furies have been subdued.

I speak from my own amateur experience with this "magisterial work of art."<sup>33</sup> Although translating from the *Persians* and the *Suppliants* had given me a sense of Aeschylus' linguistic prowess, reckoning with 70 lines from the 1700-line *Agamemnon* has truly forced me to humble myself before his dense and mysterious poetry—a density and mystery that has not in any way been mitigated by five readings of the trilogy in English. Of the five passages I've translated for this project, the reunion between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon was easily the hardest to untangle: for in this moment, *you* (though slightly less ignorant of what's in store) are just as ensnared as the king by the viper's verbal net. Since I could never hope to analyze the power dynamics and symbolic structures that govern the trilogy, or even the first play, I have therefore restricted myself to an analysis of the figure of Clytemnestra and the import of the exchange between husband and wife.

## ***II. "What Name Would Strike the Traitorous Monster on Target?"***

### **Clytemnestra (n.):**

1. "A hateful bitch." [pejorative]
2. "A female who can murder a male." [objective]
3. "She's a viper." [animal analogue]
4. "She's a Scylla housed on the cliffs to lash at ships." [mythological counterpart]

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<sup>33</sup> Zeitlin, Froma. "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*." *Playing the Other*, pp. 119.

5. “Possessed Mother of Hades, breathing war” [hyperbolic?] (1229-35).<sup>34</sup>

This, at least, is how Cassandra tries to define her while prophesying Agamemnon’s murder to the Chorus. As her torrent of titles and metaphors shows, however, she cannot settle on one fixed idea of what Clytemnestra is. Even to her, possessed with immense insight into reality, this “monumental androgynous figure”<sup>35</sup> is baffling. She poses the question, “What name would strike the traitorous monster / on target?” rhetorically, knowing that language cannot encapsulate this socially anomalous and terrifyingly intelligent woman. The Chorus dwells similarly on the (in)adequacy of language as a descriptive tool when disparaging Leda’s other ruinous daughter, Helen, whose character can, unlike her sister’s, be easily defined. One word—her name—circumscribes her:

“Who named her so very aptly?  
Was it some invisible being  
seeing the future, who directed  
language that whirred to the mark,  
calling her Helen—for Hell?” (680-90).

This is Ruden’s attempt to capture the wordplay that Aeschylus has embedded in the Greek through etymological trickery. The elders take the beginning of Helen’s name and imagine that it is related to the verb *helein*, “to take, seize; destroy,” a premise that allows them to manipulate her name in order to satisfy their hatred of her. Thus they call her,

**Helen (n.):**

1. Ἑλένας, “Ship-Destroyer.”
2. Ἑλανδρος, “Man-Destroyer.”
3. Ἑλέπτολις, “City-Destroyer.” (689-90)

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<sup>34</sup> Translation: Ruden, Sarah. *Agamemnon. The Greek Plays*. Modern Library, Penguin Random House LLC, New York. 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Zeitlin, Froma. “The Dynamics of Misogyny.” 94.

In this way, both complicated women have titles foisted upon them in an attempt to “strike the [female] monster on target.” In accordance with her traditional role as the passive recipient of misogynistic Greek and Trojan projections, Helen’s name is weaponized against her to create an endless series of fittingly pejorative names.

Clytemnestra, in contrast, resists all attempts at categorization. Although she will be undone in the *Choephoroi* by her son, Orestes, who has inherited her verbal skill and serpentine deception, in the *Agamemnon* she is the undisputed queen of words. Towering above her interlocutors, she embodies language itself at its most supple and versatile, an ἀμφίσβαινα (*amphisbaina*), a “snake that moves in all directions” (1233).

### ***III. Navigating the Sea of Clothes***

Although never mentioned in this scene, the presence of Iphigenia looms large over Clytemnestra and Agamemnon’s reunion. Since Agamemnon sailed for Troy ten years before, Clytemnestra has been unable to confront him about his sacrifice of their daughter at Aulis, nor has he been able to atone for his actions or explain his rationale behind the murder. When they are finally able to speak to each other again, Agamemnon’s guilt (or willful repression of guilt) and Clytemnestra’s fury simmer beneath the surface. Neither can bring themselves to address the tragedy directly. Instead, Clytemnestra devises a pageant of innuendoes and symbolism to exact her revenge—even if she is the only one on stage who fully understands them.

This pair is nothing like Atossa and Darius, the only other married couple that Aeschylus depicts. Whereas the Persian monarchs speak to each other openly and honestly,<sup>36</sup> and with deep concern for their son, Xerxes, the Argives trade bitter insults and evade discussing their daughter.

This bitterness first becomes apparent in Agamemnon's opening address, in which he thanks the gods for his victory over Troy and greets the elders, but neglects to recognize his wife (810-50). She, in turn, bypasses addressing Agamemnon outright and instead delivers her monologue to the Chorus: "Gentlemen, citizens, honored Argive elders, / I'm not ashamed to tell you how attached / to a man I am, by nature" (855-57: *ἄνδρες πολῖται, πρέσβος Ἀργείων τόδε, / οὐκ αἰσχυνοῦμαι τοὺς φιλόνορας τρόπους / λέξαι πρὸς ὑμᾶς*). In this seemingly innocuous introduction, Clytemnestra is already giving her audience a taste of her mastery of language. She simultaneously gives Agamemnon the chilly welcome she clearly feels he deserves by referring to him in the third-person, as simply "a man," and later "my man/husband" (it will take her another forty lines to finally address him), while also declaring her love and "attachment" to him. In this way, she creates a facade mostly to please the expectations of the public—the Argive citizens—and only partly for Agamemnon, who soon expresses his skepticism and dissatisfaction with her excessive language by remarking that her speech was "too drawn out" and that praise "should come from others, not you." What escapes notice, however, is her assertion of a powerfully androgynous nature. When she says "how attached to a man I am," she means that she feels kindred with the world of men, the world of *kratos*. Her self-professed *τοὺς φιλόνορας τρόπους* ("husband-loving ways") can also be read to mean "man-loving character." Here, then, she will definitively prove to the Chorus, who earlier questioned her susceptibility to rumors, that "My mind's not like a little girl's!" (277).

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<sup>36</sup> Recall Atossa's frank declaration: "My Darius, you shall hear the tale in full with no delay. / Persia's possessions have sacked. That's it."

Each side has delivered their long, performative preambles. Now Clytemnestra and Agamemnon finally spar.

**Lines 905-974**

**Κλυταιμήστρα**

νῦν δέ μοι, φίλον κάρα, 905  
 ἔκβαιν' ἀπήνης τῆσδε, μὴ χαμαὶ τιθεὶς  
 τὸν σὸν πόδ', ὤναξ, Ἴλιου πορθήτορα.  
 δμωαί, τί μέλλεθ', αἷς ἐπέσταλται τέλος  
 πέδον κελεύθου στρωννύναι πετάσμασιν;  
 εὐθὺς γενέσθω πορφυρόστρωτος πόρος 910  
 ἐς δῶμ' ἀελπτον ὡς ἂν ἡγήται δίκη.  
 τὰ δ' ἄλλα φροντίς οὐχ ὕπνω νικωμένη  
 θήσει δικαίως σὺν θεοῖς εἰμαρμένα.

**Ἀγαμέμνων**

Λήδας γένεθλον, δωμάτων ἐμῶν φύλαξ,  
 ἀπουσία μὲν εἶπας εἰκότως ἐμῆ: 915  
 μακρὰν γὰρ ἐξέτεινας: ἀλλ' ἐναισίμωσ  
 αἰνεῖν, παρ' ἄλλων χρὴ τόδ' ἔρχεσθαι γέρας:  
 καὶ τᾶλλα μὴ γυναικὸς ἐν τρόποις ἐμέ  
 ἄβρυνε, μηδὲ βαρβάρου φωτὸς δίκην  
 χαμαιπετές βόαμα προσχάνης ἐμοί, 920  
 μηδ' εἶμασι στρώσασ' ἐπίφθονον πόρον  
 τίθει: θεοῦς τοι τοῖσδε τιμαλφεῖν χρεῶν:  
 ἐν ποικίλοις δὲ θνητὸν ὄντα κάλλεσιν  
 βαίνειν ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐδαμῶς ἄνευ φόβου.  
 λέγω κατ' ἄνδρα, μὴ θεόν, σέβειν ἐμέ. 925  
 χωρὶς ποδοψήστρων τε καὶ τῶν ποικίλων  
 κληδῶν ἀυτεῖ: καὶ τὸ μὴ κακῶς φρονεῖν  
 θεοῦ μέγιστον δῶρον. ὀλβίσαι δὲ χρὴ  
 βίον τελευτήσαντ' ἐν εὐεστοῖ φίλῃ.  
 εἰ πάντα δ' ὡς πράσσοιμ' ἂν, εὐθαρσῆς ἐγώ. 930

**Κλυταιμήστρα**

καὶ μὴν τόδ' εἰπέ μὴ παρὰ γνώμην ἐμοί.

**Ἀγαμέμνων**

γνώμην μὲν ἴσθι μὴ διαφθεροῦντ' ἐμέ.

**Κλυταιμῆστρα**

ἠὔξω θεοῖς δείσας ἂν ᾧδ' ἔρδειν τάδε.

**Ἀγαμέμνων**

εἴπερ τις, εἰδώς γ' εὖ τόδ' ἐξεῖπον τέλος.

**Κλυταιμῆστρα**

τί δ' ἂν δοκεῖ σοι Πρίαμος, εἰ τάδ' ἤνυσεν;

935

**Ἀγαμέμνων**

ἐν ποικίλοις ἂν κάρτα μοι βῆναι δοκεῖ.

**Κλυταιμῆστρα**

μὴ νυν τὸν ἀνθρώπειον αἰδεσθῆς ψόγον.

**Ἀγαμέμνων**

φήμη γε μέντοι δημόθρους μέγα σθένει.

**Κλυταιμῆστρα**

ὁ δ' ἀφθόνητός γ' οὐκ ἐπίζηλος πέλει.

**Ἀγαμέμνων**

οὔτοι γυναικός ἐστιν ἰμείρειν μάχης.

940

**Κλυταιμῆστρα**

τοῖς δ' ὀλβίοις γε καὶ τὸ νικᾶσθαι πρέπει.

**Ἀγαμέμνων**

ἦ καὶ σὺ νίκην τήνδε δήριος τίεις;

**Κλυταιμῆστρα**

πιθοῦ: κράτος μέντοι πάρες γ' ἐκῶν ἐμοί.

**Ἀγαμέμνων**

ἄλλ' εἰ δοκεῖ σοι ταῦθ', ὑπαί τις ἀρβύλας



λύοι τάχος, πρόδουλον ἔμβασιν ποδός.  
καὶ τοῖσδέ μ' ἔμβαίνονθ' ἀλουργέσιν θεῶν  
μή τις πρόσωθεν ὄμματος βάλοι φθόνος.  
πολλή γὰρ αἰδώς δωματοφθορεῖν ποσὶν  
φθείροντα πλοῦτον ἀργυρωνήτους θ' ὑφάς.

945

τούτων μὲν οὕτω: τὴν ξένην δὲ πρευμενώς  
τὴνδ' ἐσκόμιζε: τὸν κρατοῦντα μαλθακῶς  
θεὸς πρόσωθεν εὐμενώς προσδέρεται.  
ἐκῶν γὰρ οὐδείς δουλίῳ χρήται ζυγῶ.  
αὕτη δὲ πολλῶν χρημάτων ἐξαίρετον  
ἄνθος, στρατοῦ δώρημ', ἐμοὶ ξυνέσπετο.

950

955

ἐπεὶ δ' ἀκούειν σοῦ κατέστραμμαι τάδε,  
εἴμ' ἐς δόμων μέλαθρα πορφύρας πατῶν.

### **Κλυταιμήστρα**

ἔστιν θάλασσα, τίς δέ νιν κατασβέσει;  
τρέφουσα πολλῆς πορφύρας ἰσάργυρον  
κηκίδα παγκαίνιστον, εἰμάτων βαφάς.

960

οἶκος δ' ὑπάρχει τῶνδε σὺν θεοῖς ἄλις  
ἔχειν: πένεσθαι δ' οὐκ ἐπίσταται δόμος.  
πολλῶν πατησμὸν δ' εἰμάτων ἂν ἠϋξάμην,  
δόμοισι προυνεχθέντος ἐν χρηστηρίοις,  
ψυχῆς κόμιστρα τῆσδε μηχανωμένη.

965

ρίζης γὰρ οὔσης φυλλάς ἴκετ' ἐς δόμους,  
σκιὰν ὑπερτείνασα σειρίου κυνός.  
καὶ σοῦ μολόντος δωματίτιν ἐστίαν,  
θάλπος μὲν ἐν χειμῶνι σημαίνεις μολόν:  
ὅταν δὲ τεύχη Ζεὺς ἀπ' ὄμφακος πικρᾶς

970

οἶνον, τότε ἤδη ψυχὸς ἐν δόμοις πέλει,  
ἀνδρὸς τελείου δῶμ' ἐπιστρωφωμένου.  
Ζεῦ, Ζεῦ τέλειε, τὰς ἐμὰς εὐχὰς τέλει:  
μέλοι δέ τοι σοὶ τῶν περ ἂν μέλλης τελεῖν.



### **Clytemnestra**

Come now, sweetheart,  
 O Toppler of Troy,  
 step down from your chariot,  
 but don't let your feet touch the earth.

Maids, why are you dawdling?  
 I told you to spread clothing  
 on the ground to make a path leading  
 to our house, the home he never hoped  
 he'd see again—a straight road soaked  
 in violet dye. Justice will escort him.  
 With a mind that sleep cannot conquer,  
 I will set the rest in order  
 as the gods have righteously ordained.

### **Agamemnon**

Offspring of Leda, keeper of my house,  
 your speech was like my absence:  
 too drawn out. Praise is a high honor,  
 and it should come from others,  
 not you. As for the rest,  
 don't pamper me like a woman;  
 don't gape at me, wailing, face  
 to the dirt, like an Oriental;  
 and last of all don't strew  
 my way with clothing  
 and pave a path to envy.  
 We can only honor gods this way.  
 As a mortal, I cannot step  
 on so much beauty without a sense of dread.  
 I ask that you revere me as a man—no god.  
 Fame bellows without foot-wipes.  
 To be blessed with a mind  
 that doesn't stray toward evil  
 is the most precious of all god's gifts.  
 And we can call a life happy  
 only if it ends in the comforts  
 of love and a mind at ease.  
 If I act as I say, I'll feel confident.

**Clytemnestra**

Tell me this, and please do speak your mind.

**Agamemnon**

My mind is one thing I always speak truthfully.

**Clytemnestra**

Would fear have made you vow to the gods to act my way?

**Agamemnon**

If a holy man had said to do so, yes.

**Clytemnestra**

Imagine what Priam would've done if he had won.

**Agamemnon**

Pranced all over pretty fabrics, I'm sure.

**Clytemnestra**

So don't be shy. No-names always resent the famous.

**Agamemnon**

Rumors let loose among the people gather strength.

**Clytemnestra**

A man must face envy to be admired.

**Agamemnon**

A woman shouldn't crave battle.

**Clytemnestra**

It's proper for the lucky to relent sometimes.

**Agamemnon**

Does victory in this clash mean so much to you?

**Clytemnestra**

Give in. You're still a mighty man if you let me have this.

**Agamemnon**

Fine. Since you're so bent on spectacle,  
 let one of your maids come and unstrap  
 my sandals, the slaves beneath my feet.  
 If the gods are watching me walk  
 across this glimmering sea, I pray  
 their jealous eyes don't pierce me.  
 I feel great shame in wrecking my house  
 like this, trampling on the luxury and weaving  
 bought with the silver I plundered abroad.

But enough of that.  
 Show some kindness to this foreign girl  
 as you lead her indoors. The gods  
 look with grace on kings who conquer  
 gently, since no one submits to the yoke  
 of slavery by choice. But of all the treasures  
 I've brought back, this girl here  
 is the blossom I prize most. A gift from the army,  
 she sailed home with me. She is all mine.  
 Now that I've resigned myself to listen  
 to your will, watch me as I walk  
 into our home on violet clothes.

**Clytemnestra**

A sea stretches before you.  
 Who will exhaust it?  
 It spawns an endless purple  
 ooze as valuable as silver,  
 bleeding out the dye for clothes.  
 Our house owes these riches  
 to the will of the gods, my lord.  
 The palace doesn't know what poverty  
 is like. I myself would have vowed  
 to trample on abundant robes  
 if our house's oracles had ordered me  
 back when I was scouring my mind  
 for ways to ransom your life.

While the root remains, new leaves  
 come back and spread cool shadow  
 on the Dog Star's scorching days.  
 Like this relief, you've returned  
 to our hearth, a fire in the freeze  
 of winter. And you are like Zeus  
 when he makes wine from bitter grapes,  
 when crisp air passes through the halls,  
 a king striding through his house  
 in the glow of victory, fulfilled.

Zeus, O Zeus Fulfiller,  
 fulfill my prayers!  
 Take them to heart, and execute them.



Here, once again, we see how Aeschylus' works bear the mark of a thinker and poet for whom the ocean and life at sea (navigation, warfare) often serve as vehicles to explore broader moral and political dilemmas. *Seven Against Thebes*, perhaps more than any other work, exemplifies these fixations; in that drama, he represents Thebes as a besieged ship and the world beyond the city's gates as a tempest lashing against the ship of state, while the helmsman of the *polis*, Eteocles, must navigate the perilous waters of war. The play's creation of these parallels between ships and cities, storms and socio-political threats, may appear heavy-handed, but the conceit undergoes such endless permutations that the metaphors never cease to reveal new shades of meaning in the crisis facing Thebes. From Eteocles' wish, "let this war not capsize us," to the Chorus' "storming sea-noise," to the "swift sea-lashing words of a messenger," to the Chorus' claim that "our hull is the mere width of the city walls," these incessantly repeated naval metaphors come to form the conceptual and dramatic bedrock of the tragedy (Hecht & Bacon 99, 225, 360, 972). In *Seven*, this chaotic metaphorical sea rocks the

city from both within and without. Similarly, in the *Persians*, Xerxes and his army are punished for throwing a “slavish yoke” on the Hellespont and “trying to rule Poseidon.” The disastrous news of the Battle of Salamis—a naval conflict—haunts the play. And in the *Suppliants*, when confronted with the vexing choice of whether to accept or reject the Danaids, Pelasgus declares that “We must search deep for a thought that can save us... / like a diver combing the sea floor, / and surface again unharmed with an outcome / free of disaster for the state” (398-402). All of these instances posit some ethical dimension to one’s relationship to the sea or create a rich political analogy.

In his final work, Aeschylus crystallized his long-standing preoccupation with the sea in a single, striking image that dominates the *Agamemnon*: a sea of purple clothing. He takes the sea that has fueled his imagination and those of his characters and finally gives it a central role on stage, where it becomes a rich, symbolic battleground for wills and values: Hellenism versus barbarism, husband versus wife, and, ultimately, the “intra-domestic” sphere of women versus the “extra-domestic” sphere of men.<sup>37</sup>

From her opening remarks, Clytemnestra announces that her mind is “unconquered by sleep” (912: οὐχ ὑπνώ νικωμένη): the martial diction signals her determination to wage her own little Trojan War against Agamemnon. In this fight, she does to her husband what Poseidon does to Odysseus, tormenting him at sea and preventing him from coming home.<sup>38</sup> Cassandra’s assertion that, “She’s a Scylla housed on the cliffs to lash at ships,” also proves quite apt. Before explicitly declaring that, “There is a sea” (ἔστιν θάλασσα), Clytemnestra cryptically refers to the road that she has told her maids to create as a *poros* (πόρος), a term normally used to describe a narrow channel, or strait, between two

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<sup>37</sup> Scott Morrell, Kenneth. “The Fabric of Persuasion: Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, and the Sea of Garments.”

<sup>38</sup> Yet unlike Poseidon, she succeeds.

lands. In this, she fashions herself a kind of Scylla, one of the monsters who guards a treacherous, almost impassable channel in the *Odyssey*.

By spreading out a “sea” of gorgeous clothing before her husband, Clytemnestra recreates the Aegean in both its beauty and its peril.

But this characterization of the scene as a “battle” is somewhat misleading; the episode as a whole bears a closer resemblance to an ambush, or a guerrilla attack. Thinking that he has already survived the *makhē* (“war, battle”) abroad and difficult *nostos* across the sea, Agamemnon returns totally unprepared for more conflict. He does not, and cannot, understand the true stakes of the encounter. Since Clytemnestra has planned out the arc of the event in advance, he is forced to try to catch up to her ingenious mind.<sup>39</sup> Her aim is simple: to avenge the murder of Iphigenia in spectacular fashion. She sees Agamemnon’s homecoming as an opportunity for a perfectly orchestrated scene of revenge, one made all the sweeter not by the *biā* of murder (which is a mere formality to finalize his death), but by the subtler satisfaction gained from using language—wordplay and irony—to persuade her husband to pervert his values and destroy himself. He, meanwhile, approaches the encounter solipsistically, thinking only of his fame (“[My] fame bellows without foot-wipes”), the consequences that treading on the garments will have on his reputation among his people (“Rumors let loose among the people gather strength”), and how the gods will perceive or punish him (“If the gods are watching me walk / across this glimmering sea, I pray / their jealous eyes don’t pierce me”).

In “The Fabric of Persuasion,” Morrell notes that Agamemnon’s “reservations [about stepping on the clothes] are rooted in his self image as a man as opposed to a woman and a man as

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<sup>39</sup> One might say that she, like Odysseus, is *polytropos*—“much-turning,” infinitely clever and resourceful.

opposed to a god.”<sup>40</sup> His “self image” and self-centeredness in this passage triumph over all else, and so hinder his ability to read Clytemnestra. He seeks to protect his identity as a pious Greek male, commanding his wife, “Don’t pamper me like a woman,” and “Don’t gawk at me, wailing, face / to the dirt, like an Oriental.” Here, I have chosen to translate the phrase *barbarou photos dikēn* (“in the manner of a barbarian man”) [919-20: μηδὲ βαρβάρου φωτὸς (*barbarou photos*) δίκην / χαμαιπετέες βόαμα προσχάνης ἐμοί] as “like an Oriental” in order to convey its slightly racial overtones. In the *Persians*, the word *barbaros* often just carries the neutral meaning of “non-Greek,” since the play follows the perspective of the sympathetic Other. Here, though, Agamemnon’s contempt for Easterners and their practices is unmistakable. As a religiously circumspect Greek, he fears the *phthonos* (“envy”) that stepping on the garments might evoke in the gods: “As a mortal, I cannot step / on so much beauty without a sense of dread.”

Despite these apparent anxieties, his speech is not in any way a renunciation of honor or an expression of humility. As a victorious *anax*, the “Toppler of Troy,” as Clytemnestra calls him, he still wants to be revered (“I ask that you revere me [*sebein*] as a man—no god) as long as he is revered *correctly*. Lost in concerns about the gods’ judgment and about his image, Agamemnon overlooks the obvious: his relationship to his wife. It is difficult to believe that he cannot have foreseen that Clytemnestra would be seething with resentment towards him following Iphigenia’s death, and that she would enact this discontent when he came back from Troy. The fact that he calls his concubine, Cassandra, “the blossom I prize most” (*ἐξαίρετον ἄνθος*) in her presence is also either a sign of astonishing insensitivity or a deliberate provocation.

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<sup>40</sup> Morrell, 151-52.



And indeed, he treats his slave girl far better than he does Clytemnestra. Not once does he express affection towards his Queen. The most he grants her is the icy greeting, “Offspring of Leda, guardian of my house.” But even these are hardly compliments or honorifics: by emphasizing her connection to Leda, he puts her in conversation with the reviled Helen, while “guardian of *my* house” is possessive. Then he criticizes the length of her speech and rebukes her for attempting to praise him in the first place. Here we might contrast Agamemnon’s disrespect in this play with Darius’ greeting of Atossa in the *Persians*: “Woman who shared our marriage bed, / noble by birth and venerable in years.” Both kings have been separated from their wives for years—one away at war, the other in the grave—but it is conveniently the dead Persian despot who proves to be the better husband than the righteous Greek. With Cassandra, however, Agamemnon suddenly becomes a “gentle/soft” man and ruler (τὸν κρατοῦντα μαλθακῶς). He tells his attendants to “Show some kindness to this foreign girl / as you lead her indoors” (950-51: τὴν ξένην δὲ πρευμαίνῳς / τήνδ’ ἐσκόμιζε). “Foreign girl,” *xenē*, can also mean “female guest,” a reading which would only increase the disparity between his treatment of his wife and slave girl. Agamemnon’s ability to consider how Clytemnestra might feel (if he ever possessed it) has clearly been compromised. Whether this is a result of the intoxicating effects of power and victory, of his weariness from war, or of his generally self-centered character, it is hard to say.

Clytemnestra, of course, is very much attuned to her husband’s mental vulnerability. In the stichomythia that follows his reluctant speech, she perverts his values with lightning speed. Not a moment ago, he was saying with Darius-like assurance and didacticism that “to be blessed with a mind / that doesn’t stray toward evil / is the most precious of all god’s gifts,” that his fame already “bellows” without “foot-wipes,” and that he despises how barbarians venerate their kings. Then she catches him off guard with what is essentially a non-sequitur, asking if he would have “out of fear” vowed to

trample on clothes for the gods.<sup>41</sup> He confesses that he would, in fact, have done so, if a person with “good knowledge” (εἰδώς γ’ εἶ), such as a priest or an oracle, had advised him to.

But what does a hypothetical action from the past, spurred by fear, have anything to do with the present, when Agamemnon is neither desperate nor in danger? Does her phrase “vow to the gods” not say outright that trampling on clothes is meant only to please gods—not a way to revere men? He scarcely has time to consider the fallacy.

From addressing his theological concerns, she moves to quelling his anxiety about appearing like a barbarian by appealing to his desire for glory. She asks him: “What do you think Priam would’ve done if he had won?” This move shifts his general aversion to the “barbarian man” [*barbarou phatos*] onto his insecurity about being seen as inferior to Priam, the most famous *barbaros* king. But again, why should how Priam *would have* celebrated matter *now*? Here, Goldhill offers a fine analysis: “When Agamemnon sought to define the meaning of the act of stepping on the carpet<sup>42</sup> in one way, Clytemnestra demonstrated that such a meaning was not fixed but could be shifted, manipulated, first by the postulation of different circumstances and secondly by the realignment of the moral terms Agamemnon used to describe the argument” (13). In this way, her rhetoric causes her husband to entertain distracting “what-ifs” based in faulty reasoning that also, at the same time, tap into his hidden vanity.

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<sup>41</sup> Goldhill writes: “It was customary in the ancient world in times of stress or danger for a person to vow an expensive propitiatory offering to the gods. Offers of such sacrifices, particularly of hecatombs, are common in Homer. In such circumstances, it is normal and right to destroy or sacrifice a part of the household’s wealth” (12).

<sup>42</sup> Morrell’s “The Fabric of Persuasion,” following Denniston and Page’s argument (1957.148), persuasively shows that “A survey of *heima* [used throughout the exchange between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra] in other contexts shows that the term unambiguously refers to an outer garment, not to a “rug” or “carpet” as suggested by LSJ.” (Morrell, 155).

Agamemnon does not realize that a “battle” is taking place between them until the end of the stichomythia, when he says, “It’s not like a woman to crave battle [*makhē*]” (940: οὔτοι γυναικός ἐστιν ἰμείρειν μάχης). He then asks her, mocking her use of *nikasthai* (“to relent; to be conquered): “Does victory in this spat mean that much to you?” Since he is facing his wife in a non-martial setting, he does not take the fight seriously; after all, this isn’t Troy. His characterization of their argument as a “battle” and her win as a “victory” (*nikē*) is sarcastic and hyperbolic. Ironically, this moment of surrender is the closest Agamemnon ever gets to showing Clytemnestra anything remotely resembling affection. Perhaps recognizing that he has given her nothing thus far, and, at a deeper level, remembering the wound he left by sacrificing Iphigenia, he chooses to play along with her shenanigans, to walk across her sea, to throw the “hateful bitch” a bone.

## Appendix III: Literal Translation for *Agamemnon*

### The Sea of Clothes

#### **Clytemnestra**

Now, dear head,  
 step out of this chariot, but do not place your foot  
 upon the ground, O lord, destroyer of Ilium.  
 Maids—why do you delay?—you to whom the task had been set  
 to spread the path’s ground with garments.  
 May there be a straight passage spread with purple  
 into the house that had been beyond his hope, so Justice may lead him.  
 As for the rest, a mind unconquered by sleep  
 will put in place—justly, what has been ordained by the gods.

**Agamemnon**

Offspring of Leda, guardian of my house,  
 the way in which you spoke was like my absence:  
 you stretched out your speech. But to praise me  
 properly, this honor must come from others.  
 As for everything else: don't pamper me  
 in the ways of a woman, nor, per the custom of a barbarian man,  
 gape at me, wailing and prostrate,  
 nor, by strewing it with cloths, create a path that may incur envy.  
 One must honor the gods with these acts.  
 To be a mortal and to walk on dazzling works  
 of beauty—in my eyes, no, not without fear.  
 I tell you to revere me as a man, not a god.  
 Reputation cries aloud without foot-wipes and embroideries.  
 To not be disposed to evil is the greatest gift from god.  
 One must deem a life happy after ending in lovely well-being.  
 If I act in all these ways, I feel confident.

**Clytemnestra**

Tell me the following, in accordance with your mind.

**Agamemnon**

Know that I will not corrupt my mind.

**Clytemnestra**

Would you, out of fear, have vowed to the gods to perform such acts?

**Agamemnon**

Indeed, if someone with good knowledge had said to fulfill them.

**Clytemnestra**

What do you think Priam would have done, if he had triumphed like you?

**Agamemnon**

I certainly think he would have stepped on dazzling garments.

**Clytemnestra**

Don't be ashamed now of men's reproach.

**Agamemnon**

A great rumor spoken by the people is very powerful.

**Clytemnestra**

But he who isn't envied can't be admired.

**Agamemnon**

Certainly it's not like a woman to crave battle.

**Clytemnestra**

But it is proper for the fortunate to give way.

**Agamemnon**

And you, longing for a fight, value this victory?

**Clytemnestra**

Be persuaded. You are mighty in yielding willingly to me.

**Agamemnon**

Well then, if you conceive such things, someone  
 should quickly loosen my sandals, the slaves which hold my feet.  
 And as I walk upon these sea-dyed garments, may no jealousy  
 from the gods' eyes strike me from afar.  
 For it is a great shame to destroy one's house with feet  
 by defiling wealth and weavings bought with silver.

So much for those thoughts. Now graciously guide  
 this female guest into the house. From afar,  
 the god looks kindly upon the man who rules gently.  
 For no one willingly gives himself to the servile yoke.  
 This girl here, the chosen blossom of my many possessions,  
 a gift from the army, followed me home.

Now since I have subjected myself to listen to these commands of yours,  
 I am going into the halls of my house, walking upon purple cloths.

**Clytemnestra**

There is the sea—who will exhaust it?—  
 breeding an ever-renewing ooze of abundant purple,  
 worth as much as silver, a dye for garments.

Our house, O lord, has this in plenty by the grace of the gods.  
 It has no knowledge of being poor.  
 I would have vowed the walk across these many robes  
 had I been commanded by the house's oracles  
 as I was devising a ransom for your life.  
 While the root lives, the leaves come to the house,  
 spreading a shadow over Sirius, the Dog Star.  
 And when you came back to the house's hearth,  
 it signals a warmth come in winter.  
 When Zeus prepares wine from the bitter grape,  
 then, at that point, a coolness fills the house,  
 a man fulfilled, moving about his home.  
     Zeus, Zeus Fulfiller, fulfill my prayers:  
 care for the things which you intend to fulfill.

## Translating the *Agamemnon*

Oh, Clytemnestra! How could we ever translate you?

εὐθὺς γενέσθω πορφυρόστρωτος πόρος  
 ἐς δῶμ' ἄελπτον ὡς ἂν ἡγήται δίκη.

Literal:

**May there be a straight passage spread with purple  
 into the house that had been beyond his hope, so Justice may lead him.**

Final:

**I told you to spread clothing  
 on the ground to make a path leading  
 to our house, the home he never hoped  
 he'd see again—a straight road soaked**

**in violet dye. Justice will escort him.**

I have reprised my “violet” sonic effect from the *Suppliants* passage to bring out a lurking sense of doom, once again dyeing the “purple” or “crimson” of πορφυρόστρωτος a different, but more devilish, shade. Violet, I will admit, is a less intense color than purple or crimson; it doesn’t as easily evoke blood, which the sea of clothes so wonderfully suggests. But I have gone a step further than in the *Suppliants*’ “violet sea.” Violet now rings with dye. The clothes have been “soaked” in violet dye, in a literal sense, but soaked also looks forward to the king’s blood that will be spilled inside the palace. Welcome, Agamemnon, to your violent death.

**Now that I’ve resigned myself to listen  
to your will, watch me as I walk  
into our home on violet clothes.**

I could not resist another violet opportunity.

**Ζεῦ, Ζεῦ τέλειε, τὰς ἐμὰς εὐχὰς τέλει:  
μέλοι δέ τοι σοὶ τῶν περ ἂν μέλλῃς τελεῖν.**

Literal:

**Zeus, Zeus Fulfiller, fulfill my prayers:  
care for the things which you intend to fulfill.**

Final:

**Zeus, O Zeus Fulfiller,  
fulfill my prayers!  
Take them to heart, and execute them.**

Clytemnestra, zealous in her mission, repeats the verb *telein* three times. It means to finish, end, fulfill. *Telos*, as a noun, can mean anything from deed, to marriage, to death. But we must

remember that this woman knows every connotation of every word she uses. Here, I have chosen to hint at death in her final use of *telein*. “Execute” my prayers, she says. *Execute my husband.*



## Conclusion

In 454 BCE, two years after Aeschylus' death, the Aegean Sea was shaken at the birthplace of Apollo.

Rumors abounded in the agora. The Delian League's recent expedition into Egypt to help aid the anti-Persian prince, Inarus, had just failed. Rich, haughty Athenians, who were building new, beautiful houses from all the silver flowing into the city, told their political leaders, *Make it happen, now. Remember what Themistocles had said? "He who commands the sea has command of everything."*

Using the failed expedition as an excuse, Athens abruptly moved the treasury of the League from Delos—a tiny, rocky island in the center of the Sea, and the mythical birthplace of Apollo—to their own city. The wealth of Greece was theirs to control, the silver theirs to hoard. The alliance of over three hundred city-states—a pan-Hellenic community that had kept uneasy peace in the region for twenty-five years, that had provided a bulwark against Persian aggression, that had virtually ended piracy in the Aegean, and that had spread democracy to many city-states, ushering in a supposedly enlightened era—was now firmly in the hands of one *polis* (Cartwright). As the 40s and 30s wore on, Athens flexed its ever more imperial ambitions, using force to subdue cities that wanted to leave the League. All of Greece now felt a new kind of threat emerging, one within their own borders. It did not look like the types of tyranny they knew. There were no *barbaroi* to bark at.

Soon, the Fathers of History—Herodotus and Thucydides—would feel compelled to invent a whole new genre of writing to record what they and their countrymen were witnessing. There was anger and jealousy and fear in the air. With Aeschylus gone, the next generation of Greeks would have to invent new ways to translate power, to make some sense out of its enormity.

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