

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Persians

Aeschylus

Story

The play opens at a fateful moment for the Persian Empire, which is awaiting news of the navy of Xerxes, the King's son and the military commander of the fleet. Xerxes has directed this powerful military force to attack the Greeks. The Persian Queen mother, deep in anxiety over the fate of her son's expedition, recounts to her court attendants a dream she has had that night; it portends badly. At this point a messenger enters the hall, with the news that Xerxes' fleet has been devastated at the naval battle in Salamis. The messenger recounts the bloody denouement of the struggle, reports on the great men who have lost their lives, and reports that Xerxes has escaped and is on his way back to Persia. When he arrives, the Queen is horrified by the ragged condition of her son, and by the prospects for her ravaged nation. The remainder of the play (the last 150 lines) consists of an extensive choral dialogue between the defeated king and the chorus.

Themes.

Awaiting. This brief play opens with a chorus of anxious old men of Susa, the capitol of the Persian Empire. They are waiting for news from the Battle of Salamis; their worry is only increased by the announcement, from the Queen Mother, that she has that very night been disturbed by an ominous dream concerning the plight of the navy. Every eye is watching for the arrival of a messenger, with news of the battle.

Despair. When the messenger brings his dreadful news, all those present at the court are consumed with grief and desperation. King Xerxes himself soon arrives, and witnesses to the ravages of this defeat; the chorus gives in to hopelessness.

Victory. The play is more complex than it seems. The messenger is a literalist, and includes, in his account of the battle, the On to Victory chant which the Greek forces are calling forth. As we review this messenger report we have to ask ourselves whether the present play is about sympathy for the losers (the enemy; the Persians) or about the unstoppable forward power of the Greeks. There is an ambiguity (or richness) permanently attached to the play.

Characters

Atossa. The Queen Mother of the Persian Empire, widow of Darius and mother of Xerxes.

Messenger. Breathless Persian herald, who returns from the naval battlefield, at Salamis, to report on the dreadful defeat to the Persian court.

Ghost of Darius. At the tomb of her husband, Atossa absorbs the councils of Darius, who moans at the hubris of Xerxes, in attempting to build a bridge across the Hellespont, and in attacking the Greeks at Salamis, which naval battle turned out to be a terrible loss for the Persians.

Xerxes, the son of Darius, and leader of the Greek military force. Severely defeated at battle of Salamis.

Chorus of Persian elders.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

In this brief play, just over one thousand words in length, there is little depth of characterization, though there is a huge upwelling of emotion throughout the play.; anxiety for news, then despair at the calamitous news.

ATOSSE Atossa is the main character, for it is to her trepidations and forebodings that we owe the intense sense of terror that pervades the play as a whole. Upon receiving rumors of the defeat of Xerxes' fleet, the Queen senses that the entire expedition will fail. By the messenger's report she is stunned; even more so when Xerxes returns in tatters. She is a broken figure as she listens to Xerxes' account of the fighting, and incidentally reflects on the dire dream-predictions of her husband Darius, for future defeats lying *ahead* of the Persians.

Anxious. Anxious for news of her husband, Xerxes, Atossa dominates the first half of the play. She is with the equally frightened chorus of old men, and between them they whip up a mood of fear—which translates into a keen spectator fascination. Atossa is at her most menacing and obsessed as she recites the warnings passed onto her in dream, by her dead husband Darius.

Stunned. When Atossa sees the figure of Xerxes, tattered and ragged, returning from his defeat at Salamis, she is overcome by pity and dread. It is at this point, if ever, that Aeschylus wishes to create a play about the horrors of war—the closest he comes to that preoccupation which is so dominant in the dramas of Euripides.

Parallels. In his play, *The Frogs* (405 B.C.E.) Aristophanes mocks the lamentations of the Persians, making no effort to sympathize with the suffering losers. The Persian chorus is derided for their helpless nostalgia, calling as they do for a return to the great old days of Darius, now hopelessly forgotten. Aeschylus' play, with its profuse dramatic effects, and operatic staging, has reacquired currency on the modern stage and in the poetry of our era. At least two vigorous stage adaptations—both anti-war—have spun off of the original *Persians*—and splendid passages of poetry have taken their flight from such brilliant and breathless language as the messenger's speech. (T. S. Eliot, in *The Wasteland*, 'The Burial of the Dead,' fashions the splendid line, 'I had not thought Death had undone so many,' an echo of line 432 of the Messenger account in *The Persians*.)

Discussion Questions

The Athenian responsible for outfitting the chorus and performers, for the present early play of Aeschylus, was Pericles, who was to become the most illustrious spokesperson for Athenian democracy, during the Peloponnesian Wars. What do you know, about the role of *choregos*, which Pericles performed here? How did he acquire the assignment? What skills did he need, in order to fulfill the assignment?

How does the present play mesh with (what we know of) the two other plays in the trilogy to which it belonged? (We can only conjecture the nature of those two plays, but nonetheless what can we learn from the fragments of them?)

Do you think the present play provides evidence that the Athenian theater public could tolerate a drama which foregrounds the power and cruelty of the Greek forces?