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Persians By Aeschylus

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Introduction to Persians by Aeschylus: The Oldest Surviving Greek Tragedy

Among the treasures of ancient Greek drama, **Persians by Aeschylus** holds a singular place. First performed in 472 BCE, it is the oldest surviving play in the history of Western theatre and remains a powerful, haunting exploration of defeat, hubris, and the human cost of war. Unlike most Greek tragedies, which drew on mythology, Aeschylus chose a recent historical event: the Persian invasion of Greece and the crushing Greek victory at the Battle of Salamis, which took place only eight years before the play's premiere. What makes **Persians by Aeschylus**especially remarkable is that it presents this triumph not from the victors' perspective, but from the anguished viewpoint of the defeated Persian Empire. This inversion of narrative gives the play a timeless quality, prompting audiences to reflect on the universality of suffering and the folly of imperial overreach. In this article, we will delve into the historical context, structure, characters, major themes, and lasting influence of this extraordinary tragedy.

Historical Background: Athens and the Persian Wars

To fully appreciate **Persians by Aeschylus**, one must understand the events that inspired it. In the early fifth century BCE, the Achaemenid Persian Empire, under King Darius I and later his son Xerxes, sought to expand its dominion into mainland Greece. The first Persian invasion was repelled at Marathon in 490 BCE, but Xerxes launched a second, far larger invasion in 480 BCE. The Greeks, led by Athens and Sparta, mounted a desperate defense. The pivotal naval engagement at Salamis in September 480 BCE saw the outnumbered Greek fleet destroy the Persian navy, forcing Xerxes to retreat. This victory saved Greek independence and fostered an era of Athenian cultural and political dominance, known as the Golden Age.

Aeschylus himself had fought at Marathon (and possibly Salamis), so **Persians by Aeschylus**is a work of a veteran who understood war intimately. The play was performed at the City Dionysia festival in Athens, a competition of tragedies, where it won first prize. Its perspective is astonishing: rather than celebrating Athenian glory, Aeschylus sympathizes with the enemy, depicting the Persians as noble yet doomed by their king's arrogance. This empathy serves as a profound moral commentary on the cyclical nature of violence and the fragility of power.

The Structure and Plot of Persians

Persians by Aeschylusis relatively short and taut, with a simple plot driven by anxiety and revelation. It opens with the entrance of the Chorus of Persian elders, who represent the elders of Susa, the Persian capital. They sing of the immense army that has left for Greece and express growing unease at the lack of news. The chorus's odes are rich with geographical references to the vast Persian Empire — Babylon, Ecbatana, and the shores of Asia — emphasizing the scale of Xerxes' ambition.

Enter the Queen Atossa

The Queen Mother, Atossa (the widow of Darius and mother of Xerxes), then appears, distressed by ominous dreams. She recounts a vision of two women, one in Persian dress and one in Greek, yoked to a chariot; the Greek woman breaks free, and Xerxes is thrown. The Chorus advises her to offer libations and pray to the gods. Atossa also asks about Athens, and the Chorus famously describes the Athenians as “slaves to no man” — a key line underscoring the ideological clash between Persian autocracy and Greek freedom.

A Messenger Brings News of Disaster

The turning point arrives with the entry of a Persian messenger, who delivers a devastating report of the Battle of Salamis. This speech is one of the earliest and most vivid battle narratives in drama. He describes the Greek fleet’s cunning tactics: they appeared to retreat, luring the Persians into the narrow straits, then attacked with ramming maneuvers. The Persian ships, too many and disorganized, collided with one another. The messenger’s account is graphic, showing bodies drowning, the sea filled with wreckage, and the Persian elite slaughtered. He concludes that Xerxes survives, but his army is destroyed. The emotional impact on the Chorus and Atossa is profound.

Evocation of Darius’ Ghost

In a powerful sequence, Atossa and the Chorus perform rituals to summon the ghost of King Darius. The ghost rises from his tomb and, learning of the disaster, interprets it as divine punishment for Xerxes’ hubris — his blasphemous bridging of the Hellespont (the strait between Europe and Asia) and his attempt to conquer Greece. Darius’ ghost warns against further aggression and prophesies another Persian defeat at Plataea (which historically occurred the year after Salamis, in 479 BCE). This scene adds a layer of cosmic justice: the Persians’ suffering is seen as a consequence of overstepping boundaries set by the gods.

Xerxes’ Lament

The final scene presents Xerxes himself, returning in rags, a shadow of the magnificent king who set out. He engages in a lyrical, antiphonal lament with the Chorus, mourning the destruction of his empire and the loss of his bravest men. The play closes on a note of communal grief, as Xerxes tears his robes and the Chorus joins him in deep sorrow. There is no catharsis in the Aristotelian sense; instead, the audience is left with a stark tableau of ruin.

Key Characters and Their Roles

While **Persians by Aeschylus** has no protagonist in the conventional Greek sense, three figures dominate:

- Atossa: The Queen Mother provides a maternal perspective, anxious and dignified. She serves as a bridge between the Chorus and the supernatural. Her questions to the Chorus about Athens allow Aeschylus to insert political commentary.
- The Messenger: An anonymous figure, his role is purely functional but crucial. He transforms the distant battle into a tangible horror. His report is the emotional heart of the play.
- Darius’ Ghost: The former king represents wisdom, piety, and the old order of the Persian Empire that was successful because it respected divine limits. His appearance offers a moral lesson: hubris leads to downfall. He contrasts sharply with his living son Xerxes.
- Xerxes: He appears only at the end, broken and weeping. His character is less developed than the others; he is more a symbol of failure than a fully realized individual. Yet his lament humanizes him and evokes pity.

Major Themes in Persians by Aeschylus

Hubris and Divine Retribution

The central theme of **Persians by Aeschylus** is the Greek concept of *hubris* — excessive pride that offends

the gods (and human) by invites hubris is epitomized by his bridging of the Hellespont, a natural division meant to separate Europe and Asia. The ghost of Darius explicitly states that Xerxes “thought to bind the sacred Hellespont” and treat the sea as a slave, an act of foolish arrogance. The gods, in Aeschylus’ view, enforce a cosmic balance: no mortal, no matter how powerful, can overstep. This moral framework is universal, not limited to Persia.

The Fragility of Power and Wealth

The play repeatedly emphasizes the ephemeral nature of empire. The Chorus speaks of the immense wealth of Persia — gold, silver, and countless troops — but all of it vanishes in a single day at Salamis. Atossa’s dreams and the messenger’s report show how quickly fortune can reverse. This theme came with a sharp irony for the Athenian audience: while they celebrated victory, they were also reminded that their own democratic empire might one day fall. Aeschylus subtly cautions against the very triumphalism that the play’s subject might provoke.

Empathy for the Enemy

Perhaps the most striking aspect of **Persians by Aeschylus**is its humanization of the Persian people. They are not barbaric villains but complex individuals who feel grief, loyalty, and fear. Atossa is a caring mother; the Chorus are loyal advisors; Darius is a wise ruler. Even Xerxes, despite his fatal error, is pitiable in his defeat. This empathetic portrayal challenges the audience to see beyond enemy lines and recognize shared humanity. It remains a powerful anti-war statement, especially resonant in modern times.

Divine Justice vs. Human Agency

The play wavers between attributing the Persian defeat to divine punishment and acknowledging human mistakes. Darius’ ghost insists it is the gods’ work, yet the messenger’s account shows tactical errors and poor leadership. Aeschylus leaves room for interpretation: perhaps the gods use human stupidity as their instrument. The collapse of the Persian fleet is both a natural consequence of overconfidence and a theological sign of Zeus’s will.

Literary and Dramatic Techniques

Aeschylus employs several techniques that make **Persians by Aeschylus** a masterpiece of early drama. The use of the Chorus is central; their odes build atmosphere, provide background, and express collective emotion. The messenger’s speech is a fine example of *rhesis*— a continuous narrative that brings the offstage action onto the stage with vivid imagery. The ghost scene introduces the supernatural, common in Aeschylus’ works, to underline moral gravity. The final lament uses lyric meters and antiphonal singing, creating a musical, ritualistic closure. In terms of stagecraft, the play likely used few props, relying on costumes (the ragged robes of Xerxes) and the actors’ voices to convey the pathos.

Historical Accuracy and Dramatic License

While **Persians by Aeschylus**is based on real events, Aeschylus took liberties for dramatic effect. The Persians are portrayed as experiencing the defeat seconds after it happens, but in reality, news would have taken weeks to reach Susa. The role of the Greeks is minimal; Athens is mentioned but never appears as a character. The ghost of Darius was a creative addition — no such event occurred. Importantly, Aeschylus omits any mention of Greek heroism or specific battles except Salamis, focusing solely on the losers. This selectivity serves his thematic purpose: to examine defeat rather than celebrate victory.

Legacy and Influence

Persians by Aeschylushas endured for over two millennia. It has been translated and performed countless times, with notable modern productions highlighting its anti-war message. During the Persian Gulf War in 1990,

a production in New York used the play to critique American imperialism. The play's structure influenced later tragedies, and its theme of hubris remains a staple of Western literature. It also stands as an invaluable historical document, offering insights into how the Greeks perceived their Persian adversaries — not as monsters, but as a great civilization humbled by its own arrogance.

In scholarly terms, **Persians by Aeschylus**is often studied alongside Herodotus' histories, as both attempt to make sense of the Persian Wars. However, Aeschylus' tragedy provides a more introspective, emotional perspective. It raises questions that still resonate: What does victory cost? How do we comprehend the suffering of our enemies? Can power be wielded without hubris?

Conclusion

In **Persians by Aeschylus**, we encounter a work of profound humanity. It is not a jingoistic celebration of Greek victory but a meditation on defeat, loss, and the dangers of unchecked ambition. Through the anguish of Atossa, the wisdom of Darius, and the broken figure of Xerxes, Aeschylus crafts a narrative that transcends its time and place. The play reminds us that history's winners and losers are bound by the same emotions and frailties. As the oldest surviving Greek tragedy, it sets a high standard for using the stage to explore the moral complexities of war. For any student of literature, history, or human nature, **Persians by Aeschylus**remains an essential, moving, and thought-provoking experience.

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