SHORTER NOTES

WHY HADES WAS CRAMMED WITH PERSIANS

It is a major thesis of A.F. Garvie's admirable recent edition of Aeschylus' *Persae* (Oxford, 2009; henceforth 'Garvie') that the play offers no definitive explanation for the catastrophic outcome of Xerxes' invasion of Greece, and in particular that the reasons for the disaster presented by the ghost of Darius are not to be regarded as authoritative: 'Aeschylus has set out side by side amoral and moral explanations of human suffering, and he has left us to choose between them.'[1] Two main arguments are presented for this contention. I here attempt to show that both are wrong.

(1) It is claimed that the chorus assert in the parodos (101–14) that it is Persia's divine destiny to conquer the sea as well as the land.[2] If Aeschylus had wanted the chorus to say this, it would have been very easy for him to make them do so, by allowing the content of the antistrophe (108–14), like that of the strophe (101–7), to be governed by *θεόθεν … Μοῖρ' … ἐπέσκηψε … Πέρσαις* 'by divine decree … Destiny … imposed on the Persians' (101–2); in fact he carefully avoids doing this, and starts afresh with a new governing verb, *ἔμαθον* 'they have learned', of which the Persians themselves are the subject and which carries no hint of divine dispensation. The chorus's language does not necessarily entail that Persia's divine destiny excluded overseas expansion, but it certainly does not come near implying that it included it. Of course, like other mortals (including Xerxes), the chorus do not *know* what the will of the gods is in these matters; they can only infer it from experience, and they may be right or wrong. Incidentally, I see no justification for Garvie's claim[3] that the antistrophe refers *both* to seafaring *and* to the Hellespont bridge; if he is right (as I believe he is) to take 113–14 ('trusting in cables made of thin strands and in devices for transporting an army') as referring exclusively to the bridge, then the whole stanza must refer to it, since this is the only method of crossing the sea that is mentioned – we have heard in the preceding lines about the waters, the waves and the winds,[4] but nothing at all has been said about ships. This is important, because while Persia had certainly launched maritime expeditions before (and we shall hear about them in the third stasimon [880–97] and in earlier references to Marathon [236, 244, 287–9, 474–5]) she had

[1] Garvie xxxi.

[2] Garvie on 1–139 (pp. 47–9).

[3] Garvie on 108–14 (pp. 81–3).

[4] The Persians have learned *εὐροπόροιο θαλάσσας πολιαινομένας πνεύματι λάβρῳ ἐσορᾶν πόντιον ἄλσος* ('to look on the level expanse of the sea, its broad waters whitened by rough winds'). If *ἐσορᾶν* is sound (about which I remain doubtful; see *Aeschylus: Persians, Seven against Thebes, Suppliants, Prometheus Bound* [Cambridge, MA, 2008], 25 n. 17), its point may be, not so much that 'even to look on the open sea is … a remarkable achievement' (Garvie 82), but that *looking* on the sea is all that the Persians have done – they have not needed to do any actual sea*faring*.

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never, according to this play's editing of history, attempted to turn sea into land as Xerxes did; for the invasion of Scythia, for which Darius had the Bosporus bridged,[5] is ignored throughout.[6]

(2) It is argued[7] that in the scenes following the departure of the ghost, no reference is made to the explanations he has given for the calamity. This is true – and irrelevant. The chorus had wondered in the first stasimon (554–7) how it was possible to explain the contrast between Darius' almost unbroken success and Xerxes' terrible failure. The next thing that happens is the return of the Queen and her request to the chorus to summon up Darius' ghost. And from the ghost, sometimes with the concurrence of the Queen, we hear a whole series of explanations.

(a) As soon as Darius hears that Xerxes has led the whole strength of Persia against Greece, he describes this as an act of folly (719); later he says that Xerxes has disregarded explicit instructions which he had given or left (783), and advises the Persians never to invade Greece again 'because the land itself fights for them' (790–2). An Athenian audience would certainly remember (even without all the earlier reminders) that Darius had sent an army against Greece which had been badly beaten, and would easily understand why he had advised his son not to make a second attempt, into which, according to the Queen, Xerxes had been talked by evil advisers (753–8).

(b) When the Queen mentions the bridging of the Hellespont (722), the ghost expresses surprise, and the Queen then says that 'some divinity must have touched his wits'; Darius agrees that Xerxes must have been 'out of his right mind' (725, cf. 750–1), and later makes it clear (742–52) that he regards this as the cause of the disaster, because it was an assertion of superiority to the gods and in particular to Poseidon (749–50) – making it, of course, appropriate that the result should be a great defeat at sea. The chorus had not taken anything like this view of the bridging of the strait, referring to it three times in the parodos (68–72, 113–14, 130–2) in quite neutral terms, with no hint that there might be anything improper about it. But we now find that the Queen – who has not previously mentioned the bridge at all – takes a different view,[8] which Darius powerfully endorses.

(c) The Persians' sufferings, and in particular the coming catastrophe of Plataea, are also ascribed by Darius to their having plundered and destroyed Greek sanctuaries (807–22); this is spoken of as *hybris* (808, 821) – the only times this word appears in the play – and as 'godless arrogance' (808).

If the rest of the play proceeded as though these pronouncements had not been made, or contained statements by the chorus or the Queen inconsistent with them, we might well conclude that Garvie was right. But in fact this is not what happens.

Immediately after his denunciation of the impiety and folly of the invaders, Darius tells the chorus that 'with this in mind' (*πρὸς ταῦτ'*) they should admonish Xerxes when he comes home (829–31); he also tells his widow to bring her son new clothes and 'calm him down with kindly words' (832–8). The Queen goes off to carry out these instructions (but never returns). The chorus sing an ode (852–907) which, according to Garvie (p. 325), 'shows no sign of having learnt anything from Darius'. It certainly does not refer explicitly to anything he said; but it also contrasts the success of Darius with the failure of Xerxes without

[5] Hdt. 4.83–9.

[6] As Garvie rightly says on 652–6 (pp. 267–8; cf. pp. xxx–xxxi), 'the contrast between Darius and Xerxes … requires that … there can be no mention of … the Scythian expedition'.

[7] Garvie xxx, 275, 325.

[8] Perhaps (we cannot tell) only with the benefit of hindsight.

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expressing, as previously, any bewilderment as to why they should have fared so differently. Nothing in the ode is in the least degree inconsistent with (a–c) above.

Then Xerxes returns; and Garvie claims[9] that in the ensuing *exodos* the disaster is again presented, as it had been in the first half of the play, as the inexplicable work of an unspecified deity or deities. It is certainly so seen by Xerxes, who calls it 'utterly unpredictable' (910); but then he has not had the advantage of hearing what the Ghost had to say – and we already know, because the Ghost told us, that he has forgotten the advice his father had once given him. The chorus had been told to admonish Xerxes; they do a great deal more than that, condemning him personally as the killer of all those lost in the war, as 'the man who crammed Hades with Persians' (922–4) – which must mean that, like Darius, they hold him culpable for the launching of the expedition, for acts of extreme folly committed during it, or (most likely) for both. They do not go into specifics, and they do not need to, for Xerxes at once admits his responsibility (933–4) – interestingly saying that he has been a bane to his nation and to the land of his *father* (not his fathers: πατρῴᾳ rather than πατρίᾳ). And again, nothing said thereafter in the long *kommos* is inconsistent with the words of the Ghost, or requires the chorus to have forgotten them. That the disaster is repeatedly ascribed to a divinity or divinities (921, 942, 1005) does not in the least negate Xerxes' guilt.[10]

It is certainly true, as Garvie insists (xxxii), that an important message of the play is that one often cannot be sure, *in advance*, whether one is overstepping a divinely ordained limit – a thought not without significance for the Athenians, now beginning to feel themselves a major power in the Greek world, and even beyond, for the first time. Darius met with success in all his expeditions (or all that we are allowed to hear about) until he attacked Athens: there was no way he could have told in advance that that time he would fail. And Xerxes, though he was culpable for disobeying the dying injunctions of his father, likewise could not have known that he was wrong to suppose that the previous expedition had failed only because it had not been made on a large enough scale. Even the bridging of the Hellespont cannot at the time have seemed an *obviously* monstrous act, to judge by the matter-of-fact view the Elders take of it in the parodos. Only the acts of sacrilege committed in Greece itself are blatantly impious outrages – and only they, in the play, are called hybristic. But Garvie is not just denying the proposition 'Xerxes ought to have seen in advance – even without the help of his father's advice – that invading Greece, or bridging the Hellespont, was bound to lead to trouble'. He is denying that the play invites its audience to perceive these actions, *even in hindsight*, as being unequivocally the major causes of the Persian disaster. And nothing in the text warrants such a denial.

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[9] Garvie xxxi, 342–3, 345.

[10] In accordance with the well-known principle of double determination whereby, as Richard Buxton has put it, 'the omnipresence of divine influence on human action in tragedy does not negate the importance of human choice' (R.G.A. Buxton, 'Tragedy and Greek myth', in R.D. Woodard [ed.], *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology* [Cambridge, 2007], 166–89, at 182; see also A.H. Sommerstein, *Aeschylean Tragedy* [London, 2010²], 262–7, on what is there labelled the 'Maradona Principle').

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