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Maternal Authority and Heroic Disgrace in Aeschylus's *Persae*

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SUMMARY: This essay will address the question, why is a mother figure so central to the plot and staging of the *Persae*? To answer this question, I look first at the mother-son dynamic in early epic, and then to a closer parallel, Aeschylus's Clytemnestra. Such comparisons show that we are to understand the Persian queen in a more positive light than has been recently argued. I conclude that the character of the queen plays a pivotal role in framing the return of Xerxes. Her presence, combined with the play's repeated images of maternal fecundity and loss, serves to intensify her son's public disgrace in the final scene, as well as to underscore his mortality.

THE DEFEAT OF PERSIA ON AESCHYLUS'S STAGE TAKES THE FORM OF AN AGED MOTHER who awaits the return of her son from war; although he eventually returns, the two never meet. In the view of many, the unnamed queen's principal function is to present the tragedy of Xerxes before he returns; once he arrives onstage and narrates his trials, her character becomes dramatically irrelevant.[1] Yet she is onstage the longest, delivers the second largest number of lines (apart from the chorus), and lends coherence to the entrances and

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[1] See Garvie 1978: 68; Schenker 1994: 290 and n. 26. The play does not mention the queen's name, although it appears in the cast of characters, probably because ancient scholars adopted it from Herodotus. I have followed the convention of the play, and most scholars, in referring to her simply as the queen; for a discussion, see Wilamowitz 1914: 48; Broadhead 1960: 189; Michelini 1982: 27 n. 4; Podlecki 1991: 63; and Hall 1997: 121. Harrison 2000: 47 and n. 44 claims that the queen was not named in the play

exits of all of the other characters in the play.[2] Moreover, she plays a critical narratological role: it is the queen who receives the report of Persian casualties at Salamis from the herald, and it is she who relays this news to the ghost of Darius. Her dramatic presence further appears exceptional if one considers that in Herodotus's account, Xerxes left not the queen, but his cousin, Artabanus, in charge of the palace when he departed for Greece in 480 BCE (Hdt. 7.52). In the *Agamemnon*, a play that makes use of a similar *nostos* structure, it is a wife, not a mother, who awaits the return of the hero. Aeschylus could just as easily have made Xerxes' wife, Amestris, the central figure in the *Persae*, especially given the prominent images of wives lamenting over empty marriage beds in the play's choral odes (A. *Pers.* 134–7, 537–45).[3] Instead, the *Persae* tells the story through the eyes of a mother.[4] This paper explores how the focus on motherhood and maternity frames the play's central action, the return of Xerxes.

As the daughter of Cyrus, the wife of the former king Darius, and the mother of Xerxes, the queen links together three generations of king.[5] For some, she is a model of maternal solicitude, anxious only about the welfare of her son.[6] In this respect, the queen affords a personal perspective on the war

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because she did not need to be. See also Brosius 1996: 16–17 and Groeneboom 1960: 42 and n. 113, who argue that the lack of a name is meant to convey the queen's status as a fictional character.

The Greek text of Aeschylus' *Persae* used throughout is that of Broadhead 1960.

[2] Michelini 1982: 129. One of the older debates about the play concerns its unity. Ireland 1986: 167 argues that because the dramatic action culminates with the return of the king, Xerxes, though absent, "stands at the hub"; see also Anderson 1970: 174 n. 2; and Ireland 1973: 165–8. Others have proposed the chorus as the tragic hero, for which see Perotta 1931: 55. To be sure, they speak the majority of the lines, almost half of those in the play, but the queen remains on stage the longest and speaks the second largest number of lines of all the characters, after the herald, almost half of whose lines narrate the battle of Salamis (353–432).

[3] On the similarity of this play to the *Agamemnon*, see Anderson 1972: 174 n. 1, where he observes a parallelism between the return of Agamemnon and that of Xerxes, as well as a similar emphasis on costly cloth; see also Conacher 1974: 150 n. 12 and *passim*.

[4] Scholars emphasizing her status as a mother include Broadhead 1960: xxvi, who refers to her "intense devotion to her son"; cf. Patin 1877: I.233; Smyth 1924: 85–6; Podlecki 1983: 23–7, 1991: 10–12; and the more recent discussion of Harrison 2000: 77 and 148, n. 10.

[5] Brosius 1996: 17; for the same idea, see also Michelini 1982: 139, who terms her a "genealogical link" between Darius and Xerxes.

[6] Alexanderson 1967: 9 emphasizes "a mother's concern for her son"; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1983: 24, similarly speaks of the queen as "a model of motherly care."

that contrasts with the more overtly political concerns of the male chorus.[7] Others have argued the opposite: instead of providing care and comfort, she embodies the "savagery and brutality" of her son and the Persian people.[8] Her narrow focus on her child betokens not laudable maternal concern but a despicable form of self-interest that puts the welfare of her family before that of the state.[9] Harrison has argued more recently that the queen's "selfish, superficial, and petulant" character reflects Greek narratives of the excessive influence of Persian royal women over their sons (Harrison 2000: 81).[10] Still others have identified her with the over-protective and ambitious mother of the spoiled, timocratic youth in Plato's *Laws* (Pl. *Laws* 694a2–5, c1–3, d1–7, 695d6–e5).[11]

Greek mothers seem to have been expected to exert a degree of influence over their sons, both in the literary tradition and in the classical polis, where they often played an active—albeit behind-the-scenes—role in shaping their social and political identity. In democratic Athens, women were "essential in creating the political status of their households, their sons and daughters, and upholding the citizen status of their male relatives and affines" (Foxhall 1996: 140). Johnstone has more recently challenged the nature of this power, arguing that women, because they operated within the domestic sphere and relied completely on relationships of personal trust, rather than on the impersonal and informal relationships of surveillance that characterized the polis, had substantially less power than men (Johnstone 2003: 269). However, he concludes with the acknowledgement that women's authority in the classical polis derived largely from their status as the mothers of sons, a relationship that seems to have been particularly close.[12] The fact that Pericles' citizenship

[7] For her personal perspective, see Conacher 1974: 155–6; Ireland 1973: 43; Griffith 1998: 56; Harrison 2000: 78–82. The significance of the duality of the queen and the chorus is most fully developed by Schenker 1994; see also Broadhead 1960: xxv–xxvi; Conacher 1974: 155–6; Garvie 1978: 67; Dworacki 1979: 104; and Michelini 1982: 92.

[8] Clifton 1963: 114 bases his claim of the queen's cruelty on her simple question, "Is the city of Athens still unsacked?" (ἔτ' ἆρ' Ἀθηνῶν ἔστ' ἀπόρθητος πόλις, 348). For a recuperative analysis, see Hall 1997: 120–1.

[9] Schenker 1994: 288 speaks somewhat pejoratively of the queen's "narrow identification with her son," in contrast to the more laudable civic-mindedness of the chorus.

[10] A portrait of the domineering wife and mother is found at Pl. *Rep.* 549c–50b; for a psychoanalytic interpretation, see Walcot 1987.

[11] For a discussion of this idea in relation to Aeschylus's *Persae*, see Griffith 1998: 28–30, and 53–55; on this passage more generally, see Walcot 1987. Both scholars owe a substantial debt to Philip Slater's theory of the narcissistic Greek male set forth in the *Glory of Hera*, first published in 1968.

[12] Johnstone 2003: 271; see also Hunter 1989: 39, 47; cf. Isaeus 11.17.

law of 451/0 required male citizens to have both an Athenian father *and* an Attic mother implicitly suggests that women participated, at least indirectly, in the political enfranchisement of men. In the law courts, to be sure, the citizen status of men could be called into question by casting doubts on the origins of their mothers.[13] Even as early as the literary representations of the archaic period, mothers sometimes actively negotiate the status of their sons. For example, the sea goddess Thetis exerts an unusual degree of authority over her mortal son Achilles, as well as over the other gods, directly intervening to promote his social status through the acquisition of honor (*timê*). Yet, even as she helps to construct her son's social and political identity, as well as the possibility of his undying fame, she nonetheless evokes his mortal condition and the death that must be his in order to receive it.

The relationship between the queen and Xerxes parallels, in some respects, that of Thetis and Achilles in the *Iliad*. It also reflects contemporary Athenian assumptions about motherhood.[14] Like Thetis, the queen serves a dual function: she both negotiates, or attempts to negotiate, her son's social and political status, linking him to the illustrious and immortal Persian dynasty, and she incarnates his mortal vulnerability, ultimate disgrace, as well as the demise of the empire. Xerxes, in returning to his mother, is symbolically stripped of his heroic stature and semi-divine status to become merely a man, since her maternity forces an acknowledgement of his mortality. For the possibility of his immortality derives not from his mother, as in the case of Achilles, but from his father. This interpretation in turn illuminates another aspect of the *Persae* that has engendered debate, the importance of new clothing for Xerxes at the end of the play. By attempting to adorn her son, the queen not only performs a typical maternal task—that of sheltering or protecting her child from harm—she seeks to restore him to his former status, much like Thetis in her acquisition of new arms for Achilles, except for one important difference: this finery does not embody Xerxes' *kleos* but rather represents a womanish attempt to cover up his disgrace.

[13] In Dem. 59, the hetaera Neaera is accused of passing off her children as Athenian; in Dem. 57, Euxitheus is stripped of his citizen rights because of allegations that his mother was a slave who sold ribbons in the marketplace, as well as worked as a wetnurse; Aeschines 2.78, 93, 180, 3.172 accuses Demosthenes of having a Scythian mother; see Hunter 1994: 111–12; and Foxhall 1996: 140–1.

[14] Michelini is the only scholar to consider at any length the impact of the queen's maternal status on her dramatic role; she associates her with other famous mythic mothers, but with the caveat that she "notably lacks the complex circumstances that make the motherhood of Thetis, Klytaimestra, or Niobe so poignant" (1982: 142). Slatkin 1991 and Murnaghan 1992, although they focus on Homeric epic, as well as Loraux 1998 and 2002, have been particularly helpful in framing this essay.

MATERNITY AND HEROIC MORTALITY IN EARLY EPIC

Aeschylus's use of the mother-son pair to frame the drama of Persian defeat owes something to Homer's *Iliad*, to the mythic antecedent of the Trojan war, and, in particular, to the poem's portrayal of Thetis and Achilles.[15] Both Thetis and the Persian queen are mothers closely connected to their soldier sons, and they exert strong influence over them, acting in the absence of their husbands.[16] They attempt to intervene in their children's fates even as they helplessly confront the inevitability of their deaths, or, in the case of Xerxes, his ultimate defeat. Thetis repeatedly exhibits these two seemingly contradictory functions: she is both extraordinarily powerful and yet incapable of altering her son's destiny.[17] Her first words, accompanied by the weeping that is the tangible sign of her impotence, prophetically acknowledge the brevity of Achilles' life and her inability to intervene (Hom. *Il.* 1.414–16):

ὤ μοι τέκνον ἐμόν, τί νύ σ' ἔτρεφον αἰνὰ τεκοῦσα
αἴθ' ὄφελες παρὰ νηυσὶν ἀδάκρυτος καὶ ἀπήμων
ἧσθαι, ἐπεί νύ τοι αἶσα μίνυνθά περ, οὔ τι μάλα δήν·

O my child, why did I raise you? Your birth was bitterness.
If only you could sit by your ships untroubled, without tears,
since indeed your life is to be short, of no length.

From this powerless position, however, spring several significant actions that reveal the extent of Thetis's authority and influence over her son and over the other gods as well. As a mother, her primary function is to protect her child both on and off the battlefield, and, in particular, to enhance his status: only she can persuade Zeus to shift the course of the battle to ensure that her son will receive the honor he deserves (τίμησόν μοι υἱόν, 1.505). She has little

[15] In addition to Thetis and Achilles, the *Iliad* makes reference to numerous mothers of heroes: Zeus, about to join the bed of Hera in Book 14, utters a brief catalogue of mortal women who bore him illustrious sons: the wife of Ixion and the mother of Perithous; Danae, mother of Perseus; Europa, the daughter of Phoenix and mother of Minos and Rhadamanthys; Semele, mother of Dionysus; and Alcmene, mother of Heracles; see Hom. *Il.* 14.315–28.

[16] Schein 1984: 107 notes that Achilles is alienated not only from his real father, Peleus, but also from all of his surrogate fathers within the poem: Phoenix, Agamemnon, even Patroclus. Walcot 1987: 16–18 takes a psychoanalytic position, arguing that the absence of Peleus makes Thetis an ambitious, embittered, and over-protective mother.

[17] On the helplessness of Thetis, see Slatkin 1991: 17–18; her power, embodied by Zeus's promise to respect her supplication, derives from her ability to ward off destruction from him; see 65–68.

regard for the political loyalties of Greek and Trojan but rather seeks to help her son, standing by him "night and day alike" (μήτηρ παρμέμβλωκεν ὁμῶς νύκτας τε καὶ ἦμαρ, 24.73). Indeed, she has already rescued three gods from fatal disaster—Zeus, Dionysus, and Hephaestus—by the start of the poem.[18] Her influence is also manifest in Achilles' acceptance of her counsel: only she can convince him to relinquish the corpse of Hector to Priam at the end of the poem (24.128–37).

Throughout the *Iliad*, the mother's protective power is linked to her physical proximity to the child and is symbolized by metaphors of sheltering or covering. For example, Aphrodite, in an effort to rescue her mortal son, Aeneas, from death, covers him with her robe until he is safely off the battlefield (5.314–16):[19]

> ἀμφὶ δ' ἑὸν φίλον υἱὸν ἐχεύατο πήχεε λευκώ,
> πρόσθε δέ οἱ πέπλοιο φαεινοῦ πτύγμ' ἐκάλυψεν,
> ἔρκος ἔμεν βελέων . . .
>
> Around her dear son she flung her white arms,
> and in front of him she spread a fold of her shining robe,
> to be a shelter against missiles . . . .

Such a protective gesture, even when performed by a mortal man, is often compared to that of a mother. Twice Teucer takes refuge from the fighting under the sheltering shield of his brother, Ajax, like "a child beneath his mother" (πάϊς ὣς ὑπὸ μητέρα, 8.271; cf. 8.331). Ajax is said to cover Patroclus with his shield "like a lion covering its young" (ὥς τίς τε λέων περὶ οἷσι τέκεσσιν, 17.133).[20] Menelaus stands over the corpse of Patroclus like a mother cow guarding her first-born calf (ὥς τις περὶ πόρτακι μήτηρ/ πρωτοτόκος κινυρή, 17.4–5). The protective impulse of the mother can also take the form of a deliberate intervention that will maintain or increase her son's honor, as in the case of Thetis's supplication of Zeus in Book 1 or when Ajax in the funeral games for Patroclus accuses Athena of coming to the aid of Odysseus in the footrace "she who stands beside him and helps him like a mother" (ἣ τὸ πάρος περ / μήτηρ ὣς Ὀδυσῆϊ παρίσταται ἠδ' ἐπαρήγει, 23.782–3).

The opposite state of this maternal sheltering is to be naked, *gumnos*, without armor, vulnerable to attack and subject to disgrace. So regions of the

[18] Hom. *Il.* 1.393–412 (Zeus); 6.130–37 (Dionysus); 18.394–8 (Hephaestus). For further discussion, see Slatkin 1991: 58–9.

[19] On the goddess's protection of the mortal hero she loves, see Slatkin 1991: 40–44, who argues that the motif originates in the mythology of the dawn goddess, Eos.

[20] The shield of Antilochus protects the body of Hypsenor with the same covering gesture (οἱ σάκος ἀμφεκάλυψε, Hom. *Il.* 13.419).

body not protected by armor are easily wounded: the bare chests of Thoas and Pronoös, for example, are pierced by the spear (16.312, 400). Patroclus, just before Hector kills him, is described as *gumnos*, as is his corpse, once it has been stripped of armor (16.815; 17.122, 694). Lycaon is *gumnos* as he supplicates Achilles without his helmet, shield, or spear (21.50). About to die, Hector describes his naked state as vulnerable and womanish (ὥς τε γυναῖκα ἐπεί κ' ἀπὸ τεύχεα δύω, 22.125). Achilles, deprived of the armor he has lent Patroclus, is also described as *gumnos* (17.711). The protective or sheltering function of Thetis is most fully realized in the form of the armor she asks Hephaestus to craft to cover this nakedness. She seeks the shining armor not simply to protect her son, whom she knows will soon die (ὠκυμόρῳ, 18.458), but as a symbolic restoration of his manhood, enabling him to enter the fray and to distinguish himself in battle after his prolonged absence (18.134–7, 188–90). The acquisition of new arms for Achilles further suggests that Greek mothers could have a significant investment in their sons' martial prowess and in the preservation and visible display of their honor.[21] As will be seen in the *Persae*, the queen performs a similar maternal gesture when she requests new clothing for the returning Xerxes, but her actions have a very different purpose and result.

In the epic paradox, maternal protection can only go so far, for to save a son from death means depriving him of a heroic life, and even of his manhood; preservation must yield to, or even promote, the quest for honor. As Thetis reminds us in her proleptic lament for Achilles, because the hero who earns glory must die in battle, she has reared her son for death (18.438–441):

> τὸν μὲν ἐγὼ θρέψασα φυτὸν ὡς γουνῷ ἀλωῆς,
> νηυσὶν ἐπιπροέηκα κορωνίσιν Ἴλιον εἴσω
> Τρωσὶ μαχησόμενον· τὸν δ' οὐχ ὑποδέξομαι αὖτις
> οἴκαδε νοστήσαντα δόμον Πηλήϊον εἴσω.
>
> Then when I had reared him like a tree on an orchard's slope,
> I sent him with the curved ships to Ilion
> to fight the Trojans. But never again will I welcome him
> back to his home, to the house of Peleus.

To be a hero, to be a man, Achilles cannot return home again. Return, as the hero early on observes, will not win glory; only a short life and heroic death can do that: "If I go back to my dear fatherland, then my great glory will perish" (εἰ δέ κεν οἴκαδ' ἵκωμι φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν/ λετό μοι κλέος

[21] For the idea of soldiers as a kind of maternal tax, cf. Ar. *Lys.* 651, 589–90; on motherhood and civic ideology, see Loraux 1998: 11–13.

ἐσθλόν, 9.414–5). Thus Achilles, once he recognizes the scope of his mortality, knows that he will not return to his homeland or his parents, placing poignant emphasis on the lost return to his mother through enjambment, "Since neither will my father, the aged rider, receive me in his great house upon my return, nor my mother Thetis" (ἐπεὶ οὐδ' ἐμὲ νοστήσαντα/ δέξεται ἐν μεγάροισι γέρων ἱππηλάτα Πηλεὺς/ οὐδὲ Θέτις μήτηρ, 18.330–32).

Death in battle effects a separation between mother and son, between the warrior's body and that of his mother, since "to succumb to a mother's care is to stay out of the arena of heroic life and action and thus to earn an obscurity that might as well be death" (Murnaghan 1992: 250).[22] As later Pindar observes, only cowards and losers return home to their mothers, slinking in obscurity down back alleys (Pind. *P.* 8.85–7):

> οὐδὲ μολόντων πὰρ ματέρ' ἀμφὶ γέλως γλυκὺς
> ὦρσεν χάριν· κατὰ λαύρας δ' ἐχθρῶν ἀπάοροι
> πτώσσοντι, συμφορᾷ δεδαγμένοι.
>
> . . . nor, upon returning to their mothers, did sweet laughter
> inspire joy. They cower in alley-ways,
> away from their enemies, bitten by misfortune.

These sons are met not with joy, but with mockery. The phrase πὰρ ματέρα implies a physical proximity to the mother that potentially renders the hero a child and provokes the laughter of disgrace. So, too, the Argonauts long to undertake their journey, that no one "might be left behind, to remain with his mother, and lead a life without adventure" (μή τινα λειπόμενον/ τὰν ἀκίνδυνον παρὰ ματρὶ μένειν αἰ-/ ῶνα πέσσοντ', Pind. *P.* 4.185–7). An extreme version of this idea is found much later, in Plutarch's *Sayings of Spartan Women*, where stalwart Spartan mothers exhort their sons to be mindful of their excellence in battle (ἀρετή, Plut. *Mor.* 241e–f); cowards who return home are either disowned or killed outright (Plut. *Mor.* 240f, 241a–b). In fact, one mother mockingly asks her cowardly sons upon arriving home whether they intend to slink back into her womb (ἢ δεῦρο ὄθεν ἐξέδυτε καταδυσόμενοι, Plut. *Mor.* 241b). The mother, then, serves as a reminder of her son's mortality even as she imparts to him the possibility of *timê*, conceptualized in the world of epic as a short life (μινυνθάδιόν περ ἐόντα, *Il.* 1.352, 416; cf. 21.84–5).[23]

[22] For the same idea, see also Slatkin 1991: 42.

[23] The stories of Meleager (Hom. *Il.* 9.529–605) and Demophoon in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* support the idea of the connection between mortality and maternity, as Murnaghan 1992: 249 observes, "even the most magnificent of heroes, figures like Hector, Meleager, and . . . Demophoön, are bound to mortality by the very fact of having mothers."

This assertion may seem odd given the great emphasis placed on the fathers as the architects of their sons' social status throughout the *Iliad*, yet it is not for nothing that Achilles is described as "son of lovely-haired Thetis" when Hector prophesizes his death (Θέτιδος πάις ἠυκόμοιο, 16.861).[24]

Aeschylus's debt to Homer in the *Persae*, exemplified by epic features such as the catalogue of Persian warriors in the parodos and the use of Homeric diction throughout, as well as the dramatic context of a second major conflict between East and West, invites us to consider how the epic conception of the mother informs the play. Like Thetis, the queen mother exhibits authority over her child in the putative absence of his father. She has prophetic knowledge of Xerxes' defeat on Greek soil, and only she can provide him with sound counsel upon his return, yet she is helpless to alter his fate, or that of his country.[25] When he arrives home in torn clothing, she attempts to restore his manhood and his social status by seeking to cover him with new clothes, much like Thetis's acquisition of new arms for Achilles. And yet, in striking contrast to the *Iliad*, the *Persae* allows its hero to return home to his mother. In so doing, the play emphasizes Xerxes' mortal status as well as dramatizes the depths of his disgrace. The fact that the queen fails to return with new clothing for her son in the final scene only intensifies the spectators' awareness of his failure. Just as the presence of Thetis in the *Iliad* draws attention to Achilles' mortality as well as the possibility of his *timê*, so the dramatically prominent role of the queen mother in the *Persae* symbolizes the collapse—indeed, the mortality—of the timeless Persian regime and the demise of its "gods," Darius and Xerxes.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE QUEEN IN AESCHYLUS'S *PERSAE*

Not only does the dramatic action of Aeschylus's *Persae* revolve around a mother who awaits the return of her son from war, the language of the play repeatedly invites us to think of Persia itself as a mourning mother "brought to her knees" (ἐπὶ γόνυ κέκλιται, 930) by the collective manhood of Greece.

[24] The mothers of many other major heroes are recalled just before death: for instance, as Euryalus defeats the twins Aesepus and Pedasus, we are told that they are the children of the nymph Abarbare (6.22). The mother of Gorgythion, Castianeira, is invoked moments before the boy is killed by Teucer (8.305). Probably the most extended treatment of this motif occurs in the scene of Lycaon's supplication of Achilles, when we learn that his mother is Laothoe, consort of Priam (21.84–5, 22.48). It is unclear what purpose these maternal genealogies serve: they could imply disgrace, the high social status of the warrior, or simply evoke his lost *nostos*; on the latter motif, see Schein 1984: 97.

[25] On the absence of fathers in Greek tragedy, see Griffith 1998: 33.

As the mortal link between three generations of semi-divine kings, the queen personifies the fragility of the throne and the feminization of Asia brought about by defeat.[26] Her presence onstage and the eventual return of her son starkly contrast the persistent choral imagery of empty marriage beds, childless houses, and mourning mothers, the fatal consequences of Xerxes' reckless lust for power. Although the queen is represented as a typical Greek mother, concerned about protecting her son and his honor, she is nonetheless the means by which the spectators become aware of the depths of his disgrace. Onstage without husband or son, she is the living symbol of Persian womanhood made manless because of Xerxes' failure of leadership. Moreover, she repeatedly draws attention to her son's questionable character, first through her prophetic dream about the consequences of Xerxes' attempt to yoke two wives, next through her interrogation of the herald, and finally, in her exchange with the phantom Darius. Indeed, one might argue that she provides a particularly Hellenic view of her son's character and the nature of his defeat.

Like Thetis, the queen exerts an unusual degree of authority over her son, as Darius observes, "You, I know, are the only one he will tolerate listening to" (μόνης γάρ, οἶδα, σοῦ κλύων ἀνέξεται, 838). But this power should not be understood as excessive or inappropriate: she is not the same character as Atossa in Herodotus's *Histories*, a woman "all powerful" in the Persian court (ἡ γὰρ Ἄτοσσα εἶχε τὸ πᾶν κράτος, Hdt. 7.3). Because of her influence, Xerxes, from among seven sons, became king after Darius, a choice that no doubt enhanced the queen's status at court. The historian also describes how the queen approached Darius in their marital bed to persuade him to annex Greece to the Persian empire (Hdt. 3.134). Xerxes' subsequent expedition may be seen as the fulfillment of his mother's ambition, unrealized by his father.[27] Harrison seems convinced that Herodotus's Atossa is of a piece with the Aeschylean queen, whom he views as an Asiatic version of Clytemnestra driven by destructive self-interest and even lust.[28] In his version, she resembles

[26] On the equation of Persian defeat with sexual subordination, see Hall 1993: 121 and 1997: 13 and 121; see also Kolodny 1973 for the general tendency to equate imperial conquest with sexual subordination.

[27] For a fuller discussion of the Herodotean passages as they relate to the characterization of the queen in the *Persae*, see Brosius 1996: 50–1 and Harrison 2000: 44–8 and 77–82.

[28] Harrison 2000: 78 and 148, n. 13 believes that the two authors relied heavily on stories of the excessive influence of Persian royal woman over their sons; for this view, see also Delcourt 1934: 244–5; Tourraix 1984: 124; and Griffith 1998: 52–7. He further describes Atossa's pretext for persuading Darius to invade Greece in Herodotus' account (3.134.5) as motivated by a "passion" for some female servants from Laconia, Argos, Attica

an Amazon more than anything else, a woman "most warlike and manly in every deed," as Hellanicus of Lesbos puts it.[29]

A brief consideration of the character of Clytemnestra in the Agamemnon, however, militates against this view. True, Clytemnestra is placed in a dramatically similar position: she, too, awaits the return of her king, albeit a husband and not a son, and also confronts a chorus of aging males, too old to go to war, but now heavy with anxiety over the fate of their king and people in a land emptied of its men, including the royal son, Orestes.[30] By focusing the plot on the reunion of husband and wife, rather than that of mother and son, Aeschylus draws attention to the erotic tension between the two and the dangerous consequences of uncontrolled female sexuality. Unlike the Persian queen, the absence of her husband has made Clytemnestra extraordinarily powerful. Her improper sexuality has resulted in a masculine usurpation of royal power (κράτος, 10, 258), which is suggested by repeated reference to her androgyny.[31] The Persian queen, however, lacks the type of political authority indicated by the term *kratos*, a word that is never used in connection with her. Rather, this power belongs to her son, and before that, to her husband during Persia's golden age (οἳ κράτη τάδ' ἔχομεν, 785). In contrast, the *kratos* wielded by Darius has been outrageously abused by Xerxes in his attempt to yoke the Hellespont (κρατήσειν, 750). Because Darius lives on beyond the grave as an eidolon, engaging in dialogue with his wife at vv. 681–842, in a sense he continues to act as her guardian, affording her less scope for action than Clytemnestra. The lesser authority and powerlessness of the Persian queen are further suggested by her extreme old age: she is repeatedly referred to as γεραιά (156, 704, 832), a term that likens her to the aged male chorus as icons of a vanished era (264, 682), and a word never used of Clytemnestra.[32] And while the maternal status of the Persian queen

and Corinth, while he views three references to the royal chamber in the *Persae* (157, 160, 709) as evidence of Aeschylus's "fascination" with the bedroom; see 44–45.

[29] *FGrH* 4 F 178a (= 67 a F 7); for a discussion, see Harrison 2000: 46 and 132–3, n. 34.

[30] Hall 1997: 13 emphasizes the complete absence of men in Persia, "Xerxes is too young, the chorus are old, and the character on stage for longest is the Queen"; see also Hall 1993: 117.

[31] The spectator is made aware of Clytemnestra's androgyny throughout the play: she rules with the mind of a man (κρατεῖ/. . . ἀνδρόβουλον, A. *Ag.* 10–11); and speaks persuasively like a man (γύναι, κατῷ ἄνδρα σώφρονῷ εὐφρόνως λέγεις, 351); cf. also 861, 1231–2. On Clytemnestra's androgyny in general, see Winnington-Ingram 1948; Zeitlin 1984: 163–164; McClure 1999: 73.

[32] On her lack of political power, see Brosius 1996: 109. Note that the city of Priam is called γεραιὰ at A. *Ag.* 710. The absence of this terminology in reference to Clytemnestra reminds us that she is in fact still in her prime, dangerous because of her predatory sexuality.

is repeatedly invoked, Clytemnestra is never once directly alluded to as a mother by the other characters in the Agamemnon except when Cassandra refers to her oxymoronically as the "mother of death" (Ἄιδου μητέρ', Ag. 1235). Finally, she lacks the rhetorical guile of Clytemnestra, the persuasive mastery closely connected to her sexuality that induces the submission of her male interlocutors.[33]

As can be seen from this brief discussion, the idea that Aeschylus sought to portray a politically influential and distastefully aggressive queen mother in the *Persae* finds little corroboration in the play; she is a woman neither domineering nor eroticized. Rather, she is more like a respectable Greek matron than a power-hungry Amazon: she is not publicly named, she laments in Hellenic fashion, and, most importantly, she refers to herself as the mother of a god, a peculiarly non-Persian view of god-kingship, and to her homeland in distinctly Greek terms as a "barbarian place" (βάρβαρον, 187).[34] The queen defers to the male chorus for advice (170–2) and recognizes her son as her master (δεσπότου, 169, 300–1). Although not given to excessive emotion, in contrast to uncontrolled lamentations of the male chorus, her repeated expressions of anxiety and fear about the fate of her son and her people emphasize her state of helplessness (φροντίς, 161; μέριμν', 165; φόβῳ, 206; δείματ', 210 and *passim*).[35] Moreover, she is dutiful to the gods and to her deceased husband, himself a god (201–4; 219–23). Her much-discussed exchange with the chorus regarding the whereabouts of Athens and its system of government suggests a respectably secluded matron rather than a woman experienced in public life.[36]

Whatever power the Persian queen possesses therefore does not derive from any political role, nor from an unladylike usurpation of the throne, as in the case of her Argive counterpart, but, more appropriately, from her status as the mother of a son. The language of the *Persae* repeatedly reinforces this fact. The chorus first refers to her not as a queen (βασίλεια) but as the mother of the king (μήτηρ βασιλέως, 151), and later they switch simply to calling

[33] Hall 1989: 204–207 discusses how Aeschylus deploys a "vocabulary of barbarism" to affiliate Agamemnon with Persian tyranny, with Clytemnestra playing the part of a "barbarian flatterer"; see also McClure 1999: 80.

[34] Hall 1997: 124. On the non-Persian character of the Queen, see Vogt 1972: 136; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1983: 24; and Brosius 1996: 8.

[35] For Taplin 1977: 120, the queen "receives misfortune with wisdom and dignity"; Hall 1997: 121 describes a "powerful, grave, and stately character."

[36] Hecuba's assertion in the Euripides' *Troades* that she has never been inside a ship has much the same effect; cf. E. *Hec.* 686–7. On the political implications of this exchange, see Goldhill 1988 and Harrison 2000: 58–81.

her mother (μῆτερ, 215).[37] In their honorific address, the chorus continues to stress her maternal function (155–8):

ὦ βαθυζώνων ἄνασσα Περσίδων ὑπερτάτη,
μῆτερ ἡ Ξέρξου γεραιά, χαῖρε, Δαρείου γύναι·
θεοῦ μὲν εὐνάτειρα Περσῶν, θεοῦ δὲ καὶ μήτηρ ἔφυς,
εἴ τι μὴ δαίμων παλαιὸς νῦν μεθέστηκε στρατῷ.

O highest queen of the deep-girdled Persian women,
aged mother of Xerxes and wife of Darius, hail.
You are the wife of the Persians' god, and a god's mother,
unless some ancient deity has now turned against the army.

As both mother and wife, the queen mother serves as the genealogical link ensuring the continuity of dynastic succession. If father and son are indeed divine, as the chorus suggests when they refer to Xerxes as ἰσόθεος (80), and to Darius as μακαρίτας and ἰσοδαίμων (634), she plays a crucial role in transmitting and preserving Persia's fragile immortality. Nonetheless, the prominence given to her maternal status by the designation, μήτηρ, implicitly challenges the idea of Persian divinity: as a mortal mother, she can only give birth to a mortal son. Xerxes inherits his mortality from his mother, not from his father, in contrast to Achilles. By returning home to her, he must confront the limits of his own mortality. Moreover, the evocation of the queen as a ruler among women likens her to the mothers whom Xerxes has rendered childless while foreshadowing the fact that she alone will welcome home a son disgraced by failure and cowardice.

The play's insistence on the queen as a mother, as well as its attention to parenthood in general, not only implies the vulnerability of the Persian dynasty but also underscores the immaturity of Xerxes. Through her words, we become aware of Xerxes' unsuitability for leadership. After listening to the chorus's account of the strength of the Greek army, the queen counters that the herald relates things "terrible for parents to contemplate" (δεινά ... τοῖς τεκοῦσι φροντίσαι, 245). Her repeated use of the phrase παῖς ἐμός to refer to Xerxes strengthens this idea on a linguistic level.[38] She even addresses her deceased husband, Darius, as "the father of my son" (παιδὸς πατρὶ, 609).

[37] According to Schenker 1994: 287–8, when the chorus learns the personal nature of the queen's concern, they drop her royal titles and simply address her as μήτηρ. The phrase μήτηρ βασιλέως suggests a position of seniority and status in the court —perhaps superior to the king's wife—and one recognized both at the Assyrian and Babylonian courts as well as possibly among the Elamite kings; for this view, see Brosius 1996: 24.

[38] On the phrase παῖς ἐμός, cf. 177, 189, 197, 211, 233, 352, 473, 476, 529; cf. 227 and 609; and note the similar language of Darius at 739, 744, 751.

When she does name him, it is in connection with the Persian defeat (199, 718, 734, 754), a point that will be discussed more fully below. This intimate form of reference reinforces the image of Xerxes as a child in need of a maternal guidance: he is a παῖς rather than an ἀνήρ. The chorus, and subsequently the queen, in two of the few instances in which she refers to her son by name, regard him as impetuous, a quality associated with youth (θούριος, 73, 718, 754). On a dramatic level, the onstage presence of both parents (one in the form of a ghost), rather than a spouse—as in the Herodotean version—reinforces the representation of Xerxes as an immature youth incapable of leading an empire.

AN ABSENCE OF MEN AND THE MOURNING OF WOMEN

The reproach of Xerxes is suggested not simply by the presence of the queen and her ambivalent views of her son, but also by the repeated images of the Persian earth as a fertile mother grieving for her slain youth. The fecundity of the Persian earth is represented first by the magnitude of its army. In the parodos, the epic catalogue of warriors' names and the regions from which they hale underscores the enormity of the army, which is described, in Homeric fashion, as a huge swarm of bees abandoning its hive (σμῆνος ὣς ἐκλέλοιπεν μελισσ-/ᾶν, 127–8).[39] By omitting the names of the warriors' mothers, the poet strengthens their identification as the offspring of the land itself. The chorus reminds us that the continent is rich in men (πολυάνδρου δ' Ἀσίας, 73), as are the regions of the Nile controlled by Persia (πολυθρέμμων, 33), all of which has produced a populous army (πολυάνδρων, 533). Under the control of Darius, the queen informs us, Persian cities overflowed with men (πολυάνδρους, 899); without his guidance and protection, the country has been drained of them.

The figure of the queen awaiting the return of her son, alive, to Persian soil, forms a poignant contrast to the idea of Asia as a fertile mother who has sent her sons to war, never to return. Persian soldiers are conceived of as the progeny of the earth, so the chorus tells us in their initial appearance, "the whole strength born of Asia has gone" (πᾶσα γὰρ ἰσχὺς Ἀσιατογενὴς/ οἴχωκε, 12–13; cf. 1, 60).[40] They are "the flower of the land" born and reared by mother Asia (59–62):

[39] Cf. Hom. *Il.* 2.87–90; for an image of bees guarding, rather than leaving, the hive, cf. 12.165. On this image as a means of stressing the magnitude of Persian loss and "the blind, excited, self-destructive impulse that lies behind it," see Anderson 1970: 169.

[40] The repetition of πᾶς here as elsewhere indicates the magnitude of the loss; it is used 65 times in the play. Of these, fully 33 instances mean "whole" or "complete" rather than "every," creating a sense of totality; on this device, see Avery 1964: 174.

τοίονδ' ἄνθος Περσίδος αἴας
οἴχεται ἀνδρῶν,
οὓς πέρι πᾶσα χθὼν Ἀσιᾶτις
θρέψασα πόθῳ στένεται μαλερῷ . . . .

The flower of men from the Persian land
has gone away,
for whom the whole Asian earth laments
with fierce longing, she who reared them.

The herald, too, employs the same vocabulary when he speaks of the Persian host as a flower "that has fallen and gone" (τὸ Περσῶν δ' ἄνθος οἴχεται πεσόν, 252). After the report of the Persian defeat, the earth, like a mother, laments the youth "born of the land" (ἐγγαίαν/ ἥβαν, 922–3). But, the harvest of Asia has produced another kind of crop: the living bodies that once filled the cities of Persia now glut the shores of Salamis as corpses (πλήθουσι νεκρῶν, 272). The imagery of the Persian earth as the mother of soldiers both echoes and contrasts the dramatic role of the queen mother: she, too, has raised a son and sent him out to battle, but while the Greek earth receives the dead bodies of nameless Persian warriors, the queen will live to see the ignominious return of her boy.

The play's multiple images of surfeit further contribute to the denigration of Xerxes, reminding us that Persian resources, both human and material, have been squandered by him. Compounds such κένανδρος and ἄνανδρος underscore how his campaign has depopulated all of the Asian cities. Sousa is first without men (κένανδρον, 119), then utterly devoid of them (πὰν κενανδρίαν, 730).[41] The queen expresses concern about "unmanned wealth" while the army is away (χρημάτων ἀνάνδρων πλῆθος, 166). Hated Athens has made many of the Persian women wives in name only, without men (εὔνιδας ἔκτισσαν ἠδ' ἀνάνδρους, 289). The Asian earth has been drained of its men (γαῖ' Ἀσὶς ἐκκενουμένα, 549), houses have been robbed of their masters (ἄνδρα δόμος στερηθ-/είς, 579–80), and parents have been made childless (τοκέες τ' ἄπαιδες, 580). Even the command posts of the Persian army on the campaign against Greece have been left unmanned by the dying (ἄνανδρον τάξιν, 298). Instead of increasing the population, Xerxes has emptied the whole surface of the continent (κενώσας πᾶσαν ἠπείρου πλάκα, 718; cf. 730).

[41] On the emptiness of Asia, see Bacon 1961: 3; Anderson 1972: 169–70; Kelly 1978–9: 214–5; Hall 1993: 117–8 and 1997: 13; Harrison 2000: 71. Note that Plato in the *Laws* speaks of rearing Persian children "in a desert of men"; cf. Pl. *Leg.* 694e.

The motif of Persian abundance yields to the imagery of grief—cities once full of men now fill with lamentations, marriage beds once populated with husbands now fill with tears. It also introduces and sustains a discourse of blame directed against Xerxes: the mourning of women is the fault of a single man, as the chorus reminds us, "The earth laments her native sons slaughtered by Xerxes" (γαῖ' αἰάζει τὰν ἐγγαίαν/ ἥβαν Ξέρξᾳ/ κταμέναν, 922–3). So, wives "left alone in the yoke" (μονόζυξ, 139) and "newly yoked" (ἀρτιζυγίαν, 542) recall Xerxes' audacious yoking of the Hellespont that has rendered them widows, as well as his attempt in the queen's prophetic dream to yoke two "wives," Persia and Greece.[42] Their laments for their impetuous young husbands (θοῦρον, 137) inevitably evoke the mortal recklessness of their impetuous leader (θούριος, 73, 718, 754). Moreover, the imagery of the land's lush fertility, of Asia as a fecund mother, implies not simply an extravagant surfeit, but a harvest dangerously overripe. Where boys once grew, now only hybris can flourish (821–2):

> ὕβρις γὰρ ἐξανθοῦσ' ἐκάρπωσεν στάχυν
> ἄτης, ὅθεν πάγκλαυτον ἐξαμᾷ θέρος.
>
> For hybris flowers and produces a crop
> of destruction, and from it reaps a harvest of sorrows.

The Persian earth bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction: the "flower" of the land, Xerxes' enormous army, has been destroyed as the result of a rash and immature leader. So, too, the dramatic presence of the queen and her identification with the land, reminds us that she, too, has given birth to hybris in the form of her mortal son.

The grief of the land and its people not only indicts Xerxes for his role in the disaster, it also reinforces the idea of military defeat as a form of sexual submission: Persia and its leader have become like helpless women.[43] The play fairly bristles with descriptions of mourning wives, parents, and cities, and all of its main characters are represented as engaged in lamentation. The queen asks whom to mourn after the herald arrives (296), while the chorus weeps for the lost army and its leaders (256–8 and *passim*). She laments at the news of the

[42] Yoking images recur throughout the play: those who live by Tmolus desire to cast the yoke of slavery over Hellas (50); Xerxes casts a yoke upon the neck of the sea (72, cf. 130, 722, 736, 749–50) and attempts to yoke personifications of both Greece and Persia (181ff.); tyranny checks free speech with a yoke (594). According to Anderson 1972: 168, these images exemplify Xerxes' transgression of inviolable boundaries.

[43] Murnaghan 1992: 261; motherhood and lamentation are paired in the myth of Procne, who, changed into a nightingale, eternally mourned the son she murdered; cf. Hom. *Od.* 19.518–34. On Asia as a mourning mother in the *Persae*, see Hall 1993: 122.

Persian defeat (αἰαῖ, 331; λιγέα κωκύματα, 332; οἳ ᾠγὼ τάλαινα, 517) until Darius urges her to cease (κλαυμάτων λήξασα τῶνδε καὶ γόων, 705). Persian cities, and the land itself, are compared to mothers mourning the demise of their offspring: "how the city of the Persians groaned, longing for the land's beloved young men" (ὡς στένειν πόλιν/ Περσῶν, ποθοῦσαν ἰλτάτην ἥβην χθονός, 511–12). Even the very ground is said to grieve for its loss (πρόπασα μὲν στένει/ γαῖ' Ἀσίς, 548–9; στένει, κέκοπται, καὶ χαράσσεται πέδον, 683). The repeated images of women in mourning suggest the feminization of Persia's manhood. So when Xerxes weeps as he surveys the destruction of his army, tearing his robes in a gesture of mourning, he expresses his utter impotence to alter the course of events (ἀνώμωξεν, 465; ῥήξας δὲ πέπλους κἀνακωκύσας λιγύ, 468). So, too, the chorus manifests feelings of futility in numerous gestures and cries of lamentation that culminate in a final *kommos* with the defeated king at the end of the play.

While the Persians are identified with mother Asia and therefore mortality, the Greeks are associated with paternity. Their land is not a mother, but a military ally (γῆ ξύμμαχος, 792; cf. 793). Instead of producing an excess of men, Greek soil "starves to death" any human abundance (κτείνουσα λιμῷ τοὺς ὑπερπόλλους ἄγαν, 794). Paternity, instead of maternity, is generally attributed to Hellas: "O sons of the Greeks, come,/ free your fatherland, free /your children, wives, and the seats of your paternal gods" (παῖδες Ἑλλήνων, 402, πατρίδ', 403, πατρῴων, 404). In the queen's dream, however, Greece is represented as a maiden "who lives in her fatherland Hellas" (πάτραν δ' ἔναιον ἡ μὲν Ἑλλάδα/ . . . γαῖαν, 185–6). And yet, in refusing to accept the yoke of slavery, she behaves more like a man than her Persian counterpart: she struggles against captivity (ἐσφάδαζε . . . θραύει, 194–96), using force (βίᾳ, 195) rather than guile to free herself. Instead of lamentations, the Greeks utter battle cries (ἀντηλάλαξε, 390) and sacred paeans (393). When used of Persia, the idea of fatherland always appears in connection with Darius, to describe his paternal wealth (πατρῷον δ' ὄλβον, 756), and the succession of Asiatic kings (πάτρᾳ, 774). A cherished leader (φίλος ἄκτωρ, 557), Darius did not start wars or destroy men (οὐτὲ γὰρ ἄνδρας ποτ' ἀπώλλυ πολεμοφθόροισιν ἄταις, 652–3), he kept good counsel (θεομήστωρ, 654), and continues to show concern for the polis even after death (682). In fact, he is said to have disliked war so much that he always brought his men home from campaigns unharmed (ἄμαχος, 855; ἀπόνους ἀπαθεῖς, 861), in distinct contrast to his son.[44] Paternal Greece will continue to flourish, the play suggests, while feminine Persia, having lost her *kurios*, will falter.

[44] On the contrast between father and son in this play, see Griffith 1998.

THE NAMING OF XERXES

The presence of the queen as a mother and the interplay of images of maternal surfeit and loss dramatize the devastating, mortal consequences of Xerxes' careless and arrogant quest to expand the boundaries of the empire. At the same time, these dramatic elements foreshadow a discourse of blame that intensifies as the play progresses, one that is first initiated by the queen mother, then by the ghost of Darius and the members of the chorus, culminating with the entrance of Xerxes himself. Just as in the epic and epinician models, returning home to the mother on the tragic stage is tantamount to disgrace. While the news of Persian casualties hangs heavy in the air, the herald bluntly informs the queen that her son has survived, "Xerxes himself lives and yet looks upon the light" (Ξέρξης μὲν αὐτὸς ζῇ τε καὶ φάος βλέπει, 299). The inappropriateness of the king's return is underscored by the herald's statement that he himself did not expect to reach the shores of Asia alive (καὐτος δ' ἀέλπτως νόστιμον βλέπω φάος, 261). Indeed, the ghost of Darius prophesies that the rest of the Persian forces remaining in Greece will fail to return home (ἀλλ' οὐδ' ὁ μείνας νῦν ἐν Ἑλλάδος τόποις / στρατὸς κυρήσει νοστίμου σωτηρίας, 796–7).

Apart from the chorus's obsequious praise of the king in the parodos (74–91), the queen provides the first glimpse into Xerxes' character. She does so in the description of the startling dream about her son that has brought her out of the palace to seek the advice of the chorus. In the dream, Xerxes attempts to yoke two finely dressed women, "sisters of one race," one in Persian robes (πέπλοισι), the other in Doric clothing: "he yoked them both beneath his chariot and put a strap beneath their necks" (ἅρμασιν δ' ὕπο ζεύγνυσιν αὐτὼ καὶ λέπαδν' ὕπ' αὐχένων/ τίθησι, 190–92). When the Greek woman smashes the yoke down the middle, refusing to submit like her Persian counterpart, Xerxes falls out of the chariot and rends his robes at the sight of his pitying father (195–99). Although the dream's symbolism is straightforward, portending that destruction of the Persian army at the hands of the Greeks and Xerxes' subsequent fall from power, it points nonetheless to the problematic nature of Xerxes' character by suggesting an improper sexuality, the lack of self control that will ultimately undermine the Persian dynasty. Moreover, the double reference to the *peploi* of the Persian woman as well as to the rending of Xerxes' own robes foreshadows his own ignominious, and feminized, return in torn clothing at the end of the play.

Much like Thetis in the *Iliad*, the Persian queen is represented as concerned for her son's welfare in battle and for his good reputation at home. In her exchange with the herald, she expresses joy and relief at the news of her son's

safety, which she calls a "brilliant day out of dark night" (λευκὸν ἦμαρ νυκτὸς ἐκ μελαγχίμου, 301), but worries that defeat will incur disgrace (αἴσχη, 332). She is preoccupied with the question of her son's honor, praying that Xerxes' campaign will be a success and earn the admiration of his people (παῖς ἐμὸς / πράξας μὲν εὖ θαυμαστὸς ἂν γένοιτ' ἀνήρ, 211–12). Upon learning the full extent of his defeat, however, she begins to give an increasingly negative account of her son: she blames Xerxes for the Persian casualties, avowing that he has "brought a multitude of afflictions on his people" (παῖς ἐμὸς πράξειν. . . /τοσόνδε πλῆθος πημάτων ἐπέσπασεν, 476–77). Another way that she draws attention to her son's disgrace is by using his proper name (718, 734, 754). In contrast to the epic convention in which naming confers honor on the individual warrior, the naming of Xerxes implies shame rather than approbation. When pressed by Darius as to the identity of the son who led the army into Greece, she pointedly names her son: "Impetuous Xerxes, after emptying the whole continent" (θούριος Ξέρξης, κενώσας πᾶσαν ἠπείρου πλάκα, 718). She uses his name again when she acknowledges that he has crossed the Hellespont and returned alive to Persian soil (734). The last time she names Xerxes, the queen blames his actions on the idle gossip of bad men who spurred her son to invade Greece by accusing him of a lack of manliness (753–6):[45]

> ταῦτά τοι κακοῖς ὁμιλῶν ἀνδράσιν διδάσκεται
> θούριος Ξέρξης· λέγουσι δ' ὡς σὺ μὲν μέγαν τέκνοις
> πλοῦτον ἐκτήσω ξὺν αἰχμῇ, τὸν δ' ἀνανδρίας ὕπο
> ἔνδον αἰχμάζειν, πατρῷον δ' ὄλβον οὐδὲν αὐξάνειν.
>
> Impetuous Xerxes learned the idea from consorting with wicked men.
> They said that while you (Darius) had acquired great wealth for your children
> by your valor, his lack of manliness made him play the warrior at home (inside),
> and he did not increase the prosperity left by his father at all.

Although here the queen defends her son by blaming others for his actions, she nonetheless introduces the possibility of his cowardice: through her, we learn of the public mockery of Xerxes as a womanish inversion of his noble father. Perhaps the queen tacitly concurs with this assessment, for she contrasts the martial valor of her husband, αἰχμῇ (755), with Xerxes' armchair soldiering, ἔνδον αἰχμάζειν (756).[46] Moreover, the accusation that he played the warrior at home (literally, "within," ἔνδον), prepares for the play's final action, the procession of Xerxes back into the palace.

[45] For this view, see Michelini 1982: 149–50 and Hall 1997: 161.

[46] Broadhead 1960: xxvii.

The blaming of Xerxes initiated by the queen intensifies in the speeches of Darius. He gives a catalogue of offenses, all of which center on the yoking of the Hellespont, an enterprise he views as undertaken too hastily (σπεύδῃ, 742) and one that shows Xerxes to be ignorant (κατειδώς, 744), imprudent (οὐκ εὐβουλίᾳ, 749) and even insane (νόσος φρενῶν, 750). His youthful rashness has accomplished what no other Persian king has ever managed, the complete emptying out of Sousa. Darius then sets his defeat in the context of Persian succession only to highlight the complete disgrace his son has brought on the throne (782–3):

> Ξέρξης δ' ἐμὸς παῖς νέος ἐὼν νέα φρονεῖ,
> κοὐ μνημονεύει τὰς ἐμὰς ἐπιστολάς.
>
> My son Xerxes is a young man who thinks young thoughts
> and does not remember my orders.

Here the naming of Xerxes underscores the fact that the son has failed to live up to the father, thereby inverting hierarchies of family and dynasty. His immaturity has led to hybris, delusion, and overconfidence: in leaving men behind in Greece, the man who has emptied out Asia has himself been led astray by empty hopes (κεναῖσιν ἐλπίσιν, 804).

The last instance of naming draws on the play's images of fertility and depletion, of maternity and mortality, to underscore that the real enemy of Persia is not Greece, but Xerxes (922–7):

> γαῖ' αἰάζει τὰν ἐγγαίαν
> ἥβαν Χέρξᾳ κταμέναν Ἄιδου
> σάκτορι Περσᾶν· ἀγδαβάται γὰρ
> πολλοὶ φῶτες, χώρας ἄνθος,
> τοξοδάμαντες, πάνυ ταρφύς τις
> μυριὰς ἀνδρῶν, ἐξέφθινται.
>
> The earth laments her native sons,
> slaughtered by Xerxes, who has crammed Hades
> with Persians. Many men
> from Agbatana, the flower of the land,
> archers, a great swarm of
> countless men, have perished.

The close natal connection between the earth and Persian youth is indicated on a linguistic level by the cognates γαῖα and ἐγγαία. By referring to Xerxes as a σάκτωρ, the text combines the contradictory images of surfeit and loss, fertility, and sterility, found throughout the play: whereas the king has depopulated the Asian earth, he has filled Hades to capacity with corpses. Whereas in the

Iliad, naming is a form of commemoration that brings praise and honor to the individual for martial valor, in the *Persae*, it does the opposite: in contrast to the collective actions of the unnamed Greeks in the play's description of the battle of Salamis, the evocation of Xerxes by name highlights his reckless and dishonorable actions. As in the *Iliad*, the figure of the mother plays an important role in mediating the son's access to public reputation and honor, and yet, in contrast to Thetis, the Persian queen presents a much more ambivalent view of her son. Although she desires his safe return and attempts to protect his reputation, it is through her character that much of the story of his ignominy unfolds.

CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

Let us turn now to the final scene, to the queen's instructions to the chorus to escort Xerxes directly into the house, and to her departure for the palace to find new clothing for her son. The queen feels certain that her son will continue to rule once he returns (κοιρανεῖ, 214). For this reason, she looks pragmatically to the future, to the ways in which she might salvage his reputation, "I know that doing this cannot change what has happened, but it is for the future, in case things improve" (ἐπίσταμαι μὲν ὡς ἐπ' ἐξειργασμένοις,/ ἀλλ' ἐς τὸ λοιπὸν εἴ τι δὴ λῷον πέλοι, 525–6). To that end, she advises the chorus to look after him when he arrives, with lines that have puzzled commentators, "And if my son should come here before me, soothe him with kind words and escort him into the house" (καὶ παῖδ', ἐάν περ δεῦρ' ἐμοῦ πρόσθεν μόλῃ,/ παρηγορεῖτε, καὶ προπέμπετ' ἐς δόμους, 529–30).[47] That she worries about his emotional state can be inferred from his need to be comforted (530) and soothed (837), as well as from the weight of his grief (κακῶν ὑπ' ἄλγους, 835). But, the queen also has political and social considerations in mind here. For she continues, "that he not heap trouble upon trouble" (μὴ καί τι πρὸς κακοῖσι προσθῆται κακόν, 531). Clearly, for Xerxes to act by his own lights can bring nothing but harm to the royal family; still a child, he needs the close supervision of his parents, particularly his mother in the absence of his father. Indeed, Darius predicts that the people under the control of Persia will soon revolt, and will soon cease paying tribute or prostrating themselves before the king (586–8). Since the royal power has perished (βασιλεία/ . . . ἰσχύς, 589–90), men will be able to speak freely now that they have been released from the yoke (ἐλύθη ζυγόν, 594). By keeping her son out of public view

[47] For a discussion, see Broadhead 1960: 143, who notes that the queen returns with her libations (598) well before Xerxes appears (909). Wilamowitz 1914: 44 explains that she fears his arrival will occasion rioting in the streets (cf. 584–6); others that he may commit suicide (cf. 915–6).

until he can be outfitted with proper clothing, the queen seeks to preserve the family honor and control public opinion about her son.

Darius seems to share his wife's views, for in his final injunctions to the chorus, he admonishes them to advise Xerxes "with sensible words of warning" to stop his boasting and to behave temperately (σωφρονεῖν . . . /. . . εὐλόγοισι νουθετήμασιν, 829–30). He then gives a separate set of instructions to his wife (832–38):

σὺ δ', ὦ γεραιὰ μήτερ ἡ Ξέρξου φίλη,
ἐλθοῦσ' ἐς οἴκους κόσμον ὅστις εὐπρεπὴς
λαβοῦσ' ὑπαντίαζε παῖδα. παντὶ γὰρ
κακῶν ὑπ' ἄλγους λακίδες ἀμφὶ σώματι
στημορραγοῦσι ποικίλων ἐσθημάτων.
ἀλλ' αὐτὸν εὐφρόνως σὺ πράυνον λόγοις·
μόνης γάρ, οἶδα, σοῦ κλύων ἀνέξεται.

And you, O beloved, aged mother of Xerxes
go into the house and bring out suitable finery
for your son and meet him. For in his anguish
at the disaster, he has completely torn up into shreds
the embroidered robes around his body.
But soothe him with sensible words,
for he will listen to you alone, I think.

While the chorus has been instructed to curb Xerxes' arrogant behavior, the queen must address her son's mental state by imparting sound advice (εὐφρόνως, 837) to counter the bad counsel (δυσφρόνως) that led him to invade Greece. Although the departure of the queen mother for the house to get new clothing for her son may be likened to Thetis's visit to the workshop of Hephaestus, she has a very different purpose in mind. She seeks not simply to restore his royal status by equipping him with brilliant robes, but rather to cloak his public disgrace with an outward display of finery.

Many scholars have interpreted the queen's regard for her son's appearance as a distinctly Persian "obsession" with clothing.[48] I would argue instead that it is a peculiarly Aeschylean preoccupation— consider the carpet scene in the *Agamemnon*, or the way in which the chorus of foreign maidens in Aeschylus's *Supplices* are distinguished by their barbaric robes and unhellenic garb (ἀνελληνόστολον πέπλοισι βαρβάροισι, 234–5). Broadhead quaintly views this sartorial concern as characteristically feminine: "women in general are much more alive to outward appearances than are men, and a Persian Queen

[48]Conacher 1974: 165 calls it a "brilliant Oriental touch"; for clothing as a Persian preoccupation, see also Sidgwick 1903: 49; Hall 1993: 119–20; Schenker 1994: 288.

would be more so than other women" (1960: 212).[49] Others have suggested that the torn clothes of Xerxes simultaneously evoke Persian prosperity and defeat as "the outward symbol of his failure" that effectively contrasts Darius in his royal tiara and saffron slippers.[50] As in the *Iliad*, however, maternal covering can comfort, protect, or rescue the hero, or even help to construct the outward display of his honor, as in the case of Achilles' new arms. But instead of restoring manhood to her son, the queen makes him more like a woman, sequestering him inside and arraying him with costly garments, much like the mythical Pandora. Rather than celebrating her son's victory, she attempts to cloak his cowardice before anyone can witness his disgrace.

The word κόσμος (adornment) that refers to the change of clothing supports this view. Of the numerous references to cloth and clothing in the *Agamemnon*, κόσμος is used only once, in connection with the special prophetic costume of Cassandra (A. *Ag.* 1271). In the *Persae*, most instances of the term occur in a military context: the Greeks prepare their dinner in an orderly fashion (οὐκ ἀκόσμως, 374) and enter battle in order (, 400), while the Persians, and even Xerxes, flee from battle in disarray (ἀκόσμως, 422; ἀκόσμῳ, 470; οὐκ εὐκόσμον, 481).[51] And it is the κόσμος of Persian men that the divinity has "cut down" in the war (κόσμου τ' ἀνδρῶν,/ οὓς νῦν δαίμων ἐπέκειρεν, 920). By alluding to Xerxes' new clothing as κόσμος, the play evokes on a verbal level the martial disgrace of the battle of Salamis, where even the Persian leader and his faithful retainers fled out of cowardice (αἰσχρῶς δυσκλεεστάτῳ μόρῳ, 444). The queen acknowledges as much when she describes her son's torn clothing as indicative of defeat (846–51):

> μάλιστα δ' ἥδε συμφορὰ δάκνει,
> ἀτιμίαν γε παιδὸς ἀμφὶ σώματι
> ἐσθημάτων κλύουσαν, ἥ νιν ἀμπέχει.
> ἀλλ' εἶμι, καὶ λαβοῦσα κόσμον ἐκ δόμων
> ὑπαντιάζειν παῖδ' ἐμὸν πειράσομαι.
> οὐ γὰρ τὰ φίλτατ' ἐν κακοῖς προδώσομεν.
>
> . . . but the misfortune which hurts me most of all to hear about
> is that my son is disgraced by his clothes around his body.
> I shall go and taking the finery from the palace
> I will try to meet my child.
> For I will not betray my dearest in times of trouble.

[49] For a similar view, see Schenker 1994: 289, for whom the robes do not have political connotations, but purely maternal ones.

[50] Garvie 1978: 69; see also Conacher 1974: 154, for whom Xerxes' clothing raiment encompasses Persian pride and ruin; see also Thalmann 1980: 267–8.

[51] I take ἀκόσμως at 470 in connection with Xerxes, as does Hall 1997: 143.

The verb δάκνει conveys feelings of shame and recalls the Pindaric passage discussed above in which cowards return home to their mothers "bitten by misfortune" (συμφορᾷ δεδαγμένοι, Pind. *P.* 8.87). The term κόσμος implies that the queen attempts to cover up the disgrace wrought by Xerxes' martial failure with sartorial splendor, with its meaning of covering or concealing, a usage that derives from its use in the context of female adornment. So in the Hesiodic account of Pandora, Athena bedecks the first woman with finery (κόσμος) to conceal her baseness (καλὸν κακὸν, Hes. *Th.* 585–7). The adornment of Pandora not only implies deceit, it also strongly suggests male mortality since her presence creates a separation between men and the gods and introduces suffering and sickness into the human world. By the end of the fifth century, the term often denotes feminine deception: Hippolytus in Euripides' play of the same name similarly describes female adornment as a covering for evil (E. *Hipp.* 630–33) while the chorus in *Andromache* rebuke her for a public display of remorse by stating that women should "dress up" their feminine ills (ἀλλ' ὅμως χρεὼν / κοσμεῖν γυναῖκας τὰς γυναικείας νόσους, E. *An.* 955–56).

In the end the queen fails to carry out her husband's instructions and Xerxes remains in abasement. The standard interpretation, first put forth by Wilamowitz, as to why the two never meet rests on technical considerations: because the same actor probably played both characters, they obviously cannot appear onstage at the same time.[52] I would like to propose an alternative reading: by not allowing the queen to intervene, the playwright intensifies the degree of disgrace incurred by Xerxes, thereby bringing to completion the discourse of blame initiated earlier in the play and framed by his mother.[53]

[52] Garvie 1978: 69–70; see also Conacher 1974: 166; on her failure to return, see Thalmann 1980: 262–3. For the view that dramatic necessity dictates that the queen and Xerxes never meet since the two characters were played by one person, see Anderson 1972: 174 n. 2, who notes, "the presence of Darius during this scene would make it necessary for the same actor to take the roles of Atossa and her son"; see also McCall 1986: 46–7; Schenker 1994: 290 and n. 26; and Thalmann 1980: 263. Garvie 1978: 70 further states that the queen could only provide "dramatically irrelevant consolation" in the play's final scene; for the view, see also Wilamowitz 1914: 46; Broadhead 1960: xxxix; Alexanderson 1967: 7–9; and Taplin 1977: 119–21. But could the queen have returned on stage with the fresh change of clothes as a *prosopon kophon*? Avery 1964: 182–3 argues as much. Wecklein 1901: 12 and Broadhead 1960: xxxviii believe that Xerxes actually met his mother offstage and reappeared, respectably attired; see also Taplin 1977: 121–2.

[53] This view is somewhat consonant with that of Dworacki 1979, who argues that the queen's absence in the play's final scene serves a critical dramatic function, to underscore her inability to secure a proper return for her son. In his view, her absence also allows the chorus to criticize Xerxes. But as I have argued throughout the paper, the queen herself is already openly critical of her son's actions.

Xerxes' return betokens infamy rather than glory: his wretchedly public entrance, in clothes unbefitting a king, sharply contrasts the absent Persian soldiers who have been left to die abroad, in nameless obscurity (νώνυμοι, 1003). His acknowledgement, "I have become an evil to my family and to my fatherland" (μέλεος γέννᾳ γᾷ τε πατρῴᾳ/ κακὸν ἄρ' ἐγενόμαν, 932–3), represents the culmination of the discourse of blame directed against him throughout the play.

Xerxes' ragged apparel, to which he calls attention by means of his words and gestures, further attests to his diminished status, "Do you see what's left of my cloak?" (ὁρᾷς τὸ λοιπὸν τόδε τᾶς ἐμᾶς στολᾶς, 1017). He goes on to describe the *peplos* which he has torn at the sight of Persian defeat, an action earlier prophesized by both of his parents (πέπλον δ' ἐπέρρηξ' ἐπὶ συμφορᾷ κακοῦ, 1030; cf. 199, 835–6).[54] His empty quiver demonstrates that not only his clothing, but even his weapons, have been destroyed (1020–3). Xerxes has returned home unarmed and unaccompanied, or "naked of escorts," (γυμνός εἰμι προπομπῶν, 1036). The term *gumnos* here, as in the Homeric contexts, indicates vulnerability, mortality, and disgrace: he is the warrior stripped of arms, about to be vanquished by his enemy, like a woman. The description of his ripped robe as a *peplos* further underscores his feminized state, since the term typically applies to female dress.[55] It also evokes the pair of yoked women in the queen's prophetic dream; like them, he himself must now submit to the yoke, to Greek domination. The fact that his new apparel is never seen onstage, let alone described, in stark contrast to the elaborate, honorific arms of Achilles that serve as the major focus of *Iliad* 18, suggests that he will never again achieve his former glory and that his disgrace can never be fully concealed.

Xerxes has nowhere to go but inside the house, the province of his mother, the place from which she had first departed to speak to the chorus (159), to which she repaired for funerary libations (524) and then returned after offering them (608), where she has gone to find new robes for her son (849), and the place where she will henceforth provide shelter from disgrace even as she forces recognition of his mortal condition. The final funeral-like procession of the chorus and their antiphonal laments remind us that Xerxes, in entering the house, confronts not simply the depths of his disgrace, but also the limits

[54] Avery 1964: 186 argues that Xerxes takes off his tattered clothing and puts on his new raiment after line 1036.

[55] For further discussion, see Hall 1993: 119, who notes that *peplos* in Homer and Aeschylus is never used of male clothing. Its use in reference to the garment in which Clytemnestra ensnares Agamemnon may suggest his feminized defenselessness; cf. A. *Cho.* 1000.

of his mortality.[56] He has returned to his mother, and to mother Asia, not as a god, but as a man, or worse, like a woman. His movement toward the palace proves the truth of the rumors earlier voice by his mother: lacking manliness, Xerxes will henceforth play the warrior only at home.

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[56] For Hall 1997: 175–8, the words προπομπῶν at 1036 and πέμψω at 1078 suggest a funerary procession; cf. 530.

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