

FROM EMPIRE TO DEFEAT: The tragedy of Xerxes in *The Persians*

*Eduardo Pereira Machado*¹

ABSTRACT: Aeschylus' tragedy *The Persians* represents a milestone in Greek theater for addressing historical events instead of myths, offering ethical and political reflection on power. The play narrates the Persian invasion of Greece, focusing on the figure of Xerxes and the consequences of his *hybris* — the transgression of human and divine limits. The text examines the dramatic construction of the work, highlighting

¹ Master in Letters. Specialist in Classic Studies. Professor in the Languages courses at the University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos (Unisinos) and La Salle University (Unilasalle).

the function of the chorus, which introduces the context and expectations of the audience, and the messenger, which reports the military disaster, creating progressive tension. The poetic analysis evidences the use of epithets, metaphors and images that symbolize the grandeur of the empire and, simultaneously, announce its fragility. Xerxes' *hybris* is presented as a decisive factor not only for his individual downfall, but for the collective destabilization of the Persian empire, demonstrating the tension between personal ambition and social responsibility. The study reinforces the distinction between historical narrative and poetic dramatization, according to Aristotle, emphasizing the capacity of tragedy to explore the universal from the particular. It is concluded that *The Persians* transcends the account of a military defeat, offering lessons about the limits of power, leadership and ethical consequences, revealing how the mistake of a ruler can reverberate throughout a society and remain a timeless reflection on human vulnerability in the face of ambition and excess.

Keywords: Greek tragedy; Hybris; power; Aeschylus

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Aeschylus' tragedy *The Persians* (2013)² occupies a unique place in the context of Greek theater, being the oldest tragic work that has come down to us in its entirety. First performed in 472 B.C., the play stands out for dealing with a historical event, rather than being based on traditional myths. This approach offers a rich perspective on the interplay between history, ethics, and politics in the Greek universe.

The choice of Aeschylus to thematize the conflicts between Greeks and Persians reveals more than a simple memory of the Athenian victory: it constitutes a profound analysis of the implications of *hybris* and its tragic consequences. Xerxes, as a central figure, embodies the transgression of the boundaries that govern the human and divine order, drawing a parallel between his political decisions and the destabilization of his nation. In this way, the tragedy transcends the individual plane, reflecting on the tensions between leadership, tradition, and power that permeate autocratic regimes.

Throughout this analysis, it is proposed to examine how Aeschylus constructs the drama around the Persian defeat, exploring poetic and historical elements that give depth to the narrative. The relationship between the political-cultural context of the time and the concepts of tragedy and ethics will be highlighted, as well as the way in which the play invites the

² All quotes will be taken from this issue. From now on, we will identify the transcribed passages only with the title of the work and the page, in the corpus of the work itself.

audience to reflect on the limits of power and the universal lessons arising from the confrontation with the excessive.

TRAGEDY, POWER AND HYBRIS

Aeschylus' tragedy *The Persians*, first performed in 472 B.C., is the oldest Greek tragic work we preserve. The plot centers on a failed campaign against Greece, resulting from the expansionist policy that characterized the Persian Empire. As is typical of monocratic regimes, political decisions in the empire were centered on the figure of the king, although other opinions could be consulted. In the context of the play, the invasion of Greece was ordered by Xerxes, evidencing the decisive role of the monarch in driving the destiny of his people.

Within this context, it is relevant to highlight the author's trajectory: Aeschylus had an active participation in the battles of Marathon (490 BC) and Salamis (480 BC), both fought against the invading forces that threatened his homeland. This fact deserves attention, since the actions represented in the tragedy are reported by a poet and not by a historian. From this perspective, we allude to the words of Aristotle (2002), in *the Poetics*, in which he establishes the differentiation between these two categories.

... that the poet's work does not consist in telling what happened, but rather things that could happen, possible from

the point of view of verisimilitude or necessity.

It is not in metricizing or not that the historian and the poet differ. (...) The difference is that one narrates events and the other, facts that could happen. (ARISTOTLE, 2002, p. 28)

Therefore, when analyzing *The Persians*, it is essential to remember that it is a tragedy conceived by a poet, and not a historical account elaborated by a historian. The work does not only seek to narrate past events, but also to explore, through a poetic construction, the universal and emotional aspects that transcend the facts, emphasizing the possibilities of verisimilitude and necessity, as highlighted by Aristotle.

With this question clarified, we move on to the analysis of Aeschylus' drama. The Greek play begins with the speech of the choir, composed of the so-called Faithful. They are entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of the palace, while King Xerxes is absent to lead his grandiose military campaign.

Chorus

Here we are, the only remnants
of the Persians, now in Hellas, Faithful
They call us, guardians of the multi-
family palace
golden. The basileus the great, Xerxes,
Darius' lineage,

has commissioned us to watch here,
 in recognition of our gray-headedness.
 Waiting for him to become the king of
 kings
 At the head of the pluridourado tropel

(*The Persians*,
 p.28)

We can see that the tragedy begins with the statement "Here we are, the only remnants of the Persians, today in Hellas", in which the speakers present themselves as the last survivors or descendants of the great Persian Empire. The word "remnants" suggests that this group carries the legacy of an ancient civilization, while the mention of "Hellas" — the ancient name of Greece — indicates that these remnants are now in the land of the Greeks.

In the sequence, the expression stands out: "*Faithful call us, guardians of the plurigolden palace*". The term "faithful" not only denotes loyalty, but also positions this group as devoted to the principles of the empire and the figure of the monarch. The description as "guardians of the pluridourado palace" reinforces their role as protectors and highlights the splendor of the palace, whose richness and opulence are underlined by the choice of the term "pluridourado". This image projects the grandeur of Persian imperial power and the symbolic importance of physical space in consolidating that authority.

The following passage, "*The basileus the great, Xerxes, the line of Darius, has commissioned us to watch here, in recognition of our gray-headedness*," brings to light the figure of Xerxes as a monarch of unquestionable greatness, highlighted by the epithets "basileus" (king) and "magnus" (great). In addition to extolling his sovereignty, the text inserts Xerxes into a powerful lineage, the "line of Darius," connecting him to one of the most notable Persian emperors, Darius I. The assignment of the task of vigilance "in recognition of our gray-headedness" suggests that the Faithful are experienced men whose maturity and wisdom make them trustworthy. This choice reflects the Persian appreciation for the experience and knowledge accumulated over the years.

Finally, the excerpt "*Waiting for him to return the king of kings at the head of the plurigolden tropel*" expresses the expectation for the triumphant return of Xerxes, called "king of kings", a title that reaffirms his supremacy and centrality in the Persian political system. The mention of the "plurigolden troop" points to the imperial army, whose grandeur and wealth reflect both the military power and the material opulence of the empire. This waiting carries the longing for a glorious moment, in which the sovereign regains control and restores stability to the nation, even in the midst of the uncertainties of the military campaign.

From the introduction of the Choir, the confidence of the faithful in the strength and grandeur of the Empire is evident. The recurring references to the wealth of the palace and the power of the Persian army reflect a pride that, throughout the

actions, is also revealed as a source of tragedy. Still in the speech of the Chorus, the uneasiness of the Persian people arises, who have no news of the soldiers sent to the invasion of Greece. This anxiety grows until the entrance of Atossa, mother of Xerxes and widow of King Darius, whose concerns deepen the omen of a disastrous outcome.

Upon entering the scene, Atossa expresses fears about the disturbing dreams she had, glimpsing dark omens for the fate of her son and Persia.

Queen

That's why I left the aurilavrado palace
and the room in which he slept next to
Dario.

Thought afflicts the heart. Fear
Prevent me from being silent: that a
foot-braid, friends,
of excess wealth does not transmute
into dust
the brightness that, without god, Darius
conquered!

(*The Persians*,
p.33)

His lines highlight his concern with Xerxes' boldness, questioning the risks to which he exposes himself. Atossa also emphasizes that a king does not owe the people satisfaction: if he wins, he will be exalted; otherwise, nothing should be

delivered. However, Atossa's fears are confirmed, and the tragic denouement of the Persian empire comes to fruition, marking the culmination of the drama.

The spectators who have seen the play, as well as the readers who are reading it today, already have prior knowledge about the disaster faced by the Persians, which is confirmed by the account of the messenger who arrives from the battlefield.

Messenger

I call for the list of Asian citadels!

I call to Persia, the vast haven of treasures!

One blow was enough to annihilate endless fortune. Reap the flowering of the Persians!

It is horrible to be the herald of horror, but it is urgent

I unfold the suffering entirely, for all barbarian troops are now sinking!

(*The Persians*,
p.38)

This account details the events that took place in the confrontation between the Persians and the Greeks. In fact, the unfolding of the narrative leads the viewer to build, little by little, an increasingly clear suspicion about the outcome, driven by the concerns expressed by the chorus and by Atossa's visions. The messenger's account, in this context, acts as a confirmation

of the expectations already formed, configuring a type of dramatic crescendo characteristic of Aeschylus' style.

In the course of reading, a fact draws attention and that can be important for the unfolding of events: we realize that the Greek army, although smaller, does not have a commander, unlike the Persian army that has Xerxes, the king, as a reference.

Messenger

Apart from the numerical issue, rest assured

that we would have defeated them,
because the fleet

Hellenic encompassed only three
hundred boats,

in addition to a dozen in the rear. Xerxes
I will say precisely, it headed a
thousand,

and that's not counting the fastest ships,
two hundred, more or less. Such is the
proportion.

Do you believe that we were fighting at
the back?

A demo wanted to demolish us. At his
will,

Unequal destinies hung in the balance.
The Palas stop, always save a nume!

(*The Persians*,

p.38)

This question is relevant, since to win, the Greeks used the collective; the Persians, the individual. The barbarian army was subdivided into many delegations. Each group of soldiers had a mentor, the problem for the Persians was precisely the issue of this subdivision, because there was no unification, each part acted unequally; Unlike the Greeks who maintained a strong cohesion in their actions.

Another issue that contributed to the calamity of the barbarian army was, in addition to individual action, the great wealth, as the ships in large numbers and difficult to maneuver ended up hindering the struggle for victory.

In this way, the accounts of the misfortune are gradually revealed, culminating in the arrival of King Xerxes. Atossa's speech suggests that his son, Xerxes, did not have a notoriety of his own, and his figure was conditioned to the role that the Persian sovereign should play. In fact, as a ruler, Xerxes needed to adjust his policy to the traditions and expectations of the empire, which valued territorial expansion as an expression of power. Deviating from this ancestral policy would be interpreted as a sign of weakness or incapacity, reinforcing the weight of the demands imposed by the Persian imperialist system on its leadership. For this reason, he decides to attack the Greeks, thus showing himself capable and cunning. It is precisely this posture that leads the Persian king to make his great mistake, identified by Aristotle (2002) as *hybris*. Although Aristotle's reflections are fundamental, the idea of *hybris* was already part of the ethical code of the Greeks long before him.

As Herodotus attests, the Greeks recognized the notion of power and conquest as legitimate; however, they considered it reprehensible to exceed the limits established by the natural order. Abuses such as "putting the yoke on the neck of the sea" were seen as manifestations of this *hybris*, an intolerable disrespect for the boundaries that governed the balance between men and gods.

Hybris arises, therefore, as a result of a state of dissatisfaction of the character, who, driven by an instinct, an uncontrollable impulse or something that escapes his reason, performs an action that will be understood as a "mistake". This mistake not only destabilizes his own physical and psychological universe, but also profoundly affects the balance of the characters around him. According to Vernant,

The ancient drama explores the mechanisms by which an individual, no matter how good he is, is led to perdition, not by the domination of coercion, nor by the effect of his perversity or his vices, but by reason of a fault, a mistake, that anyone can commit. In this way, he lays bare the game of contradictory forces to which man is subjected, since every society, every culture, like the Greek one, implies tensions and conflicts. (VERNANT, 1991, p. 96).

In this way, *Xerxes'* *hybris* in *The Persians* illustrates Vernant's analysis, according to which the ancient drama shows that the downfall of an individual does not result from malice or vices, but from a mistake that anyone could make. Driven by ambition and a desire for glory, Xerxes pushes human and divine boundaries by leading the invasion of Greece. This excess not only compromises their own destiny, but causes suffering and destabilization throughout the Persian empire, affecting soldiers, family members, and the social order. Thus, the tragedy highlights the play of contradictory forces described by Vernant, revealing how individual, social and cultural tensions interact, and showing that the mistake of a ruler can have profound collective consequences, making *hybris* a central element of the play's ethical and political reflection.

Complementing this perspective, Lesky (2021, p.27) observes that the true tragic is manifested in the play's ability to engage the audience emotionally and create a connection with the human experience. The impact of the tragedy depends on intense and dynamic events, which arouse interest and commotion, allowing viewers to perceive and feel the gravity of the actions represented. Thus, the tragic in *The Persians* is not only historical or narrative, but ethical and affective, constructed from the interaction between the staged events and the audience's sensibility.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Driven by the desire to stand out and consolidate himself as a reference figure within his empire, Xerxes commits *hybris*, going beyond the limits imposed by the divine and human order. This transgression not only destabilizes his nation, but also triggers irreparable consequences that configure the essence of the tragic. The outcome of their actions is inevitable and irrevocable: king, homeland and future generations are condemned to suffering.

The tragedy lies not only in Xerxes' error, but in the collective impact of his unbridled ambition. As sovereign, his failure symbolizes the ruin of an entire political and cultural system, reinforcing the idea that *hybris* is not just a personal mistake, but an act that shakes the foundations of an entire society. The tragic, in this sense, emerges from the awareness that suffering is inexorable, a destiny that the individual and the collective cannot avoid, marked by vulnerability in the face of the superior forces of the cosmic and ethical order.

REFERENCES AND WORKS CONSULTED

ARISTÓTELES; HORÁCIO; LONGINO. *A poética clássica*. São Paulo: Cultrix, 2002.

BRANDÃO, Júnio de Souza. *Teatro grego: tragédia e comédia*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1984

ÉSQUILO. *Os persas*. Tradução de Trajano Vieira. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 2013.

KITTO, H. D. F. *Tragédia grega: estudo literário*. Vol. II. Coimbra: Arménio Amado, 1990. Trad. do inglês por Dr. José Manuel Coutinho de Castro.

KURY, Mário da Gama. Introdução a *Os Persas*. In: Ésquilo. *Os Persas*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1992.

LESKY, Albin. *A tragédia grega*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2001.

MOISÉS, Maussad. *Dicionário de termos literários*. São Paulo: Cultrix, 1974.

ROMILLY, Jacqueline de. *A tragédia grega*. Lisboa: Edições 70, 2008.

SCHÜLER, Donald. *Literatura grega*. Porto Alegre: Mercado Aberto, 1985.

VERNANT, Jean-Pierre; VIDAL-NAQUET, Pierre. *Mito e tragédia na Grécia antiga II*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1991.

VERNANT, Jean-Pierre; VIDAL-NAQUET, Pierre. *Mito e religião na Grécia Antiga*. Trad. Constança Marcondes Cesar. Campinas: Papirus, 1992.

Submitted in August 2025

Approved in September 2025

Author(s) Information

Eduardo Pereira Machado

Professor in the Letters courses at La Salle University (Unilasalle) and at the University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos (Unisinos). He is also an elementary and high school teacher at Colégio Leonardo da Vinci – Beta and Gama units.

E-mail: Eduardo.machado.letras@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3485-1949>

Lattes Link: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/6189678115020077>