An open square in Susa, capital of Persia. In the background, a building reached by steps. Nearer to the spectator, and probably in the center of the dancing-floor, a mound representing the tomb of Darius.

Enter the CHORUS right, marching slowly and delivering anapestic (marching) chant.

Parodos (lines 1-158 in Greek = 1-200 in this translation)

CHORUS We the old men while Persia's young strength has gone onto Greek soil stay at home appointed their Faithful, the lavish and goldwinning throne's loyal regents whose age and experience he Lord Xerxes King son of Darius chose himself to safeguard his country. 10

King royal army blazoned in gold WILL THEY COME HOME?

My heart's ragged beat prophesies doom: all Asia's strong sons are gone gone and now rumors bruit the young King's name but not one runner and not one rider bring word to Persia's capital. 20

They rallied, they marched leaving Susa's defenses and Ekbatana's and safe ancient stones that barricade Kissa some mounted on horses, others on ships foot soldiers, too, stepping it steady eager for combat man packed on man.

You, Amistros and you, Artaphrenes you, Megabates 30
and you, Astaspes
Persian commanders
kings in your own right under the Great King
leaders who hurl on the battling horde
you bowtamers, horsebreakers
    chilling to watch
deadly in war
    because endurance gleams hard in your souls.

You, Artembares, war-joyful horseman
you, Masistres
you, the bowtamer shining Imaios
you, Pharandakes
you, too, stallion-driver Sosthanes.

And you
whose command fertile Nile outpoured
Sousiskanes born in Persia
Pegastagon sundark Egyptian
and godbelov'd Memphis' lord, towering Arsames
and satrap at Old Thebes, Ariomardos
    with swampskippers, rowers
70
    oars dipping silent
    dangerous men, too many to number.

And pressing on them
Lydia's neighbors
    who live in eyes' reach of her godswpte peak
Mardon, Tharybis, lance-breaking anvils
Mysians, too, masters of javelins—
    all, all have vowed
    to throw slavery's yoke
    firm on the Greeks.

And Babylon the gold-proud
fields motley troops in long horizon-crowding lines
    some for a ship's bench
70
    others who trust bowtugging rage
and scimitars from every fort in Asia
    surge behind
    obeying the King's
70
    deadly orders to march.

This
is the flower of Persian earth
the men now gone
and Asia's land that held their roots
groans out loud,
aflame with yearning.
Parents, wives in cold beds
count the days.
80
Time stretches thin.
They wait and shiver.

The CHORUS come to a halt.

The army HAS won through! Persians,
    Breakers-of-cities, the King's men
    sweep countries lying on the far shore
They've crossed the strait that honors Hellé by binding their ships and clamping a bolt-studded road—a yoke hard on the Sea's neck!

And teeming Asia's headstrong lord has shepherded his flocks godsped against the world on two fronts land and sea and trusts his leaders stern rocks among men As heir to a gold-showered line he gleams casting a god's light

But the heart of his eye darkens, the death-dealing stare of a snake Countless its hands! Countless the ships! And he while his chariot sings has targeted War's taut bow on spearmen trained for close combat

And not one has proved he can stand up to men in a ceaseless stream nor ever build a sure seawall to stay the unstoppable waves Resistless, Persia's armed flood and the war-joy that crests in her sons

For gods decree Fate's age-old power here and she has long charged Persians with a holy task:

Wage tower-splitting war Hurl forward horse-drawn battle glee Lay cities waste

And they have learnt when galewinds lash the saltroad white to look unshaken at the Sea's deep shrine: entrusting life to slender ropes and man-supporting tricks they stride the waves

But how crafty the scheme of God! What mere man outleaps it? What human foot jumps fast enough to tear loose from its sudden grip?

For with gestures of kindness as bait Blind Folly fawns a man into her net, nor can he hope to work loose and escape unhurt

The CHORUS begin a lament, ominous in its prematurity.

My thoughts scratched raw by fear wear black

Shall we wail WAAAAW! for the wide-ranging Persians? What word for our people? That Susa's great heart is bled empty of men?
And will Kissa’s old walls din back
that death caw WAAAAW!
and the thump of the womanhorde howling and croaking
ripping fine linen and pummeling breasts?

For horseback troops and troops on foot
all, all of them have left home
in a stinging swarm behind their chief
and all have crossed the Sea-dividing span
that juts from two shores yoking two lands

Here double beds bereft of men are filled with tears
and each wife who has rushed to war a headstrong spear is left to spend
her gentle elegance bereft of love, one yoked but alone

At ode’s end the CHORUS are scattered, each member standing alone to give visual emphasis to the last line.

CHORUSLEADER (chanting) Persians! Assemble. Gather on the steps below this ancient roof. We should discuss our carefullest, most deep-debated thoughts, for need presses close.

How does he fare Xerxes our King son of Darius?
Where lies the victory?

Taut bow or lance’s spearing force— which one has conquered?

With her retinue ATOSSA enters right in a chariot.

Look up! Dazzling as gods’ eyes, a light moves toward us. Mother of the Great King, My Queen.

Prostrate yourselves! Salute her as adorns her dignity.

**Episode 1 (159-255 in Greek = 201-425)**

*The CHORUS prostrate themselves. (ATOSSA and the CHORUS speak in unaccompanied trochaic verse from here through line 269.*)

CHORUSLEADER My lady, all honor. My lady most blest among sonbearing women, grey mother of Xerxes, Darius’ wife born to share our god’s bed and born also to mother a god unless— unless the age-old
Lust for Winning has
taken itself from our men.

ATOSSA descends from her chariot. The CHORUS rise.

ATOSSA Yes, there's
the reason urging me
to leave the gold-wrapt
shadow of my house
and room where once
Darius slept beside me.
Sharpest care is
clawing at my heart.
It's you,
good friends,
to whom I'd speak out
unvoiced thoughts.
Nothing
guards my inmost self
against the fear
that vast Wealth,
kicking up dust
as it pelts headlong,
may overturn
continued joy
in the prosperity
Darius
by some god's grace
lifted high.
There's the reason
an unspeakable, two-pronged
anxiety sits at my core:
not to bow low
honoring
a manless treasure-hoard
nor does a light shine
on the treasureless,

Surely our wealth
is beyond reproach!
My fear
centers on the Eye,
for in my mind
the house's Eye
is its master's presence.
There
my thoughts rest.
Persians,
old faithful confidants,
advise me.

All,
all my hopes lie in you.
Guide me.

CHORUS Our country's Queen,
no need
to ask twice.
A word, an act—
we'll help if we can
when you
command our counsel.
We do intend
to serve you well.

ATOSSA (in unaccompanied iambic verse) Night after night
since my son left with the army he mustered
I am joined with many dreams.
He's gone,
gone to Greece.
bent on making it Persian and his.
But never has a vision showed more clear
than what I saw last night
in the kind-hearted dark.
I'll tell you:
    It seemed to me
two well-dressed women—
one robed with Persian luxury,
the other in a plain Greek tunic—
came into view, both
taller far than any woman now living,
and flawless in beauty,
and sisters from the one same
parentage.
    And for a fatherland, a home,
one was allotted Greek soil,
the other, the great world beyond.

Then I saw
the two of them build bitter quarrels,
one against the other,
and when my son learned this,
he tried to curb and gentle them:
    under his chariot
he yokes the two, and on their necks
he straps broad leather collars.
And the one towered herself
    proud in this harness
and she kept her mouth
    well-governed by the reins.
But the other bucked stubborn
    and with both hands
she wrenches harness from the chariot fittings
and drags it by sheer force,
    bridle flung off, and she
shatters the yoke mid-span
    and he falls,
my son falls,
and his father is standing beside him—
Darius, pitying him,
    and when Xerxes sees that,
he shreds around his body
    the clothes that a king wears.

I tell you
I did see these things last night.

Today, when I'd risen
and dipped both hands in a clear-rippling spring
    to cleanse me of bad dreams,
hands busy with offerings,
I stood by Phoibos' altar
    wanting to give mixed honey and wine,
their expected due,
to the undying Powers that turn away evil.
And I see
    an eagle
fleeing toward the altar's godbright flame.

Frightened, mute, my friends, I
    just stood there,
and soon I see a hawk in downstoop
raising wings to break the fall and working
talons in the eagle's head, and the eagle did
    nothing,
    only cringed and offered up
its flesh.

Terrors! I saw them!
Now you've heard them.
    And you surely know
that if my son succeeds, he'll be marveled at,
but if he fails,
    his people cannot call him to account.
When he is safely home,
    he'll rule the country as he always has.
(From here through line 416 ATOSSA and the CHORUS speak in trochaic verse.)

CHORUS Mother,
here's advice
meant neither to alarm
nor overgladden you.
Gods abide:  
turn toward them suppliant,
if anything you saw stirs faintest doubt,
praying them
to turn it away and bring
goodness to its peak
for you and
children in your line,
for Persia, too,
and those you love.
Afterward, pour out
the drink due Earth
and give the thirsty dead their sip
and pray, appeasing him,
your husband Darius-
you say you saw him
in the kind-hearted night-
asking him to send up
from his depth into our light
blessings for you and your son
and hold the reverse back
earth-coffined
till it molders in that dark.

For this advice
I have consulted
my prophetic heart.
Be appeased,
for as we
read the signs,
everything
shall  380
turn out well.

ATOSSA Yes, you
the first
to read my dream,
with goodwill toward my son and house,
have found
its true interpretation.
Would that the omens
turn out well!
I'll do all you say
for gods and old friends under earth
when I go home.

But first
I'd like to know, dear friends,
where
Athens is.

CHORUSLEADER Far west where the Lord Sun fades out.

ATOSSA My son really wanted to hunt down this city?

CHORUSLEADER Yes, so all Greece would bend beneath a Shah.

ATOSSA Does it field a manhorde of an army?

CHORUSLEADER Such that it has worked evils on the Medes.

ATOSSA Then bowtugging arrows glint in their hands?

CHORUSLEADER No. Spears held steady, and heavy shields.

ATOSSA What else? Wealth in their houses?

CHORUSLEADER Treasure, a fountain of silver, lies in their soil.
ATOSSA  But who herds the manflock? Who lords the army?

CHORUSLEADER  They're not anyone's slaves or subjects.

ATOSSA  Then how can they resist invaders?

CHORUSLEADER  So well that they crushed Darius' huge and shining army.

ATOSSA  Terrible words! You make the parents of those gone shudder.

CHORUS (severally)  But I think you will soon hear the whole story.

Someone's coming!

He's ours—
a Persian clearly by the way he runs.

Something's happened. Good or bad, he brings the plain truth.

The MESSENGER enters left.

MESSENGER (in unaccompanied iambic verse throughout this episode)

Listen! cities that people vast Asia.
Listen Persian earth, great harbor of wealth.
One stroke, one single stroke has smashed great prosperity,

and Persia's flower is cut down.

Bitter, being first to tell you bitter news,
but need presses me to unroll the full disaster.
Persians,

our whole expedition is lost.

Ode 1 (lines 256-289 in Greek = 426-469)

CHORUS (singing from here through line 469)
Cruelest evil
newmade, consuming

Oh weep, Persians, who hear this pain

MESSENGER  Everything over there has ended. And I—

against all hope, I'm here, seeing this light.

CHORUS  Life stretches long

too long for grey old men
who hear of all hope undone

MESSENGER  I was there. I can tell you, no hearsay,
the evils that sprang up hurtling against us.

CHORUS  No nonono

That bright storm
of arrows showing Asia's massed colors advanced

all for NOTHING into hostile Greece?

MESSENGER  They met hard deaths. The corpses pile on Salamis and every nearby shore.

CHORUS  No nonono

You're saying those we love are floating, foundering awash

DEAD MEN shrouded

in sea-drowned cloaks?
MESSENGER Our arrows didn’t help. The whole force went down, broken, when ship rammed ship.

CHORUS Rage
for the Persians killed
Wail the death howl
All that began well
comes to the worst end  CRY!
CRY OUT
for the army slaughtered!

MESSENGER Salamis, I hate that hissing name.
And Athens, remembering makes me groan.

CHORUS Athens
bears Persia’s hate
We will recall
wives she has widowed
mothers with no sons  NO!
and all
ALL FOR NOTHING!

Episode 2 (290-531 in Greek = 470-867)

(ALL speak in iambic verse from here through line 867.)

ATOSSA Silence has held me till now heartsore,
struck by the blows of loss,
for this disaster so exceeds all bounds
that one can neither tell,
nor ask,

about the suffering.
Yet there is terrible need
for people to bear pain when gods send it down.

You must
compose yourself: speak out,
unrolling all the suffering,
though you groan at our losses.
Who is not dead?
And whom shall we mourn?
Of all the leaders
whose hands grip authority
which one
left his post unmanned, deserted
when he died?

MESSENGER Xerxes—he lives and sees light—

ATOSSA You speak: light blazes in my house,
and white day after a black-storming night!

MESSENGER —but Artembares,
commander of ten thousand horse,
is hammered along Sileniai’s raw coast
and thousand-leader Dadakes,
spearstuck,
danced back without any effort I could see overboard
and Tenagon,
pureblooded Bactrian and chief,
scrapes against Ajax’ sea-pelted island.

Lilaios,
Arsames,
and a third, Argestes,
wave-tumbled around that dove-broody island,
kept butting resistant stones
and so did Phamoukhos
whose home was Egypt, by Nile’s fresh flow,
and so did they
    who plunged from one same ship,
Arkteus,
Adeues,
and a third, Pheresseues.
And Matallos from a golden city,
    leader of ten thousand,
dying, stained his full beard's tawny brush
changing its color with sea-purple dye.

And the Arab, Magos,
with Artabes the Bactrian,
    who led thirty thousand black horse,
took up land as an immigrant
by dying there
    on that harsh ground.
Amistris
and Amphistreus,
    whose spear delighted in trouble,
and bright-souled Ariomardos,
    whose loss brings Sardis down grieving,
and Seismes the Mysian,
Tharybis, too,
    sealord of five times fifty ships,
Lymaian by descent, a hard-bodied man,
lies dead,
    a wretch whose luck went soft,
and Syennesis,
    first in courage, the Cilicians' chief,
one man who made most trouble for the enemy,
died with glory.

These are the leaders
of whom I bring my memories.
But we suffered many losses there.
I report a mere few.

The CHORUS cry out sharply.

ATOSSA  Noooo!
    These words I hear
lift evil to its height.
O the shame cast on Persians,
and the piercing laments!

But tell me,
    turn back again,
was the count of Greek ships so great
they dared launch their rams
against Persia's fleet?

MESSENGER  If numbers were all, believe me,
Asia's navy would have won,
for Greek ships counted out
at only ten times thirty
    and ten selected to lead out that line.
But Xerxes, this I know,
    commanded a full thousand,
two hundred and seven
    the fastest ever built.
That is our count. Perhaps you thought
we were outnumbered?
    No.
It was some Power—
    Something not human—
whose weight tipped the scales of luck
and cut our forces down.
Gods keep Athens safe for her goddess.

ATOSSA  You're saying that Athens is not yet sacked?

MESSENGER  Long as her men live, her stronghold can't be shaken.
ATOSA But at the beginning, when ship met ship,
tell me, who started the clash?
  Greeks?
Or my son
  who exulted in his thousand ships?

MESSENGER My lady,
  the first sign of the disaster came
when Something vengeful—
  or evil and not human—
appeared from somewhere out there.

For a Greek,
  who came in stealth from the Athenian fleet,
whispered this to your son Xerxes:
As soon as black night brought its darkness on,
Greeks would not maintain their stations, no,
but springing on the rowing benches,
  scattering here, there in secret flight,
would try to save their own skins.
And at once,
  for he had listened not understanding
  the man’s treachery nor the gods’ high jealousy,
he gave all his captains this command:
As soon as Sun’s hot eye let go of Earth
and darkness seized the holy vault of Sky, then
they should deploy ships
  in three tight-packed ranks
to bar out sailings and the salt-hammered path,
while others circled Ajax’ island.
And if the Greeks should somehow slip the trap
  by setting sail, finding a hidden route,
Xerxes stated flatly
  that every last captain would lose his head.
So he commanded in great good spirits.
He could not know the outcome set by gods.

There was no disorder. Obediently
the crews prepared their suppers,
  and each sailor, taking a thong,
made his oar snug to the tholepin.
And when Sun’s glow snug and Night
was coming on,
  each oarlord,
each expert man-at-arms
boarded his ship.
Squadron on squadron, cheers for the warships
  and they sailed,
each captain maintaining his position.
And all night long the lords of the fleet
kept fully manned vessels plying the channel.
And night was wearing on.
  The Greek forces never
tried sailing out secretly.
  Not once.
But when Day rode her white colt
dazzling the whole world,
  the first thing we heard
was a roar, a windhowl, Greeks
  singing together, shouting for joy,
and Echo at once hurled back
  that warcry
  loud and clear from island rocks.
Fear churned in every Persian.
We’d been led off the mark:
  the Greeks
weren’t running, no,
but sang that eerie triumph-chant
  as men
  racing toward a fight
  and sure of winning.

Then the trumpet-shriek blazed
through everything over there.
A signal:
  instantly
their oars struck salt.
  We heard
that rhythmic rattle-slap.
It seemed no time till they
all stood in sight.
  We saw them sharp.
First the right wing,
close-drawn, strictly ordered,
led out, and next we saw
the whole fleet bearing down, we heard
a huge voice
  Sons of Greece, go!
  Free fatherland,
free children, wives,
shrines of our fathers’ gods,
tombs where our forefathers lie.
  Fight for all we have!
  Now!
Then on our side shouts in Persian rose to a crest.
  We didn’t hold back.
That instant, ship rammed
bronzeclad beak on ship.
  It was
a Greek ship started the attack
shearing off a whole Phoenician stern. Each captain steered his craft
straight on one other.
At first the wave of Persia’s fleet rolled firm, but next, as our ships
jammed into the narrows and
  no one could help any other and
our own bronze teeth bit into
whole oarbanks shattered.
Then the Greek ships, seizing their chance,
swept in circling and struck and overturned our hulls,
  and saltwater vanished before our eyes—
shipwrecks filled it, and drifting corpses.
Shores and reefs filled up with our dead
and every able ship under Persia’s command
broke order,
scrambling to escape.
We might have been tuna or netted fish,
for they kept on, spearing and gutting us
  with splintered oars and bits of wreckage,
while moaning and screams drowned out
the sea noise till
  Night’s black face closed it all in.
Losses by thousands!
  Even if I told
the catalogue for ten full days I
could not complete it for you.
But this is sure:
  never before in one day
have so many thousands died.

ATOSSA It’s true, then, true.
Wild seas of loss have come crashing down,
down over Persians and all Asia’s tribes.

MESSENGER You must understand:
disaster—
I’ve told you less than half.
The next load of suffering
outweighed the first twice over.

ATOSSA What more hateful Luck
could still beset our men?
Answer me!
What fresh disaster, what
new losses weighted them down?

MESSENGER Persians at the peak of life,
best in soul, brightest in lineage,
first always to give the King loyalty—
they're dead without glory,
and shamed by that fate.

ATOSSA (to the CHORUS) Cruel chance!
O my friends, it hurts me.
(to the MESSENGER)
How did they die? Can you say?

MESSENGER An island fronts the coast of Salamis—
tiny, harborless,
where dance-wild
Pan likes stepping it light through the breakers.
There
Xerxes posted these chosen men,
planning that when the shipwrecked enemy
swam ashore desperate for safety,
they'd kill that Greek force easily
and rescue friends caught in the narrows.
How badly he misread the future,
for after some god had
handed Greeks the glory in the seafight,
that same day
they fenced their bodies in bronze armor
and leapt from their ships
and cordoned off
the island so completely that our men milled helpless,
not knowing where to turn
while stones battered at them
and arrows twanging from the bowstrings
hit home killing them.

It ended
when the Greeks gave one great howl
and charged, chopping meat
till every living man was butchered.

Then Xerxes moaned out loud
to see how deep disaster cut.

Throned on a headland above the sea, he'd kept his whole army clear in sight.
And he ripped his clothes
and screamed
and gave shrill hasty shouts to his whole land force dismissing them.

They fled in disorder.

Here is disaster greater than the first
to make you groan.

ATOSSA (looking up into the sky) You!
Hateful, nameless, not human Power,
how You cheated Persians of their senses!
How bitter the vengeance
meant for this talked-of Athens
that found its way to my son!
Marathon killed men. Weren't they enough?

It was for them
my son cast retribution
and hauled in countless cruelties
upon himself and us.

But the ships that outran doom—
where did you leave them?
Do you know what happened?
MESSENGER The captains of the ships left
ran in no order before the wind.
And the army left 780
kept dropping off, first on Boiotian ground,
some of thirst,
though water flowed beside them
out of exhaustion's reach,
while some of us,
empty from panting,
drove through to the Phokians' land
and Doris' fields
and the Melian Gulf where
Sperkheios quenches the plain with earthkindly drink,
and after that Akhaian soil
and the cities of Thessaly took us in
when we were starving.
There the most died.
  Thirst and hunger,
both of them stalked us.
And slogging north
  on to Magnesia and on to Macedon,
we reached the Axios' ford
  and Bolbe's reed-choked marsh
and Mt. Pangaios where Edonians live.
It was that night
some god
blew down winter out of season and froze
holy Strymon bank to bank.
  Then any man
who'd once thought gods were nothing
sought them out, praying, begging
  as he lay face down before Earth and Sky.
When the army finished its godcalls,
it started to cross the icelocked water,
and those of us who step out quick
before the god can shed his rays
find ourselves safe,
but when the fireball of Sun came up,
  blazing light and heat,
its flame melted the iceroad midstream
and men kept falling,
  falling one on another, and he is lucky, yes,
whose life breath was quickest cut. 820
And those of us left to gain safety,
working through Thrace against hard odds,
have slipped away,
  not many,
and come back to our homefires,
to this earth of home.
Reason enough, chief city of Persians,
to cry out
  longing for your best beloved youth.
True reasons, though there's much
I've left untold of horrors
that a god hurled
  crackling down on Persians.

The MESSENGER exits right.

CHORUS (looking skyward) You! Troublebringer!
  nameless and not human,
  how hard .
You've jumped both feet into Persia's people!

ATOSSA I am heartsick. The army slaughtered!
O vision in the night
  that roiled through dreams,
the cruelties you clearly promised me
came true.

(to the CHORUS) And you,
you read them much too lightly.
Even so, there's only your advice
to seize and act on.

I will
first of all pray to the gods,
then bring gifts from my royal house—
   wine poured out with honey—
to soothe the appetites of Earth and ghosts.
When these are done, I shall
return to you.
   There's no regaining
what is gone, I understand that,
but I act so that something better
may happen in days to come.

And you,
with due regard for what has happened,
must, as my Faithful,
give advice worthy of my faith.

My son—
   if he comes back before I can return,
comfort him,
   escort him home
so that he heaps on existing evils
   no self-inflicted evil.

ATOSSA remounts her chariot and exits right with her attendants.

_**Ode 2 (532-597 in Greek = 868-960)**_

**CHORUS** (*chanting*) God, greatest King!
The Persians' proud and manswollen army, now
You've destroyed it,
You've hidden
   Susa and Ekbatana in lowering grief
and mothers
   whose gentle hands savage their veils
   whose eyes rain tears on breasts already drenched
give tongue to sorrow
and wives, Persian brides
   wailing softly
   longing to see the men who were yokemates
stripping the soft beds where bursting youth reveled
wail, wail out the hungriest grief

   And I, too,
   raise a griefswollen voice
   at the fate of men gone
dead and gone
   (singing and dancing)

Listen
To the outmost ends
Asia's earth groans now
   emptied of sons
Xerxes convoyed them
   He CONVOYED THEM
Xerxes destroyed them
   He DESTROYED THEM
Xerxes the hothead brought on the whole rout
   he and his riverhows rigged for the sea

   Once
   we knew Darius' rule
   a bowchief who
   never volleyed such hurt
   and Susa's men loved him
   WHY HAVE TIMES CHANGED?

Soldiers and seamen lost!
   Sailwings unfurled, bluedark
   eyes on the sea
warships convoyed them
Ships CONVOYED THEM
warships destroyed them
Ships DESTROYED THEM
warships brought every one of them down
rammed them and left them to Greeks' hacking hands

Now we learn the King himself
by slender chance
runs for life down snowblocked roads in sweeping Thrace
HOw CAN THIS BE?

Those doomed to die first
DOOMED
are left
there was no choice
LEFT
to wash on Salamis' wavebroken rocks
THEY ARE GONE
Groan Bite lips till the blood shows
Howl, griefweighted voices, howl anguish at heaven
Hold sorrow's burden
till breath sobs and breaks

Flesh torn in the surge
TORN
is stripped
clean off the bone
STRIPPED
by voiceless young of the unsoilable Sea
THEY ARE GONE

Grieve you houses robbed of your men
Wail, childless parents, wail inhuman anguish

and learn in your grey years
the whole reach of pain

And those who live on Asia's broad earth will not long be ruled by Persian law
nor longer pay tribute under empire's commanding grip nor fling themselves earthward in awe of kingship whose strength now lies dead

No longer will tongues in vassal mouths be kept under guard for people are freed, set loose to bark freedom now that dominion's yoke is snapped The bloodsodden beaches of Ajax's sea-bruised island now hold Persia's heart

**Episode/Ode 3 (598-702 in Greek = 961-1134)**

ATOSSA, on foot and dressed in mourning, enters right with her ladies, who carry the jars and garlands needed for making libations.

ATOSSA (speaking in iambic verse) Good friends, whoever lives leans by experience that when a wave of evils crests and breaks, it's natural for humankind to be afraid of everything, but when the deathless Power flows calm,
to trust
to trust that Fortune's wind will always blow fair.
But now, for me,
    everything is packed with fear,
before my eyes the gods' hostility shows plain,
and the roar in my ears is battle din,
    not a healing song:
Evils attack so fiercely panic storms my heart.

That's the reason I've returned
without a chariot or queenly luxury
to bring my son's father the appeasing drinks
that serve as sweeteners to dead men:
    (pointing to the jars her ladies carry)
an unblemished Cow's white freshtasting milk
and the Flowerworker's droplets, lightsteeped honey,
with moisture poured sparkling from a virgin Spring
and unwatered drink from a wild country mother—
    this, the ancient Vine's new brightness,
and the fresh-scented harvest of one who blooms life
always in her leaves, the sundrenched Olive Tree—
    here it is,
and woven flowers, children of Allbearing Earth.

But, O my friends,
    these libations to the ones below
need solemn hymns.
    Chant them
and call his spirit, call up Darius
    while I send down
these Earthdrunk honors to the gods below.

CHORUSLEADER (chanting) Our Queen, our lady,
who Persians revere,
    yes,
    send your libations to Earth's hidden rooms
while we, chanting, calling, pour out our breath

to beg kindness from those who marshal
    1000
    men's shadows through Earth.

ATOSSA and her ladies make their ceremonies of libation, while the
CHORUS look on with increasing anxiety. When she has finished, they
begin the ghostraising. ATOSSA, weeping, muffled, sits at the tomb's base.

CHORUS (chanting) Help us, You Powers undying and holy
    that thrive beneath graves.
You, Earth and the Soul-Guide
and You who are King of the dead below us,
send him out of his utter darkness,
send his spirit up into light.

Disasters keep stalking us,
    and if
he knows of any cure
    1010
    more powerful than offerings and prayer,
only risen near us into light
can he reveal it.
    (singing and dancing)
Can he hear me?
    Blest in death
    and potent as a deathless Force
can my King hear these broken words
    earthmuffled
tumbling from my lips and touching
every note of pain in
ceaseless sorrow-roughened breath?
Or must I shout
    so that my anguish reaches him?
Can he heed me in his buried dark?

Wake and hear me
    Earth and You
    Who rule that world where dead men go
Give complete consent to prayer:
set free
   his proud and deathless glory 1030
Let Persia's god, born a man in Susa
rise now from his funeral house
Now, speed him up
   whose peer does not nor ever shall
rest hidden in this Persian earth

Man I loved, yes
tomb I love, for
everything I love lies covered there
Hand of Death
   Yours alone the power to open graves 1040
   and lead him lightward
Hand of Death
   free our hallowed lord Darius
Free him

Never once
did he kill men with
Folly's blind and life-devouring haste
He was
called the Persians' godbright counselor
and godbright counselor 1050
   he was
who steered the army on a true course.
Free him

The CHORUS fall to their knees and begin to hammer and claw at the earth
as if to help free the GHOST OF DARIUS.

In their next words they invoke him directly.

Shah once and Shah forever
come close
   break through

Go to the high prow of your tomb
Make yourself known
   showing signs of your kingship 1060
crocus-dyed shoe
turban's upright crest
Make yourself seen
   Break free
Father who brought us no evil
Darius
   break free

Wake and hear loud suffering
Hear strange
   new pain
Lord of our lord, find daylight form
The deathmist
   that grows on the eyes of the dying
   opens dark wings:
the young men, our sons
are all of them gone
Wake now
Father who brought us no evil
Darius
   awake
   The CHORUS, moaning, slowly stand.

Why, why
must friends who deeply mourned your death
[now mourn again—
sorrows twice borne, new grief exciting old?]
Where have we erred?
The fleet all Asia built
is smashed and sunk,
   the three-tiered
   ships
ghostships ghostships.
The GHOST OF DARIUS rises, spectral, from his tomb.
**DARIUS** (*speaking in iambic verse*)

Most Faithful of the faithful, comrades of my youth, Persians grown honorably grey, what trouble oppresses my people? The earth ceiling groans—hammered, scratched open. (*to ATOSSA*)

And seeing you, who shared my bed, here huddled now beside my tomb, I sense fear.

Yes,

I drank the sweetenings that you poured down, (*to the CHORUS*)

And you who stand before my tomb wail dirges and dolefully chant out soulraising spells to summon me.

There is no easy exit: Gods in the underrealms have always been better at taking than letting go.

Yet, now that I am one of them and powerful, I come.

Be quick, for I would have no blame for moments spent beneath the sun. What new strange evils weigh down my Persians?

ATOSSA *sobs. The CHORUS prostrate themselves.*

**CHORUS** (*singing*) I praise you and awe blinds my eyes I praise you but awe binds my tongue Your nearness fills me with death's age-old chill

(%*speaking in trochaic verse*)

**DARIUS** Because you chanted spells persuading me to leave the buried world, I come.

Tell everything, not rambling on, but make the story brief. Speak and be done.

I frighten you?

Then reverence exceeds its bounds. Let reverence go.

(*singing*) I dread you and would not displease I dread you but cannot find speech to tell those I love news better left untold

**Episode 4** *(703-851 in Greek = 1135-1398)*

ATOSSA laments. (*DARIUS and ATOSSA speak in trochaic verse from here through line 1254.*)

**DARIUS** Because you feel the old dread pounding in your hearts, restraining you, then let the one who shared my bed, my aged lady wife, cease her lamenting to give me plain account.

Mankind is bound to suffer the hurts of being human.
Many the evils spawned in the sea
and many on land
for you who must die.
And the longer you live,
the greater
your pain.

ATOSSA My husband, you
above all other men were destined
to a wealth of happiness.
How fortunate you were!
While your living eyes
beheld the sun,
Persians,
filled with praise and envy,
called you a god.
Now do I envy you
because you died
before you looked in the depths of loss.
Listen, Darius
I need few words
to tell you everything:
Persia's power,
her prosperity
are completely crushed.

DARIUS How? Thunderbolts of plague? Civil war?

ATOSSA Neither. Near Athens the whole expedition was lost.

DARIUS Which of my sons invaded Greece?

ATOSSA Headstrong Xerxes. He emptied Asia.

DARIUS Stubborn child! Did he go by land or sea?

ATOSSA Both. With a double front of two contingents.

DARIUS But how could footsoldiers cross the sea?

ATOSSA He made a path by yoking the Hellespont.

DARIUS What? He closed mighty Bosporos?

ATOSSA Yes. I think Something divine gave him help.

DARIUS Something so monstrous it twisted his good sense!

ATOSSA And we see his achievement—disaster.

DARIUS What happened? Why do you groan?

ATOSSA Because the ships sank, the army was lost.

DARIUS You mean the whole army fell to the spear?

ATOSSA And Susa's man-empty streets are groaning.

DARIUS Lost, a great army! Our defense, lost!

ATOSSA And Bactria's men, even the old ones, are all dead.

DARIUS Wretched man! He killed his allies' young sons.

ATOSSA But Xerxes—it's said that he and a few others—

DARIUS Is he safe?

ATOSSA —happily did reach the bridge yoking two shores.

DARIUS And arrived safe in Asia? You're sure?

ATOSSA Yes, it's been clearly reported. There is no doubt.
TOO swiftly then
the Oracles came true,
and on my son
Zeus hurled down
prophecy completed,
and I had somehow
hoped that gods
would take a longer time
to work their plan.
But when a man
speeds toward his own ruin,
a god gives him help.
Now a fountain of defeats
has been struck
for everyone I love.
And my son in his ignorance,
his reckless youth,
brought on its spurt:
he hoped to dam
the flow of holy Hellespont—
the Bosporos
that streams from god—
by locking it
in shackles like a slave
and he altered the strait
and, casting over it
hammered chains,
made a footpath
broad enough
for his broad array of troops.
Mere man that he is,
he thought but not on good advice,
he'd overrule all gods,
Poseidon most of all.
How can this not be
a sickness of mind
that held my son?

The wealth
I earned by my own hard work
may be overturned,
becoming nothing more than
spoils to the first looting hand.

Consort with evil-minded men
taught headstrong Xerxes
what to think:
they told him
that the vast wealth
you handed on
was won at spearpoint
while he,
not half the man,
secretly played toy spears at home
and added nothing
to inherited prosperity.
Hearing such taunts
over and again
from evil-minded men,
he planned
his expedition
and the invasion of Greece.

And so did his work,
the greatest ever,
to be remembered always,
such work as never before fell
and emptied out Susa
since the Lord Zeus granted this honor:
that one man
should rule vast sheepbreeding Asia,
his scepter held
as a steersman holds the rudder.
The Mede himself was the army's first leader,
and another, his son, gained the succession
because reason stood at his passions' helm,
and third after him Cyrus ruled,

Heaven's favorite,
who gave peace to everyone he loved
and made subject Lydia's people and Phrygia's
and rounded up all Asian Greeks by force
nor did the god despise him,
for his heart was righteous,
and Cyrus' son, fourth, piloted the army,
and fifth Mardos led, a disgrace to fatherland
and long-established throne,
but there was plotting
and Artaphrenes, potent in virtue,
helped by friends whose duty it was,
cut him down inside the palace.
Then I ruled.

Chosen by lot, I gained what I wished for
and fought a thousand times with my fighting thousands
but never
threw evil like this on the nation.
But Xerxes my son, green in years,
thinks green
and forgets what I taught him.

(to the CHORUS)

But you, men of my own generation,
plainly understand
that everyone of us who has held power
cannot be shown
to have worked such devastation.

CHORUS What next, lord Darius?
Where will your prophecy attain
its end? How, after the worst,
may we, Persia's people, win through to the best?

DARIUS Beware: mount no soldiers against Greek holdings.
Beware: not even if Medes count more soldiers.
Know: Earth Herself is their ally.

CHORUS What do you mean? How, their ally?

DARIUS She starves a manglutted enemy.

CHORUS But you must know
we shall select choice, action-ready troops.

DARIUS But you must learn
the army still remaining on Greek soil
shall not see a day of safe return.

CHORUS What are you saying?
That not all the forces left
will cross the Hellespont from Europe?

DARIUS Few out of thousands,
if one can trust godspoken oracles.
But when you look at those that have come true,
you know they are fulfilled—
complete, not just in part.
And if this be so, then
empty hopes have persuaded him
to leave behind a force selected from the army,
where Asopos pours kind floods on Boiotia's soil:

for them the height of evil waits implacable
to pay them back in suffering
for pride and godlessness
who came to Greek earth lacking the reverence
to stay their hands
from desecrating gods' images
and putting temples to the torch,
and altars are vanished
and shrines dedicated to the undying 1330
Dead are torn, root and branch, from their bases
and shattered.

It is sure
that having done evil, no less
do they suffer and more in the future
and not yet has evil's wellspring run dry
but still spurs unchecked:
so great shall be new
sacrifices of clotting blood
poured out
on Plataia's battleground by Dorian spears,
so great the piles of bones,
even to the third generation they shall be
seen by human eyes as speechless warnings
that those who must die
not overreach themselves:
when stubborn pride has flowered, it
ripens to self-deception
and the only harvest is a glut of tears.

These are the punishments 1350
and as you behold them,
remember Athens and remember Greece
lest someone
scorning the immediate blessings Heaven grants,
lusting for others,
pour away his worldly goods and happiness.
Zeus the Pruning Shear of arrogance run wild
is set over you, a grim accountant.
Because events have prophesied
that my son learn to know himself,
teach him in gentle admonitions
to stop
wounding gods with young reckless pride.

And you,

aged mother whom Xerxes loves,
after you have gone to your house
and found him splendor that suits a king,
go out to face your son
whose anguish at the fullness of disaster
has torn his bright embroideries

But speak kind words in a calming voice.
He will listen only to you
and only you can comfort him.

DARIUS begins to descend into the tomb, his voice fading.

I go, I must,
down below earth to the shadowworld.
Goodbye, wise old friends.
Though evil surrounds you,
give joy to your souls
all the days that you live
for wealth is
useless to
the dead

DARIUS vanishes.

CHORUS LEADER
Disasters present and disasters coming on—
I listened with anguish
to the Asians' fate.

ATOSSA (looking skyward) You! Nameless, inhuman!
How cruel the anguish
invading me! And one disaster
most of all bites deep—
to hear that shame's clothing

hungs in ragged shreds around my son's body.

(to the CHORUS)
But I'm going home, and when I've taken
kingly splendor from my house,
I'll try to face him.
Though evil surrounds us,
I shall not forsake my best beloved son.

With her ladies ATOSSA exits right.

Ode 4/Exodus (852-1076 in Greek = 1399-1714)

CHORUS (singing and dancing) GOD, PITY US
for once we knew
the life of grandeur and virtue
under stable rule
when he whose years and dignity we honored—
the All-Enabler, the Evil-Shunner,
the Battle-Winner—
when King
Darius cast a god's light
and governed us wholly

AND PITY US
for once we showed
an armed force whose praises rang sharp
through the chastened world
The laws that steered us stood bold on towers
and days of return led men safely home
Unwearyed, unwounded,
the men
of Persia came back from war
to houses that prospered

How many cities he captured
without once crossing the Halys river
nor leaving his hearth:
city on city—
the Rivergod's cities

piled on the floodplain near Strymon's gulf
and hillguarded cattletowns in Thrace
and cities east of the coastal marshes—
tower-enclosed mainland cities
bowed to him as lord,
and boastful cities
by Helle's broad current
and strung on the shores of the Inland Sea
and cities clustered at the Black Sea's mouth
And wave-caressed islands
held in the Sea's arm
close off our homeshores:

Lesbos
and olive-silvery Samos
Khios
and Paros
Naxos
Mykonos
Tenos, too
that rises out of the deep near
Andros
and salt-embraced islands
set in the Sea's midst—
he mastered them, too:
Leemnos
and Ikaros' settling place
Rhodes, Knidos
and Cypriote cities—
Paphos
and Soloi
Salamis, too
whose mother-city now causes
our groans

And more,
that rich estate Ionia
teeming with Greeks—
he bent it to his will
and drew on strength that never failed:
fighters under heavy arms
allies from a thousand tribes

But now
beyond a doubt
we must endure
being god-overturned in war,
for we are tamed
greatly tamed
by seastuck blows

XERXES enters left hidden from view in a curtained carriage drawn by
ragged men. A few other survivors straggle in, pulling worn equipment
carts.

XERXES (chanting) No!
Nonono!
Heartsick have I confronted hateful doom.
No warning signs, not one, foretold me
some undying Lust for human flesh
would stamp savagely on Persia's clans.
What now?
I am helpless,
my body's last current of strength runs out
and I must
face townfathers, fathers of sons.

Dear God!
Would that I were with the men
now gone. I wish
the doom of death had curtained me.

CHORUSLEADER (chanting) My King,
devote your sorrow to the skillful thousands,
the sweeping primacy of Persia's rule,
and the straight rows of men
some deathless Power cut flat.

CHORUS (rising from chant into full song)
And Earth herself
mourns. Listen! She cries out
wailing her own young 
slaughtered by Xerxes
who crammed them into the huge maw of Death,
for those now dead
were thousands of men
the country's flower
tamers of great bows 
thickets of men
all wasted and withered
by tens of thousands.
Cry! Can you cry?
Their courage kept us safe.
And Asia
whose mountains and plains you rule
is forced 
forced in blood
down on her knees.

XERXES, dressed in rags, climbs from the carriage. Both he and the
CHORUS sing from this point until the end.

XERXES Look at me
and weep
I am
your sorrow, a sad hollow
son to Earth and my fathers
born to bring home woe

CHORUS There are greetings for your safe return:
bleak howls of woe
bleak melodies of woe
torn from the throats of
dirge-keening men
I promise you
  promise you
tear-darkened notes

**XERXES** Let every breath you draw
  sound out
a din of endless lamenting
Divine wind has shifted Heaven
  blows against me now

**CHORUS** Every breath drawn shall din a lament
sounding your pain
and sea-battered sorrows
  But listen! a nation howls for her children
And I ring
  I ring out
a tear-spilling change

**XERXES** It was Greeks who stole our victory!
Yes, Greeks for whom ship-armored War decided
to harvest
  the black as night plain and that Luck-hated shore

**CHORUS** Thousands the thousands!
  Anguish puts questions:
Where are the friends who marched legion behind you?
Where, the men who stood proud beside you?

Where, Pharandakes?
Where are Sousas, Pelagon, Dotamas?
Where, Agdabatas, Psammis, too and where Sousiskanes who left Ekbatana?
WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

**XERXES** Past all help I had to leave them
They fell from a Tyrian ship and washed on Salamis rocks and there they died on that wave-broken shore

**CHORUS** Thousands the thousands!
  Where are the others?
Where, your Pharnoukhos and Ariomardos?
Where is his brave heart? And where, lord Seualkes or highborn Lilaïos?
Where are Memphis, Tharybis, Masistras? Where, Artembares, Hystaihmases, too?
We ask you, keep asking you over and over
WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

**XERXES** Sorrow sorrow is mine, mine
Looking with one same look at Athens old as time, anciently hated
all of them now at one same sweeping stroke
are cast on the dry land
to lie there
         lie there
gasping for breath

CHORUS Then it's true?
Your most faithful Persian
your very own Eye
whose rollcall counted those thousands
TEN thousands—
Batanokhos' son Alpistes
[you left HIM there]
with the son of Sesames, Megabates' son?
Parthos, too, and brawny Oibares?
You left them all
left them
slaughtered or drowned?
To Persia's old men you
call out a roll
of grief, unbounded grief

XERXES Sorrow
sorrow
If only I
could charm back the souls of
brave men comrades you make me remember
as you call the roll of boundless grief
hateful, unforgettable grief
My heart howls
howls
from its bony cage

CHORUS And I ache
with longing for others:
Xanthes who led out
ten thousand nomads
and war-hungry Ankhares, too
Diaixis with another, Arsakes
horselords both of them
and Egadatas and more, Lythimnas
Tolmos, too, whose spear always thirsted
I am stunned
stunned
They'll not march again
beside these men, these few
who came home
following your carriage wheels

XERXES Gone, the leaders who set my army's pace

CHORUS Gone, gone, their names become dust

XERXES Ache aching sorrow

CHORUS Sorrow sorrow
Undying Powers
You willed this hopeless loss
wide and chilling as Blind Folly's gaze

XERXES Struck, we are struck lifelong by Luck's blows

CHORUS Struck, struck down, I know it to the bone

XERXES By new strange new anguish

CHORUS From the moment
Greek sailors
loomed on fortune's horizon
War-broken no, not Persia's sons!
XERXES How not? Thousands lost—
struck through my army I suffer

CHORUS Great fool! What is NOT
ruined that made Persia proud?

XERXES (fingering his rags)
Do you see the remnant left as my cover?

CHORUS I see, I do see!

XERXES (holding up his quiver)
And see this arrow-concealing—

CHORUS You're telling us something is saved!

XERXES —this storehouse where shafts were crowded? Few left of many, too few

CHORUS Defenders are few, we are helpless

XERXES Greeks never ran from the spear

XERXES War-mad, they made me
see shame I never expected—

CHORUS You speak of DEFEAT!
Ship-armored thousands went down

XERXES —and I tore my clothes when I saw them drowning

CHORUS Despair despair

XERXES Far more than despair

CHORUS Disasters by twos, disasters by threes

XERXES In my shame I give joy to our enemies

CHORUS And strength is wholly destroyed

XERXES My bodyguard's gone, I am naked

CHORUS Stripped of friends, tricked at sea

XERXES Wail tearsongs, wail pain, wail me home

CHORUS Gone, gone, they are gone, dead and gone

XERXES Din back my howling, my thumping

CHORUS Sad voices sadly moan sadness

XERXES Cry doomsongs, tune them to mine

CHORUS Gone gone dead and gone

XERXES gone

CHORUS How brutal the losses on land and sea

XERXES Strike deathnotes, drum breasts, drum me home

CHORUS Dead, dead, they are dead and I weep

XERXES Din back my howling, my thumping

CHORUS Lead and I follow, my lord
XERXES Lift voices, beat out the dirge

CHORUS Gone gone dead and gone
XERXES gone

CHORUS And black-bruising hands and voice bruised black now mingle in grief

XERXES And keep striking breasts and keep crooning wails

CHORUS Wail thousands the thousands

XERXES And tug, pull out white hair from your beards 1690

CHORUS With tearing, tearing nails and a dirge

XERXES And rake air with cries

CHORUS Hear my cries

XERXES And rip heavy robes with fingers hooked

CHORUS Mourn thousands the thousands

XERXES And strip out your hair, lament an army lost

CHORUS With tearing, tearing nails and a dirge

XERXES And eyes rain down tears

CHORUS See my tears

XERXES Din back my howling, my thumping 1700

CHORUS Thousands the thousands

XERXES Lament as you go to your houses

CHORUS Sorrow the sorrow Hard now to tread Persia's downtrodden Earth

XERXES Wail as you step through the city

CHORUS Wailing wails, weeping

XERXES Tread soft as you sob out your dirges

CHORUS Sorrow our sorrow Hard now to tread Persia's downtrodden Earth

XERXES Mourn mourn the men in the ships three-tiered ships

Mourn mourn your sons dead and gone dead and gone

CHORUS To slowdining dirges we shall lead you home

The CHORUS surround XERXES. Together, lamenting and making all the gestures of mourning, they circle the stage as if walking through the city.

Exeunt ALL right.