Asylum at Argos: The Suppliants of Aeschylus

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When a modern audience hears the name 'Aeschylus', the first thing that is likely to leap to their minds is the famous Oresteia trilogy; some will also think of another well-known play, the *Prometheus Bound* (though the traditional attribution of this play to Aeschylus is doubted by many scholars). Aeschylus wrote more than eighty plays, but only three others have survived complete: the *Persians, the Seven Against Thebes,* and the *Suppliants*. None of these is commonly read or performed today, and the *Suppliants* is probably the least-known of the three. It is, nevertheless, a powerful play which deserves to be studied (and seen) more often.

The myth that lies behind the *Suppliants* can be summarized as follows: Danaos and his fifty daughters are fleeing from the fifty sons of Danaos' brother Aigyptos, who want to marry them. The Danaids arrive in Argos, where they claim protection from the king Pelasgos, based on their Argive ancestry: their great-great-great grandmother Io, one of the many women who attracted the amorous attentions of Zeus, came from Argos, and was driven from there (in the form of a heifer pursued by a gadfly) by Hera's jealousy until Zeus caught up with her in Egypt and had his way with her. The result of their union was Epaphos, great-grandfather of Danaos and Aigyptos. In the play, the Argive king Pelasgos consults with his people, and they agree to shelter the Danaids, though it will mean war with Egypt. An Egyptian herald arrives to drag the Danaids back to the ships of the sons of Aigyptos, but is driven away by Pelasgos, and the daughters of Danaos pledge that they will never be married by force.

This is where the *Suppliants* ends, with foreshadowing of trouble to come in Argos. We know that the story was continued in the next two plays of the trilogy (*Egyptians* and *Danaids*), and although the details are disputed, the progress of the plot seems fairly clear, based both on what we know of the myth from other sources and on the few surviving fragments of the two plays. War does indeed come to Argos, and the Egyptians are victorious, killing Pelasgos in battle. The Danaids are forced to marry their Egyptian cousins, but their father makes them promise to kill them all on their wedding night. (Some sources say that Danaos' motive in extracting this promise was to prevent the fulfilment of an oracle to the effect that he would be killed by his son-in-law). This all the Danaids do, except Hypermestra, who spares her husband Lynkeus and founds a new race of kings in Argos. It also appears that in the last play of the trilogy, the daughters of Danaos were all married for a second time, to Argive husbands, and this marriage may be the context of a famous fragment which survives from that play, in which the goddess Aphrodite proclaims that she is the source of all love and fertility in the world.

The *Suppliants* (and the trilogy), with its themes of sex and death, violence and politics, has attracted the attention of scholars approaching the play from many perspectives. Some have seen it as reflecting the necessity of young women's anxieties about sex being overcome in order to conform with the 'natural order' of human sexual relations and

reproduction; others have preferred to see as the primary theme of the play and trilogy more specific sexual problems and their solutions: such issues include the taboo against marriage within the family, the psychological transference of daughters' sexual desires from their fathers to their husbands, and (conversely) the repression by overly protective and jealous fathers of the natural sexual development of their daughters.1 Other scholars, inspired by the great amount of work that has been done on the subject of the political relevance of Greek tragedy to its original audiences in fifth-century democratic Athens, have approached the play from a political perspective, analyzing its presentation of the Argive king Pelasgos wrestling with the difficulties involved in ruling a state which also appears to show some 'democratic' characteristics, and studying the play's many references to Athenian history, democratic institutions, practice, and problems.2

A good place to begin a brief tour of some important aspects of the play would be the subject raised by the Danaids in their opening words: their refusal to marry their Egyptian cousins. The reasons for this refusal have been the subject of some debate, but in essence, these are the possibilities: either (a) The Danaids refuse *all* sexual relations with all men, or (b) they refuse sexual relations with *these particular* men, because (i) they are their cousins, or (ii) they are violent men.

The women do seem to imply the first option at some points in the play; they tell Pelasgos, for example, that their flight is caused by 'hatred of marriage beds' (332). This appears to be a general hatred, but further questioning by Pelasgos at that point reveals that they do not want to become 'slave[s] of the race of Aigyptos' (335). This hint that the suitors are harsh masters seems to accord well with the behaviour of their envoy; when the herald arrives to drag the women away, he is the very picture of brutality, threatening the women with violence, and claiming not to be deterred by the fact that they have claimed divine protection as suppliants. But Pelasgos is clearly not satisfied with this answer and questions the women further, and unfortunately the exact sense of the text at this point is rather doubtful. It may be that Pelasgos and the Danaids discuss the advantages and disadvantages of an incestuous union: Pelasgos points out that it keeps property in the family, but the Danaids reply that in the case of divorce, the woman is unable to find refuge in her own family (which would in such cases be the same as her husband's family, and would in all likelihood take the man's side in any disagreement). But it should be borne in mind that the story must end with a happy and fruitful endogamous union. Later in the play, the Danaids pray (1031-2): 'may marriage not come by force'. This seems to be the most prominent motive for the Danaids' refusal of marriage, but it is significant that the Danaids waver in their explanation of their motives; absolute consistency is not to be expected of them. They are a group of terrified women in a strange land. They are not arguing points of morality or law ('natural' or otherwise), but trying to flee what they see as a violation of *themselves*; at this stage, their bodies are all they have left to call their own.

Consideration of the Danaids' objections to their marriages leads naturally into the question of the rights and wrongs of the case. We face the dilemma of Pelasgos: do the Egyptians have a claim upon their cousins? Should the women be given the shelter that they seek?

Much has been made by some scholars of the fact that in classical Athens, if a man died leaving only daughters, those daughters were obliged to marry within their own family in order to preserve their inheritance. It would seem, from this perspective, that

the Egyptians are simply jumping the gun, not waiting for Danaos to die before claiming the rights that will be theirs when he does. On this view, the Danaids are in the wrong, putting their personal distaste for their cousins above respect for the norms of society. Have they duped an indecisive and impressionable king into supporting the wrong side? The Egyptian herald, to be sure, does not make too much of this point of law; he does refer, briefly, to Hermes in that god's capacity of recoverer of property, thus alluding to the fact that the Danaids do not 'belong' to the Argives, but this argument is overwhelmed by the brutality of the herald's behaviour in the rest of the scene. The herald only turns to this legal nicety as a last resort, when his use of force has failed, and Pelasgos is irrevocably set against him.

Pelasgos, in trying to help the suppliant women, signs a death warrant for himself and his royal house in Argos; the dilemma faced by the king is a focal point of this play. There are, it seems, two questions here: What does Pelasgos *want* to do about the suppliants? And what *can* he do?

The Danaids eventually persuade Pelasgos to favour their case, though the means by which they persuade him are striking: having failed to convince him that their case is truly just, they resort, in their despair, to a kind of blackmail – they threaten (454 ff.) to hang themselves at the very altars where they have sought refuge, thus bringing pollution to Argos. This act, essentially, makes the first question irrelevant: whatever Pelasgos may *want* to do with his unexpected guests, he cannot risk defilement of the city's holy places by suicide. He, the king, is now in the power of this band of exiled women.
It is at this point that Pelasgos takes his dilemma to the people of Argos, in what seems to be a democratic process: the Argives vote (601) to receive the suppliants and thus face war against the Egyptians. In what kind of monarchy (excluding decadent modern institutions such as constitutional monarchies!) do the people have a vote on matters of policy? And just what kind of 'king' is Pelasgos? Are we really intended to see democratic *Athens* here, in an Argive disguise? There is a considerable amount of overlap between all of these questions, and they are inextricably bound up with each other.

First of all, we should remember that Argos is not presented as a democracy such as we know it, or indeed such as the fifth-century citizens of Athens knew it. The king, Pelasgos, has not ceded his authority to the people as, for example, we see in Euripides' play about another group of suppliants, where the Athenian king Theseus says (*Eur. Suppl.* 352f.): 'I set the city free with equal votes and made the people the ruler'. Pelasgos, on the other hand, makes no such declaration; he *decides* to consult the people, but does not say that he is *constrained* to do so. He declares (367): 'Let the people [*laos*], together, work a cure'. The suppliants immediately protest (370 ff.): '*You* are the *polis, you* are the *demos*; as the chief authority [*prytanis*] you are beyond judgement. You rule the altar, the hearth of the earth, with assent of a single vote, and you hold complete command on your single-sceptred throne.' These are strong words, and Pelasgos does not deny their truth. He simply replies, weakly, 'I cannot help you without bringing harm, but it would not be wise to disregard your prayers. I am at a loss, and fear grips my heart.' He then tries to wash his hands of the matter, suggesting (387ff.) that there must be some Egyptian laws which will determine whether the suppliants are right to flee their cousins. The suppliants reply that they refuse to be subject to the power of men; they urge the king to choose Justice [*Dike*] as his ally and to pass judgement according to

what is righteous in the eyes of the gods. At this, Pelasgos' hands scrub even faster as he washes more furiously: to the suppliants' plea that he 'judge' [*krine*], he replies 'the judgement [*krima*] is not easy to judge [*eukriton*]; do not choose me as the judge [*kriten*].' He declares that he will stick to his promise that he will not do anything without the consent of the people, *even though he is the ruler* (399), thus finally admitting the truth of the suppliants' earlier assertion that he holds sole power in Argos. We are now moving into the territory of the next question: just what kind of a 'king' is Pelasgos? His behaviour as described above might suggest that he is a rather indecisive one, unsure of what to do and unwilling to take responsibility, as a monarch should, for the conduct of matters of importance to the state. This is, indeed, how he has often been seen: as putty in the hands of a band of frantic women beseeching him in the name of a 'Justice' (*Dike*) in which he has little experience. But we should pay attention to what he does next.

After the Danaids have threatened to hang themselves at the altar, Pelasgos decides that he must not allow this pollution. He then instructs Danaos (480ff.) to deck the city's altars with the suppliants' branches, with the express purpose of arousing among the Argive people both pity for the Danaids and hatred of the *hybris* of their cousins. Further (500ff.), his attendants are instructed not to tell anyone why Danaos has come to the city, thus increasing the emotional capital of his appeal when it is brought before the assembly. When the assembly has finished and Danaos returns to report the result (605ff.), we discover that Pelasgos persuaded his citizens to accept the suppliants on the basis of the wrath of Zeus of the Suppliants (*Hikesios*), but said nothing about the fact that this would bring Argos into war against Egypt. When the Egyptian Herald later issues a declaration of war, Pelasgos feels no further need to consult the assembly, but simply replies (952f.) that the Argives are real men, and ready for anything the beer-swilling foreigners can throw at them.4

Pelasgos would probably be in a difficult position at the next meeting of the people – if there would even be such a meeting under ordinary circumstances. (From the evidence of this play, the Argive assembly seems to be called at the king's pleasure.) In any case, the next meeting of the people – if there was one – would likely be the last for some time: what with the war, the death of Pelasgos, the slaughter of the sons of Aigyptos, the second marriage of the Danaids, and the probable installation of Danaos as *tyrannos* with the bodyguard that he demands towards the end of this play (985), it would probably have been difficult to fit in any more meetings.

At this point, we enter the territory of the last of the questions posed earlier: Are we really intended to see democratic *Athens* here, in an Argive disguise?

Some scholars have answered in the affirmative; it has been suggested that the picture of the manipulative Pelasgos (above) points strongly to a similar situation in Athens in 462 BC (thus placing the play, probably, in 461): the pro-Spartan demagogue Kimon had convinced the Athenians to agree to help the Spartans in their war against the Messenian helots; but the Athenians had ended up being sent home by the Spartans, causing great offence to Athens, who promptly made an alliance with Sparta's enemy Argos. Kimon was ostracized not much later, and perhaps the *Suppliants* was therefore Aeschylus' way of doing a bit of vote-rigging of his own, reminding Athens that this candidate for ostracism had dragged the city into a pointless war against foreigners who had done their city no wrong.

But what if the Argos of the *Suppliants* really is Argos? This has been a more popular interpretation, linked closely (again) to recent events: when the Athenian Themistokles was ostracized in 471 BC, he sought asylum at Argos, where he was accepted and treated well. But the Spartans later accused him of having tried to betray Greece to the Persians in the recent war, and in their efforts to bring him to trial they also enlisted help from his Athenian enemies. Was Aeschylus, then, reminding his Athenian audience of the situation of Themistokles at Argos, pursued by the Spartans, and expressing gratitude for their protection of him? Perhaps this interpretation can be combined with the episode involving Kimon, to give a picture of Aeschylus pushing both for the ostracism and for the alliance with Argos.

These questions will probably never be answered conclusively, and even the sudden appearance of the rest of the trilogy, intact, would likely raise more questions than it answered. But the *Suppliants*, nevertheless, confronts problems of sex, violence, and politics which are still relevant to modern audiences. Women fleeing sexual aggression must find refuge, and in the face of resistance to their pleas, they resort to extreme measures. A state experiencing uncertain relationships with other states faces the choice of just how much damage to bring upon itself, and others, by 'doing the right thing' – or, more accurately, *finding* the right thing to do when confronted with appeals from the vulnerable and the desperate, and then accepting the consequences. A more benign destiny may eventually emerge, as it appears to have done in the rest of Aeschylus' Danaid trilogy, but the choice facing Pelasgos in our play is in the here and now. As in many choices faced by tragic characters, the right and the wrong are not neatly distinguished.

Notes

1. See, for example, T. Gantz, 'Love and Death in the Suppliants of Aeschylus', *Phoenix* 32 (1978) 279-87; S. Ireland, 'The Problem of Motivation in the Supplices of Aeschylus', *Rheinisches Museum* 117 (1974) 14-29; R. Caldwell, 'The Psychology of Aeschylus' Suppliants', Arethusa 7 (1974) 45-70; M. Ryzman, 'The Psychological Role of Danaus in Aeschylus' *Suppliants', Eranos* 87 (1989) 1-6.
2. See, for example, T.A. Tarkow, 'The Dilemma of Pelasgus and the Nautical Imagery of Aeschylus' *Suppliants', Classica et Mediaevalia* 31 (1975) 1-13; G.W. Bakewell, *'Metoikia* in the *Supplices* of Aeschylus', *Classical Antiquity* 16 (1997) 209-28; A.H. Sommerstein, 'The Theatre Audience, the *Demos*, and the *Suppliants* of Aeschylus', in C.B. Pelling, ed., *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford, 1997) 63-79.
2. A.F. Garvie, Aeschylus' *Supplices: Play and Trilogy* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 216.
3. For this view of Pelasgos, see Sommerstein (cited in note 2 above).