

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Suppliants 463 B.C.E.

Aeschylus

Story. *The Suppliants* is the first play in a tetralogy, often called the Danaid Tetralogy, giving it the name of Danaus, the father of the fifty girls whose arrival from Egypt to Greece makes up the chief action of this first play. The other two major plays, in the tetralogy, are *The Egyptians* and the *Daughters of Danaus*; plus a satyr play, the *Amyrmone*, which provides comic energy in the midst of the high drama of flight and pursuit. The whole work was long thought to be the first work of Aeschylus, due to its seemingly archaic use of the chorus, at the beginning of the play, but papyrological discoveries in Egypt, in the last century, have made it clear that this is among the last works of Aeschylus, slightly earlier than the *Oresteia* and 'composed more than ten years after the *Prometheus*, *Persians*, and *Seven Against Thebes*.' So difficult is the job of dating ancient texts, even starkly simple tales like the present, which simply recount a frenzied pursuit and escape, from Egypt to Greece, in which fifty maidens of Argive descent make a desperate attempt to escape their suitors, and in the end simply succeed, thanks to the support of the Argive citizens.

Themes.

Flight. From the start of the play the emphasis is on flight. The fifty daughters of Danaus, accompanied by their father, have just arrived in Argos. They are panting with fear, and are just a step ahead of their pursuing cousins. The play is from start to finish pervaded by this single atmosphere of flight and pursuit.

Pursuit. The lustful Egyptian suitors, of the Danaidae, are an unremitting snapshot of pursuit, throughout the play. Their herald-representative arrives in Greece just a few steps ahead of these pursuing cousins, who claim these young women as their legal brides.

Family. Traditional family law is in the background of this entire play. By Athenian (generally classical Greek) law, widows were required to marry the cousins or brothers of a deceased husband. (The purpose was to keep property in the family.) The cousins of the Danaids insisted on this privilege, claiming the maidens as their rightful brides.

Characters.

Suppliants
Danaus Their father
Spokesman. A son of Egypt
Chorus, of Egyptians
Chorus of Argive women
Argive soldiers
Argive spearmen

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

SUPPLIANTS The *Suppliants*, though fifty in number, must probably count as the main character. They are in the spotlight of action, fleeing with all their might from their lustful Egyptian cousins. The Suppliants—a type familiar from all three major tragedians, especially prominent in Euripides—cling, from the start, to the gods' altars in Argos, counting on their own origins, in that city, to provide them security. It is the Suppliants who invoke their forebear Io, who in the most ancient times invited the lust of Zeus himself, and who was pursued by the gadfly jealousy of Hera, as the Suppliants were enduring the nasty pursuit of their cousins. It is the consciousness of the Suppliants that prompts the entire frenzied action of the drama, with its eventual 'happy ending,' in the secure support of the citizens of Argos.

Arriving. From the outset of the play we see the Suppliants ardently making their case to Pelasgus, that he should give them shelter, even if it means facing a war from the Egyptian cousins.

Realizing. In the midst of their travail, upon arriving in Argos, the Suppliants call to mind and reflect on their kinship with Io, from four generations prior, and the suffering—like their own—of that progenitor harried by Zeus' lust.

Argumentative. The maidens press their case, to both Pelasgus and the women of Argos, for justice, and fill the air with threats of suicide—hanging from the altars—unless they are guaranteed freedom from assault by their cousins.

Parallels. A ground breaking translation of the present play, and a splendid theatrical adaptation of the play, deserve attention for the efforts they display, to build out from Aeschylus' powerful *Suppliants*. (Translation and performance are in fact the chief means by which an inevitably fragmentary ancient Greek play can be brought out into a full new light.) A recent performance of the play in Edinburgh (Director: David Greig, 2016), provides a stunning choreographic play-out of the women's predicament, with convincing moral attention to the injustice of the plight of immigrants. Theater of War Productions (founded 2009) has been active in sponsoring social-awareness readings and performances of contemporarily relevant ancient plays, like Aeschylus' *Suppliants*. The American poet and naturalist, Janet Lembke, has created a free verse and free spirited, translation of Aeschylus' *Suppliants* (Oxford, 2009), a parallel to the deepest sensibilities of the Greek dramatist.

Discussion questions

The maidens are fleeing to Argos from Egypt. Did Greek law guarantee them security from their suitors? Why did they particularly dread the lustful pursuit by their suitors?

What was the reaction of Pelasgus, in Argos, to the arrival of the Suppliants? Was he sympathetic to their case, or afraid of war with the Egyptians? Did the Egyptians have any justification on their side? Has Aeschylus any sympathy for the Egyptians?

Why is the theme of 'supplication' so important in ancient Greek drama and society? Have we, in the industrialized west today, any provision for immigrant supplication? Can an immigrant be a suppliant?