

The Suppliants. 423 B.C.E.

Euripides

Overview. The story rests on the powerful ancient belief in the importance of the proper burial of the dead; a rite of last respect likely to determine the fate of the deceased in the next world. In the present case the story goes back to the death of Oedipus, which leaves the power in Thebes up for grabs between Oedipus' two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices. Polyneices, as it happens, had married the daughter of Adrastus, king of Argos and was thus supported by a powerful army; it is the army he leads forward toward Thebes (the army whose best fighters will be known as the Seven Against Thebes, the title of an early play of Aeschylus). The invading army loses the battle, in which both Polyneices and Eteocles are killed. Creon meanwhile takes power in Thebes, and declares that the corpses of the invading army are not to be buried. (The reader or viewer will think at once of the situation in Sophocles' *Antigone*, when the same Creon behaves the same way in the same situation.)

Characters

Aithra,	mother of Theseus
Chorus.	Mothers of the 'Seven against Thebes.'
Theseus,	King of Athens
Adrastus,	King of Argos, leader of The Seven against Thebes
Herald,	a Theban
Messenger,	an Argive, reporting from Thebes
Evadne,	an Argive, widow of Capaneus
Iphis,	Evadne's father, an Argive
Children,	sons of the Seven
Athena,	protecting deity of Athens

Story

Lamentation. Aithra, the mother of the king of Athens, Theseus, prays before the altar of Demeter in Eleusis. She is surrounded by the weeping mothers of the sons of Argos, who have been killed outside the walls of Thebes, and who will not be permitted by the King of Thebes, Creon, to bury their dead. Aithra has sent a messenger to Theseus, begging him to come to Eleusis, to consult over the demand of the weeping women to bury the bodies of their sons outside the walls of Thebes.

Burial. The old weeping women beg Theseus for support, then turn to Adrastus to ask for support in burying these great warriors of Argos. Adrastus explains to Theseus that it is true that he, Adrastus, was behind the attack on Thebes, but that he felt Athens, and its present ruler Theseus, were the only city states strong and honorable enough to stand up for Adrastus, and to demand a proper burial for the Seven. We can feel the Athenian propaganda oozing from the seams of the narrative.

Discussion. Theseus demurs, for he does not yet have formal approval from the Athenian people, but the tears of Aithra are finally too much for him, and he vows to take a referendum of his people. (Theseus misses no opportunity, in this back and forth, to stress the democratic nature of Athenian society, and to contrast it with that of Creon in Thebes.) As Theseus returns from his people, with a clear mandate to support the Argives, and to bury the dead, a herald arrives from the Thebans, and from Creon their ruler, contemptuously rejecting any upcoming Athenian intervention. A quite formal interchange follows between the two representatives; all the ferocity and rhetorical flourish of orators.

Aftermath. A messenger arrives, to announce the success of the Athenian forces, in defeating the Thebans. Theseus receives fulsome praise for the care with which he has attended to washing the wounds of the dead. (He is careful not to let the mothers, who continue to keen in the background, catch any sight of their sons' battered bodies; all the mothers see is the ashes which remain after the incineration. One particularly moving scene features the self-immolation of the widow of Capaneus, who mounts high above the wailing women, then throws herself onto the funeral pyre.)

Athena. The young male orphans of Argos arrive to gather the ashes of their fathers, and to return them to the boys' grandmothers. The boys make clear that their hearts are thirsty for revenge, on the Thebans; Theseus makes an appearance, to the bereaved Argive boys, making them doubly aware of their indebtedness to Athens, a bond which the goddess Athena, patroness of Athens, intervenes to strengthen. She assures the young men of Argos that they will one day organize to take vengeance on the Thebans. With that this pretty archaic tale concludes.

Themes

Burial. Ancient Greek culture, like most ancient cultures, places a powerful emphasis on the cleansing and proper burial of corpses. While this insistence has its clear hygienic basis, it has even more to do with maintaining the integrity and honor of the family. It is no wonder that ancient Greek literature reflects this cultural perspective—which of course is widely shared by modern cultures, too; in Greek antiquity one thinks of the burial of Patroklos in the *Iliad*, and the struggle over the body of Hector in the same epic; or of course the tragic personal struggle of Antigone, to honor the bodies of her two brothers against the decree of Creon.

Democracy. *The Suppliants* is full of Theseus' praise of the democracy of Athens, the governmental form, he insists, which breeds strong men and independent citizenries, in contrast to autocracies like that of Sparta or Thebes.

Lamentation. The background music of women's wailing is ceaseless in *The Suppliants*. This oriental tone is common enough in the work of Euripides, which often involves the losses, suffering, and confusion of the women whom Euripides allows to play such a central part in his dramas.

Vengeance. The young men of Argos, who have lost their fathers in the fighting against Thebes, are at play's end urged by Athena to live for vengeance against the Thebans. Theseus does all he can to turn this vengeance into a political dependence of Argos on Athens.

Character Analysis

Theseus The main character is Theseus, the king of Thebes, who has passed through many stages of attitude and self-conception in the course of the play. For a long time Theseus belittles the appeals of the Argive women, for he does not see the value in supporting those neighbors whom the Thebans had defeated. The women's lamentations, plus the ardent intervention of Adrastus, whose Argive soldiers have been left unburied, gradually win Theseus over, and, after he has delivered a couple of stuffy political speeches, about the value of democracy and the claims of political friendship, he directs his sympathies fully to the Argive cause. As a political figure, he is strongly on the side of the people, and proclaims—though in a self-interested way—that he will not take action for the Argives without the approval of the Athenians.

Impatient. The play opens on Theseus, as he finds the suppliant women from Argos clustered at his palace gates; they are weeping. He asks them, essentially, to stop wailing and begin talking. 'Nothing can be accomplished without speech.'

Reflective. Theseus, under pressure to aid the weeping suppliants of Argos, treats the chorus of Athenian women to a diatribe on human life and destiny. He emphasizes the overwhelming importance of order and good company, in the choice of a life direction.

Concession. Eventually, what with the wailing and the inner reflections on friendship and democracy, Theseus decides to give in to the women's pleas. Theseus tells Creon to care for and return the fallen bodies, or else.

Order. Theseus orders Creon to comply with the women's just request for the return of their sons' bodies. 'Give back the dead...or else I'll bury them by force.'

Hero. A messenger enters, to report the results of the battle, in which Theseus conquers the Theban army, and enforces his demand that the unburied bodies of the Argive warriors be respected and returned. Theseus proved his power and care, in this instance, and emerges a hero. He whirled a terrifying mace, and sent the enemy scampering.

Parallels. We have mentioned Sophocles' *Antigone*, and the centrality, in that play, of the issue of proper burial. Antigone defies the order, of the same Creon we meet in *The Suppliants*, that the fallen enemy should not be buried. For the sister of the fallen this edict is immoral and cannot be obeyed. Homer's *Iliad*, centuries before Sophocles, enshrines some of its most moving passages in the rites of burial. The fallen body of Patroklos, Achilles' lover, is cherished like a religious icon; the body of Hector, killed by Achilles, is worth his whole honor to Priam, who begs for his son in a powerful act of humility.

Discussion Questions

The sons of Oedipus die in a battle to reconquer Thebes: this is the battle in which Creon establishes himself as ruler of Thebes, and undying foe of Argos. Does the stain of Oedipus' own tragic life seem to you to bleed over into this setting for the conflict between Thebes and Argos? Does Euripides want his spectator to come to *The Suppliants* furnished with an alertness to the myth-background of the play?

Evadne, the Argive widow of Capaneus, throws herself into a fiery suicide, in face of her lamenting sisters. Why does Euripides introduce this high drama spectacular event? Does it make you think of Medea in her fiery chariot? Or of the frequent use of the *deus ex machina* by Euripides?

Does the suppliant posture pervade world cultures, and if so does it always have the same meaning? Is it a way of highlighting the helplessness of the postulant? Or is it a sign of ultimate respect for the powerful other? The postulant dreads even to touch the toe of such a potentate as the Oba of Benin.