

LOVE AND DEATH IN THE *SUPPLIANTS* OF AISCHYLOS

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DESPITE ITS LACK OF PHYSICAL ACTION, Aischylos' *Suppliants* contains a wealth of dramatic movement in its language and imagery, especially at those points where the playwright expands the statements of his characters to include implications beyond what the characters themselves perceive.¹ Robert Murray has already described much of this movement in his study of the use of the myth of Io:² the Danaids' appeal to Zeus to save them from the lust of the Egyptians, made as it is in the name of his own lust for their ancestor, underscores the central paradox of their position. Their very existence is the result of that ancestral coupling, and the protector of suppliants whom they invoke is himself a prime proponent of physical love, without which there would be no one to protect. The play's images often reflect a similar bias; the broader understanding achieved by Io remains only a potentiality for the Danaids. Thus what might be a laying-on of hands is to them still the physical violence of rape, and the gentle on-breathing of Zeus becomes the fierce blast of the storm.³ This incompleteness of vision extends to many aspects of the *Suppliants*; here I should like to focus on one particular device of Aischylos, namely the ironic contrast between the Danaids' suppliant posture and their oft-hinted-at future aggression against their cousins. The murders to come are not, of course, any part of the initial plot, yet the play's language—through pun, double meaning, and innuendo—reminds us again and again of the brutal denouement to their suit. Love and death fuse into a grim perversion of the process by which life is created, and the Danaids' repeated references to growth and fertility in the context of their refusal to procreate merely underline the weakness of their stance. The technique is not dissimilar to that at work in the *Agamemnon*;⁴ here

¹I should like to express gratitude to Betsy King Leifermann for insights on this paper, and to the journal's several anonymous readers for helpful advice. The following standard editions and commentaries are hereafter referred to by author's name only: F. A. Paley, *The Tragedies of Aeschylus* (London 1879); T. G. Tucker, *The Suppliants of Aeschylus* (London 1889); J. Vürtheim, *Aischylos' Schutzfliehende* (Amsterdam 1928); H. J. Rose, *A commentary on the surviving plays of Aeschylus* 1 (Amsterdam 1957); H. F. Johansen, *Aeschylus: The Suppliants* (Copenhagen 1970).

²R. D. Murray, Jr., *The Motif of Io in Aeschylus' Suppliants* (Princeton 1958). Cf. also J. T. Sheppard, *Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge 1911) 29–37, and E. T. Owen, *The Harmony of Aeschylus* (Toronto 1952) 5–9.

³Murray (above, n. 2) 32–41.

⁴For the latter cf. especially W. B. Stanford, *Ambiguity in Greek Literature* (Oxford 1939) 137–162.

as there language in its poetic role often tells us more about the characters than does the same language considered dramatically.

Suggestions of the Danaids' true nature and their ultimate choice of action pervade the play from its inception. In lines 6-7, for example, the sisters announce that they have left Egypt

οὐτιν' ἐφ' αἵματι δημηλασίαν
ψήφω πόλεως γνωσθεῖσαι⁵

"judged worthy of no exile by vote of the city on a charge of bloodshed." No one in the play has in fact intimated such a charge, yet some such situation will probably become a reality before the trilogy has run its course.⁶ At line 21 the foreshadowing is even more direct: the Danaids have come equipped

σὺν τοῖσδ' ἱκετῶν ἐγχειρίδιοις

"with these hand-held objects of suppliants." They themselves mean, as the following line makes clear, their wool-wreathed branches. But ἐγχειρίδιον is sufficiently common as a word for "dagger"⁷ that the audience must have had a momentary vision of something less conciliatory. Murray notes both these instances, but only as a means to reconstruct the action of the missing plays.⁸ I think they serve also, with many other similar moments in the surviving drama, to keep before us the spectre of the Egyptians' death, in counterpoint to the claims the Danaids make for themselves.

The second strophic pair of the parodos continues this line of development with an extended simile. To the Danaids the comparison of their own lament with that of the mournful nightingale is little more than a *topos*. To us, however, the parallel can scarcely fail to sound deeper resonances. Like the Danaids Prokne (or whatever we may choose to call her⁹) is pursued, and like them cut off from her native land. But at

⁵The text, unless otherwise noted, is that of D. L. Page's 1972 OCT edition.

⁶For conjectures on the working-out of the trilogy cf. A. F. Garvie, *Aeschylus' Suppliants: Play and Trilogy* (Cambridge 1969) 163-233, and R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *JHS* 81 (1961) 141-152. No certainty exists that the Danaids were charged with murder even in the third play, but it seems very probable.

⁷Ps.-Apollodoros, in fact, uses precisely this word for the weapons employed by the Danaids in his description of the deed: ἐγχειρίδια δίδωσι (Danaos) ταῖς θυγατράσιν (*Bibl.* 2.1.5). Winnington-Ingram ([above, n. 6] 148) speculates that the parodos of the *Danaides* presented the maidens bearing this time actual daggers bloody from their night's work.

⁸Murray (above, n. 2) 79; cf. also Garvie (above, n. 6) 61-62, and J. Lembke, *Aeschylus: Suppliants* (New York 1975) 80.

⁹For the various interpretations cf. Vürtheim 166; Rose 20-21; Paley 12; Tucker 17-20; Johansen 56-57. I confess I do not see why either *μητρὶς* or *ἀγδόνα* should refer

the same time she has murdered her own child (αὐτοφόνως ὤλετο πρὸς χειρὸς ἕθεν, 65–66), coming upon a rage ill-befitting a mother (δυσμάτορος κότου τυχών, 67).¹⁰ As she seems at first pitiful and harassed, only to emerge as the agent of a dreadful crime, so will the Danaids, who argue a similar oppression, emerge as the murderers of their own husbands. Use of *δυσμάτορος* suggests too a further relevance in the myth.¹¹ Prokne is a poor mother to her child, slaying him with her own hands; the Danaids are no mothers at all, since by eliminating their husbands they preclude even conception. If the analogies seem overly subtle, we must remember that Aischylos was under no compulsion to introduce Prokne (or for that matter Io) into this play.

Passing for the moment over the fertility imagery in the later sections of the parodos, we come to Pelasgos. His story of the legendary hero Apis and the ἀκη τομαῖα (268), "cutting cures," which rid Argos of man-devouring monsters may or may not be relevant to our purpose, since Apis' action was clearly beneficial.¹² But the characterization of the Danaids as similar to

τὰς ἀνάνδρους κρεοβότους τ' Ἀμαζόνας (287)

is more apt than the king knows, and an earlier suggestion of foreign origin certainly reflects (though only for the audience) the ways of men and women together:

Κύπριος χαρακτήρ τ' ἐν γυναικείοις τύποις
εἰκὼς πέπληκται τεκτόνων πρὸς ἀρσένων (282–283)

"and a Kypriot/Kyprian¹³ stamp is impressed upon female forms by

to the actual name of Tereus' wife when all our extant sources call her Prokne (for the myth cf. Ps.-Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.14.8 and the references cited *ad loc.* in Frazer's Loeb edition [1921, vol. 2, 98]). μήτις may, as Paley and Vürtheim, following the scholiast, suppose, indicate Tereus, but the phrase μήτιδος οἰκτρᾶς, however construed, would well describe Prokne's design to murder her own son.

¹⁰Presumably the use of *δυσμάτορος κότου* denotes a deliberate killing of one's own child, as against Homer's related tale (*Od.* 19.518–523) of the wife of Zethos who killed her son by mistake (δι' ἀφραδίας, 19.523).

¹¹Murray (above, n. 2) 79. K. A. Neuhausen, *Hermes* 97 (1969) 167–186, arrives at rather different conclusions, but he seems to me to place far too much stress on Tereus; the first point of the comparison, surely, is that the Danaids resemble Prokne.

¹²For what we know of the myth cf. Rose 33–34. Paley (31), Tucker (64), and Vürtheim (175) all suggest that herbs are indicated by this phrase; Rose supposes merely a symbolic "cutting loose" from troubles, and Johansen (75) translates the words with "surgical cure." On the possible sinister qualities of κνωδάλων βροτοφθόρων cf. Murray (above, n. 2) 81.

¹³On the difficulties raised by an opening anapest and the postponement of τε cf. Johansen, *C&M* 27 (1969) 52–54. Whatever the actual reading, I find it hard to believe that Κύπριος does not represent in some fashion an Aischylean pun on the presence of Kypris within the Danaids.

male artisans/creators.”¹⁴ Man, woman, procreation; this is the pattern rejected by the sisters. To Pelasgos’ query about their legal position they avoid a direct response; to his statement that from marriage *grows* (αὔξεται, 338) great strength for mortals they answer

καὶ δυστυχοῦντων γ’ εὐμαρὴς ἀπαλλαγὴ (339)

“Yes, and when things go wrong, release is easy.” Scholars have generally taken the line to mean (as, presumably, did Pelasgos) that men may put aside their wives when they wish.¹⁵ But release cuts both ways, and the termination of these particular marriages will prove simple in quite a different fashion. Against all expectation the women find their own solution. Nor does the following debate over sanctuary forego similar allusions. At the initial request for protection Pelasgos balks, noting that for lost property and harsh words there are remedies, but as for bloodshed:

ὅπως δ’ ὀμαιμον αἷμα μὴ γενήσεται,
δεῖ κάρτα θύειν καὶ πεσεῖν χρηστήρια
θεοῖσι πολλοῖς πολλὰ, πημονῆς ἄκη (449–451)

“So that kindred blood might not be shed, it requires indeed sacrifices, and the falling of many victims to many gods in order to avert distress.” Pelasgos appears to mean that if he accepts the Danaids, it will demand great effort to avoid killing Argive kinsmen, i.e., the Egyptians. Yet a different kind of kindred blood is most definitely shed by the Danaids (who have no desire to avoid the act) when they slay these same Egyptians, their own first cousins. A similar ambiguity emerges at lines 476–477, when Pelasgos, picturing his army in battle before the city, asks

πῶς οὐχὶ τάνάλωμα γίγνεται πικρόν,
ἄνδρας γυναικῶν οὖνεχ’ αἰμάξει πέδον;

“How is the cost not bitter, when men bloody the ground for the sake of women?” Pelasgos thinks of the Danaids as a possible indirect cause; we

¹⁴Text and sense are both in doubt here. Rose (35) paraphrases “Cypriote fathers beget such daughters as you,” and Mazon and Croiset translate the lines in much the same way. On the other hand, Paley (32), Tucker (66), Vürtheim (176), and Lembke (34) suggest an image drawn from minting, while Johansen and S. Benardete in their translations seem to suppose sculpture. Not much can be added, save that τεκτόνων surely constitutes an artistic/genetic pun. On the artistic level some form of representation (sculpture seems most likely) is indicated; on the genetic level men (ἀρσένων) stamp their likenesses upon their daughters. But beyond these implications I would maintain that the image of something Kyprian impressed into female forms by male progenitors is blatantly sexual (cf. the scholiast *ad loc.*).

¹⁵So Rose (39), Tucker (79), and G. Thomson (*Aeschylus and Athens*² [London 1946] 304). Vürtheim (183) and others suppose, with less probability I think, that the reference is to Pelasgos’ possible rejection of the Danaids.

know that their role will be far more active, that men will die at their hands, not simply for their sake. As a final touch to this section, Danaos requests of the king a bodyguard, and adds by way of explanation

καὶ δὴ φίλον τις ἔκταν' ἀγνοίας ὕπο (499)

"Supposing someone killed a friend through ignorance?" (or, "in the past men have killed friends through ignorance").¹⁶ For his part Danaos worries that he will be cut down by some Argive who takes him for an enemy. Yet the words apply far more readily to his daughters; they are the ones who will kill their own kin in ignorance of the essential necessity of marriage.¹⁷

Pelasgos then departs to petition the Argive assembly; in leaving he counsels the Danaids to ask the gods "for that which they desire to come upon," and they do so in an ode bearing suggestive phrases of several types. The first strophe concludes praise of Zeus with the wish that he might

ἄλευσον ἀνδρῶν ὕβριν εὖ στυγῆσας,
λίμνη δ' ἔμβαλε πορφυροειδεῖ
τὰν μελανόζυγ' ἄταν (528-530)

"hate truly the arrogance of men and ward it off, and cast their black-benched destruction into a purple lake." The translation of these lines usually produces for λίμνη "sea," thus making the thought equivalent to that of lines 29-36, where the Danaids clearly request a briny demise for their cousins. No doubt Aischylos intended that effect in part, but we shall still be surprised to find λίμνη, a word which far more commonly denotes "standing water,"¹⁸ and we may further suspect that πορφυροειδεῖ was meant to convey more than simply picturesque overtones. In point of fact there is no lake, dark or otherwise, for the Egyptians to drown in, but there is the dark red pool of blood into which the Danaids will cast them. Here as elsewhere, what the suppliants ask of Zeus they subsequently take into their own hands.¹⁹

¹⁶For the first translation cf. J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles*² (Oxford 1954) 253; for the second, where Denniston himself places this use of καὶ δὴ, 250.

¹⁷So Murray (above, n. 2) 75. Garvie's objections (above, n. 6) 70) affect only part of his argument, and certainly not the most important part, namely that the Danaids will murder those who are their husbands and first cousins and whom they should have loved. For a similar foreshadowing cf. 987-988.

¹⁸For the few exceptions, mostly Homeric, cf. *LSJ*. Aischylos himself in his extant work seems otherwise to use the word only in the sense of "pool" or "lake;" so for example *Pers.* 871, *Agam.* 302, *Eum.* 9.

¹⁹On this characterization of the Danaids in general compare the interesting remarks of A. Maddalena, *Interpretazioni Eschilee* (Turin 1953) 85.

References to fertility also play an important part here. In the following stanzas we find a description of the territories through which Io passed in her flight to Egypt: the Lydian plains, the mountains of Cilicia and Pamphylia, the ever-flowing rivers and

τὰν Ἀφροδίτας πολύπυρον αἶαν

(554-555)

"the wheat-bearing land of Aphrodite." The unexpected connection between agriculture and the goddess of love lays a foundation for Aphrodite's actual appearance in the third play of the trilogy as a kind of Mother Nature, an earth force who establishes sexual union as a prerequisite to all fertility, even that of the fields. But the Danaids' major treatment of fertility occurs in the subsequent song of thanks to Argos, after they have heard from Danaos the favorable news of their acceptance. They ask that Ares may never ravage Argive land, Ares

τὸν ἀρότοις θερίζοντα βροτοὺς ἐν ἄλλοις

(636)

"the one harvesting mortals in fields foreign to him."²⁰ With this image Aischylos intensifies the perverse fusion mentioned above: Ares becomes a grim reaper bearing a harvest of death in fields (ἀρότοις) which should be consecrated to the sustaining of life. Thus the Danaids' very words stress the contradictions of their refusal to procreate; like the fields they are designed for the fostering of new growth, but like Ares they shall bring in a far different harvest.²¹ Their prayer then continues with further hopes for the prosperity of Argos, hopes paradoxical in the light of their future actions and again worded to reflect those actions: μήποτε λοιμὸς ἀνδρῶν/τάνδε πόλιν κενῶσαι, "may pestilence never empty this city of men" (659-660);²² μηδ' Ἀφροδίτας εὐνάτωρ βροτολογὸς Ἄρης κέρσειεν ἄωτον, "may Ares bed-partner of Aphrodite, destroyer of men, not shear off this choicest part" (665-666); μηδέ τις ἀνδροκμῆς λογὸς ἐπελθέτω τάνδε πόλιν δαίξων, "may no man-slaughtering destruction come upon this city, cleaving it asunder" (679-680). The Danaids themselves, of course, will

²⁰Text and meaning of ἐν ἄλλοις have been much argued: cf. Tucker 129. I follow here the ms and translate with a sense similar to that of Tucker and Mazon (cf. also Vürtheim 198). Page emends with Lachmann to ἐναίμοις.

²¹So in the parados the sisters spoke of the Egyptians' arrogance as a root (πυθμήν [105]) growing out afresh, and flourishing by means of marriage with them (δι' ἀμὸν γάμον τεθαλῶς [106]). It is thus the Egyptians' desires, not the Danaids', which are pictured as leading to new life; they are the ones who operate within the agricultural contexts of the play. For all this imagery cf. B. H. Fowler, *C&M* 28 (1970) 16-21; to her fine discussion of the importance of fertility and generation in the language I would add only more emphasis on the corresponding death themes running through the drama.

²²Murray ([above, n. 2] 31) derives a different kind of ambiguity here by noting that ἀνδρῶν can also be construed with λοιμὸς as a subjective genitive; cf. as well his comment, 80.

empty the city of certain men, cleaving (*δαίζων*) them in truth, and as grim *ἐννάταιραι* bringing Ares to beds where Aphrodite ought to reign. Such reiterated references to the coming wedding night are interspersed with further prayers for life, growth, fertility, and even a wish for fair dealing with strangers (701) "before arming Ares," *πρὶν ἐξοπλίζειν Ἄρη*. The implications should by this point be obvious.

In the dialogue that follows the hymn to Argos Danaos announces the approach of the Egyptian fleet. The response is total panic; the maidens implore their father not to leave them, claiming that

γυνή μονωθεῖσ' οὐδέν' οὐκ ἔνεστ' Ἄρης (749)

"a woman alone is nothing; there is no Ares in her." Again future events will provide ironic refutation²³ (though the first part of the statement contains a truth basic to the trilogy). Danaos then tries to calm the fears of his daughters by noting that the ships will need considerable time to find a safe haven. The purpose of this speech has always been obscure, since the Egyptian herald appears promptly after Danaos' departure with no delay indicated. Perhaps Aischylos wished to emphasize Danaos' faulty planning, but we may note in passing that 768-770 could also refer to other matters: the Egyptians do come to a harborless land (*ἀλίμενον χθόνα*) on their wedding night (*ἐς νύκτ' ἀποστείχοντος ἡλίου*) and therein arises grief (*ὠδὴνα τίκτειν νύξ*, a phrase which should denote child-birth but does not because the Danaids preclude the vital other half of the process).

The absence of Danaos from the stage next leads his daughters into their most desperate appeal for help from the gods, an appeal in which the unconscious ambiguities of their language become clearer and clearer as their desperation increases. They wish for death or an escape in a variety of forms, finally hoping for a high, vulture-haunted rock from which they might fall

πρὶν δαίκτηρος βίᾱ/καρδίας γάμου κυρῆσαι (798-799)

"before coming upon a cleaving marriage against the desires of my heart" but also, as the Greek will equally allow, "before coming upon a marriage that will cleave hearts with violence."²⁴ In either case the Danaids themselves must mean their own hearts; if the first reading is taken, they wish

²³Thomson (above, n. 15) 301. This is not, of course, to say that the Danaids do not speak this line in all sincerity.

²⁴Opinion is generally divided: of recent translators, Johansen, Vellacott, and Mazon construe *καρδίας* with *βίᾱ*, Smyth and Benardete with *δαίκτηρος*. The latter view is also held by Rose and the scholiast. It seems at the very least possible that Aischylos intended both. The more sinister implications are in any event seen by Lembke (96), though I think that her additional reading of the journey from Egypt may be stretching matters.

to avoid sexual penetration by the Egyptians against their will. Yet the words also suggest, as so often, what the final outcome will be: penetration of the Egyptians in a completely different sense, and the death of the latter. The double line of thought assumes even sharper focus in the antistrophe; having named death as a liberator from sufferings, they pray that it may anticipate their marriage:

ἐλθέτω μόρος πρὸ κοίτας γαμηλίου τυχών (804-805)

"May death come, arriving before the marriage bed." So it will, but to the Egyptians, not the Danaids. The final lines of the antistrophe then bring this dimly-hinted future to its most pointed expression:

ἀμφυγᾶς τιν' ἔτι πόρον/τέμνω γάμου λυτῆρα; (806-807)

"What way of escape,²⁵ what release from marriage, can I cut?" As the audience already knows the answer, it is likely that they also understood the question.

The remainder of the play, including the end of this stasimon, suffers from serious textual difficulties, and as a result deliberate word-play is more difficult to detect. At 841 the words ἀποκοπὰ κρατός may or may not look ahead to a decapitation of the Egyptians;²⁶ at 936 there is a general reference to πεσέματ' ἀνδρῶν κάπολακτισμοὶ βίου, "many fallings of men and kickings away of life." But at 1032-1033 we do, I think, encounter one final suggestion of the murders in the play's concluding ode. The text has caused doubts, and is emended by Page following Burges to read Κυθρείᾱ/στυγερὸν πέλοι τόδ' ἄθλον, "may this contest be hateful to Aphrodite." But marriage (the clear referent of ἄθλον from the γάμος of the preceding lines) is never hateful to Aphrodite, as she herself establishes in our one substantial fragment from the *Danaides*. Moreover, as Rose notes,²⁷ the transmitted reading makes perfectly good sense if only we take it in the context of coming events: Κυθρείας/στύγειον πέλοι τόδ' ἄθλον, "may this contest of Aphrodite be Stygian," i.e., "to the death." Life-giving marriage and the destruction which will result are fused together once more, as we prepare for the second and third plays of the trilogy.

In conclusion, it is hoped that the admittedly brief survey of verbal ambiguities offered above will at least indicate possibilities for a fuller

²⁵The ms reading τιν' ἀμφ' αὐτᾶς, which yields no discernible sense, has been emended by Weil.

²⁶For the idea that the Danaids did in fact so treat the Egyptians cf. ps.-Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.1.5 and Pausanias 2.24.2.

²⁷Rose (83), though he follows Wilamowitz in emending to Στύγειον. Johansen offers the same reading and much the same sense ("May this prize involve death!"), Vürtheim likewise but with the meaning "better death than marriage." None of these editors construes Κυθρείας with ἄθλον, nor is it necessary, but I think it does make better sense. (The ms, it should be noted, punctuates after Κυθρείας.)

representation of the Danaids. Undoubtedly many other such ambiguities could be found; I have tried here to stress primarily those dealing with murder and procreation as the most important in the context of the whole trilogy. Of course the Danaids' murder of their new husbands is an inescapable part of the myth, and their failure to produce new life is an inescapable consequence of the murders. But nothing in the myth required Aischylos to emphasize these aspects of the story so repeatedly; nothing required him to remind us so frequently that apparently helpless maidens are not always so, or that sexual union is a necessary step in the furtherance of the human race. The *Suppliants* seems on the surface to support the Danaids in their bid for sanctuary, yet beneath that surface the language suggests darker tones in which the paradoxes of their position become more and more apparent. The Danaids never grasp the importance of Io's fate to the total plan of the Zeus they supplicate so fervently. They never appreciate the contradiction between the violence they fear and the violence they will offer. And they never understand, despite their many prayers for fertility, the role which they themselves are meant to play in the propagation of human life. Therein, I believe, lies the dramatic tension of this first play, in the contrast between what is said and what will happen, between what is claimed and what will prove to be so. Whatever we may think about the Egyptians (and we cannot think much without the remaining plays), the ironies undercutting the Danaids' situation suggest that they at least still have much to learn before they will be ready for Aphrodite's cosmic vision of sexual union in the final play. "Of all these things," she says, "I am the cause" (τῶν δ' ἐγὼ παρὰίτιος). For her, and surely for Aischylos, the coming together of male and female is the source of all life. To deny that process, to refuse the sheer necessity of it, is a perversion of natural order, and can only bring death, as the *Suppliants* so often tells us.

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