

“THE SUPPLIANTS” OF OUR POST-TRAGIC TIMES

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Abstract: The course of human history carries the visible footprints of millions of people who, for various reasons, found themselves displaced. There is no phase in human history that does not carry stories of all these “other” people. This paper has two parts. The first examines Aeschylus’ *The Suppliants*, the first play in drama history that interweaves issues of otherness, nationality, religion, body politics, love and sexuality, society and individual decision. The second part examines how 21st century artists appropriate this ancient myth in order to discuss similar burning issues of our times, like immigration and uprootedness. Among the contemporary examples used is Peter Sellars’ production of Euripides’ *The Children of Hercules* and Charles Mee’s *Big Love*, an adaptation of Aeschylus’ *The Suppliants*.

Key words: Aeschylus, asylum, democracy, contemporary theatre, participation

Resumo: O curso da história humana carrega as pegadas visíveis de milhões de pessoas que, por várias razões, se viram deslocadas. Não há nenhuma fase da história humana que não traga histórias de todas essas “outras” pessoas. Este artigo tem duas partes. A primeira examina *As suplicantes*, de Ésquilo, a primeira peça na história do drama que entrelaça as questões da alteridade, nacionalidade, religião, política do corpo, amor e sexualidade, sociedade e decisão individual. A segunda parte examina como artistas do século 21 apropriam-se desse mito antigo, a fim de discutir questões candentes semelhantes do nosso tempo, como a imigração e o desenraizamento. Entre os exemplos contemporâneos usados está a produção de Peter Sellars’ de Eurípides *The Children of Hercules* e a de Charles Mee’s *Big Love*, uma adaptação de *As suplicantes*, de Ésquilo.

Palavras-chave: Ésquilo, asilo, democracia, teatro contemporâneo, participação

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master — that’s all.”

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According to the Geneva Convention on Refugees, a refugee is a person who

...is outside their country of citizenship because they have well-founded grounds for fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and is unable to obtain sanctuary from their home country or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country; or in the case of not having a nationality and being outside their country of former habitual residence as a result of such event, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to their country of former habitual residence. Such a person may be called an ‘asylum seeker’ until considered with the status of ‘refugee’ by the Contracting State where they formally make a claim for sanctuary or right of asylum” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refugee>, accessed Feb 4, 2016).

The course of human history carries the visible footprints of millions of people who, for various reasons, found themselves displaced. There is no phase in human history that does not carry stories of all these “other” people. And as history is full of “other” people, so is theatre, its immediate mirror. Hamlet and Lear in William Shakespeare, Karl Moor in Friedrich Schiller’s *Die Räuber (Robbers)*, Grusha in Bertolt Brecht’s *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis (The Caucasian Chalk Circle)*, the Armenian immigrant family in Richard Kalinowski’s *Beast on the Moon*, the old lady in Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *Der Besuch der alten Dame (The Visit)*, not to mention the numerous examples we get from the classics (Medea, Oedipus, Iphigenia, among others), the first to accommodate the plight of this quest for home.

I will not rehearse what is by now well known, and better said by others, except to note the obvious: to understand the popularity of this idea in ancient Greek drama (and by extension in contemporary drama), one has to understand the importance of belonging, of having a place to call your own.

I. THE IDEA OF BELONGING

Myth was a recognizable medium that helped Athenians shape their identity and strengthen their sense of space. To be forced to leave the city-state (the home) and be exposed to “an-other” place without the protection of government (laws), friends and family, was seen as a fate worse than death, an idea beautifully dramatized by Aeschylus in *The Suppliants*, the oldest extant text in drama history (possibly 463 B.C), the first part of an incomplete trilogy (the other two parts being *Aegyptii* and *Danaides*), and the first play ever written that deals with the issue of international justice, an issue inspired by the great social changes taking place in Athens back then, where political powers shifted from the traditional Areopagus Council to the Council of 500, the assembly and the law courts, “that is, to bodies that represented the *demos* as a whole. Subsequent reforms further facilitated popular participation in politics, and simultaneously made citizenship more exclusive” (Boedeker & Raaflaub 2005: 115).

The play tells us the story of the fifty virginal Danaids who, to avoid marrying against their wishes, flee Egypt and seek refuge in Argos, the homeland of their ancestress Io, where they ask for king Pelasgus' protection. Confronted by the unexpected geographical (re) location of the daughters of Danaus — who will later on succeed him as king of Argos— the king hesitates, for he knows that by offering them sanctuary, he brings them inside the *polis*, just as marriage brings them inside their husband's house. As the husbands take on the role of guardians, the King and his citizens are expected to guarantee the Danaids' protection (Zeitlin 1996: 136 - 42), which is more easily said than done for if the sons of Aegyptus and all their followers attack the city, then his fellow citizens will tell him that he "destroyed Argos for the sake of foreigners" (l. 402). Thus, a seemingly simple refugee case, turns out to be a very complicated ethical, political and military matter, interweaving issues of nationality, religion, body politics, love and sexuality, society and individual decision.

The Danaids, on their part, know very well their rights and the strength of their position.² They claim four things to convince the king to grant them political asylum. a) The aspiring grooms are crude and voluptuous (they characterize their behavior as "hubris," l. 30, 89, 104); b) they do not want to get married against their will (they wish to maintain their freedom, l. 227-8); c) being descendants of the Argive Io, gives them the right to ask for protection and d) being under the protection of Zeus Hikesios, they are entitled to an asylum.

The Danaids are so obsessed by their struggle that they appear to have "no clear idea of

² Given the fact that local people generally hesitated to welcome foreigners, all suppliants had to follow certain steps dictated by a ritualistic typology. For example, the first place they had to approach when entering a foreign city-state was the altar. They would sit on it or just stand by it or they would simply enter the temple for there they felt more secure, since they were placing themselves and their plea under the protection of the god (usually Zeus: Xenios, Savior etc) (Bakonicola 2004: 96-97). It was also the custom to carry small tree branches as well as ribbons, to decorate the altar or sometimes crown the head of the local ruler whom they approached with great respect and humility. The custom was to touch his beard or, kneeling in front of him, gently touch his right hand and knee. Further, and according to inter-state custom, they had to have the sponsorship of a protector (*πρόξευος*), that is someone coming from the same city as they did but now living in the host city. If such a person was not available they had to have a messenger whose job would be to set forth their case to the ruler.

In the world of tragedy, every human appeal accompanied by invocations to the gods was seriously examined and never rejected in advance. Yet, seeking for shelter was not only a religious matter but also a moral one. The political refugee/ exile had on his side Zeus Hikesios ("Lord of Suppliants"), a god interested in the people who were exiled or on the run. He was also protected by the institution of *filoxenia* (hospitality), which presupposed mutual respect between the host and the visitor. It operated as a kind of moral bond. However, the whole procedure was a very serious and complicated test that frequently involved issues of public international law, individual rights etc. The dilemma rulers faced was to rightly choose between their religious duty and their duty towards the city and its citizens. That is, they protected the foreigners but at the same time they had to protect the host city, which means that providing an asylum was not an unconditional act.

political responsibility,” as Burian soundly observes (2007: 206). What makes things more complicated is that their views about political power are radically different from those they encounter in Argos. They think that Pelasgus’ power is lacking only compared to Zeus. Line 425 makes it very clear: “O you who hold all the power in this land.” With this in mind, it is only natural that they expect him to behave autocratically, like any eastern monarch. “You are the state, you are the people” (l. 170), they tell him, also reminding him that he can rule “by the sole vote of his will” (l. 327). His hesitation is beyond their comprehension. “...I am at a loss, and fear seizes my heart” (l. 329), the King confesses, thus revealing a mentality totally different to that of the suppliants. As a statesman he has to examine all possibilities and then try and reconcile two seemingly irreconcilable claims. The first is the demand of the suppliants and the other the safety of the citizens. As already argued, the wrong decision could turn people against him, accusing him of destroying the city to honor some foreigners. “What can I do?” he wonders, “I fear either to act, or not to act” (l. 379). He understands the gravity of the situation. He does not know whether to honor the right of sanctuary even at the cost of war, or to reject his suppliants and see the altars of his gods polluted with their blood. In other words, the dramatic weight here does not fall on the achievement of protection, as Burian rightly argues, but rather on the way in which the tragic choice is made (2007: 206). To this end the King has to clarify a number of pressing political and diplomatic issues (Bakonicola 1994, 2004):

- a) Are these women really relatives of the people of Argos? And if yes, can they prove it? For if they prove it the rejection of their plea becomes all the more difficult. The Argives wouldn’t refuse to protect their kins that are on the run. That would be twice as immoral (refusing asylum to a suppliant who also happens to be a relative).
- b) Is the aversion they feel for this marriage in accordance with human nature? That is, do they object to the sons of Aegyptus in particular or do they reject sexuality and marriage altogether (an unnatural objection to men and marriage)?
- c) Is their flee from Egypt connected to any unlawful act? Did they do something wrong from which they are running away? For if yes, granting an asylum would be a wrong decision.
- d) According to Egyptian laws, do the Aegyptiates, as their closest kins, have these women under their legal custody? In such a case, no city can provide them shelter.
- e) If granting an asylum is against inter-state relations (Egypt/ Greece), shouldn’t the king take into consideration the unwelcome consequences of such a decision? Who can say that the Egyptians will not take their revenge? In brief, does the protection of these women carry too much price for the Argives (war with immense casualties)?

Aeschylus is obviously concerned about the exercise of power: Where does it reside? In law, in the people, in mutual accord, in sweet persuasion [*petho*], in domination, brutal violence, or in marriage (Vernant 1981: 15)? To what extent are the people's comments

true when they tell their King (their *anax*) that he is "the State," the "unquestioned ruler" that fears "no vote" (l. 72-4)? What is the role of reason in decision-taking and in ruling.

The pressure the suppliants put on him turns an otherwise "proud autocrat to a constitutional monarch" (Burian 2007: 204). From "assertions of almost unlimited power there is a progression "to a recognition of the limitations on its exercise," Burian states (2007: 203). As a king he may have the power, yet he is unwilling to exercise it without popular consent. It is the first time ever that there is any reference to a "popular government," to people as the rulers of the *polis*. The principle behind it is that those affected by the decision should also decide on what is to be done: "If the city as a whole is defiled, let the people work out a cure together" (l. 365-66). And the community gets involved and unanimously decides in favor of the suppliants (l. 605-24). The asylum establishes holy bonds between the benefactor and the suppliant. It binds both sides for generations to come.

This issue is one of the most serious statements about a common feeling of justice and also about humanism in the field of political ethos in ancient times. Pelasgus' hesitation is not a sign of weakness but "rather of swift ... comprehension of the need to decide between dreadful evils" (Burian 2007: 205).³

His dilemma is the dilemma of a statesman. As Boedeker and Raaflaub observe, "in a time of rapid and fundamental social and economic change, when distinctions between citizens and non-citizens became blurred in many spheres, it seemed all the more important to emphasize the citizens' share in political power, government, and responsibility" (2005: 116).

The poet with great finesse updates the myth in order to bring it closer to the people (and their rulers), make it their own and thus make them more conscious of their civic (and political) responsibility. This very same principle I think also governs the decision of many contemporary artists, who appropriate the myth in order to foreground, from their own perspective, burning issues of our post-tragic (or post-dramatic) times, such as immigration, statelessness and uprootedness, in one word: belonging.

II. THE SUPPLIANTS OF THE 21st CENTURY

Whereas the movement of people across borders for business, study, recreation or family reasons has become part of the routine fabric of life for contemporary western citizens, the unprecedented wave of illegal immigrants, war refugees and asylum seekers, has recently turned border crossing into a highly problematic issue.

³ As Kitto says, Pelasgus is the Homeric King who knows how far he should go. He very well understands "the seriousness of the dilemma" (10-1).

At the end of 2015 there were about twenty million refugees worldwide, with the Syrians being the largest group in 2014 and 2015, overtaking the Iraqis (about five million) and the Afghans (2.6 million). We are bearing witness to the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War. Millions of people are thrown away from their homes and ancestral lands; and these millions of undocumented people have stories to tell (for more see Guterma 2014) and contemporary artists, on their part, want to confront these stories, which are quite often lost amidst images of pain, carnage, media distortions and lies. They want to bring into their performative acts facts to replace fictional truths, clarity and theatricality to replace ambiguity. In short, they want to use their art as a tool for myth busting.

Asylum! Asylum! by Donal O' Kelly (1996), one of the earliest examples, focuses on local Irish people and the pressure (mainly ethical) the presence of asylum seekers puts on them. Playwright Sonja Linden, founded in 2003 the theatre company Ice and Fire in order to "honor," as she says, the real life stories of individuals who have been displaced as a result of conflict (http://www.new-theatre.org/play_rwanda.php, accessed 28/02/2016). Her first performance *I Have Before me a Remarkable Document Given to me by a Young Lady from Rwanda* (2003), is described as the most produced play about the Rwanda genocide in the United States. *Crocodile Seeking Refuge* (2005), and *Asylum Monologues* (2006) that followed shortly after were less successful but well received nonetheless.

In the *Kindness of Strangers* (2004) Tony Green's refugees have to survive the tough life on the streets of Liverpool and also learn how to play the game of duplicity that is needed to get around the asylum system. Not very different in terms of focus is *The Refugee Hotel* by Carmen Aguirre that dramatizes the life of Chilean refugees in Canada (2009). In 2009 Intersections International commissioned Kim Schultz to travel to the Middle East to meet Iraqi refugees and hear their stories. The result was the play *No Place Called Home*, a story "about one refugee in 2 million." (<http://www.silkroadrising.org/live-theater/no-place-called-home>, accessed 28/02/2016). *Lampedusa*, by Anders Lustgarten (2015), dramatizes the effects of the refugee crisis from the viewpoint of a fisherman attempting to rescue refugees off the Italian coast and a working British student. The two share their stories alternately.

Also practitioners are putting together their own performance texts or are re-creating old texts in order to shake institutional Europe and the rest of the civilized world to their senses about our common humanity. The two-part *Le dernier Caravanserail* of Le Théâtre du soleil, directed by Arianne Mnouchkine, focuses on the situation from which refugees flee (first part, 2003) and on the problems they face upon their arrival in the West (second part, 2006). All the material for the production was collected over a period of two years by interviewing asylum seekers at the Sangatte Centre in France (for more see Alison Jeffers 2012). The tragedy of Syrian refugees is in the heart of the Spanish director and performer Marco Magoa's play *The Sky & I*, performed in Arabic in Amman in 2015.

In the midst of all this, the democratic principles and the sociocultural references of ancient Greek drama prove once again to be a useful source of inspiration and experimentation. Peter Sellars used Euripides' rarely performed play *The Children of Hercules* (2003) to address issues of foreignness, asylum and the rights and responsibilities of hospitality. It tells the story of how Athens protected the children of Hercules who were persecuted by the Argives and driven from their homes in the Peloponnesus. The Athenian leader Demophon (=the voice of the people) gives the children asylum and thus saves their lives. Just like the *Suppliants*, this play also explores the price the host city is called to pay for her decision. How far can she go to protect them? And what about the citizens' will? What about if they disagree with the decision of their leader? Since he is elected does he also have the right to decide on their behalf? What Euripides examines here is how far the citizens can be expected to put aside their own interests for the sake of a shared humanity? Aren't Europe's politicians today struggling with the same dilemmas?

In 2013 a group of Syrian women, all refugees living in Jordan, staged Euripides' anti-war tragedy *Trojan Women* in Amman's National Theatre which was widely covered in international media. The Greek text crosses borders to meet the Arabo-Islamic world and provide the terrain for these undocumented women to voice their narratives of homelessness, abuse, fear and embodied violence. For them re-enacting Euripides' text is not an intellectual exercise but felt experience. It is a vehicle to declare their presence and enact it. By expressing their desire to have a space of legal existence, these women show what it means to exist physically but not legally (for more on this idea see Guterman 2014).

One play that dramatizes the correlations between the Aeschylean plot of *The Suppliants* and current social and political issues is Charles Mee's *Big Love* (2000). Using the old text as his spring board, Mee comments on what is happening today, regarding the plight of international refugees, the problem of political asylum, the problem of violence, gender relations, selfhood, responsibility and of course love. He turns to characters with very different cultural, ethnic and gendered characteristics, in order to show how all these predetermine their subject positions within discourse. In Mee's retelling of the story, we do not have a transition from the state of nature to that of the state of law but from the state of law to that of a state of exception determined by the government. Each government establishes the rules, that is the limits and possibilities of acceptance (or rejection), always in the name of their perceived constituents' demands.

Big Love is a play written by a playwright who believes that, although we are made up of heterogeneous codes, we can still strive for an autonomy of a classically liberal kind that would help downplay the seemingly irreconcilable differences of identity between individuals (and nations) and help build a sense of (universal) community without exiles and locals (for more see Hopkins and Orr 2005: 16-7).

What is worthwhile mentioning is that an old play incorporated into the West's classical

canon, can still inspire new artists and also provoke audiences to discomfort and action. Who, after all, can ignore Pelasgus' original words to the Danaids: "You 're free! You 're free in this city and I, with my sovereign people, are the guarantors of your freedom." Pelasgus' reassurance provides these runaway women with the right to strengthen their presence without erasing their mark of foreignness.

III. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt an emerging market for theatre of war and the qualified labor which war provides. Common people, war survivors, people who participate in a community and at the same time exist in an- "other" world, where their presence is falsified or erased or denied, attract the attention of many contemporary artists who cast them as performers, story-tellers and turn them into our guides to their "an-other," underground, undocumented world (for more see Guterman 2014: 1-30)). And while artists take the risk, politicians consider costs and benefits. They wonder how far they can go.

In ancient Athens there was also risk in every decision in favor of an exile. Athenians offered sanctuary to blind Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus* despite their fear that this might cause divine anger. Medea performed her murder only after being promised sanctuary by the king of Athens. Athenians took pride in welcoming the needy, those bullied by other cities. And so did their playwrights whose concern touched upon principles of justice, of rights, of obligations, and of respect of human life. At the same time, however, they were not naïve. As mentioned above, they were aware of the real consequences, for very often led to war, as it happened in the war in Sicily which was passionately supported by Alcibiates who claimed that Athens' greatness was won by coming to help of all who needed it.

It is apparent as much as it is understandable that nothing in the way Aeschylus treated the myth is morally or ethically one-sided, even within the limits of a play. The prefix "post" (post-tragic," "post-dramatic"), which theatre theorists use to describe our era, gradually turns out to be mostly an indicator of chronological rather than philosophical distance, in the sense that too many things concerning human life unfortunately remain the same. Just like Athenian playwrights used old myths to teach their spectators how to tackle complex issues that affected their life, contemporary artists also use the same old stories in order to bring them closer to us, to move us, surprise us, enlighten us, awaken feelings about humanity that are dormant; in brief, to help us become better citizens, with more compassion and understanding, to help us determine who we are and what we are doing to ourselves and others.

Not everybody agrees, of course, as to the quality of the work presented around the world. However, all seem to agree that this is a much needed contribution to a mounting humanitarian crisis; a crisis that has always been with us from the start of our dramatic tradition and whatever conflicts it exposes cannot be easily wished away.

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