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BEGGING IN STYLE: SUPPLICATION IN MIND'S EYE AND ON STAGE

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Supplication is an ancient stylized procedure by which a person in need, sometimes in dire peril, pleads for help or protection, sometimes begging that his or her life be spared. It is verbal but also corporal—visible, bodily. Greek epic, one may almost say Greek literature *begins* with a suppliant scene.

Immediately after its Invocation *Iliad* brings before us the priest of Apollo Chryses, who unsuccessfully supplicates Agamemnon, whereafter a “plan” of Apollo launches its deadly

course. (Zeus' *boulē* operates, too, here and throughout the Trojan War; however, "Phoebus" is the answer when the poet asks the Muse about the cause of Book 1's consequential Quarrel.)

Centuries later high-classical Greek tragedy *ends* with on-stage supplications. Euripides' posthumous *Iphigenia* has several; Sophocles' posthumous *Oedipus* has a couple. (A grotesquely *rejected* supplication occurs off-stage in *Bacchae*. Terrified Pentheus extends a beseeching arm toward his crazed mother, *who tears it off* at the shoulder joint!)

F. S. Naiden has comprehensively studied the **ethical institution of supplication** (Greek *hikesia*) for both Greece and Rome.¹ Although he misinterprets occasionally and misses an instance or two in extant tragedy, and seriously underrates gods' interest, especially Zeus', Naiden's accomplishment is admirable.

When the supplicandus—Naiden's useful term for the person supplicated—is a living mortal, a suppliant grasps or attempts to grasp his knees and/or beard—"his" and "beard" because one with power to grant requests is usually a mature male. Then, or sometimes initially or instead, the suppliant reaches for his hand/forearm. Where, on the other hand, the supplicandus is divine (or a late pharaoh of Egypt, in Euripides' *Helen*), altar or tomb is touched for asylum-sanctuary. Occasionally a deity's statue gives (or should give) protection: Thetis' in *Andromache*, and in visual arts that of Athena Promachos on vase-paintings of Little Ajax assaulting Cassandra. In *Libation Bearers* Agamemnon's son and daughter seek not only protection but also vindictive energy from his unappeased spirit at his tomb. Ajax's corpse protects his vulnerable survivors in *Ajax*, where his body is surely most spectacular of asylum-substances.

Real-world practice of *hikesia* of both kinds had political and legal aspects.

So far as all politics is about **power relationships**, however, supplication is *political*. In two tragedies of Euripides classified as “suppliant plays,” *Children of Heracles* and one entitled *Suppliants*, state and interstate politics dominate. Supplicandi are both invisible gods with on-stage altars (Zeus, Demeter) and *visible* and *voluble* kings of Athens (Theseus’ sons, Theseus himself).

Interpersonal dynamics are wider spread in theatrical supplication, and implicitly its religious dimension. Olympian Zeus was believed to oversee and honor *all* suppliants and punish their abuse. Zeus himself receives and accedes to a suppliant in *Iliad* 1, his old flame Thetis. When she clasps his knees he doubtless feels erotic *frisson*, though the supreme philanderer must still keep hands off the Nereid beauty. The physicality, the touch of a sexy suppliant must elsewhere be a factor, too. Such encounters on stage, more or less overt seductions, make good theater; for examples: when Medea supplicates soon-to-be husband Aegeus in *Medea*, when Helen supplicates offended husband Menelaus in *Trojan Woman* and, in *Helen*, hopeful suitor Theoclymenus.

Pitiful suppliants may seek commiseration; but this is not the point. Suppliants want action from more powerful persons or forbearance, want them to do or *not* to do something. Frequently this involves third parties—in the suppliant plays mentioned above, Athenians intervene against evil foreign rulers.

HOMERIC EPIC

Supplication constitutes a notable secondary theme of the *Iliad*, culminating with its sublime manifestation in the Achilles-and-Priam scene of Book 24. Before that, however,

although rejection brings unhappy consequence sooner or later for the rejecter, supplication by Trojans is uniformly futile, as G. S. Kirk's commentary notes.²

Iliad 1 invites us in mind's eye to follow dejected Chryses along the beach, then shift to his vindicator Apollo. The immediate sequel warns us: One spurns a suppliant who offers due ransom at grave peril. Nevertheless Agamemnon conspicuously does just this, again, when he prevents his brother Menelaus from sparing Trojan Adrestus' life in Book 6, yet again when he himself rejects pleas by Antimachus' sons at 11.130-147. In Book 21 Achilles, his wrath at its zenith, puts himself in the wrong when he slays supplicating Lycaon, whom he had taken alive once before (76-79), when Patroclus lived *and was his ransom-agent*. However, after he achieves humanity, which he formerly delegated to Patroclus, he receives suppliant Priam in a uniquely moving episode. Several vase painters depicted this, although none captured the moment when the bereaved old king, doomed soon to die, grasps the death-dealing hands of the young warrior who has slain so many of his sons, and who will himself die even sooner. Achilles not only accepts supplication and ransom, but raises—literally—abject suppliant to guest, offers a hearty meal and a bed, even deducts textiles from the ransom goods to shroud his late enemy Hector.

The *Odyssey*'s Odysseus himself repeatedly supplicates, particularly on Scheria. Late, in a position of dominance, he turns supplicandus. After his rampaging slaughter of the Suitors we must visualize a still moment. Leodes, a suitor-prophet whom Apollo has blessed with no presaging skill, pleads for mercy, but the returned master of the house spurns and kills him (310-329). Odysseus' deadly rebuff here is a critical moment. Leodes dies on Apollo's day-of-the-month; moreover, Odysseus slays him with an Apollonian weapon—the *sword* dropped uselessly by dead fellow Suitor Agelaus. The righteous executioner spares another suppliant,

however, the bard Phemius, a *true* Apollonian. This singer, whose art is Apollo's, has been loyal to Odysseus' family, educating Telemachus through songs about the Trojan War.

ATHENIAN TRAGEDY

Drama and its "doing" in the theater, in real time, unfolded before the eyes and ears of audiences who breathed the same air and saw by the same light as the actors. **Personal supplication** was enacted on the stage-platform that fronts the *skēnē*-structure, while what we **architectural supplication** occurs upon that stage at an altar erected there or down in the orchestra at a permanent central altar. Wherever spectators *do* see supplication, the abject bodily attitude of suppliants, huddled someplace if not making or straining to make the rare physical contact with another actor, makes a striking tableau.³ Some supplications are reported only, however, as in epic—described by an engaged, often by a horrified messenger. He *is* horrified because the off-stage kind invariably fails, with catastrophic consequence.

Famous plays by Aeschylus and Sophocles open and proceed with spectacular suppliant scenes: Orestes, silent Pylades, Electra, and the entire *Libation Bearers*' chorus surround the tomb of Agamemnon; a crowd of suppliants led by a priest of Zeus kneel before the palace of their paternalistic *Tyrannos* Oedipus. Likewise visually impressive are two surviving plays named *Hiketides*, that is *Suppliants* (precisely, *Female Suppliants*). Each gets this title from women of a chorus who, in Aeschylus' play, are a major collective actor: young virgins who wish to stay so, fleeing from their cousins and would-be husbands, while in the later, Euripidean play the chorus consist of bereaved old mothers, widowed wives, and (only later?) orphaned children, all survivors of the Seven who fell in doomed attack on Thebes. In both plays women change from victimized to murderous-minded. Danaus' daughters will do the killing themselves

during the (reconstructed) sequel-play in Aeschylus' trilogy, while Argive matrons in Euripides pray for that bloody revenge which, grown up, sons of the Seven will exact in the future.

EURIPIDES

Almost every play of Euripides contains supplication. Only *Alcestis* and *Electra* have none though they do not lack pathetic appeals. Variations on supplication and its aftermath advance this playwright's career-long critique of vindictive violence. Furthermore, his supplication plots implicate—and objectively inculcate—"good" supplicandi in that retaliation which their protégé(e)s proceed to perform. Suppliants who first needed protection from threatening adversaries turn the tables and wish to become, often *do* become their executioners. Gods, too, hardly escape criticism, whether they fail to enforce sanctuary that their holy places should furnish or do so too late.

Euripides deploys on-stage or in-orchestra supplication with two aims. One is straightforward: "optic," for spectacular effect, entirely theatrical and *prima facie* pathetic, *scenic*. The other aim is thematic, ironic. As so often in his work he blurs moral assessments, challenging spectators to look beyond initial sympathies and first judgments. In the Homeric poems the person with the upper hand seldom properly accepts, more often culpably rejects suppliant importunity. In Euripides, on the other hand, the scandal is different. Supplication often succeeds, albeit after reluctance on the acceptor's part, *and then goes morally awry*. Alternatively villainous persons circumvent it in dastardly ways, so that suppliants leave their place of asylum or are persuaded to unsay their request.

Several of Euripides' plays incorporate *serial* supplications in complex relationship. At the 13th ISSEI Conference I discussed three.

First chronologically were two sensational dramas named after wrathful female child-killers: *Medea* and *Hecuba*. Both barbarian ladies learned supplication from Greeks, Medea from Jason, Hecuba from Odysseus. In her present plight each must now abjectly supplicate her “teacher.” The plays are contrasted, however, in how the theme develops.

After Medea cannily manipulates two kings, first Creon of Corinth, then Aegeus of Athens, she works sly physical-emotional charm less directly on Jason. She persuades both kings by twin appeals, a bodily one of grasping their knees and hand or beard, and a moral one. She suggests to the kindly Corinthian that she cannot do any harm in one day’s reprieve from banishment, seeking this little respite only for her children’s sake; to the eager Athenian, that she has been wronged—and *may cure his childlessness*. Both dynasts are anxious about children, old Creon about his daughter, the bride he offered to Medea’s estranged ex-husband Jason; the much younger Aegeus about the heir he lacks. However (and first), physical contact with an exotic but beautiful, still young woman makes an impact. Creon is deceived about what one day will permit Medea to achieve; Aegeus is seduced.⁴

Medea ultimately controls Jason, too, not by arguments, however, which failed in the *agōn* of their first scene, but by supplication—not hers, but his *sons’*. (*Med.* 894-902 indicates the little sons’ supplication, directed by her, of a much moved Jason: he *does* care for *them*.) Medea here manipulates a father through the very children whom she will later murder in order to complete his destruction; moreover, through them (in off-stage accepted supplication) she effects the princess’s and Creon’s gruesome deaths. The boys’ petition for permission to stay in Corinth with their father is reinforced by irresistible golden gifts that they offer the princess, who had no initial good will toward unwanted stepsons.

Medea understands that supplication shrewdly deployed can bring down foe or reluctant friend. She herself, on the other hand, has learned to resist it, and does so when the chorus begs her not to kill her children. Supplication, therefore, as the character Medea and the tragedy *Medea* suggest, is a weapon, to be thrust or parried as one's interests dictate. Jason taught her its offensive power. Others whom she confronts, like Jason himself, have not learned to defend themselves against it. As we *see*.

The *Hecuba* shows how cynical "civilized" Greeks can be about the ritual of supplication. The same Odysseus who gave the Trojan queen a lesson in the compelling technique of clutching a powerful person's knees when she recognized a deadly enemy during his spy mission into Ilium yet spared his life, resists *her* when *she* tries the same on *him*, her master now. He must and will save *her* life, he explains, when she supplicates him, but has no obligation to save that of her daughter Polyxena (demanded in sacrifice by Achilles' ghost). Perhaps, however, if Polyxena herself were to supplicate? A visually striking *non*-supplication occurs later in the same episode. As Polyxena steps forward Odysseus buries his right hand under his cloak to prevent her grasping it. "I see you, Odysseus," she says (at *Hec.* 342-345), "hiding your right hand under your garment and turning your face back so I may not touch your beard. Cheer up! You have escaped Zeus of Supplication for my part." She seeks no protection, for, as she explains, she will gladly die!

Despite this setback, Hecuba, after deliberation and hesitation, appeals to Agamemnon, a man ultimately responsible for countless deaths of her nearest and dearest. One might recall the sublime meeting of her husband Priam and Achilles. This business, however, is hardly sublime. When she supplicates the enemy commander-in-chief by knees, beard, and right hand, he offers

her freedom. She, however, craves only revenge. She supplicates Agamemnon to achieve it. Polymnestor of Thrace has murdered Hecuba's youngest son Polydorus to appropriate treasure that came with the boy when Priam entrusted him to this then-ally for safe-keeping. Initially Hecuba cannot move Agamemnon, but she finally induces him to allow her to punish Polymnestor by appending a very different appeal—through his lust for her only surviving daughter: reminding him of Cassandra, the old queen completes her supplication. A difficult dilemma faces Agamemnon. Hecuba was the Greeks' enemy, whereas opportunist Polymnestor can claim that he did Greece a big favor by eliminating a future avenger of Priam and Troy. Like Aegeus in *Medea*, Agamemnon decides to “look the other way” when the suppliant woman wreaks unspecified vengeance upon a third party. If the Greek army object, his *public* explanation will be that supplication and justice compelled to allow Hecuba to punish a heinous crime. (Nothing to do with Cassandra!)

As in *Medea*, therefore, sex appeal complements supplication. There it was Medea's; here it is hardly the aged suppliant's own, but that of her nubile daughter. Far from being efficacious *per se* in moving Greeks to pity, therefore, supplication needs a ‘value added’ from further motivation. Only Creon of Corinth appears to have been kindly enough to accept supplication alone, and we know what happened to him! Both Medea and Hecuba, naively accepting supplication by vulnerable Greeks, spared their eventual worst enemies and thereby got themselves into their tragic plights. They have learned to use it with equally dire effect.

The extant *Iphigenia at Aulis* is non-Euripidean in parts. We do not know how it ended or even precisely how it opened. Moreover, all the male characters—on stage or off—are as corrupt as parts of the text, so corrupt that we cannot tell whether prophet Calchas' declaration that goddess Artemis demands sacrifice of Iphigenia, commander Agamemnon's daughter,

before the Greeks may sail to Troy is accurate. (At *IA* 879 the Old Man seems to doubt it!) That the Greek army *thinks* so is enough, however, and Agamemnon cannot save the girl. Uniquely in this play a piteous supplication is *anticipated*, with dread, by a father who knows that his daughter will supplicate, begging him not for protection from some extraneous, third-party threat but from *him*. Agamemnon awkwardly keeps his distance from wife and daughter after an painful “welcoming” scene with them. Other supplications occur before that. First comes Clytemnestra’s quasi-supplication to the Old Man, queen to slave, who discloses the terrible truth about her daughter’s doom. A series of urgent pleas follows. Clytemnestra supplicates Achilles “as an altar” for help to thwart Agamemnon’s plan to sacrifice the girl. Achilles, however, advises Clytemnestra to supplicate her husband, reverting to him only if that fails.

When pathetic Iphigenia confronts her father, to strengthen her appeal she holds baby Orestes toward their “daddy.” This a typical Euripidean deployment of a child as a pathetic prop (as in *Medea*, *Trojan Women*, et alibi). Here the audience know the entire tragic future—how Clytemnestra will respond to the sacrifice of Iphigenia, how Orestes will respond to that response.

Iphigenia’s plea presents inversion of the aforementioned off-stage situation in Euripides’ other posthumous tragedy *Bacchae*. There, son Pentheus supplicates mother Agave—horrifying in vain. Here, daughter supplicates father, with equally appalling outcome. Agamemnon talks Iphigenia into accepting her slaughter as a good and desirable thing, into believing the dubious Greek cause in the coming war to be a noble one. His daughter, unlike Polyxena in *Hecuba*, who just wanted to die, thinks that her death will procure something worthwhile.

CONCLUSION

In late *Iphigenia at Aulis* the deployment of suppliant action is especially complicated. After Agamemnon's uniquely pathetic double supplication by wife and daughter, Iphigenia herself unsays her desire to live. She becomes one final example of another Euripidean theme, a voluntary sacrificial victim, this time in a manifestly reprehensible cause. Achilles' melodramatic last entrance, under imminent threat from the bloody-minded Greek horde off in the wings, makes this clear. In earlier *Medea* and *Hecuba*, in contrast, supplication succeeds, with dreadful consequence within and beyond the action. (We know what will happen between Medea and Aegeus; we also know what will come of Hecuba, turned into a howling bitch, and Agamemnon, who will soon be *late* king of Mycenae.)

Is there a moral here? Perhaps it is that, in a world where the weak and those who have suffered are capable of ungrateful and atrocious deeds, no good deed goes unpunished. Those stronger persons who do bad deeds may be punished, too; and when they reject supplication, they invariably end badly.

¹ F. S. Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

² G. S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, Volume II: Books 5-8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 160 *ad v.* 6.45. Although much argued there is probably untenable, Kevin Crotty, *The Poetics of Supplication: Homer's Iliad and Odyssey* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994) collects instances and offers valuable insights.

³ Finnish scholar Maarit Kaimio surveys instances in *Physical Contact in Greek Tragedy: A Study of Stage Conventions* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1988), pp. 49-61.

⁴ Euripides' lost *Aegeus* was likely produced before *Medea*, dramatizing how at Athens the Colchian married the king and bore him a son Medus who nearly replaced Theseus as his successor.