

THE SUPPLIANTS BY EURIPIDES.

Nothing reaches completion except through putting it into words

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Euripides' *The Suppliants* is interpreted by scholars as representing the struggle of the Athenians to implement laws replacing mythical and religious beliefs and to maintain a moderate democracy based on acknowledging individual responsibility for actions and beliefs.

I suggest that tragic poetry helps us understand reality.¹ Euripides presents politics in a moderate society as the struggle to recognize and deal with the deep irreducible splittings that are inherent in human nature. On the one hand we need to compromise, and create equality, reciprocity, mutual benefit, coexistence and harmony of peace. On the other hand, we need to tolerate –not obliterate - contradictions and differences, which are necessary preconditions that generate conflicts, thinking, and change. We need to take sides. While politicians often become clowns and entertainers that gloss over the differences, poets present a painful and accurate diagnosis of human politics. Laws of politics are linked to – but do not replace - mythical and religious beliefs.²

The staging of the play *Suppliant Women* is the burial of the dead of a war, the processing of reality of loss, the painful work of mourning, and the separation between the dead and the living. Where do those who died in war go? Do they acquire symbolic forms within us, through our work of mourning? Are they placed where they belong, in the past, as our living memories? Or do they become haunting ghosts that do not remember us, and do not speak to us? Are they eternal undead ghosts appearing in incomprehensible displays of individual enactments and within our institutions? Do we meet these ghosts?

¹ I search for analogies between an ancient tragedy and my psychic and social reality. I can't get in contact with myself directly. I can only find myself through the eyes of another. In tragedy I find the eyes of another to see in me what exists, how I feel, who I am.

² *The Suppliants* present the human struggle to recognize the reality of loss, through the painful work of mourning. Mourning never ends. Liberating investments are displaced to new substitute objects. In order to let go of the lost object, and agree as a subject to the reality of loss, we ask for compensation. With words, we tame the reality, we transform it. These exchanges are essential in the politics of a moderate democracy. The play *The Suppliants* ends with negotiations, through language.

Drama allows a stage where these unassimilated traces of memory (our ghosts) can be played out, so that we recognize them, and they recognize us. Through the tragic plot they come out of their half-existence and exist, being placed out there in a specific place and time. Drama (from the verb ‘δρᾶν’)³ gives us drastic words and meaningful sequences of actions which help us give them reality, remember them and be convinced of their historical truth. Putting these ghosts into words, gives us an ending through reconciliation and memory. We choose to live with the living and keep the dead in memory and not to live with the dead and erase the living from our memory. The words and the actions of the play are convincing because they present on the stage the exact perceptions that correspond to the hallucinatory realizations of the traces of memory that create in us (Freud, 1937).

Through ancient drama, Athens interprets the myths with words and actions, transforming them into a tragic plot. It also, through drama, enters into the myths of other cities. Theseus enters the myth of the seven who were killed in Thebes. Eleusis becomes their burial ground (Storey, 2008). *The Suppliants* converges with the myth of Oedipus children’s lethal battle.

Tragedy transforms an eternal (out of time) repetition of myth into a chronicle of tragic plot (that is realized and placed inside time)

Euripides’ *The Suppliants* is not often performed. For Kitto (1961) this tragedy causes uneasiness and embarrassment. It is considered to be a play of national propaganda. It presents a continual ambivalence between real and ideal.

Loraux (1986) has shown us how Athenians separated the agora from the theater. Agora was for politics where reason without emotions was needed. Theater was for the expression of irrational passions and mourning. *The Suppliant women* brings the theater into the agora with a dialectical presentation of conflict. They tell us how irrational passions, madness and irreducible splittings of everyday human life lie at the foundation of political conflict and thinking.

³ Arendt (1958), based on Aristotle, argued that the public life is realized when we speak and act by using an effective drastic logos, an authentically political one, that uses effective - not empty - words that mean what they say. Through his words and actions the speaking-acting subject is revealed. He presents his self publically with effective - not empty - statements that mean what they say. Public life originates in the act of expression. It is based on the innate psychic movement of repetition (presentation, transference) of internal life, in front of others.

Euripides wrote *The Suppliants* around 424 B.C., seven years after the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. That year the Athenians were negotiating with the Thebans over collecting their dead from the recent battle of Delium.

In *The Suppliant women*, the seven generals from Argos that had marched against Thebes were all defeated and killed in front of its gates. They had fought at the side of Polynices against his brother, Eteocles. Both brothers were killed in battle, fulfilling the curse of their father Oedipus. Creon, the new King of Thebes, banned the seven generals' burials.

Their elderly mothers, together with Adrastus, King of Argos, came from Argos to Eleusis to find Aethra, who had gone there to prostrate herself at the sanctuary of Demeter and Koris. They went to beg her to intercede with her son, Theseus, King of Athens, to persuade Creon to give them their deceased sons to bury.

Theseus appears afterwards on stage, invited by his mother. In the beginning, he refuses to help Adrastus because he was who sent his own army - without circumspection - into destruction. Theseus' mother in the end convinces Theseus to take action. If the seven generals did something bad, they were severely punished by death. They don't have to be deprived of their burial. Theseus begins his campaign by speaking and convincing democratically the citizens of Athens and prepares an army so that he can take the dead by force if the Thebans are not convinced to give them up peacefully.

The herald appointed by Thebes then presents with the audacity of a terrorist its arrogant demands. He inserts the logic of the inevitable that leads to war. Theseus protests the superiority of democracy. In Athens, the king, the Athenians' assembly, the meetings with ambassadors of foreign cities, everything, are simply political tools. They are not sources of authoritative power. Athens defends ethics and the rule of law. If Creon does not accept to negotiate and peacefully deliver the dead, Athens will fight.

Athenians, with Theseus as their leader, fought and won. They brought the seven dead back to Eleusis, burned them on a pyre, and delivered the ashes to their sons. Except for one, Capaneus – the sacred of the seven because he was burned by Zeus with a lightning bolt on top of the walls in Thebes – Theseus prepared a separate pyre.

Then, out of nowhere, Capaneus' wife, Evadne, appears, mad from anguish of her loss. Despite her father Iphis' pleas, the maniac, due to unbearable grief, Evadne commits suicide by falling into her husband's pyre. She seems to be pushed by an indomitable and intense desire to unite with her husband in an eternal marriage that destroys reality.

In the end, another woman, the goddess Athena emerges in order to give the Athenians a lesson on politics. She advises Theseus to demand a sworn, practical political exchange from Adrastus and the Argives in order to pay him back for what he has done for them. The tragedy ends with the Argives swearing that they will help Athens always, whenever it's in danger. Argos was in reality, and has been since, a valuable ally of Athens against Sparta.

The work of mourning brings the future, endless repetitions bring eternity

The Suppliants reflects the political reality of its time. The tragedy is full of contemplations on democracy and the rule of law, as well as destructiveness and the need for war. Euripides questions the position of the gods. Do gods rule the world with only the good of men in mind? Does man have free will to act? Does he only have himself to blame for his hardships? Are evil and indifference a part of nature? Is hubris inherent (Kovacs, 1998)?

Euripides, the most tragic of the poets, makes an accurate and painful diagnosis of the human condition. He doesn't believe in free will or an ideal humanitarianism. He believes that man is deeply split and continually struggles alone with unknown internal forces, the chaotic nature of reality, the unexpected turns of chance (τύχη), the impasses and the need for the intervention of a *Deus ex machina* to give the plot an outcome.

He presents reality that is by definition traumatic and becomes unbearable when we live as prisoners of a regime of oppression, in a prison of the compulsion to repeat, captives of the lost object that we have narcissistically identified with and let its shadow fall upon the self, sacrificing our subjectivity, literally offering out bodies to fill the splits, to become shields and bridges.

Euripides in *the Suppliants* begins with human hubris, the arrogance that abolishes all limits and promises the extreme pleasure of absolute freedom from all restrictions. It is within human nature to hate restrictions.

Forbidding the burial of the dead is hubris. Hubris is also the endless desire of unbearable pain of mourning and love. It leads man to a manic holocaust. If the mourning Suppliant women do not receive help and are left in the passions of mourning, hubris is committed.

The Suppliants is the epitome of the advocacy for political laws. Without the rule of law, there will not be cohesion within the city in the present with an anticipation of the future, and a memory of the past. Theseus “struggles” during the tragedy, he is open to external reality, he learns from experience, and he “turns around” (Dimakopoulou, 2014).

The tragedy begins from a space, the holy place, Eleusis, and an inevitable fact, a separation. Then it introduces the encounter with a new object that raises anticipation for the future, mobilizes memories from the past, and starts an unknown, unpredictable course, confirming once again that history continues; there is always a next step, a potential change.

In order to serve our interests we invest new objects, we know what is good for us, and how to take it in, we negotiate, make exchanges, conclude agreements.

However, the compulsion to repeat is an element of human nature. *The Suppliants* ends foreseeing another war and another catastrophe. The children of the seven, the hope of the mothers of those who were killed, will continue the war in the name of their fathers. The tragedy speaks of our inability to ponder our own death [479-483]:

*Hope is untrustworthy: it joined many cities
in battle, driving passions to excess.*

*Whenever war comes to a vote of the people,
no one ever reckons on his own death.*

He turns that calamity away onto another.⁴

Euripides ironically introduces uncertainty into the myth. The Athenians defend the rule of law according to Euripides. But they recognize that the opposite force exists in the world, the hubris of Thebes, of anti-Athens (Zeitlin 1986). What remains? The struggle [550].

⁴ All direct line quotes from here on are taken from translation on this university website:
<https://msu.edu/~tyrrell/Supwomen.htm>

Argos is the other anti-Athens, also a source of identification in this drama: an ambiguous city, potential ally or enemy, reckless, unfinished, on the brink of collapse, but also capable of being restored.

The suppliants constantly mourn and remind us of the injustice or apathy of the gods and the tragic nature of mortals [610-614]:

*You really are saying that divinities are just.
Yes, who else apportions what happens?
I observe that gods often treat mortals differently.
You are destroyed by previous fears.
Justice summons justice, and murder, murder.*

Silence is imposed by the agony of extinction. (Silence however is the real crime: H. Segal)

The herald, while narrating the battle, emphasizes that Theseus won, took the dead, and stopped [724-730] “though he could pass through ~~the~~ walls”. The general we elect must be brave in adversity and despise people of hybris (*ὕβριστήν λαόν*), who are unable to maintain their happiness because they arrogantly, they cannot wait and immediately want to escalate a situation.

Euripides hates war, but he accepts that it is inherent in our nature. He believes that life is a struggle. Life continues in cycles. What is a more appropriate setting for the tragedy of *The Suppliants* than Eleusis, the sanctuary of Demeter and Koris, with the cycles of death and rebirth?

Theseus is alive, fully present, in service at an official event. He takes care of the dead himself (rather than the slaves) [758-768]. Theseus’ public function is to separate and build bridges between the dead and the living [766-769].

In contrast, Adrastus, full of pain, declares how much he would like to die along with them. This “along with them” is an excruciating act of identification to accompany the dead to the bed of fire where they are felt as being incredibly lonely, unaccompanied, completely inaccessible. Theseus, in contrast, makes the work of mourning a public affair that creates links of freedom between the living.⁵

⁵ Theseus was summoned by his mother to come (to be born) to Eleusis as a liberating leader, to free her from the bondage of the supplication of the deceased generals’ mothers. Eleusis has the same etymological root as “coming” (*ἐλευση*) and “freedom” (*ελευθερία*).

Hubris and the crush of its omnipotence constitute the core of ancient tragedy. It depicts the tragic position that the infant painfully achieves when he separates and emerges as an individual painfully and gradually from the illusion of union with his primary mother.

By achieving the tragic position, the subject enters the space of transitional phenomena in order to face the shock of the loss of omnipotence (Winnicott, 1971).⁶ The transitional space of politics links and separates the opposites, the differences. The aim of politics is to put an end in the work of unresolved mourning, not to let it continue as an endless pain.

When the experiences that we repeat are put into words, they acquire meaning; they are internalized. We accept responsibility for them. The Suppliants mourn, begging Theseus with words [284]. Theseus proposes discourse as a component of public life. He invites his mother, Aethra, to speak to him, the leader of Athens, her son [112]:

Nothing reaches completion except through narration.

Nothing is finished until it is put into words. Aethra will not stay silent, she will help (as goddess Athena) her son to think with words. Silence is imposed by fear [300]. Also Adrastus⁷ is called upon by Theseus to publicly say a few words for each deceased general. Adrastus can act though speaking and persuading, as an eloquent orator like Pericles in contemporary Athens.

The *Epitaph* of Pericles was given to us by “the fourth tragic poet”, Thucydides, as a founding text of democracy. It is epitome of the mourning process.

⁶ Stanislawski said that the theatrical stage has a fourth wall, the opening towards the audience (Argentieri 2019). The opening is given by the others’ responses. It is an open-ended process that provides the linear movement of time, the time of separation, the time of mourning, and the sense of irreversibility that makes life move on to the next objects. It helps the subject not to be devastated, but to tolerate the unbearable reality. It is not the end of the world and will not last for an eternity. This process brings the anticipation of the future. For the subject to allow the dead to die, and the time to move on, he needs to exchange the loss with a new real pleasure, a substitute, and a freedom that the future bring. Without this ability, the subject erects a fourth wall on the public stage of his psychic life, with defenses of denial.

⁷ Then name Adrastus (then opposite of drastic| means a man who cannot act

The imposition of silence stems from the fear of extinction, the terror of dissolution. In front of the horror of the void's abyss the subject creates horrific images that fill it (Bion, 1965). Such horrific images are projected by Euripides: Capaneus who was burned by Zeus' bolt; Amphiaraus, who along with his chariot, was swallowed by the earth; the bloody scenes of battle in front of the walls; the suicide of Euadne who threw herself into the fire.

It seems logical for Athens to feel the anxiety of extinction during a war where the next generation is sent to annihilation. This is a fear that its civilization has no future; it will be destroyed. Without a sense of future (our succession by next generation that gives us the sense of immortality) a community is paralyzed by the anxiety of becoming extinct and it finds refuge in the eternity of repetitions of actions and omnipotent fantasies of merging with the primary mother, resulting in superficial harmony, stifling rigidity, apathy, indifference, immobility, despair.

There is something magical about the flow of time in *The Suppliants*. Before the plot can unexpectedly change course, the solution arrives. This is how a superficial climate of harmony is achieved, without conflicts, inside the city that continues to be cohesive. I assume that Euripides describes with irony the function of a common fantasy of the invincible, beyond catastrophe, in the city of the Athenians.

The protected city of the Athenians is a place of the work of the rule of law, institutions, predefined rewards, freedom of speech, poetry, history, democracy, tragedy, creation of ideas and philosophy, and doubt. This though is not real life. Real life is where unrepresented trauma, hubris, war, destructibility, authoritarianism, discrimination co-exist. Real life is where humans are separated violently from their objects, and they are being flooded with stimulation that surpasses their ability to restore the feeling of the continuation of existence and cohesion. In real life, the agony of extinction, the dissolution of the bonds between individuals and the city, prevails. It causes a fear that we have no future here any longer. Ultimately, laws of civilization do not stop wars. On the contrary they place boundaries that cause hate of differences that threatens civilization.

What do the *Suppliant* women ask for in Eleusis?

They ask to represent and internalize the loss of their children. This can be done only through the painful process of mourning. It is a conscious public process of accepting the reality that separates the dead from the living (Freud, 1917).

In sharp contrast, at the end of the tragedy, Evadne performs a “marriage with death”. She falls into the pyre in order to be united with ~~him~~ her husband for eternity, to accompany him to the bed of loneliness of the dead. Evadne renounces her bond with her father Iphis and sons; she discards the reality of time and surrenders to the flames so as not to be separated from her husband.

Evadne leaps into the pyre that represents the present of passion and destruction, eternal union which is the loss of the anticipation for the future and the memory of the past. Moreover, the self-sacrifice of Evadne opens a window to the Eleusinian Mysteries, where the initiated secure eternal life. Iphis reminds us: Femininity is a riddle [1064].⁸

However the bedrock of reality - that is often used in *The Suppliants* - is a metaphor for the un-translated personal and collective traumatic losses that are perpetually compulsively repeated, and never completely mourned. The time of separation, the time that passes linearly is a painful loss that humans have to bear [1112, 1113]. We have two options. The work of mourning that gives us the future, the succession of time, the next generation who will continue our immortality. In contrast, the compulsion to repeat gives us ~~the~~ eternity. In the latter case, we identify with those who we have lost, and abandoned us, and we abandon ourselves and our lives among the living, and we go on living as shadows among the shadows of those we have lost, in a world that is not present any longer.

The Suppliants begin with the dead’s right to die, to be buried, and to be accompanied to death. The living repeat in the present the unassimilated traces of experiences of loss, in order to mourn them, to symbolize them, integrate them in psychic life and in their history, and to reconcile with them. With every step of the process, a second death takes place. The ghosts (unassimilated traces of lost objects) take on symbolic forms and cease to haunt the living, become memories, are recognized, recollected, and contained in psychic space.

⁸ The Eleusinian Mysteries also represent the sacred union of the infant with the primary mother, the access to the feminine element of being, to the unknown underworld of early exchanges of humans with the primary mother. These early exchanges take place in an extreme asymmetry between a helpless infant facing the reality of death and the mother who with her adequate responses help him literally survive and inscribe his experiences in traces of memory. These early links of unity between an infant and his primary mother are sacred in all societies. The functions of linking, forming unities, transforming meanings, and integrating wholes, maintain their sacred nature throughout life, in the internal reality of individuals and in the social-external reality of societies.

With each step of representation and internalization of the unassimilated traces of experience, new connections are created which increase the capacity of the network of exchanges (internal, external). This is how a clear focus on the exchanges, which will benefit everyone, people and cities, is achieved. Agreements are made on the basis of clear exchanges. These agreements are unstable, yet free, because the value of communication, that practical rewards have, varies from context to context.

The chorus represents the assembly of the people that converses and researches a case concerning the city. The hypothesis of every research is concluded when the members of a plot meet in the same assembly, the same place, the same space. This gathering happens in the internal (re-membering) and also the external social reality (democratic process of civic participation).

The *Suppliant women* ask for in Eleusis the wisdom of the feminine element of being, the capacity to tolerate passivity and accept the inevitability of reality, to transform reality and form alliances, with confidence, without fear of surrendering to others. *They* do not end with the horror of war and the opening of the gates of death. They conclude with Athena inviting the Athenians to create imaginary meeting places with allies, spaces and times of concentration of attention, and to focus on politics, as an art that links internal and external events into mutual information and signification. Humans fight and destroy, but in the end, their survival depends on their capacity to think, recognize reality and form alliances.

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