

Sommerstein Aeschylus, *Suppliants*

Alex F. Garvie
University of Glasgow, UK

Review of Aeschylus (2019). *Suppliants*. Edited by Alan H. Sommerstein. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 404 pp.

This new addition to the successful and highly regarded “Green and Yellow” Cambridge Series is very welcome, and no one could have been better than Alan Sommerstein to produce it. Like all the other volumes in the Series it is aimed at advanced undergraduate and graduate students, but also at more advanced scholars, for whom the full apparatus criticus is presumably intended. As can be seen from his Bibliography, S. has already published an astonishing number of important works on Greek tragedy (as well as comedy), including his “first significant publication on tragedy (1977)”, choosing *Suppliants* for it, his 1989 Commentary on *Eumenides*, in the same Series as this one, and his outstandingly good 2008 Loeb edition of Aeschylus.

The list of metrical symbols that precedes the Introduction will certainly be helpful to less advanced students, who might also have welcomed some help with such terms as *epirrhematic*, *mesodes* and *epymnia*, and Porson’s law.

The substantial Introduction of 46 pages is divided into 12 sections, all of which are worth reading before moving on to the Commentary, but especially those which are invaluable for an understanding of how the original Athenian audience, living in a different society from our own, must, or may, have reacted to the attitude and behaviour of the Danaids and those whom they encounter – 4. “Sup-



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Submitted 2020-05-23
Published 2020-06-30

Open access

© 2020 | Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License



Citation Garvie, A.F. (2020). Review of *Aeschylus: Suppliants* by Sommerstein, Alan H. *Lexis*, 38 (n.s.), 1, 315-322.

plication"; 5. "Marriage", with the important warning (on page 44; cf. 340) that the attitude (to it) of both Danaids and their cousins is "a long way from the norms of A.'s time"; 6. "Greek and Barbarian", with the timely reminder that the Danaids look just as un-Greek as their cousins, and that they are descended from the same Io; 7. "King, People and Tyrant"; 8. "Zeus and Io".

As for the other sections: 1. is entitled "Aeschylus". 2. "The Danaid Myth", on the tangled versions of the story before Aeschylus, is essential preparation for how the plot of the play is likely to develop. 3. "The Danaid Tetralogy", presents the best case that I have come across for the view that *Suppliants* is the second play of the trilogy, the first having been set in Egypt before the Danaids' flight to Greece. I am, however, still unconvinced, and I suspect that S. has not managed to persuade himself either. In 9. "Characters and Choruses" I strongly agree with his acceptance of what I think is now the common view, but denied by R. Lionetti in 2016 (see Bibliography), that there are two subsidiary choruses, one consisting of Egyptians, the other of Argive soldiers; there are no handmaids. In 10. "Performance", I would take issue with S.'s declaration, as if it were a known fact, that a stage-building did not appear until after the date of *Suppliants*' production. That it was not *used* on that occasion does not prove that it was not there (cf. Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus*). I have argued elsewhere that there are strong arguments for its presence in *Persians* (it is pointed to, but for good reasons not actually used), which is earlier than *Suppliants*. In 11. "Place in Aeschylus' Work", I am very pleased to find that S. believes that 463 BC is most likely to have been the year of the play's first production (even though he qualifies it with though very far from certain'). 12. Consists of a brief "Transmission and Text".

The Commentary is the model of what a commentary should be. S. understands what his readers need to know, and he has an admirable gift for conveying it to them in a clear, concise, and convincing manner. He is equally at home with the intricacies of Aeschylean language and style, with the statistics for the number of interesting Aeschylean words used in comparison with the same words in epic or Sophocles and Euripides, with the peculiar textual problems of a play dependent on a single manuscript (the language used by the Egyptian subsidiary chorus being notoriously challenging), and with such matters as Athenian marriage laws, Athenian voting procedure, geography, e.g. of Io's journey from Greece to Egypt, and beer. I find particularly interesting his treatment of ambiguities, whether of syntax or of individual words which, according to *LSJ*, could have more than one meaning, depending on the context. The reader naturally wants to know which meaning is the correct one on each occasion, and S. naturally does his best to satisfy him or her. I am glad that sometimes he is honest enough to conclude with, for example, "neither sense need

be excluded" (210) or "there is nothing between them" (214; see also 269 and 274). I am sure that this is not to be reckoned as failure on his part, or indeed as carelessness on that of Aeschylus. There may, in fact, be *no* one correct answer. There are two kinds of ambiguity, one which affects only the modern reader, who, for example, agonises over the question of whether in *Agamemnon* the king came home with one or two carriages, while the original audience could see it for itself. The other kind is that which, unless the actor helps by the way in which he delivers his lines (see 8, fn. 35), produces the same problems for the original spectators as for the modern readers. Is it not possible that Aeschylus is happy to allow, or even to encourage, his audience to accept both meanings at the same time, or to decide for itself about the "correct" meaning? It would not be the only kind of unanswered question that we find in his plays. At page 151 on line 219 (on the safe arrival of the Danaids at Argos) S. provides us first with two possible translations of ἔπεμψεν, "caused us to travel" or "sped us on our way", and then adds "perhaps even "escorted us"". I would suggest that the original audience, familiar with the *Odyssey* and with *nostos* tragedy and poetry in general, and with its keywords, would think first of the third of these. Danaus and his daughters are very anxious for their landing at Argos to be regarded as a return home.

I greatly admire S.'s work for the emphasis that he places on the construction of Aeschylus' plot, and the methods which he employs in order to manipulate his audience's responses. It is on this, and on some further thoughts that he has inspired in me, that I wish to concentrate now. Irony, or ironic, or "Ironic foreshadowings", as the *Index* explains, runs like a continuous thread throughout the play. The assumption is that the audience must be already familiar with the story, but there may be different degrees of familiarity. We should not take it for granted that every spectator, and indeed every modern reader, will have noticed all the instances noted by S. in the *Index*, which itself does not include all those which appear in the "Commentary". It is impossible that Aeschylus cannot have intended them. At the very beginning of the play, as the Chorus start their supplication to Zeus, the very fact that they claim to be helpless and pathetic should arouse the sympathy of most people (see the maxim cited by Pelasgus at line 489), but as early as line 21 ("Commentary", 100) the first foreshadowing comes: the word which describe their suppliants' boughs is one that normally means "daggers". They will turn out to be less helpless and pathetic than they claim to be here. To S.'s excellent commentary on this *parodos* I would add a few words on the nature of the audience whose initial first response would be important for the development of his plot. It is of course misleading to talk about *the* audience, as if everyone in the theatre held exactly the same opinions. For them Zeus was a real figure in real life,

and their expectation of how he should, and how he would, behave on the stage would naturally be influenced by their own real-life experience of asking him for help. Those who had found Zeus helpful would be more likely to expect him to be the same for the Danaids, and they would probably be more inclined at the start to wish them well. Those who had had a bad experience would from the beginning expect things to go badly for the Danaids, and would be the likeliest to notice the foreshadowing at line 21. Aeschylus is not preaching a theological sermon. We should not look for morals. The days of didactic interpretation of Greek tragedy are, I hope, gone for ever. For Aeschylus Zeus is simply the character whose role is to play the part that the construction of the tragedy requires. If there were women in the audience it would be interesting to hear their views. S. (223) refers to “the (overwhelmingly male) audience”, but is it proven that there were any women present at all?

“The confrontation between Pelasgus and the Danaids ... is the crucial scene of the play”, rightly remarks S. on page 155 (234-503n.) and “The lines [478-9] mark the turning-point of the play’s action as Pelasgus finally makes his decision”, i.e. to give asylum to the Danaids. Some of the spectators are perhaps a little uneasy about the rightness of the Danaids’ supplication. As S. says (156) “they still know how to “court sympathy as persecuted victims”” (cf. lines 350-3, 420-32). But now a rival for that sympathy and for their favour has appeared. As they plead their case it becomes evident that if Pelasgus gives way to their appeal he will be endangering the safety of his own city of Argos in a war with the Egyptians. To make matters worse from the Danaids’ point of view, Pelasgus is an attractive character who wants to do what is right for both the Danaids and the city. But that seems to be impossible. The salvation of one will mean the destruction of the other. Moreover, the Danaids do not help their cause by declining to give a clear answer to Pelasgus’ question as to whether the cousins may not be in the right according to Egyptian law. S.’s discussion of all this is exemplary. My only minor disagreement concerns the nature of Pelasgus’ reign. It would not be surprising if, as sole ruler, he announces, out of the goodness of his heart, that the people of Argos should share so important a decision. S., and most editors, therefore translate line 399, οὐδέ περ κρατῶν by, “not even though I have the power”, i.e. “to act without consulting anyone”. I am impressed by S.’s argument that this use of the participle normally expresses “a true proposition”, and one might add that the Danaids refuse to believe that he does not have that power. But I remain, perhaps stubbornly, unconvinced. The collocation of words is not so very common, and the translation “if I had the power” is, as far as I can see, not ungrammatical, whereas lines 604 and 699 are not, I think, satisfactorily explained away by those who hold the other view. Pelasgus will have his own tragedy, but so will the city. At

line 211 S. rightly explains that a particular genitive absolute might be either conditional or causal. In the present instance I would happily accept that Aeschylus left it to his audience to choose between a conditional and a concessive participle. I suspect that an Athenian audience is likely to have special sympathy for a country with a democratic constitution.

With the departure of Danaus and Pelasgus to the city, and as the Chorus, and the audience, wait for news of the people's decision, Aeschylus takes the opportunity to bring Zeus back into the plot. The rivalry between Danaus and Pelasgus for the sympathy of the audience seems no longer to be an issue. There is no reason why we should not hope for a favourable decision. There is therefore time for the Chorus to perform a long and leisurely ode in the form of a prayer to Zeus. In their earlier prayer to the god in the *parodos* (lines 29-39) they had begged him to sink their cousins' ship and drown the cousins on the voyage. The first stanza (lines 524-30) now picks up and repeats that earlier request. It is unlikely that many, or any, of the spectators seriously believed that Zeus would grant their request, but there may well have been a moment of uncertainty. Why did the Chorus have to make it twice? Is Zeus not entirely reliable, or was there something wrong with the request? The audience has only a few lines to think about these matters, because the mood suddenly changes. In the earlier prayer (lines 154-61) the Chorus threatened, if he did not give them what they wanted, to hang themselves, so as to bring shame upon him for not treating his own family as he should. There is nothing like that in the present prayer. Most if it consists of a largely emotionless but interesting account of Io's journey through exotic countries, until she reaches Egypt, where Zeus releases her from all her sufferings. Instead of threats there is now only flattery; who could be more appropriate than the great, wise, and powerful Zeus to release Io's descendants from theirs?

After Danaus has returned to the stage with the happy news that the people have unanimously agreed with Pelasgus, the Chorus sing a thankful ode asking for Argos to be rewarded with a variety of blessings. The fear that danger may still lie ahead is completely forgotten, and Aeschylus intends the audience too to put it out of its mind. The words "irony" and "ironic" are missing from the entire song. That is why I find it hard to agree with S. (280) that there may be a reference to the future sequel at lines 704-6. The future must be entirely forgotten, so that, when Danaus suddenly announces that he has spotted the arrival of the enemy ships, the shock is as great as it can be. Zeus has turned out to be unreliable. He has failed to sink those ships as he should have done. This marks the beginning of the worst time for the Chorus. There can now be surely few members of the audience who do not sympathise with them, and this feeling can only be greatly strengthened by the behaviour of the obnoxious Herald and

his subsidiary chorus when they arrive on the stage with the intention of dragging the main Chorus off to their ships. Their language, which is as bad as their behaviour, has long been the despair of modern editors. S. rightly points out (309) that this cannot be simply the result of a corrupt text; it characterizes barbarians who cannot even speak proper Greek. S., with his careful account of the staging, shows that it probably did not get as far as actual violence. But it probably comes nearer to it, and is more exciting, than anything else in Greek tragedy. Pelasgus and his men arrive in time to prevent it, and Pelasgus, still completely loyal to the Danaids, by defying the Herald's threat of war, wins the encounter. The Egyptians retire discomfited, and the audience look forward to the imminent end of the play. Everything, except for the mention of war, seems to have ended well.

There is, however, a further surprise to come (352-3). After thanking the Argives, and receiving an Argive bodyguard, Danaus proceeds to what S. rightly calls "a passionate (and unnecessary, cf. lines 1014-17) appeal to his daughters to guard their chastity, at all costs...". It would seem that the danger that Danaus fears is that in both human and animal life sexual attraction is natural and universal, and his daughters are good-looking girls. However, the advice is quite unnecessary because the girls have shown no sign of disobeying their father, and they confirm that intention at the end of his speech. What, then, is its purpose? S. and others are certainly right to link the passage to what is going to happen later in the trilogy (especially to a fragment of the *Danaids*). The girls will eventually have to learn that what they have been avoiding is sanctioned by the gods. The warning will be repeated very shortly by the second voice in the *Exodos*, when it points out that Zeus is not the only god; what about Hera and Aphrodite, the goddess of marriage and love? It still fits awkwardly in the present context. Why does Aeschylus bring it in exactly here? It may be helpful to consider also another way of looking at the problem. After examining all the candidates for the identity of that second voice, S. establishes that it can only be the second subsidiary chorus, the bodyguard of Argive soldiers. In 2013 A.J. Bowen has gone further by suggesting that Danaus was actually hoping to arrange a marriage between his daughters and the bodyguard. S. rejects that idea on the grounds that nothing in the text has as yet suggested that the subsidiary Chorus would play such an important role in the play, and that it was impossible that Danaus could be intending the opposite of what he said. However, these objections disappear if, like the audience itself, we pay more attention to what it sees on the stage than to what it hears. Helpful here as well as Bowen are Seaford (both in the *Bibliography*) and L.A. Swift, *The Hidden Chorus* (Oxford 2010). What the audience sees are two groups of people, one of young men, and the other of attractive unmarried young women consorting and dancing together, a sight which in respecta-

ble Athenian society would rarely be seen, unless it was at a dance of courtship or a wedding. Swift talks of what at first looks like “the conventional good-natured wedding-banter between the two groups”. On the evidence of this first play of the trilogy it is impossible to agree as to whether the Danaids reject marriage with all men or only with their cousins, and, with the loss of the other two plays we shall never know. I am not, therefore, suggesting that we are to envisage a Chorus of young ladies who are eying with interest the handsome young soldiers who are to escort them. Nor could anyone with any knowledge of the traditional story seriously suppose that this is how the trilogy is going to end. Rather, it is the spectators, or many of them, who might feel that, in contrast with the direction in which the plot is moving, this would be the normal and proper way for a marriage to be arranged, and that this is how they would like it to end. Only in the next play of the trilogy would the audience have to acknowledge that “it was not to be”. Pelasgus will be dead, and so presumably will be many of the bodyguard. The play comes to an end with the departure of the two groups together, the Danaids not through the *exodos* by which they had entered from the sea at the beginning of the play, the direction that means danger for them, but by the road which leads towards the city, which should represent salvation and safety. In the final debate between the two groups it is uncertainty that prevails. For Aeschylus’ propensity for surprising the audience in the final scene of his plays, and for pointing forward at the end of the first two plays of a trilogy, see page 363.

In the days when *Suppliants* was thought to be an early play of Aeschylus it was generally assumed that it must be a primitive and therefore simple and inferior play. In recent years I have been saddened by the feeling that that judgement has not entirely disappeared. I am sure that S.’s authoritative, enjoyable, and thought-provoking *Commentary* will succeed in persuading its readers that it is the opposite of these things.

