

Daneš, Jaroslav

The political thought of the Suppliant women

Graeco-Latina Brunensia. 2011, vol. 16, iss. 2, pp. [17]-30

ISSN 1803-7402 (print); ISSN 2336-4424 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/118186>

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

JAROSLAV DANEŠ

(UNIVERSITY OF HRADEC KRÁLOVÉ)

THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THE *SUPPLIANT WOMEN*

Euripides' play the Suppliant Women was long neglected as an inferior tragic piece. The situation changed when Murray and, especially, Zuntz evaluated its qualities. Nowadays it is firmly established as a true political play with a very complex structure. There are many terms, images, symbols and concepts in Euripides' Suppliant Women which betray a reflection of both more ancient and contemporary political and social theorising and at the same time there are elements of contemporary public patriotic celebration and state ideology. Therefore, this paper focuses on two apparent political levels which are interwoven into the text itself: 1. the Athenian self-image and ideology and 2. political theory.

Key words: Euripides; tragedy; politics.

Euripides' play the *Suppliant Women* was long neglected as an inferior tragic piece. The situation changed when Murray and, especially, Zuntz evaluated its qualities.¹ Nowadays it is firmly established as a true political play with a very complex structure.² The ways in which this play can be read are various. I neglect the historical approach to the *Suppliant Women*, which was favoured by many influential scholars during the 20th century,³

¹ MURRAY, GILBERT. 1920. *Euripides and his age*. London: Williams and Norgate; ZUNTZ, GÜNTHER. 1955. *The political plays of Euripides*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

² BURIAN, PETER. 1985. "Logos and Pathos: The Politics of the Suppliant Women". In BURIAN, PETER [ED.]. *Directions in Euripidean Criticism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1985, 129–155. MICHELINI, ANN N. 1994. "Political Themes in Euripides Suppliants." *The American Journal of Philology*, 115, 219–252.

³ DELEBEQUE, ÉDOUARD. 1951. *Euripide et la guerre du Péloponnèse*. Paris: C. Klincksieck. GOOSSENS, ROGER. 1962. *Euripide et Athènes*. Brussels. BENEDETTO, DI VINCENZO. 1971. *Euripide: teatro e società*. Torino. All these scholars interpreted

because I am not interested in the contemporary political allusions in the play and I refuse to reduce the rich political material of the text to a bare repository of allusions. Moreover, I consider this approach to be the most speculative one. On the contrary, there are many terms, images, symbols and concepts which betray a reflection of both more ancient and contemporary political and social theorising and at the same time there are elements of contemporary public patriotic celebration and state ideology. Therefore, I am going to focus on two apparent political levels which are interwoven into the text itself: 1. the Athenian self-image and ideology, and 2. political theory.

I.

In the *Suppliant Women* Athens is described as the protector of the weak, maltreated and haunted (v. 380). It was one of the favourite points of the Athenian self-image. There are at least seven other tragedies apart from the *Suppliant Women* which celebrate Athens as a refuge of suppliants: Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, Euripides' *Hercules*, *Heraclidae*, *Medea*, *Electra* and *Orestes* (though the last two indicate the future situation). That this ideal was dear to the Athenians is obvious in both the public speeches of the fifth and fourth centuries and funeral speeches. We can mention Lysias, Isocrates, Demosthenes, Hypereides and Thucydides, among others.⁴ Some of them even mentioned the story of the *Suppliant Women*. This ideal was, then, a distinctive feature of Athens; however, it was also parodied and criticised.⁵ Athens takes part without

the *Suppliant Women* as “allegories” in favour of Alcibiades (Delebeque), Nicias (Goossens) or against Cleon (Benedetto).

⁴ Lysias. *Funeral oration* 7–11; Isocrates, *Panathenaikos* 168–174, *Panegyrikos* 54–58, Demosthenes 60.8 Cf.. Lykourgos, *Against Leocrates* 98, Xenophon, *HG* VI. 5. 46.

⁵ See Plato, *Mx.* 244e. Plato's Socrates laments: *Nay, we ourselves know how the Argives, the Boeotians and the Corinthians – the leading States of Greece – came to need our city, being stricken with terror, and how even the Persian king himself – most marvellous fact of all – was reduced to such a state of distress that eventually he could hope for salvation from no other quarter save this city of ours which he had been so eager to destroy. And in truth, if one desired to frame a just accusation against the city, the only true accusation one could bring would be this: that she has always been compassionate to excess and the handmaid of the weak. And in fact, on that occasion, she proved unable to harden her heart and adhere firmly to her resolved policy of refusing to assist any in danger of enslavement against those who wronged them; on the contrary, she gave way and lent assistance* (/TRANS./ BURY, ROBERT G. 2005.

any constraint in matters where it has no self-interest in the name of justice or something else. Theseus declares himself to be always the punisher of the wicked: ἔθος τὸδ' εἰς Ἑλλήνας ἐξεδειξάμην, ἀεὶ κολαστῆς τῶν κακῶν καθεστάναι (340–41).⁶ On the other hand, the righteous are not threatened by Athens (575: χρηστὰ δ' οὐ κολάζομεν).⁷ Athens defends νόμος; that is what Aithra emphasises in her speech to Theseus (310–13). Theseus picks up her argument, which is further repeated throughout the play, for example in the debate with Theban Herald (526). Athens is thus honouring justice and paying no honour to injustice (378–9). But what kind of νόμος do they struggle for? It is a Panhellenic νόμος (Aithra 311, Theseus 526, 671). This by no means indicates any international or Panhellenic sympathy. Fitton showed that this term was a “part of contemporary diplomatic badinage” and that this phrase was widely used in the ideological debates of warring factions and states in 5th-century Greece.⁸

We come to a further point closely connected to the previous one. Athens had always preferred activism or engagement (πολλὰ πράσσειν) to a quiet life (ἡσυχία). In our play Aithra and Theseus are in favour of an active life. Aithra says about Athens: “It flourishes in strenuous action (ἐν γὰρ τοῖς πόνοισιν αὔξεται). Cities that keep quiet (ἡσυχοὶ) and do no deeds of glory have no glory in their glances but only caution.”⁹ Here Aithra expresses the reputation the Athenians had among their neighbours.

Plato. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press). Cf. Andokides, *On Peace* 28; Demosthenes, *Against Leptinus* 3.

6 Cf. Hypereides III, 12: ἡ πόλις ἡμῶν διατελεῖ τοὺς μὲν κακοὺς κολάζουσα, τοὺς δὲ δικαίους ῥυομένη.

7 Cf. Demosthenes LX, 7: ἡδίκησαν οὐδένα πάποτε.

8 FITTON, JOHN W. 1961. “The Suppliant Women and the Heraclidae of Euripides.” *Hermes*, 89, 431. We are reminded of the quarrel between the Boeotians and Athenians over the military use of the sacred ground. Thucydides describes (4.97) how the Boeotians complained about Athenian transgression of the Greek custom or laws (παραβαίνοντες τὰ νόμιμα τῶν Ἑλλήνων) because the Athenians invaded and fortified the sanctuaries. There are at least two other episodes in Thucydides which show a diplomatic use of this term (3.56, 3.59). The Plataeans defended their right to punish the Thebans for many wrongs done in the past, thus following κατὰ τὸν πᾶσι νόμον καθεστῶτα (3.56). The Plataeans also argued against the intention of the Lacedaimonians to put them to death, despite the fact they did no harm to the Lacedaimonians. The common usage of the Hellenes would, then, be transgressed (τὰ κοινὰ τῶν Ἑλλήνων νόμιμα ἀμαρτάνειν – 3.59).

9 323–325. See also 576–577, where the Herald says: πράσσειν σὺ πόλλ' εἴωθας ἢ τε σὴ πόλις. And Theseus replies: τοιγὰρ πονοῦσα πολλὰ πόλλ' εὐδαιμονεῖ.

We should remind ourselves of a famous passage of Thucydides (1.70) in which the Corinthian ambassador describes the character of the Athenians:

“For with them alone is it the same thing to hope for and to attain when once they conceive a plan, for the reason that they swiftly undertake whatever they determine upon. In this way they toil with hardship (*μετὰ πόνων*) and dangers, all their life long; and least of all men they enjoy what they have because they are always seeking more, because they think their only holiday is to do their duty, and because they regard untroubled peace (*ἡσυχίαν ἀπράγμονα*) as a far greater calamity than laborious activity (*ἐπίπτονον*). Therefore, if a man should sum up and say that they were born neither to have peace themselves (*μήτε αὐτοὺς ἔχειν ἡσυχίαν*) nor to let other men have it, he would simply speak the truth.”¹⁰

Thucydides records the Athenian ideal of activism (*πολυπραγμοσύνη*) and the distaste for quietism and its impossibility several times. The most famous expression can be found in Pericles' apology for imperial policy in which Pericles demonstrates the impossibility of shrinking from action.¹¹ This ideal was not confined to international affairs, but also embraced internal political life. In the *Funeral speech* Pericles condemns the man who does not take any part in public affairs as good for nothing.¹² On the contrary, the Argive Adrastus favours a quiet life and it is obvious that a quiet life is connected with pacifism and Adrastus confirms this in his speech to the Chorus.¹³ This might seem a paradox because he himself led the army against Thebes instead of having a quiet life, and additionally refused to be put off by the unfavourable prophecies.

Aithra and Theseus on the one hand and Adrastus on the other represent two different types of discourses and ideologies of 5th-century Athens. The first of them was an official discourse of Athenian policy, the latter was em-

¹⁰ Thucydides. 1998. *History of the Peloponnesian War* (/TRANSL./ SMITH, C. F.), Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press. All the following citations of Thucydides are borrowed from Smith's translation.

¹¹ Thuc. 2.63: *Τῆς τε πόλεως ὑμᾶς εἰκὸς τῷ τιμωμένῳ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἄρχειν, ὥπερ ἅπαντες ἀγάλλεσθε, βοηθεῖν, καὶ μὴ φεύγειν τοὺς πόνους ἢ μηδὲ τὰς τιμὰς διώκειν...ἣς οὐδ' ἐκστῆναι ἔτι ὑμῖν ἔστιν, εἴ τις καὶ τότε ἐν τῷ παρόντι δεδιῶς ἀπραγμοσύνη ἀνδραγαθίζεται...τὸ γὰρ ἀπραγμονοῦν οὐ σῶζεται μὴ μετὰ τοῦ δραστηρίου τεταγμένον, οὐδὲ ἐν ἀρχούσῃ πόλει ξυμφέρει, ἀλλ' ἐν ὑπηκόῳ, ἀσφαλῶς δουλεύειν.*

¹² Thuc. 2.40: *μόνοι γὰρ τὸν τε μηδὲν τῶνδε μετέχοντα οὐκ ἀπράγμονα, ἀλλ' ἀχρεῖον νομίζομεν.*

¹³ 949–954 – Adrastus: *ὦ ταλαίπωροι βροτῶν, τί κτᾶσθε λόγχαρ καὶ κατ' ἀλλήλων φόνους τίθεσθε παύσασθ', ἀλλὰ λήξαντες πόνων ἄστη φυλάσσεσθ' ἡσυχῶι μεθ' ἡσύχων. Σμικρὸν τὸ χρέμα τοῦ βίου· τοῦτο δὲ χρὴ ὡς ῥᾶστα καὶ μὴ σὺν πόνοις διεκπερᾶν.*

ployed by the elite opposition to the regime. The state ideology used an older concept of heroic labour (πόνος) and modified it in order to fit its imperial intentions.¹⁴ As Pericles says, to possess an empire eliminates all possibility of leading a quiet life. The elite critics of Athenian policy based their criticism on the traditional concept of ήσυχία, which reflected the ideal of an undisturbed city and its preference for stability over wealth, power and fame because all these three categories provoke greed (πλεονεξία) in human souls and cause hubristic behaviour, resulting in civil strife (στᾶσις). This type of political theorising can be traced back to the 6th-century poets like Solon and Theognis of Megara, at least. Athenian intellectuals of the 5th century extended the ideal of ήσυχία to foreign policy and modified it with respect to radical democracy. In foreign policy ήσυχία meant not interfering in the affairs of other states, abandoning the strategy of expansion, which brings ἀδικία. A renewed expression of this ideal can be found in Plato's dialogues. As regards the internal policy it signified either a withdrawal from public activity and the public space or, as Michelini says,¹⁵ 'activities of the good citizen under a regime that no longer encouraged citizen activism'. The political reality of the play, however, is not against the official discourse. On the one hand Aithra and Theseus defend activism, but on the other this activism does not result in imperialism. After winning the battle over the dead bodies Theseus neither sacks the city of Thebes nor install a pro-Athenian government there or anything like this. His deeds are just and lawful and he constantly avoids mixing with the people who caused this problematic situation.¹⁶ He is rather a policeman or a watchdog than an imperial politician.¹⁷ But why did Adrastus not follow the ideal of

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of the terms πολυπραγμοσύνη and ήσυχία see EHRENBERG, VICTOR. 1947. "Polypragmosyne: A Study in Greek Politics." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 67, 46–67. ADKINS, ARTHUR W. H. 1976. "Polypragmosyne and Minding One's own Business." *Classical Philology*, 71, 301–27. CARTER, LAURENCE B. 1986. *The Quiet Athenian*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Cf. DEMONT, PAUL. 1990. *La cité grecque archaïque et classique et l'idéal de tranquillité*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres. A. N. MICHELINI. (1994: 226–232).

¹⁵ A. N. MICHELINI (1994: 227).

¹⁶ See his treatment of Adrastus in the play. First he silenced Adrastus when he was about to quarrel with Theban Herald (513), and later he refused to make Adrastus a part of his army (589–591).

¹⁷ The variation on the issue of activism and a quiet life comes back onto the stage in Evadne's episode in the final part of the play. Evadne is suffering after losing her beloved husband and decides to throw herself onto his funeral pyre. Thus she is a representation of extreme heroism and activity which is out of control and stripped of reason. Her old father Iphis, shuddering at his daughter's decision, opts for starvation to bring him death. He retires from the world, leaving it as it is. He is, then, an example

ήσυχία, which he defends later in the play, and start a war with Thebes? Answering this question urges us to move to the second part of this paper.

II.

a) Young and ambitious

Theseus' cross-examination of Adrastus concerning the Argean decision to wage a war against Thebes leads to Adrastus' resigned answer that he was led astray by shouting young men.¹⁸ He thus throws us into the middle of ancient Greek ethical and political theorising, which viewed youth as an age when ὕβρις and error have the door open (250, 509). Euripides exploits this traditional pattern; however, the structural analogies between two pairs of opposites – young and old, hubristic and prudent or modest – are not strict. On the one hand the ambitions and eagerness of the young have a disastrous effect, which is summarised in Theseus' first political monologue:

Theseus: You were led astray by young men who enjoy being honoured and who multiply wars without justice to the hurt of the citizens. One wants to be general, another to get power into his hands and commit wanton abuse (ὡς ὑβρίζῃ δύναμιν), another wants wealth (κέρδους οὐνεκ') and does not consider whether the majority is at all harmed by being so treated (232–237).¹⁹

This remark of Theseus on, let us say, *youngsters*, reminds us of a discussion about the military expedition to Sicily in 415. It was a favourite Thucydidean and Platonic topic, to which we can put the title *The Question of Alcibiades*. Thucydides shows a general, Nicias, exploiting the category of youth.

Nicias: And if there be anyone here who, elated at being chosen to command, exhorts you to sail, considering – especially as he is too young (νεώτερος) to command – only his own interest, how he may get admiration for his raising of fine horses, and then, because that is very expensive, how he may also get some profit from his command, do not afford this man, at the cost of the state, an opportunity to make a personal display, but rather consider that such men damage the public interest while they waste their own property,

of radical quietism. As P. BURIAN (1985: 150) points out, Iphis and Evadne (father and daughter) represent 'in many ways the reversal of the fruitful dialogue of mother and son (Aithra and Theseus) in the first episode'. Reversals in general and the duality of structure are distinctive features of Euripides' *Suppliant Women*.

¹⁸ 160: *νέων γὰρ ἀνδρῶν θόρυβος ἐξέπλησέ με.*

¹⁹ All the translations of the passages of the *Suppliant Women* are borrowed from KOVACS, DAVID. 1998. *Euripides III*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.

and that the matter is one of great seriousness, and not such as a youth may (νεωτέρω) decide and rashly take in hand. (6.12)

At the same time Nicias exhorts the older citizens to persuade the younger ones not to vote for war. Hesitation with regard to war does not mean cowardice or a quiet life. Thucydides' commentary on this clash between the war faction and anti-war faction is very expressive:

But most zealous in urging the expedition was Alcibiades, son of Cleinias, wishing as he did to oppose Nicias, because, along with their general political disagreement, Nicias had made invidious reference to him, and above all he was eager to be made general and hoped thereby to subdue both Sicily and Carthage, and in the event of success to promote at the same time his private interests in wealth, as well as in glory. (6.15)

Alcibiades' eagerness with respect to war was the same as that of the young Argive men. It was personal gain and private interest (generalship, money) which motivated Alcibiades to support an expedition to Sicily.

On the other hand there is a certain ambivalence in the play as regards young politicians. Theseus is quite a young man in this play. He is, then, a counterpart of those youngsters, a counterpart which is keenly appreciated by Adrastus (190–92):

It is your city alone that could undertake this labour. It looks on what is pitiable and it has in you a good young leader who is vigorous (νεανίαν ἔχει σε ποιμέν' ἐσθλόν). For want of such a general many cities have perished.

Theseus' modesty, prudence and nobility weaken the black and white pattern (young and hubristic). His optimistic account of civilisation and human life (195–218,) on the basis of which he develops an acute criticism of old Adrastus, leaves nobody in doubt that a great and wise statesman is speaking. His diagnosis of Adrastus as ὕβρις is perfect (219–234). Adrastus mixed his bright house with mud, led the army on an expedition despite a seer's warnings and was persuaded by youngsters. In short, Adrastus failed to use his reason and dedicated himself to the world of emotions. He opted for εὐψυχία (bravery) instead of εὐβουλία (prudence, 161).²⁰ Theseus introduces himself as a defender of reason (λόγος) but neither is he totally immune to emotionally backgrounded argumentation. We witness one of the many paradoxes in the play. Theseus is prompted by his aged mother Aithra to wage a war over the bodies of slain heroes (301–331). Her

²⁰ On the clash between the world of the intellect (λόγος) and the world of the emotions (παῖθος) and their mutual interdependence as a key motif of the play, see P. BURIAN (1985).

arguments have a reasonable core which is accepted by Theseus without qualification. But what moves Theseus to action is Aithra's appeal to honour (306, *τιμή*) and cowardice (314, *ἀναδρία*), which Theseus reflects in his reply to Aithra (338–340). The division between young and old, rational and emotional is stirred at that moment.

b) Constitutional debate

Euripides' plays, including the *Suppliant Women*, reflect the intellectual debate of his time and I do not mean only the political discussion; e.g. in the *Suppliant Women* we find thoughts about the origins of civilisation.²¹ As regards the political discussion, we must compare the pseudo-dialogue between Theseus and Herald on the advantages and disadvantages of *isonomy* with Herodotus' constitutional debate (3.80–82), because with the exception of pseudo-Xenophon's *Constitution of the Athenians* (limited to the Athenian constitution) these two texts are by far the longest texts concerning the constitution.

Theseus' speech in favour of *isonomy* appears to contain approximately the same arguments as Otanes' speech in Herodotus (3.80). In fact, there are several important differences, although it is much better structured. First we have to mention a slight difference in the structure of both accounts. Herodotus' Otanes speaks on the basis of his historical experience – the insolence of Cambyses and the insolence of the Magian – while Euripides' Theseus gives a purely theoretical account without any reference to some historical moments. Further Herodotus' Otanes proceeds in a negative way and he first shows the dark side of monarchy and only then praises *isonomy*. *Isonomy* is evaluated highly because we cannot experience the abuse of power we used to experience under the tyranny, which is the reason why Herodotus' Otanes emphasises equality in connection with lawfulness. He goes on with the accountability of the office-holders (*ὑπεύθυνον δὲ ἀρχὴν ἔχει*) and mass decision-making on all matters (*βουλευματα δὲ πάντα ἐς τὸ κοινὸν ἀναφέρει*). However, there is no theory and exposition supporting the view that these institutions are the best means to prevent us from abusing power. Euripides' Theseus begins his quarrel with Theban Herald with a positive assessment of the free city (*ἐλευθέρα πόλις*, 405) and equal participation in public affairs (406–7). Then he reacts to Herald's criticism of democracy with a counter-attack on one-man rule without any aim of refuting his arguments (426–455). At this point he copies Herodotus' Otanes by contrasting the positive sides of *isonomy* with the dark sides of

²¹ Cf. Democritus apud Diodorus (I.9), Hippocratic treatise *VM*, Protagorean myth in Plato's *Prt.* (320d–322d), Critias B25, Archelaos A4.

tyranny and he also repeatedly highlights the connection between equality and the law (430–32).²² Unlike Otanes, Theseus stresses the freedom of speech (438–9). It is interesting that Theseus defines freedom as freedom of speech. In his famous *Funeral oration* Pericles linked freedom to leading a life without constraints. On the other hand Euripides' Theseus neglects the accountability of the office-holders and the competence of the Assembly to arbitrate on all counsels. Theseus' speech is rather similar in some points to Pericles' *Funeral oration*.

Otanes' and Theseus' accounts of the disadvantages of a monarchy or tyranny cover the same points: breaking the law, killing, rape and illegal acquisition. The category of youth comes back into Theseus' list of the disadvantages of a monarchy. One of the arguments in favour of democracy is that it rejoices in the young (443, ἡδεται νεανίαις), while tyranny kills them (449, ἀπολωτιζή νέων). To be precise, Euripides uses an agricultural metaphor: "How, then, could a city be strong in the future when someone culls and cuts away the boldest of the young as one does the towering stalk in a springtime meadow?" (447–479). This metaphor might be an allusion to a story in Herodotus' *History* (5.92). Herodotus tells us a story about the Corinthian tyrant Periander, who became a violent autocrat after being instructed by the Milesian tyrant Thrasybulus. Periander sent a messenger to Thrasybulus inquiring how he could best safeguard his power. Periander took the messenger out of the town and entered a cornfield. While talking to the messenger he continually cut down the tallest of the stalks and threw them away until by doing so he had destroyed the best of the crop. Then he sent the confused messenger back to Corinth. While the messenger did not grasp the meaning of the action, Periander did so immediately and became bloodthirsty. This agricultural metaphor in Theseus' speech is particularly important when we take into account the fact that the play begins with Aithra's prayer for a rich crop during the festival called Proerosia.²³

Are there also some common points as regards the criticism of *isonomy*? The criticism of *isonomy* is elaborated more in Euripides' Herald speech than in Megabyzos' account. Megabyzos puts forward only one argument against *isonomy*: common people do not have knowledge, since they act thoughtlessly and emotionally. The origins of Megabyzos' argument can

²² Monarchy and tyranny are synonyms here because they both signify one-man rule without further qualification.

²³ On this religious and ideological context see GOFF, BARBARA. "Aithra at Eleusis." *Helios*, 22, pp. 65–78, especially pp. 73–75. On Proerosia in general see PARK, HERBERT W. 1977. *The Festivals of the Athenians*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 73–75.

be traced back to Theognis of Megara at least and the core of the argument had been refined by Plato. Of course, the question of *who should rule* is not a distinctively Platonic question, but the insistence on the relationship between knowledge, competence and the exclusiveness of rulership is an old aristocratic inheritance in Plato's political philosophy. In fact the relationship between the mass and the elite had always been more complex than Megabyzos, Herald and Plato thought. On the other hand, democratic or isonomic thought emphasises how we can prevent ourselves from abusing power, which is, indeed, a modern question. In this connection Theseus and Otanes rightly emphasise the question of law, justice and equality. Herald gave us several arguments against *isonomy*: demagogy, competence, jealousy of the elite, and the fact that the common people do not have enough time to participate in politics. Some of them can be relativised: it is not true that demagogy is limited to democracy; it is a quality of political oratory and argumentation which occurs in each and every type of political regime.²⁴ The question of competence is also more difficult than Herald supposes. It is true that people decided at the assembly, but they were first addressed and advised by the members of the intellectual and aristocratic elite. If they were misinformed it was not their fault but the mistake of their advisers. Moreover, the metaphysical presupposition that a collective body will make more bad decisions than an expert body has never been proved and Aristotle's postulation of collective wisdom argues the opposite.²⁵ On the other hand, there are some of the very problems discussed by classical political philosophers (Plato, Isocrates and Aristotle): the overworked population and the limits of its engagement, demagogy and self-interest versus public interest. As a set Herald's arguments seem to be close to those we find in pseudo-Xenophon's *Constitution of the Athenians*.²⁶ Even the tone of his speech is pretty much the same.

Many interpreters²⁷ have pointed out that the debate between Herald and Theseus does not have a champion and that there is some ambivalence in

²⁴ True, all Athenian intellectuals focused on the problem of demagogy: Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle. Euripides himself depicts demagogic characters and criticises demagogy in at least four plays: the *Supp.* (412–422), *Or.* (902–906, 944–945), *Tr.* and *Hec.* (122–140).

²⁵ *Pol.* 1281b34–38, 1282a17–23. On the relationship between knowledge, competence, collective intelligence and good decision-making see OBER, JOSIAH. 2008. *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in classical Athens*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²⁶ Cf. 1.2, 1. 5–6, 1.20

²⁷ J. W. FITTON (1961: 433); GAMBLE, ROBERT B. 1970. "Euripides' Suppliant Women: Decision and Ambivalence." *Hermes*, 98, 399. For a more comprehensive analysis see

the play in this respect. I am not in favour of this statement without qualification with respect to what follows in the play.²⁸ Herald's second reply to Theseus signifies the victory of *isonomy*, which upholds the law and the general principles of common life. Herald only threatens and forbids (467–474); moreover, he does it on free ground. His attitude and tone are implied by tyrannical ideology and by his behaviour he confirms Theseus' evaluation of tyranny. Herald rejects the generally accepted principles of correct behaviour without any strong argument.²⁹ Theseus, on the contrary, tries to keep the law common to all the Greeks. It was argued that the law common to all the Greeks was an ideological instrument warranting military action, something which was linked with imperialism.³⁰ But the situation in the play is different. Theseus neither wants to conquer Thebes nor sack the city. The only thing he wants is to stop another injustice from being committed. By doing this he confirms the relationship between equality and law or lawfulness.

But we have to mention a slight complication concerning *isonomy* or democracy in the *Suppliant Women*. It will become clearer in comparison with Aeschylus' *Suppliants*. We find a difference between the authority of Theseus and Pelasgus. While, in the *Suppliants*, Pelasgus seems to be very cautious as regards the supplication for asylum – there is great uncertainty about the final decision of the Assembly – Theseus is self-confident concerning the approval of his proposal. Despite the fact that Theseus gave the power to the demos, he still holds something like royal authority. Pelasgus, on the contrary, showed no self-confidence as regards the assembly's decision and by no means did he see his position as being endowed with Theseus' authority. Someone might say that Theseus meets the Herald's criticism that it is possible to 'fool the city with flattering speech and lead it this way and that way and that to suit his own advantage'. But we would be wrong to describe Theseus as a demagogue who pursues his own advantage. Theseus only convinces an assembly that the case of the Argives is just. He is rather a model of an instructive politician and orator. Furthermore we can speculate on the similarity of Theseus to Pericles, under whom Athens

A. N. MICHELINI (1994: 232–237).

28 I agree if we confine ourselves to a plain argumentative basis of this isolated episode, because Theseus does not offer a democratic theory and does not try to reject Herald's criticism. The same applies to Herald. The non-existence of strongly and argumentatively defended democratic theory in classical texts is one of their weirdest features.

29 Cf. G. ZUNTZ (1955: 8–9).

30 See note no. 8.

was a democracy in name only, but in fact it was a rule of the first citizen, as Thucydides says in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*.³¹ Moreover, we know that Feidias made the figure of Theseus on the decoration of the Parthenon look like Pericles, which indicates something.

c) Middle class

Theseus' evaluation of democracy raises a question: what kind of democracy or *isonomy* does he mean? We should come back to Theseus' investigation of Adrastus, which ends with Theseus' analyses of the three classes of citizens (238–249):

Theseus: There are three classes of citizens: the rich are useless and always lusting for more; the poor, who lack their daily bread, are dangerous, for they assign too great a place to envy <and> hurl their stings at the rich, being deceived by the tongues of wicked leaders; of the three classes the one in the middle preserves states by keeping to the discipline that the city establishes.

It sounds almost like modern sociological knowledge. It is, indeed, a hot sociological issue – the political stability of an open society is conditioned by a strong middle class. But the emphasis on those who are in the middle is, to some extent, inherent in ancient Greek political thought. The most extensive account of the importance of the middle class can be found in Aristotle's *Politics* (IV. 9) when Aristotle argues in favour of *politeia* (constitutional government) as the best constitution under the given conditions. Aristotle himself refers to the poet Phocylides (1295b34) while explaining the advantages of political society based on a strong middle class; perhaps he does so in order to show his literacy. Euripides' and Aristotle's argumentation proceeds in the same way:

For this degree of wealth is the readiest to obey reason, whereas for a person who is exceedingly beautiful or strong or nobly born or rich, or the opposite – exceedingly poor or weak or of very mean station, it is difficult to follow the bidding of reason; for the former turn more to insolence and grand wickedness, and the latter overmuch to malice and petty wickedness, and the motive of all wrongdoing is either insolence or malice. (Aristotle, Politics 4. 9. 4)³²

The best historical example of this political truth in Athenian history could be the situation in the times of Solon, described in pseudo-Aristotle's *Athenian Constitution* (5–6). Athenian society was then split between the

³¹ 2.65.9: λόγῳ μὲν δημοκρατία, ἔργῳ δὲ ὑπὸ τοῦ πρώτου ἀνδρὸς ἀρχή.

³² Translation RACKHAM, HENRY. 2005. *Politics*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.

rich and the poor and the majority served the minority. Athens was threatened by civil war at that time. Fortunately, the hostile factions elected Solon, who was of noble birth, as a mediator; however, he counted himself among the middle class as regards wealth. In other words, Euripides' Theseus opts for a conservative political theory which goes against a radical form of democracy. But we find it very difficult to show who is described as a middle class.

Closure

As regards the general interpretation of the *Suppliant Women* from the political point of view, there has long been a controversy over Aristophanes of Byzantium's evaluation of the play as *Ἐγκώμιον Ἀθηναίων*. This evaluation was followed by Zuntz (1955) in his famous, brilliant, illuminating and valuable work. Of course Athens is described as a pious city and the protector of justice, the law and helpless people. The chorus is especially active in extolling Athens. At the same time Sparta is blamed as a ravisher and brutish polis (v. 184). However, Fitton (1961), Gamble (1970), Smith (1966), Burian (1985), Michelini (1994) and many others pointed to some ambivalence in the play which prevents us from interpreting the play as a clear celebration of Athens. Rather we can speak about constant juggling with perspectives and ambivalences which provokes deeper reflection. Let us take the example of Adrastus' funeral oration (857–917). We have already mentioned that the young Argive heroes who later failed at the seven gates of Thebes were somewhat eager, greedy and imprudent; in one word, youngsters (232–237). However, Theseus prompts Adrastus to honour them as superior to other men in bravery and as people about whom the young citizens should know. In the following funeral oration they receive high praise from Adrastus because of their virtue, bravery, modest way of life and preference of the public interest to their personal interest. This is an apparent contradiction. Why do we celebrate imprudent people who start wars because of personal ambitions and later extol them as heroes and models of civic virtue? This somewhat absurd situation is underlined by Adrastus' final sentence concerning these heroes: Therefore raise your children well! It does not make sense. Of course, this *absurdly tendentious eulogy*, as Fitton says (1961: 438), is followed by the heart-rending mourning voices of the Argive women. Is it not a subversive attitude to the institution of a funeral oration? I think it is one of Euripides' ironies – if we brought up children according to these examples we would prompt them to wage wars for any reason instead of living a normal civic life. There is no way out of

this process, no Aeschylean better world of justice. It is noteworthy that Euripides changed the traditional characterisation of the Argive warriors. Fitton suggested that Euripides is here satirising Aeschylus' *Eleusinians* (1961: 439–440), which is a speculative thesis but by no means improbable. I do not think that Adrastus' funeral oration is a parody of this key institution of Athenian democracy. It rather serves as an example of what consequences we should expect if we have such an institution. Therefore Adrastus' oration does not stand on the same level as parody and satire in Plato's *Menexenos*. Socrates says (234c–235a):

*In truth, Menexenus, to fall in battle seems to be a splendid thing in many ways. For a man obtains a splendid and magnificent funeral even though at his death he be but a poor man... He wins praise and that by the mouth of accomplished men who do not praise at random, but in speeches prepared long beforehand. And they praise in such splendid fashion that, what with their ascribing to each one both what he has and what he has not, and the variety and splendour of their diction, they bewitch our souls.*³³

The non-Athenians in the play clearly defend pacifism and a quiet life for the cities. The Panhellenic idea goes hand in hand with this demand. However, this ideal would not be fulfilled because of personal ambitions, the never-ending cycle of revenge, and human foolishness. It looks as if Euripides presents the audience with a pessimistic vision (the extensiveness of the mourning passages supports it) about the clash of ideals which cannot even be reached by following reason, reaching civic virtue etc. The time of the Peloponnesian War, in which the *Suppliant Women* was staged, was totally different from the great epoch of the Persian wars, when the competitiveness of the Greeks was turned to defence against the Persians. If we compare Aeschylus' plays, e.g. *Persians*, with Euripides' *Suppliant Women* we would find that Aeschylus' celebration of Athens is straightforward: Athens is the salvation of Greece, the guarantee of freedom, the eternal fighter against the barbarians (226–245). Euripides, surely, esteemed Athens but at the same time he retained a subversive idea that neither does Athens contribute to the ideal – the goddess Athena shows herself as quite an aggressive propagator of wars. For Euripides could not share Aeschylus' euphoria; he was involved in the disastrous Panhellenic war, which was not a war for freedom and independence, as were the Persian Wars, which made Athenians heroes and united the Greeks.

³³ The translation is borrowed from BURY, ROBERT. G. 2005. *Plato*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.