

*Aeschylus' Suppliants*  
(translations by Herbert Weir Smyth)

**Passage I: *Suppliants* 190-204, 222-233**

**Danaus**

Stronger than a castle is an altar—an impenetrable shield. As quick as you can, gather in your left hands your white-wreathed suppliant boughs, sacred emblems of Zeus the merciful. [195] Reply to the strangers, as is fitting for aliens, in piteous and plaintive language of necessity, telling them clearly of your flight, how it was unstained by deed of blood. Above all let no arrogance accompany your speech, and reveal nothing impious in your peaceful eyes, from your respectful face. [200] In your speech neither interrupt, nor hesitate—for this would offend these people. And remember to be submissive: you are an alien, a fugitive, and in need. Bold speech does not suit the weak.

...

Honor to the mutual altar of all these protecting powers; and seat yourselves on holy ground like a flock of doves in dread of hawks of the same feathered tribe— [225] kindred, yet foes, who would defile their race. If bird prey on bird, how can it be pure? And how can man be pure who would seize from an unwilling father an unwilling bride? For such an act, not even in Hades, after death, shall he escape arraignment for outrage. [230] There also among the dead, so men tell, another Zeus holds a last judgment upon misdeeds. Take heed and reply in this manner, that victory may attend your cause.

## Passage 2: *Suppliants* 234-401

### **Pelasgus**

From where comes this band we address, [235] clothed in foreign attire and luxuriating in closely-woven and barbaric robes? For your apparel is not that of the women of Argos, nor yet of any part of Hellas. How you have gained courage thus fearlessly to come to this land, unheralded and friendless and without guides, [240] this makes me wonder. And yet, truly, I see that branches usually carried by suppliants are laid by your side before the gods assembled here—as to this alone can Hellas guess with confidence.<sup>1</sup>As for the rest, there is still much I should with reason leave to conjecture, [245] if your voice were not here to inform me.

### **Chorus**

You have not spoken falsely about our clothing. But, for my part, how am I to address you? As commoner, as spokesman, bearer of the sacred wand,<sup>2</sup>or as ruler of the realm?

### **Pelasgus**

As for that, answer and speak to me with confidence. [250] For I am Pelasgus, offspring of Palaechthon, whom the earth brought forth, and lord of this land; and after me, their king, is rightly named the race of the Pelasgi, who harvest the land. Of all the region through which the pure [255] Strymon flows, on the side toward the setting sun, I am the lord. There lies within the limits of my rule the land of the Perrhaebi, the parts beyond Pindus close to the Paeonians, and the mountain ridge of Dodona; the edge of the watery sea borders my kingdom. I rule up to these boundaries.

[260] The ground where we stand is Apian land itself, and has borne that name since antiquity in honor of a healer. For Apis, seer and healer, the son of Apollo, came from Naupactus on the farther shore and purified this land of monsters deadly to man, which Earth, [265] defiled by the pollution of bloody deeds of old, caused to spring up—plagues charged with wrath, an ominous colony of swarming serpents. Of these plagues Apis worked the cure by sorcery and spells to the content of the Argive land, [270] and for reward thereafter earned for himself remembrance in prayers.

Now that you have my testimony, declare your lineage and speak further—yet our people do not take pleasure in long discourse.

### **Chorus**

Our tale is brief and clear. Argives [275] we claim to be by birth, offspring of a cow blest in its children. And the truth of this I shall confirm in full.

### **Pelasgus**

Foreign maidens, your tale is beyond my belief—how your race can be from Argos. For you are more similar to the [280] women of Libya and in no way similar to those native to our land. The Nile, too, might foster such a stock, and like yours is the Cyprian impress stamped upon female images by male craftsmen. And of such aspect, I have heard, are nomad women, who [285] ride on camels for steeds, having padded saddles, and dwell in a land neighboring the Ethiopians. And had you been armed with the bow, certainly I would have guessed you to be the unwed, flesh-devouring Amazons. But inform me, and I will better comprehend [290] how it is that you trace your race and lineage from Argos.

### **Chorus**

Is there a report that once in this land of Argos Io was ward of Hera's house?

### **Pelasgus**

Certainly she was; the tradition prevails far and wide.

**Chorus**

[295] And is there some story, too, that Zeus was joined in love with a mortal?

**Pelagus**

This entanglement was not secret from Hera.

**Chorus**

What then was the result of this royal strife?

**Pelagus**

The goddess of Argos transformed the woman into a cow.

**Chorus**

[300] And while she was a horned cow, did not Zeus approach her?

**Pelagus**

So they say, making his form that of a bull lusting for a mate.

**Chorus**

What answer then did Zeus' stubborn consort give?

**Pelagus**

She placed the all-seeing one to stand watch over the cow.

**Chorus**

What manner of all-seeing herdsman with a single duty do you mean?

**Pelagus**

[305] Argus, a son of Earth, whom Hermes slew.

**Chorus**

What else did she contrive against the unfortunate cow?

**Pelagus**

A sting, torment of cattle, constantly driving her on.

**Chorus**

They call it a gadfly, those who dwell by the Nile.

**Pelagus**

Well then, it drove her by a long course out of the land.

**Chorus**

[310] Your account agrees with mine in all respects.

**Pelagus**

So she came to Canobus and to Memphis.

**Chorus**

And Zeus begot a son by the touching of his hand.

**Pelasgus**

Who is it then that claims to be the cow's Zeus-begotten calf?

**Chorus**

[315] Epaphus, and truly named from "laying on of hands."

**Pelasgus**

[And who was begotten of Epaphus?]

**Chorus**

Libya, who reaps the fruit of the largest portion of the earth.

**Pelasgus**

[What offspring, then, did Libya have?]

**Chorus**

[Agenor was her first child born.]

**Pelasgus**

And who was his offspring?

**Chorus**

Belus, who had two sons and was father of my father here.

**Pelasgus**

[320] Now tell me his wisely-given name.<sup>1</sup>

**Chorus**

Danaus: and he has a brother with fifty sons.

**Pelasgus**

Reveal his name ungrudgingly.

**Chorus**

Aegyptus; and now that you know my ancient lineage, I pray you to help<sup>1</sup>a band that is Argive by descent.

**Pelasgus**

[325] I think you indeed have some share in this land from old. But how did you bring yourselves to leave the home of your fathers? What stroke of fortune befell you?

**Chorus**

Lord of the Pelasgians, of varying color are the ills of mankind, and nowhere can you find trouble of the same plume. [330] For who dreamed that a kindred race, sprung of old, would thus in unexpected flight find haven at Argos, fleeing in terror through loathing of the marriage-bed?

**Pelasgus**

Why have you come as suppliants of these gods congregated here, holding in your hands those white-wreathed, fresh-plucked boughs?

**Chorus**

[335] So as not to be made slave to Aegyptus' race.

**Pelasgus**

By reason of hatred? Or do you speak of unlawfulness?

**Chorus**

Who would purchase their lords from among their kin?

**Pelasgus**

In this way families have enhanced their power.

**Chorus**

And it is easy then, if things go ill, to separate from a wife.

**Pelasgus**

[340] How then am I to deal with you in accordance with my sacred duty?

**Chorus**

By not surrendering us at the demand of Aegyptus' sons.

**Pelasgus**

A serious request—to take upon myself a dangerous war.

**Chorus**

But Justice protects her champions.

**Pelasgus**

True, if she had a share in the matter from the beginning.

**Chorus**

[345] Show reverence for the ship of state thus crowned.<sup>2</sup>

**Pelasgus**

I shrink as I gaze upon these shaded shrines.

**Chorus**

Yet heavy is the wrath of Zeus, god of the suppliant.

Son of Palaechthon, lord of the Pelasgians, hear me with a benign heart. [350] Behold me, your suppliant, a fugitive, running around like a heifer chased by wolves upon precipitous crags, where, confident in his help, she lows to tell the herdsman of her distress.

**Pelasgus**

I see [355] a company of assembled gods assenting beneath the shade of fresh-plucked boughs. Nevertheless

may this affair of claimants to the friendship of our city bring no mischief in its wake! And let no feud come upon the state from causes unforeseen and unforested; for the state has no need of such trouble.

**Chorus**

Indeed, [360] may Justice, daughter of Zeus the Apportioner, Justice who protects the suppliant, look upon our flight that it bring no mischief in its wake. But you, aged in experience, learn from one of younger birth. If you show mercy to a suppliant ... from a man of holiness.

**Pelasgus**

[365] It is not my own house at whose hearth you sit. If the state is stained by pollution in its commonalty, in common let the people strive to work out the cure. For myself, I will pledge no promise before I have communicated these events to all the citizens.

**Chorus**

[370] You are the state, you are the people. Being subject to no judge, you rule the altar, your country's hearth by your will's sole ordinance; and, enthroned in sole sovereignty, [375] you determine every issue. Beware pollution!

**Pelasgus**

Pollution on my enemies! But without harm I do not know how to help you. And yet again, it is not well advised to slight these supplications. I am perplexed, and fear possesses my soul [380] whether to act, or not to act and take what fortune sends.

**Chorus**

Look to him who looks down from above, to him, the guardian of mortals sore-distressed, who appeal to their neighbors, yet do not obtain the justice that is their right. [385] The wrath of Zeus, the suppliant's god, remains, and will not be softened by a sufferer's complaints.

**Pelasgus**

If the sons of Aegyptus have authority over you by the law of your country claiming that they are nearest of kin, who would wish to contest it? [390] You must plead in accordance with the laws of the land you have fled, that they have no authority over you.

**Chorus**

Never, oh never, may I fall subject to the power and authority of these men. I am determined to flee to escape this marriage that offends my soul, piloting my course by the stars. [395] Take Justice as your ally, and render judgment for the cause deemed righteous by the gods.

**Pelasgus**

The judgment is not easy—do not make me the judge. I have declared already that, though I am ruler, I will not do this thing without the consent of my people, lest hereafter, [400] if any evil befall, the people should say, “You honored aliens and brought ruin upon your own land.”

### Passage 3: *Suppliants* 605-709

#### Danaus

[605] Action was taken by the Argives, not by any doubtful vote but in such a way as to make my aged heart renew its youth. For the air bristled with right hands held aloft as, in full vote, they ratified this resolution into law: "That we are settlers in this land, and are free, [610] subject to no seizure, and secure from robbery of man; that no one, native or alien, lead us captive; but, if they turn to violence, any landholder who refuses to rescue us, should both forfeit his rights and suffer public banishment." [615] Such was the persuasive speech that the king of the Pelasgians delivered on our behalf, uttering the solemn warning that never in the future should the city feed the great wrath of Zeus, protector of the suppliant; and declaring that, should a twofold defilement—from strangers and from natives at once—arise before the city, [620] it would become fodder for distress past all relief. Hearing these words, the Argive people, waiting for no proclamation of crier, voted by uplifted hand that this should be so. It was the Pelasgian people, won readily to assent, who heard the subtle windings of his speech; but it was Zeus who brought the end to pass.

#### Chorus

[625] Come, let us invoke blessings upon the Argives in return for blessings. And may Zeus, god of strangers, behold the offerings of gratitude voiced by a stranger's lips, that they may in true fulfilment reach their perfect goal.

[630] Divinely-born gods! Hear now as I pour forth libations for blessings upon our kindred. Never may the wanton lord of war, [635] insatiate of battle-cry, Ares, who reaps a human harvest in alien fields, destroy this Pelasgian land by fire; for they had compassion for us, [640] and cast a vote in our favor, respecting our pitiable flock, suppliants in the name of Zeus.

Nor did they cast their votes for the side of the males, [645] disregarding the women's cause, since they honored the avenging eye of Zeus, against which there is no battling, and what house would have it [650] defiling its roof? For he sits heavily upon it. They take reverent heed of their kin, petitioners of holy Zeus; therefore with pure [655] altars shall they please the gods.

Therefore let there fly forth from our overshadowed lips a prayer of gratitude. Never may pestilence [660] empty this city of its men nor strife stain the soil of the land with the blood of slain inhabitants. But may the flower of its youth be unplucked, and may Ares, [665] the partner of Aphrodite's bed, he who makes havoc of men, not shear off their bloom.

And may the altars, where the elders gather, blaze in honor of venerable men. [670] Thus may their state be regulated well, if they hold in awe mighty Zeus, and, most of all, Zeus the warden of the guest, who by venerable enactment guides destiny straight. [675] We pray that other guardians be always renewed, and that Artemis-Hecate watch over the childbirth of their women.

And let no murderous havoc come upon [680] the realm to ravage it, by arming Ares—foe to the dance and lute, parent of tears—and the shout of civil strife. [685] And may the joyless swarm of diseases settle far from the heads of the inhabitants, and to all the young people may Lyceus be graciously disposed.

May Zeus cause the earth to bring forth its tribute of fruit [690] by the produce of every season; may their grazing cattle in the fields have abundant increase, and may they obtain all things from the heavenly powers. [695] May minstrels sing hymns of praise at the altars; and from pure lips let there proceed the phorminx-loving chant.

May the people who control the state guard its privileges free from fear— [700] a prudent government counselling wisely for the public prosperity. And should they have recourse to arms may they inflict no loss, but grant just rights of covenant to the stranger within their gates.

And may they worship forever the gods who possess the land [705] with native honors of laurel bough held aloft, and oxen slain, even as their fathers did before their time. Since reverence for parents stands written third among the statutes of Justice, to whom honor supreme is due.