

Euripides' *Suppliants*
(translations by E. P. Coleridge)

Passage I: *Suppliants* 8-19, 36-41

Aethra

This prayer I make, when I behold these aged women, who, leaving their homes in Argos, [10] now throw themselves with suppliant branches at my knees in their terrible trouble; for around the gates of Cadmus they have lost their seven noble sons, whom Adrastus, king of Argos, once led there, [15] eager to secure for exiled Polyneices, his son-in-law, a share in the heritage of Oedipus; so now their mothers would bury in the grave the dead, whom the spear has slain, but the victors prevent them and will not allow them to take up the corpses, holding the laws of the gods in no honor.... My herald has gone to the city, to call Theseus here, so that he may rid the land of that which grieves them, or loose these suppliant bonds, [40] with pious observance of the gods' will; for women should in all cases invoke the aid of men, women that are discreet.

Passage 2: Suppliants 184-192 (Adrastus explains why he is asking Theseus and Athens for help, rather than another city)

Adrastus

Perhaps you might say: “Why pass the land of Pelops over, [185] and lay this toil on Athens?” This I am bound to declare. Sparta is cruel, her customs variable; the other states are small and weak. Your city alone would be able to undertake this labor; [190] for it turns an eye on misery, and has in you a young and gallant shepherd; for the want of which to lead their hosts, states before now have often perished.

Passage 3: Suppliants 297-331, 334-364 (in these two passages, Aethra and Theseus discuss whether Theseus should help the Argives)

Aethra

No then, I will not hold my peace to blame myself afterwards for having now kept silence to my shame, nor will I forego my honorable proposal, from the common fear [300] that it is useless for women to give good advice. First, my son, I exhort you to give good heed to heaven's will, lest from slighting it you fall; for in this one single point you fall, though well-advised in all else. Further, I would have patiently endured, had it not been my duty [305] to be bold for injured people; and this, my son, it is that brings you now your honor, and causes me no fear to urge that you should use your power to make men of violence, who prevent the dead from receiving their share of burial and funeral rites, [310] perform this duty, and check those who would confound the customs of all Hellas; for this it is that holds men's states together—strict observance of the laws. And some, no doubt, will say it was cowardice made you stand aloof in terror, [315] when you might have won for your city a crown of glory, and, though you encountered a savage swine, laboring for a sorry task, yet when the time came for you to face the helmet and pointed spear, and do your best, you were found to be coward. [320] No! do not do so if you are indeed my son. Do you see how fiercely your country looks on its revilers when they mock her for want of counsel? Yes, for in her toils she grows greater. But states whose policy is dark and cautious [325] have their sight darkened by their carefulness. My son, will you not go help the dead and these poor women in their need? I have no fears for you, starting as you do with right upon your side; and although I see the prosperity of Callmus' folk, [330] still I am confident they will hurl a different cast of the dice; for the god reverses all things again.

Theseus

Mother, the words that I have spoken [335] to him are fair, and I have declared my opinion of the counsels that tripped him up; yet I also perceive the truth of your warning to me, that it ill suits my character to shun dangers. For by a long and glorious career [340] I have displayed this habit among Hellenes, of ever punishing the wicked. And so I cannot refuse toil. For what will spiteful tongues say of me, when you, my mother, who more than all others fear for my safety, [345] bid me undertake this labor? Yes, I will go about this business and rescue the dead by persuasive words; or, failing that, the spear at once shall decide this issue, nor will the gods grudge me this. But I require the whole city's sanction also, [350] which my wish will ensure; still, by communicating the proposal to them I would find the people better disposed. For I made them supreme, when I set this city free, by giving all an equal vote. So I will take Adrastus as proof of what I have to say [355] and go to their assembly, and when I have won them to these views, I will return here, after collecting a picked band of young Athenians; and then remaining under arms I will send a message to Creon, begging the bodies of the dead. But you, aged ladies, remove from my mother your holy wreaths, [360] so that I may take her by the hand and conduct her to the house of Aegeus; for a wretched son is he who does not serve his parents in return—fairest contribution; for, when he made his gift, he in his turn from his own sons receives all such service as he gave to his parents.

Aethra leaves the altar and departs.

Passage 4: Suppliants 399-563

Theban Herald

Who is the despot of this land? To whom must I announce [400] the message of Creon who rules over the land of Cadmus, since Eteocles was slain by the hand of his brother Polyneices, at the sevenfold gates of Thebes?

Theseus

You have made a false beginning to your speech, stranger, in seeking a despot here. For this city is not ruled [405] by one man, but is free. The people rule in succession year by year, allowing no preference to wealth, but the poor man shares equally with the rich.

Theban Herald

You give me here an advantage, as in a game of checkers; [410] for the city from which I come is ruled by one man only, not by the mob; no one there puffs up the citizens with specious words, and for his own advantage twists them this way or that, one moment dear to them and lavish of his favors, [415] the next harmful to all; and yet by fresh calumnies of others he hides his former failures and escapes punishment. Besides, how would the people, if it cannot form true judgments, be able rightly to direct the state? No, it is time, not haste, that affords a better [420] understanding. A poor farmer, even if he were not unschooled, would still be unable from his toil to give his mind to politics. Truly the better sort count it no healthy sign when the worthless man obtains a reputation [425] by beguiling with words the populace, though before he was nothing.

Theseus

This herald is a clever fellow, a dabbler in the art of talk. But since you have thus entered the contest with me, listen awhile, for it was you that challenged a discussion. Nothing is more hostile to a city than a despot; [430] where he is, there are first no laws common to all, but one man is tyrant, in whose keeping and in his alone the law resides, and in that case equality is at an end. But when the laws are written down, rich and weak alike have equal justice, [435] and it is open to the weaker to use the same language to the prosperous when he is reviled by him, and the weaker prevails over the stronger if he has justice on his side. Freedom's mark is also seen in this: "Who has wholesome counsel to declare unto the state?" [440] And he who chooses to do so gains renown, while he, who has no wish, remains silent. What greater equality can there be in a city?

Again, where the people are absolute rulers of the land, they rejoice in having a reserve of youthful citizens, while a king counts this a hostile element, [445] and strives to slay the leading men, all such as he thinks discreet, fearing for his power. How then could a city remain stable, where one cuts short all enterprise and mows down the young like meadow-flowers in spring-time? [450] What good is it to acquire wealth and livelihood for children, merely to add to the tyrant's substance by one's toil? Why train up daughters virtuously in our homes to gratify a tyrant's whim, whenever he wishes, and cause tears to those who rear them? May my life end [455] if ever my children are to be wedded by violence! This bolt I launch in answer to your words. Now say, why have you come? what do you need of this land? If your city had not sent you, to your cost you would have come with your outrageous utterances; for it is the herald's duty [460] to tell the message he is bidden and go back in haste. Henceforth let Creon send to my city some other messenger less talkative than you.

Chorus Leader

Ah! how insolent the villains are, when Fortune is kind to them, just as if it would be well with them for ever.

Theban Herald

[465] Now I will speak. On these disputed points you hold this view, but I the contrary.

I and all the people of Cadmus forbid you to admit Adrastus to this land, but if he is here, [470] drive him forth in disregard of the holy suppliant bough, before the blazing sun sinks, and do not attempt violently to take up the dead, since you have nothing to do with the city of Argos. And if you will hearken to me, you shall bring your ship of state into port unharmed by the billows; but if not, fierce shall be the surge of battle [475] that we and our allies shall raise. Take good thought, and do not, angered at my words, because you rule your city with so-called freedom, return a vaunting answer from your feebleness. Hope is not to be trusted; it has involved many a state [480] in strife, by leading them into excessive rage. For whenever the city has to vote on the question of war, no man ever takes his own death into account, but shifts this misfortune on to another; but if death were before their eyes when they were giving their votes, [485] Hellas would never rush to her doom in mad desire for battle. And yet each man among us knows which of the two to prefer, the good or ill, and how much better peace is for mankind than war, peace, the Muses' dearest friend, [490] the foe of Sorrow, whose joy is in glad throngs of children, and its delight in prosperity. These are the blessings we cast away and wickedly embark on war, man enslaving his weaker brother, and cities following suit.

Are you helping our foes even after death, [495] trying to rescue and bury those whom their own acts of insolence have ruined? Was not Capaneus then rightly blasted by the thunderbolt, when he raised a ladder against our gates and swore he would sack our town, whether the god willed it or not? [500] Should not the yawning earth have snatched away the seer, opening wide her mouth to take his chariot and its horses in, while the other chieftains are stretched at our gates, their skeletons crushed to atoms beneath boulders? Either boast your wit transcends that of Zeus, [505] or else allow that gods are right to slay the ungodly. The wise should love their children first, next their parents and country, whose fortunes they ought to increase rather than break down. Rashness in a leader causes failure; the sailor of a ship is calm, wise at the proper time. [510] Yes, and forethought, this too is bravery.

Chorus Leader

The punishment Zeus has inflicted was surely enough; there was no need to heap this wanton insult on us.

Adrastus

Abandoned wretch!—

Theseus

Peace, Adrastus! say no more; do not set your words before mine, [515] for it is not to you this fellow has come with his message, but to me, and I must answer him. Your first assertion I will answer first: I am not aware that Creon is my lord and master, or that his power outweighs mine, that so he should compel [520] Athens to act in this way; no! for then would the tide of time have to flow backward, if we are to be ordered, as he thinks. It is not I who choose this war, seeing that I did not even join these warriors to go unto the land of Cadmus; but still I think it right to bury the fallen dead, not injuring any state [525] nor yet introducing murderous strife, but preserving the law of all Hellas. What is not well in this? If you suffered anything from the Argives, they are dead; you took a splendid vengeance on your foes [530] and covered them with shame, and now your right is at an end. Let the dead now be buried in the earth, and each element return to the place from where it came to the body, the breath to the air, the body to the ground; for in no way did we get it [535] for our own, but to live our life in, and after that its mother earth must take it back again. Do you think it is Argos you are injuring in refusing burial to the dead? No! all Hellas has a share of this, if a man robs the dead of their due [540] and keeps them from the tomb; for, if this law is enacted, it will strike dismay into the stoutest hearts. And have you come to cast dire threats at me, while your own folk are afraid of giving burial to the dead? What is your fear? Do you think they will undermine your land [545] in their

graves, or that they will beget children in a cavern of the earth, from whom shall come vengeance? A silly waste of words, in truth it was, to show your fear of paltry groundless terrors.

Go, triflers, learn the lesson of human misery; [550] our life is made up of struggles; there are some men that find their fortune soon, others have to wait, while some at once are blessed. Fortune lives a dainty life; to her the wretched pays his court and homage to win her smile; her likewise the prosperous man extols, for fear the favoring gale [555] may leave him. These lessons we should take to heart, to bear with moderation, free from wrath, our wrongs, and do nothing to hurt a whole city. What then? Let us, who wish to perform the pious deed, bury the corpses of the slain. [560] Or else the issue is clear; I will go and bury them by force. For never shall it be proclaimed through Hellas that the ancient law of the gods was set at nothing, when it devolved on me and the city of Pandion.