

AESCHYLUS

SUPLIANT WOMEN

Translated by
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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

This translation is based, for the most part, on the Greek text of Herbert Weir Smith (1922, reprint 1930). The line numbers in square brackets below refer to that text; the line numbers without brackets refer to the English translation. Indented partial lines are included with the line above in the reckoning. All footnotes and stage directions have been provided by the translator.

The Greek text of *Suppliant Women* is in many places corrupt and obscure (often incomprehensible), and various editors have supplied hundreds of possible variant readings. In much of the play, it is impossible to provide an English text without considerable guesswork. Any translator of *The Suppliant Women* who wishes to stay close to the Greek text must, I think, experience considerable frustration (that, at least, has been my experience). Even T. A. Buckley, who is prepared to castigate translators for sacrificing the Greek text for the sake of fluent English, seems to catch this mood in a comment he makes on line 210, "The whole passage, as it now stands, in fact, the whole play, is a mass of hopeless absurdity." Later he repeats the sentiment: "To re-write the author by implication is not the business of the translator. . . . although I am nearly as much in the dark as ever" (p. 229). His translation is a useful example of how attempting a literal fidelity to the Greek can produce a very awkward and often puzzling English text.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

Given the difficulties with the text, a translator of the *Suppliant Women* faces a difficult choice: to try to remain as faithful as possible to the Greek and run the risk of a very awkward, unidiomatic English text or to treat the Greek text more cavalierly in order to make more sense of the translation. Since my first priority is to produce a translation in an easily grasped modern idiom, a dramatic script that can be read, recited, or performed without a very awkward English getting in the way, I prefer the latter course, although I have tried to steer a middle path between the two options and to remain faithful to the original Greek, as much as that is possible to make out. Those who wish to look at a more literal text which calls detailed attention to the problems with the Greek should consult Alan Sommerstein's translation.

I have relied a great deal on the work of a number of authors, notably F. A. Paley, H. Weir Smyth, Walter Headlam, T. A. Buckley, and Alan Sommerstein.

BACKGROUND NOTE

Aeschylus (c.525 BC to c.456 BC) was one of the three great Greek tragic dramatists whose works have survived. Of his many plays, seven still remain. Aeschylus may have fought against the Persians at Marathon (490 BC), and he did so again at Salamis (480 BC). According to tradition, he died from being hit with a tortoise dropped by an eagle. After his death, the Athenians, as a mark of respect, permitted his works to be restaged in their annual competitions.

Suppliant Women (also called *The Suppliants* or *The Suppliant Maidens*) was part of a series of four plays (the other three have been lost). The plays were based on the famous story of the daughters of Danaus, who sailed from Egypt seeking refuge in Greece. It is not clear when the play was first performed. Largely on stylistic grounds, the play was traditionally considered a very early work, perhaps Aeschylus's first, and thus our oldest surviving drama, but recent evidence has contradicted that widely held view, and it is generally accepted now that the work is among Aeschylus's last plays (c. 470 BC).

Io, a young Greek girl persecuted by Zeus's consort, Hera, had, many years before the play begins, been changed into a cow and forced by a vicious stinging fly sent by Hera to flee from Greece to Egypt, where she had given birth to a child by Zeus and established a family line. Generations later, the fifty daughters of Danaus, her descendants, were to be married to the sons of Aegyptus, brother of Danaus and king of Egypt. The daughters, unwilling to go through with the marriages, fled with their father to Argos, the land from which Io had originally left. Their would-be husbands, angry at this conduct, sailed in pursuit of them. The play opens with the arrival of the daughters in Greece.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

DANAUS: a descendant of Io, an older man.

PELASGUS: king of Argos.

HERALD: an Egyptian.

CHORUS: daughters of Danaus.

HANDMAIDENS: servants of the Chorus.

ATTENDANTS and SOLDIERS.

*[The scene is a rocky shore in Argos, with a stone altar and some large statues of the gods on a patch of higher sacred ground. Enter DANAUS and the members of the CHORUS, who are dressed in foreign (i.e., non-Greek) clothes and carrying the branches of suppliants.]*¹

CHORUS²

I pray that Zeus who cares for suppliants
will look with kindness on our company,
whose ship has travelled here across the sea
from the fine-grained sandy estuary
of river Nile. We fled that sacred land,
whose pastures border Syria, and come
as fugitives, not exiled by decree
of public banishment for shedding blood,
but acting on our own, because we wished
to flee a marriage we could not accept, 10
a hateful and sacrilegious match
with Aegyptus's sons.³ For Danaus, [10]
our father, who is our counsellor
and leads our group, debated what to do
and of our painful options chose the best—
to rush away as quickly as we could,
sailing across the ocean seas to Argos.
We can claim with pride our family line
comes from this land, for it sprang up
from the hand and breath of Zeus, who touched 20
that cow tormented by a gadfly's sting.

¹ Branches wound with white wool were the traditional sign of a suppliant. A suppliant was a person, usually a foreigner in distress, making a formal appeal, in the name of the gods, for protection or refuge (similar, in some ways, to modern refugees appealing for asylum).

² All speeches by members of the Chorus are indicated in the text by the word CHORUS, although in a production of the play these will be divided up, with some spoken by a Chorus Leader, some by individual members of the Chorus, and some by various groups of choral members, as a director will determine.

³ Aegyptus and Danaus were brothers, so that the young women were being asked to marry their first cousins. There is, however, continuing uncertainty about whether the Chorus's main objection is to marriage *per se* or whether they are objecting to marriage to these particular men (or both).

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

To what land could we come which offered us [20]
more welcome kindness when our hands hold out
these branches wrapped with wool, which indicate
that we are here as suppliants. O this city,
this land, and its clear streams, O gods above,
and you beneath the earth, stern punishers
who guard the tombs, and third of all, you too,
O Zeus the Saviour, who defends the homes
of righteous men, with this land's spirit of care 30
receive our female suppliant band,
and before that swarming horde of men,
those insolent sons born to Aegyptus, [30]
set foot upon this marshy shore, force them
and their swift-moving ship back out to sea,
and there let them run into violent storms,
with lightning, thunder, rain-drenched hurricanes
and perish in the wild and stormy waves,
before they ever carry us away,
their cousins, against our will, and climb 40
into our beds, an act which Right forbids.
And now we call on the Zeus-born calf, [40]
our champion from across the sea, offspring
of our ancestor, the flower-grazing cow
caressed by Zeus's breath, who in due time
gave birth to Epaphus, whose very name
derives from his own birth.¹

I call on him by name,
here in his mother's ancient pasture lands. [50]
Remembering the torment she once faced,
I will set out for those who live here now 50
trustworthy evidence, and they will see
some unexpected proofs, and at the end
men will believe the truth of what I say.

Should someone living here and close to us
be skilled in understanding songs of birds,
then when he hears our melancholy chant,
it will seem to him our singing voice, [60]

¹ *Epaphus* means *touch*.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

belongs to Metis, Tereus's poor wife,
the hawk-chased nightingale.¹

Forced out
from her green leafy haunts, she cries in grief 60
for her familiar woods and sings the tale
of her child's fate, who died at her own hand,
the victim of a merciless mother's rage.

In the same way, too, I chant my grief,
invoking these Ionian strains.
I tear these tender cheeks of mine [70]
burned by Nile sun and rend my heart
which has not yet known tears.
I gather flowers of grief, filled with fear
that no friends will appear to stand by us 70
as fugitives from that mist-covered land.²

But you gods of our race, O listen to me!
Look for what is righteous in this case!
If you deny young men's unjust desires
and if you truly loathe their wanton lust, [80]
you will uphold the lawful rights of marriage.
Even for fugitives worn down by war
there are safe altars sacred to the gods.

I pray whatever comes from Zeus
will truly turn out favourably for us. 80
What Zeus desires is hard to ascertain,
although it clearly blazes everywhere,
even in the dark, accompanied by Fate,
so riddling and obscure to mortal men. [90]

His will is resolute, and when it falls
it is not on its back—for once Zeus nods
the deed is then fulfilled.³ But Zeus's mind

¹ Metis was an alternative name for Procne, wife of king Tereus of Thrace. Tereus raped Procne's sister, Philomela, and then mutilated her. In revenge the two sisters killed Tereus's child Itys and served the flesh to him at a meal. The three of them were all changed into birds. Metis, transformed into a nightingale, was always singing laments for her lost child.

² The "mist covered land" in Egypt, so named for the appearance of its coastline to ships.

³ The metaphor is taken from wrestling. To fall on one's back is to lose a round to one's opponent.

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

stretches on dark and tangled pathways,
which no one sees or understands.

Men with hopes
as high as lofty citadels he hurls 90
to their destruction, and yet he works
without the use of forceful arms,
for every act gods undertake [100]
is effortless. Seated at ease,
not stirring from his sacred throne,
he somehow manages to bring about
whatever he desires.

So let him see
the arrogance of human beings,
as in that family it grows again.
Thoughts of marriage have made it thrive 100
in stubborn hearts and wild intentions.
Driven by a spur they cannot check [110]
and disappointed in their hopes,
they set their minds on madness.

I wail aloud my suffering, my pain,
and mixed in with my tears I speak
these clear and heavy tones—
Alas! Alas!—so like a funeral song!
And as I sing, I mourn for my own self,
while I am still alive.

O this land, 110
these hills of Apia, I call to you,
for you well understand my words,
the speech of those from foreign lands.
Again and again I seize my veil, [120]
this linen veil from Sidon,
and tear it into shreds.

Offerings promised to the gods
are plentiful when things go well,
once death has gone away.
Alas! Alas! This suffering 120
so hard to understand!
O these surging waves of pain
where are they carrying me?

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

O this land,
these hills of Apia, I call to you,
for you well understand my words,
the speech of those from foreign lands.
Again and again I seize my veil, [120]
this linen veil from Sidon,
and tear it into shreds.

Our oars and wooden rope-bound ship, 130
our refuge from the sea, followed the winds
on a storm-free trip, with no cause to complain.
But now I pray that Father Zeus,
whose eye sees everything, may grant
in time an end that is auspicious, [140]
so that our sacred mother's famous race
escape men's beds, unwedded and still free.

And may that holy daughter of Zeus
secure within the sacred walls
be willing to gaze down on me, 140
so willing to receive her! May she,
enraged that we are being pursued,
come down with all her strength to save us,
a virgin goddess helping virgin girls, [150]
so that our sacred mother's famous race
escape men's beds, unwedded and still free.¹

If not, our dark and sun burnt race
will move with suppliant's branches on to Zeus,
lord of earth, who welcomes all the dead.
For if Olympian gods deny our prayers, 150
we will seek death and die by rope. [160]

O Zeus! That vengeful anger from the gods,
the wrath of those pursuing Io!
I know of Hera's passionate moods,
the sky-conquering rage of Zeus's queen.
From such harsh winds fierce storms arise.

And Zeus will then confront the charge
of acting in a unjust way, if he dishonours

¹ The virgin daughter of Zeus mentioned is Artemis, daughter of Zeus and Leto.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

the heifer's child, who many years ago [170]
he sired himself and now averts his gaze 160
away from us when we implore his aid.
O from his place high in the sky,
may he hear us when we call!

O Zeus!
That venomous anger from the gods,
their wrath of those pursuing Io!
I know of Hera's passionate moods,
the sky-conquering rage of Zeus's queen.
From such harsh winds fierce storms arise.

DANAUS

Children, you must take care. You came here
with a wise and loyal old man to lead 170
that ship at sea—your father. Now on land,
I have been thinking of what lies in store.
So mark the words I say, and write them down—
preserve them on the tablets of your mind. [180]
I see dust, an army's voiceless herald,
and whirling axles in their socket hubs
do not move silently. I see armed men
shield-bearing troops, each brandishing a spear,
with curving chariots and horses. Perhaps
the ones who rule this land have heard reports 180
and are now marching here to look at us.
But whether the one who leads this force
is not a threat to us or is spurred on
by cruel rage—whatever he may be—
the wisest course, my daughters, is to sit
around this rock, a sacred monument
to the assembled gods. For an altar [190]
is a shield, impenetrable and more secure
than any city wall. So you should move here
with due reverence, as quickly as you can. 190
In your left hands hold up those suppliant boughs
wrapped with white wool, those righteous symbols
which bring so much delight to merciful Zeus.
In your response to what these strangers ask,
invite compassion for your painful needs
in speech appropriate for foreigners.
Explain to them why you have run away,
and mention that there was no blood involved.

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

But most of all, no trace of arrogance.
Let your face and eyes remain respectful, 200
calm, and modest. Do not look too eager [200]
to speak up or too reluctant. These traits
the people here will think extremely rude.
Remember, too, to be subservient.
You are a foreigner, a fugitive,
and need their help. Those who have no power
should not use words which seem too insolent.

CHORUS

Father, you have given us good advice,
and we are prudent. We will take due care
to keep your wise instructions in our hearts. 210
May Zeus, our ancestor, gaze down on us!

DANAUS

Yes, may he look on us with gracious eyes.

CHORUS

I would now like to sit down there beside you.

DANAUS

Then waste no time, and move where you propose.

[The CHORUS moves over to DANAUS, who is standing beside the altar and the statues of the gods.]

CHORUS

O Zeus, have pity on us in our distress 210
or we will be destroyed.

DANAUS

If Zeus is willing
then all will turn out well.

CHORUS

[Look over here—
there is a symbol drawn, some form of bird.]¹

¹ There is apparently a line missing here. The words in square brackets have been provided to maintain the logic of the conversation (on the basis of a suggestion by Paley).

SUPLIANT WOMEN

DANAUS

It is the bird of Zeus—invoke his name.

CHORUS

We call to the rays of the sun, our saviour. 220

DANAUS

And to Apollo, too, a sacred god,
who was exiled from heaven.¹

CHORUS

He understands our fate
and will have sympathy for mortal beings.

DANAUS

May he indeed show sympathy to us
and eagerly stand by to help our cause.

CHORUS

What other deities should I invoke?

DANAUS

I see a trident, symbol of Poseidon.²

CHORUS

He brought us safely here—and now on land
may he receive us kindly.

DANAUS

And this one here,
another god—Hermes the Messenger, 230 [220]
as pictured by the Greeks.

CHORUS

I pray that now
his messages announce good news to us
and keep us free.

DANAUS

Honour these ruling powers

¹ Apollo quarrelled with Zeus over the death of his son, Aesculapius, and killed the Cyclopes who made Zeus's thunderbolts. As a result, he was exiled from heaven and forced to labour for hire on earth.

² Poseidon, brother of Zeus, was god of the sea.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

at their communal shrine. Seat yourselves here,
on this sacred ground, like a flock of doves
terrified of hawks, who are also birds,
their kindred, but enemies of theirs,
who pollute their race. If one bird feeds
on other birds, how is that sacrosanct?
So how could a man who marries someone 240
against her and her father's will be pure?
A man who acts like that, once he has died,
will not escape a judgment for his crime
in Hades, for there, they say, another Zeus [230]
delivers final judgment on the dead
for wicked things they did. Be careful,
and speak to them the way I have advised,
so in this confrontation you prevail.

[PELASGUS, king of Argos, enters with armed attendants.]

PELASGUS

From what place do you group of women come?
This clothing is not Greek—the robes you wear 250
are thickly woven and luxurious,
a foreign style. Who am I speaking to?
Your garments are not those of Argive girls
and do not come from any part of Greece.
I am amazed that you are brave enough
to dare approach this place without a herald
or a guide or someone to protect you. [240]
I see those branches lying there beside you,
the usual emblem of a suppliant
to those divinities who gather here. 260
But that is all a native Greek could know.
In many other matters I could make
a reasonable guess, but you are here,
and you can tell me what I wish to learn.

CHORUS

What you have said about what we are wearing
is not inaccurate. But I need to know
how I should frame the words I speak to you.
Are you a private citizen, a herald,
or the one who rules this land?

SUPLIANT WOMEN

PELASGUS

I assure you
you may speak to me in full confidence 270
and answer what I ask. I am Pelasgus, [250]
the son of Palaechthon, who was born from earth.
I rule this land. The people here are named
after their lord and called Pelasgians.
They are the ones who work this fertile ground.
Through every region where pure Strymon flows
I rule the regions on the western side.
My realm includes lands by the Perrhaebi,
and regions lying beyond Mount Pidnus 280
up to the lands of the Paeonians,
and Dodona's mountain range. The ocean sea
defines my boundaries. Within these limits
I rule as king. This region here is Apia, [260]
named for an ancient healer long ago.
For Apis, Apollo's son, a prophet
and a healer from far away Naupactos,
cleansed this land of man-destroying monsters,
a dreadful colony of hostile snakes,
which Earth produced, responding to her rage
at ancient bloody deeds which had defiled her. 290
With consummate art, Apis found a cure
and freed the land of Argos of this plague.
From that time on, as a reward for this, [270]
the Argives think of Apis in their prayers.
And now that I have told you about Argos,
describe your lineage, and tell me more,
although our citizens take no delight
in speeches which continue far too long.

CHORUS

Our story is a short and simple one.
We can boast we are a race from Argos, 300
descended from a cow blest with a child.
My words will give full evidence of this.

PELASGUS

As I listen to your words, you strangers,
I find your story quite beyond belief.
How can your family come from Argos?
For in appearance you are far more like
the women in Libya and not at all [280]

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

like women in this land. The river Nile
might have produced a racial group like yours.
Your features look just like those images 310
of females cast by Cyprian craftsmen,
or like those nomad women I hear about
who ride on saddled camels, just like horses.
Their homeland borders Ethiopia.
If you were armed with bows, I would have guessed
you surely must be Amazons, women
who feed on meat and live apart from men.
But tell me more so I can understand [290]
how you can trace your family line to Argos.

CHORUS

Is there a story here that Io once 320
served as priestess in Hera's shrine at Argos?

PELASGUS

Indeed there is. The story is well known.

CHORUS

And does that story ever talk about
how Zeus made love to someone mortal?

PELASGUS

It does, but Hera knew of that affair.

CHORUS

How did those two resolve their regal quarrel?

PELASGUS

Argive Hera turned the girl into a cow.

CHORUS

And when that girl became a cow with horns, [300]
did Zeus approach her?

PELASGUS

They say he did,
but first he changed into a lusty bull. 330

CHORUS

How did that mighty wife of Zeus respond?

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

PELASGUS

She chose an all-seeing guard to watch the cow.

CHORUS

Who was that watchful sentinel you mention?

PELASGUS

His name was Argus, a son of Earth—
Hermes killed him.

CHORUS

What else did Hera do
to that ill-fated cow?

PELASGUS

She sent a fly
which keeps the cattle moving with its sting.

CHORUS

Those living by the Nile call it a gadfly.

PELASGUS

It drove her out of Argos—far away.

CHORUS

Your story matches mine in every detail. 340 [310]
Then she moved to Canobus and Memphis.
And there, once Zeus caressed her with his hand,
he produced a child.

PELASGUS

Who claims to be
the calf that Zeus created with that cow?

CHORUS

He was called Epaphus, a fitting name,
“born from Zeus’s touch.”

PELASGUS

[And what offspring
did Epaphus produce?]¹

¹ The words in square brackets are based on a conjecture by Bothe to supply a missing line (Paley).

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

CHORUS

Libya—who reaped the fruit
from the most extensive region of the earth.

PELASGUS

And, in your account, who else was born from her?

CHORUS

Belus, my father's father. He had two sons.¹ 350 [320]

PELASGUS

Now tell me your wise father's name.

CHORUS

Danaus.
He has a brother, who has fifty sons.

PELASGUS

Do not withhold from me his brother's name.

CHORUS

Aegyptus. And now you understand how far
my ancestry goes back, I pray you act
to save a group with links to Argos.

PELASGUS

It seems to me you share some ancient bonds
with Argos. But what was it that took place
to make you leave your father's home like this?
What has gone wrong?

CHORUS

Lord Pelasgus, men's evil fortunes 360
come in many different shades, for nowhere
do you see their troubles winged with feathers
which are identical. Who would have said [330]
a sudden flight would bring us back to Argos,
a kindred race from long ago, fleeing
a hateful marriage bed?

¹ There may be some lines missing here. Traditionally, Libya's first child was Agenor, and Agenor produced Belus.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

PELASGUS

Why have you come here
as suppliants to these assembled gods
holding boughs fresh cut and wrapped with wool?

CHORUS

To avoid Aegyptus' sons—we have no wish
to be their slaves.

PELASGUS

Because you hate them? 370
Or are you claiming they are being unjust?

CHORUS

Who would buy a master for herself
from her own relatives?

PELASGUS

That is a way
men make their wealth and power grow.

CHORUS

And make it easy, should anything go wrong,
to get rid of their wives.¹

PELASGUS

What should I do for you [340]
to observe due piety and reverence?

CHORUS

When Aegyptus' sons demand to have us back,
do not comply.

PELASGUS

A difficult request—
you are asking me to run the risk of war. 380

CHORUS

But Justice keeps her allies safe from harm.

¹ Families can grow powerful by intermarriage because such unions preserve the resources of the couple within the same family group. Discarding a wife is presumably easier in these marriages because there is no rival family to deal with.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

PELASGUS

Yes—if she has taken part in the affair right from the start.

CHORUS

Honour the ship of state
when it is wreathed in suppliant branches.

PELASGUS

Just looking at the shadows of this shrine
makes me tremble. The anger of great Zeus,
the god of suppliants, is hard to bear.

CHORUS

O child of Palaechthon, Pelasgian lord,
hear me with compassion in your heart.
See me, a suppliant fugitive, running
like a heifer hunted down by wolves
along steep mountain slopes, lowing
to the herdsman to show him her distress
and trusting that his strength will save her.

390 [350]

PELASGUS

I see your company of suppliants appealing to the gods assembled here and shaded by these fresh cut boughs. This issue of your being the city's guest—may that not prove to be disastrous, and may no causes we did not foresee bring unexpected strife into our state. The city has no wish for that.

400

CHORUS

May Themis,
goddess who protects all suppliants,
a daughter of apportioning Zeus, look down
and see our flight brings you no harm.
And you with your mature experience
should understand from younger hearts
if you show reverence to a suppliant
and piously give offerings to the gods,
then you will never lack the gods' goodwill.

[360]

410

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

PELASGUS

But here you are not seated by the hearth
inside my home. For if our city,
as a community, suffers from a stain,
then we must work, as a community,
to find the cure. And so, until I talk
to all the citizens about these things,
I cannot make you any promises
or offer help.

CHORUS

But you are the city. [370]
You are the people. Since you are king
with no one in authority above you, 420
your will alone, all by itself, controls
your country's hearth and shrine, and from your throne
you are the one who rules on everything.
Be careful you do not pollute the state!

PELASGUS

May such pollution fall upon my foes!
I cannot help you without risking war,
but it would be unwise to spurn your prayers.
I am confused, and fear now grips my heart,
to act or not to act and then accept [380]
whatever outcome fortune may present. 430

CHORUS

Think of the lofty god who watches us
from high above, the one who guards
all suffering mortals in their pain
who cry to those close by and yet
do not obtain from them the justice
they deserve by customary right.
The wrath of Zeus, god of suppliants,
lies in wait—and wailing cries of grief
from those who suffer punishment
will not persuade him to relent. 440

PELASGUS

But if the laws of your own state declare
Aegyptus' sons are rightfully your lords
once they proclaim they are your next of kin,
then who would wish to speak against their claim?

SUPLIANT WOMEN

You must defend yourself with your own laws, [390]
the statutes in the land from which you came,
to show they have no right to govern you.

CHORUS

O may I never find myself subjected
to the authority of men! Instead,
I would rather choose to run away 450
and chart my journey by the stars
to escape a marriage I detest.
Take Justice as your ally and decide
according to what gods consider right.

PELASGUS

This decision is not easy—and you
must not require me to render judgment.
I have already said I will not do that,
although I am the king, before I talk
to my own people, in case, at some point,
should this matter prove more troublesome, 460 [400]
the citizens declare, “You showed respect
to strangers and undermined our city.”

CHORUS

Impartial Zeus, who shares the blood
of either side in this dispute,
looks down, dispensing justice fairly—
to evil men due punishments
to the righteous their reward.
With issues weighed so evenly
why turn away from acting justly?

PELASGUS

But here we need profound and sure advice, 470
like a diver plunging deep into the sea,
with his eyes clear, not muddled or confused,
so this affair will turn out well for us [410]
and, more than anything, not harm our state,
so you will not become a prize of war,
and we will not surrender you from here,
the seat and holy sanctuary of the gods,
and bring down to this land to live among us
the grievous spirit of destructive vengeance,
who, even in Hades, does not free the dead. 480

SUPLIANT WOMEN

Surely you do not think we have no need
for counsel to deliver us from that?

CHORUS

Reflect on this, and then in piety
and righteousness become our patron. [420]
Do not betray a fugitive cast out
from far away by godless banishment.

O you who hold all power in this land,
do not look on as I am led away,
abducted from this shrine of many gods.
Think of the wanton violence of men, 490
and guard against the anger of the gods.

Do not compel yourself to see
all justice flouted, as your suppliants
are taken from these sacred images [430]
and then, just like a horse, dragged off,
seized by the bands around our heads
and by our finely woven clothes.

Know this—whatever you decide,
your children and your house remain
to pay the penalty in full. 500
So bear in mind the power of Zeus
which works for justice.

PELASGUS

I have considered that.
Things have now reached the stage where I am forced
to fight a major war with one group or the other,
a choice determined by necessity, nailed down [440]
as firmly as a ship's hull in a winch.¹
There is no way to solve this without grief.
If things are stolen from a family home,
then Zeus, protector of our property,
may graciously restore what has been lost. 510
A tongue may shoot out inappropriate words,
rousing a heart to anger and distress,

¹ The two groups are the gods, who require shelter for the suppliants, and the sons of Aegyptus, who are demanding the return of their female cousins. Paley notes that the shipbuilding metaphor seems to refer to a machine which keeps the planks tightly in place as they are being nailed down.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

and soothing words can ease that painful speech.
But so that we do not spill family blood
we surely need to offer sacrifice [450]
and slaughter many beasts to many gods,
to save ourselves from grief. I had no wish
to enter this dispute. I would prefer
to have no sense of troubles yet to come
than to foresee them clearly. May all go well 520
and prove my judgment false.

CHORUS

Hear now
the last of all these reverend appeals
to your compassion.

PELASGUS

I am listening.
Speak up. Your words will not slip past me.

CHORUS

I have a twisted band around my chest
and belts to hold my clothes . . .

PELASGUS

Yes. Things like that
are most appropriate for female dress.

CHORUS

Well then, with these, I have, as you can see,
an excellent way . . .

PELASGUS

What do you mean?
What are you trying to say? Tell me. 530 [460]

CHORUS

If you do not make solemn promises
to our group here . . .

PELASGUS

How will these bits of clothing
be any help to you?

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

CHORUS

. . . these statues here
will be adorned with strange new votive plaques.

PELASGUS

You talk in riddles. Speak more directly.

CHORUS

We will not wait, but hang ourselves right here,
on these images of the gods.

PELASGUS

I hear your words—
O how they lash my heart!

CHORUS

Now you understand—
for I have made you see more clearly.

PELASGUS

This issue is so hard to wrestle with, 540
no matter where one looks—like a torrent,
a flood of ruin, bearing down on me,
a bottomless sea of sheer disaster [470]
no one can navigate. I am embarked,
and there is no safe refuge from the storm.
If I do not discharge my obligations
to you as suppliants, you say you will commit
an act that brings pollution to our state
too dreadful to describe. But if I stand
before the city walls and move to fight 550
Aegyptus' sons, your kinsmen, how can that
not have a bitter cost? In a women's cause
men's blood will stain the ground. However,
the force of Zeus, who guards all suppliants,
makes me respect his wrath, since fear of that
among all men deserves the highest awe.

[PELASGUS moves to address DANAUS.]

So you, the aged father of these girls, [480]
quickly collect some branches in your arms
and set them down on other altars
to this land's gods, so that all citizens 560

SUPLIANT WOMEN

can see a sign that you are suppliants
and no one utters words against me,
for people are too fond of finding fault
with those who rule. It could well be the case
that those who see them will be moved by pity,
despise that band of insolent young men,
and treat your case with more benevolence,
since everyone feels sympathy for those
whose cause is weaker.

DANAUS

It means a lot to us
to have found someone who feels compassion,
a patron for our cause. But you should send
some of this country's men with us as escorts
and as guides, so we may find the holy shrines
before the temples of the country's gods,
the homes of those protectors of the state,
and proceed in safety through the city.
Our bodies do not look the same as yours—
a race raised by the Nile is different
from one which lives beside the Inachus.
Take care that boldness does not bring on fear,
for men have killed a friend through ignorance.

PELASGUS

You men, go with this stranger—what he says
makes excellent sense. Take him to the shrines
inside the city and the sacred altars.
Do not converse at any length with those
you meet along the way, while you conduct
this man who sailed here seeking refuge
at our sanctuaries of the gods.

[DANAUS and the ATTENDANTS leave.]

CHORUS

You told him what to do, and he is gone,
as you instructed. But what am I to do? 590
What reassurance can you offer me?

PELASGUS

Set your suppliant boughs down here,
the signs of your distress.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

CHORUS

I will place them here,
just as you ordered.

PELASGUS

Now, move down over there,
around that level space.

CHORUS

How will that place
keep me protected? It is not sacred ground.

PELASGUS

We will not let those flying birds of prey
swoop down and seize you. [510]

CHORUS

But what if they are worse
than hateful snakes and hostile to us?

PELASGUS

The words I spoke
were meant to lift your spirits. Your reply
should be more favourable. 600

CHORUS

But our hearts
are terrified. It should be no surprise
that we are very troubled.

PELASGUS

Excessive fear
is always uncontrolled.

CHORUS

Then reassure us—
with words and actions ease our troubled hearts.

PELASGUS

Your father will not leave you here for long.
I am going to summon the citizens,
so I may put them in a friendly mood.
I will instruct your father what to say.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

You should stay here to offer up your prayers 610 [520]
to Argive gods to grant what you desire.
I will go back and see what I can do.
May my words prove persuasive and fortune
bring these events to a successful close.

[Exit PELASGUS and his ATTENDANTS.]

CHORUS

O blessed Zeus, lord of lords,
holiest of the holy, and of all
the perfect powers the great perfection,
O listen to our plea! Protect your race
from these men's arrogant lust,
which you abominate, and hurl
the madness on their black-benched ship
into the purple sea.

Gaze down on us,
and look with favour on our female cause.
Recall the ancient story of our race,
that pleasing tale from long ago
about our ancestor, the woman
you loved. Remember all of it,
you whose soft caresses fondled Io.
We claim our race descends from Zeus,
and a native settler from this land.

I have returned to ancient tracks
where Argus spied on mother Io,
as in that fertile meadowland
she grazed among the flowers.¹
Here that gadfly's painful sting
drove her insane. She ran away,
wandering through many tribes of men,
and then, as Fate decreed, sliced through
the surging waters of the strait,
fixing the boundary of the distant shore.

¹ Io, driven out of Argos by the stinging gadfly, eventually crossed into Asia Minor at the western end of the Euxine Sea (Black Sea). Her crossing, so the story goes, is the origin of name Bosphorus (meaning *the crossing of the cow*), traditionally the boundary between Europe and Asia.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

She hurried on through Asian lands,
through Phrygian meadows full of sheep,
and past Teuthras where the Mysians live,
the valley lands of Lydia, across the hills [550]
that mark Cilician and Pamphylian lands,
racing through ever-flowing river streams,
through deep and fertile soil, and past
the wheat-rich land of Aphrodite.¹

Forced by her flying herdsman's sting,
she reached the nourishing groves of Zeus, 650
that snow-fed meadow lashed by Typho's rage,
where waters of the Nile flow past
untouched by all disease, driven mad
by suffering she did not deserve,
and frantic from that painful goad,
a frenzied girl possessed by Hera!

The men then living in that land,
turned pale with fear and trembled at the sight,
a strange half-human monstrous thing,
a beast with such a dreadful shape, 660
part woman and part cow!² [570]
Amazement seized them as they looked.
Who was it, then, who in the end
brought peace to wandering Io's pain,
the torment of that stinging fly?

That was the work of Zeus, who rules
through endless time. With the power
of his own soothing hand and sacred breath
he brought her suffering to an end,
as her tears fell to end her shame. 670
And then, according to a true report,
she took in Zeus's seed, conceived a child, [580]
and bore a blameless son . . .

¹ These geographical details trace Io's journey from north to south through Asia Minor and across to Aphrodite's land, Cyprus, on her way to Egypt.

² The physical aspect of Io's transformation here and in *Prometheus Bound* is somewhat ambiguous. Is she completely changed into a cow, or was she a woman with a cow's head (or horns), or was the transformation a hallucination? Earlier in the play the suggestion is that the transformation was complete.

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

. . . who through long ages has been blessed.
And after that throughout the land
the cry rang out—"This race, in fact,
is sprung from life-producing Zeus."
For who but Zeus could put an end
to that disease which Hera planned?
If you proclaim that this is Zeus's work
and our race springs from Epaphus,
then you will state the truth.

680

To which of the gods could we appeal
more reasonably for his just deeds?
He is our father and our king.
With his own hand he made us grow,
the mighty parent of our race,
whose wisdom spans the ages.
From Zeus, who arranges everything,
come winds that make things prosper.

[590]

690

He does not rush to carry out
some other god's commands,
nor is he ruled by someone greater.
No power above keeps him in awe.
And once he speaks, the work is done—
the counsels carried in his heart
he instantly brings into being.

[Enter Danaus.]

DANAUS

Lift your hearts, my children. The people here
have acted well—with full authority
they have passed a public vote.

[600]

CHORUS

Greetings to you father,
a messenger with very welcome news.
Tell us the outcome of the people's vote.
What did the majority of hands decide?

700

DANAUS

The Argives did not seem to hesitate—
they made my ancient heart feel young again.
The air was thick with arms as all of them

SUPLIANT WOMEN

in full assembly voted in this law,
by raising their right hands: we are free
to settle in this land. We will not be seized
by anyone and carried off as hostages. 710
We are protected from what men may do. [610]
No one—no resident or foreigner—
can act against us. If any man tries force,
then those who own some land and do not help
will be disgraced and by a public vote
will suffer banishment. Those were the words
delivered by the Pelasgian king
on our behalf—and he persuaded them
by claiming that in years to come the wrath
of Zeus, god of suppliants, would never 720
let the city thrive. He declared the curse
would be a double one, for we are strangers
and also from this land. It would appear
before the city and prepare a feast [620]
of evils they could not resist. At these words
the Argive people did not even wait
to hear the herald speak, but raised their hands
to say what should be done. Once they heard
the way the speaker turned his argument,
the Pelasgian people were convinced 730
and voted for what he had just resolved.
But it was Zeus who brought us this result.

CHORUS

Come, chant a prayer that blessings fall
upon the Argives for their blessed work.
May Zeus, the god of strangers, hear
these tributes from a stranger's lips
and make them truly reach their goal,
so all of them are perfectly fulfilled.

[As the CHORUS steps forward to chant this long prayer, DANAUS moves to the highest point in the back of the stage to look out over the sea.]

And now, you Zeus-born gods, [630]
hear us as we pour forth prayers 740
of blessings for our Argive kin.
May fire from Ares, god of war,
who with incessant battle cries
cuts down men in foreign fields,

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

never destroy this Pelasgian land,
for people here took pity on us
and voted to support our cause,
respecting our unhappy flock [640]
as suppliants of Zeus.

They did not scorn our female plight 750
and cast their votes to favour men.
For they revered that watchful one,
the agent of divine revenge,
a god no one can stand against.
What house would have that messenger
perch on the roof, which it defiles
and where its grievous weight [650]
sits hard upon the home.
These men revere blood relatives,
petitioners to sacred Zeus, 760
and thus with altars left unstained
they win the favour of the gods.

And therefore from our shadowed lips
may prayers of gratitude fly up
to honour them.¹ May no plague
ever strike this town and leave it
empty of its men, nor any strife [660]
stain this country's soil with blood
from its own slaughtered citizens.
May no one gather up the flower 770
of Argive youth, and may that god
who sleeps in Aphrodite's bed,
man-killing Ares, not slice away
men in their finest bloom.

May altars blaze with offerings,
gifts to the elders gathered there,
so their city will be wisely ruled, [670]
since these men worship mighty Zeus,
above all else the god of strangers,
who by an ancient law guides Fate. 780
We pray new rulers always rise
to serve as guardians for this land.

¹ Their lips are "shadowed" either because they are holding their suppliant branches in front of their faces or because they are wearing veils.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

And may Artemis-Hecate keep watch
protecting women giving birth.¹

Let no man-killing slaughter come
to turn the city against itself, [680]
by arming Ares, father of tears.
He is no friend of dance or lyre
and stirs up cries for civil strife.
May unwelcome swarms of foul disease 790
stay far from citizens' heads
and may Lyceus always show
to all the young his gracious favour.²

May Zeus bring earth to yield its crops
and bear its fruit in every season. [690]
And in their fields may grazing herds
produce new calves in great abundance.
May good things from the gods be theirs,
and may musicians at their altars sing
auspicious songs, and from pure lips 800
let hymns of praise accompany the lyre.

May all those here who rule the state
firmly protect the people's rights,
with prudent counsel for the public good. [700]
To strangers may they grant the right,
before they arm themselves for war,
of honest arbitration with no pain.

And may they always worship gods
who guard this land, by holding high
their native country's laurel boughs 810
and offering bulls for sacrifice,
just as their fathers used to do,
for honouring parents is a law,
the third of those engraved by Justice,
whose honour reigns on high.

[Danaus speaks from his vantage point, looking out to sea.]

¹ Artemis and Hecate, two different goddesses, were commonly identified as a single goddess.

² Lyceus is an alternative name for Apollo.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

DANAUS

Dear daughters, I commend these prudent prayers. [710]
You must not fear to hear your father's words,
his troubling, unexpected news. From here,
my lookout on this shrine for suppliants,
I see their ship. For it is clearly marked. 820
I could not fail to see it—those sails,
that leather hide along the side, that prow
with eyes in front that watch its onward track,
obeying the guiding rudder in the stern,
too skilfully for those who are her foes.
The sailors on the ship are clear to see,
the white clothes make their blackened limbs stand out. [720]
And I can see the other ships, as well,
and those assisting them. The ship in front,
with her sails furled and rowers keeping time, 830
is now approaching land. You must stay calm
and face this matter. Keep yourselves controlled.
Do not forget these gods. I will return
when I can find our friends and other men
to plead our cause. Perhaps a herald will come,
or some ambassador, eager to seize you
as stolen property and drag you off.
But they will not succeed. So have no fear.
But still, if we are slow in bringing help, [730]
it would be better if you kept in mind, 840
at every moment, the help these gods provide.
Take heart. In due time, on the destined day,
the mortal man who disrespects the gods
will meet his punishment.

CHORUS

I am afraid, father,
those ships are sailing in on such swift wings!
Before much time has passed they will be here!
I truly am so terribly afraid
that our long flight will be no help to us.
O father, this fear is killing me!

DANAUS

Since the Argives voted so decisively, 850
be brave, my children. They will fight for you. [740]
Of that I'm certain.

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

CHORUS

Aegyptus's vile sons,
lascivious men, are greedy for a war.
You know that, too. In dark-eyed timbered ships
they sailed here with a huge black host of men.
That rage of theirs has now caught up with us.

DANAUS

Here they will find a force of men whose arms
are lean and strong, toughened by midday suns.

CHORUS

Do not leave us alone here, father,
I beg you. A woman left by herself 860
is nothing. She has no spirit for war.
These men have wicked minds and evil hearts. [750]
Their schemes are devious—like ravens,
they have no reverence for sacred altars.

DANAUS

My children, if the gods, as well as you,
despise these men, then that is good for us.

CHORUS

Father, they are not afraid of tridents
or objects sacred to the gods—these things
will not stop them from laying hands on us.
They are arrogant men, full of impious rage, 870
like shameless dogs, with no thought of the gods.

DANAUS

But, as the saying goes, wolves can conquer dogs [760]
and papyrus fruit is not a match for wheat.¹

CHORUS

They have the temperament of savage beasts,
profane and rash. We must protect ourselves,
and quickly.

DANAUS

When setting out or anchoring

¹ The contrast of food stresses the difference between the Argives and the Egyptians: papyrus was a common source of food in Egypt and wheat in Greece.

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

a naval force moves slowly. For cables
to tie up the ship must be hauled onshore.
And shepherds of the ships do not feel safe
as soon as anchors are securely fixed, 880
especially when they reach a coast
which offers them no harbour, at sunset
with night moving in. In prudent pilots [770]
the night time tends to breed anxiety.
Besides, they cannot properly arrange
to disembark their troops before the ship
is confident it is quite safely moored.
Although you are afraid, remember this:
do not ignore the gods. I will be back
once I have found assistance. The city 890
will not complain about the messenger.
He may be old, but still his heart and tongue
are in their youthful prime.

[Exit DANAUS, on his way to the city.]

CHORUS

O land of hills, for which I feel
such righteous veneration,
what will become of us? And where
in Apian land do we now flee,
if there is anywhere a place,
a deep dark pit, where we can hide?
I wish I could become black smoke, 900
move up beside the clouds of Zeus, [780]
and spreading upward without wings
completely vanish, like the dust
that no one sees, and perish!

I can no longer flee this evil.
My trembling heart is turning black.
What my father saw has shaken me,
and I am overwhelmed with fear.
I would prefer to meet my doom
in a knotted noose than see 910
a loathsome man come near my flesh! [790]
Before that happens, let me die!
Let Hades be my lord and master!¹

¹ Hades, a brother of Zeus, is god of the dead in the underworld.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

O for a seat somewhere up high
in the upper air, where watery clouds
turn into snow or else a barren crag,
a steep and lonely towering peak
where no goats roam and vultures fly,
invisible from below, a place
to watch my plunge into the depths, 920
before I am compelled to marry
and my heart breaks in two.

From now on I would not refuse [800]
to serve as prey for carrion dogs
or as a feast for native birds.
For death delivers us from ills
that love to feed our sorrow.
Let my death come, O let it come,
before the wedding bed.
What way of flight can I still find 930
to save me from this marriage?

So with a voice that reaches heaven
cry to the gods our songs of prayer.
O father Zeus, look down on us,
fulfill somehow what we desire, [810]
so we may find relief and peace.
May your just eyes find no delight
in violent acts, and may you guard
your suppliants, almighty Zeus,
protector of this land.

Aegyptus's sons, 940
whose arrogance is hard to bear,
are coming after me, a fugitive,
with cries of lust, in their desire [820]
to capture me by force. You hold
the balance beam that governs all,
and for we mortal human beings,
without you nothing is fulfilled.¹

[Enter an Egyptian HERALD, with an armed escort.]

¹ Zeus is commonly pictured as holding up his scales and weighing alternative outcomes in a particular event. The result determines what will happen.

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

CHORUS¹

Aaaiiii! Aaaiii! Here on the land
my ravisher approaches from the sea.
May you die before you seize me! 950
I cry out in my grief and pain!
I see what they are going to do, [830]
to take me off by force. Aaaiii!
Move off—run to our sanctuary
there on the shrine. The savage insolence
on sea and land we cannot bear.
O lord of earth, protect us!

[The members of the CHORUS move up onto the higher parts of the shrine and cling to the statues of the gods.]

HERALD

Come down from there—and hurry!
Move off swiftly to the ships,
as fast as feet can get you there. 960
If not, we'll rip out all your hair,
or stab you with our spears,
or slice off heads in streams of blood! [840]
Damn you, get down from there!
Start moving to the ship! And hurry!

CHORUS

Would you had died in your bolted ship
while sailing here on the great salt sea,
you and your masters' arrogant pride!

HERALD

I order you to stop these cries. Come on! [850]
Leave this sanctuary! Move to the ship! 970
One with no city or honour here
gets no respect from me.

CHORUS

O never again may you behold
the stream that feeds our oxen,
the river Nile, which nourishes

¹ The text of this exchange between the Chorus and the Egyptian herald (to line 908 in the Greek) is very corrupt, and much of the English text is mere conjecture.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

by its increase life-giving blood
for mortal men. I am native here,
old man, and from an ancient line. [86o]

HERALD

No matter. Move quickly to the ship!
Willing or not, get yourselves on board! 98o
If I lay violent hands on you
to force you there, you'll suffer.

CHORUS

Alas! Alas!
May you all perish helplessly,
driven off course on the raging sea
by eastern winds onto shoals of sand, [87o]
wrecked at Sarpedon's burial mound!¹

HERALD

Keep up these shrieks of yours, these cries,
and keep on summoning the gods.
You will not escape an Egyptian ship,
not even if you scream and wail 99o
and chant more bitterly than this.

CHORUS

May mighty Nile,
who nurtures you, dissolve away [88o]
your insolent pride and kill you.

HERALD

I'm ordering you to our curving ship,
as quickly as you can—no stalling.
We're not afraid to force you down
and haul you off by the hair.

CHORUS

Aaaiii, father! These sacred images—
they are not helping me! Step by step
the spider creeps to drag me out to sea, 100o
a dark black dream, a nightmare!
Alas! Alas! O mother Earth, [89o]

¹ Sarpedon is a warrior leader in Homer's *Iliad*, a major ally of the Trojans. When he is killed his body is, with divine aid, taken to his home in Asia Minor for burial.

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

O mother Earth, turn aside
these fearful words he shouts.
O son of Earth! O father Zeus!

HERALD

I'm not afraid of these Argive gods.
They had no part in raising me
and will not help in my old age.

CHORUS

The two-footed serpent in his rage
is closing in on me—like a snake
he grabs and bites my foot.
Alas! Alas! O mother Earth,
O mother Earth, turn aside
these fearful words he shouts.
O son of Earth! O father Zeus!

1010

[900]

HERALD

If you refuse to move to the ship,
That dress you're wearing won't be spared—
we'll rip it into shreds.

CHORUS

We are lost!
O king, the evil pain we must endure!

HERALD

It seems
I'll have to drag you away by your hair,
since you are so slow to do what I say.

1020

CHORUS

You chiefs and leaders of the city,
these men are taking me by force!

HERALD

You'll soon be seeing many leading men,
Aegyptus' sons, and you won't need to ask
who is in control. So lift your spirits.

[910]

[Enter king PELASGUS with an armed escort.]

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

PELASGUS

You there, what are you doing? What insolence
has led you here to disrespect this land
of Pelasgian men? Perhaps you think
you've reached a state made up of women? 1030
For a barbarian confronting Greeks
you are far too arrogant. Your mind
has not been thinking as it ought to do,
and you have made a number of mistakes.

HERALD

Where in this affair have I been wrong
and gone against my rights?

PELASGUS

First of all,
you are a foreigner but have no sense
of how to act as one.

HERALD

How is that true?
I am taking what I lost and now have found.

PELASGUS

To what patron in this land did you appeal? 1040

HERALD

To the mightiest patron of them all— [920]
to the Searcher god, to Hermes.¹

PELASGUS

You talk of gods,
and yet you disrespect these deities.

HERALD

I worship those around the river Nile.

PELASGUS

So, as I understand, these gods of ours
are nothing to you?

¹ Hermes, the messenger god, was a protector of heralds. He was also well known for stealing.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

HERALD

Unless some person here
seizes these girls and takes them from me,
I'm leading them away.

PELASGUS

If you touch them,
you'll soon have reason to regret you did.

HERALD

I hear your words—they're not hospitable. 1050

PELASGUS

I don't show hospitality to those
who rob the gods.

HERALD

I will go now and tell
Aegyptus' sons about what's happened here.

PELASGUS

To my mind that is no concern at all.

HERALD

However, so I may know what's going on [930]
and speak more clearly—for a herald's task
requires a detailed, accurate report—
what do I say about the man who stole
these women away from their own cousins?
War god Ares does not use witnesses 1060
to judge a case like this or take silver
to settle a dispute. Before all that,
many will fall and twitch away their lives.

PELASGUS

Why should I tell you my name? In due time,
you and your people will all learn of it.
As for these women, you may lead them off, [940]
if you convince them in a righteous argument
and they all willingly agree to go.
This issue has been dealt with in a vote
of all the people in the city here— 1070
it was unanimous: never to give
this band of women up to any force.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

A bolt through this decree keeps it nailed down.
It is immovable. Though not inscribed
on tablets or sealed up in folds of books,
from the tongues of people free to speak
you'll hear it clearly. Now go! Out of my sight
as quickly as you can!

HERALD

It looks as if [950]
we are about to launch a brand new war.
May strength and victory be with the men! 1080

PELASGUS

You'll find the people of this land are men—
their drinks are never brewed from barley!¹

[The HERALD exits, going back to the Egyptian ships. PELASGUS turns to the women of the CHORUS.]

Now, all you women, take courage. Move off
with your handmaidens here, who are your friends,
inside our city's massive walls, fenced in
with a ring of well-built towers.² For lodging
there are many homes owned by the people.
I, too, have a house, built at no small expense,
where you may stay with many others
in nicely furnished rooms. However, 1090 [960]
if you would rather live in your own home,
apart from others, that, too, is possible.
Feel free to choose the place you like the best,
the one you find the most agreeable.
I and all the people in the city
who cast their votes are your protectors.
Why wait for those with more authority?

CHORUS

O noble king of the Pelasgians,
you are so gracious to us. In return
may you enjoy your fill of blessings!

¹ Paley notes that the Egyptians drank a variety of beer. Pelasgus is presumably implying that real men, like the Argives, drink wine.

² The Greek text does not use the word “handmaidens,” but rather “friendly companions,” which could refer to the Argive escort.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

Be kind enough to send our father here,
brave Danaus. He is our counsellor,
and we are guided by his prudent words. [970]
For, above all others, it is up to him
to advise us on the houses where we live
and places which will prove hospitable.
For everyone is quite prepared to blame
a foreigner.

[Exit PELASGUS.]

May all things turn out well!
May we retain our reputation here
and incite no angry words from citizens. 1110
And now, dear handmaidens, arrange yourselves
as Danaus has assigned you to attend
on each of us, as servants in our dowry.¹

[The HANDMAIDENS move to stand among the members of the CHORUS. Enter DANAUS, with
an armed group of Argive soldiers.]

DANAUS

My children, we must offer prayers of thanks [980]
to Argive people—make sacrifice
and pour libations out to them, as if
to Olympian gods. They have saved us!
They did not hesitate. For once they heard
me talk about the conduct of those men,
your cousins, towards their family, 1120
they were indignant and provided me
this band of spearmen as a retinue,
so I might have an honourable rank
and not be killed quite unexpectedly,
struck by some fatal spear in secret,
and place a lasting curse upon this land.
Those who obtain great favours ought to show
deep gratitude, from the bottom of their hearts,
and hold such men in even greater honour. [990]
Among the many other words of wisdom 1130
from your father etched into your minds,
write down this one, too: a band of strangers

¹ As Sommerstein points out (p. 417), this is the only specific mention of the Handmaidens in the text of the play.

SUPPLIANT WOMEN

proves itself in time. All men are prepared
 to say bad things about a foreigner.
 They somehow find disgusting insults easy.
 So I advise you—do not dishonour me.
 For at your age men are attracted to you,
 and guarding tender fruit is always hard.
 Animals and men, of course, destroy it,
 and beasts that fly or walk upon the earth. 1140 [1000]
 Cypris proclaims the fruit is ripe and ready,¹
 and every man that passes by, overwhelmed
 with passionate desire, shoots from his eye
 a magic arrow at young virgin girls,
 so young and lovely. We must not suffer
 the very things from which we ran away
 with so much effort, when our ship ploughed
 across that spacious sea, or shame ourselves
 and please my enemies. As for our housing,
 we have the choice of two: Pelasgus' home 1150 [1010]
 or what the city offers. Both these options
 come without a cost—a generous gift.
 Just take care. Obey your father's words,
 and honour modesty more than your life.

CHORUS

In other things may the Olympian gods
 be favourable. As for my ripe young age,
 dear father, you can rest assured.
 Unless the gods are planning something new,
 I will not swerve aside and leave the path
 my heart has set in what it felt before. 1160
 Go now, and let us celebrate
 the sacred gods who guard the city
 and those who live along the stream
 of ancient Erasinus. And you there,
 you handmaidens, join in our song.²

¹ Cypris is another name for Aphrodite, goddess of love.

² It is not clear who is being addressed here (the word for “handmaidens” is not in the Greek text), whether the invitation to join in is directed at other members of the chorus or at the handmaidens or at someone else. Since in the exchanges which follow one of the groups is seeking to calm down the other and to advise it not to be so passionately afraid, the dramatically logical choice would seem to be the handmaidens. It would be rather odd to divide the Chorus against itself, with half the members having a very different feelings from the other half. Some modern editors have assigned the lines of this “alternate” Chorus to the group of Argive soldiers who accompany Pelasgus. That option takes care of a number of staging problems which occur with the Handmaidens. The Erasinus is a river in Argos.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

And let us pour forth chants of praise
for this place where Pelasgians live,
no longer honouring with our hymns
the flowing mouths of river Nile.

Sing to the rivers here that pour
their tranquil waters through the land,
enrich its soil with fertile streams,
and make things grow in great profusion,
May holy Artemis look down
and have compassion for our band.
And may we never be compelled
by Cytherea's force into a marriage.
Let that prize go to those whom I detest!¹

1170
[1030]

CHORUS OF HANDMAIDENS

But in this gracious hymn we chant,
we mean no disrespect for Kypris,
whose power ranks alongside Hera
and very close to Zeus. She is revered,
the goddess full of devious wiles,
for all her sacred works. With her,
in their dear mother's company,
Desire stands with sweet Persuasion,
a deity who will not be denied.
Harmonia has received as well
a share of goddess Aphrodite
and the whispering ways of Love.

1180
[1040]
1190

I fear what lies ahead for fugitives—
winds of evil, pain, and bloody wars.
How did they travel here so easily
with that swift ship in their pursuit?
Whatever Fate decrees will come to pass.
The great and infinite mind of Zeus
cannot be overcome. This marriage
may well be destined to take place
the way it has for many women before.

[1050]

CHORUS

O great Zeus,
save us from marriage to Aegyptus' sons!

1200

¹ Cytherea is a common alternative name for Aphrodite.

SUPLIANT WOMEN

HANDMAIDENS

That might, in fact, be best.

CHORUS

You seek to charm someone
whose heart cannot be swayed.

HANDMAIDENS

What lies in store you do not know.

CHORUS

How could I see into the mind of Zeus?
No one can penetrate that deep abyss.

HANDMAIDENS

You need to moderate your prayers.

CHORUS

What moderation would you have me learn? [1060]

HANDMAIDENS

Do not ask for too much from the gods.

CHORUS

May lord Zeus save me from a marriage
with a wretched man whom I detest, 1210
just as he used his healing hand
to bring back Io and with gentle force
released her from her pain.

And may he make the women strong.
I will accept a mix of good and bad
for that is better than mere trouble. [1070]
So now let justice judge our cause
and with my prayers deliver me
through saving efforts of the gods.

[They all leave in the direction of the city.]

SUPLIANT WOMEN

EPILOGUE

The Suppliant Women is the first or second work in a sequence of four plays. The others have been lost except for fragments. However, the general outline of the story is known from other sources. In the ensuing battle between the Argives and the sons of Aegyptus, king Pelasgus is killed, and Danaus becomes king of Argos. The daughters are compelled to go through with the marriages, and, acting on their father's instructions, they kill their husbands on the wedding night—all except Hypermnestra, who refuses to kill her husband, Lynceus. After the death of Danaus, who is killed by Lynceus, Hypermnestra and Lynceus become the new king and queen of Argos. It is not clear how Aeschylus brings the story to a close.