Suppliant Women

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“I would rather stand three times behind a shield in battle than give birth once”—Medea says in her despair and anguish, once she felt the threat either of being deprived of her children or of an incumbent danger to her children (Medea 250–1). She would have preferred not to have had even one child, and would have found it far preferable to face herself situations that were unthinkably dangerous for a woman—unthinkably in men’s eyes—such as fighting in battle in the first line. “I wish that old Time, father of days, had kept me unwed until this day! What need did I have of children? I thought I would have suffered too much had I never married and bore any children. But now I see very clearly my suffering, the loss of my dear children”—so the mothers from Argos say once they have lost their beloved sons in war, as they beg to be granted just the right to see them, embrace them for the last time, and give them a burial (Suppliants 788–92). They too now seem to prefer never to have given birth, which is an unthinkable thing—unthinkable, once again, in a male-oriented culture. The hardship of motherhood is such that mothers reach the point of wishing not to have had children, no matter how different those mothers then turn out: a killer of her own children, Medea, and pitiful suppliants for their killed children’s bodies, the women from Argos. The fear of losing her children, or the actual loss of them, seems to be the most intolerably sharp pain that a mother can experience, which leads her to desire to be childless, or to desire to die: “May I forget this pain in death” (Suppliants 86). Relying on an empathy that only mothers can feel, the suppliant women from Argos address their supplication first to a mother, Aethra, the mother of Theseus, king of Athens. They look for her outside Athens, and they reach her at Eleusis. Once they found her, they fall on their old knees and supplicate her right there, in the place sacred to Demeter—the archetype of motherly grieving for the loss of a child—at the spot of her final reunion with her child, an auspicious spot—one may think—for the success of the supplication. The motherly grief for the loss of children, which informs the supplication, parallels the cause of that loss, which charges that grief with a deeper nuance of everlasting resonance: the war. The

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1 All translations, from any language into English, are mine, unless differently indicated in the footnotes.
2 Throughout the chapter I shall use the shorter title Suppliants when quoting specific lines.
mourned sons were warriors; they lost their life in one of the thousands of meaningless and foolish wars that men fight over and over again. Together with the wives, symbolized by Evadne, the fathers, represented by Iphis, and the children, appearing as the orphans of those warriors, these suppliant mothers embody the “forgotten warriors.” These are the ones who fight on the emotional front of the war and provide a vivid picture of the family destruction that war causes alongside the casualties on the battlefield. Motherly grief, with its family echo, and the ensuing criticism of war are the key features both of this Euripidean tragedy and of its re-elaborations, above all on the modern stage. The motif of the burial, which is the object of the mothers’ supplication and one of the main issues at stake, adds to the pitiful situations of these women. Not only are they victims of the atrocities of war because they have lost their sons, but they also are victims of the abuse of power. The enemy, Creon, king of Thebes, where the war occurred, arbitrarily and tyrannically denied them the restitution of the corpses, and thus their burial. Like Sophocles’ Antigone, these women fight for the right to have the bodies back and to properly bury them. But in contrast to Antigone, these women eventually find a champion: Theseus, king of Athens and the embodiment of an idealized democracy that stands and fights for the freedom and the rights of the oppressed. Along with the hardship of the “forgotten warriors,” the victimization by an abusive regime and the prompt aid offered by democracy let this tragedy find broad resonance in modern times, as shown by several works of reception.

In Literature

Sporadic references to the military expedition of the so-called Seven against Thebes can be easily found in the very first extant Greek epics, i.e., in the poems of Homer (ca. 8th century BC) and in the works of Hesiod (8th century BC). Likewise, the fear of being denied funeral rites, and the ensuing supplication either by the one who would be very likely killed (e.g., Hector in Iliad 22.

3 I borrow this poignant phrase from Matsakis (1988).
4 The most extensive reference to the expedition occurs in Iliad 4. 377–400, with an emphasis on Tydeus’ deeds. The event is also indirectly evoked through the references to Capaneus, another major character of the story who is inevitably mentioned in Euripides’ play as well. In Homer he is mostly referred to as “the father of Sthenelus” (e.g., Iliad 2. 564; 4. 367, 403; 5. 108, 241, 391), who in turn was one of the Epigoni (“descendants,” who later attacked again Thebes, to avenge their fathers: see, e.g., Apollodorus, Library 3.7.2–4). This means that an allusion to the whole story of the Argives’ ‘feud’ with the Thebans is present in the Homeric epic.
5 Namely in Works and Days, within the myth of the Five Races (ll. 158–63).