Geoffrey W. Bakewell


In _Aeschylus’s Suppliant Women: The Tragedy of Immigration_ Geoff Bakewell provides a nuanced reading of the play within its ancient political and social contexts. Moving beyond gender dynamics, Bakewell shows how Aeschylus’ _Suppliants_ (c. 460 BCE) addresses immigration within the framework of large-scale immigration to the city after the Persian Wars. The play offered a charter myth for the newly established legal status of metic (metoikia), a myth that explained both its benefits and limitations. In a detailed close reading such as this, individual moments of interpretation will not persuade everyone, but Bakewell’s over-arching thesis convinces. Bakewell reveals the consistency and persistence of the language of metoikia within the play and even readers averse to historicist approaches will likely find themselves nodding along.

In the introduction, Bakewell situates the _Suppliants_ within scholarly debates both on the political and ideological nature of tragedy and within historical debates over the nature and development of citizenship. In contrast to the widespread assumption that the legal status of metoikia was created as part of the Kleisthenic demes, Bakewell argues that metic status, a clear legal distinction separate from that of citizen, was only created in the 470s or 460s BCE. Bakewell correctly points out that the Kleisthenic view lacks both evidentiary support and is unreasonable. Instead, Bakewell connects metic status to the same impulse that led a decade later to the passage of the Periklean Citizenship Law (451 BCE), an impulse that does not belong to the last years of the 6th century, but to the rise of Athens’ hegemony (a view he shares with Cynthia Patterson).

The first chapter shows how Aeschylus deploys the language of metoikia in the play in its technical sense. Aeschylus takes great care to define in this technical language the future status of the Danaids in Argos. This care implies that metic status was something relatively new in law because the audience required more explicit explanation. Aeschylus wrote similarly about the Areopagus in _Eumenides_ and Bakewell views _Suppliants_ as likewise providing a charter. In this chapter, Bakewell also discusses what the Danaids reveal about the ambiguous social position metics hold. When the Danaids first arrive on stage, their foreign appearance is emphasized, while their Greekness is recognizable by their understanding of supplication. Bakewell suggests this duality is echoed in the first and last movements of the play, reflecting their position vis à vis immigration and incorporation. The Danaids move between these two positions throughout the play. Incorporation for Bakewell, however, never
reaches incorporation as citizens, a view that leads him to reject both Farenga’s idea that the play’s dialogue reflects the _dokimasia_ and Zeitlin’s view that the trilogy tracks the Danaids’ transition in status from immigrants to citizen wives.

The second chapter addresses the Danaids’ political and social ideals. Their ideas, Bakewell argues, reflect typical stereotypes that the Athenian audience associated with foreigners and metics. The Danaids’ foreign ideas contrast with the democratic principles upheld by Pelasgos and the assembly of the Argive people. Aeschylus uses uncommon or unusual language to imply the Danaids’ foreignness and the women attribute monarchical (even divine) authority to Pelasgos while he relies on democratic institutions. Danaos appears as a manipulative and potential tyrant, his desire for power ignoring the safety of Argos. The deceptive and dangerous speech of the foreign suppliants contrasts strikingly with the democratic speech of Pelasgos, a contrast that reveals a gulf between citizen and metic perspectives.

Chapter 3 begins from a notoriously obscure remark by Pelasgos, who states that the Danaids bear the ‘Cypriot stamp in their female forms’ (_Supp._ line 283). For Bakewell this famous remark serves as a gateway to how the play addresses the political difficulties of integrating metics into a city. First, the issue of marriage. Here he rejects Zeitlin’s argument that the trilogy moves from the Danaids as _astoxenoi_ to _metoikoi_ to citizens. This marital integration into the citizen body lacks clear evidential support in the fragments of the other two plays. Marriage is, however, evident in the fragments and Bakewell argues that the marriage of the Danaids to Argives is problematic and that the agency Zeitlin attributes to the Danaids remains a challenge to Athenian mores regardless of marriage. The Cypriote stamp passage (_Supp._ lines 279-89) highlights the foreignness and relative independence of the Danaids and it explicitly conjures up the dangers that women of different _nomoi_ pose to the citizen body. The reference to Cyprus and its mark upon them once again emphasizes their liminal status, not only because Cyprus itself was considered liminal, but also because of the associations of Cyprus, and thus the Danaids, with Aphrodite. She too has marked them with their exotic sexuality. As Bakewell concludes, ‘The close of the play depicts nubile, foreign women entering a Greek polis, with their nominal kyrios in a subordinate role and forced to countenance their sexual choices’ (p. 67). Bakewell agrees with Sommerstein that the Danaids were likely married to Argives but he makes no attempt to grapple with the potential resolution offered by the end of the trilogy. Metic-citizen marriage under the conditions Bakewell posits cannot end happily because there is no male kyrios to help control them. Ending with such a marriage would surely be unsettling to the Athenian audience.