SUCCESSFUL BIRTH, UNSUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE: 
AESCHYLUS’ SUPPLIANTS AND MESOPOTAMIAN 
BIRTH INCANTATIONS

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1. Introduction

Aeschylus’ tragedy, the Suppliants, tells the story of the fifty Danaids who try to escape unwanted marriage to their cousins, the Aegyptids. They demand the protection of Argos, the home of their ancestress Io. Having fled by boat from Egypt to Argos, their cousins in hot pursuit, they place themselves in the city temple as suppliants, appealing to king Pelasagus. To prove their connection to Argos and their right to ask for help both from Pelasagus and from Zeus, the Danaid maidens tell the story of Io, the cow maiden ravished by Zeus, tormented by Hera’s gadfly, and finally brought to birth by the healing touch of her lover to stand at the head of a line of Greek heroes. Yet, the maidens don’t realize that Io’s story works against them; its moral is that no matter how unpleasant the thought of their impending marriage, women should accept their lot, for they may eventually be rewarded for their suffering by bearing an illustrious son. Though Io’s story establishes the Danaids’ right to appeal to Pelasagus, it also undercuts their appeal. In this paper, I argue that Aeschylus develops this tragic irony by alluding heavily to the themes of birth incantations, including the Io story, which were meant to vindicate and relieve the suffering of women in labor. Although Aeschylus regards these birth incantation themes as having a Near Eastern flavor, part of the barbarian character of the Danaids, the Greeks must have used birth incantations with similar themes for the allusions to be meaningful to them. The two sets of birth themes discussed in detail in this paper are those associated with the cow-maiden: the herdsman, copulation between bull and cow, eating plants in a meadow, the suffering of the female in labor, and divine intervention through healing touch; and those associated with the boat at sea: primordial waters, storm, journey, blockage, unfurling and untying, and the baby as cargo. I also look at a key difference between the Near Eastern and Greek cow-maiden stories, the negative portrayal of sexual
intercourse in the Io story, and explain why the Io story had Near Eastern connotations for the Greeks.¹

Though the Near Eastern birth incantations have been studied extensively by Near Eastern scholars as examples of both literary and medical texts, few Classical scholars have explored birth incantations in ancient Greece, despite evidence that the Greeks used them.² In Theaetetus, Socrates mentions the use of incantations by midwives when he portrays himself as a midwife helping his interlocutors give birth to ideas through the use of words (148e1-151d6). Among other things, “midwives can awaken the pains (of labor, odinas) and make them gentler if they want, by giving medicines and singing over them (epaidousai), and bring to bear those who are suffering in labor (tas dustokousas)...” (149c9-d2).³ Although managing and interpreting birth is a relatively frequent topic in the medical and divination texts of the Near East, we lack the same direct evidence to study birth incantations in ancient Greece, since the Greek medical texts eschew and often deride the use of medical incantations, preferring to focus on “more scientific” methods of intervention.⁴ The Near Eastern texts thus provide us with a wealth of comparative material that can help fill the gap in Greek sources for birth incantations.

¹ Although in the discussion that follows, I focus primarily on the motifs associated with the cow and boat themes, I hope to publish soon a fuller discussion of all the parallels between the Suppliants and the Near Eastern birth texts, along with cross-cultural parallels for the birth themes. Parts of the argument published here were presented at the American Oriental Society meeting in 1999 and the Classical Association meeting in 2002. I’d like to thank Ann Guinan, Laurie Pearce, and Joan Goodnick Westenholz for helping me turn the first draft into a polished paper.

² The best treatment is that of Robertson (1983, 148), who points out that parts of the Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo reflect themes common to ritual songs about childbirth.

³ Theaetetus, evidently as anxious and unsure of himself as a young girl, says to Socrates that he cannot give an answer to questions concerning the nature of knowledge, nor can he “put aside his concern”, and Socrates replies, “It is because you are in labor (odineis), dear Theaetetus, since you are not empty, but pregnant.” Theaetetus answers, “I don’t know, Socrates; I’m just telling what I feel.” (148e1-8) Socrates then jokingly reminds him that he is the son of a midwife and one himself, listing o their abilities. The use of charms by midwives is noted by Johnston (1999, 168, note 16), Lain Entralgo (1970, 110), Demand (1994, 19, 135-6) and King (1998, 177), among others.

⁴ See Hippocrates On the Sacred Disease 1 and Diseases of Virgins. On the use of charms by ancient Greek doctors, see Renehan (1992, with references to more general works), Lain Entralgo (1970, 158), and Demand (1994, 99-101). Ovid, writing a few centuries later than Hippocrates, mentions both charms to aid birth and to prevent birth: in Metamorphoses 10.511 verba puertura “birthing words” are spoken by Lucina, goddess of childbirth; in Metamorphoses 9. 301 Juno mutters charms to prevent Alcmena from giving birth to Hercules (inceptos tenueraunt carmina partus “the songs held the birth which had begun”).