ACTS OF SUPPLICATION IN ANCIENT GREECE

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I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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Introduction

Scattered widely through Greek literature are references to the practice of supplication, a practice which modern readers find alien yet oddly familiar. Clearly this was a social phenomenon widely understood, and (for the most part) respected, at least in the abstract. Examples abound in both historical narrative and literature. A few cases will serve as examples of typical supplications.

Odysseus, in his mendacious reply to Eumaios' request for the story of his arrival on Ithake, describes how he came to Egypt after he had arrived home from Troy. There his companions attacked the Egyptians, and were defeated. Odysseus describes how the supposed Cretan, on recognising his own imminent death, threw away his helmet, shield and sword, and approaching the Egyptian king in his chariot clasped his knees and kissed them in supplication. Despite the unprovoked attack by the "Cretan" and his men, the Egyptian king rescued him, and took him to his home, even protecting him from the understandable anger of other Egyptians (Odyssey 14.240-84 et passim, esp. 276-84). Of course, according to the main narrative, this did not happen; but Eumaios, well-versed in his responsibilities to strangers (ibid., 14.56-58), accepts the story without comment, thus tacitly testifying to its credibility.

After Pausanias had been put to death by the Spartans, an accusation is brought against Themistokles to the effect that he is guilty of the same crime as Pausanias. When the Athenians resolve to mete out to him the same punishment that Pausanias had suffered, Themistokles, rightly fearing for his life, seeks refuge with Admetos, king of the Molossians.

Between Themistokles and Admetos there had been enmity for some undisclosed slight, and the king had vowed vengeance on the Athenian. Themistokles therefore appeals to the king in a manner designed to win succour. He supplicates Admetos' wife (in an unspecified manner), takes the king's son in his arms and sits by the hearth. He then makes a verbal appeal to Admetos. This is successful: the king signifies his intention to assist Themistokles by raising him from his seated position by the hearth. Later, when the Athenian and Spartan envoys arrive and demand that he be surrendered, Admetos refuses to turn him over, but instead sends him to safety in Pydna (Thucydides 1.135.2-137.1).

The daughters of Danaos, desperate to avoid an odious marriage with their cousins, flee to Argos and take refuge at an altar sacred to an anonymous miscellany of gods. There they hold in their left hands boughs bedecked with wool, suppliant branches, sacred to Zeus. Their claim is that they are suppliants of Zeus. They are instructed by their father to speak persuasively to strangers, who, they hope, will succour them. This they do; when the king approaches, they beg that he raise them from their suppliant position, thereby undertaking to grant them what they wish. They drape the altars with the freshly-cut boughs, in token of their supplication. While the success of their supplication is still to be decided by the people of Argos, the king, by now sympathetic, advises them to drape the other altars in the city also, in order to signify their supplication. Whether persuaded by the words of their king or the presence of the suppliant branches, the people of Argos vote in favour of granting refuge to the suppliants. Subsequently, when the herald of their cousins is about to drag the Danaids by force to ships waiting to carry them to Egypt, the king intervenes with an Argive army, and prevents their capture (Aiskhylos, Suppliants, esp. 191-203, 222-25, 274-341, 323-24, 346, 605-24, 911-65).

Thus we have three different acts of supplication, for different purposes, employing different means, and with slightly differing results. In each case the suppliants are being threatened by some perceived danger; their own resources are insufficient to save them. As their only means of safety, they appeal to others, at times even avowed enemies, for assistance, by means of a more or less universally recognised set of ritual actions, whereby suppliants placed themselves figuratively - sometimes literally - under the protection of Zeus *hikesios*. In this way, through an appeal to the one institution that united Greeks - their religion - they hope that the pressure of tradition and the threat of divine displeasure will induce those supplicated to deal with them favourably, though on occasion a different action would have been taken if that pressure had not been applied. Therefore, the suppliants may gain safety from an immediate threat, or even reintegration into different communities, if their own communities have expelled them.

It is the purpose of this thesis to investigate acts of supplication, examining the practice, and its function within Greek society. There will be an analysis of the act itself, to find patterns and meaning in the actions. The response of the supplicated will be examined as well, both the intended and the actual response. How safe was the suppliant, and what (if anything) guaranteed that safety? There was an element of self-abasement in supplication, and this will be discussed. An attempt will be made to trace the development of supplication, from its putative origins and original purpose, to the end of the fifth century B.C. Its relationship with guest-friendship will also be addressed. This investigation will be undertaken through an examination of examples from both historical and literary sources, as literature indicates practices and institutions which are

considered acceptable within that culture, or as exemplars to be followed. The literary works consulted will include dramatic, epic and erotic poetry, and rhetoric; historical works include biography as well as social and political history. Epigraphic sources have not been consulted. The *terminus ad quem* will be the end of the fifth century.

Generally speaking, source material will be treated synchronically. This procedure may seem to invite criticism, given the wide range of source types and periods in which the sources were written (to say nothing of the periods to which the writers refer). Pedrick especially is critical of a synchronic analysis of supplication, one which does not take into account the specific nature of Homeric supplicatory ritual. Indeed, she would have the rituals of the Iliad and the Odyssey carefully differentiated, as being distinct though linked forms.[1] This objection may seem just; however, some comparison with later sources is not merely appropriate, but necessary. The works of Homer were so pervasive in later Greek society that they informed practices, and rationalisations of those practices, centuries later than the date of composition of the poems themselves. Secondly, Pedrick's objection that the poems indicate different attitudes towards supplication[2] is undercut by her own observation. She notes, rightly, that supplicatory scenes are written in as much or as little detail as is required by the theme of each poem, and by the context in which each occurrence is written.[3] This, however, is not unique to Homer: the same may be said of Euripides, of Sophokles, even of Herodotos and Thucydides. There exists in each of these writers the same difficulty in teasing out an outline of the ritual. In this thesis, therefore, Homer will be used to explore the ritual and its meaning,

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[1] Victoria Pedrick, "Supplication in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*", Transactions of the American Philological Association CXII (1982), pp. 125-40

[2] Ibid., pp. 129, 133; esp. 140

[3] Ibid., p. 140

in the same way as Alkman and Aristophanes, as Herodotos and Plutarch. Differences in time and place between sources are not irrelevant, but should not debar them from use in a survey of custom and ritual, particularly in the case of a writer as ubiquitous as Homer.

The approach will be thematic, with consequent alternation between sources. There will, as a result, be some repetition of examples discussed; this will however be minimised as much as possible. Primary sources are from the Oxford Classical Texts, unless otherwise specified. All Greek names are transliterated literally, except in cases like Thucydides and Plutarch, where the Latinised versions are so well established that the Greek appears incongruous.